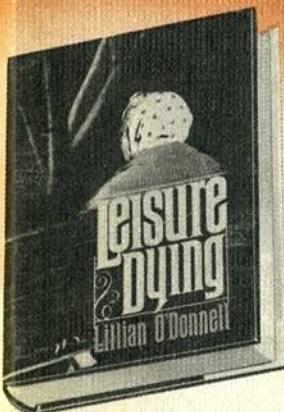
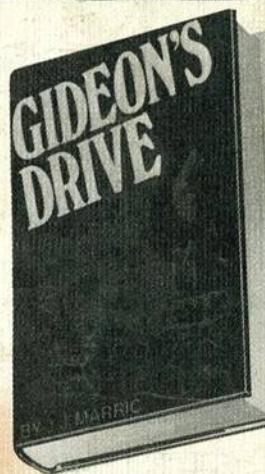


Gideon's Drive

BY J. J. MARRIC



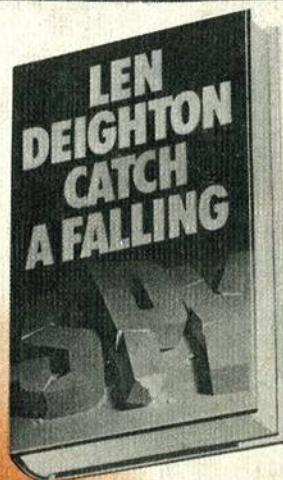
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BY LILLIAN O'DONNELL



Catch a Falling Spy

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BY

J. J. MARRIC

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GIDEON'S DRIVE

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J. J. MARRIC

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Chapter 1

MOOD

I hope he won't be late tonight, Kate Gideon thought; tonight of all nights. She was standing in front of a tall dressing-table mirror, the centre one of triple mirrors in a burr-walnut suite darkened only slightly with the twenty-five years it had been in this room: hers and George's. She tipped the mirror so that she could see herself in a straight reflection; and then moved the side mirrors so that she could the better see her left and right profile.

As objectively as a woman could, she studied the result.

On the whole, she was content with it.

It did not greatly concern her that she was a handsome woman, as indeed she was, with dark hair showing remarkably little grey for a woman in her early fifties. It was good when George, or any one of the children, for that matter, told her she had lovely grey eyes, but she was no longer flattered by such compliments: or at least, very seldom. She looked now for the added or the deepening lines around her eyes, and at the corners of her lips, and her forehead. She really didn't think she had acquired more—at least not many more—since she had last allowed herself time to dress and make-up to go out with her husband.

It was twenty minutes to seven on a pleasant August evening; he was to be here at a quarter to, so he was not yet late. They were going to dine out for a variety of special anniversaries: one for their wedding, weeks past now; one for his birthday which had been two months ago. One, the anniversary of the day they had moved into the solidly-built house in Fulham, a residential part near the Hurlingham Polo grounds and tennis courts. Then, it had been much as now; the red brick had mellowed slightly, like all the others in this terrace of houses, forty-four on this side of the street each with a solid wall dividing it from its neighbour on either side. Grey slate roofs, painted woodwork mostly black and white or green and



white; coloured glass panels in each front door, tiles in vari-coloured patterns on the porch and on the path leading from the iron gate which led from the street itself.

Neither large nor luxurious, but highly respectable and worth, today, ten times the fifteen hundred pounds Gideon had paid for it, it was a kind of symbol of Gideon himself.

She went to the sashcord windows in the small bay, and looked out. Their neighbors' cars were parked nearby. A few couples were already going out. The homeward rush was over, then, but George—

The clock in the dining-room struck quarter to, melodiously in a homely imitation of Big Ben. *Da-da-da-dahll, da-da-da-dahhl, da-da-da-dahhh*, the last note echoing faintly. She watched traffic passing the end of Harrington Street, thinking: "He is late."

Then she laughed at herself and told the big room: "*Minutes don't count.*"

But as she knew well, minutes often counted very much indeed in the life of a senior officer of London's Metropolitan Police, the Commander of the Criminal Investigation Department and a man who had won the distinction, over more years than they had been married, of becoming the most renowned and dependable policeman in all England. George himself was probably the only one on the Force who did not pay much attention to this; unless, of course, he took it for granted.

But it was probable that he rarely thought about it at all, and merely went on with his job, as he always had. Whatever the cost, to him or to her, he had been a policeman first, husband, lover and father afterwards.

There was an unexpected whiff of criticism in this reflection, and it pulled her up short, made her ask herself whether it was really true. She repeated the words in a whisper which came back to her gently from the shadowed room.

"A policeman first, husband, lover and father afterwards."

Why on earth should such a thought enter her head now? Because he was two or three minutes late for an evening date which was probably of much greater importance to her than to him? Of course, if she really thought that he was taking her out simply to please or to humour her, then she could understand the unexpected trend of her thoughts: unexpected because they had come so sud-



denly and no vestige of them had shadowed her getting ready for the evening.

Once he was here, they would vanish.

"No," she said aloud to herself, "they won't vanish. They'll fade into the background and stay there painlessly for weeks, perhaps for months."

If he were seriously delayed, if he had to call and tell her the evening was off, or he would be very late, it would hurt, whether there was justification in that or not. For some reason she did not understand, she was feeling more strongly about—against—the lot of a policeman's wife than she had for a long time, certainly for years. When she made herself think back she remembered that in the past few months he had been forced to call off an evening out, or a much-anticipated family evening at home, more often than she could recall since he had been promoted from Chief Detective Superintendent George Gideon to Commander of the Criminal Investigation Department, the highest step he could go; or as high as he was ever likely to allow himself to go.

She looked out of the window again, saw no sign of him, and went back to the dressing-table. She gave a final, perfunctory look at herself in the mirror, picked up pale, biscuit-coloured gloves of thinnest leather and a matching handbag. She wore a russet-brown suit, not quite right for her grey eyes and colouring, but fitting perfectly; Junoesque, they had called her at school, and Junoesque she was still. If the reflections pleased her, her mood did not, and it was the mood which had the upper hand again when she reached the foot of the stairs.

George must be ten or fifteen minutes late.

The stairs, behind her, were steep, carpeted from wall to banisters, like the landing above and the four bedrooms, of which only theirs was now occupied. That could have something to do with how she was feeling, of course: loneliness. Penelope, their youngest daughter was touring Australia with a B.B.C. Symphony Orchestra and would be away for several weeks, returning to be married almost at once. Malcolm, their youngest son, was also away, touring Europe with a group of youths about his own age. When he came back he was going to ask them if they minded if he shared a flat with one or two friends; and they, she and George—would have to say that of course they didn't mind, that he must live his own life.



The old, trite truisms; true, certainly, but leaving the heart hollow and hurting.

Why was her mind so full of the thought of hurt tonight?

Was it because she had nothing to do, no one to prepare for? She walked listlessly through the living-room, into the bright, recently refurbished kitchen which had a window overlooking the long garden. The light was good enough for her to see the formal grass on one side, the crazy-paving she and the boys had laid, and a herbaceous border bright with flowers. Everything was spick-and-span out there, even the vegetable patch beyond lawn and flowers, divided by a box hedge, over which could be seen the scarlet blossom of runner beans.

The big refrigerator hummed.

The kitchen glistened and glowed.

"I haven't enough to do!" Kate Gideon exclaimed suddenly.

A car door slammed outside.

"There he is!" she exclaimed, and in spite of herself her heart leapt, she snatched another glance in a mirror on the passage wall, saw a shadow approaching the coloured glass panels of the front door, and then with a clang of disappointment, realised that it wasn't George; whoever approached was too small.

He—wasn't—coming.

She steeled herself to show no expression except a superficial pleasantness as, almost simultaneously with the ringing of the bell, she opened the door. In the porch, backing away in anticipation of her approach, was a rather short, elderly man whom she knew well by sight, and who had often driven her and Gideon. A messenger. He had a lined and leathery face and deep-set blue eyes which kindled at sight of her, no doubt at all in admiration.

"Good evening, Mrs. Gideon."

"Hallo, Mr. Ferris."

"The Commander's very sorry—" She had to school herself not to show her disappointment, "but he got delayed at the last minute, and won't have time to come home and then get to the restaurant in time. So he sent me for you, and he'll meet you there."

"Oh," she said, and gave a little breathless laugh before confessing. "I thought for a moment he—" She didn't finish, but turned into the hall. "Come in—I won't be two or three minutes."

"I'll wait in the car," said Ferris, "if that's all the same with you. Better not stay double-parked for long even outside the Com-



mander's house. These young coppers today, no respect for their elders!"

He turned away, smiling; and she carried a picture of a humorous mouth and twinkling eyes. Kate went into the front room, which was the biggest in the house except for their bedroom immediately above it, and stood there for a few seconds, quite absurdly affected and full of self-reproach. Why had she felt so?

Did it matter, now that she was on top of the world?

She went out only a minute or two after Ferris, who was standing by his big, old-fashioned car, one used to carry the Yard's V.I.P.'s to appointments. Across the road she saw a small red sports car with the word "Doctor" on the windscreen: and it made her pause. This was a new doctor in the neighbourhood, Kelworthy, already making himself popular as one of the "old sort," which meant that he made house calls promptly and spared time to talk with his patients.

Why was he there this evening?

She knew that the young girl who lived in a flat in the house almost opposite was within days of having her first-born; it wouldn't have surprised her to see a taxi; or the girl and her husband going off in a neighbour's car, for they had none of their own. But the doctor—

"Is there something the matter?" asked Ferris.

"Yes," she said, "but I'm not sure what. You can wait a few moments, can't you?" Without waiting for him to say yes or no she walked across the smooth surface of the road, with a grace which Ferris, who had always had a soft spot for the Commander's wife, watched appreciatively.

The house was owned by a Mrs. Jameson, whose husband had died leaving her very little to live on; with the help of relatives she had made three flats in the house, ground, top floor and attic, and lived mostly on the rents. She was older than Kate by twenty years and had lived in Harrington Street for about the length of that time. Outwardly, the house was exactly the same as all the others in the street, but inside the porch were three bell pushes and three names. She pressed the bottom one next to the name Jameson.

There was a longer delay than she had expected.

If the old lady was out, would another ring disturb the neighbours in the house. Did—

There was a flurry of footsteps, and the door opened and Mrs. Jameson stood there, her eyes bright as with tears, her grey hair



untidy, her blouse sleeves rolled up to the elbows. Just for a moment she paused, not recognising Kate; then, on recognition, she burst out:

"Oh, the poor lamb, she's lost her baby! She's lost her baby! And the doctor's up there fighting for the poor lamb's life. I thought you were the ambulance, it's supposed to be here by now."

As if answering her, the ringing of an ambulance bell sounded in the distance; and at the same moment understanding of her own mood fell upon Kate Gideon like a thunderclap. She was twice appalled: by the awful thing that had been happening in this house while she had been going over her grievances—yes, that was what she had been doing—and by the subconscious power of her own thinking.

She and George had lost a child.

Not in childbirth, but soon afterwards. Not in this street, but in a top flat in a house not very far away. She remembered she had so desperately wanted George to come back, for she had been fearful of being alone with the child, if death came. But George had been out, working; and she *had* been left alone.

She was not needed here and would only be in the way when the ambulance men came in. She asked, of course: "Could I help, do anything at all."

"No, no, Mrs. Gideon, the husband's upstairs with her and her mother's on the way. You're ever so kind, but—"

"Of course. Of course. I understand," Kate murmured.

The ambulance was pulling up as she reached the car. Ferris got in nimbly and drove off, Kate sitting beside him, her eyes closed, thinking and remembering. What a strange, painful thing to happen. How dreadful for the young mother, the father . . .

"The husband's upstairs with her."

"Policeman first, husband, lover and father afterwards."

When they were in the stream of traffic in King's Road, heading towards the West End, Ferris shot her a sideways glance of which she was conscious and which made her open her eyes and look at him. Now there was only his profile, set in concentration, for two sports cars were passing. Neither had a "Doctor's" notice on the windscreen. When they had gone far ahead, Ferris asked without looking round:

"Is everything all right, ma'am?"

"It will be soon," Kate answered; and feeling that she owed the man some kind of explanation, she went on: "One of the young couples in Harrington Street was going to have a baby. Their first." Her eyes stung. "They lost the child and are worried about the mother."

Ferris's lips turned down at the corners.

"Bad luck," he said, gruffly. "It's always a shock when something like that happens, especially these days. The doctors know so much but sometimes they don't seem to know a thing."

That was the moment when Dr. Jonathan Kelworthy watched as his golden-haired patient was carried out of her bedroom on a stretcher. Watching as tensely was the young, black-haired husband, so nearly a father, who had the look of the Southern European about him. As the golden hair vanished down the stairs the husband swung round on the doctor and said in an anguished voice:

"It is your fault! You should have sent her to hospital. If anything happens to my wife I will kill you! Get that into your head, I will kill you!"

Outside, on the landing, Mrs. Jameson heard the threat, and wrung her hands.

Chapter 2

GEORGE GIDEON

For George Gideon, it had been a very different kind of day from Kate's; different in mood and tempo and, consequently, in his attitude. He had been looking forward to taking Kate to dinner without telling her where they were going; looking forward to talking; even looking forward to trying to ease some of the pressures which he knew were on her mind, some of them psychological. He had not yet discussed these problems with her, and in the secluded corner he had reserved at Boulanger's they would be able to talk freely, without being overheard. Moreover at the Moon World Club, only a short distance from the restaurant, there was said to be one of the best floor shows London had seen for years.

"Topless, of course," said the superintendent who had divulged that piece of information at a morning meeting, "but clean as a whistle. I'd take my daughter almost anywhere today, knowing she'd probably been there before; but I'd take my wife and mother to this show."

The management of the club had been told that Gideon and his wife might arrive, and a special table was already reserved for them.

Yes, Gideon thought, he wanted this to be quite an evening to remember, for Kate. At the back of his mind he had the feeling that she felt that her life was, in usefulness, ending; he wanted her to know that in more ways than one, it could be a new beginning.

True, the day had been too busy to allow him to think too much about it. Within minutes of getting to his office he had learned that a man on the run after shooting a police officer, had been caught; that one major bank robbery had been foiled and its perpetrators held, because of a squeak from an informer. There was particular relish in both of these because he, George Gideon, had been at the morning briefing alone. For some years the Deputy Commander,



Alec Hobbs, had taken much of the briefing session and been first to get the news, but Alec was on holiday, and would not be back for ten days. He was in Australia, combining a little police business and a lot of pleasure. Engaged to marry the Gideons' youngest daughter, he visited police stations and Criminal Investigation Bureaux in the morning when Penelope was rehearsing; spent the afternoons with her; and most of the evenings sitting and listening to her playing, marvelling that his future wife held magic in her fingers whenever she sat at the piano. Because Hobbs was away Gideon felt himself to be completely back in harness, instead of sustaining the role of a kind of elder statesman. And at the morning briefings, when every senior officer in charge of an investigation came to discuss the case with him, he spent more time with old friends than he had in years. Perhaps of even greater value, he was able to study some of the younger superintendents, known better by Hobbs. He had long trusted Hobbs' judgment of men, and that trust was being fully confirmed.

Gideon, then, was extremely busy, and absorbed in what he was doing. The anticipation of an evening out with Kate had added zest to all of this, and until the last minute it had not occurred to him that he might be late. For Hobbs most certainly had his uses, one of them being to take over if late calls which needed supervision at Commander level came in. Tonight, a call had come from a mid-land Federation Headquarters.

"George," the Commander of the Federation had said, "one of the ugliest prison escapes has just been reported from Dellbank." Dellbank was perhaps the oldest top security prison in the country. "Two men escaped, and they killed a warder and later killed the drivers of a car they stole. We think they're on the M.1 heading for London, but we're not sure. And our only knowledge of the car is that it is a medium-sized one."

"Put your *Information* man onto ours and I'll brief them to give this top priority," Gideon said.

"Thanks. Can I call you later?"

"I'll leave word where I can be found," Gideon promised, with a picture of Kate in his mind's eye.

He dialled *Information* on the inter-office machine, gave instructions, and then stood up and went to his window, which overlooked the Thames, Westminster Bridge, the Embankment and, across the river, London County Hall. Traffic was massed every-



where, gaily-beflagged ships and boats sailed in bright sunshine up and down the river; it was a beautiful evening. Big Ben, out of sight but within hearing, struck six, and he turned back to the desk and gave instructions to the car pool to send for Kate; then on second thoughts, told the driver selected to come and see him.

It was Harold Ferris.

When Ferris had gone, Gideon left the office and walked along the wide, bare-looking passages of the Yard, heading for the lifts and *Information*. Only when he walked was he seen at his best and most powerful. A tall, very big man, with massive shoulders only slightly rounded, he walked erect but thrustingly, as if he would allow nothing to stand in his way. He had a strong face, rugged more than handsome, his eyes were a steely grey, matching in colour the thick waves of his hair.

He found *Information* already busy.

The motorway, M.1., was being closely patrolled and two road blocks had been put up. Provincial as well as metropolitan police were working closely together. Prints of recent photographs of the two wanted men were being distributed, and two were pinned up on the notice board of the Chief Inspector on duty.

Gideon read:

"George Pitton—sentenced to 10 years imprisonment for robbery with violence. 7 years to go."

"Arthur Dalby—sentenced to life imprisonment for rape and murder of a fifteen-year-old girl."

"Pitton looks as if he comes from the stone age," the Chief Inspector remarked, looking at a simian-faced man with hair growing very low on a low forehead. "But Dalby—"

Gideon studied the photograph of the rapist killer, noting the remarkable good looks, the kindly expression: it was almost impossible to imagine a man with such a face committing the crimes that he had.

"I see what you mean," he said. "Sent these to television studios?"
"Not yet."

"Get them over. And as soon as you can get copies sent to the Back Room for the Press."



"Any statement, sir?" The inspector, a youngish man, was obviously anxious to do exactly what Gideon wanted.

"Check with the Federation," ordered Gideon. "I don't see why a brief recital of the facts shouldn't be given, sprinkled with alleged and believed-to's—and certainly say they're believed to be heading for London on the motorway."

"Right, sir." The inspector was already at a telephone, while an elderly messenger came into the big, long room, with its teleprinters and its up-to-the-minute country-side communication system, carrying a box full of more prints of the two prisoners. Messages were coming in of reports that the two men had been seen; but there were likely to be hundreds of such reports, all false, before the night was out.

There was nothing more Gideon could do.

He told *Information* where he could be found for emergency messages only, and then sent for another car; the handiest was a Flying Squad car about to start out after suspects inside a jewellers in the Strand, only a stone's throw from Boulanger's. Gideon squeezed in the back with two other men. The walkie-talkie radios kept coming into, while *Information* kept up a stream of instructions. If any of the others were ill-at-ease Gideon put that right by saying into a lull:

"Now I know I wish I were back on this job."

After a general laugh a man asked: "Were you actually in the Squad, sir?"

"Four years."

"You mean we've got a chance of getting where *you* are, sir?" another man quipped.

Gideon joined in the laughter, then heard another instruction from *Information*. "Bandits in the Strand now attempting to escape in dark green Ford Cortina down Northumberland Avenue."

The driver exclaimed: "Cut down Chandos Street and we'll cut them—" he broke off, obviously suddenly remembering the precious cargo they had in the car. "Plenty of others can—"

"Cut down Chandos Street," Gideon ordered.

The driver let his siren wail and then put out his left hand signal and swung into the narrow street. As he did so, a green Ford Cortina came hurtling towards them. The Flying Squad man turned his wheel enough to avoid a head-on collision, the other driver swerving right, hit a traffic bollard, and crashed to a stand-

still. The driver was out and running fast towards the Embankment before the police car came to a shuddering halt alongside the wrecked Cortina. One of the policemen jumped out of the door across from Gideon and gave chase after the running man. A hundred people were standing and staring, and a taxi with its *For Hire* sign alight was only just behind.

"You chaps get on with the job and forget me," ordered Gideon. He was out of the car in a flash, and hailing the taxi. "I want to get to Boulanger's in a hurry," he said authoritatively. "That is a police car and they were giving me a lift."

The taxi-driver looked at him with sharp interest. "Mr. Gideon, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Didn't know you were still on the beat, sir!" The driver chuckled at his own joke and leaned out of his cab to open the rear door for Gideon, who only just ducked in time to save bumping his head. He sat well back, while the taxi squeezed past the wrecked car. As they turned into Whitehall Place and its gaunt mammoths of Victorian architecture, Gideon saw the thief who had got away collide with a man coming towards him; his pursuer was only a few feet behind.

So they got them all, he thought with deep satisfaction.

The sudden race and the collision carried him back over the years. His Flying Squad days had been among his most difficult—in fact his only seriously difficult days with Kate. On the Squad one had no hours, too little rest, no time for home life. How Kate had hated it! And how different things were now.

The taxi dropped him outside the entrance in the narrow street where Boulanger's had served Londoners for at least four generations; and, it was said, neither the inside nor the outside had changed very much, some of it not at all. There was a tiny bar, where he expected to find Kate; he hoped he wasn't too late, and a glance at his watch reassured him; it wasn't quite half past seven, and he was here first. He much preferred it that way. A pale-faced proprietor, a great grandson of the founder, and the head waiter came forward to welcome him. As they talked, and Gideon watched the door for Kate, a telephone rang at the bar. A moment later the French barman called out:

"Is zere a M' Shideon, pliz?"

Gideon almost groaned as he took the receiver. If this really *were*



urgent he might have to go, but he would fight it to the last. The thought made him smile grimly as he said:

"Gideon."

"George, we've got one of them," a man reported, and only after a moment did Gideon realise this was the Federation Commander and he was talking about the escaped prisoners. "The man Patton. He was caught driving the dead man's car, the one which was stolen. We've no idea where the other man is yet, but if the way your chaps are working is anything to go by, we'll soon have him."

"Splendid," Gideon said. "I'm glad—"

"Excuse me, sir." A different man, the *Information* inspector at Scotland Yard, interrupted as the other was saying good-bye. "They caught all *four* of the men involved in the jewel raid in the Strand."

"Couldn't be better," Gideon said. "This looks like being our night."

"Can't be sure yet, sir," replied the *Information* inspector sententiously. "I think it's going to be a busy night. Two lorry loads of citrus fruits were hi-jacked from Covent Garden this evening, and—"

"I'll take reports of that in the morning," Gideon said, for at the moment the door opened and Kate came in.

She looked stunning, in an outfit which Gideon had never seen before, but a single glimpse of her expression, before she caught sight of him and smiled, told him that something had distressed her; this wasn't going to be the evening he had planned, and looked forward to so eagerly.

Chapter 3

TETE A TETE

"Hallo, love," Gideon said, drawing her forward and kissing her on the cheek. "I thought you said you couldn't wear brown."

Her eyes lit up.

"Do you really like it?"

"Very much," Gideon assured her truthfully. "I'm sorry I couldn't get home for you, but—"

"Don't worry," she interrupted. "It's good to be here." Again she smiled but without the fullness of heart he had hoped for. "Ferris wouldn't tell me where we were coming until we were actually in the street. Then I knew." She turned as the patron came hurrying, hand outstretched in welcome; he kissed her hand and then murmured, "*C'est impossible.*" Mischievously, he added: "You must please tell me the secret of how to grow younger." It was as if he sensed that he must make some special effort to please her this evening; and Gideon thought she looked more genuinely cheered up than by what he had said. "Come, please—I have the special table for you."

The special table was in a corner and one step above the rest of the main dining-room. On one side was a carved wooden screen protecting them from the kitchen door and kitchen noises; on the other a rather attractive stained glass window, while the entrance was wide enough for them to see most of the restaurant with its gay atmosphere of a French hostelry. On the table were six red roses.

"If you will tell me what you would like to have for an *apertif* I will arrange it," Pierre Boulanger promised. "And if you would like my recommendation for you, Mr.s Gideon, I would suggest the duck a l'orange, for you M. Gideon, the filet de beouf *en croute.*" He spread his hands, and smiled, and disappeared, keeping an unobtrusive but careful watch on them. Before her duck Kate chose an avocado with shrimps and a bland sauce; Gideon, a pate which he



never failed to enjoy. The service was immaculate; they were treated as royalty; the food was a gourmet's delight.

Yet, some air of tension remained in Kate.

Shall I ask her what it is? Gideon wondered, troubled.

I should have told him when I arrived, now it's more difficult, Kate thought. If I keep it from him he'll wonder why.

"Kate," Gideon said, as he waited for another slice of the *filet*, "what is it? No bad news, is there?"

Hesitantly, she said: "No, not really." Then, realising the inadequacy of the reply she went on: "Not for us, that is." Now she could lead into the subject, knowing how quickly he would understand the effect of the child's death on her; for this huge man whom some thought dull and even insensitive had one of the quickest minds a man could have. That he had always possessed; but his sensitivity had grown slowly, over the years. "You know that the girl across at Mrs. Jameson's was going to have a baby, don't you?"

Gideon said in a surprised way. "Yes, of course."

"It was stillborn," Kate told him. "And the mother—well, Mrs. Jameson might be exaggerating but she implied that it was touch and go with the mother, too."

"When did you find this out?" Gideon asked.

"Only a few minutes before I left."

"And all the years rolled back and all the hurt was with you again," Gideon said. His big but well-shaped hand closed over Kate's, pressed gently, and stayed while the trolley was wheeled up and the silver hood was turned over, revealing a freshly cooked *filet en croute*. The end cut looked temptingly appetising, but it seemed almost a sacrilege to over-indulge just now. The carver hovered, a waiter with the sauce hovered, each puzzled, until Kate said:

"Darling, do you think I might have a tiny piece?"

Gideon stared, and then said: "Good lord, of course!" And the knife flashed and cut, while Kate turned her hand under Gideon's and gave him a strong, reassuring squeeze.

"Yes," she said. "The years and the pain rolled back, George, but so did some of the good things before and since. I wonder if—" she broke off.

"Yes?" Gideon watched her anxiously.

"It doesn't matter," Kate said.



"Nonsense. Of course it matters."

"That is enough, M'sier? Or a leetle more?"

"It's fine, thanks."

"Madame?"

"Just what I wanted."

"Some haricots verts, madame?"

"No, just this."

At last the trolley was wheeled away and they were on their own again, Kate beginning to eat. "In a minute," her eyes said, and that suited him. Somewhere afar off the telephone bell rang and momentarily Gideon feared it was for him, but no one came. He saw Boulanger at the bar, talking earnestly. Was it imagination or was the Frenchman worried? Thought and sight of him faded, and Kate finished her morsel of the filet and began to speak while Gideon was still eating.

"I don't know why, George, but I've been—" she paused, groping for a word, and found one that would do "—unsettled, lately. Restless."

"And with Penny away and the house empty, you find that surprising?" Gideon asked, mildly.

"I tell myself that's what it is," she said.

"But you don't convince yourself," Gideon responded.

"Not really."

She leaned back, feeling as if a weight had been lifted from her, that her discontent was George's business now, and that she could trust him to cope with it. "I'm sure I need some other interest, but I'm not really sure what. I've been so busy for so long, and I suppose I'm not a natural do-gooder. I mean, working for the Red Cross, or muscular dystrophy, or—you know, don't you?"

"I know what you mean," he agreed. "I'm not sure but I think you have to start that kind of thing early." He finished eating and took another sip of the full-bodied red wine. "If you took an interest in them I'm sure Harrington Street dwellers would think you the best neighbour they've ever had."

"They might have, once," she admitted.

Gideon's eyebrows shot up. "And what's changed you?"

"I haven't changed as far as that's concerned," Kate replied. "At least, I don't think so. But the neighbours have. How many do you know who are in Harrington Street today, George?"

Half frowning, he admitted: "Not many." After a pause he went



on: "Very few, in fact. Half of the houses have been turned into flats, and a very different type of person lives there." He watched as one of the lesser waiters cleared the table, and went on slowly: "Are you driving at anything, Kate? Do you want to move?" When she didn't answer immediately he went on: "I could well understand it, the place is big and empty now, you must feel as if you're rattling around in it when you're there alone."

She laughed. "I do, rather."

"*Is that what you want, Kate?*"

"George," she said, "I honestly don't know. I don't think so. Oh, I don't pretend I haven't thought about it occasionally, moving out further *or* moving right into town, but things are pretty expensive at the moment."

"We'd get a very good price for the house," Gideon remarked, when she paused.

"Would you move, George?"

"Of course, if you wanted to."

"I don't mean that, I mean of your own accord, without any prompting from me, would you want to move away from Harrington Street? Be honest, darling—would you?"

He wanted to say roundly: "No," and that would be the truth. It was the last thing he wanted to do. But—"be honest with me, darling"—there were times for honesty, times for literal truth, times surely for half-truths. He wanted her to be happy. If she were not, he would not be. They were a long way from the evening of their lives but they were at crossroads; he could remember Winston Churchill in his war-time speeches using a word he had never heard before: climacteric, a kind of minor crisis, of semi-climax. He would soon have more time and they ought to be able to use and enjoy it together, but he would be out and about more, she would by the very nature of their lives, be the home anchor. If she wanted to move from the house where they had been for so long then she must be free to move, but a round: "No!" from him would put invisible bars up at the windows and the doors of Harrington Street. All of these things passed swiftly through his mind, but not so swiftly that she was not aware of the silence.

"You'd hate to move, wouldn't you?" she said.

"No," answered Gideon, with great deliberation. He gave a smile, quick and warm, one which he contrived to keep entirely for her,



and then went on: "But I'd hate to move and then find we wished we hadn't!"

"I don't follow you!"

"We could let the house," Gideon said.

Obviously, the thought had not occurred to her and she was completely taken aback. Before she could comment, the waiters arrived with a lemon souffle, known to be their favourite, and a gentle white wine brought with the compliments of M'sier Boulanger. Kate was watching Gideon warily, while he was looking about for Boulanger, who would normally come, at this stage in the meal, to make sure that all was well. He appeared at the telephone again and there was now no question: he was worried.

"Let it *furnished*?" asked Kate, wonderingly.

"Or partly furnished," he replied.

"Are you really serious?"

"I am wholly serious," he assured her, forcing his thoughts off the unknown troubles of the restauranteur so that he could concentrate on his wife. "I don't mean let's put it on the market tomorrow, but I do mean let us think seriously about living somewhere else for a year, even two or three, without getting rid of the house entirely. At the end of the time we would know what we really wanted, and wouldn't spend the rest of our lives regretting a hasty decision."

"You're quite right," she said, as a waiter hovered. "Are you going to have a brandy, dear?"

"Coffee, M'sieur, Madame? Et le cognac?"

"I'm not sure," Gideon said, and put his head on one side. "Kate, would you like to go on somewhere?"

"Go on?" she was startled.

"Well, why not? One of my chaps tells me that a new show has opened at the Moon World Club."

"You mean a night club!" she exclaimed.

"Believe it or not, I mean a night club," Gideon said solemnly.

"George," declared Kate Gideon. "I don't think I'll ever get to know everything about you. I would *love* to go to a night club, and we can have coffee and a liqueur or something there. Is there any hurry? I'll have to tidy up, and—"

"There's no hurry at all," he assured her. "The first show doesn't start until half-past eleven, and I've already arranged for a table. Take your time." He stood up, moving his chair so that she could



pass more easily. She had hardly gone down the single step towards the cloakrooms when Boulanger appeared, his expression not only worried but frightened. There could be no doubt that he had waited for the chance to have a quiet word with Gideon, but now that it was here he seemed tongue-tied.

"What is it, *mon ami?*" Gideon asked. The polite little venture into French might help to loosen the other's tongue; the reminder that he was not simply a detective but that they had been good friends for many years; from the time, in fact, when a young Gideon had made an arrest in this very place but so quietly and with such little fuss that none of the diners had realised what had happened.

"Mr. Gideon," Boulanger said. "I am very much troubled. I do not know whether you can help me. If I should ask, you will forgive me, please."

"There's nothing you can't ask," Gideon assured him. "What is it? Something that has happened tonight?" He thought perhaps there had been a thief at work, in a cloakroom left unguarded for a few moments; or a clever pick-pocket discovered in the guise of a waiter. He thought in fact of virtually every possibility except the one which Boulanger now mentioned in a tone so low it was obvious he did not want to be overheard.

"Two of the people who have dined here tonight have been taken ill," he declared. "One of them is very, very sick, and in the hospital. Each of the customers had some eels, a very special delicacy, and each customer also had some pork. I have had the check made, Mr. Gideon. In all, seven customers ate those two things—just seven. Two I know. One of those in hospital I know. The others are strangers. If—and I must consider it—if this illness is poison from the food then the people I do not know should be warned. But—think of the consequences for the restaurant. Is there a way to inquire and warn them, M'sieur? and at the same time be discreet?"

"What makes you so sure the others will fall ill?" Gideon asked slowly, but his mind was racing.

"I am not sure. Simply, I am afraid. If I do nothing and others fall ill and die, what of my conscience? And such poison can affect some people in an hour or two, other people may not be affected for three, four, five hours. I cannot take the chance, M'sier Gideon."

"No," Gideon agreed.

He saw Kate out of the corner of his eye and wished this had



happened on any other night. He had no choice, however, no more than Boulanger, and he had so much less to lose than the little Frenchman. As Kate approached he reached one decision and said quietly to Boulanger:

"I think if we name the kind of eel and where it comes from, and the shop from which you bought the pork, we can put out a call without bringing you in by name." He put out a hand to Kate, who needed no telling that something was wrong. "Kate," he said, "I have to talk to the Yard but it won't take long."

"You mean others, besides those who are here, could be affected?" Boulanger asked.

"Obviously it's possible," Gideon said. "And we can't find out too quickly. Will you explain to Mrs. Gideon while I talk to the Yard?"

Chapter 4

NIGHT LIFE

Gideon finished talking on the bar telephone to the man in charge of the Yard that evening, put down the receiver and rejoined Boulanger and Kate; Boulanger had got round to the subject of Penelope's piano playing; she had played a solo in a short presentation of Liszt on the B.B.C. a few weeks ago, and he had watched it. So great was his courtesy that he did not turn too hurriedly to Gideon although he must be aching to hear what had been done.

"Calls for people who have eaten eels and also pork at the same meal are going out on television and all radio stations," Gideon said. "Anyone who feels the slightest stomach cramping or nausea is being advised to go to a doctor or a hospital at once. I don't see what else we can do. And the two cases might be coincidental, I should try not to worry too much."

Boulanger put a hand to his forehead and said huskily: "Only one time have I heard of trouble with the Oise eels, M'sier Gideon. Hundreds of people were made ill and some died."

"You don't often get epidemics of food poisoning as serious as that," Gideon said.

Outside, while the doorman went to get a taxi for them, a sharp wind blew and Kate shivered. Gideon slipped his arm round her. She leaned against him for a few moments, not solely for warmth, and he was almost sorry when the taxi arrived. The doorman opened the door for Kate, accepted Gideon's tip with a flourish and saluted as they went off.

There was a hint of laughter in Kate's voice as she settled herself. "A busy night for Commander Gideon."

"You don't know how busy," Gideon said, and told her about the Flying Squad case. Almost as soon as he finished he wondered whether he should have done; she murmured something which he didn't quite catch, but he did not press her to repeat it. Soon, they were in Soho, and approaching the Moon World Club, passing the inevitable crowds of tourists, strip-tease and topless show touts, the



pimps, the narrow doorways with their post-card announcements of French massage and off-beat sex attractions. The gay lights crossed and recrossed Kate's face and she was gradually won from her thoughts to the scene of Gideon's square mile: Soho, and the streets nearby. It was some time since he had been here, and ages since he had brought Kate. The taxi slowed down and Gideon said:

"There'll be one more message for me here. That should be the lot."

"When the evening's over I might believe that," retorted Kate.

The Moon World Club had a narrow entrance, the doorway festooned with lighted moons, crescent shaped, half-moons, full moons, even a few with female models whose breasts were made to look like the full moon with the man in the moon winking at the passers-by. But if the entrance was cheap and tawdry the foyer was of a fair size, the photographs on the red-papered walls of modern-day singers and pop stars. At the foot of a staircase covered in thick, rich carpet and which grew wider the lower they went down, a youthful-looking man in a dinner jacket and black tie came forward.

"Commander Gideon?"

"Yes."

"I am Charles Todd, the manager here. We're very glad you can be with us. I have a message for you. Your office would be grateful if you will call them, Commander. There is no hurry," he added. "We will delay the start of the show if necessary. What will you have to drink, Mrs. Gideon?"

Kate watched George disappear into a room marked 'Private.' If he hadn't warned her about the call, she thought, she would have been as mad as a hatter, as it was she was resentful; they, the nebulous "they" of the police, could not leave him alone for five minutes.

George was gone only for a very short time, and she thought there was more spring in his step as he crossed to her.

"I had the Yard check with the hospital about Mrs. Moreno," he said. That was the name of the young girl who had lost her baby. "She's holding her own and the chances are very good. And the hospital wouldn't lie to the Yard, love."

A great wave of affection welled up in Kate, and overflowed, encompassing this man who, among all his preoccupations, had



taken the trouble to find out the one thing she longed to know. Not once again that evening nor in the early hours, did the restless mood return. She looked on indulgently as he watched the stage and roared with laughter at jokes both childish and sophisticated. It was much more than a night club show, much nearer musical; and if the dancers wore no more than G-strings and an occasional ostrich feather, there was a certain forthrightness about it that disarmed criticism. As Gideon finished the last of a bottle of champagne and called for his bill, the manager appeared.

"I hope you'll be our guests, Mr. Gideon."

"Not for as long as I'm in the Force," Gideon said. "But thank you all the same."

The bill came and was much smaller than he had expected; but was this an occasion to make a fuss? He followed the crowd out, Kate close to him, and as he reached the narrow street and stood beneath the moon-lit doorway, a doorman pushed forward.

"Your car's here, sir."

He hadn't ordered a car, and hesitated.

"Mr. Gideon," the manager said from his side, "it is my car, and I won't need it for at least half-an-hour."

It was very quiet in the bedroom.

Kate lay still and he wondered whether she was asleep, or pretending; whether, lying with her back to him, she was looking at the light in the attic flat across the road. Whether she would welcome his hand upon her bosom; whether this was a night for gentleness and quietness and sleep. The clock in the front room downstairs struck two, and he would have to be up by half-past seven and off by half-past eight.

Her voice came sleepily: "George, tomorrow's Friday."

"I know," he said, surprised.

"We're near the week-end. Can we—Oh, I'd forgotten, of course we can't."

"Can we what?" he insisted.

"Go away for the week-end, somewhere not too far? On the river, perhaps, with a room overlooking it. I'd forgotten Alec was away."

"I had week-ends off before I'd heard of Alec Hobbs," he said, drily. "If anything prevents us, it's going to be very serious indeed."

She put a hand out to cover his; and very soon he felt her arm go limp and knew that she was asleep, he was going to prove nothing



to her tonight; unless this had been the best proof of how he felt towards her. He drew his hand away carefully and eased over on his other side, where he had learned to sleep so that if the telephone bell rang he could simply move his left arm over and pluck the instrument up before Kate did more than stir. He stifled a yawn and expected to drop off to sleep soon—but he didn't. He found himself going back in his mind to the night when he had been forced to choose between staying with Kate or doing his job, his "duty" was the more formal way of putting it. There really had been no choice. Occasionally he wondered whether, even today, Kate realised that, really understood it, and whether the time had come when in her heart she had forgiven him.

Which was the more important? Understanding or forgiveness?
Could one, over the years, have one without the other.

A creak in the floorboards made him suddenly more alert, and when he had satisfied himself that the noise was no more than that, his thoughts were off on another track. None of the Flying Squad men tonight had hesitated to take a chance which might have led to a serious, even a fatal collision with the bandit's car; and in these days of increasing violence all of them must have known that the others might be armed. The police had responded almost in a reflex action; thank God, so had he!

The balance on this particular day's police work seemed good. The fact that a rapist and a killer was at large was on the debit side but at least the whole Force could concentrate on that man. There was no major hunt on, apart from that, at the moment: a thousand criminals on the wanted list, but that was normal.

What were they planning, these criminals, and others as cunning, or more so?

That was a question which often struck him with great force. Someone had plotted the jewel raid this evening; Pitton and Dalby must have been planning their escape for a long time, no doubt with help from fellow prisoners. And—a strange thing to enter his mind except that in its present receptive mood almost anything was likely to pop in and out of it!—there was that lorry load of citrus fruit stolen from Covent Garden Market. No thieves would steal such a load unless they had a market all ready; one didn't go round trying to find a vendee for such goods. So, where were these going? A point to remember: they would have to be sold soon or they would be worthless, unless they had been in a special van at exactly



the right temperature, and nothing had been said to him about that.

It wasn't a thing to worry about now, by the time he reached the office, the lorry might have been discovered.

Vaguely he thought of Boulanger and the two poisoned customers, wondered if by chance each could have eaten the offending food before getting to Boulanger's, thought more vaguely that he was glad neither he nor Kate had eaten the eel and the pork, or the eel or the pork for that matter; and at last he fell asleep.

So much was being planned, or was being born in the mind of man, that would cause trouble or at least activity for the police.

At the hospital where Daphne Moreno lay inside an oxygen tent, looking near death, her husband Paul kept muttering to himself, although the nurse who was constantly in the curtained-off section of the ward could not distinguish the words. Even if she had done so, she would not, in all probability, have taken them seriously, for he was distraught, she told herself, and tired to a point of collapse.

"If she dies," the young husband muttered, "I'll kill him."

Jonathan Kelworthy, in a twin bed next to his young wife, could not sleep. He was too unpractised in his chosen vocation to be able to throw off the effect of the death of that child. How had he come to lose her? Why, of all the tens of thousands born each week, had that soft-skinned, gentle girl been so robbed. Was it some error of his, of commission or omission? He went through every stage of his treatment of her and could think of nothing, nothing at all. He would check each step in the morning, and talk to Sylvester about it: Sylvester was the obstetrician who was counsellor and friend to youngsters like himself.

He pushed the bedclothes back slowly and cautiously, and crept out of bed. The springs creaked. He watched Janice, not wanting to wake her, because—oh, never mind because. He must go downstairs, warm some milk and have a biscuit, that might break his obsession with the stillborn child, the dangerously ill mother and distracted father. He was halfway to the door when he heard Janice turn in bed, and then call in a voice heavy with sleep:

"What's the matter? Have you had another call?"

"No," he answered. "I'm restless, that's all. I'm going downstairs for a few minutes."



Her voice came again, a little contemptuously. "You're a fool if you're worrying about that Moreno girl and her baby. If you ask me you had more than a soft spot for that patient."

How the words, the implication, hurt.

How right and yet how dreadfully wrong she was!

Of course he had a soft spot for anyone who was weak and helpless, from sickness. That was why he was a doctor. But Janice would never understand. He was sure of that now. Janice wanted the social prestige of being a doctor's wife but no part in being his wife, in the sense of helpmate. He had been facing that truth for months now.

He said quietly: "You go to sleep, darling," and went out, half afraid that she would pursue the subject; but obviously she was too tired, for when he came back she was fast asleep. He stood looking at her for a few moments, a pretty—no, damn it, a beautiful face which showed at its best in the light filtering through from the streets.

She looked—pure.

He thought: "If I'd dreamt you would be like this . . ." and then checked himself, and went back to bed.

Arthur Dalby, quite unaware that his co-escapee had been caught, slept in the car which he had stolen. It was parked in the garage of an empty house. Like Janice Kelworthy, his face and expression looked 'pure.' Every now and again he smiled in his sleep.

Not far away from him, at a wholesale fruit and vegetable warehouse on the outskirts of Birmingham, four men unloaded a lorry load of oranges, grapefruit and lemons, all of which had come from South or West Africa. They did the work quickly, but without secrecy; night unloading was not uncommon here, for there was an open market nearby which had to be kept fully supplied, as well as the dozens of small shops in the southeast Birmingham area. When at last the truck was empty, money changed hands: two hundred and fifty pounds in small, used notes.

"Now all we've got to do is ditch the lorry," said the driver to his companion. "Then we've got a hundred each and fifty in the saving's account!"

For some reason, that made him roar with laughter.

Chapter 5

POISONING

Kate was asleep when Gideon woke, and he did not disturb her, but made himself a pot of tea, then bathed and shaved in the bathroom along the landing, and, that finished, stood outside the bathroom door looking at a loft ladder which disappeared into a partly open ceiling hatch. This led to the sound-proofed attic, where Penelope *was* to have practised. He remembered the extreme excitement when he had promised to have this done, because so many neighbours complained about her practising classical music at all hours of day and night. It had been an expensive job, but for one reason or another, mainly the fact that she had been away with the B.B.C. Symphony Orchestra so much and partly because she and Alec Hobbs had needed some time together, the Bechstein Grand hoisted up before the attic had been refloored, had seldom been used.

A case of Gideon's Folly, he thought wryly, then dismissing his nostalgic mood, strode purposefully downstairs. He could get breakfast at the Yard canteen and would be there in twenty minutes. He stepped out into a morning with a pale Autumn mist covering grass and shrubs and trees, and obscuring the sky, but there was a promise of a warm day. The doctor's car was not across the road, and all the blinds at Mrs. Jameson's house were drawn; she was a great believer in savouring grief to the full. For once he had not under-estimated the crush of traffic as he drove along the Embankment, and he was in Parliament Square in fifteen minutes; it took another six or seven to reach the Yard itself.

Men who saw him seemed to pay him more attention than usual; one actually saluted, and that puzzled him. Respect he was used to, but not deference. He went up two flights of stairs and into his own office, where several files had already been placed; Hobbs or no Hobbs, the system went on. A youngish Chief Inspector with the hard-to-believe name of Tiger was standing-in for Hobbs, and would come the moment he was summoned.



On the desk were four newspapers, folded so that only the front page headlines showed. He rounded the desk which was at one side of a medium-sized room with a big window overlooking the Embankment, desk, chairs and filing cabinets of rich-looking red mahogany, and snatched up the papers.

GIDEON CATCHES BANDITS! he read.

**COMMANDER GIDEON IN CAR CRASH—THIEVES CAUGHT
YARD CHIEF IN LONDON CHASE.**

BRITAIN'S TOP DETECTIVE IN CHASE AFTER BANDIT

And on every front page his photograph stared up at him.

"The fat-headed idiots," he growled, and then opened the papers full out. He was relieved to see photographs of the Flying Squad men on the inside pages, though exasperated that they were considerably smaller than those of himself. There was also one of the crashed car.

His internal office telephone rang and he picked it up and growled: "Gideon."

"Good morning, Commander." There was no doubt who this was: Sir Reginald Scott-Marle, Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, one of the few men who made Gideon leap, metaphorically, to his toes. Usually the 'Commander' meant that there was someone in Scott-Marle's office, to prevent him from the "George" which had become more customary, but something in Scott-Marle's inflection told Gideon that this time it was out of good humour, rather than formality.

"Good morning, sir."

"So you've reduced yourself to the ranks," Scott-Marle remarked.

"Next time I get a lift in a Squad car I'll be more careful," Gideon said.

"So that's what it was."

"As simple as that," Gideon said.

"Well, you obviously hit the headlines," declared Scott-Marle genially, "a welcome boost to police morale." He paused, and when he spoke again there was a subtle change in the Commissioner's tone, a seriousness. "George, what made you start the food poisoning inquiry last night?"

"I was dining at Boulanger's," answered Gideon, astonished that Scott-Marle should know of it.



"One Cabinet Minister was dining at *Les Gourmets* in Chelsea," said Scott-Marle. "He had those river Oise eels, and he's a very sick man. Not fatally ill but ill enough. I had one of his colleagues on to me as soon as I got in this morning."

"The Home Secretary, I suppose," Gideon said.

"Yes. He had been told by one of the divisional superintendents that there was a general inquiry, emanating from you." Gideon grunted. "It looks as if that particular consignment of eels should be traced, doesn't it?"

Scott-Marle did not often make positive proposals unless he was consulted, and Gideon read into this one the probability that the Home Secretary, who was the Minister in charge of Home Affairs and therefore of the police, was exerting some pressure.

"I'll check," Gideon said. "If it's widespread—the food poisoning, I mean—then it should have been."

"Let me know one way or the other," said Scott-Marle, and then changed the subject completely. "How are you managing without Hobbs?"

"Managing," Gideon replied, drily.

"I had a letter from a colleague in Sydney this morning," said Scott-Marle. "He was very impressed—" Gideon expected him to say "by Hobbs" and not surprised but a little puzzled as to why Scott-Marle should choose this way of saying so: "by your daughter's playing," Scott-Marle finished.

"Good lord!" exclaimed Gideon.

"Apparently the leading New South Wales police turned up in force to hear her play," explained Scott-Marle, "and they gave a reception after the performance to the orchestra, Penelope being the star turn. She is a remarkable young woman, George."

"I couldn't agree more," Gideon replied.

When Scott-Marle rang off he, Gideon, replaced the receiver very slowly, and stared out of the window, filled with thoughts both happy and sad of a daughter twelve thousand miles away. Then he gave himself a little shake and turned briskly to the newspapers. Folding them neatly, he put them aside; he could read the articles later. Now he looked for the first time at the files. Big Ben began to strike. Ten o'clock already? He raised his head and counted . . . seven, eight, nine. *Nine*. He was in much earlier than he had expected, and Scott-Marle must have been at his office much earlier, too.



There were four folders, and the top one was very thin. He opened it, and saw a pencilled message heading several other messages, some of them teletyped. This message read:

*Mrs. Moreno died at seven-thirty this morning, August 26th
at St. Stephen's Hospital.*

At that moment Paul Moreno was standing by the empty bed in his wife's room. His dark eyes were ablaze, with anguish, with grief, and with hatred.

He said as if it were part of a refrain: "I shall kill that doctor. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life."

"Jonathan, you are worrying yourself unnecessarily," Dr. Sylvester said to Dr. Kelworthy. Sylvester was an alert-looking man in his early fifties. He wore grey tweeds, and looked as hard and fit as a man could be. "There is no way in which we can guarantee a live birth. I've seen the child, of course, and I will do the autopsy on the mother, but I am sure you will find that there are some special circumstances and that you are in no way to blame."

Jonathan Kelworthy ran his fingers through curly, nut-brown hair, then drew those same long, strong fingers over his lean, attractive face.

"I hope to God you're right," he said. Then after a pause he went on: "I ought to go and see the husband. He needs sedation badly, and—oh, hell! I've got to go and see him, anyway!"

He turned and left the great man's office.

Gideon put in a call to Kate as soon as he had read the report, and then opened the next one. For some reason Hobbs' stand-in was not putting a description or name or title of the case on the outside of the folder, to Gideon an odd omission. He saw that this was the report on the food poisoning, and read almost unbelievingly:

Twenty-seven cases of food poisoning, at least eleven of them acute, have so far been reported in the metropolitan area and its immediate environs. Two of the victims have died. Officers from the Yard as well as all divisions affected have been instructed to warn all restaurants not to use this particular eel. A list of wholesalers and shops and restaurants which deal in it is being compiled. There appears



some possibility that the poison becomes more virulent when the eel has been eaten at the same meal as pork.

"Two dead!" exclaimed Gideon, and stretched out for the internal office telephone, but before he touched it, the bell of the Yard's exchange rang. Who—of course, Kate. He picked up this receiver, and the operator said:

"Mrs. Gideon, sir."

"Kate," Gideon began, "I felt that I ought to tell you—"

"She's dead," Kate interrupted, in a very still voice. "I heard half-an-hour ago, George." Both were silent for a few moments before Gideon said:

"There's so little to say."

"There's nothing, really," Kate said, "but I'm glad you called. Thank you, George." She sounded formal but no formality was intended, just a measure of her understanding of his concern for her. He wondered if he should tell her about the food poisoning and decided that it would only depress her more, and was actually about to ring off when he remembered what Scott-Marle had told him about Penelope. "Kate!" he cried, "don't ring off. I must tell you! Scott-Marle had a letter about Penny"

He hoped that the good news would sustain her for the rest of the day.

What was he talking about? Sustain her for the rest of the day? Did he really think she was in such urgent need of support? Surely last night had been more of a passing mood than a constant or chronic one. He began to think about what they had said to each other, until suddenly he forced himself to dial Scott-Marle's office. Scott-Marle himself answered at once:

"This is the Commissioner."

"That food poisoning looks very ugly," Gideon said, and for the sake of clarity, read out the report. Scott-Marle did not comment at first and Gideon went on: "So you can be sure we'll see that supplies are brought in. The divisions will work closely with the Health Departments concerned and I'll have a word with someone at the Ministry of Health to make sure there's not too much red tape."

"If you have any trouble let me know," said the Commissioner. He did not add, but obviously meant, that he would, if necessary, talk to the Home Office.



Gideon turned to the next file, his thoughts still on food poisoning. Why didn't Tiger put the name of the case on the outside of the files? Gideon flipped the cover over: this was about the prison escape case, and the summary was as brisk and lucid as he could hope for. He pressed the bell-push at the side of his desk which rung a bell in Hobbs' office: one ring meant come in, two meant telephone me. Almost as soon as he had moved his finger from the bell-push the communicating door opened, and Chief Inspector Tiger came in. He was a big, muscular man with a benign expression. Anyone less tigerish it would be hard to imagine.

"Good-morning, sir."

"Good-morning, Chief Inspector. Explain a little mystery for me, will you?"

"If I can, sir."

"Why don't you put a description of the case on the outside of the folder?" asked Gideon.

For a moment, Tiger looked nonplussed, and he actually echoed "folder" as if he had been repeating Gideon's words to himself, one by one. Then the expression in his dark eyes changed to comprehension and he began: "Because I always—" and suddenly he stopped, obviously doubting the wisdom of what he was about to say, and added lamely: "I always thought you would like to name the case yourself, sir."

"Oh," said Gideon. "Did you." What this man meant, of course, was that Hobbs liked to use his own phraseology; it was always Hobbs' writing on the outside of the folder. "Well, pencil a description in, in future, and if I don't like it I'll change it."

"Very good, sir."

"Has anything else come in during the past half hour or so?" Gideon asked.

Tiger did not hesitate this time, and the answer came quickly.

"I think so, sir. It may be coincidence but I rather think we're up against something new. A refrigerated meat container-lorry was hijacked on the M.1. early this morning. That's the third somewhere in the country inside a month. And the lorry taken from Covent Garden last night, full of oranges and grapefruit, was found empty in a disused quarry outside Coventry two hours ago. Someone must have had a ready market for that kind of fruit, sir—and someone must know where they can sell that meat in a hurry."

Chapter 6

MURDER ONE

Gideon sat very still in his chair for what seemed a long time. Tiger stood in front of the desk, silent now, perhaps wondering whether he had said too much. If Gideon had a criticism of the man it was that he had obviously had this in his mind for some time, days at least, but had not uttered a word about it; probably he would have spoken to Hobbs.

At last, Gideon said:

"Have you done anything about this?"

"I don't understand you, sir."

"Have you told anybody else what you suspect—the big market security police, for instance."

"No, sir," replied Tiger.

The obvious rejoinder was: "Why not?" but Gideon had a feeling that he must not let this man feel the sting of criticism too early. One worked *with* the men as much as was practicable, not above them. "I think we should," said Gideon. "I think we need a breakdown on the thefts from the London markets, anyhow—Smithfield, Billingsgate and Covent Garden. It might be possible to tighten up security at some of them." He saw eagerness in the other man's eyes as he went on: "It looks as if the goods are taken out of London and sold in the provinces. Thought anything about that?"

"I really only woke up to the full possibilities last night," Tiger admitted, "but once I started to think things over, a lot of bells began to ring at once. As the goods are all perishable they'll want to get rid of them quick. They might steal a refrigerated truck but I doubt if they'd be able to maintain temperature control for long. And they would expect the lorries to be missed pretty soon, so they'd want to be out of London in a hurry. I'd say probably the M.I. up as far as Birmingham but no further north, sir. Of course they might have a lot of small vans waiting, so that they could



spread the load, but if a refrigerated lorry or a special fruit-carrying one was seen in the same place, unloading into small vans, it would soon be noticed. There'd be a big risk, anyhow. So I'd say they have a big wholesaler ready to take the stuff at one go. The wholesaler could sell it in small lots without any trouble."

Tiger said all this very quickly as if to make sure Gideon couldn't interrupt. When he had finished he was breathing hard. Gideon nodded.

"That seems to add up. We need a man to get moving quickly, preferably one who has had some dealings with the Federation and the County people—"

"May I make a suggestion, sir?"

"Yes."

"Someone who knows the markets might be better in the long run. They can all get along with the provincial blokes if they obviously know their business."

"Ah," said Gideon. "Yes. Whom do we have?" He knew whom he would select unless the man was deeply involved in another case from which he should not be moved, but wanted to find out whether Tiger would select the same man, or had some special candidate of his own.

"Chief Inspector Cockerill, sir."

It was the man of whom Gideon had thought; one who had probed into thefts from Covent Garden two or three years before, but thefts on a much smaller scale than the present ones.

"I'll talk to him," Gideon said. "What's he on at the moment?"

"The Covent Garden job—I put him on to that at once. You weren't here, sir, and he seemed—"

"You were quite right to put Mr. Cockerill on the Covent Garden inquiry," Gideon told Tiger. "But get him here as soon as you can, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

"What about the food poisoning?" Gideon asked.

"That's a different kettle of fish," said Tiger, and looked puzzled because Gideon grinned. The pun dawned on him a moment later. "I see, sir. It looks as if it's confined to London, and probably the West End—Central London, anyhow. I asked Superintendent Firmani if he'd look after it for the beginning, sir."

"Why Mr. Firmani?" Gideon wanted to find out how this man's mind worked.



"Well, chiefly the lingo," replied Tiger without a moment's hesitation. "The chefs and headwaiters at so many of these places may speak fairly good English, but as likely as not they're not fluent, especially those who work in the kitchens. Mr. Firmani's a pretty good linguist, sir."

"Right," Gideon agreed. "I'd like to see him, too."

"I'll arrange it, sir."

"Thanks," Gideon said in an obvious tone of dismissal, and he waited until Tiger reached the communicating door before saying: "Oh, Tiger."

"Sir?"

"I'm not going to miss Mr. Hobbs as much as I thought I was."

The other man actually turned a dusky red. He muttered something that sounded like: "Thank you, sir," and went out; the door closed very quietly. Gideon half-smiled, half-frowned, and turned back to the reports, to read each one thoroughly so that he was fully up to date. Those which Tiger had either written or edited were models of lucidity; some of the others were fuzzily-written, it was amazing how badly some first class senior officers wrote their reports. But all of them gave him the facts, and facts mattered most, he could make his own interpretations.

The reports finished, he read the newspaper articles. They were exaggerated where his part was concerned, he had been used as the peg on which to hang the story, but a picture of the courage of the Squad car crew came through. Scott-Marle had referred to one man's comment in reply to the question:

"Did Commander Gideon take charge?"

"He just told us to get on with it and never mind him," the detective had answered, and that was as good a summary as Gideon would ask for. Moreover, it underlined the fact that the men at the Yard were looking on him with approval. He was astonishingly lucky, and always had been, with his men, and their attitude towards him. When things had gone wrong their loyalty had been a byword. The feeling that he was one of them, that they were all dependent on one another, was perhaps the most important single factor.

Enough of self-congratulation!

His telephone rang and he picked up the receiver while writing on one folder: *The Markets Case*. "Gideon," he announced, and the operator asked: "Will you speak to Mr. Boulanger." "Yes,"



Gideon agreed at once, and thought: I hope none of his clients died. Almost immediately Boulanger spoke, his French accent more noticeable on the telephone than when they had been face to face.

"Mr. Gideon?"

"Speaking," Gideon said.

"Mr. Gideon," repeated Boulanger, "I have the news which is not good. First, M'sier Harrison, who was at the restaurant, he has died. It is terrible, terrible." After a moment he went on: "There is another thing." There was a pause and Gideon wondered how many more of the people who had dined at Boulanger's had been taken ill. "The eels," Boulanger said stonily, "they were not from the right place."

"What?" Gideon's voice rose.

"You send a man, he asks many questions—a Superintendent Firmani, yes? I tell him where I buy the eels and the pork and he goes away. Afterwards, one of my assistants come to me and tells me the truth. He did not buy the eels from the right place, which is a shop in Billingsgate—the market, you understand."

"I know what you mean," said Gideon.

"He buys from a man who comes to the back door when I am not in, and sells them cheap. They are not good and fresh, Mr. Gideon. They have been de-frozen, and then ice heaped upon them. I do not doubt they are the cause of the trouble. I would have told Mr. Firmani but he is not in."

"I'll see that he's told very soon," Gideon promised. "Do you know the name of the man who sold you the eels?"

"There was no name given, it was a cash sale, Mr. Gideon. My man had so much to spend and he made the profit on the side, you understand. He is now very frightened and very ashamed."

"I dare say he is," said Gideon. "Will you hold him at the restaurant until Mr. Firmani has arrived?"

"But of course."

"Thank you," Gideon said. "And thank you for telling me. Goodbye." He rang off, and on the instant saw the handle of the communicating door turn, but it stopped at once and there was a sharp tap at the door. "Come in," he called, and Tiger appeared, a shadow behind him. "Mr. Firmani's here, sir, if you would like to see him."



"He's the very man I want to see," Gideon said.

Firmani always managed, somehow, to surprise him. The name implied an Italian or someone from Southern Europe, and Firmani was as blonde as any Scandinavian, with a round face and a snub nose; everything about him was a contradiction to his name. He was a big man who moved jerkily as if operated by clockwork or by invisible strings; hence his nickname, Springer.

"Good morning, Commander." There was a hint of Cockney in his voice.

"Good morning, Springer." The use of the soubriquet obviously pleased Fermanni, who came across and shook hands. He was putting on weight, Gideon thought, and would soon have a sizeable paunch. He said pleasantly: "Sit down . . . I've just had a piece of news that should interest you."

"Who from?" asked Firmani.

"Boulanger. He just called me."

"He's been letting an assistant do the buying, and the assistant's been cutting corners in price," Firmani said, with evident satisfaction at Gideon's expression. "Am I far out?"

"Bang on, don't they say?" said Gideon. "Have you found others at the same game?"

"Commander," Firmani replied. "I have now seen the owners or managers of seven restaurants whose eels caused a violent form of ptomaine poisoning last night. Each of them either cut price corners himself or used an assistant who did. The eels as well as other fish were sold from a plain van which carried a small refrigeration unit which I suspect was there to impress, rather than to work. So far the descriptions of the driver-salesman tally fairly well. Aged about twenty-five, fair-haired with hair growing back on his forehead, a broad nose and thick lips. I've got two of the restaurant buyers going through the rogues gallery now—photographs of itinerant salesmen and house to house salesmen with records."

"Very nice work," Gideon said. "All the descriptions are about the same, you say?"

"Near enough for us to get a good *Identikit* likeness if the rogues gallery is a flop," said Firmani. "I've got a man over with some city chaps at Billingsgate, to see if they know the fellow, as well as at two or three smaller fish markets and wholesalers in the City. With luck I should have something to show you by the end of the day."

It wasn't like Firmani to count his chickens too soon, so Gideon



simply said: "We can't get results too quickly. Did you know that a Cabinet Minister was one of the victims?"

"Did I! He'll have his photograph in as many newspapers as you did this morning! Don't go and throw your life away, Commander, will you?" He obviously meant the remark seriously. "Well, if that's all—"

The internal telephone bell rang and Gideon lifted the receiver with one hand and raised the other as a sign of dismissal to Firmani. But before the superintendent opened the door, Tiger said into the telephone: "Is Mr. Firmani still there, sir?"

"Yes," said Gideon, and raised his voice. "Springer, half-a-mol!"

"Both the men going through the photographs have identified the van driver," declared Tiger. "He's a man named Baker who's had three short prison sentences for peddling old bread that had been watered and re-heated, as well as selling stolen fruit and vegetables. Jack Baker," he repeated.

Gideon replaced the receiver, and turned to Firmani. "It looks as if we know who the salesman is. Don't lose a minute picking him up, will you?"

Firmani was already opening the communicating door.

Jack Baker, known to wife, mother and intimate friends as Jackie, had one besetting fault; perhaps it was even a sin. He loved to get something for nothing. "Buy cheap, sell dear" was his motto, and he could quote a dozen instances of millionaires who had made their money in exactly that way. He was, on the whole, a happy man. He ferretted out bankrupt stocks and slightly fire-damaged goods and even some which he suspected had not been honestly come by, and sold them door to door in different parts of London. He was a good-natured man, and although there was something sensual about his full lips and roving eye, he was not often unfaithful to his wife; and he was a good provider, not only for her but for his mother, whom he three-quarters supported.

When, a few weeks before, he was asked if he would take on a job as van-driver salesman to high class restaurants, he had jumped at it. For among his attributes was a rubbing acquaintance with both French and Italian. It did not take him long to learn the names of the special fish he was to sell, and being Jackie Baker it did not occur to him that there was anything wrong in taking fish out of an old refrigerator which had a small electric motor inside for sound



effects, and pretending it had been under constant refrigeration. After all, he had sold many a baker's dozen of rock-hard rolls or loaves, soaked in water and then put in a hot oven to make them fresh for at least long enough to sell.

There was big money in it by his standards, too; he was making a hundred pounds a week!

He went, on the morning of the food poisoning investigation, to collect his van from the old warehouse where he parked it, free, by night. It was a small warehouse, filled with old crates and cardboard cartons, close to Billingsgate Market. He would go to a small wholesaler, named Bateson, for his morning supplies and be taking in the shekels within an hour. He did not trouble to secure the double doors behind him, as there was little wind; he could edge one of the doors aside with the van if one did swing to.

He was actually starting the engine of the van, a Hillman Imp, when not one but both doors swung to. Muttering under his breath he got out of the seat and went to the doors to open them; but neither would budge. He pushed harder, then placed his shoulder against first one side and then the other, exerting all his strength, but nothing yielded; someone had fastened the doors from the outside.

"What the hell are you playing at?" he called out angrily. "If this is a joke I don't think much of it."

No one responded; and he heard no sound.

He looked about him, with sinking heart, knowing that there was only one window in this section, which had been sealed off after one end had collapsed years ago. The window was not only too small for him to climb out of, but too high to reach. Puzzled, but aware that he was stuck here until whoever had secured those doors came back, he yelled:

"Open up, you flickers! I've got my work to do!"

He kicked at the door.

Simultaneously with the kick there was a flash from behind him; as if lightning had struck. He spun round, and saw fires blazing not in one but in a dozen places, on the old crates and among the cartons. In sudden frenzy he rushed forward in an attempt to quench the flames, but as he did so there was another flash and another dozen fires started.

That was the moment when he realised that he was being murdered; being burned to death. A split second later he began to



scream and kick wildly against the solid, unyielding doors. Behind him the heat grew fiercer and the fire grew closer until first his clothes, and then the very flesh of his body began to burn.

But before that he was dead of suffocation.

Chapter 7

MURDER TWO

Jonathan Kelworthy pulled his car into a parking space outside Mrs. Jameson's house, for parking was fairly easy by day. It was almost the very moment that the fire had started at the disused warehouse, some seven miles across London as the crow flies. He looked tired and haggard, but his movements were brisk as he walked to the street door of the house. He rang the top bell twice and the ground floor bell—Mrs. Jameson's—once, an arrangement he had made with the two women to identify himself without bringing either to the front door. Then he pushed open the letter-box and fished inside with a bent forefinger until he touched a piece of string on which a street door key was hanging. He pulled the key through, metal rattling on metal, and inserted it into the front door.

There was no sign of Mrs. Jameson he noted with a sigh of relief.

He went up the first flight of stairs and passed a doorway in a wooden partition which divided the landing into two. Beyond was a self-contained, three-roomed flat, equivalent to the two smaller bedrooms and the bath-room at Gideon's house. Then he went up a very narrow stairway leading to the attic apartment.

The whole place was gloomy, because of partitions and boarded up windows. The stairway, a strong ladder securely fastened to the wall but with a flimsy handrail, creaked loudly. He had tried to persuade Mrs. Moreno to stay with friends rather than have these stairs to climb in the late stage of her pregnancy, but he had not been successful.

At the top was a narrow landing and a locked door. Usually it would be open for him. Now there was no sound. He put a finger on the bell, and then hesitated. Both the husband and the mother were said to be here. Supposing they were asleep, it would be



criminal to wake them, for his main purpose in coming was to make sure they were getting rest, particularly Moreno, whose face was like the face of a dead man.

Should he ring? If the ringing from downstairs had not disturbed them, was there any purpose in it? He had other house calls to make, and needed rest himself.

He turned, cautiously, on the narrow landing—and as he did so the door opened. Caught almost off-balance, he grabbed the hand-rail and turned to face whoever was standing there.

It was Paul Moreno.

It was Moreno all right, wild and unkempt, his right hand holding a knife with a thin bright blade. Sunlight came in stealthily from a half-blocked window and shone upon them both. But neither the knife nor Moreno's expression gave Kelworthy the slightest warning. He thought vaguely that the man had been cutting something, bread perhaps; and he was quite sure Moreno hadn't slept and was desperately in need of a sedative.

He smiled in greeting, gently, trustingly, and then he saw the movement of the knife, pointing towards him, the sharp end on a level with his stomach. He saw not simply tiredness and grief in the other's eyes, but madness. That was the moment when he knew beyond all doubt what Moreno intended to do.

Moreno drew his lips back and said through teeth that seemed too tightly clenched for utterance:

"You killed her. *I kill you.*"

Alarm ran through Kelworthy. He dared not step back quickly, or he would stumble and fall down the stairs.

With sudden, terrifying speed the knife was thrust towards him. He flung out his left arm and searing pain shot through it. He moved backwards, slipped, and began to fall. The last he saw of the knife was the light flashing across the blade.

That was all.

He was oblivious of Moreno standing and staring as he fell down the stairs, blood already welling out of the wound in the throat. He did not hear Mrs. Smith, the mother-in-law, demand: "What is it, Paul? Who—" And he did not hear her scream.

He did not see Moreno turn and slash at her with the knife as she slammed the door in his face. He did not see Moreno stumble down the stairs, the knife still in his hand.



Moreno saw Kelworthy's body on the landing below.

He held the knife poised as if about to thrust it into the man, once again; then, seeing the blood, he decided that Kelworthy was already dead or dying. He flung the knife into a stair tread where it stuck, quivering, sprang over the body and ran downstairs. He kicked against something which gave off a metallic chink of sound, glanced down and saw a bunch of keys. *Car* keys: the keys to Kelworthy's car! He snatched them up and hurried outside, slamming the door behind him. The red sports car was right in front of the house, and he went straight to the driving seat, pushed the key into the ignition, and turned. The engine caught on the instant. Seen by several people, none of whom saw anything out of the ordinary, he eased the car into position.

Across the road, at Gideon's house, Kate was in the kitchen, scrambling eggs for a late breakfast.

She did not even hear the sports car being driven away.

She felt much more contented this morning, and enjoyed reading about George's escapade without any great feeling of concern: she had lived with the fact that a policeman's lot was a dangerous one too long to be easily worried. After washing up, and because she felt in the mood she put on the russet brown suit, took her shopping basket, and went to the end of the road for a bus. A taxi came along and in a moment of rare extravagance, she took it.

She had shopped for years in a part of Fulham which had changed in some ways out of all recognition. As she got out of the taxi at the entrance to the small shopping centre she usually patronised, she saw a huge banner across the front of one of the new stores, bearing the words:

THE BEST BUY IN LONDON

This was a Quickturn store, one of the chains, where the food *was* cheap. Huge posters in the windows showed prices which were anything from ten to twenty percent below the private store where she usually went.

The only thing which kept her out of Quickturn was the mass of people inside. "Her" store had only a few customers and a manager who looked troubled.



Superintendent Firmani left Scotland Yard feeling very pleased with himself. It was some time since he had been briefed by Gideon, not Hobbs, and Gideon had managed to convey the impression of a meeting of old friends. If that wasn't enough, there was the news about the van salesman, and it should not be long before he was picked up. Already, there was a general call out for him in the London area, especially the restaurant districts of the West End, the City, Knightsbridge and Soho. And the Superintendent-in-Charge of a division which included the docks area, had jumped at the chance of sending men round to Jackie Baker's home in Fiddle Street, Whitechapel.

Firmani headed for the East End; driven by a long-jawed bony-kneed, big knuckled detective sergeant named Ebony. The radio was left on and snatches of talk, instructions and reports drifted into the car. They went by way of the Embankment, past the old sailing ships where cadets still trained. Then on beneath the under-pass at Blackfriars, driving steadily until the stench from Billingsgate market filled the air.

"Slow down," ordered Firmani, and the driver slid towards the kerb and the cobbled pavement. As he did so a City of London police inspector got out of a car parked a few yards along. No one in either of the London forces was really aware of the anachronism of their being a force, completely autonomous and independent, in the middle of the district covered by the Metropolitan Police Force. The truth was that they had grown up with it, and accepted it. The forces worked together and here was evidence of it. The City man, Greerson, was in uniform. He came towards Firmani with a smile.

"Come to help me out?" he inquired. He was big, red-faced, jovial-looking.

"Come to ask if you've heard anything about Baker yet," replied Firmani. "I'm on my way to N.E. and his house."

"So far the answer here is a blank," Greerson said. "There's only one of the wholesalers seems to know him, and that's by accident. Hold your nose." He took it for granted that Firmani would want to come into the great Market, and Firmani jumped at the chance. An old man wearing a filthy cap was hosing down the cobbles of one of the entrances, and although he stood aside, water splashed over their shoes. Firmani had a feeling that it was done intentionally. He stepped into the great hall, with its high ceiling, the cubicles round the sides, the main selling blocks in the middle.



Huge piles of block and crushed ice stood about, making the place as cold as a winter morning, so cold in fact that it seemed to nullify the smell of fish.

There it was, on stone benches, in crates marked: Gt. Yarmouth or Felixstowe, Looe or Avonmouth, Hull or Grimsby, all the fishing ports to the east and the south-west of London. Small lorries and vans were being loaded by porters who wore their flat hats, like solidified and black-painted boaters, as if they were featherweight although to some they must have seemed as if they weighed a ton.

Firmani felt ice crunch beneath his feet, and nearly fell. Greerson steadied him. A short, astonishingly broad man wearing a black jacket and striped trousers came towards them with a little shrimp of a man whose "boater" looked far too big for him.

"Anything more for me, Mr. Pettifer?" asked Greerson.

"Depends what you call more," replied Pettifer cautiously.

"Superintendent Firmani, Mr. Pettifer, the manager here," said Greerson.

"How are you?"

"How'd you do?"

"Mr. Charley Peak," said Pettifer of the shrimp. "You tell them, Charley."

Charley began to speak in a voice so croaking that at first Firmani could not understand what he said, but gradually the import of it came to him. Charley was not a full time porter at Billingsgate: he was retired and "helped aht a bit." He also helped small shops and wholesalers out when their staff was short because of holidays or sickness. That was how he had come to know Jackie Baker, who had started to call at wholesalers for fish and specialties at the end of the day.

"Didn't know a bloody fing about fish," croaked Charley. "Didn't seem to 'ave no sense of smell. Strewth. I'd have dumped most of what he bought."

"Do you know where he sold it?" asked Greerson.

"Search me, Guv'. I only know he took it away in a plain van. Green it was, with the name of the people who had it before painted out." Charley appeared to have finished his statement, and then he added out of the blue. "Not the only one, neether."

"What do you mean?" demanded Greerson.

"Been several of the blaggars lately buying up old fish. Ought to be a law against it, that's what I say." He allowed this profound



statement to hover, and then, struck by the enormity of telling the law there ought to be a law, he began to laugh; and the laugh sounded exactly as if he were choking to death.

This alarming cacophony followed the two policemen to the doorway through which they had come in. The old man with the cap had moved further away but as they approached he began to swivel round, turning the jet of water gradually towards them while strengthening the pressure. It looked for a moment as if they would be swamped, but Greerson jumped round, over the jet, and then made a bee-line for the old man, who backed hastily away, letting the hose nozzle droop towards the cobbles.

"Hallo, Smithy," Greerson said. "Ever heard of resisting a policeman in the process of his duty?"

"I never was—"

"Or using an offensive weapon? That's a very serious charge."

"Offensive weapon my—"

"I could even work in abusive language," interrupted Greerson.

"A hose ain't no offensive weap—"

"You're out of date, Smithy." Greerson would not let the old man finish a sentence. "A water-hose is now considered to be a powerful weapon, both offensive and defensive. It's used to quell riots all over the world."

"I'm not no riot!"

"You'd be surprised," Greerson said, and he laughed. "My chaps and the Yard men might be coming in and out of here for a few days, you be careful with that hose." He took a packet of cigarettes out of his jacket and when Firmani refused one, proffered the packet to the old man. "How's Maisie?" he asked casually.

The deepset eyes set in a lined face worn to the consistency of leather by the years of fighting for a living, stared at him unwinking. After a while the man stretched out a hand as gnarled as the branch of an old tree. He leaned forward to take a light from Greerson, and then said in a gruff voice without any of the anger and resentment he had shown before:

"Think I'd be working if she was still around?" After a pause he added: "Lorst her, two years ago. Bloody cancer."

"Oh," said Greerson, and he looked genuinely concerned. "I'm sorry, Smithy. Very sorry."

The old man nodded, and Greerson and Firmani turned away. They were out of earshot of everyone in the market and within



earshot of a distorted voice coming over a police car radio before Greerson said in a tired-sounding voice: "You can't keep track these days. If I'd known about his old girl I'd have gone to see him. Used to make a living stealing fish from the boats and the lorries, but he's past that now. Want to know something funny?"

The radio voice was very loud as they stood by the side of Firmani's car.

"I'll buy it."

"He won't claim an old age pension, won't take anything from Welfare, won't even take help from the Salvation Army. Independent old flicker." He gave a guffaw of a laugh, this big, insensitive looking man, and went on: "They don't come like him any more. If a crook goes through a lean patch you find him on the dole!" Firmani found himself laughing, too, but suddenly his laughter and Greerson's faded as a voice sounded more clearly from the car.

"Fire in a disused warehouse at Whitechapel, near Brown's Quay, caused the death of a man as yet unknown. The fire is now under control. Arson is suspected." There was a pause before the man from *Information* went on: "Special message for Superintendent Firmani. Please contact Superintendent Lemaitre at N.E. Division. This is urgent."

The voice broke off, and only atmospherics sounded, until Greerson said:

"You're within ten minutes of him—why don't you go straight on and I'll tell him you're on the way."

In fact it was fifteen minutes later when Firmani stepped into Lemaitre's office in a big old-fashioned building in the heart of Whitechapel. Lemaitre, tall, spare, bony, grey, sporting a red and white spotted bow tie and a green and white check suit, stood up with his hand outstretched, and said in exaggerated Cockney:

"Watcher, me old mate. Dunno what you've started, do you? That cove you're after, Jackie Baker, burned to a cinder in that warehouse, van and all. And it was arson, all right—got the fire boys on to it already."

Chapter 8

SUDDEN PRESSURE

Firmani and Lemaitre stood and looked at the gutted shell of the warehouse. Here and there crates and cartons still smouldered, giving off a pungent smoke. The van was burned right out except for the driver's cabin, which had been protected by the old refrigerator, itself a charred box. The heat had cracked but not shattered the windscreen. Police were in the cabin, one man taking photographs, one using grey powder in a search for fingerprints. This man climbed down when he saw Lemaitre.

"Wotcher got?" demanded Lemaitre.

"No doubt about it, sir—Baker's prints are all over the wheel. All over the cabin, if it comes to that."

"Anyone else's?"

"I haven't found any yet, sir."

"We need some," Lemaitre declared. "Don't miss a thing, George." He turned away and grinned at Firmani showing good but widely-spaced teeth. "Talking about George, how is Gee Gee?"

"On the ball as ever," answered Firmani.

"Ask him when he's coming out this way," Lemaitre urged. "I haven't seen him since the police ball." There was a nostalgic expression in the bright eyes, for Lemaitre had been Gideon's right hand man for many years, until changes in the structures of the Yard had given him a chance to come out here as the Divisional Superintendent. There was neither jealousy nor envy in him for Hobbs; but there was wistfulness at times.

"I'll do that," Firmani promised, but he was still looking at the sheet of canvas over what he knew to be a charred heap of ashes, all that was left of Jackie Baker. He had a feeling which he knew Lemaitre shared: this was not an unconnected incident; this was the beginning of a major case. He felt it, as it were, in his bones.



So did Gideon.

First, he had the news from Firmani by telephone. Next, he had a call from Gillespie, the Chief Fire Officer for London, who confirmed that the cause was arson; a quick combustible preparation known as *firex* had been thrown, or shot through the window and had set the place on fire in seconds.

"The poor devil didn't have a chance," the Fire Officer said.

"Is *firex* used much?"

"It's used commercially for quick combustion and it's also used when big stacks of rubbish have to be destroyed. It's easy enough to get from the manufacturers and a few wholesalers."

"Will you let me have a list of all you know?"

"I'll do better," the other said. "I'll let you have a list of all producers, suppliers and stocklists; in London for a start, and then for the rest of the country."

"Thanks," said Gideon.

He rang off, and contemplated the file in front of him. A first-class restaurant buying cheap fish from an on-the-make salesman who saw no further than the end of his nose was one thing. But why kill this man, and use such hideous means, except to make sure that he could not talk?

Someone knew that the police would find him very quickly; and someone feared that he knew enough to give the police vital information about them.

What could that vital information be?

Almost certainly it was information about crime on a large scale; people didn't kill in such a way unless it was. The sense of uneasiness which Firmani also felt was very strong in him. He called Tiger on the inter-office machine and asked:

"What's the news on Cockerill?"

"He hasn't reported yet, sir."

The message that I want to see him went out, I hope."

"The moment I came back to my desk, sir."

Gideon grunted, and was about to ring off when the other man repeated: "Sir." So he grunted again, very preoccupied, and looked up. In the light from the window Tiger's hair looked almost blue-black. His eyes were rounded in concern, the whites very white indeed. "There's one other thing that's come in, sir. Very nasty."

"Oh," said Gideon, and he thought: We've had everything "very



nasty" that we want, not more of it, for God's sake. "What?" he asked, his mind still on the fire at the old warehouse. He did not know Baker himself but had heard reports of him; a fairly harmless little man who wanted life to be on Easy Street.

"You know Dr. Kelworthy, sir, don't you?"

"I know of him," Gideon replied, wrenching his thoughts away from the other problem. "Why?"

"He was murdered this morning, sir. Just an hour or so ago."

Gideon echoed, stupidly: "*Murdered?*" And then, in wonder, "But why?"

"The husband—" began Tiger, and from that moment Gideon understood. He heard Tiger going on "The husband of the woman who died in childbirth, a man named Moreno, went berserk. He killed him with a carving knife, sir."

Oh, God. Oh, God.

Kate.

"Are you there, sir?"

"Yes." Gideon made himself speak firmly. "Have we got him?"

"No, sir."

"What?" Gideon roared, as if this were Tiger's personal responsibility.

"Apparently he raced out of the house and drove off in the doctor's car, sir. Apparently—" Tiger, obviously, was nervous—"the doctor often kept his car keys in his hand—but that's guesswork, sir. It was an hour before we learned about it, apparently the dead woman's mother went all to pieces and the landlady was in a stupor, what with drugs and drink. Fulham is handling the case, sir. There's a general call out for the car, but as far as I know nothing's been reported yet."

"Let me know when it is," Gideon said, and rang off on the other man's "Yes, sir."

Gideon sat still and solid in his chair.

It was one of the most awful things in his experience. Could they not—could *he* not, have spotted that the loss, first of the long awaited child and then of the cherished wife, had turned the husband's mind? A thousand, a million minds placed under the same awful strain would not have broken, this man's mind must have been already close to breaking-point.

Kate must know by now.



He wanted to go to her, but it was impossible. He was not even sure that he should telephone her. On her own she would probably hold up well, but if he were to talk to her she might break down. Suddenly, he thought: "Priscilla." She was his married daughter, living in a London suburb with children of school age; Priscilla might be able to go and see Kate for an hour or two. He put in a call to her through the exchange and then looked up the number of a Dr. Malcolm Henby-Kite, one of the Yard's consultants on psychiatric and pathological cases, a man often called on to give expert evidence of the state of mind of a man charged with a grave offence.

A woman answered his call, bright and brisk: "Dr. Henby-Kite's office."

"This is Commander Gideon. Is Mr. Kite there?"

The woman hesitated. "Well, Commander, he's with a patient."

"Is it a matter of life and death?"

"No, sir."

"Mine could be," Gideon said. "Put me through at once, please." The nurse did not argue and the exchange telephone did not ring, so there was no answer from Priscilla yet. His inter-office machine began to ring, and he picked it up with his free hand. "Gideon."

"I've just had word from Mr. Cockerill," Tiger said. "He's been up to Northampton, sir, and only just got your message. He's on the M.1. and should be here by half-past three."

Gideon looked at his wristwatch and saw that it was nearly two o'clock.

"Send him to me as soon as he arrives," Gideon said. "And have the canteen send me down something to eat. They know what I like." At that moment a mellifluous voice sounded in his other ear; this was Henby-Kite's, who had one of the most impressively gracious-sounding voices imaginable. Even in the witness box he talked as if judge and jury were patients who needed to be soothed and indulged.

"Good-afternoon, Commander. How can I help you?"

"With a very quick off-the-cuff opinion given without the full knowledge of the facts," said Gideon, and startled Henby-Kite into a laugh which was rather less considered than his usual speaking voice.

"I can but try, Commander."



Gideon explained, with the lucidity born of long years of making sure that he was clearly understood; and he described what little he knew of Moreno and of the young doctor: the *murdered* doctor. The very thought made him wince.

"As far as I can, I understand," said Henby-Kite. "May I presume to guess what you would like to ask me?"

"Yes."

"Is the young man so demented that he might kill others?"

"Yes," said Gideon.

"Commander," Henby-Kite said in a firmer voice than before, as if he wanted to make sure that Gideon could not possibly underestimate the significance of what he said, "if I were a mother with a very young child I would not like to meet this man now. If I were a young and pregnant woman, I would not like to meet him, either. I give you as my considered opinion that in these circumstances he could—I do not say he would, only that he *could*—be extremely dangerous. It goes without saying that if cornered by your men he might be very dangerous, also; on the other hand if cornered he might kill himself." Henby-Kite paused for what, in the circumstances, was a long time, then went on: "I do hope I have made myself clear."

"Crystal clear," Gideon agreed, gruffly. "I was alarmed before. I'm terrified now."

"I really think you have cause to be until that young man is where he can do no harm," said the psychiatrist. "Please don't hesitate to call me if you think I can help. If the young man is cornered, I might be able to reason with him where less experienced men or women could not."

"I understand," Gideon said. "Thank you."

He rang off, but kept a hand firmly on the telephone, as if he wanted to hold onto something. This was worse than he had anticipated. Now he had to decide quickly what to do. Warn all divisions, of course; step up the search for Moreno until it had absolute priority. That much was easy but—how? If the men knew the kind of crime Moreno might commit, then they might find that vital little extra to put into the search. The murder of a policeman; the murder of a child or of a mother-to-be—these gave to most of his men reserves of strength that they did not know they had.

But if he put the full story out it would reach the Press; tele-



vision; radio. It was the kind of thing which could spread near-panic; the kind of danger which might seriously harm a woman in the later stages of pregnancy.

If he didn't put out the full story, then none of these women would be warned to take care.

This was a period when there was no active Assistant Commissioner whom he could consult. He might be wise to check with Scott-Marle, but that would simply be shifting responsibility, or attempting to. The longer he clutched the telephone, the more certain he became of what he must do. He rang for Tiger, who came in as quickly as Hobbs ever did, and asked:

"Do you do shorthand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then take this down, get it on the typewriter as roughly as you like and let me have it the moment you're through. It's a general call to London and Home Counties—" he broke off, with a sudden flare of hope. "Is there any news of Moreno?"

"No, sir."

"The car?"

"No, sir."

"Then take this down, and fill in the blanks for me. Quote. The search for Christian name Moreno wanted in connection with the murder of Dr. Jonathan Kelworthy in Fulham this morning must be given absolute priority. Moreno, known to be suffering severely from shock can be anywhere in the London metropolitan area or beyond. He was last seen at—fill in—in Harrington Street, Fulham, driving a red M.G. number—fill in. Experts fear that the double shock of losing his wife and stillborn child may make him attack young babies and their mothers or women obviously pregnant. A special watch should be kept in High Streets, shopping centres and supermarkets. Officers must use their own judgment whether to advise mothers with infants-in-arms or mothers-to-be whether to stay in the open or stay in the security of their homes. Wherever possible out-of-doors they should not be alone." For the first time since he had started to dictate Gideon stopped, and for the first time Tiger's pencil stopped on his note-book; apparently he had kept pace without any difficulty. Gideon stared out of the window and then went on: "Since Moreno has had no experience in evading the police it should not be long before he is apprehended, but until such time the search for him must be given absolute priority.



Repeat: Absolute priority. Signed: George Gideon, Commander C.I.D."

He broke off, motioned to the other man to get up, and said: "The last sentences are for press and publicity. Get moving."

"Sir," said Tiger.

"Well?" Gideon demanded impatiently.

"The message could go out as it is, without any revision."

"So I should hope. But I want to check for any change of emphasis," Gideon said. But he half-smiled. "You've lost a line on that typewriter already!"

Tiger went out of the communicating door like a streak, and for the first time the door closed behind him with a bang.

Gideon felt the sweat spreading across his forehead and the back of his neck. He was undergoing the kind of pressure that he had not experienced for a long time; and until Moreno was caught it would get worse. But he must not let the other cases slide; he needed to concentrate on the food business, although that could wait until Cockerill arrived.

There was a tap at his passage door, and he called: "Come in."

The door opened slowly and an elderly man, one of the retired policemen who had become messengers at the Yard, came in, holding a tray with great care. Food! Gideon had forgotten that he had told Tiger to send for some. The man walked past the desk with a nod and a smile at Gideon, placed the tray on a small table by the side of the window, straightened out and beamed in self-congratulation.

"Haven't spilt a drop, sir!"

"Good. What have you brought me?"

"Green pea soup, sausages and mash, coffee in a pot, cream, baked jam roll, butter and cheese. You won't starve, sir."

"Better not tell my wife how you feed me," Gideon said. "She can't understand why I'm putting on weight." He sat watching as the man spread first a white cloth and then the silverware, and finally the food. He stood back to admire his handiwork and then backed away.

"Just give a ring when you're finished, sir."

"Thanks, Tom."

Gideon moved over to the table and began to eat, slowly at first, and then more heartily. Before he had finished the soup Tiger came in with the message typed, letter perfect. Gideon altered only a word



or two here and there, and added at the top: *For General Release*, then handed it to Tiger.

"Get it out in record time," he ordered.

He had nearly finished the meal when it occurred to him that he had forgotten the escaped prisoner, what was his name? Dalby, Arthur Dalby. Had there been any news of him Tiger would surely have said so.

So one of the two prisoners, rapist and murderer, had been at large for twenty-four hours.

Chapter 9

PRETTY FACE

Arthur Dalby, known at Midlands West Prison as Pretty Face, was driving along a busy road on the outskirts of London when he saw the girl, her hand raised in silent request for a lift into London. His heart leapt. She wore shorts and a kind of scarf blouse which covered her bosom but left her back bare down to the waist. These things he took in at a glance as he began to slow down.

He had chosen to come along less busy roads than the M.1. and the A.1. for he guessed that the police had barricaded the main thoroughfares and were checking all cars. In this north London suburb the chances of being seen were very small. His car, stolen from a car park, was one of a popular model, too usual to be noticed, and he had taken it from a place where All Day Parking was written, so that its owner was not likely to miss it until the evening.

He felt good.

Everything had gone right for him since the break, whereas poor old George Pitton had run into a search party in a matter of hours. No mind, that was the trouble with George Pitton. Though he knew everything and actually knew practically nothing. He hadn't known, for instance, that his good pal Arthur Dalby had stashed away a couple of hundred quid in the side of a disused well, so that now he was flush. Almost the first thing he had bought was a wig, and wearing it made him look very different from the prison-cropped creature whose picture had been shown in the papers and on television. The second thing he had bought was a suit from a second-hand shop, with big pockets, a flared jacket and bell bottom pants. Just the thing! He could hardly recognise himself, and no one else was likely to.

Now this girl was flagging him down.

He deliberately passed her, although going slowly, and then pulled into the side of the road. Traffic swished by in two busy lanes and dozens of people were on the pavement. He wanted to see



her run! Here she came. Oh, boy, what a pair! And he didn't need any telling that they weren't acquainted with a bra. She swayed from side to side and he wondered what she would look like, when running, from behind. Well, he couldn't find out now. He leaned across as she bent down to look in at the window. Don't be in too much of a hurry, that was his motto! He opened the window slowly.

"Hallo, sweetie," he said.

"Room for a little one?" she asked; and flashed a smile.

She wasn't a beauty no one could call her that. But she had pretty eyes and pouty lips and dimples. Nice. Plump and round. He pushed down the handle and she opened the door and slid in. Without appearing to do so he looked at her legs—and swallowed. He hadn't seen a girl for over a year, let alone touched one. But he had to be careful; if he let his hand stray too soon she might get scared, and there were plenty of traffic lights along here and she could get out whenever she wanted.

Time, boy; timing, that was what mattered.

It was a small car. Sitting side by side they had to touch, and he noticed with glee that she did not attempt to draw away.

The last one—

He drew in a breath too quickly and the girl glanced at him.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Where the wind takes me, my dear," he replied.

She raised her eyebrows. "One of the funny ones, are you?"

"My very worst enemy never said I had no sense of humour," Dalby assured her, earnestly.

"Did your worst enemy ever tell you not to look where you're going?" she asked. "There's a red light in front of you."

He brought the car smoothly to a standstill.

"I will say your reflexes are good," she declared. "And you're certainly smooth."

"The smoothest ever," Dalby said, pleased.

"Where is the wind going to take you today?" she asked.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Wimbledon," she suggested.

"I don't see your racquet anywhere."

The girl actually laughed, and as he moved the car on again, she murmured: "You're cool, man, cool. Not bad at all."



He shot her a side-long glance and pursed his lips. They were thin but well-shaped lips and very pink.

"Why Wimbledon?"

"For the bread," she said.

"You mean the dough?" he demanded.

"That's right."

He drove on for a few moments, pretending to be preoccupied with thickening traffic, actually trying to make this girl out. She wasn't ordinary. She had a "posh" voice, but it could be put on. And she talked of "bread" meaning that she was going to collect money from someone in Wimbledon. Was she going to do a job? It was on the tip of his tongue to ask her when caution interposed; she might be hitch-hiking, but that didn't mean she was one of "them" the natural breakers of the law.

"Who are you going to collect from?" he compromised at last.

"My father," she answered.

"You mean he lives in Wimbledon."

"It's actually sinking in," she said, half-laughing. "I go there now and again, when I'm skint, and he always lets me have some. Enough," she added, and laughed again. "I don't spend much."

He settled back in his seat. "Do you have to be there at any given time?"

"No."

"Expected?"

"Sooner or later."

"Well now, isn't that lucky," he said easily. "I've a little job to do on the way—a car deal," he added. "This one's giving me too much trouble and I've got a pal who will give me a square deal on an exchange. After I've done the deal I'll take you to Wimbledon, and after that we do the town, hey?"

"So long as you don't mean Wimbledon Common," she said.

He stared at her, and then roared with laughter. She really did amuse him, he couldn't remember anyone who had made him laugh so much in years. Cute, that was the word. And did she know the odds! "So long as you don't mean Wimbledon Common!" What a hoot. Wimbledon Common was the cheapest place anywhere for a lay—grass or bracken, plenty of bushes, no one nosing about too much. But that wasn't for her. What could she mean except that she rated herself good enough for a bed?



He nearly brought his hand down on her leg, but he knew that if he did, it would waken something in him; lust, desire, he knew the words for it. He knew that if he could keep his hands off that warm flesh he would be all right, and that it was only a matter of waiting.

And if she led him up the garden, like that last one—

Well, she better look out, that's all.

Would she fight like that last one had? Fight until he had been forced to stop her screaming by pressing his hand against her throat, tighter and tighter, until she went stiff.

But this one was all right. She knew her way about.

She asked, as they turned off the main road, at Islington: "Where am I going to be while you fix your car deal?"

"You can come and wait," he said, "or—"

"I don't want to wait about in a smelly old garage," she said, and in one way he was greatly relieved; he had made the offer simply because he did not want to lose her. Not to worry! "I'm going to do some window-shopping and then have tea," she said. "How about waiting for me here in two hours?"

In two hours, it would be a quarter to six; rush hour.

In two hours, he could get his exchange done and have a car which a million policemen wouldn't notice! And "here" was a little side street near a red light, an easy place to drop her and an easy place to pick her up. He pulled into it, and then for the first time put a hand on her leg. It was as if fire ran through him; not just through his fingers and his arm but through his whole body.

"You'll be here, won't you?" he demanded, hoarsely.

"I'll be here," she said, and opening the door slipped out with a supple movement of those lovely, sun-tanned legs. She walked past a new store which displayed a banner in crimson and black letters.

CHEAPEST BUY IN LONDON.

But she did not go in; her interest was in the smaller shops, the salons, the hairdressers, the boutiques, although she spurned everything they sold.

About the same time, on the other side of London, in Clapham, another girl of about the same age was looking at herself in a long mirror. What having a baby could do to you! But at least it



couldn't touch your legs. They looked exactly the same. No one could deny that she had the most beautiful legs! Not even she, Sylvia Russell!

She laughed; then frowned.

Were they strong enough to take her to the shops?

She ought to go, for the larder was very bare and it wasn't fair to leave all the shopping for Bobby to do at the week-ends. And she couldn't honestly say that her legs ached. She felt clumsy in movement, that was all, and although Bobby chided her gently, while many of her friends scoffed, she was self-conscious about her condition. Gibes such as: "Come on old girl, don't be prissy, everyone knows where babies come from," didn't hurt her a bit; nor did they encourage her.

"We *must* have something for supper," she said aloud, and made her decision on the instant.

She and Bobbie lived on the second floor of a house in a street which was due for demolition. Some houses were already down, others were empty shells. A few of the sites had been turned into car parks, others into unofficial junk yards. Their tiny flat was self-contained, and had its own separate side entrance through a door in a brick wall. This wall stretched the whole length of the house to the street, which in turn led to the High Street and a main shopping centre. She had to walk along a kind of alley between the wall and a thin wooden fence surrounding a rough and ready car park, and as she closed the side door—her private door—she saw a man standing by a vivid scarlet sports car. She thought, idly, just the job for Bobbie, and walked into the street.

As she walked, the man watched her.

Chapter 10

DAY'S WORK

She had a sense that she was being watched when she reached the street, but when she glanced round no one was in sight. She was dreaming it up! She saw two youths on the other side of the road, brightly dressed in coloured shirts and patched trousers. A few months ago these two would have whistled across at her, or called her over, even crossed the road to intercept her. They would have meant no harm and in fact it was a great compliment to her: to her figure and her appearance at all events. Now, they only glanced covertly at her.

Would the baby be worth it?

Oh, not just the giving up of a flippant, passing admiration, but the giving up of freedom, of being herself. She had always, even as a child, been free to do what she liked within well-defined limits which had been extended year by year. Even when she had grown old, become sixteen, began to go out with boys on their own and not in groups, began to understand the mystic awareness that made one boy's touch welcome, even loved, and another's repellent; even when her mother and father had come into the room and found her reading an esoteric book on *Human Sexual Appetites*, it had not occurred to her to slip the book out of sight.

"Sylvia," her mother had said quietly, "we think—your father and I think that you are old enough to set your own standards of moral and sexual behaviour. Do you think so?"

Taken aback, she had said: "I—I think so, yes. Yes, I'm sure." Her father had said drily:

"But are you sure we'll agree?"

"I don't know," Sylvia had said, and then caught her breath as she asked: "Must you? Should you? Haven't you always taught me that each of us is a separate individual with our own rights, our own responsibilities, our—our own independence?" She could re-



member how she blurted the questions out, and how her cheeks had flushed in a kind of defiance she had never felt towards them before.

"That's what we've tried to teach you," her mother had said.
"Have you learned it, Sylvia?"

"I—I think so. But why ask me now. Why *now*?"

"Because in a few days time you'll be eighteen," her father had said, "and because soon afterwards I want to take your mother away from London, out of England." After a pause, he had added: "To Australia, in fact."

"You—" she held her breath until when she spoke the words were gasps, forced from her. "You mean you're going to emigrate? Leave *England*? For good."

"We think for good," her father said, "but we can't be sure. Do you feel that you can really fend for yourself in England, or would you rather come with us?"

Leave *England*? London? Friends, the art school, life as she knew it, life as she loved it? No, no, no, no! And what had passed through her mind must have shown on her face, for they both burst out laughing. Soon afterwards they began to talk and plan and she found herself sharing in their excitement and understanding that they wanted new lives for themselves, that they had made sure she did not feel under any compulsion to go with them. They had put aside a little money for her, she had a job and her skills. So she had gone into the future, by herself, with the same breathless enthusiasm they were showing.

And she had loved every minute of it, and in loving, and in living, the advice and teaching of her parents over the years often became as vivid as when it had first been uttered. "You don't have to be conventional, but you still live in a conventional world." "You don't have to conform but unless you do in a lot of ways life will be very uncomfortable." "Better to know a dozen men and reject them later than to marry the first and regret *that* later." "Make your own rules of behaviour but don't try to force them on others." "If you have serious doubts, about anything, cut it out."

All these, and so many others.

And every moment of living and loving and taking and giving had been joyous, for joy was part of her. Yet she had not known true ecstasy, of the body or of the heart or the mind, until she had met Bobbie. She had felt as if a knife thrust had cut into her when



she had first seen him, with his curly hair and deep brown eyes, and the way his lips curved at the corners. From that moment on there had been no man for her but Bobbie, and no woman for Bobbie but her. It had been like living in another person; sharing absolutely.

And then the decision to have a baby.

At first, an abounding excitement, followed by the inevitable discomforts, which did not matter, and the limitation of freedom, which did. Can't eat this, can't drink that, can't go there, can't be every moment with Bobbie, can't swim, bathe, play tennis, run, dance.

Would it be worth it?

Yes, she told herself fiercely, as she had time and time again.

But there remained a nagging doubt.

No one whom she knew was able to reassure her absolutely. Some doted on their first born, some accepted them dutifully, some—well, to some they were almost a burden. She did not understand the reasons and could not be sure how she would feel; that in itself was disturbing.

For the first time since they had left her, she wanted her mother and her father; Bobbie, dear, darling, rather scared Bobbie, wasn't enough support by himself. Was that why she had doubts? Did she fear that the baby, stirring now, would bring about a change in their relationship? Were there already signs that his eye roved, causes for jealousy?

There was never cause for jealousy.

At the shops, she hesitated. A new Quick Turn store had opened recently but in spite of its name the "turn round" at the cash desks could be terribly slow, and she didn't feel like standing.

On the other hand, even on a pound's worth of goods she would save two shillings, and saving was saving. A stirring within her seemed a gesture of agreement.

She turned beneath the huge banner with its:

THE BEST BUY IN LONDON

fluttering in the wind. She bought milk, eggs, cream and butter, biscuits and other groceries which would not weigh too heavily, and started back from the shops. It was not a long walk to the house, but her back ached already. She was not half-way home before the bag



seemed to weigh a ton, and she knew she had been foolish to get so much. That was the trouble, she was held back from doing so many of the normal things.

At last, she reached the house.

There was still the walk between the wall and the car park, but that was not so bad. There was a coping on which she could sit for a few minutes, and rest. Her legs began to cramp and the little brat inside her kicked as if in some kind of protest, but that only made her smile.

Then she became aware of men in the car park; not one or two but several men, including policemen. She wondered what they were doing, and twisted round on the coping to watch. There were six or seven in all, and more were coming from the road at the other side of the car park. Goodness! They were surrounding the red sports car which she had noticed before where a man had been standing. Shifting her position a few feet, she could see one man open the driving door; she thought he had a handkerchief in his hand. Another, smaller man slid into the car. In the rush of excitement she forgot her aching back, and it was a livelier kick than usual from "the brat" which reminded her that she should go home and rest: excitement, the doctors and nurses at the clinic said, was not good for her.

For the first time she felt a wave of happiness, of positiveness that she would love the child. She was absolutely sure that everything would be all right, that the child would be the making, not the breaking, of her marriage. She picked up the shopping bag, and found it surprisingly light: as light as her heart! The old gaiety flooded over her, wonderful, ecstatic, delirious! as she opened the side door with her key.

Or at least, she put the key into the lock. There was something the matter, for it did not turn, but under slight pressure the door moved an inch or two, so the lock trouble couldn't be serious. She pushed the door wider open. The bag was heavier now and heavier still as she walked up the stairs, such easy stairs when they had come here to live, so steep and difficult now. But it was only a few steps to a landing and a doorway leading to her own apartment.

She reached the landing, and then heard a sound which made her jump and started her heart beating fast in alarm.

"Who's that?" she called in a shrill voice.

There was no answer, but she looked at another door on the



landing, a cupboard where she kept brooms and mops, her ironing board and other things for which there was no room in the flat itself.

Was the door moving?

She took out her keys again and thrust the front door key into the lock; this went smoothly. She turned and pushed the door, picked up the shopping bag, and rushed forward. She hadn't seen anybody, there couldn't be any danger, and yet she felt terribly afraid. She slammed the door behind her, let the bag slip and stumbled against a table. She was leaning heavily across it, her heart hammering, when she made a fearful discovery; the door had not closed.

She had slammed it hard but it had not closed.

Very slowly she straightened up, as slowly and in great fear she turned her head: and she saw the man in the doorway.

She recognised him at once; he was the man from the red car.

She did not know anything else about him for she had heard nothing of the death of Dr. Kelworthy or of this man's tragedy, but she felt dreadfully afraid.

He stood, perfectly still, in the doorway. His face was swarthy, she noted, and his eyes were over-bright. He held the door with one hand, and had the other hidden inside his coat. Her breathing came in short, sharp gasps, but she did not cry out. She hardly knew how she managed to ask:

"Who are you?"

He gave no answer but stepped further into the room, and pushed the door to behind him. It did not latch and he did not seem to worry. He was small and dark and as utterly alien to her as a wild beast. She made herself say once again, through chattering teeth:

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" Her mouth was so dry that she could hardly get the words out.

He said tonelessly: "My wife is dead."

"Wh-what?"

"My wife is dead. My child also."

The words went round and round inside her head like some hideous jingle.

"My wife is dead. My child also. My wife is dead my child also."

"I—I'm terribly sorry, but—"

"You are alive, with your child," he stated.



"Yes," she gasped. "Yes. My husband will be home at any minute now, I—I have to get his meal, I—"

As if she had never spoken he drew his hand from beneath his jacket. He moved it out slowly as if to leave her in no doubt that he was holding a knife with a thin, steel blade.

She screamed, and as she did so, he leapt forward.

A little earlier, when the first police car had reached the car park, the two youths who had passed Sylvia Russell without taking any notice of her, sauntered up to it. No one took any notice of them. When a second car arrived and disgorged plainclothes men, the taller of the two youths with beautiful pale brown hair brushed sleekly to his shoulders, called out:

"What's going on, mate?"

One of the uniformed policemen eyed him with disfavour.

"Nothing you have to worry about," he said curtly. "We're looking for a *man*."

The insult, so obviously intended, appeared to pass over the youth's head, certainly it was ignored as he said:

"I'd still like to know what's going on."

"Well, I'd like you to get a move on," the constable retorted sharply. "We're busy and there's a crowd gathering already. I've got too much to do to stop and talk to you."

He moved towards half-a-dozen people who were approaching from the High Street; women with children and an old man. Several more were coming from the other direction, still more were turning into the street from either end; the miracle of the quick spreading of news and the assembling of crowds was being repeated.

The youth rejoined his companion, then, dodging the police cars, they slouched towards the scarlet M.G. One of the men in plain-clothes glanced round and spoke to a younger man, who approached the youths.

"Can we help you?" he asked.

The youth shrugged: "Maybe we can help you. You looking for the driver of that car?"

"We are," the young plainclothes officer answered sharply.

"We know where he is," said the youth, and on the instant the young officer called out: "Sir!" The bigger plainclothes man came over, not hurrying, not dawdling.

"They say they know where the driver is, sir."



"Where?" The senior officer's voice came sharp as a pistol shot.

"Over there," the youth said, nodding towards the house on the other side of the car park. "He was just sitting here, and then the birdie in the family way came along and he couldn't keep his eyes off her. When she'd gone he went—"

The senior man took his arm. "Tell me as we go," he urged, and in an undertone added to the young officer. "Get that house surrounded, Jones, and try not to make it too obvious." He moved with the youths, both eager now, as they threaded their way among the cars. "What was he like?"

"Dark haired chap, looked a bit foreign to me. *Murder*, is it?"

"Yes. Are you sure the woman from that house is pregnant?"

"Couldn't be more sure."

The detective officer began to run towards the side door of Sylvia's house.

Chapter 11

CAPTURE

The detective's name was Shea—Detective Sergeant Daniel Shea, of the Metropolitan Force. He was a much better-than-average detective but the real breaks never came his way. He did not see this as a "break" but as an emergency, but as he ran into the road and across it he told himself that he might be making something out of nothing, that it might be the man they were after, but he may simply be an old friend, or a relative. These possibilities did not make him slacken his pace. Something in the teletype message received less than an hour before and signed by the great Gideon himself had put urgency into him. Gee-Gee would not stick his neck out like that unless he were scared. And every man on the Force who had read or been told of the message, had responded with a driving compulsion.

He reached the door, tried the handle, and pushed; it did not budge and he did not hesitate. He took a set of keys out of his pocket, one of them a skeleton key, and slipped it into the lock. It proved easy to open.

He glanced up and down the road.

Young Jones was quick, too; a police van was turning into the road and several plainclothes men from the division were walking towards him, keeping close to the brick wall of the house. He pushed the door open and stepped inside, and as he did so, without making a sound, he heard a man's voice, hoarse and menacing.

The man was on a landing at the top of a flight of narrow stairs. The door leading from the landing was open and the man was half-way through the entrance.

Shea began to creep up the stairs, keeping close to the wall where there was less likelihood of the treads creaking. He hardly dared to breathe as he debated this dilemma with himself. If he shouted and distracted the man's attention it might give the woman time to run



into another room, might even give her a chance to push the man away and slam the door.

These things *might* happen.

But it might also be the one thing needed to make the man act, and act fatally.

If he could get close enough to grab the man—

He went faster; a stair creaked, but the man did not turn round. From the movement of his right arm, elbow bent, it looked as if he were taking something from his jacket. At that moment a shaft of light caught the steel of a blade and made it flash; and at that moment, the woman screamed.

Shea went up the stairs like a rocket, roaring: "*Drop that knife!*" A dozen thoughts flashed through his mind, one of them that this man was the killer of Dr. Kelworthy, who had died from a knife wound in the throat; that everything pointed to his being insane. That he held a knife and could plunge it into the woman but might swing round and use it against him, Danny Shea.

The man turned round, as if on wheels.

The knife glistened as he raised it.

Shea was two steps below the landing now, and the knife was on a level with his throat. He saw the other's eyes glittering as brightly as the knife, and then he lowered his head and hurled himself forward. He felt the knife pass through his hair, and as he fell he saw the woman, face pale as mist, raise a shopping bag and bring it down with great force on the attacker's head. Men called from below, and hearty footsteps thundered up the stairs.

And Daniel Shea knew that it was all right: he'd saved her.

He did not know what the shock might do to her, but he had saved her life from a murderer's hand.

He looked at Moreno, who was on his back, and it was funny, damned funny, for it was egg yolk that streamed down his forehead and over his face; not blood, but egg yolk!

Gideon sat back in the swivel chair with padded arms, and let all the details of the outstanding cases flow through his mind. He had told Tiger to keep all but the most urgent calls from him, without adding that he wanted time to think. Several things had happened during the afternoon, one of them irritating: Cockerill had been involved in an accident on the motorway and had been delayed.



Other than cuts, and a certain amount of bruising, he had not been badly hurt; but he had been severely shaken. He was due, now, about half-past six; and Gideon had wanted to be home soon after then.

He had called Scott-Marle, reported the fire at the old warehouse and his fears about its significance. The poisoned Cabinet Minister, while not yet recovered, was better than he had been, and Gideon had a feeling that so far as the Home Office was concerned, the pressure had eased. That annoyed him. The case was either important or it wasn't. The fact that a Cabinet Minister was involved should not have affected it either way. His feeling had probably reflected itself in his voice, for Scott-Marle had said:

"And now he's on the road to recovery you will really get your teeth into it, won't you?"

Gideon gave a grudging laugh.

"I suppose there's something in that, sir. I won't let up at all, anyhow."

"I wouldn't expect you to," Scott-Marle said drily, and he went on in a different tone: "I think I am only just beginning to comprehend what you told me. You think this murder by fire was to prevent the fish-seller from talking, and that so far we've only seen the tip of the ice-berg."

"Exactly," Gideon said. He paused, trying to get the half-formed fears and ideas in his mind into some kind of shape, then went on: "I'm waiting for Chief Inspector Cockerill, the chap I want to handle the inquiry in all its aspects. He's been injured—slightly injured—in a road accident. And I'm wondering whether it *was* an accident."

Into the silence that followed, Scott-Marle said: "I think I hope it was, George."

"So do I," Gideon said. "I'll keep you posted, sir."

Now he was going through that "accident" in his mind. He had a report from Watford, the nearest town to the actual crash. A car had overtaken Cockerill on the inside and then swung in front of him, forcing him to brake sharply and causing the car behind him to bang into the back of the police car. The cut-in car's number had been noted by the police driver; it had been an old Jaguar but moving very fast.

Gideon now wondered what Cockerill himself would have to say.



His telephone bell rang, and he hoped this would be news that the other man was here early; instead, it was *Information* with the officer in charge in a rare mood of excitement. Almost as Gideon announced himself, he declared:

"We've got Moreno, sir!"

A great surge of relief went through Gideon and everything else faded into the background. "Thank God for that. Where is he now?"

"On his way to Fulham H.Q., sir. Apparently he was caught only just in time, out at Clapham. One of our chaps was hurt a bit, but not much."

"Good chap," Gideon said, still feeling enormous relief.

He rang off, and immediately put in a call to the Division which included Clapham and several adjacent areas. He knew the superintendent there fairly well; a man named Blunt. Blunt was on the line almost immediately, and after a quick: "Hallo, Hugh," and: "Evening, Commander," Blunt went on with obvious satisfaction: "So you've heard about Moreno."

"Yes. How's our chap who was hurt?"

"He'll be all right. Nasty cut in his forehead, Moreno had got another knife from somewhere. And was your general call on the mark, George. A minute more and he would have killed the woman. If you'd like all the details—"

"I'd like a full report in the morning," Gideon interrupted. "Just the essence, now. Who was our chap?"

"Detective Sergeant Shea," Blunt answered, "and it was time he had a break, he's a damned good man. I'm going to recommend him for promotion. He took the trouble to listen to a couple of hippies, who'd seen Moreno go into a house. A very quick and tidy job, thank God."

"Give Shea my personal congratulations," Gideon said, and rang off.

Bobbie Russell leaned over his wife, who lay in bed looking pale but surprisingly untroubled, and kept on saying over and over again: "Thank God the police got here in time. Thank God."

Arthur Dalby, in an early model Jaguar obviously the worse for wear, but the best deal he could get from his friend, pulled into the arranged meeting place, then sat, very tense and still, waiting for



the girl. Ah, here she was. He gazed avidly at her legs, long and lovely. My God, he thought, what a pair!

Smiling, he leaned across and opened the door, "Welcome back, girlie. What do you think of this beauty?"

She got in and looked at torn upholstery and a cracked window. "Well, it's got more leg-room, I'll say that for it," she said drily.

He shot her a swift, almost wolfish look, as he started the car, and throwing back his head laughed uproariously.

He was laughing so much, at getting the car, at getting the girl, that he did not notice the policeman on the other side of the road, who most certainly noticed him. The policeman, a youngish man, did not recognise him; did not have the vaguest suspicion of his identity; he simply knew that a man who laughed like that when at the wheel of a car wasn't really paying attention to what he was doing, and so wasn't really fit to drive. No one could throw his head back like that and rear away from the wheel and still maintain full control.

The fellow was out to impress the girl he'd just picked up, of course.

The officer, whose name was Howard, Police-Constable Howard, watched as the car moved into a stream of traffic. It went smoothly enough, and the man seemed to have recovered, so it wasn't worth passing on, by walkie-talkie, to other policemen along Islington High Street and further beyond. Yet the way that head went back, the way the man's mouth had opened when he had laughed, remained a vivid picture in his mind.

While he was worrying over this, the girl next to Dalby was saying to herself: I've got to be careful with this one. He's half crazy.

Her name was Janice; Janice Westerman. Sometimes she thought she was a little crazy too, taking the chances she did.

Kate Gideon laid down the evening paper as the telephone bell rang. Instinctively, she knew that this was George to say that he would be late; only occasionally did that particular instinct fail her. About the family room there were oddments seldom seen here these days; at one side a half-built castle of bricks, on the other books lying face downwards, their covers bright with animal pictures; and there was a tray with spoons and nursery-rhyme plates on it: the very plates most of her own children had eaten from.



"Kate Gideon," she said into the telephone.

"Kate," said Gideon, "I hate to have to say it but I'm going to be at least an hour and a half."

"Oh, don't worry, dear," Kate said. "Priscilla's been here most of the day. She brought the children over. There's some kind of school holiday."

"So *that's* where she was!"

"Did you try to get her?"

Gideon laughed. "Yes. To see if she could come over, or she could persuade you to go to her. There's one good thing," he added. "Moreno won't do any more harm."

"You've caught him!"

"He's been caught," Gideon replied, "and apparently since his arrest—" he broke off, for this was no time to talk too much, but he wanted Kate to know that he felt a kind of pity, perhaps even true compassion, for the man.

Kate said: "I don't think I've ever felt so badly about anyone outside my own family." She paused, and then went on with forced brightness: "Are you sure you'll be an hour and a half?"

"At least," he said. "More likely two. And I'd better have a snack here, so you needn't worry about food."

"I'd much rather get you a meal," she said, "unless you're famished. George—I've had a silly idea today."

"How silly," he tried to sound flippant.

"You'll think it's absurd."

"Try me," he urged.

"Well, I've thought a lot about the sound-proofed attic and the piano standing up there doing nothing but collect dust, and it seems such a waste. I *used* to play, suppose I take it up again? Shut up there the neighbours won't hear a thing." When Gideon didn't respond at once she said almost anxiously: "Are you laughing at me, George?"

"Laughing!" exploded Gideon. "That's the best idea I've heard in years!"

Gideon put down the receiver with a sigh of relief. He had meant exactly what he said. In one swoop, the sense of waste and purposelessness of the sound-proofing had gone, while Kate had thought of something which might make a world of difference to her. She had

played, once, but all their daughters had proved to have a musical talent so far exceeding her own that she had lost heart. If the idea of playing again really caught hold of Kate there was no telling how significant it might be: the thought of moving from Harrington Street might become just a vague fancy, never to be taken seriously.

Thank God!

He heard footsteps in the passage, and then Tiger's door opened. How much more clearly sounds travelled in the evening, when most of the offices were empty and the Embankment traffic was so much lighter. He could even hear a murmur of voices, and thought: surely Cockerill. There was a tap at the communicating door and Tiger appeared.

"Chief Inspector Cockerill, sir," he announced.

"Show him in, and then you get off," Gideon said. "You look dead beat. If I need anyone I can call on the night staff."

"If you're sure."

"Quite sure."

"Thank you, sir." Tiger stood aside for Cockerill to come in. At sight of him Gideon had one of the shocks of his life, for a bandage covered Cockerill's left eye and was taped to his forehead and underneath his chin. If this was to read "superficial wounds" what the devil would he have looked like if he had been badly hurt? One side of his mouth was badly swollen and bruised, too, although it wasn't covered. His hands seemed uninjured and he walked freely enough, putting out his right hand.

"Sorry I'm late, Commander," he said.

"It looks as if we're lucky you weren't a lot later," Gideon said gruffly. "Sit down." As the other man settled, rather gingerly, into a large armchair, Gideon went on: "The first thing I want is an opinion," he said. "We can get the details later." He sat behind his desk, looking at Cockerill squarely. "Do you think it was an accident? Or was it an attempt to put you out of action?"

As well as he could, Cockerill smiled. Normally, he was sharp-featured and thin-faced, the skin drawn tight across his bones, but now his features looked puffy. He must have taken a real buffetting about the face.

"Ah," he said, "so you smell a rat too? I haven't breathed a word, and thought it better not to do so until I'd talked to you. But this smash was deliberate. I haven't any doubt whatever. In fact if it



hadn't been for my driver I think we'd have been under a lorry without any chance at all. Someone was after me, Commander, and I can only imagine it was because I had been nosing around some places in the south midlands where I wasn't welcome."

He sat back, both convinced and utterly convincing.

Chapter 12

FOOD MARKETS

Gideon bent down to a cupboard in his desk and took out a siphon, a bottle of scotch, and a bottle of gin.

"Will whisky go to your head?"

"Could do," Cockerill said. "You haven't got a beer, have you?"

"Certainly, but canned, and probably warm."

"Suits me—don't care for iced drinks myself," Cockerill said.

Gideon bent down again for two tins of beer of the self-opening type, and a glass tankard. He passed these to Cockerill and mixed himself a whisky-and-soda, sipped, added a little more soda, and leaned back.

"Cheers," he said.

"Cheers." Cockerill drank like a man who had been wandering in the desert for days, and when he lowered his tankard he murmured apologetically: "It's these drugs they pump into you. Dries you out."

"I shouldn't be surprised," Gideon said, and after a pause, added: "So, it's big."

"I think so," replied Cockerill. "That Whitechapel fire this morning—do you think it's part of the same racket?"

"It could be," Gideon replied non-committally. "I think Firmani would say so."

Cockerill finished the tankard, and leaned back cautiously in his chair. Gideon wondered if his head was aching badly or whether the drugs had numbed him; but whatever it was, either or both, did not appear to have affected his wits.

"Then it is big."

"What have you discovered?" asked Gideon.

"That there are at least two lorry-loads of stolen fruit and vegetables taken up on the M.1. every day, and off-loaded at small wholesale markets or at the branches of big supermarkets. On the



surface the buying side is legal. The buyers may know that they're getting stolen goods and the managers may be taking a cash discount on the side, but I'm not sure. I am sure about the stolen produce leaving Covent Garden and I think I know how it's done." He opened the second can of beer, pulling back the little fastener too abruptly, so that the spray spurted over his face and bandages. "I'm okay," he said as Gideon started to get up. "Haven't lost more than half-a-mouthfull!" He went on talking as he refilled the tankard. "I've been keeping an eye on Covent Garden for some time, but you know that. At first there was a little pilfering and a few fingers in the tills, which most of the market men take in their stride. Then it got bigger and the market security chaps thought we'd better take a hand."

All of these things Gideon knew, although Hobbs had handled most of the details; and it was surprising how soon information read, or passed on by word of mouth, could fade. He nodded, and asked:

"What was special about last night's hi-jacking?"

"New ground," answered Cockerill.

"I don't follow you."

"Sorry," the other man said. "I'm not as clear in the head as I might be. Well, in the past, lorries have been rented and stolen goods brought from all over the market and loaded: a crate here, sack there, string bag—the lot, so to speak. No one misses a single item, and a lot of stuff is moving all the time. Until someone gets suspicious the thieves can get away with murder, but once the security chaps know what's going on, the details can be found out fairly easily. Clear so far, sir?"

"Yes."

"Last night was quite different. A lorry filled with produce from one big merchant for delivery to an associated wholesaler in Coventry was stolen—hi-jacked. It wasn't missed for an hour. The driver who was to take it up on the M.I. was having his dinner; he came back on time, to find it gone. Somehow the name of the firm was blotted out, probably with a quick drying spray paint, and there wasn't a trace of it until it was found in an old quarry."

"Damaged?" asked Gideon.

"Good as new."

"Then they haven't a home for stolen lorries," Gideon remarked.

"Hardest things in the world to keep under cover for long, and



the easiest things to check for engine numbers and chassis numbers. I wouldn't be surprised to find someone with a fleet of smaller lorries and vans, many of which might be stolen; but the big ones—no, Commander."

"I'll take your word for it," Gideon said. "What made you stay in the midlands so long?" Seeing a change of expression in Cockerill's one visible eye he went on hastily: "That isn't meant as a criticism, man—you must have had a good reason."

"Theft of refrigerated lorry from Smithfield," Cockerill said.

Gideon stared, thinking the answer through. Cockerill gave him very little time before going on:

"I wanted to find if the meat was going to the same places."

"Ah!"

"Some of the big wholesalers have sections for fruit and veg., meat, fish, provisions and groceries or dry goods," went on Cockerill. "They supply not only the small trader but the supermarket chains—it's very involved these days. You go to a fishmonger to buy fruit and to a greengrocer to buy bacon, very often. The day of the specialist is nearly over."

Gideon said: "My wife doesn't like it."

"A lot of wives who have to save five or ten percent like it," Cockerill replied, frankly, and then added hastily: "But this is just background, sir. I went up to Coventry and Northamptonshire and got the local chaps to watch the wholesalers who had bought some of the Covent Garden stuff, to see if they'd bought some of the frozen meat." Cockerill gave a crooked smile as he went on: "The refrigerated vehicle was found in the grounds of a big industrial estate near Coventry. It's also near a very big warehouse owned by Quickturn Supermarkets. It was empty. The meat had been unloaded into small vans—I can give you chapter and verse, Commander, they did a bloody good job up there, and these small vans carried the stuff round."

"As Jackie Baker carried the fish," Gideon said softly.

"Right on the nose, sir. We traced five vans; there might be ten or twelve in all but we traced just five. Each one sold its entire stock to one of the wholesalers who bought the Covent Garden produce."

"Good," Gideon said, showing both satisfaction and enthusiasm.
"Bought?"

"Oh, yes."

"Cash?"



"Some cash, some on accounts," answered Cockerill. "As with the fruit and veg. there's no way of being absolutely sure the buyers knew the meat was stolen, but it looks likely. Wouldn't you think so?"

"Probably, when I've seen the general evidence," Gideon admitted. "What did you do?"

Cockerill said: "Nothing, sir."

"Question the buyers at these wholesale places?"

"No, sir," answered Cockerill. "By the time I was sure the meat had gone to the same places, I began to smell something very big, and I thought I'd better do some thinking. And conferring, Commander! I didn't want to catch a few sprats and scare off a whole shoal of mackerell."

"You couldn't be more right," agreed Gideon. "Yet—"

"They tried to get me."

"They actually did get you," Gideon reminded him. "Do you know how you warned them?"

"No, I'm damned if I do," replied Cockerill thoughtfully. "I would have said that we kept away from trouble, always had a phoney reason for asking the questions. If you ask me—" he broke off, frowning. When he didn't continue, Gideon said:

"I am asking you."

"I was afraid you would," said Cockerill, pulling down the uninjured corner of his mouth. "If you ask me, sir, they have a first class warning system. Antennae all over the place, as it were. Spies everywhere. The harder I look at this the bigger it seems to get, and if you ask me, I boobed."

Gideon asked quietly: "How? What more could you have done?"

"How much less should I have done?" asked Cockerill. "I think that's the question. If it is a really big operation then the people who are running it might decide to close it down for a while. A few weeks, even a month or two. If I hadn't gone back about the meat I doubt if they would have got so worried. But I did."

He shrugged, then looked at Gideon out of that one visible eye with an expression of bewilderment. He was not sure of himself, not sure of Gideon's reaction. That was not all. He was looking much more tired than when he had first arrived. The injuries, added to the shock of the accident and the effect of the drugs, were taking their toll. This man needed two or three days off, at least. He also needed a strong injection of self-confidence, must not be sent away



from here thinking that Gideon thought he had fallen down on the job.

"You did what any one at the Yard would have done, knowing the circumstances," Gideon said, and added quickly: "What I can't understand is why you think you went wrong."

"Isn't it obvious, sir?"

"It's not obvious at all. You alarmed them, yes. They were alarmed about the search for Jackie Baker, but you weren't involved in that. In both cases, they were forced to show their hand." Gideon hesitated and then amended: "I don't know about forced to: the fact is they *did* show their hand. So we know we're up against something big, possibly nationwide, certainly covering London and the whole of the midlands. We needed to know. But now that we do—" he smiled dourly, and spread his hands.

"I can't wait," Cockerill said.

"You've got to," Gideon answered. "You and I don't tell a soul that we believe your accident was a deliberate attack on you. And we don't pursue the inquiries openly for a few days. That way they should be lulled into thinking there's no need to worry."

"And that way I can take time off," Cockerill said drily.

"No use working on the job until you're fit," said Gideon. He sat back, looking into that one bright eye, and went on slowly: "Why did you mention Quickturn, Cocky?"

"Well, they were very handy, and they always *are* very handy. What's more they've bought an interest in some wholesale grocers, butchers and fruit and veg. wholesalers. They're spread wide and they've got the facilities. But I've got to admit it's no more than a guess," Cockerill added quickly.

"Intelligent guesses are always worth checking," remarked Gideon. "Who's working with you on this?"

"Detective Inspector Merriman," answered Cockerill, and put into Gideon's mind a big, heavy-jowled, heavy-paunched man who was as nearly a "typical" detective pictured by the public as there was at the Yard. A few years ago Merriman had been involved in a Flying Squad accident which had broken his left knee and left him with a stiff leg. He had asked for a job inside the Yard, and had become one of the most reliable record-keepers and organisers. He did not fit into *Records* or into *Information* but had made a niche entirely for himself.

"Doing what?" asked Gideon.



"Getting a complete picture of the men at all the main markets, and the main wholesalers, sorting out the difference between the sellers and the buyers; making graphs and generally getting everything down in black and white."

"Keep him at it," Gideon said. "Any idea how long it should take him before he's through?"

"Four or five days."

"Just about right," Gideon said, and Cockerill laughed.

The near-certain thing was that nothing could be done much more quickly where the markets were concerned, and he must know it. But the investigation into Jackie Baker's murder had to go on, intensively, with Firmani in charge. Gideon brought Cockerill up to date on that: the search for the supplier of the fire-raising material, for the man or men who had locked Baker into the warehouse before setting it on fire. This way, Cockerill would rest more easily, knowing that everything was being handled under Gideon's direct guidance and that nothing was being kept from him.

It was a little after eight o'clock when Cockerill left for home; nearly half-past before Gideon had finished his notes on the report, for it would be several days before Cockerill turned in a written report. Once finished, Gideon sent for his car and drove himself home to Kate.

She was downstairs, and her eyes were glowing.

"I loved it up there!" she declared. "Who had that absurd idea of moving from Harrington Street?"

At nine o'clock, Arthur Dalby was waiting, again, for Janice. He was in the old Jaguar, parked in the street not far from the big, modern house where her father lived. He knew her as Janice, now; knew that her father was a wealthy businessman; knew that he might be on a very good thing.

In more ways than one!

As that thought struck him, he thrust his head back and roared with laughter.

This time no one noticed him.

At nine o'clock, Sylvia Russell said to her husband, in a tense voice: "Darling, I think—I think it's beginning. Please—please send for the doctor."



At nine o'clock, Dr. Kelworthy's wife sat alone in the front room of the small house they had shared and stared blankly ahead of her. The strange thing was that she could not think, except of the way she had talked to Jonathan last night. It only she hadn't, if only she hadn't!

And a little after nine o'clock the three men who were directly responsible for the murder of Jackie Baker and indirectly responsible for the attack on Chief Inspector Cockerill, were gathered together in an apartment in Knightsbridge, surrounded by luxury, and faced with ugly facts and uglier fears. But they kept these fears in the background as they faced the facts.

Chapter 13

MASTER PLAN

The shortest and tubbiest of the three men sat in the middle of three armchairs, his legs so short that he had to use a stool in order to rest his feet. He was beautifully dressed in a suede suit of pearl grey, black leather shoes of modern styling, and a dark blue tie. He had a round face and blue eyes, often merry-looking. His hair was cut short but curled a little at the temples. He was Horatio Kilfoil, the *Honourable* Horatio Kilfoil, only son of an Irish peer who had served both Ireland and England well. Lord Kilfoil was on the boards of many companies, including food importing, distributing and manufacturing companies, and was wealthy in his own right.

So was his son.

He himself did not quite understand his own motivation; there were times when he told one or both of the men now with him that it certainly wasn't the profit motive only, substantial though it was. And that was true. What he didn't say, and perhaps didn't know, was, that there was a flaw in his character which made him almost compulsively, a criminal.

The second man in the long, elegantly furnished room which overlooked Kensington Gore, was very different. He was entirely self-made, profit being his only motivation. He had started life as an assistant porter at Covent Garden market, worked—and stolen and cheated—until he had enough money to buy his own business in the market, gone into a dozen profitable side-lines, including the buying of stolen goods of any kind. Eventually he had sold out of his business in the market and set himself up as a general food distributor and producer. From this, he had extended various ventures until he owned or controlled at least a hundred food wholesalers in the country. Still not satisfied, he had started a small chain of grocery stores or supermarkets which—because he could undercut most competition—were beginning to flourish. He was a tall,



austere-looking man with a high-bridged nose, and the ambition to be taken for an English gentleman. He had even acquired a convincingly aristocratic voice which could fool most of the men with whom he dealt. His name was Black, Lancelot Black.

The third man was quite different from either of the other two. He was the accountant, a genius with figures, and a brilliant organiser. He was younger than either of the others, each of whom was in the middle-forties, although he looked younger even than his thirty-five years. There was the sharpness of a ferret about his face, the upper lip protruding slightly and the chin receding; he had pinched features and large, dark eyes which had a rare quality in eyes of such colour; they were cold. Lifeless. Yet his mind was a computer in its own special way.

He was an American, of Dutch extraction, and his name was Graaf, Joseph Graaf. He dressed carelessly, never considering his appearance, only facts and figures.

He sat on Kilfoil's right: Black sat on the small man's left. Coffee and brandy were on a circular table in front of them. This was Kilfoil's London home; a bachelor, he found it easier to entertain the others for business than they, who were married, found it to entertain him.

They had been watching the news on television, waiting for mention of Cockerill's "accident" or of the murder of Jackie Baker.

Neither was mentioned.

"*Scotland Yard officers this afternoon arrested Paul Moreno . . .*" they heard, the announcer going on to relate the story of the death of Kelworthy. It held no interest for them, and they harked back to their own affairs.

"Cockerill must know it was deliberate," said Graaf.

"It was an act of madness," Kilfoil said.

"We'll get more from the newspapers in the morn—" began Black, and then he drew in his breath: "Quiet!"

"*The Ministry of Food and the police, working in close co-operation, believe they have traced the source of the outbreak of food poisoning which affected diners at many of London's best known restaurants last night,*" the announcer stated. "*Superintendent Firmani of New Scotland Yard, in charge of the investigation, does not think there is any danger of a fresh outbreak provided all stocks of . . .*"



"I knew the police were dumb," Black said. "But *this* dumb is too much."

"They're pulling the wool over our eyes," said Graaf.

"Or they cannot find out what they want to know," declared Kilfoil. "One thing is certain, gentlemen. We must be extremely careful from now on."

"The Baker business was crazy," Graaf said in a reedy voice. "To let him go round making a few pounds a day—"

"Joe, you don't mean that," interrupted Black. "Baker and a hundred like him bring in big money, and you know it. The difference was that Baker knew that I was involved, and he had to go. The others have no idea who they're working for. The real idiocy—" he stood up and began to pace the room with long, easy strides; he was a striking looking man, particularly in comparison with the other two. "The real idiocy," he repeated, "was attacking a man from Scotland Yard."

"That was a mistake, certainly," Graaf agreed.

"The man who made the mistake mustn't live long enough to make another," said Black, very distinctly.

"We can't go around killing people with impunity," Kilfoil protested. "A murder is a murder, Lance."

"We've killed before and we'll kill again," insisted Black, "and we won't hand ourselves out a lot of hypocritical hog-wash." He looked down at Kilfoil with narrowed eyes. "We're not playing for chicken feed." When neither of the others replied he turned to Graaf and demanded: "Are we, Joe?"

"No, sir," agreed Graaf. "We're certainly not playing for chicken feed."

"We're in this for millions, and if we play it cool and if we make sure no one can betray us we can be exactly where we want to be a year from now."

"A year and a half," Graaf amended.

"All right, a year or a year and a half. That's the time it will take for us to have control of all the major food outlets in the United Kingdom. That's what we are aiming for, that's what we are going to get, and anyone who stands in our way or who makes serious mistakes has to go." He looked from one to the other. "Have you any arguments?"

"On principle, no," Graaf replied.



"So what's your objection on the practical side?" demanded Black.

"That we cut out the small business, and that we shift from the present operation to the markets, and underselling the competition until we can buy it."

"I am in absolute agreement," Kilfoil declared.

"Oh, are you," said Black, heavily. He leaned forward to pick a cigar from a box on the table, broke the band and then pierced the end with a gold pin. "Oh, so you're both in agreement, are you?" That was a growl, that denoted he was both angry and impatient with them. "Well, let me remind you of one reason why I don't agree with either of you." They waited, until he had lit the cigar and tossed the match into an empty fireplace. "Twenty to thirty million pounds," he stated, flinging the figures at them with a nonchalance he had no intention of being taken seriously. "When we started out we wanted fifty millions, now we only want twenty to thirty."

"But we have it!" cried Kilfoil. "Our shares in *Quickturn* and the other stores—"

"Shares and money aren't the same," Black said gently. "Tell him, Joe."

"We could raise the money on the shares," Graaf said, with a streak of stubbornness sharpening his voice.

"But we're not going to," declared Black. "Not while I'm part of this organisation, and it would look bloody funny without me. We can pick that money up in a year at the rate we're going. If we stop now, if we slacken the tempo, it will give the others time to get their breath back. They're not going to have the chance. *We're* going to hold all *Quickturn* stock, we're going on with a cash business, and when we see a weak link in the chain, we cut it out. *That's* how it's going to be."

Graaf said slowly: "What happens if I won't go along?"

"Then you get out."

"I've got too much tied up in this to get out, and you know it."

"That's right," agreed Black. "We've all got too much tied up in this. We're going on cutting corners and dealing in cash and forcing the little shops out of business and some of the big chains, too. They close-down, we buy or we swallow them up for cash—and we get the cash the way we always have. I'll run that side of the business."



"What the hell happens if the police catch up with us?"

"That will be just too bad," Black said. "But if we're careful and we don't do crazy things like attacking senior detectives they won't catch up with us. It won't occur to them that the hundreds of individual hi-jackings are organised by one group. They'll go on chasing one at a time, and we'll make sure no one knows who he's working for. You can leave that to me. You handle the money and the figures, Joe, and you sit with your father on all those boards of directors, Horatio, and at the end of a year—" he gave a sardonic grin—"or perhaps eighteen months, we'll be just where we want to be, with all the main food distributors in our pocket. Did you ever stop to think how much people will pay for food when they're hungry? Did you ever see what happened to a government which tried to keep food prices down by cutting the profits? And did you ever pause to think who's going to be blamed for rising food prices when we're well and truly in the Common Market?"

He paused; and then he laughed; and in a few moments he said: "We can't afford weak links like Baker, or fools like Webber in Coventry."

Neither of the others argued any more; it was as if he had beaten down their arguments by the very strength of his will and the power of his voice.

That night, the owner of the Jaguar which had nearly killed Chief Inspector Cockerill, was found dead at the wheel of the Jaguar, which had crashed into one of the bridges spanning the M.1. No one else was in the car with him, and the experienced policeman who found him said that it looked as if he had fallen asleep at the wheel. The number of the Jaguar was sent to London, of course, and next morning Detective-Inspector Merriman checked it; it was not the number of the car which had caused Cockerill's crash, so he simply made a note of the report and the number and made no request for the dead man's car to be closely examined, or brought to London. The trouble with facts was, that to be seen in their true light there had to be imagination; and Merriman was almost a stranger to that.

But facts he collected as a bright lamp collected moths; in a way his mind was as much a computer's as Joe Graaf's.

At half-past eleven that night, Janice Westerman looked into her



companion's eyes, and realised what she should have realised before. He was very tired. Even when she had left her father's house and returned to the car he had been dozing. She could remember now the violent start he had given when she had opened the car door, how something akin to terror had shown in his eyes in light of the street lamp. She hadn't spoken, nor had he. He had taken some minutes to settle down at the wheel of the car, and forgot to put the headlights on until she told him. After that he had driven well enough, and to her surprise, he had not headed for Wimbledon Common. Half-way down Putney Hill, with the closed shop windows lighted and a few people about, she had asked him suddenly:

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes," he had answered, "starving."

"There's an Indian restaurant open over there—if you like Indian food."

"You'd like any kind of food, if—" he began.

She did not know what he had been going to say: "If you were as hungry as I am," would have been apt enough, but so might several things. She was puzzled by the sudden way in which he broke off and then glanced at her slyly, as if trying to see whether she had noticed anything.

"Then let's go there," she said.

There was plenty of parking space so late at night, and within five minutes they were eating curried chicken, with sweet chutney, coconut, sultanas, almonds, "all the fixings," the little Indian waiter had said. He *did* eat ravenously and yet not crudely; she simply could not make him out.

Now, they were near her flat, a small apartment on the third floor of an old house in Bloomsbury, not far from the London University. She saw him caught by a fierce yawn at a time when he could not take his hands off the wheel.

She wasn't sure what to do.

She had been so sure—

She had been going to get out of the car at a red traffic light, wave and run off; he would never find where she lived.

But now she felt sorry for him; and there was more than that. There was a devil in him which she recognised, having one of her own. His looks, his talk, his touch, all told her how much he wanted her but—he was too tired! If she took him up to her apartment she believed he would drop onto the bed and fall asleep. When he woke



in the morning he would feel humiliated, of course, but—well, it would be his responsibility, not hers.

Should she take the risk?

He yawned again, and the car swerved. He straightened it out quickly enough, startled and a little scared. He had nearly fallen asleep at the wheel!

"Take the first right and the second left to Mount Square," she instructed. "You'll be able to park there, and it's only a step from my place."

He parked with great care in the small square. She took his arm and half-pushed, half-led him to the house where she had her flat; twice he actually stumbled on the stairs. Once inside he stood and looked about him, stupidly. She led him to the bedroom, and he dropped onto the bed, yawning widely.

She pointed to the bathroom, then went on to the big living-room where she had a day bed on which she proposed to sleep. She waited for ten minutes or so and then peeped into the bedroom. He lay, inert, shoes on, tie on, fully dressed. He did not notice her unlace his shoes and pull them off, or unfasten his tie. It was while doing this that she noticed something strange about his hair; a moment later it dawned on her that he wore a wig.

She locked him in before she went to bed.

He puzzled her, but she was also intrigued.

Chapter 14

MEAT MARKET

Next morning, the newspapers chose the murder of Kelworthy and the capture of Moreno as their main theme. All three of the men who had met in Kilfoil's flat searched for and found mention of the murder at the warehouse and the poisoned food, but neither was given much space. The *Globe* ran a main inside feature on prison escapes, finishing with the latest one and the fact that Arthur Dalby was still at large.

In the *Stop Press* of three newspapers was a single sentence, which read:

Mrs. Robert Russell who was yesterday attacked by Moreno, the murderer of Dr. Kelworthy, gave birth to a 7 pound 5 oz. baby girl in South West London Hospital last night.

Kate read this out to Gideon when, for once, the newspapers arrived before he left for the office. Detective Sergeant Shea, still glowing from the message from the Commander, read it with deep satisfaction. The two long-haired youths who had done as much as anybody to save the woman, read it with a kind of embarrassed satisfaction.

Police Constable Howard read it, also.

That was when he was having his breakfast in the front room of a small guest house not far from the local police headquarters. Then he saw a Jaguar pass, fairly new and wine red, not like the battered black one he had seen yesterday evening, but the combination of events reminded him of the way the driver had thrown back his head and laughed. Why should such a simple thing affect him so? He told himself there was a vague familiarity about the driver's face but he could not place the man who was etched so vividly on his mind's eye.



Within ten minutes of going on duty he was within sight of an accident in which a youth at the wheel of a battered-looking Volkswagen crashed into a Ford, crumpling the driving door, and seriously injuring the driver. P. C. Howard gave no more thought to the man who had laughed. Here was a serious job to do; an ambulance to summon, traffic to control, a hysterical passenger to calm, people to hold back from a determined endeavour to look at the driver of the Ford, who was bleeding freely.

What made people such ghouls?

Gideon talked with half-a-dozen superintendents at briefing sessions that morning, including Firmani, who had a fully detailed report on his previous day's work. No one had yet discovered where the incendiary material had come from; no one appeared to have seen the start of the fire.

"Most of it's routine, now," he remarked.

"Yes," Gideon admitted, "but finding all the other van salesmen who call on restaurants isn't, and I don't want any of them alarmed."

"Discretion is my middle name," Firmani assured him, and went bounding out of the office.

Merriman, summoned for the first time to the Commander's office, showed the gradual accumulation of facts and figures, and a total of theft value that startled Gideon.

"Over eleven million pounds-worth! Is that figure reliable, Inspector?"

"That's just for London," Merriman assured him gloomily. No man could have been more inappropriately named. "It will be double or treble throughout the country, sir."

"Are you getting the other figures in?"

"Yes, sir," Merriman said stolidly. "I'll have a report ready as soon as possible."

When he had gone, Gideon studied the copy of the report again, frowned, and then called the Confederation of British Industries. Could they help him to find some facts and sales figures of foodstuffs in London—at the major markets, for instance, as well as in the main shopping areas, central, suburban and provincial?

"I am sure you will find that the Association of Master Food Suppliers will be able to help you more than I," the secretary of the



C.B.I. replied. "If I were you, sir, I would ask for Sir Bernard Dalyrymple."

"The head of Serveright Stores?" asked Gideon.

"That's the man, Commander. He is this year's president of M.F.S., and spends a great deal of time at their offices. If he's not there, they'll tell you where to find him."

Sir Bernard Dalyrymple was at the offices of the Association of Master Food Suppliers, in the Strand. He was gentle-voiced and forthright in manner.

"I hope you will soon be able to tell me why you need these figures, Mr. Gideon, but meanwhile—yes, I am sure I can get some by mid-afternoon. Will that be in time?"

"Splendid," Gideon answered appreciatively.

"May I ask now why you're interested, Commander?"

"We've had so many thefts lately I'd like to get a proportion of goods stolen as against general turn-over," Gideon told him. "It may prove to be very illuminating, or it may be so negligible as not to matter."

"I don't think you'll find it negligible," the other man said. "There's one *very* interesting thing which I'm sure has struck you, Commander. I don't know whether we would have thought much about it if one of your men—Mr. Cockerill, would it be?"

"Probably."

"Well, someone with a name rather like that raised the question and we prepared some tentative figures. The point is, that although food may be stolen it's nearly always sold. It isn't a loss in actual food, it's simply a loss to the producers or distributors from whom it's stolen. I would say it is a very substantial proportion," Dalyrymple went on.

"Such as?" Gideon asked.

"Four or five percent, sir."

"My God!" exclaimed Gideon. "That's a lot of money!"

"It is indeed," the President said, "and whichever of my hats I am wearing I am keenly alive to it. Er—I don't know whether it would interest you, my deputy has an appointment at Smithfield this afternoon at three o'clock. The market won't be very busy at that time, but one of the Chief Security Officers and the Public Relations Officer are going to prepare some figures for me. I'd rather thought Mr. Cockerill would be there."



"He's off sick," Gideon explained. "But I would very much like to be."

"Three o'clock then, at the main entrance," the other said.

Gideon rang off, but was soon talking to the secretary of another group, the Food Retailers Association, who said in a worried voice:

"There's so much savage price-cutting, a fantastic number of our smaller members are being forced out of business. Some of the smaller chains are feeling the pinch, too. There isn't much doubt what's causing it," he added bitterly. "The big boys mean to squeeze and squeeze until there's no room at all for anyone else. But I'll gladly send you details of bankruptcies and losses, Commander."

When Gideon rang off, he held the instrument under his hand for much longer than usual.

Janice Westerman was wakened by the telephone bell. It appeared to be muffled. She could not understand it, until she turned over in bed to look at the instrument and saw a hand covering it.

It was her "guest's" hand, and he was standing by the side of her bed staring down at her. He was wearing an old towelling dressing-gown which she had had for years; it was short enough to show his legs, bare and hairless. His wig was on straight again.

She remembered with a pang of fear that she had locked his door last night.

"Move over," he said.

She began to rise on one elbow. She wore a shift type nightdress which draped loosely over her full bosom; it had no sleeves, and was cut in a shallow curve at the neck.

"How did you get out?"

"No one locks me in, sweetie," he stated. There was a peculiar smile on his thin lips, which had a frightening effect on her. "No one, ever, anywhere, locks me in. You'd better get that straight."

"I must go—" she began.

"You aren't going anywhere," he said in a taut voice. "Move over." When she stayed on her elbow, her heart palpitating, he lurched forward with devastating suddenness. With one hand he gripped and then ripped the neck of the nightdress, with the other he thrust her across the bed. She had never known such violence, seldom violence at all, and her fears were near screaming pitch. He



ripped the nightdress down to the bottom hem, and then flung the dressing-gown off himself.

"Now," he said, close beside her, "you do what I say. Just what I say. That way you aren't going to get hurt."

She was trembling from head to foot, but there was enough detachment in her to realise that it would be better not to struggle.

She was fairly experienced in a rather shoddy way, but this man's excesses amazed her.

She thought: He's been starved of sex for years—

"Now, beautiful," he said, between gasps, "you and me can get along all right if you just remember who's master here. Just do what you're told, see—and you'll find it works out the same every time: you'll find yourself joining in!" He gave her a squeeze which almost drove the breath out of her body, and then went on: "Now I'll have a cuppa, and breakfast in bed." Quite suddenly his whole body seemed convulsed with laughter. "I haven't had breakfast in bed for a long time, sugar plum. Make it extra-special!"

Gideon stepped out of his car a few minutes before three o'clock that afternoon, and looked about him. Standing by another car was Greerson of the City of London Police, for Smithfield was also within the City boundaries. They shook hands as a third car drew up and an extremely tall man in a clerical grey suit and a bowler hat got out of the back seat; he seemed almost to unfold himself, and when at his full height was at least four inches taller than Gideon, who seldom had to look up at any man.

"Commander?" It was the pleasant voice of the deputy president of the association of Master Food Distributors. "I am Reginald Appleby." There was a little flurry of introductions and hand-shakes.

"I've brought Miss Pearson because she has all the facts and figures at her fingertips which is a lot more than I have. You don't mind a photographer, do you?" Another man was hovering in the background, a man with a big head and a thin neck, manipulating a huge camera into position.

"I don't mind what photographs are taken," Gideon said, "but they mustn't be used until we give the O.K."

"My word on it," the acting manager said. "Now, where would you like to begin?"



"If you were going to steal a refrigerated lorry load of meat, how would *you* begin?" asked Gideon. "I'd like to see how the deliveries arrive, where they're kept, how they're loaded."

Gideon felt chilled from the refrigeration. Surprised at the huge-ness of the stocks, he wondered what this place would be like early in the morning, when the market was at its busiest.

"That's the time when big lorries could come in and be loaded up with meat and taken off without much trouble," the acting manager said, "but if you ask me, Commander, a lot more is likely to go from the docks, when the ships come in and are unloaded from New Zealand and the Argentine."

"And Australia," piped up Miss Pearson.

"And Australia, of course. A driver and his mate could get away with a lot that way, once the unloading started. Often have ten or twenty at the quayside, don't they, Miss Pearson?"

"From New Zealand, the Argentine *and* Australia," she declared. "And some from Europe, particularly pork from Denmark, but some comes in from Poland and Czechoslovakia and West Germany, *and* France," she added. "And only a proportion of it comes here these days, Commander. More here than any one place, of course, but there is a great deal that goes direct from the docks to provincial markets. Some of the big chain stores have two or three lorry loads at a time which start off from the docks and call at their biggest stores to make deliveries." She was a small, grey-haired woman, with an over-exposed projecting forehead. She wore ugly, unbecoming clothes, but to Gideon she stood out among these people, not simply as a personality, but because her heart was so obviously in her job. She added crisply: "There's a ship from New Zealand just beginning to unload. We'll be getting part of a load here tonight but the provincial deliveries will start almost at once. I happen to know that the ship's been cleared," she added, with a positive little nod. "And I can easily arrange it."

Gideon thought: Why not let her, while she's in the mood? And if she arranges it, there won't be so much fuss as if we arrange it ourselves.

But there was protocol: first, a word by telephone with the Divisional Headquarters to say he would be there. Next, a word with the Port of London Authority Police, to make sure no toes were trodden on, because officially they were the autonomous secu-



rity authority within the docks; next again, a word with the particular branch of customs which cleared cargoes and ships before they could be unloaded.

No: he mustn't go. His presence would attract more attention than he wanted.

"I wish I could," he said regretfully. "Another time I hope. Taken by and large you think that the big containers and big deliveries could more easily be stolen or side-tracked from the docks than from here?"

"Far more easily," she said, with a sharp glance at the acting manager. "I've always said our security could be tighter."

"But once you make the security too tight you look as if you suspect the porters of theft and get trouble that way," said the acting manager ruefully. "It's a difficult world, Commander. Every job has its own problems. But that's an internal one."

"It's not simply internal if it involves the theft of food," Gideon said, and for the first time Miss Pearson smiled. He wondered what she would look like without her spectacles. Certainly he had said what she had wanted him to say; as certainly he was greatly in her favour when she dispensed tea and cream cakes before the party left.

Chapter 15

CHANCE

"Merriman," Gideon said next morning, when the big and stolid Detective-Inspector was in his office, "have you taken into account the amount of direct theft from the docks, before the goods reach the markets?"

"Oh, yes, sir," answered Merriman. "It's a pretty big proportion, but I haven't got the exact figures yet."

"Substantial?"

"Very, sir."

Gideon nodded. "Have you heard how Mr. Cockerill is this morning?"

"Yes, sir. He telephoned some instructions."

"Oh, did he," said Gideon, stifling a laugh. "Well if you don't get on with them you'll be in trouble when he gets back."

"No fear of that, sir," the big man assured him; there did not seem to be a spark of humour in his make up. "I'll get it done."

Another man might have explained what he had been told to do, but Merriman stood silent, responding only to direct questions. And another man than Gideon might have asked those questions, but Gideon sensed this man's pride in his job, sensed too that he would be a stickler for rules and regulations: he should report to Cockerill, *Cockerill* should report to him, Gideon.

"All right, thanks," Gideon said. As soon as the door had closed on the man he rang for Tiger, who did not come in at once; did not come, in fact, until Gideon's fingers hovered over the bell-push again; but then the door opened quickly and Tiger arrived with a rush.

"Sorry, sir. I was caught on the telephone."

"That's all right," Gideon said. "How well do you know Inspector Merriman?"

"Fairly well, sir. He's very thorough."



"Yes. Check with him at least twice a day to find out if he's got anything new to report or any final figures." He did not add that he thought Merriman might hold back interim reports until Cockerill came back, Cockerill almost certainly knew how to handle him. "Anything very exciting this morning?"

"Well—one thing could be, sir," said Tiger. "It's a report . . ." Police Constable Howard was worried.

It was not often that a single mind-picture stayed with him as long as the picture of that driver of a battered Jaguar with his head thrown back and his hands momentarily off the wheel, but it was as vivid this morning as ever it could be. He was at the Divisional Headquarters, making out a report on the accident between the Volkswagen and the Ford. That case was going to give him a lot of trouble, he knew, because the Ford driver had died, and all kinds of development might follow. Certainly there would have to be a check on careless driving; so they would need witnesses for that, and witnesses had a habit of vanishing into thin air. Then there would be the Coroner's inquest, a special report was needed for the Coroner. And the insurance people were already asking questions, and if the dead man had been heavily insured then the insurance people would check everything, especially possible negligence on the part of the dead driver, so as to cut down the size of any award for damages.

This case, P. C. Howard knew, might go on for years before it was settled.

He put the report aside, about eleven o'clock, and went to the canteen for a cup of coffee; he was allowed a break of twenty minutes. For some reason the canteen was crowded this morning and he sat down at a table at which three other policemen, one a sergeant, were sitting. The sergeant, senior in age, as well as in rank, was listening to a boyish-looking constable, who was saying:

"I only just wondered, Sergeant. I know London's the last place I'd come to if I wanted to hide."

"Maybe it is but a lot of people think they can lose themselves better in a crowd," replied the sergeant. "And whether you like it or not you've got to find a way of picking out a familiar face—"

"Don't you mean a face that *ought* to be familiar?" demanded the second police constable.

The sergeant put his head on one side and looked as if he were going to deliver a blockbuster to the young chap who had both



interrupted and corrected him. Instead, he nodded slowly and admitted:

"Yes, that's what I do mean. How many of you would *really* pick Arthur Dalby out of a crowd," he went on, and before any of the others could reply he continued: "If he wore a wig, for instance, or a beard; or if he changed his colouring, or put false heels in his shoes or padded his clothes." Now the others were silent. "You've got to know everything about a man and learn it off by heart, and don't tell me you can't—if you can't you'll be a copper all your life, you want to see the way the C.I.D. works. You've got to study the man. For instance, there's a piece in the special sheet sent round with the *Police Gazette* this morning. Have you all read it?"

One of the men said: "I looked through it. Description of Arthur Dalby, isn't it?"

"Isn't it," jeered the sergeant. "You ought to know."

"Well, the others haven't even read it yet," the man protested.

"Well, you make sure you read it and study it *and* commit it to memory. Dalby's got a smaller left little finger than usual, that's one thing I didn't know. And when he grips the wheel of a car, he spreads his fingers out, that's another. And he's got a laugh like a hyena, when he laughs he—"

"My God!" breathed Howard. "It was Dalby!"

The words came out with such a blast that they silenced the others absolutely; and then he stretched across and without a by-your-leave took the sheet from the sergeant's place and stared at the profile picture of the escaped murderer. He drew in a long hissing breath, and went on as the sergeant began to speak.

"It was him. He wore a wig; and that fooled me. Changed his profile, but—he spread his fingers over the wheel and he laughed like a maniac. He was in an old Jaguar, just off Islington High Street. He . . ."

Gideon waited for a call to come through, drumming his fingers on the desk and looking at a menacing grey cloud which hung low over the river. Before him was one of the special sheets which sometimes went out about wanted men, and this was a particularly good one. The details of Dalby's mannerisms were fascinating in themselves. He turned the sheet over to see if the author of the piece was named, but there were not even initials. He called Tiger on the inter-office machine.



"Tiger, find out who did this special insertion for the P.G. will you?"

"Yes, sir. Good isn't it?"

"Very." Gideon heard the first warning ring of the operator's telephone and hung up. It was remarkable how one could go along with a method or a situation and think it first class and then stumble upon an improvement. He lifted the other telephone as it began to ring full blast.

"Sharples? Hallo, Mike," Sharples was only a few years younger than he, and soon due for retirement. "Gideon . . . This report about Arthur Dalby being seen. How reliable is the chap who put in the report?"

"I would say absolutely reliable," answered Sharples, speaking with a noticeable north country accent. "I've had him in my office and questioned him for half-an-hour, without shaking his story. Apparently he noticed the laugh, first, and he saw the man with his fingers spread wide and off the wheel for a moment. Thought of checking that he was sober, then decided he was all right and out to impress his girl friend."

"Ah. First I've heard of a girl friend."

"I don't mind admitting it worries me," Sharples said. "He has a reputation for stringing them along for a few days and then doing unspeakable things. He—"

"I know his reputation."

"Sorry, Commander. My chap Howard said the driver straightened up at once and was driving well enough, so he didn't follow. But he *did* get the car registration number."

"Good!"

"It was a 1958 or 1959 black Jaguar, right wing crumpled and looking the worse for wear. Licence number 8512 BD. I've checked," went on Sharples, "and that's a licence number issued in 1959 by the Northamptonshire County Council, but the records show that it's changed hands seven or eight times at least. And it may have changed again without the licensing authority being informed."

"Have you put a call out for it?"

"Thought I'd check with you first," replied Sharples. "I've only had the full details for ten minutes or so."

"I'll tell *Information* to expect details from you," Gideon said. "Which way was the car heading?"

"On a one way stretch of road towards the West End."

"Hmm," Gideon paused for a few moments and then went on: "Well, first we want the car, then we want anyone who's seen the car. Then we want a description of the girl."

"Howard's done pretty well on that," Sharples said. "About twenty, long hair, very short hot pants-type jeans, scarf blouse. The kind who ask for it. Howard says that on reflection he thinks they had an appointment. I'll add her description in the general call."

"Yes. And once we find that car we want a house-to-house search."

"Only hope we find it," said Sharples, in a tone which made it clear that he rather thought they wouldn't. "He could be anywhere by now—and could have dumped the car, too."

"Yes. What else are you doing?" asked Gideon.

"There are several shops, a newsstand and a café near the spot where he picked the girl up. I'm going to send Howard out with a plainclothes man to find out if anyone noticed anything." Before Gideon could comment Sharples went on: "What about issuing descriptions to the Press, T.V. and radio?"

"Yes, widespread," answered Gideon. "Get our Identikit people to draw full face and profile of Dalby as he would look in the kind of wig he was wearing. Better have Howard have a talk to them, they might get a good idea of what the girl looked like, too. Put Dalby on the screens and in the newspapers with and without wig."

"Right," ejaculated Sharples.

Gideon rang off, not displeased, but troubled. One of Sharples' sentences hovered in his mind: "The kind who ask for it." There wasn't a girl in the world who 'asked for' the kind of treatment which Arthur Dalby was likely to mete out. At the time of his arrest and during the inquiries which had followed, he had been revealed as a sadistic pervert who seemed to get the greatest satisfaction from behaving, early in an intimate sexual association, with extra-normal virility, until suddenly something seemed to crack in his brain.

For P. C. William Howard it was a day of days. First, the obvious astonishment of the sergeant at coffee break; then the equally obvious approval of a man he knew only as an aloof and distant figure, the Superintendent; soon a visit to the *Identikit* and *Photography* departments and Scotland Yard, where about twenty wigs



had already been brought in on loan from a nearby hairdresser. Unhesitatingly he had pointed to one of the wigs, identical to that worn by the man in the car. With a few deft strokes an artist added it to the photographs of Dalby, and Howard could not conceal his excitement.

"I'm more sure than ever—that's him all right!"

He was less happy about the attempt to get a good likeness of the girl; but one could not be a hundred per cent sure on everything.

To cap the day he went with two detective officers of the C.I.D. branch to question shopkeepers and the news-boys and passersby at the spot where he had seen the laughing man.

At half-past five that afternoon, the first report came in. The battered Jaguar with the registration number 8512 BD had been found in Mount Square, near Russell Square, in Bloomsbury. Heavy rain and leaves had half-covered the car, lessening the chance of it being found hours earlier.

At ten past nine that evening, sitting in front of his coloured television set in the comfort of the living-room in his Wimbledon house, Janice Westerman's father sat alone watching the news. This had become a ritual since his wife had left him, two years before, for a man fifteen years younger than he. At heart, he was lonely, despite his material success and despite being able to afford expensive 'consolations' to ease the boredom of his new bachelorhood. He knew that he was really too old to be an understanding father to Janice. He had learned that criticism and condemnation of her way of life did nothing to help their relationship, and for the past year they had come to a working agreement: if she were in need she would come to him, and he would not ask why, or for what purpose, she needed the money. She was never greedy, and, in a strange way, he had come to enjoy these brief visits.

He heard about the Jaguar, about Arthur Dalby, and the fact that he had a girl with him. Then an *Identikit* picture was thrown onto the screen, and he felt a stab of recognition. The newscaster was describing her.

"Full figure, slightly plump but not fat, wearing blue jeans cut short as hot pants and fitting very tightly, wearing a halter or scarf-type blouse of vari-coloured pastel shades . . ."

Janice Westerman's father felt as if he had been turned to stone.

Chapter 16

MONDAY, TUESDAY

Gideon heard about the call to the Wimbledon police by Mr. Westerman in the middle of the Saturday morning, when he was cleaning the lawnmower. Kate, watching him from the kitchen window, saw him frown as the telephone bell rang. He was caught between frustration at being interrupted at a job he wished to finish, and relief that he could leave it with a clear conscience for a few minutes. There was an extension in the kitchen, and after a moment Kate called:

"It's *Information*, George."

Why wasn't it Tiger? Why did the Yard have week-ends? Why didn't the whole staff, civil as well as uniformed and plainclothes, work in shifts so that the Yard was fully manned seven days a week? These thoughts teased through his mind as he approached the back door. Step and floor were covered with an old builders canvas, a manoeuvre of Kate's so that neither he nor the children trampled dirt into the kitchen. The telephone was the wall type, near the door which led to the passage alongside the stairs.

"Gideon," he stated gruffly.

"Thought you should know, Commander, that the girl with Arthur Dalby has been identified. Her father saw her *Identikit* picture and heard her description, and called in last night. We've checked her fingerprints, left on a cigarette box and furniture when she was at home on Thursday, with fingerprints in the car, identical, sir."

"Good. Did the father know she knew Dalby?"

"He says he doesn't know *who* she knows, sir. She lives her life away from home, he lives his. He doesn't even know her address."

"Good lord!" exclaimed Gideon.

"But we've got some good photographs," *Information* went on. "Should we use them in place of the *Identikit* picture?"



"Yes. Is that all?"

"Mr. Lemaitre was on the buz—was calling for you, sir, and I told him you wouldn't be in this morning unless something special turned up."

"If he calls again, ask him to ring me here," Gideon said. "Anything else, while I'm on?"

"Nothing really special, sir," *Information* told him. "Two refrigerated provision lorries were hi-jacked outside a transport cafe last night, and one containing cigarettes was stolen from a wholesalers warehouse. The usual crop, sir—as I say, nothing out of the ordinary."

"No," said Gideon. "Thanks."

He rang off, thinking "nothing out of the ordinary." That is exactly what he would have said a week ago, but now anything to do with food thefts was very out of the ordinary indeed. He wished he had asked what the latest figures on the ptomaine poisoning were, and then reassured himself that Firmani would keep him advised of any serious development, Saturday or no Saturday. Kate was bending down in front of the oven, and already, whatever she was cooking smelled good. A casserole—no, the lid would keep the smell in. Certainly not a roast. Perhaps one of the old-fashioned dishes which he liked too much; hot pot. He watched her as she straightened up, wondering why some people had such natural grace while others looked so clumsy doing everyday things.

"Hot pot?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Bless you. I—"

The front door bell rang, making both of them start, because they had been so absorbed in each other for those few moments. Then Gideon glanced down at his gardening shoes and Kate said: "I'll go." He looked after her, listening. The note of pleased surprise in Kate's voice could not be mistaken.

"Why, Lem! What a pleasant surprise!"

"It certainly is for me," said Superintendent Lemaitre. "If I'd come at the worst possible time you'd still pretend I was welcome. Is George in?"

"He's in the garden."

Good idea, thought Gideon, and withdrew to the garden quickly. He was lifting the grass box when Kate called out: "George, it's Lem." A moment later Lemaitre appeared beside her, looking spic-



and span, even slightly pernickety, in a matching shirt and tie with coloured handkerchief.

"My!" breathed Gideon. "Sartorial splendour indeed. My hand's a bit dirty, Lem."

Lemaitre turned and winked at Kate.

"Cracks every crime problem in England, but doesn't seem to have much success with his lawn-mower, does he! 'Morning, George! Want some help?'"

"And spoil those spotless cuffs? Kate would never forgive me."

"It's not your wife who would have to forgive you but mine. She sends her how-de-do's, by the way. Nearly brought her but she's got some charity thing on, bazaar or some such nonsense! Well, George, you'd never believe what *I've* done."

"Lem," Kate interrupted. "Will you have some coffee? Or is it time for something stronger?"

"Coffee'd be just the thing," replied Lemaitre. He picked up a trowel and began to scrape the blades as if it were second nature. Gideon sat on a bench and watched, while Kate went into the kitchen. "I checked on the quay-side deliveries of the old frozen carcasses, George. Do you know what I found?"

"What do you think you found?" asked Gideon warily.

"Good old George. Never believe a thing until it's down in black and white and can be used in evidence!" He went on scraping the muck off the blades but looking occasionally at Gideon.

One thing was certain: Lemaitre would not have come right across London on a Saturday morning unless he was sure that it was a matter of extreme importance. He had a habit, his main weakness, of jumping to conclusions, but he seemed superbly confident this morning. True, he was obviously determined to impress Gideon, but if the information was significant Gideon was eager to be impressed. The only sounds were the scraping, the rattle of cups and saucers in the kitchen, and the trilling of birds.

"All right, Lem," Gideon said when he judged the moment right. "Let's have it."

"You might or you might not believe that whole lorryloads of the frozen mutton, lamb and beef, especially from New Zealand, leave the docks but never reach their intended destination. Not one, not two, but half-a-dozen each shipment." Lemaitre finished scraping, and wiped his hands against one another fastidiously. "It's the same as the old trick of putting a railway wagon in a siding, and losing it



long enough for it to be emptied by night. George, this is a *very* big job."

Gideon stared at him, his eyes narrowed.

Kate's voice drifted out from the kitchen. "Are you coming in for coffee?"

"Half a mo', Katey," Lemaitre called, and stared back at Gideon.

Gideon said gruffly: "How did it come to grow so big. How did we *let* it happen?"

"Easy," Lemaitre stated.

"I don't want any guesses, Lem."

"No guesses. It isn't from me, either, it's straight from the horse's mouth." Seeing the storm gathering on Gideon's forehead, he added quickly: "It's from Edie Pearson, the Smithfield woman. She was over at the docks last night, and I got a call to go and looksee. That woman's got an analytical mind, George, she—"

"*How did it happen?*"

"One or two key men at the docks, or at a market, signing for nine lorry-loads going out when there was ten. General falsification of papers—a very clever mind behind it, Edie says. A dozen drivers in the know and say a dozen others—checkers, superintendents—and that's all. That's *how* the stuff goes, George. How it goes from other big food warehouses, too—the only commodity that doesn't seem to suffer much is tea, and anything under bond. Question is—who buys it?"

"Yes," Gideon agreed. "Who buys it. We should have some idea on Monday, Merriman's collating information about wholesalers and main distributers."

"That old ox still around?"

"Let's go and have that coffee," Gideon said. "Have you told anyone else, Lem?"

"No, sir. The Commander gets to know the big stuff first, in my book."

Gideon put a hand on his arm for a moment in a rare gesture, and as they went into the kitchen, he said: "Thanks for cleaning the lawn-mower." Kate was in the living-room, hovering over the coffee percolator, tall cups, biscuits and chocolate cake. She asked Lemaitre to stay for lunch, but he refused with obvious regret. By the time he had gone it was after twelve o'clock, and Gideon was thinking more clearly than before about the situation.

It simmered in his mind all the week-end.

There were the moments of sadness, when a van collected the furniture from Mrs. Jameson's attic flat. There were minutes of deep satisfaction when both Gideon and Kate were upstairs in the soundproofed attic, Kate playing, Gideon humming, sometimes a hymn, sometimes an old music hall song. A newspaper reporter rang up to ask if Gideon had any comment about Arthur Dalby and his girlfriend Janice.

"No. And you should know better than to call me at my home on a—at any time," Gideon corrected hastily.

"Have to take a chance sometimes, Commander," the reporter said reproachfully. "Did you hear about Sylvia Russell and her new baby?"

"I knew she *had* a new baby."

"And both doing fine," the reporter said. "I showed her and her husband one of your special S.O.S.'s about that. If they'd had a boy instead of a girl, they'd call it George!" Before Gideon recovered from that laughing statement, the reporter went on: "Is it true there's a special investigation going on about large scale thefts from the big markets and from the docks?"

A bright young man indeed, thought Gideon; and there did not seem much doubt that this was the question he had really called about. There was no time to hesitate, and Gideon was never in favour of the direct lie.

He said: "There will be, if the thefts really reach a big scale."

"Come off it, Commander! They're enormous, and you know it!"

"What newspaper do you represent?" asked Gideon mildly.

"The *Echo*. And by the way my name is Elliott. Commander, off the record, are these food thefts worrying you?"

"All thefts worry me."

There was a moment's pause before the other said: "Well, thanks, Commander. Goodbye." He rang off before Gideon could make any further comment. Gideon waited only a few moments before lifting the receiver and then skimming through the *E* to *K* section of the London Telephone Directory for *The Echo*. He asked for the News Editor, who came on briskly:

"Who's that?"

"Commander Gideon of—"

"Good evening Commander! How can I help you?"

"Do you have a reporter named Elliott?" asked Gideon.



"No," the man replied.

"Are you planning a special news story on food hi-jacking?"

"I'm not, but features might be. Care to hold on?" Gideon held for what seemed a long time but the other came back at last and said: "No, Commander. It's not on our schedule. Do you mind telling me what this is all about?"

"Someone named Elliott is using the *Echo* as a cover," Gideon said.

"Could be a freelance," observed the News Editor. "It has happened before. If we get a story offered, I'll let you know."

"Be glad if you would," Gideon said, and rang off.

He went back into the living-room, where Kate was watching the Sunday night play on a B.B.C. channel. She was so intent, that he didn't disturb her. But in some ways he was more worried than ever.

Later that evening, Kilfoil, Black and Graaf met again in Kilfoil's apartment, sitting in their accustomed positions, drinking their accustomed drinks. But there was, now, a tension which had not been there even on the meeting earlier in the week. Obviously they were waiting for a telephone call, or for a fourth person to join them. Eventually a young man was admitted by a manservant. He lost no time, saying as the door closed:

"I talked to Gideon, Lemaitre, Firmani and several divisional men. None of them gave me the direct negative, just said they were investigating the incidents one by one. But I don't believe them. I believe they're really going to move, that they've already started to see how big it is." He looked into Black's deepset eyes and went on: "And when the police really get on the move, they're like a steamroller in action. Nothing can stop them. If you want my opinion you have to do some very quick thinking."

Lancelot Black asked Kilfoil: "How many men can put a finger on us, Horatio?"

"That's your job," Kilfoil protested. "How many do you think?"

"I know my side of it. I'm thinking of yours."

"Two," said Kilfoil, slowly. "Two and possibly three, know that we're working some racket."

"Joe?" asked Black, flatly.

"None," Graaf said. "I keep all the facts and figures that matter



and all the names and personnel in my head. No one can get to us through me, but your twenty-man, that's dangerous."

Lancelot Black said: "If he's right about the police attitude, that's dangerous. So are Horatio's men. We need to keep a very careful watch for two or three more days, and if the police look like closing in, then—" he brought his hand down with a chopping motion. "We stop."

"That's what I wanted to hear last time," Graaf said.

"Well, you're hearing it now," retorted Black crisply. He narrowed his eyes as if lost in thought. "We can't take chances. We've got to warn everyone concerned and we've got to make *sure* they don't talk." The others exchanged glances while Kilfoil moistened his lips. Then Black's eyes opened at their widest and he said: "We'll call a meeting. We'll question each one and find out if he's had any trouble, or noticed that the police were being more active than usual. We'll meet at—" he hesitated, and then went on: "At our warehouse in Battersea. Seven o'clock, Wednesday—no, Thursday. You tell your two or three," Black added to Kilfoil, "and bring anyone who might know what's going on."

As they went downstairs in the lift, Graaf said in his almost aggressive manner: "Do you think he knows what you're planning?"

"What *we're* planning," corrected Black, and laughed. "No, Horatio hasn't got a thinking-cell in his brain. He 'thinks' I want to ask them questions."

"I know one thing," Graaf said.

"What particular thing?" demanded Lancelot Black.

"Nothing would make me go to that gang of thieves, partner. Nothing in this world."

"But Horatio won't be able to wait to get there," Black said, and he gave an explosive laugh. "And we'll be doing what the police want, won't we? Putting a stop to the hi-jacking!"

He laughed again.

Graaf didn't laugh; he shivered.

CHAPTER 17

"THAT GANG OF THIEVES"

One of Gideon's deep preoccupations over the years had been: *why* did men from a good honest background, who earned a reasonable income, turn to theft, pilfering, the dozen-and-one forms of larceny which did so much harm to society and took up so much time of the police. At best a homespun philosopher he knew that this was a motivation allied to that behind shop-lifting by women who were well-off by ordinary standards; stealing out of tills by shop assistants; "borrowing" by bank cashiers and others in positions of trust.

He could understand when there was an acute need of money to meet an emergency; he could understand the pressure caused by gambling debts, by over-spending on hire purchase. He could even find excuses as well as reasons for many of these but—why did so many people who did not need to profit from crime seize the first opportunity, and then go on and on?

The drivers on the refrigerated lorries, for instance, were highly-paid; why did some cheat? Why did some deliberately go into transport cafes and overstay their break-time, knowing their vehicle would be gone when they went outside? It was not so much "what makes men steal" which preoccupied him as "what makes men with plenty of money in their pockets steal"?

There was, of course, no easy answer, unless the obvious one was right: that there was a brain defect in those who stole, just as there was a brain defect in men like Arthur Dalby, and others like Moreno. He accepted the fact that of a family of three brothers, say, born into the same background, given virtually the same care by parents, the same educational opportunities, all three would turn out very differently. One might be as near a saint as human beings ever were; another as near a devil; the third, neither saint nor positive sinner, could be merely a nonentity. The answers, of course,



were wrapped up in the biological factors; in genetics; in heredity, which was another thing.

The simple truth was, then, that though he could not fully understand, he must accept the situation. It preoccupied him a great deal in the early days of the week which followed the first realisation of the size of the food thefts. Many of the men involved, and by his reckoning there must be at least twenty actively concerned, would be ordinary family men; happily married or not, according to the luck of the draw, probably proud of children who were proud of them. They were the people next door; the trusted neighbours, except that in the bitter experience of the police one could trust only those whom one knew for certain to be trustworthy.

Those van drivers really puzzled him.

Cockerill, who came in on the Tuesday morning with a magnificent purple, blue and black eye, half closed, and with some partly healed cuts and scratches, said helplessly:

"They get sixty quid a week when they do a full week—and they can work a full week whenever they want to. It beats me."

Sam Tollard was one of the drivers.

He was a married man with a son and a daughter. It was a happy enough home in an apartment block near the docks. At forty, he had managed to put a few thousand pounds aside, he had some sizeable endowment insurances, and as far as he knew, not an enemy in the world.

And as far as he knew, only he and the man who paid him for the jobs were aware that every now and again he delivered a full load of meat to a big buyer, was paid cash for it, and kept two hundred of the cash for his trouble. He had been doing it for so long that it almost seemed part of the legitimate side of his job. His work kept him away from home for long hours, but he had absolute trust in his wife, and she in him. No week passed when he did not take her and the kids a small present, and treat them to a flash restaurant and the pictures.

Roger Banner was also one of the drivers.

He was younger than Tollard but also married, and a good-natured man who played rather than watched cricket and football at week-ends, went out on Friday evenings with his wife shopping,



taking turns at pushing the pram which held his children, one year old twins Sarah and Martha.

Both these men, and all the others whom Graaf had called "that gang of thieves" received notices to be at the Battersea warehouse on Thursday at seven o'clock, even if it meant turning down a shift. It did not occur to any of the men to object. There were the long-distance drivers, the van salesman, two or three tally-men—white collar workers—at the docks, an inspector of goods traffic on the railways, one or two key workers at Smithfield, Billingsgate and Covent Garden markets.

There was one other man involved, one who had worked with Lancelot Black since his early days, but had twice been jailed for robbery. He was an expert on explosives, and he was an expert at asking no questions. When Black told him to take sufficient nitro-glycerine to a certain warehouse at Smithfield, and exactly where to hide it, he obeyed. It was in position a day early: on Wednesday.

On Thursday morning this long-time friend of Lancelot Black was found dead at the foot of the stairs in the tall, condemned building where he lived. His neck was broken, and the autopsy showed that he had been full of whisky, and there was little doubt that the coroner's verdict would be one of death by misadventure.

On the Tuesday before these things happened, Gideon, Cockerill and Firmani, with Merriman sitting in as a kind of talking reference book, went over the facts as they were now known. Whatever his faults, Merriman had done a thorough, almost a brilliant job. He had the figures for the main cities in the United Kingdom as well as for London, and the total value of the stolen or misdirected food was colossal. Cockerill said:

"It's five percent of the total food bill, Commander."

"The wholesale total," Gideon said. "Yes. And how far have we got with the finding out where it goes?"

"No more than we knew before," Cockerill said. "As you instructed, Commander, we went carefully, not wanting to raise any alarm. We know of at least five wholesalers who take stolen goods of any kind and ask no questions; but they can only be one in a hundred."

"Thousand," interjected Merriman, unexpectedly.



"I can tell you this," Firmani said, "one in six of the restaurants on my list have been buying from dubious markets. If they can save ten percent they save it. If it hadn't been for those eels—" he broke off.

Gideon said: "The distributors must be very big."

Cockerill grunted, Merriman grunted, Firmani raised both eyes and then said:

"One big one or a lot of little ones."

"One big one, most likely," declared Cockerill. "To fix this with thousands of distributors would need a huge administration. Did you have any luck with the Food Retailers Association, Commander?"

"I've been promised some kind of report this afternoon," Gideon answered. "I'll let you know if it has much to say."

He nodded dismissal.

They went out very quietly. Gideon watched the door close, then moved to the window, taking up his favourite stance and watching the ever-changing scene. The weather had turned unpleasant in the last few days and the grey Thames was pocked by a million rain drops. He singled out one pleasure boat as it disappeared beneath Westminster Bridge, going perhaps as far as Richmond and Teddington Weir; then turned away.

There had been little briefing that morning; very few major problems had cropped up over the week-end, but that meant little. Crimes committed might still be discovered, crimes from murder to the comparatively trifling. He was ill-at-ease with himself, and quite suddenly knew what he must do. He called the Commissioner, who answered his own telephone in a voice which sounded a thousand miles away.

"What is it, George?"

"Do you have half-an-hour to spare, sir?"

"Now?" asked Scott-Marle, obviously hesitant. "I had planned—" he broke off. "Half an hour."

"Should be plenty," Gideon assured him.

"Then come along right away."

Scott-Marle was a tall, lean, military-looking man, good-looking in an austere way. Gideon, who had not seen him for several weeks, was startled; lines at Scott-Marle's mouth seemed deeper, as if a sculptor had been at work on him, chipping at the hard, leathered



face. Now he waved a hand towards an angular-looking armchair. It looked too small for Gideon, but from experience he knew that it was not only big enough but also very comfortable. Scott-Marle had his own chair positioned so that Gideon did not have to face the window-light while looking at him. He did not speak at once, but waited.

"Two things, closely related, sir," Gideon said, aware of, and grateful for, this characteristic gesture. "We've been criminally slow getting onto the size of the food thefts. We still don't know the full extent of it, but it seems to have been brilliantly organised and I'm as sure as I can be that it's big enough to have an effect on the national standard of living."

Scott-Marle, for once, was startled into saying:

"Can anything be as big as that?"

"I've convinced myself," Gideon stated, "and I've been trying to think how it could be done." When Scott-Marle simply nodded he went on, choosing his words with great care. "I think it could be done by forcing down prices, forcing the small trader out of business, leaving the largest share of trade in the hands of a few large chain or multiple stores who could fix prices as they wished." Still Scott-Marle kept silent, and it was impossible to say whether he was agreeing or disagreeing. "The price-fixing wouldn't be our business," Gideon said, "but the steps being taken to reach the position from which it could be done is our business."

"Most certainly," Scott-Marle agreed.

"A major distributor must be involved," Gideon said, "and I'd like to start investigating them all." His lips widened in a grim smile. "And that's a tall order."

The Commissioner did not argue. "If it has to be done, it has to be done. Do whatever you think necessary."

"Thank you, sir. It may take some time but I'd like to plant a man in most of the head offices and main branches of the biggest chain stores." Gideon shifted in his chair. "Then there's another angle that really gets under my skin."

"And that is?"

"The way the van salesman for those eels was murdered. It was quick, callous and hideous, sir. The man who could order it could do anything. When I first started this investigation I wanted to keep it quiet, but that hasn't proved practicable. A lot of inquiries have



been made. On Sunday I was questioned by a bogus newspaperman about our plans, so was Lemaitre, and several others. I'm afraid of another ruthless act if we get too close."

Gideon stopped.

Scott-Marle leaned forward, looking at him very intently. It was as if he were asking himself questions and then answering those questions, the main one being whether Gideon was absolutely serious. At last he said:

"Are you saying that you think we should take some of the suspects into custody?"

"That's what I'd like to do," Gideon said, enormously glad that he had come here; this man was one of the few who would really understand what was driving him. "So I'm in a cleft stick, sir. Make some arrests and tell the organisers that we really are getting close to them; or let things go on as they are until we get a fuller and clearer picture which would lead us to the main criminals. If I choose either, and it goes wrong, it could be disastrous." When the Commissioner sat and waited, he went on heavily: "I'm not asking you to make the decision for me, sir. But before I decide one way or the other I think you should have the chance to veto either or both."

Quietly, Scott-Marle replied: "I'd like to think about it, and I've a man coming in five minutes. I'll be in touch in about two hours."

Chapter 18

EITHER OR BOTH

As Gideon was saying: "I think you should have a chance to veto either or both," to Sir Reginald Scott-Marle, one of the oldest police constables on the Metropolitan force was looking into a room which was a curious mixture of grubbiness and glitter; of junk and valuables. It was on the top floor of Poberty's Buildings, in White-chapel, on the fringe of Lemaitre's division. The constable, whose name had grown to suit him, was Old, commonly known in the division and among the people with whom he worked as "old Charlie Old." Getting up four flights of narrow stairs had been an effort, but from the moment he had learned that his namesake, Charlie Larsen had been found at the foot of the stairs with a broken neck, he had meant to come here.

Old Charlie Old had a great many attributes. Loyalty, courage, tolerance, not being the least. But no one would have called him brilliant. His ideas, such as they were, were born out of experience, and what thinking he did was along the most conventional lines. Over the years that he had served here, and they were over thirty, he had come to know and accept a great many of the residents of the district, and, having a good memory he knew who had been inside and for what offences; which wife would be faithful when her man was in prison and which would not; which mother needed watching, especially when in drink, for her children's sake; which mother managed miracles on a small or negligible income and kept a large family spick and span.

Old Charlie Old, then, was part of the district. Even when the great changes had been taking place in the operation of the Force and younger men were being drafted in, and the older ones retired, he stayed. He did not know that this was because his superiors all knew that his knowledge of this particular part of London was invaluable. Even thieves in trouble would go to him, and many a



wrong-doer when taken away by the plainclothes men for a well-earned two or three years sentence, would plead:

"Keep an eye on my old woman, Charlie." And old Charlie Old would nod and say: "Right you are, Bob,"—or Syd, Jim, Joe, whatever the name might be. He always got the names right. No one would ever know how much his kindness cost him in hard cash, but he didn't smoke, had only an occasional glass of beer, and had a wife who earned nearly as much as he did at a gown and mantle manufacturers in Shoreditch.

This morning, he had come back on duty after two days off, and heard about Charlie Larsen. The inquest hadn't as yet been held, but the facts were known by everyone, and it did not surprise Old Charlie that the other man had fallen down the stairs and broken his neck. The marvel was that he hadn't injured himself long before. Old Charlie's visit was due to something very different: curiosity. For Larsen, especially when on the way to being drunk, had often passed on what he called: "Li'l ole secrets." In fact he said very little, except that he had influential friends, and didn't have to worry about his future. Old Charlie Old had noticed—without actually asking—that he seldom bought groceries or food-stuffs from the corner shop, now glorified by the name Supermarket, or even from the bigger shops in the nearest main road. He had a secret source of supply. Whether he stole them or not Old Charlie could only guess. He didn't think so.

One thing Larsen had paid for was his whisky, from a nearby off-licence.

He had no regular job but took odd jobs whenever it suited him. He was, for instance, a standby pall-bearer for a local undertaker, as well as a messenger for many of the shops.

Now, Old Charlie Old looked about the room.

The bed was solid with a good, fairly modern mattress. Two big electric heaters would keep the room warm when London was freezing. There was one hide armchair which looked inviting and two smaller, velvet covered ones. On the mantelpiece was a French porcelain clock which was of beautiful colouring and design; Old Charlie knew instinctively that it was very valuable. Next to it was a cheap alarm clock, a tin tea-caddy with a garish design, and a dozen dust-gathering odds and ends. On a corner table was a silver candelabra, which looked as if it had been lovingly polished, next to a cracked ash-tray. A bottle of ink which seemed to have dried



up, flanked another, cleaner ash-tray with some white pellets in it.

He picked one up and sniffed. It had a faint and distinctive smell, and yet he could not place it. A bit acid, he thought; it lingered in the nostrils. Then he spotted, among the rubbish on a table behind the door, something he had not dreamed he would find here: an old detonator.

He went close. Yes, that was a detonator, the kind they used in plastic bombs and nitro-bombs, which would explode either at a set time if it was wired to a timing device, or under a slight impact. He did not pick it up but asked the empty room:

"Charlie, what have you been up to?"

He began to search more closely, in cupboards and drawers, until he found a half-full box of the detonators on top of a cupboard—out of sight until one stood on a chair.

"Strewth!" Old Charlie exclaimed. "He's been fooling me all these years."

He went out, closing and locking the door, going down the interminably long staircase, stepping over the white chalk marks with which the police had outlined the dead man's body. He could have used his radio from here but he did not altogether trust walkie-talkies; they did the job all right, but big time crooks could get the wavelength and monitor the reports to and from policemen and headquarters. He walked, dropping a word here and a word there to people at their windows or doorways, until he reached a cross-roads where he knew a police patrol car would appear soon. One did, in less than five minutes, and pulled up at his signal.

"Want some help, Charlie?"

"How about a lift to the station?"

"Hop in. Getting secretive in your old age, are you Charlie?"

"Just find my legs get more tired than they used to," Old Charlie replied evasively.

He reported in person to a sergeant, the sergeant reported to an inspector; the inspector sent the sergeant and Charlie Old back to the flat, for a closer look; the sergeant did not share Old Charlie's misgivings about walkie-talkies, and he reported straight back to the inspector.

"They're detonators all right, sir. And that's not all. There are some pallets of *Firex* about the place, the stuff the fire chaps think started the fire when Jackie Baker was killed. And tucked away



under the bed are a couple of tins of gelignite, brand new—it looks as if they were stolen with that lot out of the Hi-Build yard last week."

The inspector immediately went up to see his superintendent, Lemaitre.

Lemaitre was in his office; it was his habit to keep his door open so that anyone who wanted to see him could do so. A closed door meant *Keep Out*, and no order was more effectively obeyed. Lemaitre, intently studying papers, looked up immediately.

"Sit down, Perky."

"I'm not sure I've time, sir," said the inspector, and launched into his story.

During this same period, Gideon buried himself more and more deeply in the figures and the general situation, concentrating on the distribution to wholesalers and the retail outlets for the stolen goods.

Mr. Westerman spent those two hours sitting at his office desk, trying to concentrate on work, but unable to prevent his eyes from straying towards the photograph of Janice which looked up at him from a neatly folded newspaper. His secretary and everyone concerned with the business seemed almost as shocked as he.

Now and again, when alone, he would clench his fist and cry out in anguish: "*Where is she?*"

During those two hours, the door-to-door search being made for Arthur Dalby and Janice Westerman was slowed down by two bank robberies, two smash-and-grabs, and a suspected plot to rob a bullet-proof car which was to collect old currency notes from a bank in Kings Cross and take them to the Bank of England for destruction. Nevertheless, it went on relentlessly. The police had taken the position of the Jaguar as a central point, and from there made a circle approximately half a mile round it. This took in an enormous area of London, which included the mass of guest and boarding houses serving the University of London, huge apartment blocks, as well as hundreds of small, pleasant streets of Georgian or late Victorian houses.

By sheer chance, Janice Westerman's flat was easier to approach by car from the perimeter of the circle than the heart; it would be among the last to be visited, and the officers in charge of the search



estimated that if they could keep fifty men on the job they would be finished by Friday at the earliest.

Most of the time, now, Janice was frightened, for she had no doubt that she was being kept prisoner. So far all their supplies had lasted, but they would have to contact some shop, or else cut down on eating, before this day, Wednesday, was out. She still did not know who her jailer was, but she knew that he was bordering on the pervert.

He would not put on the radio, and she had no television. The thing which saved her from absolute boredom and despair was the record player. And in some moods he would jump up from his chair, pull her from hers, and dance to frenzied music, wild, exhilarating, breath-taking. He would start to drag her clothes off, but before he had finished he would collapse, exhausted; too exhausted for love.

After these periods of fierce excitement, he would become moody. Wherever she was, whatever she was doing, he would stare at her. All this time, he kept on the wig, and she had no idea whether he realised that she knew that he wore one. It was after one of these unnerving moods, when he said: "Let's eat, I'm hungry," that she ventured, in the calmest voice she could summon:

"We'll have to go to the shops, soon."

"We stay here," he said, sharply.

"But we must get some food," she protested. "We're out of milk and eggs, there's hardly any bread, most of the canned food—"

"We stay here," he repeated, and his expression changed, his lips tightened, there was viciousness in him. He went on with strange petulance: "You ought to be on the phone, we could order some food delivered then."

She said patiently: "Unless you want to go hungry one of us must go and get something."

He said roughly: "If anyone goes, *I* go."

"But why can't we both go?"

"Because I say so."

Anger welled up in her, and had it not been for the accompanying fear, she would have shouted at him. *Freedom* was what she worshipped, was why she had left home, was why she lived here on her own, dependent on no one and beholden to no one—except, occasionally, her father. She liked the apartment because the rest of



the house was used as offices. She liked being on her own, without neighbours, without close friends, preferring strangers and short acquaintances; but this man—

“What’s the matter with you?” he demanded.

“I want to do my own shopping,” she said, “and I don’t see—”

He had sprung out of his chair, and was striking at her face, before she realised that he had moved. He struck her with the palm of his hand, a vicious blow on either cheek, and then drew back, breathing hard; his lips seemed to have disappeared into a thin line. Her cheeks stung and her anger rose to fury; but terror was greater. She sat and stared at him, wide-eyed.

He backed away, saying viciously: “If you don’t want me to get violent, just do what I tell you, in bed, out of bed, everywhere, all the time.”

Whatever the consequences how could she possibly let him get away with it?

And if she did, this time, what hope was there for the future between them, be it a day or a week or a month. She had never been dominated and controlled and she wasn’t going to be now. Whatever it cost her, she had to fight back. He was staring at her as these thoughts went through her mind and it was almost as if he could read the defiance in her.

Her heart was beating so fast she felt as if she were choking.

She couldn’t get the words out, but—she had to. She could not meekly submit—

Unless she just pretended to, and at the first chance that came, escape. He couldn’t keep watch on her all the time.

“Come on, let’s know what you’re thinking,” he cried. He was in front of the chair, feet slightly apart, hands held out in front of him, the fingers curled and the palms downwards; an animal, about to pounce. An animal. A terrifying animal. But if she let him get away with this, where would her self-respect be? Her sense of independence?

“Get away from me,” she said, “and I’ll tell you.”

“You tell me now.”

“Get away from me, and I’ll tell you,” she repeated. “I don’t want trouble with you, but I don’t take orders from you or any man. So—”

He leapt at her. He grabbed her wrists as she tried to fend him off, and hauled her up from the chair. It was as if he had a dozen



arms and legs and fists and feet. He was breathing hard and she was gasping, quite sure that she was about to die. He dragged her into the bathroom and dumped her on a stool. She felt him yank her arms behind her and fumble at her wrists; he was binding her. At some stage he had fetched a rope she used when she went camping, and when her wrists were locked together with this he tied the other end to the lavatory chain that hung from the high cistern. When he had finished he was breathing in loud, animal gasps. He buried his fingers in her hair and pulled savagely, and then tied a scarf round her mouth and the back of her neck, so that she could hardly breathe.

She heard him go; heard the door shut; heard the key turn; and heard him move away. After that there was only the gurgling of the cistern and the harshness of her breathing. If she was to live, she had to breathe more gently, the gasps were almost choking her.

If she wanted to live—

The real question was, would he let her?

At the same moment, two bells rang on Gideon's desk, the internal one and the Yard operator's. He took a chance that the first would be Scott-Marle, lifted the other receiver and said to the operator: "Whoever it is, hold him or have him call back." He picked up the second receiver as he put the first down and announced:

"Gideon."

"This is the Commissioner, Commander," Scott-Marle said, so formally that he must surely have someone else in the office with him. "I've decided that you must be guided by your own assessment of the evidence. Whatever decision you reach I will support, of course."

"Thank you, sir," Gideon said, not really sure whether to be pleased or sorry. "What time will you be free?"

"Not until late afternoon, if at all. But I shall be home this evening."

"Thank you," said Gideon, and rang off.

Scott-Marle had left him on his own and that was really how it should be, but he did not relish making the decision. Arrest as many as they could now, and warn the big shots; or wait and take a risk that even in a short time irreparable damage could be done. It wasn't often that the connection between police work and some-



thing as basic as cost of living and the life of the community was so obvious. For a few seconds he forgot the other call, but recollection came and he lifted the second receiver and asked:

"Is my caller still waiting?"

"Yes, Commander." Here was another man speaking formally almost certainly because he was not alone. "We've found a store of firex, some gelignite from a recently stolen store and a man who might or might not have died by accident. Shall I give you the story over the telephone, or come and see you?"

Before Gideon had answered, before he had really made up his mind what to say, there was a tap at the communicating door and Tiger looked in, apologetic and yet insistent.

"Sorry to worry you, sir," he said, "but Sir Bernard Dalyrymple is here—actually here, sir, waiting in the hall. May I tell him you'll see him?"

Chapter 19

SIR BERNARD DALYRYMPLE

Gideon said to Lemaitre: "Hold on, Lem," and to Tiger: "I'll gladly see him but won't be free for twenty minutes, possibly half-an-hour. Find out if he would like to do a Cook's tour of the Yard and if so get a senior man to take him round. If not, find him a comfortable chair and a cup of tea—what's the time?"

"Half-past three, sir."

"Right." Gideon nodded dismissal and before the door had closed was on the telephone again to Lemaitre. In the way that he had acquired while in this office he had dealt with the two problems at once, and knew exactly what to say and do. "I need everything you can tell me now, Len, and may need to see you later. Go ahead."

Lemaitre, sensing his preoccupation and the need for urgency, brought him up to date with the Charlie Larsen, detonators and *firex* situation, lucidly and yet vividly; and he managed to get a word in for old Charlie Old.

"Is he still working?" Gideon asked, astonished.

"And still as blind as a bat in some things," replied Lemaitre. "We wouldn't have got this without him, but he's known Larsen for twenty years and didn't realise he was an explosives expert."

"I've known food thefts have been increasing for years but didn't realise how big it was," Gideon replied. "Has the autopsy on Larsen been held?"

"No."

"Get it done, quick. This afternoon, without fail."

"Right."

"And we need to trace Larsen's movements for the past few days," said Gideon. "If he was the man who set fire to the warehouse we need to know very quickly, because he wouldn't do it for the excitement."



"Cash," Lemaitre said. "We found two hundred and fifty notes stashed away, and some car or van keys. The only way we can check for that vehicle is to try all the cars and vans parked nearby. I've started the tracing, George, but—"

"There aren't any buts on this job, Lem."

"But I'll have to withdraw the chaps I lent for the house to house search for Dalby and that wench."

Gideon drew in a deep, almost painful breath. Lemaitre was quite right to raise the question, of course, and the decision had to be made. If they didn't find the escaped murderer and the girl soon, her chance of survival was slim indeed: but the other issue was so much bigger.

"Withdraw your men. I'll try to get some more in from the outer divisions," he added, but he knew that it was not going to be easy. August was still the great holiday month, policemen with families liked to be away in school holiday time, and forces were stretched thin. But he must try. He rang for Tiger, who appeared at once.

"Sir Bernard asked if he could see *Records* and the *Information Room*, sir. He's happy."

"I wish I were. Get onto all the perimeter—not the central divisions, and see if we can get some men in for the Dalby search. There's another emergency in N.E. and we're going to have to get some of their men back." He nodded dismissal and was lifting the telephone again while Tiger was still in the room, calling the superintendent in charge of the house-to-house search. The least he could do was tell the man what was to happen and promise as much help as possible tonight and tomorrow.

"Quite understand," the other said. "I did hope we'd be through by Friday but it could go into the week-end, now. Overtime pay all right?"

"Yes," replied Gideon.

"Someone will love us," the other replied, and rang off.

Janice heard the front door of the flat open; heard it close; heard "him" go into the kitchen. There were little thumping sounds, she could not place. She was beyond real thought and near coma, the ache at her arms and shoulders intolerable. She had swooned off several times and waked up to a sweat and a frenzy of fear.

The key of her prison turned; the door opened. Fear flared again, and merged with thought, and she wanted to plead with him,



promise anything, if only he would let her go from this awful position.

He touched the top of her head; gently. *Gently*. He unfastened the scarf round her mouth and drew it away. He freed the rope from the chain and then from her wrists, and not once did he hurt her. He slid his arms round her waist and hoisted her slowly to her feet; she could not put any weight on them because her legs were so numbed; and pins and needles began an agonising tattoo. He eased her into the big room, and helped her onto her own bed. He took her wrists, one at a time, and rubbed quite gently.

"Okay," he said at last. "You just had to know who's boss, that's all. Do what you're told and you'll be all right." He smiled down at her as if he really meant that and was full of affection, then said: "I'll go and make a cuppa." Over his shoulder, he added: "I got some milk *and* cream, and—but wait until you see what I got. Enough for a week, I shouldn't wonder!"

A week?

A week here with him, now that she knew what he could be like?

She shivered violently . . .

And yet when he brought in the tea, put the tray on the foot of the bed, helped her to sit up and then poured out, the horror of her ordeal began to blur. He was obviously pleased with himself, proud of his shopping, ready for the time being to treat her well.

But what would happen if something she did or said sparked off another of those rages?

"Fascinating," declared Dalyrymple. "Absolutely fascinating. I'd read and heard a lot about the *Records* room and *Information* but to see them in action—" he gave a gentle smile and brushed his silky, near-white moustache with an affectionate gesture. He was a tall, willowy, pink-faced man; and his manner had the benignity of a clergyman who had absolute faith in his calling. But he was nervous, Gideon thought. "I'm most grateful for the time you're sparing, and dare to hope that it will be mutually helpful. Commander, am I right in thinking that you are more at home with a man of few words than one who tends to be over-prolix?"

Gideon smiled faintly, and said: "I like a man to be himself, sir."

Dalyrymple looked sceptical, and then he actually chuckled. "An



excellent precept—though one not always wise to follow. And now to business. It has come to me through various trade sources that the police are deeply concerned with the matter of the theft of food in bulk. Further, that you have reached a fair and reasonable conclusion that stolen food finds a retail outlet, fairly quickly. Am I right?"

"Yes," Gideon said.

"And may I take it that what I say to you is in absolute confidence?"

"Unless it concerns a crime committed by you or known by you to have been committed, sir."

"You are precise, Commander. I have only suspicions; but I have held them for some time. It may be said that when one gets burned one looks for the cause of the fire. I am Chairman of the Board of the largest single food retailing business in the United Kingdom, and also this year's president of the National Association of Food Retailers." He paused to allow Gideon to take this in, and then added: "For my own company I am concerned: for many of the members of the association I am gravely perturbed. Many face ruin. My company faces severe reductions in reasonable profits and so reductions in dividends to our shareholders. We have known for some time—a year, at least—that a carefully considered campaign of price-cutting has drawn a great deal of our customers away. By our, please take it that I mean my company and the Association members. Price cutting is not new. It comes in various guises—or should I say disguises? But now, for over a year we have faced genuine and steadily maintained price-cutting. As a result, many of our customers have gone to the place where they can get the best value." Again, he paused.

"So would most housewives," Gideon said, flatly.

"Yes, indeed, And most understandable." A smile appeared only to die at once. "We—our experts—have checked the prices against which we are having to compete. In the beginning we suspected, at this juncture we feel convinced, that it can *only* be done at a loss. There are no ways in which the price-cutter concerned can cut his own expenses—we have checked most carefully, have planted our own staff in a number of their stores and know that either they are losing money heavily in the short term to get the long term benefit—"

"How much do these losses run to?" asked Gideon.



"Our estimates are that one particular firm which has a variety of outlets, chiefly a Supermarket chain, loses at least twenty-five million pounds a year." Now, the tall man's eyes were bright and questioning. "*A least, Commander.*"

"A pretty high total for short term losses," Gideon said.

"Yes, indeed. Unless, of course, the losses are being offset by some other means." Sir Bernard Dalyrymple uttered these words both slowly and solemnly. Gideon studied him intently, wondering how much guile there was behind that benign exterior, sure there was a great deal. Dalyrymple accepted the long scrutiny without any sign of embarrassment and did not change his expression until Gideon said quietly:

"Offset, for instance, by buying stolen goods in bulk."

"We understand each other perfectly," Dalrymple said.

"I'm not sure I do comprehend the situation," replied Gideon. "If our estimates are right, the total thefts might be as high as five or as low as four percent of the wholesale turnover. Would that make such a difference? Is five percent sufficient for such serious price-cutting?"

Dalyrymple answered so quickly that he had obviously been prepared for the question. He leaned forward, and spoke with greater vehemence than before.

"Of itself, perhaps, no. But it is enough to attract a very large share of the customers. Its extra buying potential enables it to buy its other goods at higher discounts. Add these together—a profit from bulk thefts and a profit from extra large bulk buying, and—well, Commander: at least two sizeable chain stores are in difficulty, because their customers and so their turnover has fallen so seriously. They can give neither the quality nor the service competitively. And over two thousand small shopkeepers—food shopkeepers—have gone bankrupt in the past twelve months."

Gideon nodded, and for the first time since he had arrived Dalyrymple began to show some indications of what Gideon read as nervousness. Now he felt sure of this, for Dalyrymple went on apologetically:

"This is only suspicion. The means, I mean. The facts are indisputable, but—well, the chain concerned has an American efficiency expert for its secretary, it is just conceivable that he has managed to cut corners honestly. Only just, but nonetheless conceivable. And it is also conceivable that some giant corporation overseas is trying to



buy its way into our market at any price. But I know the American firms well, and—”

“You plump for the bulk thefts,” Gideon said.

“I do,” admitted Dalyrymple. “I’ve come to that conclusion since making the closest possible study of the present position and—let me freely admit it—since you have shown such an interest. It is a matter of great delicacy. I can hardly accuse the board of a successful competitor. And until I felt virtually certain I did not feel justified in coming to see you. Now—”

“Which is the company?” asked Gideon bluntly.

Dalyrymple drew in a deep breath, gave the impression that he would like to be evasive, and then answered unequivocally:

“Quickturn Superstores, Commander. On their board is the Honourable Horatio Kilfoil, son of one of the most highly respected men in commerce; Mr. Lancelot Black, who has been a member of our association since he was a barrow boy in London twenty years ago; one or two others who are—if I may say so—names simply to impress—the secretary is a Joseph Graaf.” Having delivered himself of these facts, Dalyrymple went on more easily. “May I beg you not to take action until you have evidence enough to satisfy you completely? I cannot offer evidence: only suspicions and indications. But if I am right, then this company is seriously attempting to control food in the United Kingdom. It is as easy to overcharge, once one has killed the effective competition, as to undercharge. And it might be disastrous to act too quickly, to catch the small fry and allow—”

Sir Bernard Dalyrymple stopped. Possibly that was because of Gideon’s expression, possibly some warning signal sounded in his own mind. He shifted in his chair and then gave an impish smile.

“Now I am becoming prolix! And intruding into your province. Do please forgive me. And do please—” in a flash he was earnest again, even pleading, and his voice took on a deeper tone “. . . do please prevent what could be a disaster, Mr. Gideon. Napoleon once called us a nation of shopkeepers and at the same time remarked that an army marches on its stomach. A nation exists on its food, the health, the Social Services, even political issues depend on this.” He pushed his chair back, stood up, looked down at Gideon and went on in a slightly lighter tone: “But you are fully aware of that, I am sure, Commander.”

Gideon said: “Sir Bernard, I shall be sending some of my officers



over tomorrow morning—Thursday—to scrutinise all the reports you've collated. Can I rely on you to give them every facility?"

"No one will ever be more welcome, and no one will have greater facilities," Dalyrymple promised.

Could Sir Bernard Dalyrymple be trailing a red-herring, wondered Gideon.

Could he possibly be the man behind it all?

He was still wondering when his Yard exchange telephone rang. He did not answer for a moment, he wanted time to think over Dalyrymple's visit, all he had said, all he had implied. He wished he had had the interview recorded, but there was still something distasteful about taping a conversation with a man who had come in good faith. The bell rang again on a longer burst, and Gideon lifted the receiver.

"Mr. Lemaitre, sir," the operator said, and almost on top of her words there came Lemaitre's voice with overtones of excitement.

"Commander? . . . We found the van for those keys . . . It was parked in the yard of a Quickturn Supermarket in Whitechapel . . . Got Charlie Larsen's prints all over it . . . And what's more it must have been outside the warehouse about the time of the fire. There are some of its tyreprints in a patch of oil, and the nearside front tyre of Larsen's van has a lot of oil in the tread. But that's not all—"

Lemaitre had to pause because he was out of breath; and Gideon needed the pause, to take in what he had been hearing. Thought of Dalyrymple had been driven from his mind, after mention of the yard of a Quickturn Supermarket. Between what Dalyrymple had told him and Lemaitre had to say, he had to make a decision: and he had to make it soon.

Chapter 20

DECISION

"Are you there, Commander?" Lemaitre asked at last. His voice was now more controlled, the excitement less evident.

"Yes," Gideon said.

"Larsen's van was almost certainly used to carry at least twenty cans of jelly recently. There are some torn labels which came from the stolen cans, and marks on the inside of the van show where they stood. Larsen didn't keep his van very clean, he carried some kind of powder, probably flour, before, and it had settled on the floorboards. The tins made marks which match up exactly with the gelignite cans for size."

Gideon had a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Do you know where he took the stuff?"

"Can't even be sure he took it anywhere, there might have been another driver," replied Lemaitre. "But the answer's no, so far. I've put a general call out for anyone who's seen the van, it's a green Vauxhall with hinged sides and back."

"Send me a note of the number," Gideon said.

"Right."

"Lem—have you *any* idea what that gelignite is to be used for?"

"I know one bloody thing, it's going to be used to blow open safes, or strong rooms, or—he, George!" Fresh excitement drove all formality away. "What about the refrigerator stores at Smithfield?"

"Do they lock them?" asked Gideon.

Lemaitre shook his head. "I don't know—Commander, I've an urgent message coming through. Will you hold on or shall I call you back?"

"I'll hold on," Gideon said.

It gave him time to think. He could do with it. *Now!* What did he really have? He answered himself without hesitation. He really



had an explanation which would fit all the circumstances, and he had it from a man who was *the* authority on the subject. It was absurd seriously to suspect Dalyrymple, although he might reasonably wonder whether the man's concern was really for the general public or whether it was primarily for Serveright Stores. Nor did that greatly matter. Dalyrymple had tried to avoid implicating himself in a charge against Quickturn but he would not have named the chain, nor its directors, especially Kilfoil, unless he felt sure they were responsible. So, he came back to the question he had to decide: go slowly, amass more and more detailed evidence, *or*, make a move against the leaders, now.

He always favoured direct action.

But then, there was always a case for patience.

"Commander," Lemaitre said, without warning, "that was a false alarm. Sorry."

"Forget it," Gideon said, and rang off. He did not wait long before pressing for Tiger and sending for Cockerill and Firmani. It was time they were brought up to date. They would see things from a different angle.

Firmani arrived first, a spring-heeled jack even when he came into the office as sedately as he could. He had a folder of papers with him but hardly needed to refer to this as he made his report. There was as yet nothing absolutely positive, but the van salesman all seemed to work for a small wholesaler who dealt in every variety of food, except fish. The company was an old-established one but had recently been taken over by a larger group of wholesalers.

"Who wouldn't be associated with Quickturn, would they?" asked Gideon.

Firmani made no attempt to conceal either his surprise or his disappointment.

"Connected is the word," he said. "The new owners are a subsidiary of Quickturn, who are extending fast in the wholesale *and* the Supermarket sides of the business. What made you gue—er—how did you know?"

Gideon was saved the need of answering, for Cockerill came in at that moment. His face still showed signs of the battering it had taken, but there was a glint of satisfaction in his eyes. He said decisively:

"I think we've got something, sir."

"Good. What?"



"We've been keeping tags on six drivers and a few other men who seem to be involved," Cockerill said, "and they've nearly all had instructions to attend a meeting at Gnocchi warehouse tomorrow at twelve noon. Officially it's a union meeting, but the union knows nothing about it. They think the drivers might be planning a wildcat strike, but there's no certainty. We picked the information up at pubs, and—"

"Details can come later," interrupted Gideon. "You are quite sure of this?"

"They'll be at the meeting all right," Cockerill assured him. After a pause, he added: "We could get the place bugged—I mean wired up, sir—and find out what's going on. Safer than trying to get someone into the meeting, don't you think."

"I'm bloody sure," declared Firmani.

Gideon said, slowly: "Yes, I suppose so." He pondered, but came up with nothing fresh, so he gave them the gist of what Dalyrymple had told him. It was Cockerill who said:

"A lot of things point to Quickturn, once you start thinking of them, sir. Most of these wholesalers do a fair amount of business with them."

"And the van salesmen . . ." Firmani explained to Cockerill, and then went on with a quick glance at Gideon: "It looks as if we want to wait for this meeting tomorrow, find out what's discussed, and then take action, sir."

Gideon looked at Cockerill.

"Is that how you see it?"

"I can't see it any other way," Cockerill admitted. "Would you like me to fix the mikes? It can be done after dark tonight. The roof is probably the best place, it's one of those with open steel girders, easy to fix. We don't have to break in."

After a long pause, Gideon said decisively: "Yes, fix it."

He telephoned Scott-Marle just before six o'clock, but the Commissioner was not yet back, so he wrote a succinct precis of what Dalyrymple had said, and a message: "Am going to allow the meeting to take place, then visit Black and Kilfoil in person, early tomorrow afternoon. G.G." He sent this along to the Commissioner's office by messenger, and then called for his car, and drove home.

He had the uneasy feeling that he had missed something, but the uneasiness was dispelled at sight of Kate's radiant face when she opened the door to him. She gave and received a perfunctory



kiss on either cheek, and then said: "There's a long letter from Penny! The tour's been extended by a month, *she's* proving the star soloist—Alec put that in! and they plan to get married as soon as they get back. And George—*look*." There was a postscript at the end of a long, often barely decipherable letter, which read: "*Alec and I have struck a bargain: mornings when I'm free I can come and practice in 'my' attic.*" And there was a PPS. "I don't know why I haven't realised it before, but I *do* love him so!"

Gideon's heart was lighter than it had been for days when he sat down with Kate for the evening meal.

But in the night worry came back to him, and he tossed restlessly.

Joseph Graaf was restless, too; but he slept on and off, gradually getting used to the idea of a mass murder, the only thing now that would keep them high and dry. One thing he knew; there was no flaw in Lancelot Black's reasoning. Dead men could not talk.

Night and day had become much the same to Janice Westerman, and it was half-past two in the early hours when she went into the kitchen to get a meal. Her captor wanted bacon and eggs, so bacon and eggs it would be. She knew he had bought the groceries from a small shop in a side street, for most of the things were wrapped in newspaper. She was taking the outer wrapping off the bacon, after putting eggs, butter, canned food and cheese away, when a photograph caught her eye: her own photograph! Astounded, she smoothed out the paper and saw a picture of "him" torn so that she would hardly have recognised it but for the one next to it, without a wig. On that instant, she realised who he was, and she spun round towards the door.

He was there: staring at her. It was no use pretending she hadn't seen the photograph or that she hadn't been shocked, and her breathing became shallow and fast. He came in, picked up the newspaper and read what it said, and then added:

"So now you're a celebrity."

She made herself say: "No—no wonder you're so sure of yourself, darling."

She did not know how she got the "darling" out but she did know that it was effective, for there was a slackening of the tension



about his mouth. They ate at the tiny kitchen table and every now and again he made some light semi-facetious remark, watching her covertly. When they returned to the living-room, he locked the door and put the key in his trouser pocket.

She knew, then, that she had just one chance: to fool him absolutely.

Presently she went into the bathroom and came back wearing a loose negligee. She stifled a yawn as she slid, affectionately, onto his knee. His hands began to caress her. She put her check against his, nibbled his ear, did all those things which she knew he enjoyed. It would only be a matter of time before he pushed her onto the bed.

Quite suddenly, he did this, flinging himself on top of her. For a few moments they played, her heart beating tumultuously for one reason, his for another. They kissed, wildly, exploratively, and as they did so she slid her hands down, down, and began to caress him. His kissing grew gentler, softer: for this he loved. Slowly, slowly, she moved, and then, suddenly, she struck.

He screamed.

She flung him off, and as he writhed she snatched up his trousers and dived into the righthand pocket for the key, found it, rushed to the door and pushed it with trembling hands, into the lock. Helpless, groaning, bent double, he could do nothing. She pulled the door open and went racing down the stairs, out into the street shouting hoarsely, wildly, for help.

A taxi-driver, passing, stopped; his fare leaned forward in utter astonishment at this confrontation with a naked, screaming girl.

"D-D-Dalby," she gasped. "Dalby's—at my flat. D-D—"

The passenger was out of the taxi now, taking off his jacket to cover her, while the taxi-driver used his two-way radio to tell his controller to send for the police. By then Janice was shivering violently, and her teeth were chattering; she hardly seemed to realise what had happened.

Because of his broken night, Gideon slept later than usual the next morning, and was wakened by the telephone bell. When it stopped, he thought, I've been dreaming, and then he heard Kate speaking, and opened his eyes to see her fully dressed and standing by the telephone.



"Yes, I was just going to call him. Who?" She listened for a moment as Gideon struggled up in bed, and then handed him the telephone.

"It's Mr. Sharples."

"Ah," said Gideon, and was wide awake on the instant. "Hallo . . . What have you got for me?" As he listened a smile began to dawn on his unshaven face, and it broadened into a grin and then into a laugh. Sharples went on as if thoroughly enjoying the telling, until Gideon interrupted, saying:

"Thank heavens for that. Obviously a girl of ideas. Have you told Westerman?"

"He's been over and collected her."

"Good." Gideon sprang out of bed, his tiredness forgotten.

It wasn't really late; but it was nine o'clock before he left for Scotland Yard, acutely aware of the meeting to take place in three hours time.

Chapter 21

"EXPLOSION"

Gideon left his car for a driver to put away and went straight up to his office. The whole place was astir with ribald, masculine humour, the story of the way Janice Westerman had outwitted Arthur Dalby on everyone's tongue. The coarseness which came so often neither annoyed nor surprised Gideon.

There were more folders than usual, and all the new ones had a pencilled-in title or heading. Two were bank robberies and one, very ugly, the murder of a night-watchman at a London departmental store. Everything was in hand; he needed to check and to get the full stories from men from the divisions who were already handling the case. All of this took a lot of time and it was getting on for eleven before he turned to the cases already in hand.

He did not look at the report on Dalby; that could wait. He gave only a cursory glance at Firman's report; that had become virtually a side issue although it could have caused a dozen deaths. He opened the fat report on the FOOD BUYING CASE as Tiger had for some reason called it, and found everything he had been told last night down in black and white, but only one new positive factor in a note signed by Cockerill.

"Microphones which will pick up everything said at the meeting have been installed. We have a rendezvous safe from observation at the top of Serveright's, a hundred yards away."

Microphones.

Gelignite.

A meeting of a dozen suspected men, and if the police knew of a dozen then there might well be at least twice as many more; perhaps three times as many. Why? Instructions for thefts, hi-jacking, the transfer of goods, everything in this racket must surely be passed on carefully, by telephone or by word of mouth. Why a meeting? Why—



Something seemed to explode inside his head.

For a moment which might in fact have been seconds and might have been a minute or two, he felt numbed by it; aware but not convinced. It was as if the explosion had brought a great flash of understanding into his mind, but another part of that mind refused to believe that anyone could possibly plan to kill a group of men in cold blood.

Dead men told no tales.

"It can't be," he said, and pressed for Tiger, who came at once. "Get Mr. Cockerill here, quick," he ordered.

"He's not in, sir. He's gone to superintend the surveillance on the warehouse so as to make sure all of our chaps are well hidden before any of the others arrive. Mr. Firmani's gone there, too—and I believe Mr. Lemaitre was going to join them. Er—there's one thing you should know, sir."

Gideon, getting up from his desk with ponderous deliberation, barked: "What?"

"The Honourable Mr. Kilfoil is going to address the meeting at twelve sharp."

"Oh," Gideon said. "Is he?" He still felt as if the noise and the flash from the explosion were whirling about in his head. "Is he? Have a car sent round—not mine, one with a radio." He stood by the desk as Tiger went out, and for once Hobbs' stand-in looked as if he could not understand Gideon's expression. He dialled Scott-Marle's number, knowing that the Commissioner might not be in. But he was in.

"The Commissioner."

"Gideon," Gideon said. "I've added everything together, sir, and I think that the suspects plus a meeting at that warehouse plus a large quantity of gelignite plus the probable existence of detonators plus firex in large or small quantities add up to one major explosion. I'm going over myself, sir. We've an observation post at Serveright's close by. I'll radio instructions to our people while I'm on the way."

There was hardly a pause before Scott-Marle said: "I shall meet you at the warehouse, George," and rang off before Gideon could make any protest.

It was not a time for protest. There was an hour and a quarter—no, ten minutes—before he would know for certain whether he was



right. The warehouse could be raided, of course, and any explosives rendered harmless, but that would warn some of the men and the place would be closely watched by the other side. He rang for Tiger, who appeared at once, saying:

"Your car's on the way, sir."

"Thanks. Call the R.A.O.C. and ask them if they can have a man at our warehouse rendezvous in half-an-hour. Let me know by radio." He turned to the passage door and opened it—and Merriman, one hand raised to knock, almost fell onto him. Never before had Gideon seen excitement shining in this man's eyes and burn on his cheeks. In his free hand he held what looked like a photograph.

"Sir! I couldn't get you on the phone, but sir—that van of Larsen's, the van which the jelly was in—*Look sir!*" He thrust the photograph in front of Gideon's nose, and went on in a voice that was very nearly a shout: "Top left hand corner, we missed it before but I've just seen—"

"I'm on my way there," Gideon said. "You come with me."

Merriman's mouth dropped wide open; and then sheer joy chased the excitement out of his eyes.

It was no more than twenty minutes to the Gnocchi warehouse, and Gideon sat in the back, Merriman by the driver; Gideon had not realised how huge the man's shoulders were. Within five minutes a message came: "Royal Army Ordnance Corps will be there, sir." Gideon grunted, and leaned forward. "Give me that thing, Inspector." Merriman handed him the telephone, and he went on: "My office, please . . . Hallo, Chief Inspector Tiger? . . . I want a close but not obvious watch kept on Mr. Lancelot Black, Mr. Joseph Graaf and all the senior staff of Quickturn Limited. None of them is to be allowed to leave the country." He waited for Tiger's, "Yes, sir," and handed the instrument back to Merriman.

"You knew, sir, didn't you?" Merriman said, quietly.

"I guessed you brought the proof," Gideon said.

He thought that Merriman went red about the neck, but soon put the man out of his mind and concentrated on the next hour. He knew exactly what he wanted to do, but was far from sure that he could do it all. He watched the stalls and the open store fronts in Long Acre, the litter of vegetables on the cobbles, here and there some fruit or flowers, and then they came to the sector which had



been rased. On one edge, nearest him, was the tall, new Serveright building, and soon they turned in. No policemen were in sight, but inside the building there were several as well as plainclothes men whom he recognised. He went up to the top floor, which appeared to be taken over by the police. One or two of Serveright's security men were about, and a Captain in the R.A.O.C. was talking to Cockerill.

"My God," Gideon said. "You were quick."

"I was at the Tower, sir—not far. How can I help you?"

"Have you seen the stuff we're dealing with?" asked Gideon.

"Chief Inspector Cockerill told me the size of the cans and I've seen a label," answered the bomb disposal man. "I know the stuff all right." He turned towards a window which overlooked a wide expanse of demolished buildings. In the middle was a single brick building; it was difficult to judge the distance but it must be a hundred yards away at least.

"If that blows up, will it do any damage anywhere else? Here, for instance?"

The Captain pursed his lips, and then slowly shook his head.

"I can't see why it should, provided no one's roaming about."

"Good. Can you get over and check when the explosion's due?"

"Shouldn't be any trouble," he said, and went off, wearing a long coat over his uniform. He was back in twenty minutes, to report:

"Twelve-thirty, on the dot."

"Good," said Gideon, as Scott-Marle entered the office, and he raised his voice for the other's benefit. "We'll keep it clear," Gideon said. "Thanks." He turned to Cockerill and Firmani. "I'm going to let the meeting start, so that we get everyone who turns up," he said, "and at five past twelve, raid and empty it. We'll have about twenty-five minutes, so we want plenty of vans and Black Maria's. *And* plenty of rush," he added, gruffly. "Then I want all the men we pick up, including Mr. Kilfoil if he's there, to see the place go up. If that won't open every mouth among them, nothing will." He looked about him at men who seemed stunned into silence, and then went on: "I'd like to arrest Mr. Kilfoil myself."

Scott-Marle came across and shook hands, then settled down to watch from the window.

They watched the drivers and the others heading for the Gnocchi warehouse, many driving up in cars, a few walking. They saw a



Rolls Royce, undoubtedly Kilfoil's, draw up, and the member of the board of Quickturn get out of his car. That was a signal for the police to move in. No one inside the building had any indication of what was going to happen when the doors opened and the raid began. Kilfoil, standing on a roughly-made platform, began to complain, and Gideon said:

"Wait twenty minutes, sir, and you'll see what it's all about."

They waited and watched with agonising tension, until suddenly there was a great flash; a roar; and fire. Debris went high into the air but none came as far as the forecourt of the building and no harm was done except to the morale of the men who had been told to go to the building. The only man who did not speak was Kilfoil. As Gideon charged him with conspiracy to defraud, he looked as if he would never recover from the shock.

An hour later, Cockerill, Firmani and Cerriman entered the offices of Quicksturn, taking the chairman and the secretary completely by surprise. They did not speak when charged with attempted murder and conspiracy to defraud. Within an hour, police accountants had taken over completely, within two, Dalyrymple's association was working on plans to keep the stores open, until the legal and the illegal aspects were sorted out. The two arrested men were taken to West London Police Court, and would be charged before a magistrate next morning.

Gideon managed to avoid most of the clamouring press, and to get home reasonably early. There was a message from Scott-Marle, which said very simply: "The more I think about it the warmer my congratulations." Gideon put the message in a box in which he stored his few mementos, watched the television news, rejoiced with Kate and felt both deeply satisfied and a little flat at the same time. He was tired. The pace of the past week told on him. He would be glad when Hobbs was back—

But Hobbs and Penny would want a honeymoon!

Suddenly, he thought: Or are they having one now?

He thought of the changes in society, conventions, morals and beliefs, and he wondered how Janice Westerman would face the future.

"Daddy," she said to her father, a few days later, "I can't, I just



can't, stay here. I don't know where I'll go or what I'll do, but I'll be all right. I'm one of the wild ones—but I can look after myself."

"Janice," her father said with a wry smile, "I really believe you can."

THE END

LEISURE DYING

B Y

LILLIAN O'DONNELL

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The Jogger entered Central Park at West Sixty-seventh Street. He was distinctive—big, over six feet tall, and close to two hundred pounds in weight—and he wore a bright red warm-up suit with a white stripe down each arm and each leg, yet nobody paid particular attention to him. The mothers with children felt safe behind the iron palings of the playground enclosure; the old people, sprawled on the benches like bundles of laundry waiting to be picked up, averted their eyes—fearing the young, not daring even to look at them; the dog walkers were concerned with keeping watch for the police while their animals cavorted illegally off leash. No one gave the jogger a second glance.

He crossed the road and headed east, moving at a slow, even, plodding pace, his sneakers silent on the cement path.

The night's heavy rain had continued into morning, stopping around ten. Now at last the sun was out, a bleak November sun with little warmth in it and not enough strength to dry the puddles choked with newly fallen leaves. The vast, open expanse of the Sheep Meadow was largely mud; one badly eroded area had been turned into a lake on which half a dozen ducks floated as placidly as though it were their natural habitat. Here there were no people at all. It was much too early for the children's sporting clubs—organizations which under the guise of teaching and supervising team sports such as field hockey, football, and baseball actually served as baby-sitters for affluent parents—they would come after school, if they showed up at all on such a day. The hot dog and bagel vendors wouldn't appear unless there were customers.

The jogger slowed. His feet dragged. His breath came in uneven grunts, condensing into little puffs in front of him. His affable but vapid face was covered with sweat. He hated jogging and was considering taking a break when he caught sight of his friends up ahead on the other side of the Mall. It cost him a considerable effort, but he quickened his pace. They wouldn't like to be kept waiting.

They saw him, too, but they had no intention of going out to meet him. Lounging against the edge of the bandstand, smoking their cigarettes, they pretended not to notice him as long as the police car moved cautiously along the pedestrian path. If the day



continued to improve, there would be more patrol cars, helmeted police on scooters, and at dusk, regardless of weather, the area would be at patrol saturation. For now the one car made its cursory tour of the Mall and exited back to the roadway just above the Bethesda Fountain. When it was gone, the two in the royal-blue suits squashed out their cigarettes and sauntered lazily toward the jogger in red.

They were brothers, Duncan and Brett, both small, dark, nervously thin, with young, fresh faces and eyes, already old, that darted restlessly, searching without knowing what they were looking for. There had been no need to wait for the police car to leave; it didn't matter whether or not they were seen together, but Duncan, the smaller of the two, never missed a chance to make the big guy squirm.

"You're late," he challenged.

"Sorry, Dunc. I wasn't sure . . . I mean, the weather. . . ."

"This is the best kind of weather. You ought to know that by now."

"I'm sorry."

"Okay, okay. So what are we waiting for? Let's move out. There's no action here."

At that moment a lone man, well dressed, carrying a briefcase, emerged from the rest-room building, heading toward them. He appeared to be in his late thirties, and his pace was brisk and energetic. Duncan shrugged, and the other two immediately lost interest.

"How about the Ramble?" It was an order, not a question, and Duncan moved off.

"Why not?" Brett followed.

The jogger in red mutely accepted their decision and hurried to catch up.

The three crossed the road then took the long, broad flight of steps down to the esplanade. Turning left on the lake path toward the Bow Bridge, they began jogging, but not in single file— abreast, so that they filled the width of the path and no one could get by them.

The park was Horace Pruitt's refuge and his solace. The Ramble, an intricate maze of paths that dipped and turned between the lake and the great meadow, that climbed small hillocks and plunged into miniature valleys, wound around mock ruins, and skirted artfully placed boulders, was his favorite area. Here Pruitt could imagine that he was out of the city, really in the woods. Of course, in spring and summer, when the trees were in full leaf, it was easier to sustain



the illusion, for then the buildings surrounding the park were screened out. Forty years in the city and Horace Pruitt still yearned for the woods of Vermont.

He was already middle-aged when he came to New York with his wife, Amy, and the two boys. He had intended to stay only a few years, just long enough to make the money to buy back the farm he'd lost during the Depression, or one like it. He'd been lucky, got a job as an apprentice printer, learned the trade, went into business for himself, did well, yet was never able to set enough aside. He made more money than he ever had before, but everything cost more, and there were emergencies always. Somehow the years passed; suddenly he was old and alone. The boys had died in Korea; Amy was gone. He sold the business, but the proceeds were used up by her long illness and the funeral costs. He had Social Security though, and the apartment was rent-controlled. He wasn't as badly off as some.

To fill in the long, empty days Pruitt had started coming to the park. He came early, at first light, and one day he fell in with a bird-watching group. He started making sketches, then later, when he was home in his empty apartment, and again to fill time, he translated the rough sketches into wood carvings. A forgotten skill of his youth, his early efforts were crude, but as his stiff fingers limbered, the work improved, engrossed him, and the collection of birds and small woodland creatures, some observed in the park and some remembered from the Vermont woods, proliferated. They filled his two and a half rooms, perching on shelves and tables. Rather than relegate them to boxes and closets, he gave them to his neighbors in the building till inevitably someone suggested that he sell them. With considerable trepidation, Horace Pruitt packed a few of his best examples and offered them to an antique and gift shop, one of many that had recently sprung up on Columbus Avenue. They were accepted and quickly sold. Now he had four outlets for the carvings and derived a variable but respectable income from the work. He was eighty-two. Living frugally and with no outside demands on him, Horace Pruitt had every expectation of going back to Vermont at last.

This morning, as soon as the rain let up, Pruitt had come out to the Ramble as usual, and as usual he carried his sketch pad and his lunch. The sketching finished, lunch over, the rise of the hill sheltering him from the gusty wind, he leaned against a sun-warmed rock and looked out over the newly restored Bow Bridge, which spanned the narrow neck between boat basin and lake. Already the shadows were falling on the water as the sun sank behind the



Gulf + Western building, but it would be another half hour before they reached his aerie. He would have liked to stay that extra half hour, but he had work waiting at home and marketing and house-cleaning to do before he could get to the work. Being a disciplined man with a goal, Pruitt got up, stretched lazily, and started down the hill toward the lake. As he did so, he noticed three boys in jogging outfits—one in red and two in blue—crossing the Bow Bridge and heading toward him. He smiled because he liked to see the young people out exercising: It was an indication that some of them were aware of natural pleasures, could find enjoyment away from city streets. They seemed uncertain which way to go. Probably they wanted to ask him for directions. He was still smiling when they met at the foot of the bridge.

"Hey, mister, give me a dollar."

Pruitt was taken aback. "What for?"

The speaker wore blue and was the smallest of the trio. He was thin and awkward as a puppy with arms and legs that had grown faster than the rest of him and to which he had not yet accommodated. There the similarity ended. He smiled at Pruitt, but it was not a nice smile. "Because I want it."

Horace Pruitt was not easily frightened, and he wasn't frightened now. They were only kids, showing off to one another, probably on a dare. It was a game. No doubt they stopped lots of people and even made a few dollars; but it was a nasty game, and he had no intention of encouraging them in it. "That's no reason," he retorted, and shifted to step past. Instantly the other two took up positions on either side of the boy who had made the demand, blocking Pruitt's way.

"Give me a dollar." The smile had turned into a sneer; the eyes were calculating.

"Why should I?" Pruitt stood his ground. It was the only thing to do. With these kids you had to be firm, show them you weren't afraid.

"Why make a big deal out of it, mister? It's only a dollar."

"You're a real cheapskate, you know that?" the second one in blue joined in. "Why don't you give it to him? He's asking you nice and polite."

Only the big one, the one in red, said nothing.

A cold chill passed through Horace Pruitt; he shivered. He'd heard of gangs of youths beating up old, defenseless bums and winos, picking their victims by some mindless lottery—such as going up to a prospect and asking for a match. If the person had it and



offered it, they passed on. Otherwise. . . . Never having expected that he would himself be approached, Pruitt had not considered what he might do in such an eventuality. He took a quick look around. There was nobody in sight, nobody. He was far from feeble, he could fight, but they were three and they were young. Could he turn and run? How far would his old legs carry him?

As though reading his thoughts, two of the three repositioned themselves slightly behind so that with the small one still in front, Pruitt found himself at the center of a triangle and even that slight chance of escape was cut off.

"I'm sorry, I don't have a dollar." He was ashamed to be so meek, but he was now, finally, afraid.

"Don't lie, old man."

"I'm not lying, I swear. I don't have it. I don't have any money on me at all. Not even a wallet. I never carry money when I come to the park. That's the God's truth."

The first blow caught him at the side of the head just below his right ear. His brain felt as though it had been jarred loose from his skull; his teeth ached; his vision blurred. Instinctively his arms went up to protect his head, and then the blows rained on his body. He went down to his knees, hunching in on himself. They beat him on the back. They were all around him and over him. Still in pain from that first brutal blow, disoriented and off-balance because of the humming in his ears, not daring to raise his head, he nevertheless saw a sneakered foot drawn back, aiming at his groin. He threw himself on it; grabbing the ankle, clutching it, and using all his weight, he pulled that particular attacker down and somehow managed to sprawl on top of him. He stayed there. Pruitt was a heavy man, and there wasn't much to the boy. Pruitt's weight was sufficient to keep him pinned.

"Get him off me. Get him off!" Duncan screeched.

The beating stopped. As hands pulled at Pruitt's coat collar, the boy underneath him squirmed and heaved to get free. Hardly knowing what he was about, reacting instinctively, Horace Pruitt's hands, his strong wood-carver's hands, found the youth's throat.

"He's choking me. Help . . . help . . ." The plea turned into a series of strangled gasps.

Hands tore at his arms, but Pruitt's grip tightened. "Go away," he grunted. "The two of you go away from me and I'll let him go. Not before." His strength was failing. He didn't know how much longer he could last, long enough, he hoped, for someone to come and help or at least to give the alarm.



"Don't just stand there, for God's sake!" the second boy exhorted the one in red. "Give me a hand. He's killing Dunc. Can't you see he's choking Dunc to death?"

With a different kind of terror, Horace Pruitt now realized that the boy underneath him had stopped struggling, that he was lying limp and still. Yet he couldn't let go. His hands were rigidly locked around the boy's throat. He had no power to remove them. He watched in horror as the boy's face turned purple, as he gasped for air.

"Come on, Rick, come on, man, help me," the boy cried as he continued his futile efforts.

In the next moment Pruitt felt the boy pulled off his back and strong arms lock around his chest. They tightened. Then he was hoisted up and off the prone youth, raised a couple of feet into the air, and held there. But still he couldn't let go. Still his hands retained their grip; his fingers would not uncurl. Then he was shaken, methodically, relentlessly, and with such power that he thought if he did not close his eyes, they would fall out of his head. The tremors passed into his fingers at last, and somehow the death grip was loosed. At the same moment that Horace Pruitt let go, a scream sounded from somewhere up in the woods behind them.

The scream paralyzed them all. The boy on the ground did not pick himself up; the one holding Pruitt stopped shaking him. Finally the screaming stopped.

Brett kneeled beside his brother. "Dunc? Dunc? You okay?"

"The old man nearly killed me," Duncan rasped. "Well, what are you waiting for?" he demanded. "Hit him. Hit him."

Rick still held Pruitt like a sack he didn't quite know where to put down.

There was a second scream, closer this time. A dog barked hysterically. A police siren bleeped from somewhere across the lake.

"Kill him, Rick. Kill him!" Duncan snarled as he got up.

The police car cut off the road to the path, was circling the lake, making good speed.

"It's too late." His brother tugged at Duncan's arm. "It's too late. We gotta split."

The dog was on them, darting in and out between their legs, yapping, barking.

The police car had got as far as the Bow Bridge, but because of the metal posts embedded at either end, the vehicle couldn't cross.

"Kill him!" Duncan screamed.

Horace Pruitt felt himself jerked erect. He was turned around



and held by the front of his shirt at arm's length. He saw the blow coming, the fist clenched, the arm pulled back. He flinched and turned his head aside. He heard an animal snarl, then before the blow was struck, he heard a yelp of pain. His own? Unrecognizable. The last things he saw were the lake and trees of his beloved retreat with the spires of the city curving up and around as though the whole were encased in an old-fashioned paperweight. Then someone turned the paperweight upside down.

2

Sergeant Norah Mulcahaney caught the squeal. As soon as she heard that the victim was still alive, without bothering to wait for the elevator, she ran down the stairs and out of the precinct house. Eighty-second Street was choked with cars parked on both sides—a bone of contention between Traffic Division and the detectives to whom most of the cars belonged—but Norah had no trouble spotting hers. It was the first car she'd ever owned, and she felt an inordinate pride in it. Norah had always considered that men were childishly infatuated with their automobiles, yet from the moment she'd entered the showroom, she'd begun to behave just as irrationally. There was no use denying that when she got behind the wheel of the dark moss-green Pinto, Norah Mulcahaney Capretto experienced a sense of freedom and identity that, despite the fact that she was holding down a good job and making good money, she hadn't felt since she and Joe had married.

They had a good marriage, Norah and Lieutenant Joseph Antony Capretto; they were happy. Norah would have been the first to deny, and hotly, that she existed in her husband's shadow. She hadn't resigned her own personality or been absorbed into his—either at home or at work. On the contrary, Norah felt that she had grown and developed since her marriage. She had joined the force when she was twenty-eight, still unsure of herself, still searching for direction. She was the one who fell in love first; at least, she was the one first aware of being in love.

In those days Joseph Antony Capretto had been somewhat of a swinger. Handsome, tall, dark, with a noble Roman profile and



accompanying Latin charm, he had dated a string of glamorous models and stewardesses. Norah knew that she was older than most of his girls and certainly not in their league for looks. Oh, she was attractive enough, but in a quiet, unobtrusive way. Heads didn't turn when Norah entered a restaurant. She was tall, slim enough, but too sturdy to be whistled at, often anyway. She had the fine Irish coloring: pale skin, dark, nearly black hair, and blue-gray eyes with long, naturally thick lashes. Unfortunately these good points were marred by a square, much too prominent jaw which she was in the habit of thrusting out in moments of stress. Since she wasn't his type and didn't seem interested in becoming another of Sergeant Capretto's conquests, Norah Mulcahaney had tried to suppress her feeling, dismissing it as a crush, the natural admiration of a rookie policewoman for a handsome superior officer who had been nice to her.

But Capretto had been more than nice. He had given Norah Mulcahaney guidance and the chance to show what she could do. The fact that she had proved equal to the opportunity and had made detective wasn't the point. Making detective was still a hit-or-miss business; some officers waited for years for the chance to show their mettle, others never got the chance at all. Then and now, being a detective meant everything to Norah, and she felt she owed it all to Joe.

As for Joseph Antony, he couldn't have said when he started to think of the rookie policewoman romantically. Admittedly he over-reacted when she was in danger, but he rationalized that as a natural concern for any woman under his command. That didn't explain, however, the twinges of jealousy he felt when Detective Mulcahaney showed a more than professional interest in the men she worked with. . . . Specifically there had been a certain assistant DA. Nor did it explain his own spurt of ambition. For eleven years Joe had been a detective sergeant—a good, satisfying job, financially adequate. Suddenly he'd started to think about advancement, about the future. Certainly he expected to get married—sometime. Approaching forty, a bachelor with a doting mother to care for him, thoughts of marriage were becoming nebulous. It wasn't till Norah Mulcahaney entered his life that he began to wonder if he might be missing something. He even wondered whether his attitude might be somewhat immature! He began studying for the lieutenant's exam and courting Norah at the same time.

Joe's love fulfilled Norah, made her confident as a woman, less afraid to show tenderness, and at the same time imparted a degree of sophistication. Married to Norah, Joe Capretto didn't have to be



flaunting his manhood constantly. They complemented each other; they grew individually and as a couple.

To avoid confusion, Norah still used her maiden name on the job; she was Sergeant Mulcahaney. That she would continue to work was agreed between them, and their work was a strong bond. At first they had worked the same shifts but out of separate commands, then Joe was transferred from Narco to the Fourth Homicide and became Norah's commanding officer. There was no strain. It wasn't the first time Norah had worked for Joe, not even the first time since their marriage. She followed her husband's orders as she would those of any superior—with the same respect but also with plenty of independent expression of her own ideas. If she'd stopped to think about it, if either of them had, each would have agreed that they worked well together, better than with anyone else, that the emotional tie seemed to add strength to the professional.

Because the call was so urgent, Norah skipped the usual walk-around assessment of her car and got right in. The motor responded with satisfying promptness and smooth power. Yet as she edged out into the street, her elation was marred by a twinge of guilt. Lately she'd begun to look on this freedom of spirit as a disloyalty to Joe. He put no strings on her, no limits to her growth. On the contrary, everything she was—the woman she had become, as well as her police rank—was because of him. She had been advancing steadily from detective third grade to second to first, but it was Joe who had urged her to go out for sergeant.

They had no children, so after two years of marriage they'd decided to adopt a son. The questionable legality of the adoption had been used by the mob to blackmail Joe Capretto. Realizing that the uncertainty about their right to keep young Mark would hang over them for the rest of their lives, certainly make it impossible for either of them to function as police officers, Norah had made the only possible decision and given the boy up. By this time it wasn't her own career that mattered but Joe's, as well as the child's future security. It was the hardest thing she'd ever done. The aftermath for her was a period of lethargy and sorrow that she couldn't seem to shake off. Even now she occasionally fell into troughs of despondency, but they were leveling off. Deeply stricken himself, Joe's concern was all for her. One day, he prayed, they would have a child of their own, meantime . . . he suggested to his wife that she take the sergeant's exam.

For Norah it was therapy. For Joe it meant long nights of watching television in the living room while his wife studied in the dining room, lonely Saturday nights, and dreary Sundays. He never



complained. He had encouraged Norah. And his pleasure when she was appointed, one of the last before the mayor's budget cutback in civil-service promotions, was as great as hers. Even the car had been Joe's idea.

"You're a sergeant now and you should have wheels of your own."

They were still using the car of Joe's bachelor days as the family car. They rode to work in it together, crossing through the park via the Sixty-seventh Street transverse from their East Side apartment to the West Side precinct house; after that it was allocated according to need.

"I thought we'd decided to replace the Mustang."

"Are you kidding? I've just about got it broken in," Joe had replied with mock indignation.

So it was silly to feel guilty about the car. The car was not an indication of restlessness or subconscious dissatisfaction with her marriage or her way of life. It was a novelty, and a novelty that would wear off soon enough.

Entering the park at Seventy-second, Norah put aside all stray thoughts to concentrate on the job ahead. Mugging had become an ordinary crime, Norah knew, and nobody gets excited anymore about a mugging—except the victim. Very little effort is expended in investigating a mugging precisely because there are so many of them; they happen every day many times over, in every part of the city to all kinds of people, rich and poor, white and black. Nowadays a victim is considered lucky if all he suffers is a loss of money or valuables. Most often he gets a bad beating; a woman may be raped—seemingly at whim, whether or not resistance is offered, and apparently regardless of the amount of money involved. Violence for the sake of violence—it both revolted and saddened Norah Mulcahaney. Apparently this attack was one of the really vicious kind. All she knew was that the victim was male, that he had been severely and perhaps fatally assaulted. In the usual course, street muggings were the responsibility of the local precinct investigating unit, and in accordance with the recent pass-along system, Homicide would be called only if and when the victim died. That could mean a delay of hours or days. There was a saying that the chances of solving a murder cool off faster than the corpse. So the uniformed officer had shown good judgment in notifying Homicide as soon as he realized that the victim was near death. Because of his quick thinking, it might even be possible for Norah to get a statement.

She hurried, swinging off the road and onto the grass verge so she could go against traffic directly to the parking area. She got out and walked to the top of a small rise from which there was a good



view of the lake and environs. But Norah was not interested, not when she saw that the ambulance was already there and that the attendants would be removing the victim shortly.

"Hold it!" she shouted. "Wait." She was gasping and had a sharp stitch in her side from running when she reached the small group around the prostrate man. "Sergeant Mulcahaney, Fourth Homicide," she said, identifying herself. "Just give me a couple of seconds, please."

A man moved to one side, and she knelt beside the victim.

He was old, an old, old man. His face was swollen and discolored from the beating; the back of his head was covered with blood already darkened and caking. Norah felt sick, sick with pity and sick to her stomach. As many times as she saw the aftermath of violence she never got used to it, and she had resigned herself to the fact that she never would. How could anyone do this to a helpless old man? He was unconscious, appeared barely to be breathing. There wouldn't be any statement—not now, if ever. She got up and motioned to the orderlies to go ahead: She didn't want to cause even one more second's delay.

She watched as they lifted him carefully and laid him on the stretcher, but as soon as he was strapped in, she turned away. Her job now was to find out who had done it.

If this were a homicide, the area would have been crowded with cars and swarming with detectives and a full complement of technical personnel to examine the scene and record every nuance of the crime. Norah was very conscious of their absence and the responsibility this placed on her. She would have to try to cover their functions. She took a deep breath, held it, then slowly let it out again. The first thing was to study the layout.

The victim had been lying on the cement path about fifteen feet from the bridge and ten feet from a small gazebo, with the water on one side and a wooded hill rising steeply on the other. Inside the gazebo, half hidden in shadow, there appeared to be a woman. A witness? Norah would interview her later, after she got the story from the two radio-car officers.

Their names were on the new tags worn beneath their shields. "Rosoff? Carson? I'm Sergeant Mulcahaney."

They were both young, with a good healthy bloom in their cheeks. They looked well padded, particularly about the hips, but that was probably because of the heavy underwear most men who drew outdoor duty put on. They shook hands all around. "So what happened?" she asked.

Rosoff answered. "We were cruising along with the regular park



traffic." He pointed to the road above and on the other side of the lake. "We heard a woman scream. We got off the road and started down when we spotted these three guys beating up on the old man."

"Three!" Norah thought. No wonder he looked like that.

"We turned the siren on, but it didn't mean a thing to them," Rosoff continued bitterly. "I mean, I can see where some woman screaming would hardly scare them off, but a police siren? That should have stopped them, shouldn't it?" he appealed to Norah. "It didn't. They kept right on hitting him, just kept right on knocking him around."

Norah looked to the other side of the arched bridge. The ambulance was long since gone, and only Rosoff and Carson's patrol car remained, with both front doors wide open.

"They split before we got out of the car, Sergeant. Maybe we should have stopped and fired from the other side. But the distance . . . the risk of hitting the victim. . . ."

He was not alibiing; he was genuinely questioning the course of action he and his partner had taken. Norah sympathized, but made no comment. Let it all hang out, she thought. It would help put Officer Rosoff at ease, allowing her to get a good picture of exactly what had occurred.

"We're not supposed to fire warning shots, you know." Rosoff continued his bitter review of the events. "A wild bullet could injure an innocent bystander, but there were no bystanders. I could have fired into the water. It might have scared them away before they finished him off." Rosoff took a deep breath. "What I'm telling you, Sergeant, is that when we got down to the water's edge, the old man was still on his feet. The kid in red was holding him by his shirtfront, but he was on his feet."

It was a catharsis for Rosoff, but his partner didn't like it. "We figured to drive right up and grab them; that's why we didn't take time to stop and fire." Carson realized he'd made matters worse. "We forgot about those lousy posts." He pointed ruefully to the posts that blocked access to vehicles. "All that money to restore the dumb bridge, then they don't make it strong enough to support the weight of a car."

"Did you get a good look at the perpetrators?" Norah asked.

"We only saw them from the back," Rosoff explained. "They were wearing sweat suits—two blue and one bright red. They all had hair, kind of an in-between length. The two in blue were skinny, medium height. The one in red was big, over six feet, and heavy, say about two-ten. The old man was down, and this punk in red just hauled him up to his feet like he was nothing. He held him up



for that last punch, then dropped him on the cement. You saw the back of his skull—it just cracked open like an egg."

The blood and matter had already seeped into the pavement, and all that remained was a dark, enigmatic stain. The three officers stared at it as though it could tell them something.

"I stayed with the victim," Rosoff concluded. "Ev—Officer Carson —went in pursuit."

Norah turned inquiringly to Carson.

He shrugged. "They scrambled up the hill and fanned out in different directions." He was as disturbed as Rosoff but for different reasons. "That damn Ramble! There's just too much cover in there, too many twists and turns and hills and dales. They ought to clear out the whole area."

"I assume you put out an alarm," Norah said.

"Yes, ma'am, right away, but we haven't heard anything. If there hasn't been a report by now, well, they haven't been picked up. And if they haven't been picked up, they're out of the park." Carson scowled. "What gets me is the nerve of those punks wearing those bright outfits. It's like they're thumbing their noses at us."

"There must be plenty of those outfits around," Norah observed.

"Sure." Carson looked at Norah as though she weren't very bright. "The point is you can spot them a mile off."

"Maybe that's the idea. All they'd have to do is pull off the jacket and the pants and they could walk right by you without your giving them a second glance."

Carson and Rosoff stared at her.

"The only thing is, muggers, ordinary muggers, don't usually go to that much trouble." She frowned, then glanced toward the gazebo, where the woman she'd noted earlier still patiently waited. A couple more minutes shouldn't matter. "Let's get back to the victim. Was he conscious when you reached him?"

"No, Sergeant." Before, Rosoff had been venting his frustration; now he was supplying information to a superior. "From the way he hit the pavement I was surprised he was still breathing."

"How about ID?"

"He didn't have a wallet on him, but he did have a couple of letters." The officer consulted his notebook. "One was addressed to Horace Pruitt. That one was a bill and the other was addressed to 'resident' but the number and street were the same. Both were post-marked four days back. I figure Pruitt picked up his mail on the way out, stuffed it into his pocket, and forgot about it."

Norah nodded. "Let's have the address."

Having noted it, she now turned to examine the area over which



Carson had indicated the muggers had fled. The ground was still soggy and should have taken prints. Norah bent down, searching. There were prints, all right, but badly messed up—probably by Officer Carson. She could hardly blame him for not thinking about prints while he was in hot pursuit. Anyhow, since the three had fled in different directions, there should be two unspoiled sets. She made a mental note to get a photographer over; it might also be worthwhile to have someone from the lab make casts. . . . Meanwhile, she moved up the hill, careful where she put her own feet. Suddenly she stopped and bent down to examine a clump of grass that was still a healthy green. There were dark spots on the tips of the blades. She touched one such spot with a finger. Tacky. Looking closer, she saw that the spots were pearshaped rather than round, with the narrow end pointing up the hill. She found more patches of grass spotted in the same manner. "Did you fire?" she called down to Carson.

"No, ma'am. They were out of sight before I had the chance."

"Which one did you follow?"

"The big one, the guy in red. He was the one that did the damage."

She pointed to the spots. "He was bleeding."

Rosoff and Carson looked at each other. "The dog," they said with one accord.

"What dog?"

"Hers. The woman who screamed." Rosoff pointed to the woman in the gazebo. "The dog was right in the thick of it, yapping at their heels. I guess he took a bite out of Red."

Carson grinned. "Feisty little mutt."

Obviously they hadn't got the witness' statement. A lot had happened, and happened fast. Norah didn't want to appear to reprimand them, particularly as they were already smarting from having failed to apprehend even one of the muggers. "Why don't I just go over to her and talk with her quietly, woman to woman? Make it easier for her to loosen up."

Rosoff took the remark at face value. "She probably would feel easier with you, Sergeant."

Carson wondered why she bothered to explain. "Whatever you say, ma'am."

Norah flushed. She had meant to be considerate, but it had come out as though she were asking their permission. She was too aware of others' feelings, too anxious for their good opinion. It was about time she learned to do the job without apologizing. Without another word, she marched over to the gazebo.



It was one step down from the path and one step above the gently lapping water. Its low rustic roof kept out the sun and forced Norah to duck her head in order to see inside. The woman sitting on the wooden bench was bundled up in a shabby fur coat, species no longer identifiable, and wore a black woolen cap pulled down to her eyebrows. A few wisps of white fuzz escaped on either side. Her face was completely crisscrossed with lines deep as knife cuts. Her pallor was so ghostly it seemed impossible that the blood that nourished her could be red. She paid no attention to Norah; she was completely engrossed with her dog. It had the body of a small German shepherd, but the legs were short and the jowls heavy. Its rheumy eyes indicated it was not a young dog. The old lady obviously adored it. Leaning over, she stroked it, murmuring to it in a low, soothing voice.

"Hello, I'm Sergeant Mulcahaney." Norah held out her ID so the witness could take all the time she wanted to examine it, which she did, then tilted her head up sideways to get a good look at Norah with eyes that were small but bright and alert.

"You're a detective, dear? Isn't that nice?"

Norah was prepared to be patronized, resented, admired, but she had never before been praised like a bright child. "Well, yes, I like it."

"And I'm sure you're very good at it, dear."

"Thank you, I try to be. And you're Mrs. . . ?"

"Youngbeck, dear. Cordelia Youngbeck. This is Lady." She indicated the dog.

"Hello, Lady."

"She'll shake hands if you ask her."

Norah took time to do that, and the dog, panting heavily, managed to lift a limp paw. "Is she all right?"

"I hope so. She's had a lot of excitement; it's not good for her heart. She's not as young as she used to be."

Norah bit back a smile. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, Mrs. Youngbeck."

"That's all right. I don't have anything else to do." Though she wore so many clothes, the old lady shivered.

"It's very damp here," Norah observed. "Why don't we go over to the cafeteria and get some hot coffee?"

"Well . . . I didn't bring any change with me."

"It's on the department." Norah didn't think she would accept if she thought it was coming out of Norah's own pocket.

"Oh. In that case. . . ."

"Good. Actually, I haven't had lunch yet. Maybe you'd join me?"



There was longing in Mrs. Youngbeck's eyes, but her pride won out. "Thank you. I've eaten."

Norah doubted it. "Won't you just have something to keep me company? A snack? My mother-in-law says that the 'appetite comes with the eating.' That's a rough translation."

"It's very kind of you. All right."

"I'll just make a note of your name and address and pass it on to the officers for the report."

That done, Sergeant Mulcahaney, Cordelia Youngbeck, and Lady crossed the Bow Bridge and strolled along the path to the low brick building overlooking the end of the boat basin. It took awhile because slow as Mrs. Youngbeck was, the dog was even slower. When they reached the cafeteria, there was another problem: The dog was not permitted inside and Mrs. Youngbeck absolutely refused to tie Lady up and leave her.

"Somebody might steal her."

The difficulty was resolved by Norah's going in to get the food and bringing it out. They sat on a bench in the lee of the building, warmed by the last rays of the autumn sun, and ate. Half of Mrs. Youngbeck's roast beef sandwich was surreptitiously slipped to Lady. Norah pretended not to see, suspecting that to be the real reason the old woman hadn't wanted to go in without her dog. Norah offered to get another sandwich, but Mrs. Youngbeck would not accept.

Norah leaned back and crossed her legs. "Now, Mrs. Youngbeck, tell me about it. What happened?"

"It was terrible, just terrible, the way those boys were hitting that old man. Lady and I were out for our constitutional—we walk two hours every day; gets us out of the house; gives my nephew's wife a chance to clean. . . ." For a moment she was lost in her own concerns, but she shook them off. "Lady loves to chase the squirrels. It's not allowed but. . . ." All at once she remembered she was talking to a police officer. "She's so old she can't possibly catch one. Anyhow, she'd just got to the top of the hill and saw what was going on. I screamed for help, but there wasn't anybody around. Finally I saw the police car, but it was a long way off and they were still beating that poor man. So I turned Lady on them."

"Lady bit one of them?"

"I'm sorry about that, but what else was there to do? Those . . . bad boys wouldn't stop. I had no choice but to sic Lady on them." She leaned over to stroke the weary dog. "Lady chased them. She saved that man's life."

"Weren't you afraid?" Norah asked.



"For myself, you mean? Of course not. Lady wouldn't have let them touch me."

Norah gave the dog a couple of pats. "How good a look did you get at them, Mrs. Youngbeck? Could you describe one or all of them?"

"There were two boys in blue. They had dark hair, nearly black, like yours, dear, but they wore theirs longer. They had thin, pointy faces with not much chin. They looked very much alike; they could be brothers. The other one—the one in red, the one Lady bit—he was a big boy, overweight. He had short, wavy hair, light brown, and strange eyes . . . sort of watery-looking."

"He was the leader," Norah prompted.

"Oh, no, not at all. In fact, he didn't take part in the beating till the very end, not till the little one ordered him to hit the old man. Sometimes, you know, the big ones are the timid ones. They shoot up so suddenly—overnight, it seems; they don't know their own strength; they don't have time to adjust. Sometimes they never do adjust, particularly if they were sickly as children. I'd say that was the case with this boy; he was certainly older than the other two."

Norah felt a chill of apprehension. Mrs. Youngbeck kept referring to the perpetrators as "boys." Probably she would consider Norah, at thirty-three, a "girl." To a woman close to eighty anybody under fifty qualified as young. Still. . . . "How old would you say the 'boys' were?"

"The two in blue—incidentally, one was called Duncan—the brothers, I'd say they were thirteen or fourteen."

Norah gasped. "Are you sure?"

"Oh, absolutely. I used to teach school—junior high. I can tell. The big one, he might be seventeen, even eighteen." She sighed. "Children, just children."

"I don't know what bothers me more," Norah admitted, blue-gray eyes flashing. "I don't know whether it's that the victims are so old or that the criminals are so young."

Joe sighed. "Both."

"Children not only don't have respect for their elders, they're



contemptuous of them. They choose them for victims because they're easy; they can't fight back. Which means that besides being criminals, the children are also cowards. And what does that say about us?" Norah wanted to know.

They were at home, dinner over, still at table lingering over coffee. It had been a good meal. Formerly a proficient cook, Norah was becoming a superior one, and Joe, who appreciated good food, was lazily content and just about ready to adjourn to the living room, where he would sneak a little nap behind his newspaper while Norah cleared and put the dishes in the dishwasher. It occurred to Joe that some people might consider his and Norah's homelife uneventful, even dull, and think that they shared few interests. They would be wrong. In fact, Norah and Joe Capretto had a great deal more in common than most married couples—they had their work. Whereas others were separated by their jobs, the Caprettos were joined. The work, woven into their lives, was exciting, demanding of their full capacities. Joe often thought that he and Norah had the same kind of all-consuming passion for police work that an acting couple has for the theater and were as absorbed by it and each other so that there was not time or energy for anything else. These apparently humdrum moments at home were much cherished by both for their very lack of excitement, but tonight was not destined to be one of them. Norah was too worked up. So Joe poured himself another cup of coffee, pushed back his chair, and crossed his legs, prepared to listen.

"Most of these poor old souls are alone in the world; they have no family, no friends, no money." Norah's indignation gathered force. "They're being ripped off by everybody. Their savings, if they have any, are watered down by inflation; the government's threatening cuts in food stamps and in transportation aid—did you know that? The nursing homes are a scandal. Most of the old people are just waiting to die. Well, they ought to have the privilege of dying of old age. We ought to be able to assure them of that much."

Joe reached across the dining-room table for her hand. "You're not worrying about your father?"

"Not really, though I must confess Horace Pruitt reminds me of Dad a little—the way he fought for his life, the way he's still fighting."

"Has he regained consciousness?"

Norah shook her head. She was silent for so long that Joe thought the subject was closed, at least temporarily.

"We ought to do something!"

"We?"



"Sure, we, the police, who else? That's our job—to protect people. Aren't we coming around to the idea that preventing crime is more efficient than trying to catch the criminal afterward? We have a Crime Prevention Squad."

"Sure we do, but. . . ." Joe didn't finish. She had thought it out. He knew his wife well enough to realize that she had some kind of scheme, was bursting with it. "What do you suggest?"

"We've departmentalized crime. We used to have broad categories—Homicide, Safe and Loft, Vice. Now the distinctions are finer—Homicide and Assault, Narcotics, Organized Crime, Sex Crimes Analysis, Robbery Squad, Emergency Service, Public Morals, Pick-pocket Squad. . . . I could go on. So why can't we have a unit devoted to crimes against the elderly?"

"I don't see why we couldn't."

"The unit could patrol the area where the incidence of this type of crime—"

"You've got the regular anticrime and street-crime units doing that," Joe pointed out.

"Sure, sure, but unless they catch the perpetrator in the act, they don't make much effort to trace him."

"You know yourself how little there is to go on in these hit-and-run—"

"There's plenty if you look for it!" Norah insisted, her color high, her eyes bright. "We could work up a profile on the criminal in the same way the Sex Crimes Unit does. Muggings are as subject to solution as any other offense. It's just a matter of taking the trouble."

"And of having the manpower. We didn't have it before," Joe pointed out. "With all the men that have been fired recently and the ax still hanging over the department, we have even less."

"If we had such a squad, it would act as a deterrent, don't you think? And the old people would know that somebody's trying to help. That's important, too."

Joe got up, went around to Norah's chair, and kissed her in the temple. "I think it's a great idea."

"You do?"

"Absolutely."

"Then you'll present it?"

"Me? I can't do that."

"But . . . you just said you liked the idea."

"I do."

"So? I don't understand. Why won't you present it to Chief DeLand?"



"Because it's not my idea. It's yours, *cara*, and you should be the one to present it. Put it on paper and submit it. I'll help if you want. I'll bet anything you get a favorable response."

"But that could take months," Norah protested.

"You have to go through channels, love. Unless. . ." Joe frowned. He wanted to help, not only because it meant so much to Norah but because he did basically believe in the idea. "You could talk to Jim Felix. As division commander he could set up a unit within the division. With the kind of pressure he's been getting from the neighborhood citizens' associations, he might just go for it."

"And if it works, if it proves itself, then maybe Chief Deland would expand it to cover the whole city, all the boroughs. . . ."

He started to laugh. "Whoa, slow down, first things first, okay?"

"Oh, Joe." She hugged him. "Why don't we go and talk to Captain Felix together?"

"No, ma'am. This one's yours, all yours. It's your baby."

As soon as he said it, Joe winced. He shouldn't have used that particular cliché. But Norah hadn't caught it. Thank God! His frown eased, so did the knot at the back of his neck. Norah's idea was good; the job needed to be done. He was proud of her for coming up with it. But most of all Joe Capretto was happy to see his wife engrossed in something, anything that distracted her from the loss of their son.

Captain James Felix, commander of the Fourth Division detectives, tilted back in his swivel chair. He was a tall, thin man with wavy red-brown hair and dark green eyes that now roamed over the ceiling tracing the old, familiar cracks and searching for new ones as he considered Sergeant Mulcahaney's suggestion. "Why not?" he mused aloud. "Why shouldn't the old people get some special attention? Everybody else does."

He liked it! Norah could hardly believe it.

"We form the unit to protect a special group, but at the same time we cut down on street crime generally. At the least, it'll get the concerned citizens and the block associations off my back for a while."

Norah held her breath. The reaction was far more favorable than she had dared hope.

Abruptly, Jim Felix leaned forward, and the swivel chair squawked alarmingly. "You do realize that there is such a unit in the Bronx? It's called . . . ah . . . the Senior Citizens Robbery Unit."

"It's mostly advisory, though, isn't it?" Norah countered. "It warns the old people not to open their doors to strangers and generally



tells them what precautions to take to keep from being victimized. The Street Crimes Unit puts out decoys. What I have in mind is a combination of the two."

Felix leaned his elbows on the desk and looked straight at Norah. He had known her almost as long as Joe, and he had just as high a regard for her abilities. In many ways Norah Mulcahaney Capretto reminded the captain of his wife, Maggie, an actress whose energy and initiative sometimes, often, overcame her caution. "We have to start small," he cautioned. "On a trial basis."

"Yes, sir." Norah swallowed. He was going to do it. Her idea had been accepted.

From the way she sat, spine straight, shoulders squared, chin thrust out, Felix knew he'd let his own enthusiasm show too much. "It'll be a pilot project. The patrol will operate within a limited area. Now, which area would you suggest?" As commander, James Felix knew the neighborhood block by block, by age and by ethnic group; he knew which section it should be.

She answered promptly. "Between Seventy-fourth and Eighty-sixth, from Central Park West to West End Avenue."

"Too big."

"I suppose you could cut the east-west spread to, say, Broadway, Captain. Most of the single-room-occupancy buildings are on Central Park West and on Broadway, and a lot of the old people live in them. That residential hotel where we had the homicide earlier this year, the Westvue, is on Central Park West and Seventy-fifth. Horace Pruitt, the man who was mugged in the park, lives on Eighty-fifth. I don't really see how you can cut north-south and still get a fair sampling."

She had done her homework well and, having had her plan accepted, was now fighting to give it the best chance for success. Felix was satisfied. He turned his chair part way around so he could look at the precinct map on the wall. "I don't know if I can spare enough men to cover that."

"You only need one shift, Captain."

"How's that?" Felix's high, arched brows lifted a fraction higher.

"The old people don't go out after dark, not if they can help it. A lot of the offenders are kids and they're in school till nearly four. So the prime hours are from four to dark, which at this time of year is around six."

"Not all offenders are juveniles."

"No, sir, but most of the attacks don't occur till late morning. A special shift from eleven A.M. to seven P.M. should do it."

"All right. How many men?"



"I hadn't thought in actual numbers, Captain."

"Go ahead and think about it."

Lips turned inward, frowning, Norah calculated. The manpower problem was ever present; now, with the mayor's anticipated budget cuts, the allocation of men was critical. If she suggested too large a number, the project was dead right there. She didn't dare suggest too few or it wouldn't work. "I think it could be done with six. One for decoy and three for backup, one swingman, and one to take a turn at the phone. The unit should have a special number, and the public should be urged to use it. Also, any assault on an elderly person taking place anywhere in the division should be reported to the unit."

"No on that, for now. Later on, maybe, but for now I want the unit to stay within its own limits. Why a three-man backup?"

"Because the perpetrators usually work in pairs, sometimes in gangs."

"Who's going to keep the records, feed the computer, and do the analysis?"

"The head of the unit."

Felix nodded. "Okay. Sounds good, Sergeant. Go ahead."

Norah sat where she was and stared at the captain.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm not sure I understood you correctly, sir."

"I told you to go ahead."

Still Norah didn't move. "You mean you want me to form the unit? You want me to set it up, choose the personnel?"

"Isn't that what you came in for?"

"Captain . . . I came in to present my idea. It never occurred to me that you would . . . that I would . . ."

"Don't you want the job?"

". . . be given command," she finished.

"Who did you have in mind?"

"Nobody. I thought . . . I didn't think. I assumed, naturally, that you'd make the selection."

"Right. I have. You. It's your idea."

"Yes, sir." Somehow she managed to get to her feet. "Thank you, sir. I'll do my best."

"No, not good enough. Make it work, Sergeant."

Norah's eyes met Jim Felix's and held steady. "I will."

"And one more thing, Sergeant Mulcahaney. I want daily reports. In fact, I want to see you in here at the beginning and end of each shift. I want to know exactly what's going on."

Norah left Captain Felix's office in a daze. It wasn't till she was



back at her own desk that the full import of what had happened hit her. She was to have her own command! Suddenly she felt like shouting, throwing up her arms, twirling around the squad room between the desks. The thought of the reaction of the other detectives if she were suddenly to dance among them like Carmen among the Spanish soldiers was too much. She started to giggle, but instantly covered her mouth, looking around guiltily. Nobody had noticed; they were all much too busy. It occurred to Norah that she would be making her selection for the team from among these men, subject to the captain's approval, naturally. Then the doubts set in. Could she handle the job? She could. Of course, she could. The captain would not have appointed her if he didn't think so. If he had faith in her, then she should have faith in herself. After all, as both Felix and Joe had pointed out, it was her idea. Her qualms were natural, a result of the unexpectedness of the assignment, that was all. Her own command! What would Joe say? He'd be as elated as she was. She couldn't wait to tell him. She started for his office, but the phone on her desk rang before she was halfway across the room.

"Sergeant Mulcahaney, Homicide," she answered automatically, her mind already grappling with the logistics of the new squad. As soon as the caller identified himself, she set them aside. "Yes, Doctor?"

"You asked me to inform you of any change in Mr. Pruitt's condition."

She knew instantly from the resident's tone what was coming. Horace Pruitt was dead. Thirty-six hours after being assaulted by the three teenagers, without ever having regained consciousness, Horace Pruitt had lost the fight. So now there was no doubt that the case belonged to Homicide. She hung up, gathered the pertinent material, and once again headed for Joe's office. She knocked.

Joe was on the phone talking to a reporter. His back was to the door and he was staring out the window. He sounded relaxed as he parried the questions.

"What can I tell you, Chuck? We had no reason to suppose that the ID was planted. The Stromberg family was satisfied. Now, four weeks later, some man calls up purporting to be Ernest Stromberg and his cousin claims he recognizes the voice. That's no basis for exhumation; you know it as well as I do. Let this alleged Stromberg show himself, and if we get a positive ID from the family, well. . . ." He let it hang.

The reporter's pressure didn't ruffle Joe.

"I haven't the faintest idea why this man should claim to be



Stromberg if he isn't, any more than I have any idea how his ID got on somebody else's corpse—if it did," Joe continued. "Certainly we'll reopen the case if the facts warrant. . . . Certainly it'll get my personal attention. . . . How are Leila and the kids? . . . Norah's fine, thanks. . . . Anytime, Chuck, glad to talk to you anytime."

Joe hung up. He took a deep breath, held it, then slowly exhaled while continuing to stare thoughtfully out the window. He was head of homicide detectives in the Fourth. Jim Felix had held the post before him, and when Felix was appointed commander of the Fourth Division detectives, he had recommended the man who had worked with him for fifteen years, Lieutenant Joseph Capretto. At first Joe had felt like a juggler who couldn't quite keep all the balls in the air at the same time, but he'd learned. Now he derived a lot of satisfaction in being on top of all current cases.

So what he'd told Chuck Hines, the reporter, was true: He did supervise every homicide in the division, but he didn't second-guess his men. Detective Grodin, however, had already admitted to Joe that he hadn't checked the dental records. Stromberg had been missing for over six months. The private detective hired by the family had traced him to New York and then lost him. When the badly decomposed body, its general specifications matching those of the missing man and bearing his identification, had turned up in an abandoned warehouse, the family accepted that it was Stromberg. Without indication of foul play Grodin hadn't seen any need to pursue the matter. Whether or not Joe would have taken the trouble to check the dental records was beside the point. He'd been in charge for just over a year, and one thing he'd learned was that you couldn't do everything yourself. You chose good men, you trusted them, and then you backed them up. That was the job.

Aware finally that someone was knocking at his door, he called out, "Come. Well, hi, darling. How'd it go? What did Felix think. . . ?" From her expression he gathered that the interview had not gone well, so he amended what he'd been going to say. "What did he think was wrong with the idea?"

Norah frowned. "He didn't think anything was wrong with it. He likes it. It's going to be a pilot unit. I'm to set it up and be in charge."

He couldn't understand why she wasn't more enthusiastic. "That's great, great." Joe had been sure that Felix would go for the plan, and he had even considered the possibility that she might be put in charge, then dismissed it because she had, after all, only recently made sergeant. "That's marvelous. Congratulations, *cara*. I'm proud of you."



"Thanks. What I came in to tell you is that the hospital called. Horace Pruitt is dead."

"Ah," Joe sighed. So that was it. "You knew he was critical," he reminded her.

"He was strong for his age. He fought so hard. . . ."

"Did he regain consciousness?"

"No." She couldn't help but think of her father. Patrick Mulcahaney was not as old as Pruitt, but he wasn't as strong either. He had a physical disability, his left leg having been mangled in an industrial accident years before. For all practical purposes he had overcome it, walking with barely a limp, but if he were to be assaulted . . . would he last even as long as Pruitt?

Joe knew what was on her mind. "How about that witness"—he glanced at the papers she had put on his desk—"Mrs. Youngbeck? I see that she claims she can identify the perpetrators. Is she competent?"

"Absolutely."

"I take it she's been through the mug shots without result?"

The fact that they had a witness who could make identification wasn't of much use if they didn't have any suspects for her to identify. There were no leads either. The way it looked, the only chance they had was to pick up the boys during the commission of another mugging. Though it might seem hit or miss to a civilian, Norah knew from experience that a lot of crimes were solved in just that way. "We'll let it be known that Pruitt didn't talk. That way, whoever did it won't be afraid to go out again. Who knows, maybe you'll get lucky and pick them up. You and the new team."

Norah shook her head. "The fact that they wear those outfits suggests that they work only in the park. Captain Felix has limited our jurisdiction, and the park is not included. I have to agree that it's too large for us to cover effectively."

Joe considered. "I could contact my good buddy Chuck Hines and get him to do a piece for his paper. He could say the park patrol is on the lookout for joggers in those bright outfits. That would make them discard the outfits, and it might also scare them out of the park and into the streets."

"Maybe." Norah wasn't too sanguine.

"And, cara . . . why don't you give your father a call? We haven't seen him in a long time. Ask him up for dinner."



The old man tottered out of Barney's Shamrock Bar and Grill on upper Broadway. He stood on the sidewalk uncertainly, then turned up the collar of his stained raincoat, sizes too big, bent his grizzled head against the light but penetrating drizzle, and started uptown. Weaving from side to side, he lurched toward the gutter, grabbed at a fire hydrant to steady himself, then, overcompensating, lurched in the opposite direction and crashed into a building, bouncing off apparently unharmed. The few pedestrians gave him a wide berth. A young housewife approaching hastily yanked her child out of his path, then stood watching and shaking her head as he made it to Gilhooley's Tavern and staggered inside.

He was out again in a matter of minutes. At Seventy-eighth he turned the corner, heading for Central Park West. He got about a quarter of the way up the block, then, just short of the Mayberry Hotel, a dingy welfare establishment, he leaned against the building for support. Slowly his legs folded under him and he sat on the pavement. Another couple of minutes and his head lolled, his chin dropped to his chest, and his eyes closed.

"Don't you think he's overdoing it?" Norah asked Roy Brennan.

The old man was Officer Ferdie Arenas, black hair streaked with cornstarch, eyes hollowed with a heavy layering of brown grease-paint, acting as decoy for the new unit's first sweep. Norah Mulcahaney and Detective Roy Brennan were following in Norah's car. As Arenas now apparently dozed off, Norah turned the corner and parked.

"When he goes into a bar and comes right out again, it looks like he hasn't got the money to buy a drink," she complained.

"It also looks like he's so far gone the barkeeper refused to serve him. It's a pretty good act, Norah," Brennan assured her.

Good or bad, it didn't matter if nobody was watching, Norah thought, but kept that to herself.

As the special telephone line had not yet been installed, the whole team turned out for this first duty tour. They had started with high hopes. The weather appeared made to order: the early darkness, the rain that kept honest people off the streets. An old man nearly



stupefied by drink should have made the perfect target, but Ferdie had been at it for more than three hours and nobody had given him more than a pitying or loathing second look. Norah noted the nondescript black Plymouth turn the corner after her, pass, and proceed up to the far end of the block. That was Detective David Link and Officer Dolly Dollinger. So now the street was sealed at both ends. There was nothing to do but wait.

Sitting beside her, Roy Brennan appeared completely relaxed. Norah, whose jitters had started the night before, almost resented his calm. Of course, he didn't have the personal stake in this that she did. To Roy it was another day's work. And he had no imagination. . . . No, she corrected herself, that wasn't fair. Roy's imperturbability came from experience. He was an old hand; what he lacked in flair he more than made up for in thoroughness and attention to detail. As for caring about the team's success, Roy Brennan wouldn't have joined if he didn't care.

Joe had been surprised that Norah wanted him and had cautioned her on two counts regarding Detective Brennan: one, he was too experienced for the job; two, being her senior by so many years, he might not take orders from her easily. In fact, Roy had once been Norah's direct superior, assigned by Felix to act as a damper to her impulsiveness. Roy had never hesitated to point out flaws in her reasoning, nor had he ever allowed her to take shortcuts in procedure. Yet there had never been any animosity between them. Norah trusted Brennan and wanted him on the team, but on Joe's advice she was careful to leave him an out. Roy Brennan could have turned her down in any number of ways. He could have said he had cases pending that couldn't be passed along, that the special-duty hours wouldn't be convenient, or, being Roy, he could have come right out and told her he wasn't interested. But Roy Brennan, a confirmed bachelor from a blue-collar home, now living alone and used to pleasing himself, had listened while Norah explained the reason behind the unit's formation and then simply said: "Count me in."

It had been a moment of very special satisfaction for Norah. Roy was not only the first man she'd asked, he would also be the senior member of the squad, and so his ready acceptance gave her added confidence in approaching the others. Not that she'd had any real doubt about the others.

David Link, detective first grade, was nearly as enthusiastic as she. David was thirty-four, married, with two children, both boys. He and Norah had started on Homicide North within a couple of months of each other under the supervision of the then Lieutenant Felix and Sergeant Capretto. They were similar in temperament,



worked harmoniously, backing each other whenever necessary. Norah expected that David would be her staunchest supporter.

With David at this moment as part of the backup was Officer Ethel Dollinger, nicknamed Dolly. A small, dumpy, cheerful police-woman of twenty-five, with short straight hair cut in bangs and big china-doll eyes peering from beneath them, she was a hard worker. No job was too routine for Dolly. She compiled lists; she ran them down; she canvassed tirelessly. The really tedious research somehow inevitably found its way to Dolly's desk.

"It's like the Rape Squad all over again," she said enthusiastically. Dolly Dollinger had been one of the original members.

"We'll be going out on the street," Norah told her. "We'll be searching out the criminals, baiting them."

"Me, too? I thought you'd want me in the office, keeping the records."

"We'll all take turns at everything. That way we'll each be informed about what's happening and the squad will be better integrated."

"Wow! I'm actually going to get out on the street and do police work! There's only one thing. . . ." Dolly's big brown eyes revealed her anxiety. "How are you going to get me up to look like a feeble old lady?" Norah started to laugh. "I'll go on a diet. I swear I will. This time I mean it."

Ferdie Arenas, now acting as decoy, was the youngest member both in age and in time on the force. He had come from San Juan five years before, and his family were still there. Two sisters worked as maids at the Caribe Hilton; his only brother attended the University of Puerto Rico. They were proud of Ferdie's success up there with the "Continents"; they considered being a police officer an important job, one that gave them status. They were also grateful for the money Ferdie sent home each month. Arenas was diligent but self-effacing.

"It would be an honor to work for you, Sergeant Mulcahaney." He had grasped Norah's hand when she offered it. "It will be a privilege to help the old people."

That was the regular team. Norah considered it to be well balanced. She had confidence in each member.

The drizzle had become rain and was getting heavy. On the sidewalk Ferdie Arenas was slumped over on one side, apparently passed out. If that didn't attract a mugger, Norah thought, there weren't any muggers around.

Suddenly she sensed a new alertness in her partner. Roy was sitting very straight, watching intently. Following the direction of his



gaze, Norah saw a tall, thin male in tight jeans, nail-studded jacket, and chunky platform shoes, high-stepping across the street. He wore an Afro hairstyle, but the bluish tinge of the streetlights washed out his complexion so that it was hard to tell whether he was light tan or white. He cast a quick look over his shoulder, then slithered toward the prone figure of Arenas.

He got down on one knee and bent over Ferdie, but the undercover officer didn't move. Nobody in the cars moved. If they announced too soon, the suspect could claim he had been merely trying to give assistance; he had to have the wallet and money actually in his hands and be moving away. The trouble was that he was hunched over Ferdie in such a way that Norah couldn't see what he was doing. So she was startled when Roy flung the car door open and jumped out.

"Police!" he yelled, gun drawn. "Freeze!"

David Link and Dolly were out of their car and running.

It was over in seconds. The prisoner had been read his rights and was on his way to the precinct to be booked by Ferdie and Dolly. The new unit had made its first collar.

Norah was at once elated and disappointed in her own performance. She had been watching the suspect's hands. She realized now that since she couldn't see them, she should have taken her cue from the decoy. As soon as his wallet was lifted, Ferdie Arenas drew up his legs, ready to spring. That was how Roy had known when to move. He had, in effect, taken over. Not that Norah blamed him; it was hardly the moment for consultation. She'd wanted an older, experienced man and, having got him, had better not be sensitive about prerogative.

"It sure didn't need five of us to collar that guy," David complained to Roy.

She couldn't let it pass. "We might have had to deal with a gang."

"In this lousy weather?" David retorted. "Never. All you're going to get in this weather is loners and not many of them. We should have split up for double coverage."

Norah pressed her lips inward nervously. "We'll follow the procedure I set up with the captain."

David raised his eyebrows. "I'm sure the captain expects us to use judgment." Then he added in a conciliatory way, "We've got to show a good record if we want to stay in business."

"We'll stay in business," Norah assured him.

Link shrugged and looked to Brennan.

"She's the boss," Roy said.

* * *



The following day, Dolly Dollinger, disguised as an old lady, was accosted by two youths as she came out of the supermarket carrying a bundle of groceries. The bag was knocked out of her arms, her purse seized, and she was thrown to the ground. The perpetrators laughed, but they stopped laughing when the team moved in. As it developed, one of them had a record of two previous arrests for petty theft, and the other had been pulled in on suspicion of rape, though he was later released. They were both white, eighteen and nineteen, respectively, and with enough muscle so that they didn't need little old ladies to knock over.

"Cowards," David muttered, and every member of the unit silently echoed it.

The day after, it was David's turn to be decoy. He wanted to look like a man who had money in his pocket, so he got himself up in a business suit which was out of date but of good quality. He wore a wide-brimmed hat to hide his face and used a cane to help disguise his walk. It was unusually warm for late November, and it seemed to David, as he leaned heavily on his cane, that all the old people in the neighborhood had turned out to sit on the benches on the traffic island in the middle of Broadway. They were squeezed together thigh to thigh and shoulder to shoulder, yet isolated, refusing to acknowledge the body on either side. David had seen similar rows in Queens, the Bronx, on other traffic islands, in housing-project parks, on the sidewalk in front of retirement homes. They sat, raddled faces to the sun, displaced persons in their own hometowns. At the same time, David had been observing a group of four young toughs swaggering aimlessly on the other side of the avenue. They were moving parallel to him, and David thought they were looking him over. He hoped that his apparent lameness would encourage them to select him as a victim. Would they accost him not only in broad daylight but with witnesses abounding? Or should he turn off into a less frequented side street? While he considered, the four crossed over toward him.

David tensed, but the toughs passed him by and continued sauntering along the row of old people like customers examining the merchandise. By common accord they stopped in front of an elderly, shrunken Hasidic Jew in a long black coat and high-crowned black hat, with flowing locks and curly beard. A yank at the beard brought the little man to his feet yelping with pain. They demanded his money, and when he wasn't quick enough in handing it over, they started to slap him and kick him while the old people who had been sitting nearby scattered like frightened birds before a pack of dogs. David threw his cane aside, drew his gun, and announced he



was a police officer. But he couldn't fire, not with so many bystanders, and the gang knew it. Alone, David would have been frustrated, but when the team converged, the hoodlums dropped the cowering, whimpering victim, expecting to escape into the crowd. Seeing that someone was actually coming to help, the alienated, terrorized individuals were forged into a single entity. Shoulder to shoulder and thigh to thigh, the old people stood silent, a living barrier against the thugs, determined not to let a single one through.

It was an impasse. For a moment there was silence on the island in the middle of traffic that continued to speed by unheeding. Then one of the youths tried to crash through. In one avenging surge the prey fell on the predators. The old people seized whatever they could—an arm, a leg, a sleeve, a collar, the back of a jacket. They shouted as they dragged the tormentors down and sat on them. Some entwined themselves around their arms and legs like strangling vines on statues. One wizened old woman locked bony fingers into an assailant's long hair, guaranteeing that his first free action would be to get it cut. The mauled youths welcomed the police, relieved to be taken into custody. When all had been removed to the cars, the old people gathered around the officers. Some had tears in their eyes. One woman kissed both Norah and Dolly. Everyone shook hands. It was a moment neither the officers nor civilians would ever forget.

The newspapers latched onto the story and played up the incident. In an age of noninvolvement the way the old folks had come to the aid of the police was news indeed. The old people's unstinted praise for the work of the team turned the spotlight around. The fact that the sergeant heading the unit was a woman, young and attractive at that, didn't hurt either. Sergeant Norah Mulcahaney had her picture in the paper.

The precinct was amused, but little more. Basically, without the trimmings, there wasn't that much to it. The only comment was about Norah's picture. She was complimented, and Joe was teased.

"How does it feel to have a celebrity in the family, Lieutenant?" Detective Augie Baum asked.

Joe grinned. "She's still the same simple girl I married."

Captain James Felix decided that this was an opportune moment to announce the formation of the Senior Citizens Squad and its purpose.

Public reaction was immediate and commendatory. The papers cited Felix as compassionate. Representatives of neighborhood associations called on him to express their gratification and support. He was praised for his concern and for his perception in appointing



a woman, who was by nature endowed with extra sensitivity to the needs of the elderly and would more readily inspire their confidence. Now the precinct also took note. Reactions were mixed. Norah was congratulated, of course. So was Joe, but with a difference. Those who knew him well probed his feelings with caution. Those who did not asked him right out how he felt. His answer to both was the same.

"I think Norah's doing great. I'm proud of her."

Augie Baum couldn't let it go at that. "Doesn't it bother you?"

Joe replied just as bluntly. "No. Why should it?"

"Well, I mean. . . ." Augie's shrug implied that the reason was obvious. He tried again. "If she were a man, the appointment wouldn't be getting anything like this kind of play from the press."

"Maybe not."

"What do you mean, maybe? That's the truth, Lieutenant, and we both know it. If Norah were a man, the appointment wouldn't rate a paragraph on the back page."

"So?"

"So I'm all for women's rights, equal opportunity, equal pay for equal work, the whole bit. No offense to your wife, you understand, Lieutenant; we all think she's great, a competent officer. . . ."

"She'll be glad to hear that."

"The point is, the thing that started all this commotion . . . it was an ordinary bust. No big deal. Happens every day."

"You miss the point, Baum," Joe contradicted. "It's not this one particular bust that matters, it's the idea behind the squad, which is to show the old people the department cares about them and is trying to protect them. That's what's getting the publicity."

"If you say so, Lieutenant." Baum concealed a sneer.

"Let me ask you something, Baum."

"Yeah, sure, Lieutenant. What?"

"If a man had the command, would *you* be giving it a second thought?" Without waiting for an answer, Joe turned and walked into his office. The exchange with Baum wasn't the first of its kind, and he knew it wouldn't be the last. He was not jealous of his wife's success, but he was getting sick of saying so. He was careful not to slam his door, but it certainly would have relieved him to do it.

After all the attention the squad felt increased pressure to make good. Dissension was banished, and if there was any reservation about the way Norah was running things, she wasn't aware of it. She believed in herself, considered she was doing a good job, and was happy in it. The arrests piled up.



The commissioner sent a note of commendation to Captain Felix. The chief of detectives called Jim Felix to his office.

Louis Deland was a cop's cop—tall, cadaverous, with dark, crepey bags under his eyes. He looked as though he never sat down to a proper meal or ever got his full quota of sleep. Both were true. He had the typical cop reservations about women on the force: They should be matrons, do clerical work, handle juveniles. Louis Deland, however, was a pragmatist: The current of the times was for equality for women, and either you went with the current or you got sucked under. Also, the chief was a fair man, and he had to admit that so far the women had acquitted themselves well. He knew about Sergeant Mulcahaney; she was okay; she possessed a lot of natural instinct for the work.

"I just wonder, Jim, whether the job might not get too big for a woman. I know Mulcahaney's got a fine record, but she hasn't had that many years on the force," Deland reasoned. "Also, I'm not crazy about having her out on the street. I know some of the women are on patrol with a male partner, but that's in a subordinate position."

When assured that the idea for the squad was Sergeant Mulcahaney's, in fact, and not merely for the purposes of publicity, Deland wavered. There was no doubt that Sergeant Mulcahaney was doing a good job. As long as she had plenty of strong, competent backup. . . .

"Keep the unit small like it is now. Don't lay more on her than she can handle. You understand me?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Good. If the thing really takes off . . . if the momentum continues and we decide to expand . . . well, we can let her handle the administrative work, do some PR—give talks to local groups, like that. She could do some of that right now, as a matter of fact. I'll tell you what else she should do—that's get a special phone number and invite the senior citizens to use it to report anything suspicious. What the hell, you never know—somebody might actually report something useful."

Felix did not pass the chief's remarks on to Norah in full. He edited. He told her that Deland was pleased and that he had suggested the special phone number, but that he, Felix, had not deemed it advisable to inform the chief of detectives that Sergeant Mulcahaney had already put in a request for it.

Norah agreed, happy that they would get the special line at last.

"We ought to send notices of the number to the various neigh-



borhood associations and social clubs," she suggested. "Maybe we could even give little talks about the purpose of the unit at their meetings. I'm sure David or Dolly or either of the others would be willing to go."

"Would you?" Felix asked.

"Sure, anytime."

He nodded gravely. Jim Felix did not deem it advisable to inform her that Chief Deland had already suggested that.

5

Norah was worried about her father. Patrick Mulcahaney was behaving oddly. He seldom called and was seldom at home when she called him. When she invited him over for dinner, he made excuses not to come, and when he finally did accept an invitation, he was preoccupied, fidgety, and, it seemed, couldn't wait to get away. It was no different on Thursday night.

They were hockey fans, the three of them, and at this time of year they automatically turned on the TV after dinner to watch the game together. They shouted and exhorted their team as enthusiastically in their living room as they would have done at the game. Only Pat Mulcahaney wasn't joining in. Several times Norah caught him staring off into space when he should have been engrossed in the action on the screen.

He looked well. Now that she was married and no longer saw him every day, Norah was acutely conscious of the physical changes in her father. He had been showing the signs of age markedly—skin becoming crepey, movements tentative, frame shrinking, but lately that process had slowed. In fact, she thought he was putting on weight; certainly his color was better. Also, the drag of his left foot, a barometer of his condition, had been barely noticeable when he arrived.

"What are you up to these days, Dad?" Norah inquired brightly during a commercial.

Patrick Mulcahaney shrugged. "The usual. You know."

And that was out of character. The question should have prodded her father into a minute account of everything going on in his neighborhood.



"You look great, really great."

"I feel great. I'm working out again."

"Oh?" Norah frowned. She knew that he still went to O'Flaherty's Gym, but it was a token appearance; he hadn't worked out in at least two years. "You think that's a good idea?"

"Yes, I do."

His tone, if not Joe's look, should have warned her to drop it. She ignored both. "You will be careful not to overdo, won't you, Dad?"

Joe sighed, raising his eyebrows at her.

Norah couldn't stop. "You're not as young as you used to be, you know."

Joe groaned.

"Who is?" Mulcahaney's eyes flashed, but instead of launching into a tirade, he smiled gently. "I'm not into my second childhood yet. Don't fuss, darlin'."

Norah and Joe exchanged glances of disbelief. Well, Norah thought, if her father was so determined to avoid argument, maybe this was the moment to make her announcement. "I've got terrific news."

"Oh?"

"There's a marvelous three-room apartment available in the building. Living room, bedroom, and small kitchen. The super gave me the key. Why don't we go down and take a look at it?"

"You want to move?"

"Not us, Dad—you." She laughed, somewhat hollowly. "It's for you."

"I don't want to move."

Patrick Mulcahaney had steadfastly resisted all offers to come and live with them. He said he didn't want to intrude, and though they wanted him, they did appreciate his consideration. An apartment of his own in their building seemed the solution.

"The old place is too big for you, Dad. Seven rooms for one man! It's ridiculous."

"We want you near us, Pat," Joe said quietly.

Mulcahaney's face softened. Anxious as he had been to see his girl married, he had not favored Joe's courtship. He'd been wrong. He willingly admitted that Joe Capretto was everything he had wanted for Norah. "I appreciate that, but I like it where I am. It's my home. My friends are up there."

"You wouldn't be moving to another city, Dad. You could still see your friends." Norah began the old arguments.

He shook his head. "They wouldn't come down here, not after



the first few times. And I'd stop going up there. Sweetheart, I appreciate your concern and Joe's—I really do—but I can look out for myself. You're all involved with the senior citizens thing, but the people you're dealing with are abandoned and helpless. They have nothing to live for. Don't put me in that category. I'm healthy. I've got friends. I've got interests. With the election coming up I'm putting in more and more time at the district club. Above all, I've got you and Joe to call on if I really need help. I'm not going to be easy pickin's for any young hooligan."

Norah was both touched and frightened. "Please, Dad, be careful. If you ever are assaulted, don't resist. It's the worst thing you can do. Let them have what they want. It's only money."

"It's self-respect."

She thought of Horace Pruitt. "It could be your life."

"She's right, Pat," Joe added.

Mulcahaney sighed. "Maybe so."

Meek, meek, her father was too meek! Norah couldn't understand it, and it made her testy. "It wouldn't hurt you just to come down and look at the place."

Mulcahaney reached for her hand. "It wouldn't work, sweetheart. It would be just like moving in with you."

"No, it wouldn't." She was glad that at last an argument was shaping up.

"Yes, it would—exactly. You'd feel you had to have me up for dinner every night, include me when you were entertaining. . . ."

"No, I wouldn't."

"You'd feel guilty if you didn't include me."

"I wouldn't. Okay, okay, we'll make a deal. I promise not to—"

"You'd be running down to cook my meals, to clean my place. Can you promise not to do that?"

Norah bit her lip. "I work cheap, Dad."

"Ah, darlin'!" Mulcahaney put his arms around her and held her for a moment. "I'm grateful for what you're trying to do, both of you." He extended a hand to Joe. "It's the sweet, lovin' pair, you are. But let it be."

"I just don't understand it," Norah complained to Joe later as they were getting ready for bed.

"I do. Your father's a proud man, *cara*; he's a fighter, just like you. Giving up his place, whether to move in with us or live downstairs, would be a tacit admission that he's no longer able to look after himself."

"That's silly."



"It's the way he sees it. Remember when your father used to try to get you dates, when he used to bring eligible men up to the house? You resented his trying to run your life."

"It's not the same thing."

"Isn't it? Come on, isn't it?" Joe grinned, pulling her down on the bed. "Here's one old man who wants all the attention you can give him."

As the Senior Citizens Squad settled into an efficient working routine the number of arrests at first increased, then leveled off, then began to drop. Norah found herself doing more and more PR work. She had a full schedule of appearances before community groups. After the first couple of times she got over her stage fright and began to speak easily, even to enjoy it. Her confidence grew on both fronts—as head of the unit and as a lecturer.

At the beginning Joe accompanied his wife whenever possible. He refused to sit on the platform with her because he didn't want to take the spotlight from her, but sitting in the audience night after night got boring, so he started to beg off. Then he didn't know what to do with himself. He had once played handball, but when he tried to revive those games, nobody, single or married, was interested in handball as an entire evening's entertainment. He had never cared for cards, had never been one for hanging around with "the boys," and the entertainments available to him in his bachelor days were not suitable now. There was nothing for Joe to do but sit home and watch television and wait for the sound of his wife's key in the lock.

Norah would return exhilarated, full of the evening's events. She would recount them in detail, and though Joe certainly was interested, he couldn't make himself care about who said what—especially since he didn't know the people. Sensing it, Norah tried to be less exuberant, and that caused constraint between them. Each determined to do better: Joe to show more enthusiasm, Norah less. And each felt a little resentful at having to do it.

With Norah no longer working for Homicide, the Pruitt case had to be passed to someone else. Joe decided to take personal charge. The lab had casts and photos of the footprints on the muddy park slope. Unfortunately the boys had been wearing old sneakers that had left no identifying tread. The piece he'd asked reporter Chuck Hines to do had produced no results. Joe had requested all precincts, particularly the park patrol, to forward any complaint involving a perpetrator wearing a red or blue warm-up outfit, but none came in. He had interviewed Cordelia Youngbeck himself



without eliciting anything new. Now that Pruitt was dead, her testimony was crucial. He was satisfied that Mrs. Youngbeck would be able to make positive identification of the youth in red, who had delivered the lethal blow, but they still had to find somebody for her to identify.

With her help a police artist made Identikit portraits of the suspects, and these were circulated. There didn't appear to be anything else that could be done.

Norah had no idea. "Why don't I show the Identikit pictures to my groups when I lecture? Maybe somebody will recognize one of the suspects?"

Joe wasn't too optimistic.

Norah did more than show the drawings. She detailed the case. She described Horace Pruitt's valiant resistance. She made Pruitt the symbol of all elderly victims and enlisted her audience in the army of resistance. "Give a second look at any young man wearing a jogging outfit in those colors," she urged. "If you have any suspicion at all, contact me directly."

She intended, of course, to pass the information on to Joe or whoever happened to be catching for Homicide, but when the call came, Norah had no way of knowing its importance or that it was even connected to the Pruitt case. All she had to go on was a message on her desk that a Mrs. Bertha Tilsit at the West Side Community Center wanted to see her as soon as possible.

She stopped by on her way home. The receptionist informed her that Mrs. Tilsit was a volunteer and was presently working down in the basement. There, in a large bare room, linoleum tiled and lit by fluorescent bulbs, were two long trestle tables with a mound of used clothing in the center of each and about a dozen women working to sort it into stacks. Most of the women were over fifty and physically out of shape. Probably housewives, Norah thought. What they were doing didn't seem exciting to her, but they were chattering cheerfully, apparently having a nice social evening, as well as performing an act of charity. Every head moved in her direction when Norah appeared, and one of the ladies, gray-haired but fresh-faced, with large myopic eyes, left her station and came forward.

"Mrs. Tilsit? I'm Sergeant—"

"Yes, I know you, Sergeant. I was at your lecture two weeks ago. We had quite a conversation afterward. I don't suppose you remember?"

Norah tried, was about to give up, then smiled, "I didn't recall your name, Mrs. Tilsit, but I couldn't forget the lady who baked that delicious gingerbread."



Bertha Tilsit glowed.

"What have you got for me, Mrs. Tilsit?"

Now the lady was all business. Putting her head close to Norah's, she spoke in a low tone, at the same time darting significant glances in all directions to make sure that none of her friends was missing an awesome and delectable moment. They weren't. Nobody was doing any sorting. Nobody was even pretending. Norah was sure that whatever Mrs. Tilsit was about to tell her so confidentially was already known by every woman in that basement room.

"I hope I did right to call, Sergeant. I know how busy you must be; I wouldn't want to bring you out for nothing."

"What is it, Mrs. Tilsit?"

"You remember the drawings you showed us of the three suspects in the homicide?"

Norah felt a cold chill move through her. As many times as she got this kind of tip, it was always a surprise. "You've spotted one of them?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. No, my eyesight isn't too good." Mrs. Tilsit was embarrassed. "In fact, I'm afraid I didn't really see those pictures too well. I've been meaning to get glasses, but. . . ."

Norah hid her disappointment. "Then what did you want to see me about?"

"The suit."

"What suit?"

"You did say one of the suspects was wearing a bright red exercise suit?" She squinted anxiously.

"Oh, yes, that's right."

The eyes widened in relief. "Well, I do believe we have it," she claimed modestly. "You see, people don't usually give anything nearly brand new to a clothing drive. We don't expect it. What we want is good, serviceable, warm garments. What we get is not only out of style, but beyond use. Most times we have to repair it and get it cleaned before we can give it away."

"So?" Norah prodded.

But now that things were going as she'd anticipated, Mrs. Tilsit was in no rush. She was in the spotlight and enjoying it. "We get all kinds of things. You wouldn't believe the unsuitable items people dump on us—satin negligees—I ask you! Evening sandals, bikini bathing suits—junk. Then they want an evaluation so they can take it off their income tax as a charitable deduction!" By now Bertha Tilsit had forgotten that it was all supposed to be confidential; her voice rose and she looked around, inviting support. A dozen heads obliged her by nodding eagerly. "So when I first put my hand on



this bright red thing, I thought, now what? Then I saw that it was a sensible garment, warm and nice and in good condition, in fact, practically new. It did have a tear in the leg but that had been sewn." She fixed her gaze on Norah and lowered her voice to a heavy whisper. "Then all of a sudden the reason came to me."

"Where is the suit?" Norah asked.

Mrs. Tilsit led her to a supply closet, reached for a small carton on a low shelf, and put it in Norah's hands. Space was cleared at the end of one of the tables for Norah to set it down and examine the contents. The ladies gathered around, all pretense that they didn't know what was going on abandoned.

"You see, it is perfectly good," Bertha Tilsit reiterated as Norah unfolded the red jacket and held it up. "Hardly worn. Doesn't make sense for anyone to throw it away."

Norah agreed. Examining the pants, she noted that the tear at the left ankle was jagged. Whoever had repaired it wasn't very handy with a needle; nevertheless, the job was adequate and didn't affect the garment's wearability. All labels had been removed.

"Is there any way of knowing who brought this in?"

Mrs. Tilsit's look was one of consultation with the other ladies, all of whom shook their heads. "People just come in and leave their contributions and walk out again," she explained. "Unless they want a tax evaluation, that is. Then they leave a name and address with the bundle. There wasn't any with this."

"Is this the original carton?"

"No, it came wrapped in brown paper."

"I don't suppose you have the paper."

Again Mrs. Tilsit looked to her friends for help, but they couldn't supply it. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. There was no reason for you to keep it. Was there any other clothing in the bundle?"

Mrs. Tilsit brightened, and the other ladies brightened with her. "Several things."

"Where are they? What did you do with them?"

"I sorted them. I put them in the appropriate piles. . . ." She looked around uncertainly at the various stacks. "They were women's things. . . ." She moved along the table. "There were a couple of heavy woolen skirts, out of style but good quality, and there was a thick cardigan, sort of a rust color." As she talked, she moved, riffling lightly through a stack here and there, becoming more and more agitated. "They'd already been cleaned so I put them on this table," she murmured mostly to herself. "Could I have made a mistake and put them on the other?" Suddenly she pounced. "Here they are! I



knew I put them here." She pulled the neatly folded articles she'd described from the bottom of a stack and triumphantly handed them to Norah.

As Mrs. Tilsit had indicated, the articles had been freshly cleaned, and that, Norah thought, could well be all the luck they would need. Yes, the cleaner's tags were still there—in the waistband of each skirt, on the side seam of the sweater.

"You're sure these came in the same bundle as the warm-up suit?"

"Positive, Sergeant."

This time Berthat Tilsit didn't look around for confirmation, but Norah did. Every woman there gave it.

On Thursday night the neighborhood stores would remain open late. Norah called the precinct, but Joe was out. Was there any reason she couldn't do the job herself? She decided there wasn't.

By nine P.M. Norah had located the store where the two skirts and the sweater had been cleaned and had the name of the customer—Mrs. Amy Cotter. The clerk said that a young man—he assumed it was Mrs. Cotter's son—regularly delivered and called for the laundry and cleaning. He didn't know the son's name, but he had no hesitation in identifying the Identikit portrait Norah showed him.

Mrs. Amy Cotter opened the door on the chain and peered through the slit.

"Police officer, Mrs. Cotter," Norah announced, and showed her credentials. "May I come in?"

"What is it?"

"I'd like to talk to you."

"If it's about the robbery upstairs, I don't know anything. I wasn't home at the time it happened. I work."

Nowadays there was always a robbery upstairs or downstairs or next door, Norah lamented. "No, ma'am, it's not about the robbery. May I come in?"

Reluctantly Mrs. Cotter slipped the chain.

She was in her early forties, youthfully slim and showing it off



in severely tailored slacks and a body-hugging jersey shirt. Her brown hair was liberally streaked with gray and even strands of white, but though she disdained to color it, she had it cut by a master so that with every movement of her head the hair swung freely. The style would have imparted dash to a young face; unfortunately it called attention to the indelible frown of discontent on Amy Cotter's, the puffiness around her eyes, the sullen set of her mouth. The overall impression was one of dissatisfaction and strain. Was she trying to make a statement, to say that one could be over forty and still compete? Or did her job demand this kind of effort?

"I was just paying some bills and straightening out my household accounts." It was not an apology; on the contrary, it was meant to inform the police officer that she was intruding.

The papers spread out on the massive mahogany desk were the only clutter in a rigidly ordered room which reflected the woman and her fortunes. A mixture of old and new—the old, solid and of top quality, indicated she'd been accustomed to the best; the replacements, of lesser grade, that she'd come down in the world, been forced to make compromises. But she still strove for effect: Every ornament was precisely placed, every pillow artfully tossed, and the magazines on the coffee table were arranged for color impact rather than content.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," Norah replied politely.

Mrs. Cotter did not deny she was being disturbed. "What can I do for you, Sergeant?"

Norah wasn't offended. Knowing what was coming, she could only pity the woman. "Is your husband at home?"

"I have no husband."

It was an odd way of putting it, and evidently Mrs. Cotter didn't intend to elucidate. Setting speculation aside, Norah held the carton from the community center out and indicated the coffee table. "May I?" After Mrs. Cotter had cleared space and attempted to minimize the resulting disorder, Norah aggravated it further by opening the box and laying out the contents on the sofa. She began with the two skirts and the sweater. "I believe these belong to you."

"Yes, yes. That is, they did. I gave them to the community clothing drive. What are you doing with them?"

"Did you deliver them yourself?"

"No, my son, Richard, took the bundle over there."

Norah extracted the red warm-up suit. "Does this belong to Richard?"

The frown between Amy Cotter's eyes deepened. "Where did you



get that? I didn't throw that out. It's brand new. I just bought it for him."

"You made up the bundle?"

"Certainly."

"Your son must have added the suit to it."

"Why should he do that? I told you it's brand new. You can see for yourself. . . ." She snatched the garments out of Norah's hands as much to examine them herself as to prove her point. "Ah . . . this isn't Richard's. This has a tear in the leg. You see? Obviously it got mixed in by mistake."

"Is Richard at home?"

Mrs. Cotter nodded toward the inner hall. "He's in his room, studying."

"Why don't we just ask him if this is his suit?" Norah suggested.

"No, Sergeant, I don't think so. First I want to know what this is about. Why have you brought my things back? And why are you so interested in this warm-up suit?"

"I'd like to speak to your son."

"Is Richard in some kind of trouble?" Amy Cotter's assurance wavered, her voice trembling slightly, but she overcame that immediately. "He can't be. I don't believe it. He's never been in any kind of trouble in his whole life. With all the terrible things that children get into these days, Richard's never caused me one moment's worry. He's a good boy. Whatever it is, Richard had no part in it."

Without comment, Norah showed her the portrait the clerk at the cleaner's had already identified. "Is this your son?"

For a long moment Mrs. Amy Cotter stared at the drawing without any expression at all. She swallowed a couple of times before speaking. "What's that supposed to be?"

"It's a drawing of a suspect in a case of assault and attempted robbery. It was made by a police artist under the direction of a witness to the crime." No use telling her yet that the victim was dead; she had enough to bear. "The drawing has been identified as your son, Richard."

Perspiration broke out on Mrs. Cotter's face. "Who identified it? Who?"

Norah remained silent.

"Well, it's not Richard. It looks like him . . . something like him, but it's not. Whoever said it was wrong." She cocked her head to one side, pretending to study the portrait. "Actually, now that I look at it again, it's not much like him at all. These drawings—I don't see how anybody can make an identification from them."



Privately, Norah agreed. She never ceased to marvel at a witness' being able to guide the police artist into creating a really good likeness and even more at anyone's being able to make positive identification from it. Nevertheless, it did happen, constantly. The drawings were an important police tool.

"According to the witness, the suspect was wearing a red warm-up suit just like this one."

"There must be a thousand of those suits."

"I'm sure there are. That's why I'd like to speak—"

"Assault . . . robbery . . . if you only knew how crazy it is to suspect my boy of such things." The woman laughed, an edge of hysteria in the laughter. "Richard wouldn't hurt a fly. To start with, it's not his nature, and second, he's not physically capable of it. He's not a strong boy. He had polio when he was a child."

That, Norah had not expected, yet hadn't Cordelia Youngbeck when speaking of the eldest and largest of the three boys suggested that he might have been a sickly child? "How long ago?" she asked.

"He was twelve when he was stricken."

"But he's recovered?"

"As much as anybody can from a terrible thing like that," his mother replied guardedly. "He looks fine, but he tires easily. He has periods of extreme debility. He denies it, but I know. I have to keep reminding him that he's not like other boys, that he has to be careful not to overdo."

"Some of our most outstanding athletes were polio victims in childhood," Norah pointed out. "I remember reading about Doris Hart; she took up tennis as therapy for polio and became a champion. There are others who through therapy developed great physical prowess and dexterity—dancers, figure skaters. I think there was even a boxer—"

"And some never got up out of the wheelchair." Amy Cotter gave Norah a patronizing smile. "You do recall Franklin Delano Roosevelt? It depends on the severity of the attack—obviously. In my son's case, strenuous activity was and is out of the question. Richard has been excused from phys ed at school at his doctor's orders."

Did the doctor give the orders at his mother's instigation? Norah wondered. "So Richard takes no physical exercise of any kind? Then why the warm-up suit?"

"I didn't say that. His condition requires a certain amount of controlled physical activity, but nothing strenuous or involving sudden, abrupt exertion."

"How old is your son?"

"Seventeen."



While she still held the police artist's drawing in her hand, in Norah's mind another picture was forming—of an overly protected boy, a boy set apart, excluded from the normal play and companionship of other boys, made to feel physically inferior, whether he actually was or not. Again according to Cordelia Youngbeck, the youth in red had been big and strong, but reluctant to use his strength. Could that be because he wasn't accustomed to using it, because he had been told that he was, in fact, a weakling?

"Just exactly what kind of exercise does Richard take?"

"He swims three times a week. He jogs a certain specified distance each day."

"Where?"

"In the park, Sergeant, where else?"

Norah said nothing.

"When he recovered, I put him in a private school so that he should be in a stress-free situation. I paid for tutoring to enable him to keep up with his age group. Now you come and tell me that he's repaying my sacrifice by slipping away from his exercise group—for which, incidentally, there's an extra charge—and going around assaulting and robbing people. I don't believe it. Why should he do such a thing? I give him everything he needs.

"Richard doesn't smoke or drink or, God forbid, take drugs. If you think I wouldn't know it if he were doing any of those things, that I wouldn't recognize the signs, you're wrong. I've made it my business to learn what to look for. Richard is a fine boy, and I deeply resent this unfounded accusation."

Norah pitied Amy Cotter and all the parents who were so sure they knew their children and did not, who watched them so carefully for the dreaded signs and then refused to acknowledge them. "I haven't charged him yet, Mrs. Cotter. I just want to talk to him. I could get a warrant. Then the questioning would take place at the precinct. Of course, you could call your lawyer and have him present. Perhaps you'd prefer that?"

Abruptly Amy Cotter sat down and covered her face with her hands. "I don't have a lawyer. I wouldn't know whom to call."

"You could consult the Legal Aid Society. Or the court could appoint someone."

"Oh, God . . . oh, God, how could such a thing happen? What have I done to deserve this? I've sacrificed my whole life for that boy. I could have remarried, I had plenty of chances, but I didn't want Richard to have a stepfather . . . and this is the thanks I get. What will they say at the office? I'll lose my job!"

How many women, personally frustrated, blighted their children's



lives in just this way? Norah pondered, yet she felt sorry for Amy Cotter and believed that under the layers of selfishness there was a core of real love. In the crisis she would discover it—unfortunately too late both for her and for the boy. This parent, however, was a fighter and was already emerging from despair to scheme a way out.

"I don't want Richard dragged down to the precinct, Sergeant Mulcahaney. I'm sure that this is all some terrible mistake. So, suppose I let you talk to him here, at home. Nobody would have to know about it, would they?"

"I can't promise that, Mrs. Cotter. I can't promise anything."

"Of course, of course."

But she was counting on just that. Norah could tell, and she had to disabuse her of the false hope. "The situation is quite serious."

"I see." Amy Cotter became very still. Her face, moments before contorted, now was a mask. She got up, started for the hall.

"Mrs. Cotter . . . please, just knock on his door and ask him to come out."

The woman nodded and did exactly as she'd been asked.

Norah could have picked Richard Cotter out of a crowd—the police artist, guided by Cordelia Youngbeck, had drawn that good a likeness. There was the same open face and, albeit somewhat flabby, the same nice, regular features and wavy, light brown hair cut short—at his mother's dictum, no doubt. The portrait could not reveal how big he really was or how awkwardly hunched over he held himself, but a lot of other boys and girls who towered over their schoolmates got into that habit, too. There was something else about Richard Cotter, something not quite right. Norah struggled to define it.

"This lady wants to ask you a few questions, Richard." His mother spoke to him in the soothing tone one might use to someone not very bright.

As Richard Cotter turned obediently from his mother to her, Norah thought she had it—he was a bit retarded, but when she looked into his eyes, she realized she was wrong. Richard Cotter just lacked interest. He had no curiosity and so was deficient in that kinetic energy that should have been consuming a boy of seventeen. "I'm Sergeant Mulcahaney, Richard. I'm a police officer."

He was interested in that, all right, though he tried to hide it. He was frightened, too, and tried to hide that.

"I'm here about an old man who was assaulted in Central Park two weeks ago."



"I don't know anything about it. We didn't go to the park that day."

"What day?"

"The day it happened."

"How do you know which day it was?"

"I . . . I read about it. Yes, I read about it in the papers."

"Who's we?"

Richard Cotter was at a loss.

"His exercise group. I explained about that." His mother came to his aid.

Norah waved to her to be silent. Should she read Cotter his rights? The exact moment a witness became a suspect was subject to varied interpretation. If the suspect turned out to be guilty, not having read him his rights could get the case thrown out of court; on the other hand, reading them too soon often frightened a guiltless witness out of divulging valuable information. Norah decided to risk holding off awhile longer.

"Where were you on November twelfth at about three thirty in the afternoon?"

"Home, studying." He glanced quickly at his mother, flushed, and looked away again."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What day of the week was that?"

He frowned. "Tuesday. No, Wednesday. I'm not sure."

"If you don't remember what day it was, how can you remember what you were doing?"

"Because I'm always home studying at that time in the afternoon."

"Your mother says you jog in the park in the afternoon."

His color deepened. "No, ma'am. Not anymore. I got excused." He cast another shamed look at his mother. "I wrote a note and signed it with my doctor's name. I hate it; I hate jogging! It's boring."

Later Amy Cotter would undoubtedly give her son a tongue-lashing; for now she was simply relieved.

"So you were at home on the afternoon of the twelfth," Norah continued. "Alone? Did you have any friends over? Did you speak to anyone on the telephone?"

"No, ma'am."

"Did the doorman see you come in?"

"I don't know."

"I'll have to ask him. If he did see you come in, I'll have to ask



him whether he saw you go out again. You understand that, Richard?"

"I didn't go out again," he insisted sullenly.

Either it was true, or else he was very sure that he hadn't been seen. "Well, if you've given up jogging for good, I suppose that's why you discarded this very fine outfit." She held up the red jacket and pants.

"I didn't discard any outfit. I wouldn't do that. My mother paid good money for it. My mother works hard for her money."

"This doesn't belong to you?"

"No, ma'am."

"You still have your outfit?"

"Sure."

"See, I told you, I told you!" Amy Cotter could no longer restrain herself. She threw her arms around her son and kissed him. "My baby. My big boy."

"Would you mind showing it to me?" Norah asked.

Norah watched as he disengaged himself and walked out of the room—slowly. Was his left leg dragging? Yes, she thought when he came back, then she turned her attention to the garments he mutely gave her. She examined them closely. Both jacket and pants were in perfect condition—no tear anywhere, not even dirt on the white neckband or on the wrists or at the ankles. In fact, the warm-up suit looked as though it had never been worn.

"Now are you satisfied?" Amy Cotter demanded.

But Norah spoke to the boy. "There were three youths involved in the assault. One of them was bitten on the left leg by a dog. May I see your left leg, Richard?"

He took a step back . . . and winced.

"Richard!" His mother had noticed. "Richard, show her."

"No. I don't want to."

For a moment Amy Cotter stared at her son, then with a sudden lunge she reached down for his pants cuff and jerked up the trouser. The bruise was there, still discolored, swollen, oozing infection.

"Oh, my God."

Norah sighed.

"Richard . . . baby . . . tell her how you got that. Tell her. Explain."

Norah waited. He didn't speak. "You're under arrest. You have the right to remain silent. If you wish to waive that right and answer the questions put to you, you have the right to have an attorney present. . . ." Mother and son listened in a daze as she re-



cited the warning based on the Miranda case. "Do you understand these rights as I've explained them to you?"

Cotton nodded. He seemed awed rather than frightened.

"Do you want to say anything?"

He shook his head.

"Do you want to tell me the names of the other two boys who were with you?"

He shook his head energetically.

"Tell her, Richard, please. Tell her. Why should you take all the blame?" his mother pleaded.

Not only did he refuse to look at his mother, he bit his lip as though something might slip out against his will.

"Why are you protecting them? They wouldn't do the same for you. Please, Richard, please, I beg you, for my sake. . . ." Enraged that her appeals were useless, accustomed to taking matters into her own hands, Amy Cotter turned to Norah. "Do you have drawings of the other two like you have of Richard?"

"Yes."

"Show me. Maybe I know them."

"Mom!"

"Show me."

Silently Norah held them out. In her opinion Mrs. Youngbeck had not succeeded as well in guiding the artist in these as she had in the portrait of Richard Cotter. Only a general likeness had been achieved, and she wasn't surprised that Mrs. Cotter was taking a long time studying them. But gradually the frown on her brow eased, and while her son watched anxiously, she cried out, "I do know them!"

"No, no, Mom. . . ."

"Yes, yes. The Vismitin boys. Brett and Duncan Vismitin. I'm sure it's them."

Richard groaned. All color drained out of his pudgy face. If his mother had had any doubts, his reaction dispelled them.

"Those Vismitin kids are lazy good-for-nothings. Juvenile delinquents is what they are," she raged. "You just ask anybody in the neighborhood and they'll tell you."

"Stop, Mom, stop. Don't say any more."

"Why shouldn't I? It's the truth. I told you to stay away from them. They're bad. They got you into this. It's their fault."

"Knock it off, Mom."

His tone startled Amy Cotter. She wasn't accustomed to having her son speak to her like that. "What?"



"I said, knock it off. Nobody got me into anything. I knew exactly what I was doing."

"Don't listen to him," Mrs. Cotter begged Norah. "He doesn't know what he's saying. My poor baby—"

"I'm not a baby. I'm a man. It's about time you admitted that, Mom. And I'm no weakling either. I'm strong, real strong. I knocked that old man down with one punch." He cocked his right fist, took a fighter's stance, and jabbed into the air. "I killed him."

"No . . ." his mother whimpered.

"I killed him. And he wasn't the first one either. There were others, if you want to know. Plenty, plenty of others. I can't even remember how many."

It was nearly two A.M. when Joe Capretto emerged from the interrogation room. For four hours he and Norah, two detectives from the DA's Homicide Squad, and a secretary had done little more than listen to Richard Cotter—or Rick, as he insisted on being called. He had been booked in the Pruitt case, and Norah was on her way to the arraignment, which meant she'd be tied up well into the morning. Joe had too much on his mind to go home. He went back into his office.

Of course, Joe Capretto had heard all kinds of confessions: reluctant confessions, extracted by guile, persuasion, or threat; boastful confessions accompanied by vehement justifications; repentant confessions by which the culprit sought relief for his guilt. There were also, as a matter of routine, confessions by the mentally deranged, the "crazies" who turned up to claim credit for every well-publicized atrocity. Certainly it wasn't the first time in Joe's experience that a suspect apprehended on one charge admitted other crimes; that didn't make the confession false. Rick Cotter had spewed out a plethora of details. He had given names, dates, and descriptions of victims and scenes. It was the job of the detectives to challenge the accuracy of such confessions, but their skepticism had acted as a goad to Cotter. He had not merely countered with additional specifics but added to his list of victims as though he would convince them by sheer weight of numbers. By the time they



were through, Rick Cotter had confessed to five killings. All five had occurred in one building, the Hotel Westvue, a single-room-occupancy building on Central Park West at Seventy-fifth tenanted principally by welfare clients, prostitutes, and elderly, long-time tenants who couldn't afford to move out. Joe spent the rest of the night at the files reviewing the circumstances of the five deaths for which Rick Cotter claimed responsibility.

The first occurred on March 4 of that year. The victim had been one Phoebe Laifer, female, Caucasian, age seventy-one. Unmarried. Writer of children's books. She'd had a pleasant three-room apartment at the Westvue, having moved in thirty years before, when it was a prestigious address and a gracious place to live. Cause of death: manual strangulation. The motive was assumed to be robbery, but there was no indication of what had been taken, and the apartment was in good order.

The second homicide had taken place on May 3. The victim was Bernice Hoysradt, female, Caucasian, age eighty-two. She had been found bound hand and foot, lying face up on the floor with a rag stuffed into her mouth. Cause of death: suffocation, the rag having been jammed too far down into her throat. Again the motive was assumed to have been robbery, and again there was no indication that the apartment had been searched.

In the third instance the victim was a Mrs. Estelle Waggoner, retired vaudevillian and singer, age seventy-seven. Mrs. Waggoner had been in the original American production of *The Merry Widow*. A full-color poster depicting her in her role—wasp-waisted, in velvet and feathers, bejeweled—dominated her living room. She had applied for admission in the Actor's Fund Home in Englewood, New Jersey, had been approved, and was waiting for a vacancy when she was killed. She had been found lying on the floor under the poster that proclaimed the days of her glory—an old lady in a faded housedress, with a knife in her back. Date: July 3.

Rick Cotter had known a great deal about these women—what was in the police files, and more. He knew their histories so well that he named the titles of the books Phoebe Laifer had written. He could describe the photographs on Mrs. Waggoner's walls, the plays they represented, the part she had played, and her costume—down to the black-button boots and the oversized ruby-and-gold brooch prominently displayed on her bosom.

Joe could find no record of a fourth or fifth homicide. Cotter had named names, of course—Isabel Brady and Theodora Zelinsky. In the morning, Joe thought, he'd have to find out what had happened to those women. In the morning. . . . Wearily he raised his head;



it was morning. The window was a rectangle of gray light. He leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes for a moment, and when he reopened them, the window was ablaze with a rosy fire. He reached over and switched off the desk lamp. It was six thirty-two.

Five deaths, according to Rick Cotter, all the victims women, all elderly, and all living in the same building. Also, all occurring within a nine-month period—since Lieutenant Joseph Antony Capretto had been appointed commander of the Fourth Homicide Division. It looked bad. In fact, he couldn't imagine how it could be worse.

At the moment, though, what principally concerned Joe were the two unrecorded homicides. Why weren't they in the files? In each case of sudden death in which a physician was not in attendance to file a death certificate, someone from the medical examiner's office examined the body. Joe's hand was on the phone when he realized that the chief, Asa Osterman, was not likely to be in yet. Besides, this wasn't the kind of thing that could be resolved on the telephone. So he would shave, go out for breakfast, and then drive downtown and see Doc in person. It was just after seven when Joe emerged from his office, and already the squad room was filling up. The night watch consisted of a skeleton crew, but the men of the eight-to-four were already coming in. They carried the usual paper sack with a container of coffee and a Danish, but the half-sleepy banter was missing. They were not only early, they were silent and they were alert. They knew. Joe sensed it instantly. The word of Rick Cotter's confession had got around. And its implication.

"Morning, Lieutenant." David Link spoke up loud and clear.

"Morning, sir." Roy Brennan greeted Joe in the same firm tone.

Ferdie Arenas took a step forward.

On special duty with Norah's team, these three weren't due till ten. Their greeting was reinforced by a low murmur from the rest. Normally the kind of confession that Cotter had made, one that cleared several cases from the books, should have been cause for satisfaction, every man on the squad sharing the success. This was an instance of getting out from under the blame. In the final analysis, it was Joe who would bear the responsibility, but his people were there to show their support.

"Lieutenant. . . ."

Detective Gus Schmidt had carried the Laifer case, the manual strangulation. Due for retirement four years ago and eager for it, Schmidt had suddenly lost his wife. Childless, with no outside interests, he had elected to stay on. Formerly a plodding officer, cautious almost to the point of inaction, he had become one of Joe's



most reliable investigators. Joe could not imagine Gus' overlooking evidence, and yet he was obviously worried.

Joe waved him off. "Later, Gus. You, too, Slim." Slim O'Connor, pale, earnest, perpetually harried, had carried case number two: Bernice Hoysradt, suffocation. "I'll see you both later."

Joe knew that as soon as the door closed behind him the talk would erupt. Most of it would be supportive, but there was always someone who got a kick out of the other guy's trouble. He thought he knew more or less how it would go, but, in fact, he would have been surprised.

He was not surprised that Asa Osterman was expecting him.

Osterman was a small, compact man—five three and 120 pounds—sitting behind an oversized desk. Twenty-two years ago he had moved into the chief medical examiner's office, jammed a sofa cushion into the chair, and raised himself to working height. He had a special chair now, but otherwise nothing had changed in the office or the man. Asa's eccentric attire was legend. Today he sported a bright red woolen vest with big gold buttons and a matching red bow tie so wide it hid the collar of his brown striped shirt. Joe didn't smile at him. Few who knew Doc Osterman did. He was an acknowledged authority in forensic medicine; he had single-handedly solved more homicides than any team of detectives; his opinion was eagerly sought and rarely challenged; juries believed him, and his appearance in court virtually guaranteed victory for whichever side he supported. Nevertheless, his bright, sparsely lashed eyes were troubled as he regarded Joe through thick-lensed steel-rimmed glasses.

He tapped the folders in front of him. "Here are the two cases that were not referred to Homicide.

"Case number one," Osterman intoned. "Isabel Brady. Female, Caucasian, so on and so forth . . . here we are. Age sixty-nine. Found in bed. Cause of death: cirrhosis of the liver. Examining physician: Dr. Alan Dubois." He set that aside and picked up the next. "Theodora Zelinksy, so forth and so forth . . . age seventy-five. Found in bed. Cause of death: cardiac arrest. For your information, Lieutenant, she had recently recovered from an attack of pneumonia. Examining physician: Dr. Douglas Pollard." He set that one aside neatly with the first, then folded both hands on the empty blotter in front of him. "Both Dubois and Pollard are good men. They know not only how to do an autopsy, they know how to evaluate the circumstances accompanying a questionable death and how to read the evidence at the scene. There was nothing in either of these two deaths to indicate other than natural causes."



"Cotter says he killed these two women. He says he suffocated them."

Osterman sighed. "Well, it's not impossible. We both know that it's pretty hard to diagnose suffocation as homicidal, particularly when the victim is elderly and weak—as were both Brady, an alcoholic, and Zelinksy, with her heart condition. Of course, if there had been lipstick on the pillow. . . ." The little doctor shrugged. "But there was nothing to arouse suspicion, nothing at all."

"Still, the five of them dying in the same building. . . . I'm not blaming your department, Asa, I'm blaming myself," Joe hastened to assure the medical examiner.

"What for? To start with, two of those deaths were judged natural and you weren't even informed about them. But aside from that, the majority of the tenants in that building are over sixty-five years of age, we'll work out the exact percentage if that will help, and it probably will. So. They're not only old, they are sick, and they've got precious little to live for. So they die. There's nothing suspicious about it."

"Three of them died by violence."

"Two by intent. Your suffocation by gag was clearly an accident."

"Cotter claims intent."

"He also claims five murders. The question here is credibility, isn't it?"

"I appreciate your support, Asa."

"Hell, I'm not supporting you, Lieutenant," the medical examiner cut in testily. "Or alibiing you or anybody else, me and my department included. We deal with an imperfect science. We make judgments based on the known evidence and backed by experience. We could be wrong; nobody's perfect. But on the basis of the present evidence, my opinion is that you've got two separate cases of homicide here. All right, all right, three, with three different MO's."

"What about Cotter's confession?"

Osterman shrugged.

"I can't ignore it."

"Nobody's telling you to ignore it, Joe. What do you usually do with the kooks who come in and confess to the latest sensation?"

"These crimes were not well publicized, Asa." The fact that Joe had to remind him of this most salient fact was a sure indication that Osterman was far more disturbed than he cared to admit. Joe sighed. "I can't figure how Cotter can know so much unless he's guilty."

"So you believe him?"

Joe took a deep breath, held it, then slowly released it. "He cer-



tainly took part in the assault on Pruitt. The dog bite on his leg, his getting rid of the warm-up suit—pretty conclusive. Also, we've got a witness. We'll have a lineup this afternoon, and I expect to get a positive ID. As for the rest . . . I don't know."

Asa Osterman had known Joe Capretto for years he; knew the kind of man he was, as well as the kind of officer. He leaned across the desk and spoke sternly. "You want a piece of advice? Don't make a big thing out of this. Don't go around beating your breast and claiming responsibility. Nobody's going to blame you unless you blame yourself."

But Asa Osterman was wrong.

Maybe he had been trying to reassure himself, as well as Joe, but at the very worst he couldn't have expected, nor could he have imagined, the furor that Rick Cotter's confession would cause. Repercussions within the department were inevitable, but public reaction was exacerbated by the press, who knew when they had a good story. Headlines were bold and persistent. Day after day there was no letup. The newspapers could hardly be blamed: The case was fraught with human interest. There was the high school student as self-confessed mass slayer; the loyal, hardworking, self-sacrificing mother; the sordid scene of the crimes, the Hotel Westvue, with its own fascinating history. Feature writers did "pieces" on every aspect. One reporter actually checked into the Westvue for a couple of days, then moved on to other similar single-room-occupancy buildings in mid-Manhattan and wrote his firsthand impressions of the filth and degradation he encountered. It stirred up a lot of indignation—against landlords, against the Social Security and welfare agencies that permitted their clients to live in such squalor, but principally and inevitably the major sensation remained the "mishandling" of the case by the police and the medical examiner's office. No one quite dared to accuse the vaunted chief medical examiner of negligence, certainly not of incompetence—that was unthinkable—but questions were raised about the particular physicians who had judged the last two deaths as natural. There was less reticence in fixing responsibility within the police department. That had to fall on Lieutenant Joseph Capretto. His excellent prior record, the publicity he'd received in breaking past cases made the present lapse puzzling. Joe had rapport with the press, was well liked, but that didn't save him. Even his friend Chuck Hines joined the pack. It was he who recalled the Stromberg case and the goof on identification of the body, which, when Ernest Stromberg presented himself in Joe's office alive and well, had had to be exhumed and



remained still unidentified. By insisting that the lieutenant was not directly responsible, Hines clearly implied that Joe didn't keep a sharp enough eye on his men. Could it be that as fine an investigator as he was himself, the lieutenant was not suited for command? Joe bore no grudge because Chuck cited the Stromberg case, but he did think the conclusion was unfair.

As titillating as any aspect of the sensational case was the fact that the officer who arrested Richard Cotter on another charge and was thus unwittingly responsible for breaking the series of hitherto unsolved and unsuspected murders was an attractive woman, Detective Sergeant Norah Mulcahaney, head of the newly formed Senior Citizens Squad. Most intriguing of all, though the point was not belabored, Sergeant Mulcahaney was also Lieutenant Capretto's wife.

Nora was appalled.

The precinct took note and took sides.

"What's Sergeant Mulcahaney got to do with it?" Ferdie Arenas walked over and joined the men clustered around Augie Baum.

Baum shrugged. "She made the bust, didn't she?"

"So?"

"Well, if she hadn't made the bust. . . ." Baum smiled as though the consequences should be evident to anybody with any brains.

"You mean she should have let Cotter go?" Arenas asked.

"No, no, I don't mean that." Baum looked around at his supporters a bit uneasily. "All I'm saying is that it's ironic that she should have made the bust that's causing all this trouble for the lieutenant."

"Yeah, too bad it couldn't have been you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"The lieutenant is in no trouble." Agitated, Ferdie Arenas fell into the speech pattern of his native tongue. "Is nobody in trouble except you, *hombre*. You are in big trouble if you do not shut your mouth about the sergeant."

"You going to shut it for me?" Baum demanded. "Go ahead, let's see you try."

Roy Brennan stepped between them. "Okay, that's enough. Knock it off, both of you."

Asa Osterman stuck to his scientific guns. He called in reporters and handed out copies of the statement he was about to make. Perched on his special chair, attired in a bottle-green corduroy jacket and flowing paisley cravat, he summarized the findings of his department in each of the five alleged homicides.



"I have personally reviewed these findings, gentlemen, and they are correct," he concluded, folding his hands in front of him.

Questions exploded. He answered them in his usual dry, brisk manner, wasting no words, but covering the subject precisely. In essence they didn't get any more out of him than they had in the printed statement. They had to be satisfied.

Chief Louis Deland had no choice but to order a study of the handling of the Westvue murders. Public interest decreed all possible speed, and the study was completed in less than two weeks—record time. The report placed on Deland's desk blamed the detectives of the Fourth for failing to spot a pattern. It did not say what that pattern was. It did find a lack of "in-depth investigation."

REPORT RAPS COPS ON HOTEL MURDERS, blazed the headlines. "Shake-up of detective unit imminent."

Captain James Felix and Lieutenant Joseph Capretto were summoned to Deland's office. The chief was in his shirt sleeves, jaws clamped on the fourth cigar of the morning, the slimy stubs of the previous three distributed in various ashtrays around the office and throwing off a foul stench. What Chief Deland wanted to know was why the hell the kid hadn't been picked up the first time around. Never mind the two questionable homicides. If Asa said they weren't homicides, that was good enough for Deland. Forget about them. Forget about the death by gag. Why hadn't the kid been picked up and interrogated on the strangulation and the stabbing? He'd been tutored by one of the tenants in the building, hadn't he? He'd been in and out of the Westvue every day, every damn day, right? So how come he'd slipped through their fingers? Deland demanded of Captain Felix while carefully keeping his baleful eyes off Joe.

And, of course, as senior officer and Joe's boss it was officially Felix's responsibility, as well as his problem, to explain. "Cotter's tutoring sessions were finished in January when he took and passed his Regents' exams, Chief. That was two months before the Laifer strangulation. By that time Hughes, the tutor, had moved out, and nobody else mentioned Cotter. We didn't know he existed."

Deland ground down on his cigar. "Lousy luck."

"Cotter's a nice clean-cut young man with short hair and good manners. The old people were crazy about him. None of them ever considered him in connection with the crimes. They used to have him in for cake and coffee after his lessons. He listened to their stories," Felix continued.



"Then he went back and killed them," Deland commented sourly.
"Maybe."

Chief Deland raised his shaggy eyebrows, shifted the cigar. "You got something new? Something that says he didn't?"

"No, sir," Felix admitted regretfully.

"How about the two kids with Cotter in the park? What's their name—Vismitin?"

"I interrogated them myself, Chief," Felix replied. "They claim they hardly know Cotter. They ran into him in the park and he invited them to join him in some fun. It was supposed to be a joke." Felix sighed. "You know how hard it is to talk to kids when a juvenile officer is standing by and monitoring every word, but I just got the feeling. . . . Well, I don't like the way it adds up."

Louis Deland recognized a hunch, and he'd been around too long to underestimate a good officer's instincts. He wanted to know the basis, however. "Yeah?"

Felix knew he was being offered a chance and seized it. "Cotter says he killed those people during the commission of a robbery, but there's no evidence he ever stole anything, absolutely none. We haven't found the money, and we haven't found anything he could have spent it on."

"So he did it for kicks."

"But the woman who witnessed the assault in the park claims that Rick Cotter hung back, that he never laid a hand on the old man till the old man had the younger kid by the throat, and even then all he did was pull Pruitt off. If he'd already killed five times, it doesn't figure for him to have been so squeamish."

Deland grunted. "Maybe he knew there was a witness. Maybe he held off because of her."

"Maybe. But what was he doing running around Central Park as part of a gang?" Felix decided the moment was favorable for bringing Joe into the discussion. "Lieutenant Capretto caught that and he's made a pertinent observation." He nodded to Joe to go ahead.

But Joe waited for the chief's permission, which was given somewhat irritably.

"Speak up, Lieutenant. What've you got?"

"Sir, either Cotter's a loner or a groupie. The murders at the Westvue were committed by a loner, in secret, without the need of the kind of reinforcement Cotter got to make him flatten Pruitt. Psychologically, he doesn't figure for the two styles."

Deland was disappointed. "That may be true. But it's not evidence."

"No, sir," Felix agreed. "We've got him nailed on the assault.



Here's a kid who's been treated like a weakling his whole life, always behind in the regular schoolwork, excluded from normal participation in sports and after-school programs with other boys his age. He's been looked down on, and he wants to show that he's got guts and that he's as strong as anybody. So he gets in with two other kids and goes around the park ripping off the old people. I don't think he cared about the money. I think he was just trying to build up his own ego by terrorizing easy victims. Then he gets caught. His mother falls back on the usual alibi that her son is a physical weakling. He just can't take that anymore. He knows he's going to be charged with the old man's murder, so he figures he might as well make a big man out of himself and confesses to everything he can think of."

The cigar in Chief Deland's mouth had gone out. He removed it, staring at it with distaste, but whether for the cigar or the situation the two anxious detectives couldn't tell. "We can certainly look for the defense psychiatrist to take that line." Somewhat more amiably he addressed Joe. "You got any other suspects, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir," Joe had to admit. "We've interrogated the tenants of the Westvue again, but there's a heavy percentage of transients. A lot of the people who were living in the hotel at the time are gone, and they weren't the type to leave a forwarding address. So after eliminating the staff, delivery people, the regular loiterers, we came up empty."

"Too bad. It would have taken some of the pressure off. As it is, we've got to do it another way. Get me?"

Unfortunately they did, and there was nothing for it but to bow their heads to the chief's edict. When they left Deland's office, Jim Felix was in charge of the Westvue investigation and temporarily also head of the Homicide unit, and Joe was transferred to headquarters—also temporarily.

Norah was distraught.

She had been waiting all day to hear the results of the meeting. As the hours passed and Joe didn't call, she became increasingly worried. By dinnertime, when he finally came home and told her about the transfer, she couldn't contain her dismay.

"It's not fair. It's just not fair! You should be conducting the investigation."

"I'm biased. It's to my interest to prove Cotter's lying."

"He is!"

"Yes, I do finally believe that, but any evidence I would turn up to support that would be . . . well, let's say it wouldn't be as readily accepted as it will be when Jim Felix turns it up."



Norah sighed.

"Actually, the chief could have brought a man in from another division to replace me; he showed a lot of consideration. Putting Felix in charge leaves the job open and makes it look like my transfer really is temporary."

"I wish I'd never found that damned warm-up suit," Norah muttered.

Joe gave her a weak smile. "It wouldn't have made any difference."

They put their arms around each other and stood for a few moments in the middle of the living room, silently comforting each other. Norah gave him a soft, lingering kiss, then disengaged herself.

"If the circumstances of his arrest had been different. If he hadn't felt compelled to show off to his mother. . . ."

"That, believe me, was inevitable. It was programmed the day Rick's father walked out on the two of them."

"I wish I'd never started the whole senior citizens thing!"

"Okay, that's enough. Do you mind? Please. I've had it. I've really had it with the whole subject." Joe's face darkened and he turned away.

"I'm sorry."

"I don't want to talk about it anymore. I'm home. I want to forget my problems. I just want to have dinner and relax. Okay?"

"Okay, sweetheart. I'm sorry."

"And stop saying you're sorry."

She was hurt, but she didn't say so. "I'll put the vegetables on and we can sit down in about ten minutes."

Having started to unburden himself, Joe couldn't stop. "There's nothing for you to be sorry about. Actually, I'll be glad to move to HQ. At least I won't have to listen to any more remarks."

"What kind of remarks?"

Joe shrugged. "Oh, you know."

"No, I don't."

He looked searchingly at her. "You mean nobody's said anything to you?"

"About what?"

"Forget it. I shouldn't have brought it up."

"Well, you have, so now tell me."

"Oh, some of the men have been making cracks. It doesn't mean anything."

"What kind of cracks?"

He shrugged. "Do I resent your appointment? How do I feel about your getting all that publicity? Who gives the orders at home? Like that. Most of it is good-natured."



"Most of it?"

"Sweetheart, when you start to climb, you're going to run into some jealousy. That's the price."

"Nobody teased me when you were appointed head of Homicide. All I got were congratulations."

"Right. Sure."

"Nobody suggested I might resent your advancement. Nobody asked me if we observed rank at home."

"Typical male chauvinism, right?" Suddenly Joe started to laugh. "Oh, love, love, don't look like that." He put his hand to her square pugnaciously thrust chin and wagged it gently. "Come on, loosen up. I don't give a damn what anybody thinks of us; it's none of their business. What's really bugging me is the transfer. I know Chief Deland had no choice, still. . . ." He sighed heavily.

"Are you sure you don't mind about my appointment?"

"Wasn't I the one who urged you to go to Felix and present your idea for the squad?"

"Yes. . . ."

"I'm proud of you, *cara*." He looked directly into her eyes. "I have been right from the day you made detective, and I will be on the day you become the first woman police commissioner—at which time I hope you'll appoint me chief of detectives."

Norah started to laugh.

"So why don't you put the meat loaf or whatever delicacy you're concocting in the freezer and let's go out to dinner? What do you say we go to Vittorio's? We haven't been there in a long time."

Vittorio's was "their place." Joe had courted Norah in the small neighborhood bar and restaurant, and it wasn't difficult to let the memories take over and erase present trouble. Except that when they got home the trouble was there, waiting: The evening's gaiety was hushed; they went to bed silently, lying back to back, each walled in by his own thoughts.

Certainly Joe had meant it when he had insisted that he didn't blame Norah for his transfer, but he hadn't been completely honest about the gossip. It did bother him. It bothered the hell out of him! He knew, however, that taking any counteraction would make matters worse. Without further material to feed it, the gossip would die down. All he had to do was play it cool. And he did—on the surface. Underneath, Joe Capretto smoldered.

As for Norah, though what he said was warmed by his love for her, she was only partially reassured. She knew her husband: He was a proud man, and the needling he was getting was obviously



affecting him. It was all because of the Cotter case, she mused. The Cotter case had opened a Pandora's box of afflictions for them all—for Joe, Captain Felix, the whole detective division. If only the confession could be proved false. . . .

Beside her, Joe stirred restlessly.

Should she ask Captain Felix to let her work on the case? It would mean withdrawing from the Senior Citizens Squad, and she would hate that. The unit meant a lot to Norah; she was proud of the work it was doing, but she would gladly give it up to help Joe. On the other hand, how would he feel about it?

"Darling?" she murmured softly. "Joe? Are you asleep?" She put a hand on his shoulder lightly.

He turned over instantly, drew her to him, held her. She never got around to asking the question.

Norah made her own decision. It was that the best thing she could do for Joe at this point was to do nothing. But staying out of the case wasn't easy. Being Norah, not taking direct action toward solving both the case and her problem at home made her restive. Roy Brennan and David Link wanted to get back to Homicide so they could take part in the Cotter investigation and, of course, she agreed. They made a point of keeping her informed, but getting the news secondhand was galling. When her frustrations seemed just about insupportable, she reminded herself how much worse it must be for Joe. Yet he showed no impatience. He seemed to have adjusted to his new job, claimed he liked the regular hours, appeared normal, but Norah thought he smiled too much, that his jokes were forced, and there were times when he didn't know she was watching that she caught him staring blankly off into space. She kept her thoughts to herself.

In order to spend more time with her husband, Norah cut down on her speaking engagements. When she couldn't get out of a commitment, she made sure to leave as soon as possible—no more social mingling with the audience afterward. Because her mind was only partially on her work and because by mutual consent they didn't



discuss the Cotter case, Norah now turned her attention again to her father. On a free afternoon, with Joe on duty, she decided to look in on Patrick Mulcahaney.

As she walked down the hall toward the door of the apartment on Riverside Drive, Norah heard the sound of the vacuum cleaner inside. Yesterday had been Mrs. Sullivan's day; the apartment shouldn't need cleaning again this soon, she thought irritably. That woman was absolutely useless. Norah directed all her frustrations to the aged cleaning woman who had been with Patrick Mulcahaney since Norah's marriage. Her father had no business running the vacuum. I'm going to catch him in the act. He's not going to be able to deny doing Mrs. Sullivan's job for her. He won't have any excuse not to get rid of her, Norah thought as she jabbed the doorbell. The noise of the vacuum stopped. Norah rang again in case he hadn't heard the first time.

The door was opened on the chain, and a dark-haired woman with bright eyes and pink cheeks peered out.

"Who are you?" Norah asked.

"Mrs. Fitzgerald."

"Where's Mrs. Sullivan?"

"Oh, she doesn't work here anymore. She's retired."

That was the only way her father ever would have got somebody new. Well, thank God for small favors. Norah relaxed and smiled. "I'm Norah Capretto. I'm Mr. Mulcahaney's daughter. May I come in?" Accustomed to verifying her identity, she automatically opened her handbag for her ID wallet. "Here. . . ."

Mrs. Fitzgerald waved it aside. "I know who you are. He's spoken of you."

"Well . . . may I come in?"

"Oh. Of course. Yes, please. . . ."

Once inside the vestibule, Norah gave the new cleaning woman a longer appraisal. Perhaps in her late fifties, she was short, plump—a pleasant way that suited her. Yet her dark hair showed little gray, and her face was fresh, barely lined, rosy as though it had just been scrubbed. In fact, Norah thought she had never in her life seen anyone who looked so shiningly, scrupulously clean. Norah gave her a warmer smile and passed on through to the living room. She stopped at the threshold. The place had never looked like this! It was shining. Every surface polished, the hardware on chest and table drawers glinted; the rug looked as though it had been recently shampooed.

"You do beautiful work, Mrs. Fitzgerald."

The woman's face became rosier still. "Thank you."



"How did my father ever find you? Through an agency?"

"No. It was . . . through a friend of his."

"I don't suppose you have any free time?"

"I'm sorry."

"I guess it was too much to expect. Well, don't let me interrupt you. I'll just go and knock on my father's door; he should be waking up. . . ." She started down the inner hall.

"Uh . . . Mrs. Capretto? He's not in. Your father's not at home."

Norah glanced at her watch; it was just going on three. "Isn't he taking his nap? Doesn't he usually take a nap after lunch?"

"I've never known him to."

Norah considered. Her father had always run out when she cleaned house, claimed he didn't want to get dusted with the rest of the furniture. "Well, thanks, Mrs. Fitzgerald. I'll look in at O'Flaherty's Gym."

"Is it important? What you want to see your father about, I mean?"

"Not really. Why? Do you know where he went?"

"Oh, no. I just thought you might like to leave a message."

Norah frowned. "If he should get back before you leave, just say that I came by." As she started for the door, again marveling at the cleanliness and order, Norah became aware of cooking odors. "Have you got something on the stove?"

"I'm making a bit of stew for his dinner."

Her father's favorite. "Do you always fix his dinner before you leave?"

Mrs. Fitzgerald nodded.

"I thought he was putting on weight. Well, that's wonderful of you, Mrs. Fitzgerald. My father's lucky to have you looking after him, and I'm very grateful. It takes some of the worry off me." She sniffed. "Smells delicious."

Norah didn't find her father that afternoon—not at O'Flaherty's Gym nor at Houlihan's Bar.

"It's not just that he wasn't there today," she told Joe, belaboring the point. "It's that he's changed his whole routine, or rather that he doesn't have a routine anymore. I got the same story in both places. He still shows up, but not regularly as he used to. He just drops by the odd time and then he doesn't stay. Now, you know that's not like Dad. He's kept a rigid schedule and not deviated from it in years."

"But they did see him yesterday and he was okay?"

"Yes . . ." she admitted.



Dinner was over, the dishes done, and the hockey game well into an exciting second period. Joe sat comfortably on the sofa, feet up on the coffee table, watching. Norah sat beside him, feet up, too, but she wasn't paying attention to the game.

"I don't understand why he didn't tell me that Mrs. Sullivan had retired and he'd hired somebody new."

"Probably didn't think it was important."

"After the way I've been after him to make a change?"

Joe shrugged. "Maybe he was afraid you wouldn't like Mrs. Fitzgerald either."

"Not like her? She's terrific. You ought to see the place! She's some cook, too."

"So she's probably expensive. Maybe he was afraid you'd say he's paying her too much." Suddenly Joe leaned forward, every bit of his attention on the screen. "Look at that! Look at that pass. . . . Score! Score!" He turned exuberantly to Norah. "You missed it. It was a terrific play. Never mind, here it comes on instant replay."

She looked, not really taking it in."

Joe sighed. "Okay, what's the problem?"

"I don't know. There was something odd. I had the feeling . . . don't laugh, but I had the feeling that Mrs. Fitzgerald knew where Dad had gone and didn't want to tell me."

"Ah. . . ."

"I know, I know . . . it's ridiculous. I think I'll call Dad." She jumped up and went into their bedroom. Joe heard the sound of dialing, there was an interval, then he heard the receiver being returned to its cradle. Norah came back. "He doesn't answer."

"So he's out."

"Where? It's after nine. He doesn't go to the movies. There's this big game on TV. Why isn't he home watching it as we are? And why doesn't he ever call anymore? What's he up to?"

"I suppose he'll tell you when he wants you to know."

"So you agree he's hiding something?"

"You've always been very big on the right to privacy, *cara*. I think you ought to grant your father that right. Now will you please stop pacing and let's watch the game."

She sat obediently but continued to mutter. "He's up to something. I recognize the signs."

Joe hid a grin; he'd heard that before—from Norah's father about her.

Then the phone rang, and Norah jumped up and ran. "There he is!"

The cry had been one of relief and exasperation. Joe knew ex-



actly the kind of loving argument that would ensue, how much of a catharsis it would be for both father and daughter, and settled himself for a long wait. But he had barely picked up the action on the screen when he was aware that Norah was back, much too soon, and that she was standing just inside the door, much too quietly.

"Anything wrong?"

"That was David. He called to let us know that Rick Cotter has retracted his confession."

It didn't change the situation with regard either to the investigation or to Joe.

"Bound to happen, sooner or later," was Joe's comment. "Between that mother of his and a lawyer like Billy Benjamin, I'm surprised it took this long."

Norah tried to squeeze something useful out of it. "It prepares the ground. If Captain Felix is able to clear him of even one of the homicides, then there would be strong doubt that he committed any of the others. It would support the retraction."

"Sure."

"If Cotter's confession can be proved false, as he now claims, then there's nothing to tie those homicides at the Westvue together, is there? And if they're not connected, then there was no pattern and you weren't negligent."

"It sounds simple the way you tell it."

"It would help, wouldn't it, if Cotter could be proved innocent of at least one of those murders?"

"Wouldn't hurt. Have you got an idea?"

"If it could be proved that he was somewhere else. . . ."

"That's the first thing I checked. Naturally. Besides, if the kid had an alibi for any one of those times, he would have presented it in support of the retraction. Did David mention anything?"

"No."

"That's it, then." He held out a hand to her and drew her down to the sofa beside him. "Let's forget about it and enjoy the rest of the game."

But Joe could no longer absorb himself in the action on the screen and Norah knew it. He was worried and unhappy and too proud to show it—even to her. Something had to be done.

In fact, Norah did have an idea and a pretty good one, but she hadn't told Joe because she didn't want to get his hopes up. The idea did, in fact, concern a possible alibi. She went to the captain with it.

Felix was at a loss himself. No matter what Doc Osterman said,



how he explained it, the press would not let their readers forget that there were five unexplained deaths which had all occurred in the same building. They printed the medical examiner's disclaimers, but they hinted at multiple murder by one killer, and so it was fixed in the mind of the public. The only way to resolve it was to treat each death individually. So Felix had five separate investigations running concurrently, and not a clue had turned up in any one of them. When Norah entered his office, he was disposed to listen—to almost any suggestion.

"What do you have in mind?"

"An alibi for Rick Cotter." Before he could argue against it, Norah continued. "I think he does have an alibi and he doesn't want to use it because it would get someone else in trouble."

Felix considered. "Like the Vismitin brothers?"

"Yes, sir. Rick was very upset when his mother identified them."

"I interrogated those kids myself," Felix reminded her. "I have to say that I wasn't satisfied at the time, so I'm all for giving it another try." He hesitated, green eyes narrowing. "Now that a finding has been made, I suppose you could go over there on your own, without a juvenile officer, but watch your step. . . ."

"Me? Oh, no, not me, Captain. I'd rather not."

That surprised Jim Felix, but only for a moment. He hadn't heard any of the talk, but he was sensitive to the atmosphere of his command and he knew that there were cross-currents regarding the Caprettos.

"Joe doesn't have to know, though I'm sure he wouldn't mind."

"Well. . . ." Certainly Norah wanted to follow up on her own idea. She was opposed in principle to the pass-along system of one detective, in order to avoid overtime, passing on to a man on the next shift that part of his investigation which he had not been able to complete. It was a false economy because the next man didn't have the feel of the situation and had his own work and often couldn't get it done either. Also, the Vismitin boys were already inured to resisting authority. If they were not approached just right . . . if they guessed what was wanted, they might decide to hold out just from sheer rebelliousness. "I'd rather Joe didn't know."

"That's up to you," Felix said, but he had an uneasy feeling that he'd committed a blunder.



In the lexicon of juvenile justice there is no such word as "guilty." There is no charge. The complainant makes a petition. The young respondent, not *defendant*, appears in family court, and a finding is made. A finding had been made against the Vismitin boys, and they were now awaiting placement—a euphemism for sentencing. Before making placement, however, the judge needed the Probation Department's investigation and report (I & R) plus the psychological evaluation. It might take as long as four months before he got them.

According to the probation officer's initial report, which was made immediately after the boys' arrest, the mother was an alcoholic, divorced, currently living with a man not her husband. In the opinion of the neighbors, the man, George Box, seemed to care for Duncan and Brett Vismitin and while he was at home attempted to exert some control over them. But he was a drifter, a heavy drinker himself, and the relationship with the mother was tempestuous. Periodically George Box walked out, was gone for days, even weeks, then turned up again. Mrs. Vismitin had no job, receiving minimal support from her father, reputedly a rich man living in Florida. The consensus among the neighbors was that the quarrels developed when the money ran out and that George Box returned when the next check was due. It was not exactly a healthy environment, but the law does not permit a juvenile to be held in detention more than twenty days while awaiting the final disposition of his case. None of the agencies that might have taken the brothers had vacancies, so although they were accessories to murder, there was no choice for the court but to release Duncan and Brett in their mother's custody—temporarily. Children who were far worse, who presented an actual danger to the community, had been similarly sent back home. So it was to their home that Norah went to look for Duncan and Brett Vismitin. Having read the report, she thought she knew what to expect.

The screaming was audible in the hall. Norah heard it as soon as she stepped out of the elevator.

"You're not going out that door and that's final!" a woman



shrilled hysterically. "You'll leave this house over my dead body. You hear me? Over my dead body!"

"Ah, Ma. . . . Come on, Ma." That was one of the boys.

"You march right back into your room and stay there. Go do your homework. Both of you. Go on. Right now."

"We did our homework, Ma." The voices were coming from the Vismitin apartment. This was the other boy, and he was placating.

"If you go out, I'll kill myself. I swear. Yes, I will, I'll kill myself. Then you'll be sorry. You'll be sorry." The woman began to whine, and the whining gave way to deep, convulsive sobbing. "Why can't you stay home with me? Why can't you ever stay home with your mother? I'll buy you that new color TV for your room that you wanted. And I won't drink anymore. That's a promise. Here, here, Brett, take the glass . . . go on, take it and pour it down the sink. Go on."

Norah decided it was as good a moment as any to ring the bell. At its sound, everything inside stopped, or at least was suspended. Norah could feel the wariness. The door was flung open.

"What do you want?"

Leila Vismitin spoke even before she looked to see who was there; used to trouble, she instinctively attacked first. Dark eyes, heavily outlined with black eye pencil, reddened by drink and tears but flashing nonetheless, bloated face coated by a heavy layer of flour-white powder and streaked with the runoff of mascara, coarse black hair mixed with gray and in need of shampooing, vermillion lips pulled back in a snarl, she blocked the entrance defiantly—a pitiful sight. Then her eyes narrowed. "I know you. You were in family court when my boys' case was heard."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm Sergeant Mulcahaney."

"You testified against them."

"No, not against them, Mrs. Vismitin. I testified to the facts that led to the arrest of Rick Cotter."

The woman shrugged, but remained on guard. "So what do you want? What are you doing here?"

"I'd like to talk to the boys."

"Why? What's happened. What's wrong? What've they done?"

"Nothing, nothing, Mrs. Vismitin, believe me. I just need some information."

Relief breached Leila Vismitin's defenses as no threat could have done, and she fell back. Before the woman could collect herself, Norah entered the apartment. Not quickly enough, for the boys had disappeared. Norah looked the place over.

"It's a dump, a real dump." Leila Vismitin deprecated and apolo-



gized at the same time. "I do my best, but I can't keep anything nice, not with two growing boys. They knock into everything."

The furniture was cheap and flashy, junk, the kind that fell apart before the payments were completed and wasn't worth repairing. It all seemed neat enough, but Norah had a feeling the house-keeping wouldn't bear close scrutiny. "It seems very comfortable."

"Don't bother to be polite, Sergeant. It's a dump. Don't think I've always lived like this. I know what a nice home is. When I was a girl, we lived on Park Avenue and we had real antiques."

"I'm sure it was lovely."

"Yes, yes, it was." Mrs. Vismitin's voice softened. Her eyes had a glazed, faraway look. "Did you ever hear of the Gardner School?"

"I'm afraid—"

"It was a private school. The best families, the very best, used to send their girls there. That's where I went to school. It used to be on Madison Avenue in the Fifties. I don't remember the exact street, but it was the nicest part of town. What's the use of even trying to have anything decent over here? The West Side is a slum. Lower Slobovia. That's where I'm living now—in Lower Slobovia."

Actually, it was a good neighborhood. The particular block of West Eighty-sixth on which Mrs. Vismitin lived was lined with expensive apartment buildings and town houses. Her building was eminently respectable.

"You ought to see our place in Miami Beach," Leila Vismitin continued. "It's a block from the ocean and it has a heated swimming pool."

"It sounds wonderful."

"Yes, it is. My daddy's always inviting us to go down and stay with him, but we can't. On account of the boys' school, you know." She paused, then added, "We could go in the summer, of course, but it's much too hot."

"Of course."

Having salvaged some of her pride, Leila Vismitin sat down and indicated that Norah should sit, too. "So what do you want to talk to the boys about, Sergeant Mulcahaney?"

"I'd just like to ask them a few questions."

"Have you got the right to do that?"

"I'm not looking to get the boys into any more trouble, but if you would prefer to have your lawyer present. . . ?"

"That shyster from the Legal Aid! He treated them like hoodlums. They're not bad boys. They're high-spirited. They didn't mean to hurt the old man. It was the other kid, Rick; he was the one. He's bad. He's a killer."



Norah hesitated, then decided to be direct. "Rick Cotter has retracted his confession."

Under her white powder Leila Vismitin turned livid. She began to tremble. "Get out. Get out!"

"Please, Mrs. Vismitin. You don't understand. Calm yourself. There's no question of involving your boys with the Westvue murders. I swear it to you. Please, sit down." Norah went to her, took her arm, and tried to lead her back to the sofa.

The woman shook her off. "What do you want?"

"I want to find out anything I can about Richard Cotter."

A cunning look passed over her face. "You mean you want to find out whether he was lying the first time or now."

"Exactly." Mrs. Vismitin was shrewd enough when it came to protecting her own. Good. "I think your boys can help me. I need their help."

"Why should we give it to you? What do we care what happens to Rick Cotter?" The sullen protest was automatic, a cover while she sized up the situation.

Norah let her take her time.

"A probation officer came to see me the other day. I know I didn't make a very good impression on her. I wasn't feeling well."

This was in the nature of a probe, to which Norah's response was, "I'm sorry."

Mrs. Vismitin switched to a self-pitying whine. "I know she'll put in a bad report, and the judge will send my boys to reform school."

"Training school," Norah corrected.

"Same difference."

Norah couldn't argue.

"I know I'm not making the kind of home for them that I should, but it's better than reform school. It's better than any institution. I love my boys, Sergeant Mulcahaney, I do love them, and I promise to do better by them. Don't let them take my boys away from me."

It was a blatant appeal for sympathy, but Norah thought that it was sincere. "It's not up to me, Mrs. Vismitin."

"But you could put in a good word. You could tell the judge that the boys cooperated. Wouldn't that count in their favor?"

It would, of course, but there was no way of knowing how much. Why belabor it? Why not simply agree to put in that good word and get whatever information the boys had to give? Norah didn't. "The court's decision will be based on your ability to provide an emotionally stable home environment." That meant she'd have to give up George Box or marry him—which probably meant he'd give her up, fast. She'd also have to stop drinking.



Leila Vismitin didn't need to have it spelled out. Hands clasped in her lap to stop their shaking, her voice low, she managed a surprising dignity. "I promise."

Norah sighed. "The court will want more than a promise. You'll have to prove you can do it. There might be a probationary period."

"Would I be allowed to keep the boys? During the probation?"
"Well, you have them now."

"Only because they can't find anybody else to take them. That's not good enough. Every time that doorbell rings . . . when you rang just now I thought it was the social worker come to take them away. My heart jumps. I get goose bumps. I can't stand that. I want to know that nobody is going to come and take them away."

"I'm sorry. . . ."

"I don't want my boys in an institution."

"They wouldn't necessarily. . . ." An idea occurred to her. "How about your father? You say he has this big place down in Miami. Would he take the boys temporarily? I'd be willing to recommend that they be placed with their grandfather while you're . . . making your arrangements. I think the court would look favorably on that solution."

When Norah had first seen Leila Vismitin, she had thought the dead white face and black-ringed eyes grotesque. Now, as the tears welled up anew in the bloodshot eyes, the reaching for youth and glamour seemed not ludicrous but pathetic. Maybe the woman sensed Norah's pity because her tears did not fall; instead she pulled herself up and called in a loud, peremptory tone, "Duncan! Brett! Come in here."

The boys appeared with suspicious promptness. So they'd been listening. Well, it would save going back over the same ground. It was both ugly and sad to see the shrewd look of their clear eyes and the wariness on their young faces. Nowadays the seeds of violence were germinating earlier and earlier. Norah sighed. The criminals were getting younger. Was it already too late for these two?

"You're to answer Sergeant Mulcahaney's questions," their mother ordered. "You hear me? You tell her everything she wants to know."

Both boys nodded obediently; they still seemed to have respect for their mother, and that was encouraging. Immediately after Rick Cotter's confession they had been picked up and interrogated by a detective in the presence of a juvenile officer. According to their statement, they had been associated with Rick Cotter only on that one tragic occasion. Because Cotter was the eldest, the natural leader, the Legal Aid lawyer of whom Mrs. Vismitin had such a low opinion had succeeded in getting the boys remanded to their



home to await their final placement. Norah knew that if she challenged their statement directly, she would antagonize both the boys and the mother.

"As I understand it, you weren't close friends with Rick Cotter," she began.

"No, ma'am," Duncan replied, and Brett nodded in agreement with his older brother.

"You took swimming practice with him at the Y, but you never had much to do with him."

"He went to a sh—" Duncan caught his mother's eyes and moderated his adjective. "He went to a sissy private school."

"So how come he asked you to join him in the rip-off of the old man? He did ask you, didn't he? It was his idea?"

"Right." Duncan continued as spokesman, and Brett silently supported him. "Like we already said, we were out jogging and he was out jogging and we joined up. Then we saw the old man. Rick said, 'Let's have some fun.' That's all we meant; we only meant to have some fun with the old man."

"So it was the first and only time you did anything like that?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am." The look of innocence that shone on Duncan's face was reflected on Brett's.

"How about Rick? Was it the first and only time he'd done anything like that?"

Duncan shrugged.

"You tell the sergeant what she wants to know," Mrs. Vismitin ordered.

"He said he'd done it before, lots of times. He said it was easy. It was his idea . . ." Duncan whined.

"Yet according to an eyewitness, Cotter held back while you and Brett approached Horace Pruitt. He didn't do a thing till you yelled for him to hit Pruitt."

"Sure, I yelled. The old man was on top of me. He was choking me."

"When Rick lifted him off, you yelled, 'Kill him, kill him!'"

"He didn't mean it," his mother interceded. "He didn't mean for Rick to actually hurt the old man."

Norah's attention remained fixed on Duncan. "After Rick got Pruitt off you, you continued to urge him to 'kill, kill him!'"

"It's just a manner of speaking. . . ." The mother's protest was weaker.

"The old man nearly killed me," the boy muttered.

"When the patrol car arrived, you all ran. The officers immediately put out an alarm to all park patrols to be on the lookout for you,



but you got away. I can't figure how you did that. I mean, those outfits you were wearing were certainly conspicuous." She looked from one to the other.

Duncan shrugged, but Brett refused to meet her gaze.

"If somehow you could have got rid of the jogging outfits. . . ." Norah frowned as though thinking it out. "You could have hidden in one of the caves in the Ramble, taken off the suits, and then nobody would have given you a second glance. You could have walked out of the park, right past the officers if you wanted."

Both boys remained obdurately silent.

"If that's the way it was, it was smart, real smart. Quick thinking. Resourceful. You know, I have to hand it to Rick Cotter. He fooled the entire park patrol," Norah marveled. "To tell you the truth, I didn't think he had it in him. I didn't think Rick was that smart."

"He's not. It was my idea," Dunc blurted out.

"Oh?"

"Yeah."

"Hm." Norah appeared unconvinced. "If you say so. What were you wearing under the jogging outfits? It wouldn't have been just underwear; that would have been more conspicuous. What did you have on?"

"Regular stuff—pants and a shirt," Duncan replied promptly.

"Why?" Nora asked.

Their mother gasped.

"You were fully dressed under those jogging suits because you'd done it before. You'd had to make a run for it other times, and you were ready."

The boys consulted silently.

Duncan took a deep breath. "Okay, so we ripped off a couple old people. But we never hurt nobody. Never. We didn't hurt the old man. We never touched him, either one of us."

Norah ignored that. "How many times before? Once, twice, five times, ten, more?"

The mother groaned.

"Always in the park or on the streets, too?"

"In the park mostly."

"When?"

"Jeez, I can't remember."

"There were that many, eh?"

Duncan looked down at his feet; Brett turned away.

"How about the first time? Do you remember the first time you terrorized some poor helpless old person? The day, the place, the victim—anything at all about the first time?"



Mrs. Vismitin couldn't stand any more. "You're making them out to be criminals. They're children, just children, playing a prank."

"Not harmless, though, was it?" Norah challenged.

Leila Vismitin flinched. She turned to her older son. "When was the first time? Tell her."

"Last year. Halloween."

"Aren't you a little old for trick or treating?"

Duncan shrugged. "We're small for our age. That's how we got started. There was this one old lady wouldn't give us anything. Called us rowdies and started to shake this cane she had in our faces and yell for the police at the same time. We ran. The patrol car was coming so we hid in an alley and we heard the old lady complain. The thing was she couldn't tell the cops what we looked like because we were wearing these long black robes with hoods that hid our faces. So we dumped the robes in the trash, and then when the cops were gone, we walked right down the same street, past the old lady's window. She looked out straight at us and never knew us. It was cool."

Norah felt the dread break out into goose bumps—it was even uglier than she had feared. "And that was how you got the idea. You substituted jogging outfits for the Halloween costumes. And it was your idea, wasn't it? Not Rick's."

"Okay. Okay, so it was my idea. So what?"

"So I never could figure Rick for the leader, that's all," Norah answered. "Now, that first time, Halloween, it was just you and Brett, right? Rick didn't come in with you till later. You recruited him, not the other way around. What I still don't get is, what did you need him for?"

"Muscle," Duncan replied promptly.

As Duncan himself had pointed out, the two brothers were small, thin, their appearance far from intimidating. But with Rick Cotter's hulking presence to back them up, it would have been a foolish victim indeed who refused to hand over what they demanded—as foolish as Horace Pruitt. Probably they'd tried it a couple of times on their own and met with resistance. At least they hadn't turned to knives or guns, Norah thought, and then wondered whether Duncan hadn't deliberately avoided using them because he knew that the possession of weapons would clearly take the incidents out of the harmless-prank category. Could he already possess that degree of criminal cunning? He could. Statistics on the youthful offender were becoming daily more horrendous. How could she honestly intercede for these boys? Maybe there was still a chance for Brett, who seemed merely to be following his older brother's lead, but for Dun-



can? He needed intensive psychological counseling. He wouldn't get it at Spofford, and a state mental hospital was an open facility from which his mother might sign him out at any time. Maybe if the grandfather were willing to pay for private treatment. . . . She might make that part of her plea to the judge.

"When was the first time that Rick took part in these . . . incidents?"

"I don't remember."

"All right, let's see if we can refresh your memory." Norah took out her notebook and thumbed through the pages till she found the list of the Westvue murders. "I have some dates here. . . ."

"I don't remember dates. I didn't keep records," Duncan sneered.

It was too much for Leila Vismitin. "Thief! Thief! Liar!" She sprang forward and slapped her older son across the face. She grabbed him by the shoulders and started to shake him. "How could you do this to me? How could you? Why? Don't I give you everything . . . everything? Why do you need to steal?"

It was in essence exactly what Amy Cotter had demanded from her son. Two different women reacting with the same self-pity and lack of understanding. Norah felt sorry for the children.

Mrs. Vismitin slapped Duncan again, harder. "Answer me."

Duncan's arms were up around his head, shielding himself.

"That's enough, Mrs. Vismitin. Stop. It won't do any good. Stop it." Norah had to grab her hand and hold it.

"I've done my best for you, but you're bad, bad. Like your father. You get it from him. You're his son!" She wrenched herself free from Norah's restraint and flung herself into a chair and began to sob convulsively.

"That's enough. You'll make yourself sick."

Because Norah had spoken coldly, without sympathy, the woman moderated her sobbing to an assortment of sighs and sniffles.

Norah turned back to the boys. "I'm going to read off some dates, and you'd better try real hard to remember where you were and what you were doing then. Maybe you don't keep records, but the police do. We have a computer, and we can just punch out all the complaints from old people who were bothered in the park or in this neighborhood on the specific dates I'm going to ask you about. I wouldn't be surprised if at least one of them couldn't positively identify the two of you as their assailants."

"You'll go to jail!" their mother shrieked, the powder washed away and her face an ugly mottled red. "Maybe that's where you belong."



"Mrs. Vismitin, if you don't stop yelling, I'm going to have to take the boys down to the precinct and finish questioning them there. Then these other incidents will have to go on their Youth Department cards and the judge will see them when he reviews the case. I doubt very much that he will then be inclined to grant probation in their grandfather's custody."

For the first time Brett spoke and his voice trembled. "Grandpa won't take us. He doesn't want us. He doesn't like us."

Norah waited for a moment. "Is that true?" Brett nodded. She turned to the mother.

"It's just that the boys are so lively. They make him nervous and he snaps at them," she hedged.

"He threw us out," Duncan confessed.

The bitterness of it saddened Norah. "Well, Mrs. Vismitin?"

"He threw *me* out." It was an admission of defeat. "He threw *me* out because of my drinking and . . . other things. It had nothing to do with the boys. He would have kept them. He wanted them. But I refused to let them stay. I thought he'd let me stay so he could keep them. It didn't work."

The boys watched her, wide-eyed, but she wouldn't meet their look.

Norah put the question as gently as she could. "Do you think he's still willing to take them?"

She nodded. "As long as I'm not part of the deal. He doesn't want me. He says I'm no daughter of his." Leila Vismitin bowed her head.

Slowly Duncan Vismitin turned away from his mother. For a moment hate, real hate, distorted his young face, then it was gone. "You going to see to it that we go to Grandpa?" he asked Norah.

"I'll do my best."

"So what do you wanna know?"

"I want to know if Rick Cotter was with you on certain dates. He's the one I'm interested in."

"Let's have them. Shoot."

Norah read from her notebook. "January fourth, that was a Monday. It would have been right after your Christmas holiday."

"No, we didn't go out then much. It was too cold."

"All right. How about April third? That was a Wednesday. As I recall, the weather—"

Duncan interrupted. "We have swimming practice on Wednesdays."

"I see. How about July third? No, that was a Wednesday, too."



But school was out by then; were you still having swimming practice?"

"No." He glanced at Brett. "I remember that day because we were supposed to go on a picnic for the Fourth. We were going to Reis Park. George was going to rent a car, and we were all going to spend the day together. We were going to swim and play golf—they have a great pitch-and-putt course. . . ." Just the memory of their plans eased the bitterness from his thin young face. But it hardened again almost immediately. "The day before, the third, *she* started drinking—in the morning." He jerked his head toward his mother, but he kept his eyes averted. "So then she and George had a fight and George walked out. So we decided to get ourselves some bread and go to Regis Park on our own—Brett and me."

"So you were in Central Park on July third. Was Rick with you?"

"Yeah, we called him and he met us. But we didn't make out. It was too crowded. Too many people."

"So then what did you do, the three of you?"

"Just hung around." He shrugged.

The shrug said it all, Norah thought, the lack of interest, the disaffection, the emptiness of his life. "For how long?"

"Well, there was going to be this big rock concert over at the Wollman Rink so we went over there and watched them set up for it."

"What time was that?"

"Oh, I guess . . . I don't know, maybe around four or five in the afternoon. Rick didn't show till close to two-thirty because he had to do an errand for his mother, and then he had to leave at six to get home for supper."

Duncan sneered, but Norah detected a trace of wistfulness, even envy. "That's it, then," she said. "Thank you, Duncan, Brett, Mrs. Vismitin." The woman, hunched to one side and wrapped in self-pity, made no reply. What would happen after she left? Norah wondered. Probably she'd go back to her bottle, and the boys would go out to their movie or whatever they'd been headed when Norah rang the doorbell. She hated to walk out on this kind of situation, but what could she do? "Mrs. Vismitin?" The woman didn't even raise her head. "I'll keep my promise. I'll do my best." Getting no answer, Norah started out.

"Ma'am. . . ." Duncan caught up with her at the door. "We'd just as soon you didn't . . . speak to the judge, I mean." He glanced over his shoulder at his mother. She wasn't listening, but he lowered his voice anyway. "The thing is, we've changed our minds, Brett and me. We don't want to go and live with Grandpa. Not without Ma."



"You might be sent to a training school."

"Yeah. Well, we'll take our chances."

Norah looked from one to the other. "You're sure?"

They both nodded emphatically.

"If we go live with Grandpa, Ma's gonna be all alone." Duncan turned toward the sorry, sodden hulk. "Who's gonna look after her if we're not around?"

Norah left the Vismitin apartment exhilarated and confident. Naturally she intended to check with the Parks Department to see if a rock group had been booked on July 3 at the Wollman Rink and find out what time they started to set up, but she really didn't have any doubts about Duncan's story. He had good reason to remember the particular day and no reason to lie about it. The important thing was that he vouched for Rick Cotter's whereabouts on the day Estelle Waggoner was stabbed and for the period covering the time of death as approximated in the autopsy report. It was the first step toward vindicating Joe. Norah couldn't wait to see his face when he heard. First she had to find a phone booth and call Captain Felix and ask him to pass on the good news.

Jim Felix's reaction was guarded. The developments were certainly encouraging, but there was still a long road ahead, he warned. He did agree that Joe could use some encouragement.

"Why don't you tell him yourself?" he urged Norah.

"I'd rather not."

"Okay, then, I'll call him. Is he home now?"

"Yes, he is. And thank you, sir, I appreciate this."

Norah hung up and stepped out of the booth, standing for a moment to fill her lungs with the cool, crisp air. She looked up at a crescent moon and a single star competing with the city lights. It had been a good night's work! As far as she was concerned, the Cotter case was cleared and she was out of it. Of course, Rick would have to answer for the death of Horace Pruitt and she'd have to testify at the trial. But she was willing to bet the case wouldn't come to trial. Rick had a smart lawyer who would plea-bargain him into either a token sentence or even a conditional discharge or probation. She bit back the bitterness: The disposition of a case was none of her business. She thought about the Vismitin children instead. Maybe the grandfather could be prevailed on to relent and forgive his daughter and take her in along with the boys. Maybe she could explain the situation to the judge and he might in turn reason with the old man. . . .

That was for tomorrow. Tonight. . . . She glanced at her watch:



ten to nine. She'd be home in twenty minutes at the most. By then Joe would have heard from Captain Felix. Tonight was for celebrating.

10

As soon as Joe got home he changed into a pair of comfortable old slacks and a sports shirt, picked through his record collection, and put on the Steber and Tucker recording of *Madama Butterfly*. The yearning, bittersweet music exactly suited his mood. All Norah had said when she called him at the office was that she'd be working late and he should go ahead and eat. She didn't say what she was working on, and he didn't ask. It used to be that she couldn't wait to tell him everything, and then in turn he'd tell her. Of course, shuffling papers downtown, he didn't have much to tell these days. He was sure that it was out of consideration for his feelings, to spare him embarrassment, that Norah had started holding back, and so their garrulous, uninhibited exchanges had turned into a series of cautious evasions and awkward silences. It frightened Joe that outside of their work they had so little else to share.

He wished he had some idea when Norah would get back, but she hadn't said that either—probably because she didn't know. She'd be back when she was through. He had used to take that for granted.

He wandered into the kitchen, lit the oven, turned the thermostat to 350 degrees as instructed, then got the ham-and-cheese casserole out of the freezer. He started to unfold the foil wrapping and stopped. This was one hell of a way to spend the night! If he had to eat alone, it wasn't going to be a frozen dinner. He rewrapped the package, returned it to the freezer, then went back to the bedroom, where he changed into his good brown slacks and tweed jacket. He slammed out of the apartment just as the opera's opening chorus filled the empty room.

On the street he hesitated. Where should he go? Vittorio's was nearby. It was his and Norah's favorite place. The food was excellent, the wine good and cheap; Vittorio always looked after them personally. Also, Joe knew most of the regulars; he wouldn't be eating alone after all.

For those very reasons Vittorio's turned out to be a bad choice.



Where was Norah? everybody asked. Would she be joining him later? Aware that he'd been removed from his command, for the move had had plenty of publicity, his friends worked too hard at pretending everything was normal. They were afraid to ask him anything about himself at all. He drank too much wine, got a headache, and left early. Maybe Norah would be home by now and waiting for him. He hurried. The apartment was as he'd left it—lights blazing, record player still going (something wrong with the cutoff switch), and empty. A glance at his watch showed him it was only eight-thirty. He couldn't really expect her back this soon. The music jarred his head; he turned it off and tried the television instead. He switched the dial but found nothing to interest him.

Joe wasn't a drinking man, and he'd already had more than his quota of wine. He wasn't the type who enjoys hanging around bars with strangers either. He was too restless for a movie, but he couldn't stay home. He might run over to see his mother? That presented the opposite problem from the one he'd encountered at Vittorio's. Signora Capretto's attitude toward Norah had softened; she had become genuinely fond of her daughter-in-law, but she still disapproved of her continuing to work. With Norah on duty while Joe was free, Signora Emilia would not be able to remain silent. Despite her best intentions, allusions and innuendos would slip out. Joe wasn't up to making the usual defense.

He could go for a walk. A good long walk in the cold air would clear his head. Except that he didn't want to go for a long walk because he didn't want to think.

He could visit his father-in-law. Why not? Initially, Mulcahaney's objections to Joe had been similar to those of Signora Capretto to Norah: He hadn't wanted her to marry a police officer. But they had vanished as hers had. The two men enjoyed each other's company. He'd go and spend a couple of hours with Pat Mulcahaney. At the same time he could try to find out what, if anything, was bugging the old man. Though Joe had tried to set Norah's mind at rest about her father, he did think she had some basis for concern. This was the perfect opportunity to clear it up. Mulcahaney might well confide man to man what he was reluctant to tell his daughter.

It was twenty to nine when Joe left the apartment. At nine he was ringing Mulcahaney's doorbell.

Mulcahaney opened it partway and stared. "Joe."

"Hi, Dad."

"Well, this is a surprise. Where's Norah?"

"Working."

"Oh."



"I was at loose ends. I didn't know what to do with myself. . . . So I took a chance and dropped by."

Mulcahaney didn't move.

Suddenly Joe got the feeling that he wasn't wanted. "If I've come at a bad time . . . if I'm interrupting anything. . . ."

"No, no, of course not. You're always welcome, Joe. Come on in." Mulcahaney opened the door and stood aside.

Definitely the old man was embarrassed. "I should have called first. Listen, Pat, forget it, okay? I'll drop by some other time." Joe pulled back.

Patrick Mulcahaney reached out to put a hand on his arm. "I'm glad you're here. In fact, I've been meaning to ask you to come by. I need your advice."

When she got back and found the apartment dark and empty, the exhilaration oozed out of Norah. Her first thought was that Joe had stepped out for the papers. If that were all, he wouldn't have turned out all the lights. Next she went into the kitchen. Obviously he hadn't eaten at home. Maybe he'd worked late, too. Hand on the phone, she paused; if he wasn't at the office, it would look as though she were checking up on him. She wandered into the bedroom, turned on the lights, and saw the slacks and shirt he wore around the house tossed in a heap on the bed. So he'd been home and gone out again. Could he have got some kind of emergency call? On his present assignment—not likely. Besides, he would have left a note. Probably he hadn't felt like cooking and had gone out to eat. He'd be back soon. Norah took off her pants suit and got into one of her most becoming robes.

It wasn't till she'd combed her hair, freshened her makeup, and sprayed on cologne that it occurred to Norah that Captain Felix had probably not been able to reach Joe. It would be a shame for him to have to wait till morning for the good news. Maybe she could pass it on as having come from Felix? Of course, that meant calling and warning the captain that she'd done that. . . .

An hour passed. Maybe Joe had decided to take a walk after dinner? Maybe he was waiting for the Sunday papers? Sometimes they didn't come till very late; he was probably standing around waiting for the delivery truck.

Another hour went by and Norah was becoming anxious. If he'd gone to see his mother, why hadn't he left a note to say so? Should she call? No, and for the same reason she hadn't called his office—she didn't want it to look as though she were checking up on him. Also,



she didn't want to alarm Signora Capretto in case Joe hadn't been there.

What could have happened to him?

Norah was sweating; her hands were like ice.

It was close to twelve-thirty when she heard his key in the lock. She jumped up, started for the door, and then, somehow, couldn't move. It was three and a half hours since she'd spoken to Captain Felix and rushed home. It was too bad that after all this waiting she couldn't share the good news with Joe, but never mind, he was home and safe.

"Where've you been?" she demanded.

Joe, who after a bad start had had a pleasant evening with his father-in-law, was taken aback. "I went out."

She tried to take the edge off her tone, tried to make up for the antagonism of the greeting. "I was worried about you. I didn't know what to think."

"What's to think? I went out. You can't expect me to sit home all night waiting for you."

"No, of course not . . . I know that. It's just . . . I've been home since nine o'clock."

"How could I know that?"

"If you'd bothered to call, you would have found out."

He shrugged. "If I'd known you were going to get home that early, I wouldn't have left."

Actually, she could very easily have given him an indication of when she'd be through, but once you started keeping things back. . . . Norah bit her lip. Never again, she promised herself, never again would she get involved in anything that she couldn't share with him. "I'm sorry I snapped. I don't know what came over me. Forgive me?"

"Nothing to forgive, *cara*."

They kissed, but there wasn't much ardor in it.

"So how'd it go?" Joe asked.

"Okay." Having just resolved not to hold anything back in the future, Norah was distressed that she couldn't say any more. "How about you? Did you have a good time?"

"Well . . ." Joe began somewhat evasively, too, then suddenly he grinned. "Yeah, as a matter of fact, I did. I enjoyed myself thoroughly."

"Good, I'm glad." Norah smiled and waited to hear all about it. When it became apparent he wasn't going to say any more, she had to ask. "What did you do?"

"First I went to Vittorio's for dinner."



"That was nice." Actually, she was a little disappointed that he would go there without her.

"Vittorio asked after you. Everybody did. Paul and Isabel invited me to join them. They'd already ordered a bottle of Frascati, and Vittorio insisted on sending over another one. Then Charlie Barnes came in and he had to buy a bottle. . . ."

Why shouldn't he go to Vittorio's? It had been his place long before it became theirs. "It must have turned into quite a party."

"It was still going strong when I left."

"I thought Vittorio closed at eleven."

"Oh, I left before eight-thirty. I came home. I thought you might be back. When you weren't, I went out again."

That hurt. "We just missed each other."

"I guess." He grinned even more broadly. "I went to see your father."

"Oh. Oh, darling, that was nice." She didn't know what she'd thought or feared, but the relief was tremendous. "That was a nice thing to do, sweetheart." She was blushing, knew it, and didn't care.

It wasn't till later, much later, after they'd gone to bed, after the lights were out, that she thought to ask.

"How was Dad? How did he seem to you?"

"Fine. Great. Never looked better."

"Did he give you any inkling of what he might be up to?"

Joe hesitated. "I didn't ask." It was the truth as far as it went. He decided that a little spadework on Mulcahaney's behalf was in order. "Whatever it is, it obviously agrees with him. He's very happy."

Norah's grunt indicated she wasn't convinced.

They were happy the following morning, almost as free and easy with each other as they'd been since the strain caused by Rick Cotter's confession. The glow stayed with Norah into midafternoon. At any moment Joe would hear that Cotter was definitely cleared in the Waggoner killing, and then he would call to pass the news on to her. All day she waited for that call. It didn't come.

Maybe the captain had decided to tell Joe in person and had asked him to stop by. Every time the squad-room door opened, Norah looked up expectantly, but it was never Joe. Maybe Felix had decided to pass the news of Cotter's alibi on to the brass first so that he could tell Joe he had his job back. But it wouldn't happen that fast. It would all have to go through channels, would take days at least, and Norah couldn't see Jim Felix not even letting Joe know it was in the works.



So why didn't Joe call?

It was hard to keep her mind on the job. At six, the end of her special tour, she almost went into Felix's office to ask if he had indeed informed Joe of the new developments, but she didn't—and for the same reason that had kept her from calling his office or his mother last night: She was embarrassed. She went home instead. On the way she stopped at the supermarket for the extra-special cut of sirloin Joe liked, got the Bardolino at the liquor store, and on impulse bought a bunch of yellow roses from a street vendor. Still she tarried, looking idly into shop windows, unwilling to admit that she dreaded going home. Finally she reached her own block; there were no more excuses for delay.

Joe was waiting for her. He was sitting on the sofa, slumped forward, elbows on knees, hands covering his face. At the sound of the door opening he looked up. His face was darker than usual, his expression strained.

Still holding the bundles, Norah stood in front of him and stared. When you love someone, you see him with your heart, Norah knew, but it was years, or so it seemed, since Norah Capretto had looked at her husband with her eyes, and she was not only surprised but saddened by what she saw. She hadn't been aware how gray he'd become, nor how the lines in his handsome face had deepened, nor how many new ones there were. She had always thought of Joe as eternally young and vital, but at this moment he looked every one of his forty-five years. Never mind, we all grow old, she chided herself. Norah had seen Joe tired, depressed, but never defeated. Never before.

She dumped the bundles into the armchair. Her instinct was to go and sit beside him and put her arms around him, but something told her not to. "What is it?"

He sighed. "How could you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Sneak behind my back. Make a fool of me in front of everybody—Jim Felix, the whole bureau."

"I didn't do that. I never would. How can you accuse me of such a thing?"

"Norah . . . Norah . . . stop playing games. Be honest. For God's sake, just for once be straight with me."

A hot wave passed over her. Her stomach tightened into a hard knot of pain. "Just exactly what did Felix say to you?"

"How do you know he said anything? How do you know we even talked?"

Norah flushed and bowed her head. She'd given it away. Dumb,



dumb. One look at Joe told her there was no use trying to cover up. "I should think you'd be pleased, delighted that Cotter's confession is discredited."

"I would be if it had come about any other way."

Oh, God! Norah thought, and the pain in her stomach made her nearly double up.

"Don't blame Felix, he didn't tell me; he didn't need to. I figured it out—all by myself." Joe was bitter. "You may think I'm so vain that I'm afraid of being overshadowed by my wife, but allow me the intelligence of making a couple of very simple inferences. When Felix talked to the Vismitin kids, they claimed they had nothing to do with Rick Cotter except on that one occasion. There was no way he could budge them. I didn't ask Jim Felix how come they reversed themselves, just—when? He said last night. So unless you want to tell me exactly where you were and what you were working on last night. . . ."

"Nobody else knows I interrogated the Vismitin boys. Nobody else knows I had anything to do with it. I specifically requested—"

"You still don't get it, do you?" Joe sighed. "I don't care who knows!" For a Latin Joseph Capretto was a self-contained man; he never shouted, never—not at his men, not at suspects—never raised his voice to Norah. But he was shouting now. "I want them to know. I want everybody to know. I'm not jealous of you, Norah. I'm not jealous of you professionally any more than I'm jealous of any good, intelligent officer. I've told you a hundred times." Then it was over. "But you shouldn't need to be told."

The quiet and bitter addition hurt more than the rest. "I wanted to spare you."

"From what? A few remarks? You think I can't handle a few remarks—most of them good-natured, at that?"

"I'm sorry."

"I know. You always are." He got up, paced to the window, turned. "It so happens I'm proud of you, of your abilities, of your accomplishments. I thought you knew that."

The pain in her stomach eased. "I do."

"No, I don't think so. If you did you wouldn't have asked Felix not to tell anyone that you were working on the case. You would have known that I'd be happy to have you on it. Grateful for any help you might be able to give me to get my job back. Proud of your loyalty. That I'd want everybody to know you were standing behind me."

"Joe . . . please. . . ."



"Okay." Heaving another sigh, he came back and sat down, but he didn't indicate that he wanted Norah to sit beside him. "The trouble is there's a lack of communication between us, always has been, right from the beginning—before we were married and since. When something really important comes up, you don't consult me. I don't know whether it's because you don't think I'm smart enough . . ."

"Oh, no!"

" . . . Or don't have enough guts," Joe continued with determination. "But when there's a crisis you just go ahead and act on your own as though I didn't exist. That's not my idea of what being married is all about."

It was true that she'd kept other things from him. Specifically, she was thinking of their adopted son, Mark, and knew that he was on Joe's mind, too. She'd made both decisions—to adopt the child and to relinquish him—without discussing them with Joe. Then and now, she'd meant only to spare him. She'd had no idea that he resented it so much or that he was so deeply hurt. Nor did she have any idea how to make it right again.

She still had her coat on, but she was cold, freezing. "I don't seem to learn, do I? Everything that's happened is my fault."

"I don't know whose fault it is; I wish to God that I did. I do know that this time you've gone too far. You've interfered in my professional life and humiliated me in front of everybody—our friends, every man and woman in the bureau."

"No. . . ."

"By sneaking behind my back you've as good as announced that I can't look after myself, that I'm an incompetent. You haven't left me any pride."

"Oh, darling, don't—"

"I've told you before, plenty of times, that we're not in competition with each other, but you keep behaving as though we are."

"I don't mean to."

"I've been a cop for a long time, much longer than you, and I also hold a higher rank—for the moment, anyhow."

She flushed hotly. He'd never spoken to her like this. It was on the tip of her tongue to retaliate, to protest that he was going too far, then she thought better of it. Trying to defend herself would, at this point, result in charges and countercharges; bitter things might be said which, though later forgiven, would not be forgotten. The relationship could never be the same. "I'm sorry."

"I'm afraid that doesn't help."



Norah caught her breath.

He looked straight at her. "I'm not saying we should call it off—" "No!"

Doggedly he went on. "I've given it a lot of thought since I spoke to Jim Felix this morning, and I've decided that each of us needs time for personal reexamination. Each of us needs to be alone to decide what he needs and wants from marriage."

Once a teacher had slapped Norah and caught her against the ear. The blow had deafened her temporarily, caused her to be uncertain in her balance and thus disoriented. It was that way now. The color went out of Norah's world. The rosy light of the setting sun that streamed through the west window turned gray. Joe, his dark, sad faced blurred, grew smaller and farther away . . . smaller and farther, diminished, as though she were looking at him through the wrong end of a telescope. His lips were moving; he was saying something, but the words, coming from such a long distance, were faint; she could hardly hear the words, but she knew what he was saying.

"I'm moving out."

He said it only once, but the words echoed and reechoed around her, growing louder and louder each time, booming, shattering till she had to put her hands over her ears and shout to drown them out. "No. No, Joe, don't do that."

The sound of her own voice restored her. The reality around her regained its normal shape and tint. "We can work it out."

It had cost Joe a great deal to say those words. "I hope to God we can."

He walked out of the room, and Norah finally sat down. She sat on the edge of the chair into which she'd dumped the groceries for the night's celebration and the bunch of yellow roses.

He came back too quickly and he was carrying a suitcase—evidently it had been packed and ready.

"I'll let you know as soon as I get settled."

She had assumed that he'd be going to his mother's place. That he wasn't was surely a good sign, meant the separation was really temporary. Didn't it? "What are we going to tell the family?"

"The truth. Nobody else has to know if you don't want them to. That's your decision. Of course, I'll have to give the office a number where I can be reached, and I suppose that after a while it will leak out. . . . Meanwhile at least we won't be working out of the same command; that should save some embarrassment."

"You don't think you'll be reassigned?"



He shrugged. "The case is far from solved. You still don't have an idea who the killer could be."

"Killers," Norah corrected.

"Maybe. I'm not so sure as I was."

"What do you mean you're not sure?" Norah cried out, seizing on this as an outlet. "You have three different MO's. . . ."

"I'll grant you the stabbing doesn't fit, but the strangulation and the suffocation are basically variations of the same method. Add the other two—the deaths of Isabel Brady and Theodora Zelinsky. . . ."

"Asa said their deaths were natural."

"He may have changed his mind."

"Asa?" Norah was amazed. The chief medical examiner did not give an opinion lightly; having done so, he did not reverse himself. It was unprecedented. "Why? What's happened?"

"Late this afternoon the ME's office was called to certify an unattended death. The woman was elderly, had died in her bed. Cause of death: suffocation. It's been marked a CUPI."

That was case unknown pending investigation.

Ordinarily the death of Mrs. Grace Swann wouldn't have given an assistant medical examiner a moment's uncertainty. He would have categorized it as due to natural causes. But Dr. Alan Dubois had given that opinion in the first of the now suspect and much celebrated deaths at the Hotel Westvue, and he decided that this time he would cover himself by calling his chief's attention to the similarity of circumstances. Asa Osterman had in turn notified Jim Felix.

"I'm not drawing inferences, much less conclusions," the chief examiner cautioned in his dry, caustic manner. "I'm not prepared to quote statistics on the number of natural deaths by suffocation of people over sixty-five years of age either. I'll just say that there seems to be a lot of them lately."

"I see."



"I also want to point out to you, Captain, that it's not all that easy for a person to die by suffocation—naturally, that is. The prime requisite obviously is helplessness—an infant in a crib, a very aged person who is also feeble, drunk, an addict—these would be likely victims. Now, this Mrs. Swann was seventy-three but in relatively good health. There was no alcohol in her blood, nor had she ingested any drugs—sleeping pills or sedatives. In any quantity," he qualified.

"I get the picture."

"I'm not sure you do. Homicide by suffocation is even rarer than natural suffocation. We get maybe three cases a year. It's also hellishly hard to prove. Hellishly. It comes as close to the perfect crime as you can get." He paused. "I'd say that the death of Mrs. Swann warrants a second look—as will any other deaths by suffocation that may occur from here on."

God! Felix felt a cold shiver pass through him. Osterman was no alarmist. If he thought there might be more. . . .

"We have two possibilities," the ME continued. "One: that someone read the information we gave out on death by suffocation in the Westvue case and has adopted it for his use—"

Felix interrupted. "That someone having nothing to do with the original crimes."

"Exactly. That's the first possibility. The second is that the killer doesn't need our information or instruction. He's used suffocation as his method before and he will again."

"How would that explain the knifing and the strangulation?"

"Trial and error," Osterman replied. There was a distinct edge of bitterness in his voice. "Trial and error," he repeated, and hung up.

Felix sat for a while tapping the tips of his fingers together while he thought. It was a matter of determining whether or not Mrs. Grace Swann had died a natural death. Careful though Osterman had been not to commit himself, it was obvious that the medical examiner believed she had not. It was not an opinion that the commander of the Fourth Division detectives was inclined to take lightly. Nevertheless, an opinion, even from such an eminent authority, was not enough on which to build an entire sequence for multiple murder. Jim Felix had to see for himself.

Every instinct told Captain James Felix that murder had been committed in the small overcrowded three-room apartment on Eighty-fourth just two blocks from the precinct house. He could smell it, but he couldn't find the physical evidence any more than



Asa Osterman had been able to find the medical. There was no sign of forcible entry. There was no indication of a struggle. The empty teacup and the plate with a few cookie crumbs on a fragile table beside the wing chair indicated Mrs. Swann had had a snack. In the bedroom her clothes were neatly laid on a chair, her shoes lined up side by side underneath it. Everything seemed in perfect order.

Mrs. Swann had not been all that small and frail either. The killer, if there was one, would have needed both strength and expertise to subdue her without leaving a mark on her. According to the neighbors and the building staff, Mrs. Swann had few visitors, and these were mostly tenants in the building, people of her own age and limited vigor.

Still, like Doc Osterman, Felix wasn't satisfied. He sensed that he was missing something. It was there, but he wasn't seeing it. Augie Baum had answered the medical examiner's original request for an investigation by Homicide and he hadn't found anything. Of course, Augie was not noted for sensitivity. What was needed here, Felix mused, was someone with a very special kind of . . . empathy.

For the first day or so after Joe moved out, Norah was numb. She went through the motions of living. In many ways the first night was the easiest. She fixed herself something to eat and ate it though she couldn't taste it, then washed up. With the emptiness of the night stretching ahead she cleaned her house; it was her usual therapy, a way of keeping busy without using her mind. Mercifully anesthetized, physically weary, emotionally numb, she went to bed and fell quickly into a heavy, unrestful slumber. The next morning when she awoke alone in the double bed the full impact hit her. She let the tears come. She sobbed till she knew that she had reached the point of self-indulgence and had to stop. She washed her face, got dressed, and went to work well ahead of time because she had nothing else to do.

Still it was hard to immerse herself in the work. Nobody noticed her abstraction except perhaps Dolly Dollinger. In time, the word was bound to get out, and then she'd have to have some answers, at least an attitude. . . . Why? she asked herself suddenly. Why should she bother? She didn't really care what anybody thought or said, not the family and not the people she worked with. She didn't care any more about the gossip over their separation than Joe had about gossip over her promotion. It was a bitter thing to have to admit.

Yet when she was called to Captain Felix's office, she couldn't help but wonder if he'd heard.



"Sit down, Norah."

His face was grave, his green eyes somber. "How's it going with the Senior Citizens Squad?"

That was a surprise. She submitted daily reports; in fact, there was one on his desk right now. "Slow," she replied. "Of course, street crime is always down at this time of year. We'll have to wait for the warm weather before we can claim any credit."

"The unit's done good work. Are you satisfied?"

Another surprise, but also an opportunity. "I'd like to expand the patrol area, and we could use more people—"

"Hold it." Felix grinned wryly. "What I meant was, do you like the work? Really? Do you like being out on the street?"

Captains don't usually ask sergeants if they're happy in their work. "I think the squad has been very well accepted and is fulfilling an important function."

"That wasn't the question. Do you think you're in the right slot?" This time he didn't wait for her answer. "I don't. I don't think you're a street cop or a desk officer either."

Norah tensed. "Has there been a complaint?"

"No, no. If there were, I'd tell you straight out. Actually, I need you on something else."

"Would that be the recent CUPI, the death of Mrs. Grace Swann over on Eighty-fourth?"

Felix nodded.

Norah took a deep breath. "I'd rather not work on that, Captain."

"Because it would be connected with the Westvue?"

"Yes, sir."

"I consider you the officer most qualified for this assignment. I realize that you're personally involved in the outcome, but if you should come to me and tell me that you can't find any indication that Mrs. Swann's death was anything but due to natural causes, I'll accept that."

Norah was deeply affected. What Jim Felix was saying in essence was that he had faith in her integrity as a police officer to rise above personal considerations.

As for Felix, there was more involved than making an assignment. There was the career and efficiency of two good people. He could have given Sergeant Mulcahaney the order without discussion. But he thought it was important for her to take the case and follow wherever it might lead—important for Joe Capretto, too. "You know that I'm your friend just as much as I am Joe's. . . ."

He knew! Joe had told him. That hurt, not so much because



he'd done it, but because he'd done it so soon. "I don't think he should have discussed our personal problem."

"All we discussed was your feelings about taking on the case—and his."

"Oh." So he hadn't said anything. She flushed. "We've agreed to a temporary separation."

"I didn't know. I'm sorry." Eight years ago—it didn't seem that long, never does when you're happy—Jim Felix and his Maggie had come close to breaking up. They'd survived and he wanted Norah and Joe to survive, too. "As a man married to a very independent, impetuous, and adorable woman, let me say this to you, Norah: Don't underestimate Joe's capacity—either to love you or to understand you."

He had it wrong, Norah thought. The fact was that she'd relied too heavily on Joe's love and on his understanding. The fact was that he didn't love her enough to accept what he couldn't understand in her nature. She couldn't say so, for no matter how good a friend Jim Felix was, he was still commander of the division and not Dear Abby. Also, this was hardly the time or the place for Advice to the Lovelorn.

"I'd rather not leave the Senior Citizens Squad, Captain. I feel as though I'd be turning my back on the old people."

"Did I say you should?"

"I thought . . . the way I understood it. . . ."

"No, no. I wanted to make sure you didn't have too heavy a work load, that's all. Seems to me that your big argument when you came in to present your idea for the unit was that it shouldn't be merely advisory or a decoy apparatus, but investigative, too. You wanted a unit that would see a case through from beginning to final disposition. Right? Have you changed your mind?"

"No, sir."

"The way I see it, both the Swann case and the Westvue case belong within the purview of the Senior Citizens Squad. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know there's been a lot of pressure to disband these special-interest squads for economy reasons. A squad that's wiped five open cases from the books would certainly be earning its keep."

"I'll do my best, Captain."

"I expect you to get results, Sergeant."

Norah always felt a deep poignancy when handling the effects of someone recently dead. It was a sad irony that inanimate things



survived after the person responsible for assembling them and giving them a life of their own was gone. She thought that she had never been more acutely aware of the spirit of the deceased than she was during the examination of Grace Swann's tiny apartment.

It was crammed with mementos of a lifetime. It was furnished with the cumbersome pieces of an earlier, more grandiose, certainly more spacious abode. There was barely space to thread one's way between tables, chairs, settees, cabinets, consoles of Mrs. Swann's past, a past she cherished because she'd had no present. There wasn't any family—husband dead, no children, relatives on both sides gone, too. She did not even have a television set to offer a window on the present. It was as if she had refused to acknowledge what was outside those cluttered rooms. But she had not been able to keep it outside.

She had been found in bed. She might have lain undiscovered for days but for the watch the old people in the building reported they kept on one another. It could have been called a life watch or a life-support system. It was not organized; it was not even openly acknowledged, but it existed and functioned efficiently. It consisted simply in every aged person making sure that every other aged person was accounted for—every day. It was to guard against being stricken and unable to call for help; it guarded against dying and lying undiscovered till putrefaction. On the morning following her death, Grace Swann should have been in the basement laundry room by eleven. She was not. Quick consultation ascertained that no one had seen her that morning or spoken to her on the telephone. At noon Mrs. Ellen Stanton rang her bell. Getting no answer, she summoned the superintendent and convinced him that he should get the passkey and go inside. Carefully the two of them picked their way through the obstacle course of the living room and entered the bedroom.

It seemed to Norah as she now followed in their steps that it would be extremely unlikely for anyone in a hurry to get in and out without knocking over some knickknack or at least disturbing the precise position of a chair or table. After the shock of what he and Mrs. Stanton had seen, the super, Timothy Losey, was understandably vague as to whether two of the battery of silver-framed photographs on the Jacobean sideboard had been lying face down when they entered. He couldn't swear that either he or Mrs. Stanton mightn't inadvertently have brushed against them. Any one of the procession of people who had been in and out of



the apartment since—officers, technicians, medical personnel—might have done so.

Norah noted that there was a tea set on the delicate piecrust table consisting of a small silver tray, pot, creamer, and sugar bowl. The cup was fine china with the dried stain of the tea plainly visible. It struck Norah as odd that Mrs. Swann, who kept everything in such impeccable order, had not washed up before going to bed. She put that small discrepancy at the back of her mind and continued on to the bedroom.

The big tester bed took up most of the space. The pillows which were the apparent cause of suffocation had been tossed aside by Mr. Losey when he discovered the old lady and turned her over to try to revive her. The bed covers had been thrown back when the attendants removed the body. Otherwise, Norah assumed, the scene had not been disturbed. Mrs. Swann's clothes—bra, full slip, old-fashioned corset, which to Norah's modern eyes looked like an armature, and a pair of opaque serviceable old lady's lisle hose—were neatly draped on a chair in a corner. Norah frowned. Where was her robe? It wasn't on the chair or at the foot of the bed. And how about slippers? There should have been slippers nearby in case she had to get up at night. Norah got out the official photos; no robe or slippers appeared. She looked in the closet and discovered a faded blue quilted nylon robe hanging on a hook and fuzzy slippers tucked in the pocket of a shoe bag attached to the inside of the closet door. The management apparently provided adequate heat and since Grace Swann's nightgown had been flannel, high-necked and long-sleeved, maybe she hadn't needed a robe. But slippers? There was no wall-to-wall carpeting, only a couple of throw rugs, and the floor had to be cold in between. Besides, Mrs. Swann was not the type to go padding about barefoot and then tuck her dirty feet into a clean bed. There was something else. . . . Narrowing her eyes, Norah went over her own bedtime routine. Wash face, brush teeth, put on nightgown and robe, comb hair, and then . . . open window. That was the very last thing; Joe used to do it—now she did. Of course, Mrs. Swann's window was shut now, but in the pictures? Shut.

Timothy Losey, whose rosy chubbiness combined with snow-white hair made him look ageless, replied readily and with every indication of sincere concern. No, ma'am, he hadn't noticed whether the window was open or shut, but he hadn't touched it. Besides using the telephone to call the police, he hadn't touched a thing, not a single thing—he knew enough for that, Sergeant!



Seen enough crime shows on TV, Norah thought, and supposed she should be grateful. Since neither the patrol officers nor any of the official personnel who came after them would close the window till the photographs had been taken, it followed that the window had not been open.

Of course, Norah mused, having thanked and dismissed Losey, there were women who did not open their window at night or put their slippers under the bed. She went back to the closet. She took the faded blue robe off the hook and found another nightgown underneath. There might also be some women who put on a fresh nightgown without depositing the soiled one in the laundry hamper. For one woman to vary from the norm in each of these things seemed to Norah highly suspect. If she could find some evidence of another person's presence in the apartment on the afternoon or night of Grace Swann's death, then she would accept that the victim had been manually suffocated, carried to the bedroom, undressed, and put into her bed.

She went back to the living room. The unwashed tea things were as much out of character as the used nightgown left hanging in the closet. She turned abruptly away and went into the narrow kitchen. Its neatness and cleanliness seemed to support her idea, urging her to follow it up. There was nothing on the drainboard, but maybe. . . . Norah stepped on the garbage can's treadle, the lid went up, she peered inside: a broken teacup and about half a dozen perfectly good butter cookies. She reached in and retrieved the broken cup and the cookies.

She had thought it odd that Grace Swann should bring out the silver service to brew herself a solitary cup of tea.

Norah canvassed the building. No one had any idea whom Grace Swann might have been entertaining. The last person to see her on the afternoon of her death was the doorman, Valentine Scharf. He was thin, straight, stiff, and elegant as a walking stick, sporting a small mustache and slickly plastered-down hair with a suspicious redness at the black roots.

"I saw her when she came in from her grocery shopping, Sergeant. And of course she was down here in the lobby earlier waiting for her mail with the rest of them. They're all hanging around waiting at this time of the month."

"Oh?"

"Sure. For their checks. Their Social Security checks. That's what most of them live on." He said it sadly and with a touch of contempt.



Norah stared at him. The Social Security checks. Blessed Mary be praised, the Social Security checks!

"But . . ." She frowned, eager and yet reluctant to commit herself to his lead. "Don't most of them have their checks mailed to their banks?" Congress, she recalled, had recently enacted a law whereby Social Security benefits could be sent to the bank and deposited to the client's account. The purpose was to avoid delay, loss, or theft. She had assumed everyone would rush to take advantage of the new system. Her father had. Of course most old people were not like her father; they were set in their ways, mistrusted banks, would want the assurance of seeing that government envelope with their name on it, of holding the precious piece of green cardboard in their own hands. "Wouldn't that be a lot more convenient?" she asked.

The doorman shrugged. "All I know is that on the third of every month half the building is down in this lobby waiting for the mailman."

She had been rummaging through her handbag for her notebook, and now as her fingers closed on it, a new wave of excitement coursed through her. Now she knew what it was about the date of Mrs. Swann's death that had been nagging at her. She flipped through the pages—yes, here. Grace Swann died on Thursday, April 3. Wednesday, April 3, exactly one year ago was the date of Isabel Brady's death—of cirrhosis of the liver. Coincidence? Not when you noted the other dates: May 3, Bernice Hoysradt—suffocation; June 3, Theodora Zelinsky; July 3, Estelle Waggoner.

"The third," she muttered. "The third . . . every time. . . ."

"Yes, ma'am, right on the button," the doorman agreed. "It may not be much but it comes regular. Unless the third's a holiday or a Sunday, naturally, when there's no mail delivery. Then the checks come on the fourth."

Phoebe Laifer had been strangled on March 4. According to the calendar at the front of Norah's notebook, March 3 had been a Sunday.

"And let me tell you, ma'am, it's a real hardship when those checks are even one day late. Some of the old people go hungry." Valentine continued with the same superior attitude as before.

The pattern was glaringly obvious—once you knew. Before even noting the dates, however, certainly before deducing a motive from them, you had to suspect that the deaths were not natural. Therein lay the killer's cleverness. Even Doc Osterman with his years of forensic experience hadn't caught on.

"Was Mrs. Swann entirely dependent on her Social Security al-



lotment?" Norah wanted to know. The doorman was hardly the final authority, but he seemed to be a shrewd observer.

"She was down here every month waiting like the rest of them. As soon as the check came, she went out and loaded up on the groceries like the rest of them." He took a step closer to Norah and lowered his voice. "They spend the money as soon as it comes in. The first part of the month they eat real good, pay their bills, get caught up—then they hang on till the next check." His face sagged. He stroked his mustache. For a moment he looked as defeated as those he had been belittling. "I pray to God every night to keep me on my feet and able to work because no matter how much you put by it's not going to be enough. What with inflation, taxes, rip-offs, you've just got no control on your future anymore. No control."

That was the reason for the stiff posture, the dyed hair, the youthful mustache. Norah decided Valentine Scharf was afraid. He was afraid of old age. And Norah couldn't blame him.

"Mrs. Swann and the others go right out the same day and cash their checks?"

"Not the same day, the same minute."

There had been no cash in Mrs. Swann's purse or anywhere else in her apartment. No money in the other women's purses or their apartments. "What time is the mail usually delivered?"

"Between two and three in the afternoon."

"That late?"

Barely time to get to the bank before closing, Norah thought. Not that it mattered; banks don't cash checks unless one is a depositor and has a large enough balance to cover the amount. Contrary to their advertising, banks are not in business to do favors. Besides, if those people had wanted to deal with a bank, they would have had their checks mailed there directly. No, they would get cash at the supermarkets or at one of the local merchants. Still, all those people wanting cash at the same time. . . .

"Is there a check-cashing service nearby?" Norah asked.

"Yes, ma'am. Two blocks over. Federated. Just off the corner of Broadway."



Norah sat in Captain Felix's office, legs crossed, relaxed, reporting.

"The manager of the check-cashing service wasn't inclined to be cooperative, but I convinced him." She smiled jauntily. "Going through his records, I found that every one of them—Laifer, Waggoner, Brady, Hoysradt, and Zelinsky—had cashed their Social Security checks at Federated. That includes the latest victim, Grace Swann."

"Good work."

"Luck, Captain, it was luck. The doorman out-and-out told me that the old people in the building spent the third of every month down in the lobby waiting for the mailman. After that it was just a matter of following from one thing to the next."

"That's what detective work is all about." Felix slid down low in the chair, stretched out his long legs, and cupping his chin in the palm of the right hand, supported the right elbow in his left hand. "Somebody has figured himself one hell of an ugly way to get money." He grimaced. "You think you've seen and heard it all, then something like this comes along. . . ." He reached one hand to the intercom and flipped a switch. "I want everybody on duty with Sergeant Mulcahaney's unit in here. Plus . . . Baum, Link, Brennan . . . and Schmidt." He raised his eyebrows at Norah. "You're going to get your additional personnel."

As they filed in, each one took note of who else had been called and particularly of Norah. When they were all assembled, Felix began.

"It looks like we've got something very big and particularly ugly on our hands." He swiveled his chair around so that he could look at the oversized wall calendar to the left of his desk and by so doing drew everyone's attention to it. For a moment he let them stare at the full-color photograph of a peak in the Rockies, snow covered but with the first green shoots of spring peeping through around the base. "On the third of this month, two days ago, a Mrs. Grace Swann, age seventy-three, in relatively good health, died in her bed—apparently by natural suffocation."



That drew their eyes from the melting snow to the big red numeral below.

"As you know, we've had a rash of deaths by suffocation lately," Felix continued. "In Doc Osterman's opinion the number has risen well above the norm. He suggested we take a look at the circumstances surrounding this latest one. Augie went to the scene."

Everybody eyed Baum.

"Don't worry about it, Augie," Felix reassured him. "I went over it myself. I knew something wasn't right, but I couldn't put my finger on it either. So I decided we needed somebody who understood the feminine mystique."

That meant Norah. They acknowledged that she was back on the case with a nod or a grin in her direction.

Felix continued. "It appears that on the afternoon of her death Mrs. Swann fixed herself a cup of tea. The setup was for one, but the way Norah reads the scene, Mrs. Swann was not alone. For one thing, she had brought out her best silver and her good china, and there was an extra, broken cup in the trash." Before Augie Baum could voice his objection, Felix parried it. "Plus at least half a dozen perfectly edible cookies. Now, the cup certainly might have been broken and thrown out by the victim herself, but nobody as short of money as Mrs. Swann would sweep half a dozen delicious butter cookies into the garbage. If she didn't want them, she'd return them carefully to the box or to a cookie jar.

"So it looks like her visitor could have been her killer. He could have grabbed her, covered her mouth and nose with a scarf or pillow, and when she was either unconscious or perhaps even dead, dragged her into the bedroom, knocking over the teacup in the process. He undressed her and put her in her bed to make it look as though the suffocation had occurred naturally during sleep. He got rid of every sign of his presence by throwing out the broken cup and putting away the extra silverware. Maybe he didn't know where the cookies belonged or just couldn't be bothered to put them away and threw them out instead." Felix folded his hands on top of his blotter and looked around for comments or questions.

"What was the motive?" David Link asked.

"Robbery."

"Had the place been searched?"

"Not necessary. He knew the cash was in her purse and that it was all she had."

David scowled.



"It was the third of the month," Felix explained. "The day Social Security checks are delivered—and cashed."

"God!" David paled.

"As soon as Mrs. Swann received her check, she rushed out to cash it—like everybody else. Then she bought food and a few items at the drugstore. Deducting the amounts of the cash-register slips we found in her handbag from the amount she cashed at Federated, she figures to have had two hundred and sixty-four dollars in cash when she got home—plus whatever extra she had from before."

Brennan groaned.

"It could have been the kid who delivered the groceries," Schmidt suggested.

"She carried the groceries home herself," Norah told him. "Most old people do; for one thing, they don't often buy in large enough quantities to warrant delivery, and then they're afraid to let a stranger inside the apartment."

"Somebody at the market could have seen her flash her roll," Schmidt mused.

Baum didn't agree. "It could have been anybody. The muggers are out in force at the start of the month just looking for those green government checks."

"Why in God's name don't these people have the checks sent to the bank?" Brennan exclaimed, and his voice quavered. "Why do they think the law was formulated?"

For Brennan to show such emotion was an event in itself. Felix placated him. "The law is new. A lot of them don't know about it yet."

"We're not talking about an ordinary mugger, Roy," David pointed out. "This guy didn't follow her to her building and upstairs to her apartment and then strong-arm his way in. She served him tea."

"So she knew him; so that makes it easier," Baum grunted. "Or ought to," he qualified glumly.

"Did she cash her check at the supermarket?" Brennan asked.

"No. She went to the Federated Check-Cashing Service on Broadway." Felix paused for a moment to prepare them. "Every one of the known and suspected victims in the Westvue also cashed her checks at Federated."

Augie Baum let out a long, low whistle. David Link nodded as though he had been expecting just this. Brennan, in control once more, said nothing but his face was grim.



"That makes six," Gus Schmidt observed in awe.

"That we know of," David corrected.

His words hung in the silence of Captain Felix's office as acrid and palpable as cigarette smoke in still air. Felix was not surprised that Link should so quickly grasp the full implication. A quick glance at Norah told him that she had been ahead of David, ahead of all of them. And Brennan, usually measuring the height and breadth of an obstacle while the other two had already hurtled over it to the finish line, wasn't far behind on this one.

"Creep . . ." David muttered. "Cold-blooded creep."

"But smart," Felix said. "It's pretty hard to prove murder without a body, but he's left us the bodies and we still can't prove a thing. If Norah hadn't come up with the Federated Check-Cashing Service as the connection between the deaths, we wouldn't know where to look or have any reason for looking."

David winked at her, Brennan bestowed a solemn nod, and Schmidt an avuncular smile. Augie Baum moved one step closer to her; later, outside, he'd slap her on the back, make a big thing out of his support.

"So. As of now you're all working for the Senior Citizens Squad." He nodded to Norah.

She made the assignments. "Gus and Augie, here's the list of the women who've cashed Social Security checks at Federated during the past two years; check it against the ME's files of unattended deaths. Also CUPI's. If a name appears on both lists, get the date and cause of death, age of victim, health . . . and so forth."

"Right."

"Roy, a full history on Grace Swann. As far as we know now, she had no living relatives, but make sure. Then check her friends, her activities, where she shopped, who she talked to—the whole bit. I have a feeling that the killer is someone she knew casually, maybe somebody she talked to at the market or the newsstand or wherever. He's not going to be easy to pick out, but give it your best shot."

"Right, Sergeant."

"That leaves the employees at Federated. David and I will check them out."

"Wouldn't they be bonded?" David asked. "In which case the bonding company would have investigated them pretty thoroughly."

Felix picked that up. "You willing to run this case secondhand?"

"I was just trying to avoid a duplication of effort. Sorry, Captain."



"I don't think our man would have done anything a bonding company could pick him up on." Norah smoothed things over. "What we're dealing with—well, obviously he's not a beginner, not anymore; let's call him a talented amateur. I think we have to double-check everything and then check it once more after that."

Felix nodded and that was the dismissal. Everybody filed out. Nobody had said a word about how all this would affect Lieutenant Capretto's situation. Not even Norah. She'd hung back for a private word with the captain, then changed her mind. They'd already covered the subject. Besides, what she did or didn't do now, whether or not she was part of the investigation, no longer mattered. The case had got too big, gathered too much momentum.

The Federated Check-Cashing Service was a small operation with a manager, one secretary, and three clerks. None of them was in debt. None lived beyond his means—though God only knew what wild extravagances a monthly Social Security allotment could provide, even as supplementary income. Neither the manager nor any of the employees had a sick mother, wife, or child who might require special medical treatment—in which case the allotment wouldn't go far either. In sum, none of the people at Federated appeared a likely suspect.

Gus and Augie had come up with two more apparently natural deaths that fitted the pattern and must now be considered suspect. Both had occurred within the same area as the ones under investigation—one in an apartment building on Broadway and Seventy-fifth, the other around the corner from the Museum of Natural History. That brought the count up to eight and meant that each of the five Federated employees had to be checked out against eight possible homicides. Every detective on the case had worked longer and more tedious odds.

It was always possible for one investigator to catch what another had overlooked, so Norah made sure that neither she nor David interviewed the same employees on the second round. Of course, it was unrealistic to expect hard alibis for each of the eight dates in question. Norah didn't expect it. Pick a date and ask someone what he was doing, where he was. Nobody remembered. Isolate one day from all the rest. It can't be done. Not unless something memorable happened. It could be a world-shaking thing—everyone recalls what he was doing when he heard the news of President Kennedy's assassination—or it could have purely personal significance, but there had to be a reason for remember-



ing. What Norah was looking for was a means of eliminating as many of the Federated people as possible. Then they could move on, though she didn't know to what.

Two of the crimes had been committed during the first week of June and the first week of July. Vacation time. Any of the personnel out of the city either of those weeks would be automatically free of suspicion.

As it happened, the job was made easier by the fact that all the deaths occurred on weekdays, and subject to certain flexibility in estimating the exact time of death because of the lapse before some of the bodies were discovered, most of the deaths had occurred during the business day. It remained only to verify the attendance records of the employees. There were no unexplained absences on any of the pertinent dates.

"Washout." Looking disgusted, but far from discouraged, David dropped his report on Norah's desk, pulled up a chair, and sat down beside Roy Brennan for an impromptu conference.

"Doesn't have to be an employee," Brennan pointed out. "Could be one of the other clients. There's a line of them every month waiting to get their money. They probably get to talking, get on friendly terms. Later, when the doorbell rings and the intended victim answers and sees her buddy from the line . . . well, she's got no reason not to let him in."

"If we're going to check out each and every client on the line, then we've got to check every merchant in the area, every passerby. Pick something hard, will you, Roy?"

"It wouldn't be an old person," Norah reminded them. "The killer had to have plenty of physical strength."

David nodded, deep in thought. "How about a stakeout? We could stake out Federated."

Norah frowned. "Assuming our man shows up and we spot him and tail him and his victim, we've got to catch him in the act. But we haven't a clue where they're going, so how are we going to take the necessary precautions to protect the victim? Tough."

"But not impossible."

"And we have to wait nearly three weeks for the next month's checks to be delivered," Roy observed, then sighed. "He could even skip a month. We're going to have to canvass the neighborhood."

Norah shook her head. "If he lives in the area, and both the captain and I think he does, then we'd be tipping our hand."

The three were silent for a while.

"How about a former employee, somebody who used to work



for Federated?" David offered. "Maybe he got fired, bears a grudge, and is ripping off the old folks for revenge."

Norah indicated the phone. "What've we got to lose?"

David dialed the number they all knew by heart.

"Mr. Borgen? This is Detective Link. Sorry to trouble you again, sir. . . . Well, I wish I didn't have to take up your time, sir, believe me, but this will be brief. We are interested in former employees of the company. Could you give me the names of people who worked for you, let's say within the last two years, and either quit or were fired?"

As he listened, it occurred to David that for a man who said he had no time, Ernest Borgen was going into a lot of unnecessary detail. "What's his name?" David asked, and jotted it down on the pad Norah pushed toward him. "Is that so? He wanted to come back, but you wouldn't take him. When was that, do you remember? . . . Yes, well, when did he quit? . . . How about his last paycheck? You'd have a record, wouldn't you? . . . Yes, I'll hold."

David covered the mouthpiece. "They don't have much of a turnover, but there was one guy who quit sometime last year. He's looking up the exact date. The guy wanted—" He broke off. "Yes, Mr. Borgen, I'm still here. Way back then, eh? . . . No, no, that's very helpful. Thank you. I appreciate—" Again David had to listen to the manager's apology. "I understand you couldn't rehire him. Certainly I understand. . . . No, no, I don't blame you one bit. If the man proved unreliable the first time, there would be no reason to suppose—" He wasn't allowed to finish. Grimacing, David held out the phone so that both Norah and Roy could hear the squawk of Borgen's protestations.

At the manager's first pause for breath David cut in firmly. "Thank you again. . . . No, sir, you can be assured that we will not reveal where we got the information."

He hung up. "Looks like we might have something. Fellow's name is Leon Eilbott and he lives right around the corner from Mrs. Swann, or at least he used to. He worked for Federated for about four months into the middle of January last year. Good worker, punctual, steady, reliable. Then suddenly, one day, without any kind of advance notice, he turned in his cashbox and quit. Just like that."

Norah raised her eyebrows. "Didn't give a reason?"

"Oh, yeah. Said he had something better. Got himself a part in a Broadway show. He's an actor."

"Actors will drop anything, the best and most secure job in the



world, for a bit part in a third-rate road company," Norah observed.

"Borgen knows it and that's why he's mad," David replied. "He claims that Eilbott gave him references from a bank on the West Coast where he'd worked, but he never mentioned he was an actor. If he had, Borgen wouldn't have hired him."

"Probably why Eilbott didn't mention it," Roy observed.

"This is where it gets interesting," David continued. "About six weeks after he quit, Eilbott turned up wanting his job back. Seems the show folded out of town. Borgen was indignant. Told Eilbott he couldn't just come and go as he pleased. He turned him down cold and also warned him not to give Federated as a reference because he, Borgen, was going to inform all parties that Eilbott was unreliable."

Norah consulted the timetable. "If this Eilbott quit in mid-January and turned up six weeks later, that would bring it just to the beginning of March—which is when the first victim at the Westvue, Phoebe Laifer, was strangled."

Roy shook his head. "I don't see this Eilbott running around killing old ladies to spite Borgen or ruin his business. If that were the motive, wouldn't he have left clues pointing to Borgen and Federated? Wouldn't he have proclaimed the injustice, sent letters to the newspapers, made phone calls, something? He not only made no attempt to call attention to Borgen, he covered up the very fact of murder."

"Right, right. He didn't do it to spite Borgen. He did it for the money. It's that simple. He did it for the money." David's face was carefully blank, his eyes steady, fixed on the far wall past the top of Norah's head. "If he could lay his hands on three hundred or so a month, he wouldn't need to scrounge around for temporary jobs to support himself while he waited for his agent to call. He wouldn't have to tie himself down as a clerk or salesman from nine to five; he could be out doing theatrical rounds, auditioning, taking classes . . . whatever. He's not greedy; he's not living high; he's satisfied just to get his rent and grocery money every month. He's a modest, reasonable man."

You couldn't bleed for every victim, they all realized, or you'd be bled dry in a week. A cop retreated into humor; a cop was quick with the gag as protection against the daily horrors of the job. But this one was beyond laughs, so David leaned heavily on the sarcasm. It didn't really help.

"He tried to make each allotment last as long as possible,"



David went on. "When he runs short, he just hangs around Federated for one of the old dolls to go in and get her money. He's choosy. He wants one who's real old and feeble and not likely to put up much resistance."

According to Roy, crimes of violence were deplorable, and further comment was neither necessary nor helpful. Emotions obscured the intellect, got in the way of impartial investigation. Emotions were for amateurs. "Even an old lady isn't going to stand still while she's being suffocated," he commented.

David continued with his reconstruction. "He follows the intended victim home. He has to be sure that she lives alone . . . so that means he has to know something about her. And she has to know him, of course, well enough to admit him. She might remember him from his days at Federated, but that was a long time ago. Maybe he's taken the trouble to strike up an acquaintance more recently. . . ."

"Maybe he's worked up some kind of ruse to get in," Roy suggested.

"He could say that he's from Federated . . . claim that the old lady got shortchanged—by accident, naturally. He's full of apologies. He offers the intended victim a five- or ten-dollar bill, but he needs a signed receipt. You can bet he gets invited inside!" David's voice quickened. He wasn't looking at the wall anymore. "Once inside it's easy. He overpowers her, undresses her, and puts her to bed with the pillow over her face. If she's a rummy, he doesn't even have to bother to take her clothes off. No weapon, no fingerprints, no indication that a murder was even committed. Neat, efficient, untraceable." Then he added, so low that Norah and Roy barely heard, "He's got to be some kind of monster."

"But Mrs. Swann was neither that old nor that feeble," Norah reminded him.

"So she struggled and that's how the teacup got broken. Or he slipped something into her tea—a minimal amount of some tranquilizer, enough to lower her resistance but not enough to show up in the autopsy."

David was close, but . . . something was missing, and Norah didn't quite know what. She was surprised, though, that David should be assuming facts to support a theory. It was one of the very first pitfalls they had both been warned against—by Joe. She was even more surprised that she should be aware of it, whereas David was not. She decided not to say anything directly. "Between the two of you you've worked up a good, plausible case—



on the basis of a single phone call to Ernest Borgen. Don't you think we have to find out something about this Eilbott before we apply for a warrant?"

Certainly it was most unlike Norah Mulcahaney, the emotional and impulsive one, to caution the other two.

"First we've got to check his employment record. We've got to know exactly when he was working and when he wasn't. If he quit Federated in January of last year to go into a Broadway show, then he has to be a member of Actors Equity. He could also belong to the Screen Actors Guild and AFTRA. One of the unions will be able to tell us whether or not he has an agent. Of course, we want to make sure that Eilbott doesn't know we're interested in him."

David sighed aggrievedly.

"I'm sorry if I'm underscoring the obvious, David."

"I get the impression you don't like my reconstruction."

"I'll like it better when we get some facts to support it." Surprising how rank changed one's point of view. "On the other hand, not only is Eilbott all we've got—he has the one single, indispensable qualification to be a suspect."

Roy was openly curious. David was somewhat wary, but he had to ask: "What?"

"As an actor Eilbott would be either unemployed or working at night. Since every one of the deaths occurred during the daytime, he's the only one we know who doesn't have an automatic alibi."

On occasion actors do work in the daytime—they rehearse in the daytime; they do daytime television and radio; motion pictures are filmed in the daytime and so are commercials—but what Norah had really meant was that actors do not keep regular office hours, and to that extent Leon Eilbott did not have a built-in alibi. For Norah not only liked David's theory, she liked it so much she was afraid to commit herself to it without solid evidence. Getting information turned out to be easy. At Actors Equity David was handed the *Players Guide*, a compendium of just about every



actor in New York. The actors on the West Coast had their own separate book. Each entry in the *Guide* consisted of name and telephone-service number—if the actor had a telephone service and usually he did since casting directors were notoriously impatient and given to calling someone else if the first choice wasn't around to answer his telephone. Also included were physical description, professional credits, agency and union affiliations. Ninety percent of the entries were accompanied by a photograph; the other ten percent represented Equity members who were so down on their luck that they couldn't afford the added cost of having the picture taken and published. Leon Eilbott was among the ninety percent who could.

He had a disarmingly pleasant face, Norah thought as she studied the photograph in the copy of the *Players Guide* that David placed in front of her. In Madison Avenue parlance, Eilbott had a *sincere* look. Dark blond, with a small, neat head and small, neat features. According to the description, he was five nine and a half, weighed 150. He was supposed to be thirty-five years old, but Norah thought he looked younger. Possibly he was using an early photo. He was a member of both Actors Equity and the Screen Actors Guild, and he worked out of several theatrical agencies—exclusive representation being reserved for the top stars.

It was then merely a matter of collating the union records and the casting-agency records to make up Eilbott's professional-employment profile for the past couple of years. Aside from the Broadway show for which he'd quit his job at Federated but which had never reached Broadway, the record was not impressive. He'd done a couple of TV commercials, appeared as a contestant on one TV game show, toured briefly in the fall with an industrial show—the kind of thing presented at conventions. He had been "at liberty" more often than working. Not that it was anything to be ashamed of. According to the statistics kept by the actors unions, Eilbott's situation was typical. Of the 12,000 members of Actors Equity, for example, 3,000 were employed, which meant that 9,000 were out of work—not an impressive average. It seemed to Norah that the glamour was superficial and that the chances of joining the select group that managed to eke out a living in their chosen profession was too much of a long shot on which to base one's life. But many did.

Next they examined Leon Eilbott's nonprofessional-employment record. According to the New York State Unemployment Service, the only nonacting job he'd held during the last sixteen months was the one at Federated. He had applied for benefits after Bor-



gen refused to rehire him, but as he had not worked for the required number of weeks during the year, he was informed that he was not eligible. He had not reapplied. Either he'd found steady employment or he hadn't needed the money. A check of the employment records for Social Security deductions revealed he had not had any kind of employment.

Eilbott was not married. Discreet inquiries around his building indicated he had no steady girlfriend. He had plenty of visitors, male and female, but these were thought also to be actors who came to rehearse scenes for classes or auditions. In other words, Leon Eilbott was dedicated to one thing only—his career. Copies of the *Players Guide* picture were shown around, but none of the tenants of the Westvue or of any of the other buildings in which the victims or suspected victims had lived remembered having seen him.

"The point is that they would have had no reason to take particular notice of him." Norah was trying to justify the lack of evidence while reporting to Felix. She was surprised herself at how much she'd been counting on validating David's theory. "We haven't come up with a thing, not a single hard fact. We can't even prove murder was committed, much less pin it on Eilbott—or anybody else."

That, of course, was the heart of the problem, always had been. Felix waited, expecting Norah's natural optimism to reassert itself, but she just sat dejectedly.

"So we're back to the stakeout," he said. "At least we know who we're looking for."

"I wish we didn't have to sit around and wait for two weeks."

"You have a better idea?"

"We could put a tail on him."

"We know he's not going to act till a certain date." Norah was floundering, and they both knew it. "We agreed that the last thing we want is for Eilbott to have any inkling that we're suspicious. We have no choice but to wait till the third of May."

It wasn't only because the investigation was stalled that Norah was depressed, but because she was lonely. It had been exactly seventeen days since Joe had moved out, fifteen days since he'd called to let her know where he could be reached. She hadn't heard from him since.

The lectures were over, and she had nothing to do with herself. Before, she had been anxious to see and talk to her father, but he had avoided her; now he was the one calling and she the one mak-



ing excuses. She was simply not in the mood for advice and afraid that sympathy would make her break down completely. Before, there had been the constant obligation of visiting Joe's mother. Actually, Norah had become very fond of Signora Emilia, but it was sometimes difficult to squeeze the visits into their schedule, but squeezed in they had to be. Now that there was plenty of time, she could hardly go alone. Or could she? Would Joe think she was trying to enlist his mother's aid in getting him back?

How was she going to get Joe back? So far she hadn't done a thing. What was she supposed to do that she hadn't already done? Or say that she hadn't already said? She'd admitted her fault, admitted that she shouldn't have gone behind his back. She had promised not to do it again. She would not beg him to come back. She wanted him—oh, God, yes! But he would have to want her, too.

Norah believed in meeting problems head-on. But not this time. To press might mean—not divorce, she wouldn't even let herself think of that and she didn't believe that Joe, as a good Catholic, would consider it, but annulment was not beyond possibility. Joe had said that they should have time. How much time? How long could they go on like this?

It was hard to fill the hours. Norah's house was as clean as it could be; there was just nothing more to scrub or polish or vacuum. She started on her wardrobe. There was mending to be done, and all the skirts she had put up a couple of years back needed to be let down again—hardly an engrossing occupation. Nevertheless, she got out the sewing basket, turned on the stereo, then turned it off again—the records had all been selected by Joe; she didn't want to hear them. Essentially a solitary person, she had never before felt lonely. Maybe she should get a pet? It wouldn't be fair to get a dog and then leave him home alone for most of the day. Cats didn't mind being alone. She could get a cat. There was only one thing wrong: She didn't like cats. What she wanted was Joe. She wanted Joe to come home. To just be there. Even if they weren't speaking, just to have him in the house . . . his presence. . . .

She was starting on the second skirt when the doorbell rang. Her heart stopped, then started again with a sharp stab of hope in her chest. She set the sewing aside, gave herself a quick inspection in the mirror, then opened the door.

"Oh. Hi, Dad."

She tried to hide her disappointment, then forgot about it in her surprise at his companion. "Hello, Mrs. Fitzgerald. How are you?"

"I'm fine. Thank you, Mrs. Capretto." The housekeeper's eyes were bright, her cheeks rosy with embarrassment.



"Aren't you going to let us in?" Mulcahaney asked.

"Oh. Sorry. Sorry, Dad. Of course." She stepped aside. What was going on here?

Her father's booming tone as he took a stand in the center of the living room indicated that he wasn't exactly at ease himself. "Sit down, Eileen." He indicated the sofa to Mrs. Fitzgerald. "Norah, you sit, too. I have something to say and I want you to sit and listen quietly. You'll be wondering why Eileen and I have dropped in on you like this. . . ." He took a breath. "The reason is twofold, the first part being the situation between you and Joe. If it weren't for that, we wouldn't be here, Eileen and me. We wouldn't have had the nerve to come. So I guess there's good in everything because you should know. You have a right to know."

"What are you talking about, Dad? Will you get to the point?"

"Well, will you sit down? Both of you. You make me nervous standing there, sizing each other up like a couple of prizefighters."

"Dad!"

Mrs. Fitzgerald turned even rosier.

"I'm sorry. Eileen, sit down, please. Norah, have a little patience. What I have to say. . . . You remember how anxious I was to see you married? I always told you that the saddest thing is to be alone, not to have anybody that gives a damn whether you live or die, not to have anybody to come home to."

"I didn't turn Joe out. He was the one who wanted to leave."

"I know. He told me. He came up to the apartment and we talked. Now, I'm not taking sides—"

"He shouldn't have done that. I didn't go to his mother. . . ."

"All he said was that you'd had a disagreement; he didn't say about what. He thought you should both have a cooling-off period."

"I'm not going to say any more either."

"I didn't think you would."

That was another surprise, that her father wasn't going to try to pry it out of her and then press his good advice on her.

"Mind you," Mulcahaney continued, "I think sharing the problem would relieve you. I never thought I'd live to say it, but—maybe you should go to a marriage counselor."

"Dad!" She'd never thought she'd live to hear it.

"You should unburden yourself, sweetheart. Personally, I think it would be a lot easier to tell your troubles to someone close, someone who cares—like me. Cheaper, too."

Norah had to smile; that was more like it.

"All right, all right. I'm not trying to force a confidence out of you. That's not why I'm here."



"Why are you here?"

"I'm trying to tell you if you'll give me a chance." He glared; Norah sighed; Mrs. Fitzgerald kept out of it. "You see, I figure the problem between you and Joe is that you don't talk to each other."

"Is that what you came to tell me?"

He went right on. "You talk, but you don't say anything. You don't say what's in your hearts. You're both at fault: you, because you go ahead and make decisions on your own; Joe because he lets you get away with it."

"So you're on his side."

"I'm not on anybody's side. I told you, I'm not going to interfere."

"What do you call this?"

"I'm trying to explain why Eileen and I came over here. You see, I've been doing exactly what I'm blaming you and Joe for doing. I have no right to preach honesty if I'm not honest myself."

Norah was stunned. She waited and watched while, with a shyness that was distinctly new for Patrick Mulcahaney, he went over and sat down beside Mrs. Fitzgerald. He took her hand in his. "You thought Eileen was my housekeeper: She's not. She's . . . she's . . . we're in love."

Of all the various possibilities Norah had considered to account for her father's recent odd state she had never thought of this one simple answer. She was ashamed because she'd stopped thinking of him as an individual, relieved that he was all right, and sad because he'd been afraid to approach her sooner. Then she saw that he was watching her anxiously for approval.

She went over and kissed him on his withered cheek. "That's wonderful news, darling. Wonderful. I'm happy for you both." Her smile was as warm for Eileen Fitzgerald.

The look they shared, her father and Eileen, was one of quiet satisfaction. His hand gripped hers a little harder, and she squeezed back. There was no other overt sign of their feeling, yet it was an aura around them. They wore the new love they had found in their last years like a mantle and they wore it with dignity.

"Why didn't you say something that day I came over, Mrs. Fitzgerald? Why did you let me think you were the cleaning lady?" Norah asked.

"Her name's Eileen."

"I'm awfully sorry about that, Eileen."

"You were very complimentary about my work," Eileen Fitzgerald teased.

"You should have told me. You should have said something."

"I thought it should come from Pat. From your father."



"Dad." Norah was very gentle. "Why didn't you tell me? Why did you hold back?"

"I wasn't sure how you'd take it. I was afraid you might disapprove."

"Because of Mother? She's been gone such a long time. I'm glad you've found someone you care for and who cares for you and that you're not going to be alone anymore. When is the wedding?"

Hastily, Eileen Fitzgerald pulled her hand back from Mulcahaney's grasp and flushed violently. Her father was also distinctly embarrassed.

"You don't understand." Mulcahaney's gaze wandered around the room; he looked everywhere but at his daughter. "Eileen and I . . . we're . . . She's moved in with me."

"You mean the day I came to see you she'd already. . . ."

Mulcahaney nodded.

"But you're not married?"

Her father shook his head.

Norah was shocked. This was not the time to analyze the depths of her disapproval and she tried hard to control it. She looked from one to the other. "It's not my place to criticize; you're both adults and you know what you're doing, but I . . . I just don't understand. Why didn't you go to St. Joseph's and have the priest perform a short ceremony?"

"We're not going to get married."

That left her speechless.

Mulcahaney sighed. This time when he reached for Eileen Fitzgerald's hand it was a statement of intention. She let him take it and hold it tenderly and protectively. Now that the worst was out, words came more easily. "We want to get married. There's nothing in this world we want more, but we can't afford it. It's the Social Security law. As a widow Eileen gets full benefits each month. If she remarries, she relinquishes—"

"But she'll get benefits based on your earnings," Norah protested.

"Half. She'll get half."

"Oh, Dad . . . does it make that much difference?"

"I'm afraid it does. We've discussed it and we've decided that the way the economy is going we can't afford to get married. We'd be able to scrimp along now on the reduced income, but later on. . . . The apartment is rent-controlled, but there's no guarantee it always will be. Eileen's a thrifty shopper, but prices keep going up. Even now there's mighty little left for clothes or entertainment."

There was nothing new about the situation. A lot of elderly people seeking companionship and finding affection, even love, were forced



by economics to "live in sin." Certainly Norah was aware of it. It was depicted on TV with accompanying smirks and snickers. But this was not situation comedy; this was real and it was happening to her father. As far as Norah was concerned, it didn't rate even an indulgent chuckle. Looking at her father's face, she could have wept for the humiliation she saw there.

Patrick Mulcahaney's background, standards, and religious beliefs were opposed to this illicit relationship. As for Eileen Fitzgerald, it was obvious that her background was similar, that she was devoted to Mulcahaney, but that her conscience bothered her and that her joy was tinged with guilt. There were Catholics who still believed in mortal sin and who feared excommunication.

Norah seethed. It wasn't fair. Her father and Eileen were entitled to self-respect and to respect from their peers. They should be able to proclaim their love, not forced to hide it. Eileen Fitzgerald shouldn't have to pose as the cleaning woman when she answered the door. A hot wave of shame for them all surged through Norah. Her father should be able to give Eileen his name.

"Joe and I would be glad to help you out." For a moment she forgot her own uncertain situation.

So did her father. "When the babies come, it may not be convenient. Besides, we want to be self-sufficient. We're not happy about the way things are, but . . ." He shrugged.

"Have you talked to the priest?"

Mulcahaney shook his head. "If we persist in the sin, how can he offer us absolution?"

Joe was adjusting to his new life-style and not having any easier time of it than Norah. He was putting in a lot of hours at work, but inevitably he had to return to his hotel room. Inevitably he had time to think. What exactly did he expect to gain from this separation? He asked himself that over and over. Norah had already admitted that she had lacked trust, that she took too much on herself. She had promised to do better. What more did he want? What more could he expect? Some kind of guarantee? Then what? What was keeping him away from his wife when he was miserable and lost and unfulfilled without her?

As the weeks passed, Joe even began to question whether he was himself completely blameless. Had he overreacted? Had he moved out to give each one of them an opportunity for reassessment? Or was he subconsciously punishing Norah?

That was an ugly thought, and Joe brooded a long time before he rejected it. The fact remained that he had done very little honest



self-appraisal during the separation period. He did spend a lot of time thinking about Norah, though, wondering what she was up to, how she filled her time, whether she was as lonely as he. He yearned to talk to her, to hear her voice. He could call. Why not? They'd set no ground rules that said he couldn't call. Perched on the edge of the bed in his hotel room, Joe stared at the telephone. How would Norah feel about his calling? When she heard his voice, wouldn't she expect that he had worked things out? But things were no different now from what they'd been the night he walked out. So instead of calling Norah, Joe tried a couple of old phone numbers.

Two of the girls had moved away, and the numbers now belonged to strangers. Another was married and it was her husband who answered. Another wasn't at home. Celeste Keach was thrilled to hear from Joe after all these years.

"Long time no see," she murmured coyly.

"Well, I've been busy. Actually. . . ." What the hell, might as well give it to her straight. "I got married."

"Oh?" Some of Celeste's girlish pleasure abated.

"But we're not together right now."

"Oh? That's too bad." Celeste didn't mean it.

He took her to dinner at a restaurant she'd suggested and to which he'd never been. Nothing was right—the atmosphere, the service, the prices. God! The prices! His date's chatter grated on his nerves. All she did was talk about herself and clothes. He did recall that he'd never thought much of Celeste's brains, but she wasn't that gorgeous either. Had he ever thought she was? Finally Joe just tuned her out. After dinner he made the expected moves—she would have been insulted if he hadn't. He anticipated being turned down and had no intention of pressing, but she accepted. He had no choice but to bring her up to the room.

As they walked along the hotel corridor, Joe noticed a line of light under his door. He was sure he'd turned the light out before leaving, and it wasn't the kind of hotel where the maid came in to turn down the bed at night.

"Hold it," Joe whispered. With one hand he held Celeste back while with the other he drew his gun. Then he edged forward along the wall to his room, listening intently. There was no sound, no sound of any kind. Could Norah be in there? His heart started to pound. Could Norah have come, got the clerk to let her in? No. No, she wouldn't do that. If she did, she'd have the radio or television on. He grasped the doorknob firmly, turned it, and flung the door open, at the same moment lunging forward to cover the intruder with his gun.



A woman screamed.

"Mamma!"

Dressed in her Sunday black, relieved only by an heirloom lace collar and a small white-gold cross on a white-gold chain, Signora Capretto sat upright in the room's only chair.

"Mamma," Joe repeated.

"*Oh, Dio mio, che scossa!*" she clasped her hands over her heart.
"Come mi hai spaventato."

Joe got down on his knees beside her. "I didn't meant to frighten you, Mamma. Are you all right?"

"Put that gun away. Put it away, *per l'amor di Dio.*"

"Sorry, Mamma, sorry. I saw the light under the door. I had no idea who was in here."

"Ah . . . ah . . ." Her chest heaved up and down.

Now that he had got over his concern, Joe was annoyed. "Now, Mamma, there's nothing wrong with your heart. We both got a fright, okay? What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you, *figlio mio.* What else?"

"I know that. Why?"

"You would not come to see me." She shrugged, shoulders high and hands out in the elaborate Latin manner. Then her eyes strayed from Joe and fixed on a point over his shoulder. "I wished to talk to you about your wife."

It needed neither her overly loud tone nor the deliberate underscoring of the crucial word for Joe to know that Celeste Keach had appeared in the doorway. Suppressing a sigh, he got up and turned around. "Mamma, this is Celeste. Celeste, my mother."

The two women looked at each other, and neither liked what she saw.

"It seems I have chosen an inconvenient time," Signora Emilia said with great formality, and rose.

"You should have let me know, Mamma."

"Ah, si. I will make an appointment."

"Mamma."

"So I'll be going." She smoothed the folds of her skirt and adjusted her handbag precisely over one arm.

Joe cast a look of helplessness at Celeste.

"I gotta be going myself, Joe," Celeste obliged. The mood couldn't be restored; the evening was shot anyway. "It's getting kinda late."

"It is at that," he agreed gratefully. It was ten o'clock. He looked from one to the other. He cleared his throat. "My mother lives in Brooklyn so I'll drop you off first, okay, Celeste?"



"Don't bother about me," his mother said. "I can take the subway."

"Don't bother about me," Celeste Keach assured him. "I can take a cab."

"Mamma, I am not going to let you ride the subway alone."

"That's how I got here."

He turned to his date. "If you're sure you don't mind taking a cab. . . ?"

"I don't mind."

She did mind, of course she did, and they both knew it. What could he do about it? He wanted to give her cab fare, but in front of his mother . . . it wouldn't look right. "You're sure?" he repeated helplessly.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

Still she waited. Of course she wanted the cab fare. He didn't blame her. Then Joe had an inspiration. "I'll go down with you and help you find a cab." He could give her the money then.

"Don't bother." Celeste Keach tossed her head.

The inspiration had come too late. "No, listen. . . ."

"Stay with your mamma." The blonde stalked to the door.

"I'll call you," Joe murmured under his breath as he saw her out. It was reflex. He didn't mean it, and she didn't hear it. And on top of both, Celeste Keach would wait for his call only for the pleasure of slamming the receiver down on him. He turned to his mother. Her face was stern, lips primly pursed, but there was no doubt that she had derived intense satisfaction from every moment of the exchange. Suddenly Joe grinned.

"It is not funny," Signora Capretto chided.

"Sure it is. Come on, Mamma, you know it is."

"No." She remained grim.

"Okay, Mamma. So now you're here you might as well sit down and say what you came to say."

"I see that it is no use. I am wasting my time."

"Okay, Mamma, if that's the way you want it. I'll drive you home."

"Are you going to get a divorce?" she asked abruptly.

Joe was stunned. "Of course not."

"An annulment?"

"No. We have no grounds. . . ."

"Then why aren't you living with your wife?"

"We've had a misunderstanding. I told you."

"Ah! A misunderstanding. I see. It must be very serious."

"Certainly."

"I will not ask what it is. If your wife has been unfaithful. . . ."



"No. Nothing like that."

"Or denied you your conjugal rights, then, of course, you are fully justified in leaving her."

Joe flushed. These were not matters to be discussed with one's mother. "Mamma, don't involve yourself."

"She has not committed either of these sins?"

"Of course not."

Signora Emilia sighed heavily. "Something else, then? Well, what are you doing about it? Have you discussed this 'misunderstanding' with your wife?"

"She doesn't talk to me, Mamma. That's the problem."

"Ah? And the solution is for you not to talk to her. I see." She paused as though she were considering. "Well, are you seeking help? Have you consulted the priest perhaps?"

"You know I haven't."

"Then what are you doing, *figlio mio*? Waiting for the good God to perform a miracle on your behalf? I think he is waiting for you to help yourself."

Norah made meticulous preparations for the stakeout. May 3 was a Saturday, so she checked the Planetarium Station of the post office to make sure there would be a local delivery. On the Friday, just before lunch, David Link stopped at her desk.

"I think we can forget about tomorrow."

"What?" She was startled. She had been thinking about Joe; she'd got into the habit of doing that more and more lately. "What do you mean?"

"I just had a call from Superior Artists, one of the agencies that handles Leon Eilbott. They just got him a job, an acting job. He's got a part in a movie for TV that's shooting in town. He starts tomorrow."

"No!"

"I'm afraid so."

"Damn."

"What's more, it's a good part, a feature role, his agent, Sol Weiss,



tells me. They'll be on location here in New York shooting outdoors for at least a week, depending on the weather naturally. After that Eilbott will be moving on to Hollywood for the interior sequences. Looks like this is the break he's been waiting for. I don't think he's going to be ripping off anybody's Social Security money for a while."

Norah groaned.

"So?"

"We call it off? What else?"

They looked glumly at each other.

They had nothing on Leon Eilbott. They had no other suspect. They hadn't even proved the fact of murder. Neither Asa Osterman's nor Norah's inferences—the one based principally on statistics, the other on personal interpretation of the scene of Mrs. Swann's death—were conclusive. She had been counting on the stakeout. She had been absolutely convinced that Leon Eilbott would show in the vicinity of the Federated office and that he would follow one of the old ladies who cashed a check. Difficult as the logistics were of covering a building without knowing in advance what building it would be, Norah had been certain that they could both have protected the intended victim and caught the killer in the act.

Captain Felix took the news in stride. He counseled patience, but in Norah's mind the case and Joe were still linked. Subconsciously she believed that solving the case would somehow result in a solution to their problems. She had no idea how it would come about—she wasn't even aware of thinking that it would—she only knew that having to call off the stakeout was a bitter setback.

"Any other ideas?" Felix asked.

"No, sir, not one in the world."

"Then we just have to wait."

"For what? Suppose he makes a big hit in this picture. Suppose he never needs to steal another dollar. Does that mean he gets away with it?"

"If it is Eilbott, if we read him right and he was doing it only for the money . . . then yes."

Norah couldn't accept that. Every instinct rebelled at the thought that he might never be brought to account for eight murders. It was galling, it was frustrating that there was nothing to be done, no clues to be chased down, no witnesses to be interrogated. Somewhere, sometime, Eilbott must have made a mistake, one mistake at one of the scenes. He must have left one clue: dropped a book of matches, caught a sleeve on a nail, been scratched perhaps and dripped one drop of blood. Or maybe he carried something away with him un-



knowingly: dust in his trouser cuff, a stain of some sort—fresh paint, special furniture polish. . . .

Something must have happened during the commission of one crime that would trip him up. Something unexpected, an accident, a contingency for which he had not made provision. Otherwise Leon Eilbott had committed not only the perfect crime but a string of them. Norah wouldn't accept that either. There were no perfect crimes. None. Ever. Oh, crimes did remain unsolved, certainly, but that was because the investigator gave up.

She sat up most of the night reviewing the reports on the eight victims. She didn't discover anything new in the files, but she did get the glimmer of an idea. During the night it grew, and when she awoke the following morning, she knew what she would do. Actually, Norah thought with a tingle of excitement that she hadn't experienced in a long time, what she had in mind was just a ruse, even less—a gimmick to approach Leon Eilbott and talk to him without arousing his suspicion.

She had thought she might have to put on her uniform, but a quick check with the agency involved revealed that she did not. The occasion called for a skirt, however, she should look as feminine and pretty as possible. When she was ready, Norah surveyed herself critically and liked what she saw. She looked jaunty and carefree, and that was how she felt.

April had been much like March, raw, unseasonably cold, the winds often gusting close to gale force. But today was one of the rare days—bright sunshine and dry, clear air apparently distilled of impurities as though the city were under a giant dome and a vacuum had sucked out the foulness. Maybe such days seemed better than they actually were because they came so seldom; certainly they made the city seem not merely livable but a good place to be. The arrival of spring was even more evident inside Central Park. Norah was instantly struck by the sweep of purple blossoms of the rhododendron around the children's playground. Farther ahead, scrawny forsythia flanking the underpass had been transformed into graceful sprays of gold that swayed gently as mobiles in the breeze. She inhaled, squared her shoulders, thrust out her chin, and strode ahead. Unfortunately inside the tunnel it was still damp and the usual stench of garbage and urine persisted, but that didn't affect Norah's spirits. She hurried through.

A slight rise brought her up to the Mall and from there she could look toward Sheep Meadow, where the shooting was taking place.

The whole thing was on a much smaller scale than she had expected. She saw only one camera, but this was mounted at the top



of a crane, which in turn was mounted on a mechanized platform, a dolly. The people seated below were obviously the director and his assistant. There weren't as many spectators as she'd expected either. If they'd been shooting out on the street, a crowd would have gathered in minutes; there would have been barricades and police. But few came to the park this early. Not that it mattered. Norah wasn't trying to hide her presence. She joined the small group of spectators just as the action began.

The dolly moved forward cumbersomely, the camera rolled, two actors on bicycles entered the scene—a man and a girl.

The man was Eilbott. He was perhaps a few years older than he appeared in the picture in the *Players Guide*, possibly in his late thirties, but Norah recognized him right away. Neither the photograph showing his small neat head and neat features nor the description—dark blond hair, brown eyes—could convey the quality he exuded. To term it magnetism would be too general, but there was something . . . elusive and at the same time tangible. Norah stole a look at the people around her and noted that they were all watching Eilbott rather than the girl—and she was a pretty girl. The way he leaned toward her, the smile he gave her—a smile that reached up and into his eyes. He looked at her as though they were the only people in the world, as though he cared only for her. Maybe the intensity of his concentration was the secret; at any rate, he made the audience feel privileged intruders, each one holding his breath so as not to give away his presence. Norah couldn't hear the dialogue, but actors in movies didn't project the way they did on the stage, and that added to the sense of privacy and caused Norah, as it did everyone else, to strain forward and compensate by watching even more avidly. It was hard to envision this engaging man committing murder, killing eight old women in a manner that was both sly and ruthless.

She reminded herself that he was an actor and that she was watching him at his trade. Then the director yelled "cut." There was a *sotto voce* consultation with the technicians, then the director went into a huddle with his actors. The audience came out of its collective trance. After a few moments the actors returned to their original positions; the whole thing started again.

This time Norah watched the girl, and it seemed to her that she was giving a better account of herself—that she was more believable, but that it wasn't through her own skill but rather a response drawn from her by Eilbott, a response to Eilbott's compelling sincerity. If he had appeared at the door, not one of those forlorn old ladies could have denied him entrance.



When the movie scene was repeated for the third time, Norah stopped watching. There was no doubt that Eilbott could have gained admittance, that he had the strength to overcome the frail victims. Did he have an alibi for any one of the pertinent times? He'd be leaving for Hollywood soon, and closer inquiries could be made in his absence.

"Cut! Take ten."

The announcement jolted Norah out of her reverie. She saw that the director was huddling with his crew and that Eilbott and the young actress were heading in the direction of the trailer. Norah ran after them.

"Excuse me, Mr. Eilbott?"

He turned. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm from the mayor's Office for Film Making. I wonder if you could spare me a couple of minutes?"

"Oh? You bet. Sure."

The actress hesitated and, seeing that she was not included, withdrew. Eilbott waited till she was gone, then bestowed an engagingly diffident smile on Norah. "What can I do for you?"

"As you know, the mayor is very anxious to promote film production in New York. It's our responsibility not only to facilitate a legitimate movie company in getting the various necessary permits to shoot in the city, but also to cooperate in every way we can. So I'm down here to make sure that you have everything you need, give you any assistance . . ."

"That's certainly very nice, but—"

". . . Make sure that you have enough police to handle the crowds. . . ." It was only too obvious that there weren't any crowds and that the two patrolmen on duty weren't paying any attention to the few spectators that were there. Norah hurried on. "The mayor is very anxious that you should be courteously treated."

"I have been, absolutely, but I'm afraid, Miss . . . uh. . . ?"

She smiled up at him. "Norah. You can call me Norah."

"Well, Norah, everything's just fine, but I'm afraid you're talking to the wrong person. I don't have anything to do with the production."

"Oh, I know that. I already spoke to your production manager and to your director, Mr. Stanislas. . . ."

"Sadler," Eilbott corrected. "Stanislas is his first name."

"Really? Anyway, I thought that I should talk to the star, too."

He hesitated. "I'm not really the star."

"Ah, come on, Mr. Eilbott. Give me a break. Just a couple of questions?" She took out notebook and pencil.



"How can I refuse a pretty woman like you? Come on, let's find a place to sit down." He led her to a bench out of the way of both the movie people and the spectators. "Now, shoot."

"You've already indicated that you've been courteously treated by the police and by park personnel?"

"Absolutely."

"Do you have any suggestions for improving procedures for movie making in New York City?"

He shook his head. "I think it's all wonderful." His eyes were fixed on her face. "You know, you make quite a picture. The way the sun draws the gold flashes out of your hair, the blue sky, and that magnolia tree as backdrop—the camera should be on you."

The compliment, coming from a suspect, was unsettling. "Thank you."

"I haven't seen a woman blush like that since . . . since grade school. Oh, please, I'm not making fun of you. It's charming."

What was happening here? Was it possible that Leon Eilbott was baiting her? The possibilities tumbled through Norah's mind. Could he have seen her picture in the paper in connection with the Senior Citizens Squad? Had he recognized her?

"Could I ask you something personal?" she countered.

"Just about anything."

He could be acting, but the way he said it was reassuring. "Doesn't it get boring having to do the same little bit of action over and over again?"

"After a while, sure. It's up to the actor to find nuances to sustain his own interest."

"Is it always like this? I mean, it doesn't seem very glamorous."

The actor laughed. "The glamour is highly overrated, I'll grant you. It's a rough business. There just isn't enough work, and too many people who don't belong trying to get what work there is and making it harder for those who are qualified. But it has its rewards. And I don't mean money necessarily. I'm talking about the opportunity for self-expression. The stage is the most satisfying of all, though its repetitious, too, but in a different way."

"You've been on the stage?" Norah made herself sound naïve and very impressed. "On Broadway?"

"Not exactly. I was in a Broadway show, but it closed out of town."

She knew that, of course. She knew the date of the opening and the closing and how much Leon Eilbott had been paid. "What happens in a case like that?"



He shrugged. "You go out and look for another job."
"Okay, people, let's go. Places, please. Places."

The actor cast a quick look over his shoulder, noting that the crew was ready and the actress with whom he played the scene already straddling her bike. "Listen, Norah, you going to be around for a while? I'll buy you lunch."

"Well. . . ." She hesitated: There weren't that many more questions she could ask without arousing suspicion. "Thanks, but I have to get back to the office."

"Dinner, then. Come on, how about dinner tonight?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Listen, no strings. Honest." He held out his hands, palms up. "Look, no hands—that's a promise. Just dinner. What do you say?"

"Come on, people. Let's go." The production manager was getting annoyed. "How about it, Leon?"

"Coming, coming. Norah—I'll pick you up at seven. Where do you live?"

"Uh . . . no. I'll meet you." Then she remembered to ask, "What's your address?"

His eyes widened, but he recovered quickly, found a card in his wallet, and scribbled on the back. As he handed it to her, he asked, "You're not planning to stand me up, are you?"

"Eilbott! You're on!"

"How'm I doing?" Even as he made the traditional response, the actor winked at Norah and ran for his position.

Norah watched the scene start, then slowly walked away.

Could she have made a mistake about Eilbott? Could they be focusing on the wrong man? Norah asked herself those questions a dozen times during the day. She could see Eilbott committing murder in an explosion of rage and passion. The man she had met this morning wasn't the type to choose an old lady at random, follow her home, force his way into her apartment, and suffocate her whenever he ran short of the rent. Norah bit her lip. How could she make such a judgment on the basis of one brief meeting? Could she dismiss the possibility that he had identified her as a police officer and the whole thing was an act? Either way, act or not, the date was a tremendous opportunity.

She couldn't afford not to keep it.

For one thing, she'd be getting a look at Eilbott's place. Not that Norah expected to find any grisly mementos lying around. Assuming that he kept and displayed any ghoulish souvenirs, they would not be recognizable as such and not admissible as evidence unless



discovered during a legal search backed up by a warrant. Certainly keeping the date would give Norah the opportunity to know Eilbott better, to observe him, and to discover his flaw.

So, then, why was she reluctant?

Physical fear didn't enter into it. She was no frail little old lady. She carried one gun in her shoulder-strap handbag and a second small backup weapon in a leg holster strapped to the inside of her calf. Over the years she had become a good shot; if attacked, she could defend herself. No, that wasn't what she was nervous about. It was four years since Norah Mulcahaney Capretto had had a date with anybody but Joe. She was shy.

She rang Eilbott's bell at five after seven that evening. The door was opened almost immediately.

He gave her an intimate, disarming smile, flashing white, impeccably capped teeth. "I really didn't expect you to show."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I just didn't. I'm glad I was wrong, though. Come on in."

Once over the threshold, Norah's professional curiosity came to the fore. Eilbott's place was half a block down from Central Park West in a remodeled brownstone. Certainly from the outside it couldn't compare to the Gothic splendors on the avenue, but inside it had style, and the style hadn't come cheap. The long, narrow, high-ceilinged room had been stripped of all architectural folderols except for a small mid-Victorian mantel, the walls painted white, the front bay window left uncurtained. The furniture was sparse—sofa, Eames chair (or a very good copy) and ottoman, butcher block and chrome coffee table. She needn't have worried about the significance of knickknacks: There weren't any, just a pair of oversized crystal ashtrays. A single geometric black-and-red print, which to Norah's untrained eye looked like a giant crossword puzzle, hung on one wall. On the opposite wall, however, there was a gallery of photographs, mostly eight-by-ten professional glossies, identically framed. It took only one glance to know that these represented Eilbott's professional life. She couldn't wait to get a closer look.

"Well?"

"Oh . . . I like it."

"Thank you, but what I meant was may I have your coat?"

"Oh, yes. Thank you." She let him help her off with it and watched as he carried it into the next room.

"How about a drink?"

"Scotch and water, please."



She started toward the sofa, settling for the Eames chair instead—she didn't want the situation to get too cozy. But when he came back from the kitchenette with the drink in his hand, he ensconced himself on the ottoman, pulling it close to her knees with a smile that was just a little mocking.

"Mind if I ask you a personal question?" Norah asked.

"I told you this morning—anything. Shoot."

"From what you said, the acting business is pretty uncertain. This is a very nice apartment, in a good neighborhood. You have the time and money for sports. . . ." She had noticed that some of the photographs depicted Eilbott on ski slopes and tennis courts.

He grinned. "You want to know if you can order steak tonight?"

Norah flushed, part of the embarrassment genuine. "I've never dated an actor before."

"Listen, I understand." He chuckled. "I'm a working actor, so you can order filet mignon if you like. And when I'm not working, my family helps me out. Okay?"

She lowered her eyes and sipped her drink. He had no family. Both parents were dead, and the paternal grandparents lived in Florida on meager income. That had been checked out along with everything else about Leon Eilbott. The lie was the first positive indication that the actor was not what he appeared to be. It made Norah feel less guilty about the deception, bolstered her confidence. Subtly the situation had shifted.

Eilbott went on. "They're not rich, you understand, but they've got a little of the green stashed away. A lot of parents don't approve of show business. They think acting is . . . well, not manly, for one thing, and for another, they don't consider it real work. But my folks aren't like that. They believe in me. They're glad to help me out."

Why the elaboration of the lie? Why the almost compulsive justification?

"It's nice that you don't have to take all sorts of odd jobs to keep going like most actors."

"I'm lucky."

This time his smile was forced. Norah waited, but when he said no more, she asked, "Have you been in show business a long time?"

"Too long, considering the results—or lack of them. That's enough about me. Let's talk about you for a while."

"I'm nobody. Tell me some more about the picture. You won't have any trouble getting work after this, will you? You'll be famous."

"I'm afraid it takes more than one television movie to make you



famous, but"—he ducked his head modestly—"I do have a good part, a hell of a good part, and I think I'm good in it. It could be the break I've been waiting for." He sighed and stretched luxuriantly. "I was just about to give up when the call came. Ironic, isn't it? I'd just about decided it was hopeless. Oh, it's not that I haven't worked and had good parts, too. . . ." He gestured expansively to the rows of photographs. "But it was all small time—summer stock, off-off Broadway, even showcase. Nobody saw me, nobody that could do me any good—no agents, producers, like that. They tell you they have to see your work, so you take any job for peanuts, even for free. You rehearse a month and the show lasts a week. Then when you go to their offices, they say, 'Oh, sorry, we missed that one. Be sure to let us know next time.' Your notices don't mean anything; they're just so many pieces of paper."

"It sounds very hard."

"Demeaning. You have to lick everybody's . . . boots. From the receptionist to the producer. What really used to get my goat, still does, is the Trilbys."

"The what?"

"That's what I call the puppets, the performers that have no talent, that some *commedia dell'arte* director picks up off the street because they happen to look like his idea of the part. Then he has to teach them every inflection, every gesture."

"They don't last, do they?"

"They make it. They make it big." For a moment the raw need showed, glittering out of his eyes, ravaging his pleasant face like a consuming and crippling fever. Then it was gone. "How about you, Norah? Why don't you tell me a little about yourself? Don't you think it's about time?"

"There isn't much to tell."

"Sure there is. I sense all kinds of hidden depths."

"In me? No."

"How about your name? You realize you haven't even told me you full name?"

"What's in a name?"

"Could be a lot. An attractive young woman agrees to have dinner with me, to come to my apartment, but she won't tell me her name or where she lives. What am I expected to conclude from that?"

"I don't know." Norah was tense again.

"Obviously that she's married."

She relaxed. "We're separated."



Eilbott nodded. "I didn't think you were the type to play around. It still doesn't explain why you didn't want me to call for you."

"I'd rather not talk about it."

"Come on, Norah, something's bugging you. I can tell. You seem at ease and enjoying yourself, then all of a sudden you tighten up. Why don't you get it off your chest?"

She turned aside. He was too observant—fortunately he was making the wrong inferences.

"You're not afraid of your husband, are you?"

"That's silly." She could laugh at that.

"Because if you are . . . if he's hanging around bothering you . . ."

"No."

"Is that why you didn't want me to come around to your place? Are you afraid that if he sees you going out with another man he'll make trouble? That's it, isn't it?"

"No, honestly."

"Have you called the police? You should."

Accident or calculation, that was too much. "Do you mind if we change the subject?" Norah got up and strolled over to examine the display of photographs. "Are these scenes from the plays and movies you've been in?"

"Plays and TV, yes."

"You certainly have a wide range."

"I used to be what the casting people call a 'character juvenile.' Now I'm too old to be a juvenile," he quipped.

"Do you do your own makeup? It's terrific. I can hardly recognize you in . . . some of these." Norah moved on. Finishing her drink quickly, she held out her glass. "Refill?"

Eilbott raised an eyebrow at the abruptness of the request but took her glass. "Coming right up."

As soon as he was gone, Norah returned to the photograph that had caught her attention. In it Leon Eilbott was dressed in a nineteenth-century frock coat and tall beaver hat. His hair was silvered and the hairline built down to a center peak on his forehead, and he had a thin, elegant mustache so that his face appeared quite differently shaped. But it was the background which had caught Norah's attention—an outline of towers and crenellations which were generally accepted as representing Scotland in the same manner the Eiffel Tower symbolized France. In the lower right-hand corner was the play's title: *The Grave Robbers*.

As though from a distance, barely distinguishable through the roaring in her ears, she heard Eilbott call.



"Norah. . . ."

She jumped, thinking him at her shoulder, but he was still in the kitchen. She called back. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

He stuck his head out. "You're wandering again. I asked what kind of food you were in the mood for tonight."

Her mind was racing. If one saw a picture of a young woman in an old-fashioned dress holding a bloody ax, the name immediately leaping to mind would be Lizzie Borden. So the title of the play, the background, and the actor's costume suggested to Norah a case famous in criminal annals. The parallel between that case and the murders she was presently investigating was inescapable. It had literally stunned her. The first thing she managed to do was move away from the photograph, then somehow she replied.

"What kind of food? Oh, I don't know. I leave it to you."

The photograph was not proof. Strongly presumptive, yes. As corroboration or what the art world calls provenance, intensely valuable, but there had to be more. What she needed was one piece of evidence, just one, to connect Leon Eilbott directly with any one of the eight victims.

She hadn't heard him come up behind her, didn't know he was there till she felt his warm breath on the back of her neck. He stood very close. His left arm encircled her waist. She tensed, holding her breath.

"Hey, you're real jumpy, aren't you?" he whispered, his mouth lightly brushing her hair. Then he brought his right arm around and put the drink in her hand.

Slowly Norah let her breath out again. Now she knew. She knew exactly how it had been done, how all those women, after the first two, had been killed without showing a mark. What was more important, she had an idea how it might be proved. It was a long shot, but she had no doubt that it would pay off. The evidence was here, in this apartment, and tomorrow she intended coming back to find it, legally. She took the drink and, willing her muscles to relax, willing away the tension, turned—still within reach of Leon Eilbott's embrace.

"Thanks."

His eyes caressed her. "I was thinking . . . if you're nervous about being seen, maybe it would be a good idea to eat in? I'll just run over to the market, there's one open all night, pick up a couple of steaks. . . ."

"No, I'd rather not."

"You're the boss." He shrugged, his eyes releasing her. "It was just an idea."



"Some other time." Now it was safe to edge past him, but the thought of spending the rest of the evening with Eilbott, even in a public place . . . well, she didn't think she could maintain the pretense. Not now that she was sure of what he'd done. "If you don't mind, I think I should go home."

"You mean right now? Skip dinner?"

"I'm sorry."

Now she was determined to get away, and as Eilbott himself had provided a reason for her nervousness, she used it. "You were right, I'm more nervous about my husband than I realized. I'm sorry to spoil your evening, but I just wouldn't be good company."

"I never force a lady against her will." He said it lightly, but his annoyance came through.

"Will you give me a rain check?"

"Why not?" He went to the other room and came back with her coat and his.

"You don't need to see me home."

"Whatever you say." He started to go back with the coat.

Norah wavered. It might be better to let him take her home. It would allay his resentment and stop any suspicions from forming later on when he had time to review the evening. She bit her lip. "My husband is . . . a violent man. I wouldn't want . . . anything to happen. But, actually, I'd be grateful if you did see me home. . . . If you wouldn't mind."

Her instincts had been right. Eilbott brightened. As he slipped into his coat, he grinned at her and spoke in a clipped British accent. "Not to worry, luv. I can take care of meself."

Joe had been trying all day to get Norah. He knew it was her day off so he'd given her a little extra time to sleep, but by nine o'clock, when he tried their number, she'd already left. He called at lunchtime, midafternoon, again around six. Where was she? What could she be doing? He tried Mulcahaney, but she wasn't with her father. Around eight Joe decided to go over to the apartment.

There was no answer to his ring, no sound inside. He wasn't anxious, there was no reason to be, but he was disappointed. He had decided that his mother was right, that there was no use waiting for divine intervention to solve his and Norah's problem; they had to do it themselves. He had also acknowledged that he wasn't blameless. He'd complained about the lack of communication, but instead of trying to improve it he'd destroyed what little they had by walking out. He wanted to admit to Norah that he'd been wrong.



Instead he stood uncertainly in front of his own apartment door. He had his key, of course, but he wasn't sure whether or not he should let himself in. He had the right . . . and yet . . . he didn't. That hurt.

He went back down. He left the building, crossed the street, and was starting up the block when he noticed a cab coming around the corner from Madison. There was no reason why he should pay it particular attention, yet instinctively he moved into the nearest doorway. He watched as the cab pulled up in front of their building and a man got out, then handed Norah out. A date. She'd been out on a date. Well, why not? Norah was a beautiful and desirable woman. Joe felt a tightening across his chest as he watched the man, who was very good-looking, escort his wife to the front door. Was she going to ask him up? Thank God he hadn't gone inside to wait. Joe held his breath . . . no, she was sending him away. Without even a friendly good-night kiss! Joe let his breath out slowly, aware of the extent of the strain only by the measure of his present relief.

But though Norah was gone, her date showed no sign of moving on. He stood at the edge of the sidewalk looking up toward the window of the apartment. After a few moments the curtain was pulled aside and Norah appeared. She waved. The man waved back. The curtain fell and finally the man sauntered off.

Joe remained where he was, inside the doorway.

Okay, okay, so Norah had been out on a date. He'd looked up an old girlfriend, hadn't he? The ending of that little incident still brought a glow of embarrassment. Forget it. He couldn't. He hadn't expected it of Norah; it wasn't like her. On the other hand, it couldn't have been much of an evening for her either or she wouldn't have come home this early. Joe felt a lot more cheerful. Also, she hadn't invited her date up. That tender wave from the window, though . . . he wasn't too crazy about that.

He left the doorway and started across the street toward the house. No. He stopped at the curb. This was not the moment to approach Norah. No. He'd had news for her, too, big news, that he'd been eager to share, but the joy was gone. Another time. He'd tell her about it another time—assuming she still cared.



Norah got the information she wanted the next day at the New York Public Library, music and drama branch. The off-off Broadway play in which Leon Eilbott had briefly appeared (five performances) had somehow found a publisher. A quick scanning confirmed what Norah had suspected. There had been other, better known and better rendered versions of the famous case, but *The Grave Robbers* was indeed the story of Dr. Robert Knox of Edinburgh and the trade in corpses for dissection during the early nineteenth century.

At the time, Edinburgh was renowned for its medical schools, but the bodies that anatomists needed for study were hard to come by. Demand created supply, and the doctors' zeal for knowledge spawned a brisk trade in grave robbing. A particularly adept and enterprising pair of grave robbers named Burke and Hare, however, greedy for profit, grew impatient with waiting for the natural death and decent burial of the merchandise. They evolved a method of speeding up the process. Obviously the deaths had to appear natural, both for the sake of the buyer as well as the seller and also to preserve the integrity of the various organs for the subsequent examination. Therefore the victim had to be selected with some care: He had to be alone in the world so that embarrassing questions would not be asked later; he had to be old and weak, preferably made helpless by drink. Having found such a likely prospect, one of the team would throw him to the ground and hold him there by the weight of his own body on the chest, then a hand was placed over nose and mouth and the other hand used to force the lower jaw hard against the upper. The combination caused asphyxiation with almost no trace of trauma. In fact, so expeditious was the method and so nearly undetectable that the unsavory team of Burke and Hare dispatched uncounted numbers of unfortunates before they were apprehended. The method was dubbed "burking" after its initiator and principal practitioner.

Particularly suited to the needs of the time, burking appeared to have little modern application—till now. The grisly case was famous in both medical and legal annals. As an avid reader of everything



connected with police work Norah was particularly intrigued by stories of famous cases and trials, had accumulated a surprising amount of forensic and legal knowledge, and was generally familiar with the case. Leon Eilbott knew about it because he had been in a show that told the dreadful story. What Norah knew (though she'd had to refresh her memory by consulting the pertinent section in her *Legal Medicine, Pathology, and Toxicology*) and the actor did not know, however, was that twentieth-century medicine had developed a test by which the nineteenth-century method could be detected and its user convicted.

The next step was to check her theory with Doc Osterman. The ME was intrigued but cautious. She was told that her reconstruction was plausible, certainly, and medically consistent, but her theory for proving it a real long shot. "Always assuming that he used anything other than his bare hands to cut off the victim's air," Osterman reminded her.

"We have to hope that he was too fastidious to use his bare hands," Norah replied. "That being so, I don't think he'd rely on finding something at the scene. He'd bring it with him and take it away again."

"We also have to hope that some saliva escaped from the victim's mouth before he slammed it shut for her."

"Or maybe some mucus from her nostrils. . . ."

Osterman grunted. "Assuming we get enough of the exemplar—saliva or mucus—to permit testing, we come to the biggest hurdle. Was the victim a secretor? There are two types of individuals—those who have the ability to secrete the specific substances by which we can deduce blood type in their tissues and organs and those who do not. If the victim belonged to the group that doesn't secrete, then finding the mucus or the saliva isn't going to do us any good."

Norah refused to be discouraged. "But if she was a secretor and her saliva does yield her blood group, then we've got him. How's he going to explain a saliva stain with the victim's blood group on something that belongs to him?"

"Depends on what the something is," Osterman observed tartly. "I'm not saying it's not worth a try, I'm just reminding you that there's a whole chain of conditions to be fulfilled." He paused. "Has it occurred to you that Eilbott might himself be a secretor?"

"Ah, Doc. . . ." Norah was impatient with what she considered his scientific fussiness. "It's no different from testing an ordinary bloodstain to find out if it belongs to the victim or the suspect. You wouldn't argue about the odds then."



"I'm trying to point out the probabilities, but since you apparently already know them, go ahead."

"Asa. . . ."

"Go ahead, Sergeant, go on. Nobody's stopping you." He dropped the receiver back onto the cradle with a clatter that made Norah wince.

By midmorning Norah had her warrant and was ready. She took David with her, choosing him not merely because he'd done the major work on Leon Eilbott but because she still felt most comfortable working with him.

"Do you care whether or not Eilbott knows we've given his place a toss?"

Norah considered. They both knew that the actor would not be at home, that he'd be out on location. "I don't think it matters. As long as he doesn't know what we're looking for."

"What are we looking for?" David asked.

"Something with spit on it."

David gaped at her. "Spit?"

Carefully Norah explained.

If the killer had used an old rag, he would have thrown it away. If he'd used a handkerchief over the victim's nose and mouth, that would have been laundered many times over by now. Norah clung to her faith that having at last discovered the method, they would not now be thwarted in proving it. In fact, she had convinced herself that Leon Eilbott had not used a rag or a handkerchief or even a scarf, but had—quite simply—worn gloves. Wasn't that the simple and logical explanation of the total absence of fingerprints at any of the various crime scenes? So while David went through Leon Eilbott's bureau drawers, Norah examined his closets and almost immediately came on what she'd been hoping and praying to find—a pair of gloves, one of which, the left, showed a scummy stain on the palm. She broke out in a cold sweat, and her knees wobbled with relief. The gloves were quite evidently new, but they'd been stuffed into the pocket of a very old and dilapidated raincoat. The left glove was immediately sent to the lab; the right glove was given to Brennan to trace.

The leather was thin but strong, of fine quality, and the word "Firenze" was stamped on the inside. There weren't that many importers of fine leather gloves in the city and even fewer retail outlets. One of them was an elegant new shop on Seventy-ninth and Columbus Avenue. The owner knew the merchandise; it had sold



well. He was perfectly willing to consult his records, though most of the transactions had been cash. When Brennan reported to Norah that Leon Eilbott's name had appeared on a Master Charge voucher for the gloves, she was sure that the breaks were finally going their way. If the stain on the left palm was in fact saliva, the odds were fifty-fifty that it would have the qualities necessary to determine the blood group of the victim. There was nothing to do but wait for the lab report.

Though the job had top priority, it still took time. Norah sat at her desk long after she was off duty waiting for the phone to ring. David didn't go home when he was supposed to either. He said he had other work to do, which undoubtedly he had, but she also knew that the work could have waited. He was staying to keep her company. They sat desks apart, the normal confusion of the squad room between them, yet his presence was a comfort. At one point David made a phone call he didn't want her to know about. The signs were easy to read—wary glances in her direction, turning his back when he spoke and cupping his hand over the mouthpiece. He had to be canceling something he and Marie had planned. Later on, Norah thought, she'd have to thank Marie, let David's wife know that she appreciated the sacrifice of their evening. For now she was just grateful.

At a little after eight Norah's phone rang.

"Homicide, Sergeant Mulcahaney." It was the lab. Her eyes sought David's, and he came right over. "There was sufficient exemplar to conduct the tests? Good, good." She exchanged congratulatory smiles with David. "Did it yield a blood type? . . . Terrific. And. . . ?

She stopped similing. "You're sure?"

"Well, thanks anyway, Harry. . . . Yeah, I'm sorry, too. I thought the odds were in our favor, but. . . . No, don't bother to call him. I'll talk to Asa in the morning." She hung up.

"What? What happened?"

"The saliva yielded an AB blood type."

It took a couple of seconds before he realized what that meant. "Oh, God. I don't believe it. I just don't believe it."

Norah sighed heavily.

"It was one hell of a good idea, Norah. We could have nailed him."

"Sure."

"Those are the breaks, kid." He rested a hand on her shoulder. "Well, we'll just have to come up with something else."



Norah nodded, but she had no such hope. She was discouraged, depleted, wrung out. She had agonized over this case, twisted and turned the facts looking for the loophole and had been convinced that she'd finally found it. As each link in the chain of her reasoning was validated, she became more confident. Induction was proved fact. To fail now, at the every end, was that much more disheartening. The irony of it was that the final lab test did not invalidate the preceding evidence. It did not exonerate Leon Eilbott. It didn't say he hadn't committed the crimes; it merely failed to provide proof that he did.

The test had successfully identified the saliva stain on Eilbott's glove and extracted the victim's blood group from it—type AB. AB is the rarest group. Only three to five percent of the population have it. Grace Swann had it. Unfortunately, according to his military record, so did Leon Eilbott.

The odds against their both having AB blood were twenty to one.

The first thing Norah did the next morning when she got to work was call Asa Osterman. As usual, the ME was fatalistic; it really had been too much to expect, too much of a long shot. He really wasn't surprised.

But she wouldn't give up, not yet. "Wasn't there some way to differentiate within the same blood group?"

"Sure," Osterman replied. "Any number of ways. There are M, N, MN subdivisions. There are Rh factors and Kell-Cellano factors. Any of them would differentiate the blood of the victim from that of the suspect despite their being of the same major group. There's just one problem: Only a sample of the blood itself will yield the information—not the saliva."

Norah was silent.

"There is one possibility."

She perked up.

"I did mention to you that Eilbott might be a secretor. Suppose he's a nonsecretor."

She gasped. "I forgot. How could I forget? That's it, Doc, that's it!"

"Of course, in order to find out, you've got to get me some exemplar. A used handkerchief if it has some mucus on it would do. Even a cigarette stub might yield enough."

"He doesn't smoke. I'll check his laundry. . . ." She had been riffling through the messages on her desk. One caught her eye; it concerned Eilbott. He had called to protest the invasion of his



apartment. "I should have done it while I was there." She slammed her fist hard on the desk top. "I goofed. Oh, blessed Virgin, how I goofed!"

"Hell, it was up to me to warn you to pick up something of the suspect's just in case," Osterman soothed.

"You tried, Asa; I wouldn't listen. I was just too eager and too sure of myself. As usual," she added bitterly.

Osterman cleared his throat. "It happens to all of us sometimes; why should you be any different? So forget it. Think of something else. You can do it."

"Thanks, Asa," Norah murmured, but the tough little man, ashamed of having shown that much sentiment, had already hung up.

So. Norah heaved a sigh and gave a desultory look at the rest of the message. Eilbott's call had been referred to Brennan, and Roy had told the actor that if he wanted further information he'd have to contact the officer in charge. He hadn't given Norah's name, and Eilbott, who was leaving for Hollywood momentarily, had been too preoccupied to ask. He had assured Brennan, however, that when he got back the officer would be hearing from him. It was the least of Norah's troubles.

For Norah the elderly, defenseless, and trusting victims of Eilbott's assembly-line murders had become symbols of all the pathetic old people who were daily assaulted in all kinds of ways—some of them legal. She felt that by avenging these eight women she would be avenging the others, at least serving notice that they could not be violated with impunity. Of course she would manage somehow to get hold of a sample of Eilbott's saliva. Assuming that the test results were favorable, she realized now that it might not be enough to convince a jury—even in conjunction with the burking MO. She wanted Eilbott brought to trial with as little chance of acquittal as possible.

The actor was due back in a week. He had assured Brennan that he would then look up the officer who had searched his apartment. Innocent, his indignation was warranted; guilty, he had to go through the motions. The confrontation was inevitable. Norah wondered how she might use it.

It doesn't take much to disrupt a shooting schedule: a star's temperament, illness or accident, from trivia to cataclysm, the delays are legendary. They can bring even a major studio to the edge of bankruptcy and certainly wipe out an independent. Director Stanislas Sadler was the darling of the television film industry for his



ability to maintain a tight schedule and thus bring in his pictures comfortably under the limit. It was certainly unusual for Sadler to require retakes, particularly on location. Of course, going back to New York wasn't all that expensive; he could work with a local crew, and both the leading actors, Leon Eilbott and Linda Turner, were from New York and their return fare had to be paid anyway.

The location was to be Rockefeller Center, specifically the sunken plaza, an area dear to the heart of filmmakers because it was so recognizably *New York*. The whole thing would be handled with a minimum of fuss. The camera would be concealed in a doorway and camouflaged with heavy padding so that only the lens remained uncovered and the casual passerby would not even be aware that there was anything unusual going on. Sadler's reputation for economy suited Norah's purpose, for she wasn't particularly eager to attract attention either. The choice of scene was close to ideal: It was almost completely self-enclosed and would require only a couple of men to block the stairs leading down from the promenade and a couple more at the doorways at substreet level; her people could also mix in with the public unobtrusively. Of course, Rockefeller Center is private property, but the center's public relations office lived up to its reputation for sympathy and cooperation, and as it was between seasons—the skating rink having closed and the outdoor restaurant not yet opened—they readily granted a shooting permit.

Even the weather assisted in restoring Stanislas Sadler's reputation for bringing in a picture on schedule. At eight A.M. on the Saturday the temperature was sixty-three degrees and expected to hit close to eighty; humidity comfortable; sun mellow in a clear sky; breeze just enough to ruffle the tender new green of the street trees. The stores along Fifth Avenue were fresh and bright with their Easter displays. It was as though the avenue had put on its best face to be photographed, Norah thought as she walked from the bus stop. She had planned the coming interview in detail, outlined it on paper, and learned the points she must cover. Experience, however, had taught her not to fix herself too rigidly, but to leave some flexibility and to be ready to receive impressions and insights so that she could take advantage of unexpected opportunities. As a rule she made it a practice to clear her mind before an important interrogation. But today it was more difficult than usual. There was a bad traffic jam in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral. A fleet of buses had lined up and were unloading passengers. Horns blared, drivers shouted, pedestrians jostled one another as they dodged between cars to cross the intersection. Norah hardly noticed. She had just



been informed that the Senior Citizens Squad was to be terminated.

Jim Felix had assured her that it was purely an economy measure; as such, it was hardly unexpected. The city had been in crisis for a long time. Wave after wave of firings had shaken the department. With men uncertain about whether they would have a job, and the city uncertain about whether it could pay those who had, she could not protest. Still, she was depressed. Today was the last day of the unit's existence and her last day as its head. She was determined to wrap up the case so that it would go on record as having been solved by the unit. She wanted them both to go out big. She squared her shoulders, thrust out her chin, and turned the corner into the Rockefeller Center Promenade.

It was still too early for more than a handful of shoppers to be peering into windows or tourists to be out sightseeing, and that was all to the good. Norah walked purposefully past the display of tulips and dogwood trees toward the stairs that led into the sunken plaza. Augie Baum leaned idly against the parapet smoking a cigarette; Gus Schmidt was apparently lost in contemplation of a display of men's haberdashery. Neither so much as glanced at her as she passed. She paused to check the disposition of the film people and her unit below. Sadler and the cameraman were to the left of the golden statue of Prometheus, the camera itself set up in the doorway of the French restaurant. She spotted Brennan and Link among the men surrounding the director. Link looked up. Norah squinted and raised her hand to shield her eyes.

Just then Sadler called out, "Okay, people. Let's go."

Eilbott stepped out of the shadows behind the statue and joined the director for instructions. With him was the girl who'd worked in the scene at the park a week earlier. After a brief consultation they separated, taking positions on opposite sides of the concealed camera. The handful of people involved were quiet and alert; the public on the street above went about its business unconcerned. At a nod from Sadler, Eilbott moved forward into camera range, looking in the direction of the girl. He waved to her and started to speak and the shriek of a fire engine seemed to come right out of his mouth.

"Cut, cut!" Sadler called. "Damn," he muttered.

Nobody was very excited; it was the kind of thing you got used to on location.

Sadler only shrugged as the wailing and clangng grew louder; evidently more than one engine was passing. For the first time the director seemed to notice the young actress. "Say, honey, is that what wardrobe gave you for this scene? It's wrong. Completely out



of character. We've got to find you something else. Come on." He led her into the restaurant.

This was the moment Norah had been waiting for. She started down the stairs and approached Eilbott.

"Hi."

"Norah! Well, Norah . . . this is a surprise. I didn't expect to see you." He grinned. "Come to see if our permits are in order and if everybody's happy?"

"Not this time."

"Oh? What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you."

"Really? That's an unexpected pleasure."

"You asked to see me. You called the precinct and said you wanted to talk to the officer responsible for searching your apartment. That's me."

He gaped. "You're a police officer? You're putting me on."

Delving into her handbag, Norah brought out her ID and held it open for him to see. "Okay?"

"Sergeant Mulcahaney." He read the name, looked at the picture, then looked at Norah. "Mulcahaney," he repeated.

"Ring a bell?" she asked.

"You came back to my apartment the next day?" He wanted to know.

"With a warrant."

"That was a lousy thing to do. I mean the act you put on—all that talk about your husband, how scared of him you were, how nervous about his seeing us together. And I swallowed it. I fell for it all."

"My husband and I are separated; I told you the truth about that. The rest was your idea."

"You didn't tell me I was wrong. You let me go on thinking it. Anyhow"—he dismissed that with a wave of his hand—"let's get to the point, Sergeant Mulcahaney. Why are you so interested in me? I assume this visit isn't any more social than the first one was. So what do you want?"

"First, I have to inform you of your rights." Norah began the official recitation. "You have the right to remain—"

"This comes a little late, doesn't it? Shouldn't you have gone through this a week ago? You're not from the mayor's film office and you never were. You lied. You tried to set me up and you used your sex to do it."

She'd never been accused of that before. Norah flushed. "I only meant to observe you. You asked me for a date."



"And you accepted. You came into my home as a friend. You snooped around under false pretenses. You're not supposed to do that," he accused, shoulders hunched, face drawn, mouth in a straight hard line. Then, all at once, he changed.

"Oh, hell, Norah, I'm sorry." He gave her that special, engaging, and, this time, slightly aggrieved smile. "I don't mean to blow up at you, but it is quite a shock to find out that the pretty woman I was trying to make time with is a police officer, not only that but a police officer investigating me." His eyes pleaded. "What am I supposed to have done, Norah?"

Could it really be that her name meant nothing to him? Was it possible that he didn't know? Well, for now she had to play it his way. "You may remember a while back, in late November, there was a lot of publicity about several unexplained deaths in an apartment hotel called the Westvue."

"I think so." He frowned. "Sure. Didn't some kid confess?"

"He didn't do it."

"Oh? So? Wait a minute, wait a minute! I know who you are. I've got you now. You're the lady detective who stumbled on the whole hornet's nest. You got your husband—a lieutenant—fired. . . . But I thought the police claimed the deaths were natural. As I recall the newspaper stories, the medical examiner insisted there was no foul play. That was your husband's defense."

He talked as though Joe were on trial, Norah thought, but she refused to rise to the bait. It was a good act, very good, and she must keep reminding herself that acting was his business. "We've since uncovered other deaths that fit the same pattern."

For a moment he showed surprise, but covered it quickly. "I should think that would make your husband's position worse."

Norah ignored that. "Each victim died by suffocation. Each victim was a female, elderly, living alone. Each one died on the third day of the month. Each one was on Social Security and on the third of the month received her check, which she then cashed at the Federated Check-Cashing Service on Broadway. You used to work for Federated."

"Oh, for God's sake, is that what this is all about?" He seemed both relieved and angry. "Why didn't you say so? You could have saved us both a lot of time and anxiety. I quit Federated over a year ago."

"You quit on January eleventh because you got a job in a Broadway show."

He raised an eyebrow. "Right."

"The show folded out of town, in Philadelphia. Six weeks after



you quit Federated, you tried to get your old job back. But the manager wasn't having you. He was mad as hell at you for leaving without notice and he swore he'd never hire another actor again."

"Okay, that's true. So what?"

"So you didn't get work till August that year when you were in an industrial show that lasted another six weeks. January of this year you did a TV commercial. This is your only other job. How have you been living?"

"You already asked me that."

"And you told me that your family helps you out."

He shrugged. "Okay, so I lied. But they used to help me out."

"Answer the question."

"I play the numbers. I'm lucky at the track. I don't have to tell you where I get my money. It's none of your business."

"It is if you killed eight defenseless old women to get it."

"Eight!"

"That's how many we've discovered so far. Were there more?"

"God! Norah . . . do you honestly believe that I did such a thing? I know we've only spent a couple of hours together, but even in that short time I sensed a rapport between us. If you believe me capable of this . . . then I guess I was wrong." He sighed. "Why pick on me? Why don't you go hassle the other employees at Federated?"

"They have alibis."

"Maybe I do, too. Why don't you ask me? Why don't you tell me the times involved and I'll—"

"Try to come up with something? I don't think you can, but it's not important. You see, none of the other employees of Federated can be presumed to have any knowledge of burking."

He paled at that. Despite the layer of makeup, Norah could see the color drain out of his face. His eyes narrowed speculatively; the tip of his tongue licked at the cleft in his upper lip. "You saw the picture on my wall, so there's no use denying that I know what you're talking about. Sure, I know about burking and so does every other actor and stagehand and usher and cleaning woman connected with the show. And everybody in the audience that came to see it."

"None of them worked for Federated."

"You can't make a case out of that. That's a coincidence!" he roared, then he made another of those complete reversals. "You know what I think, Norah, luv? I think you're on a fishing expedition. I don't believe you have a single damn thing on me."

"Actually, we do have a very strong circumstantial case against



you, Leon." She had reached a crossroads. There were two ways the interrogation could go: She could try to trick Eilbott, but she didn't think he'd fall for it and if he did, his lawyer might later charge entrapment. She decided to play it straight. "We know that you're guilty. The trouble is we can't prove it."

Eilbott frowned. As an actor he was trained to transmit meaning by the most subtle inflection, the most imperceptible of gestures, so he also knew how to interpret such signs in others. He knew that Norah was telling the truth; what he couldn't fathom was why she'd made the admission.

"What's more, you know that we can't prove it," Norah said casually, almost carelessly. "But we came close. You have no idea how close." She permitted herself a fleeting sigh.

Eilbott's eyes never left her face.

"I don't mind telling you," Norah went on, "our main obstacle is proving that murder was committed at all. And that, of course, is what you're depending on—that we can't prove it. I'm sure that once you discovered burking, you thought you had an undetectable murder method. After all, it took his accomplice's testimony to put the noose around the neck of your model, Burke. But medicine has advanced since the days when it was necessary to buy corpses from grave robbers for medical study. For instance, we know now that all blood is not the same, not even human blood. There are several distinct groupings."

Despite himself, Eilbott nodded like an earnest student at a lecture.

"Everybody knows that it's a relatively simple matter to determine to which group a person belongs, but did you know it doesn't require a sample of the actual blood to do it? It doesn't. The blood group can be determined by the analysis of other body secretions. The saliva, for example." She paused to give him a chance not only to assimilate that but perhaps to anticipate what was coming.

"Since we found no unexplained fingerprints at any of the scenes of the suspected homicides, we reasoned that the killer wore gloves. It was possible that when he placed his gloved hand over the victim's nose and mouth, some of her saliva might have trickled out and stained the glove. That's what we were looking for when we searched your place, Leon—the gloves you wore when you killed those women and, we hoped, one victim's spittle on the palm."

Eilbott remained transfixed.

"We did find the gloves," she informed him. "And the stain, too."

They had both forgotten time and place. Certainly they were



not aware that the fire engines that had disrupted the shooting had long since passed out of earshot. Nobody came near to tell them.

"We thought it didn't matter which of your victims' saliva was on the glove, but we were wrong. The saliva was Grace Swann's. Her blood group is AB."

It took Leon Eilbott several seconds to grasp the significance.
"I'm AB."

"Yes, I know, but she was a secretor; you may not be."

He looked sick. He turned away, shoulders shaking so that Norah thought he was going to throw up. After a few moments he faced her again, pale and grim, but in control.

"If you think I'm going to submit to any cockamamy tests, forget it."

"Up to you." Norah shrugged. She opened her handbag, took out a handkerchief, and wiped her face.

"Okay, people, we're back in business," Stanislas Sadler announced.

Eilbott started to take his place.

"Where do you think you're going?" Norah asked. "You're not going to be playing any scenes for a while."

He gaped at her. "But . . . but you just said—"

"I said the saliva test was inconclusive. I didn't say I wouldn't arrest you." She opened her handbag and this time brought out a pair of handcuffs.

He stared at the handcuffs, then at her. "I don't believe this. I don't believe any of this. You mean you're not going to let me do the scene? You can't stop me."

"Try me."

"But why? What's the point? It's crazy. The whole thing is crazy. You said yourself you don't have any real evidence. You have to arrest me to protect your job, is that it?"

"I should warn you that I'm not here alone, Leon. There are detectives covering the area—working with the crew, in the restaurants, on the stairs."

He didn't even bother to look where she pointed. "I don't care how many men you've got, I'm playing the scene. You'll have to carry me away to stop me."

"We can do that."

"You mean it, don't you? You really mean it?" He sighed. "Norah, don't you understand what this scene means? I'm not asking just for myself. If I don't do the scene, the picture won't be finished and that's going to hurt everybody—the other actors, the designers, writers, producers. . . ."



"I'm sorry."

"Sorry isn't good enough! Norah, please!" He clasped his hands in earnest appeal. "Please, let me do the scene. How long is it going to take? A few minutes, a quarter of an hour at most. I know you have no feeling for me, that the feeling is all on my side, but what's a quarter of an hour to you? For me it's my whole professional career. I've waited so long. I've sacrificed so much. I can't get away. Where can I go?" Looking around to emphasize the point, the actor seemed at last aware that escape was effectively blocked. "If you don't let me play this scene and finish the picture, they'll get somebody else. They'll replace me. They'll throw out all my footage and reshoot. It'll be expensive but they won't have any choice."

"I imagine they'll wait a few days before doing anything that drastic. You'll be released by then, if you're innocent."

His eyes held on her for a long time.

"Well, we both know it'll be more than a few days before I'm released. You're a smart lady, a real smart lady." He took a step toward her, and despite her best efforts, Norah flinched. "Okay, what's the idea? What do you want? A confession? Okay, I'll confess."

He had taken the bait! Norah sucked in her breath and felt the clammy, cold, nervous goose bumps break out all over. Just how deep in was the hook? She probed.

"You could deny it all later," she told him. "No, thanks, I've been that route before. I'm taking you in."

He froze. His face was pale, muscles rigid. After a moment he glanced over his shoulder toward the concealed camera and the waiting crew, then back to Norah.

She'd read him right, Norah thought. He'd counted on a one-on-one situation, her word against his. She could have got herself wired, of course, but she didn't want to be accused of trickery or entrapment. Quietly, almost soothingly, as though offering a solution, she murmured, "I have a tape recorder."

"Oh? Well. . . ." He hesitated.

Was he figuring the odds on beating a tape confession? Norah wondered. Leon Eilbott was a man obsessed. He saw this movie as his chance for fame. He had come down a long road to this moment, sacrificed so many women to his monomania, his white whale. Norah was gambling that he wouldn't, or couldn't, stop now.

"Okay," he said suddenly. "Okay. Let's get the show on the road."

For just a second Norah's eyes closed and she permitted herself a soft sigh of relief, then she took the little machine out of her bag. "You're making this confession of your own free will?"



"Yes, yes, absolutely. What do you want me to say?"

He was so eager. She had the impression of an actor in the wings impatient to make his entrance. "I want the truth."

"Really? Really, Sergeant Mulcahaney?" He thought that having made a deal, he had a right to arrogance. "I don't believe that. I've been trying to figure your stake in this. You got your husband into hot water over this case and it looks to me like everything you've done since is making it worse. Maybe you don't care, but if you're interested in repairing the damage, I'm willing to help. I'll get your husband off the hook. I'll say whatever you want me to say. I'll confess or deny whatever you tell me to."

It was an outrageous suggestion, of course, but for a moment, just one, Norah allowed herself to think about what it could mean for Joe and for her . . . and was shocked at how tempted she was.

"No."

"No what?"

"No deal." She was even more shocked at the regret.

"Then what the hell are you after?" he shouted.

"The truth. The truth, whatever it may be. I want to know exactly what you did and didn't do."

"I could pile it on, you know. Really fix your husband. Make him look like a bum . . . and you, too."

She had herself in hand again. "Why should you?"

"To get even."

"I'll take the chance."

"How do I know that you'll keep your part of the bargain? How do I know that after I tell you what you want you'll let me play the scene? How do I know you won't march me right off to jail?"

What could she tell him? How could she convince him? "I didn't have to tell you the truth about the saliva test. I could have let you think the results proved you guilty."

Slowly Elbott nodded. Again he looked toward the hidden camera, then at Stanislas Sadler. He swallowed.

"Give me a couple of minutes, will you, Stan?" he called, then drew back into the shadow of the statue.

Norah followed, held up the recorder, and flipped the switch again. A contemplative look came over his face as he addressed himself to the machine.

"I think the first thing I want to say is that I never intended to hurt any of the poor old things. I didn't want them to suffer, not even for a second, if I could help it. And that is the God's truth. Actually, I was very sorry for them. They were waiting to die. I did them a favor. I put an end to their waiting."



For Norah the logic behind a murder always exerted a dreadful fascination. What was particularly appalling to her in this instance was that Eilbott really had pitied his victims. She wanted to hear no more of that. "Start with the women at the Westvue. Phoebe Laifer. If she was the first?"

He appeared lost in thought.

"She was a writer of children's books. Manually strangled."

"Yes, yes, I know. I remember." He was irritated at being prompted. It was as though he were playing a scene and a line had been thrown to him when he didn't need it. "I was sorry about her. She struggled. She was a lot stronger than I had anticipated. I couldn't hold her down long enough to cut off her air with my hands. She bit me. Here, here, look—you can still see the mark."

By this time the scar had almost disappeared, but it loomed still raw in Eilbott's sight because he remembered the pain, and in Norah's because she could visualize the victim's desperation.

"It was after that that I started wearing gloves."

A much better reason than Norah had come up with and a detail which would help authenticate the confession.

"She bit me, and naturally I pulled my hand away. As soon as I did that, she started to yell. I had to shut her up. I really had no choice. I bungled the whole thing," Eilbott admitted. "To start with, Miss Laifer was a bad choice. I was more careful in my next selection, and then, too, my technique improved."

Norah was revolted.

He caught her look. "When I say that Miss Laifer was a mistake, I don't mean because she put up such a fight, but because she was still productive. The others were not only unwanted, friendless, but they had long since stopped fulfilling any useful function. Their lives had no meaning. I gave meaning to their dying. To each one I explained my ambition and my dedication. I told each one about my dear mother. How she'd been a promising young actress and had given up her career to bear me and to raise me. How I felt obliged to succeed for her sake. How I'd promised her on her deathbed that I would never give up. I asked for their help and they were glad to give it. Each one was glad for me to have the money."

Sure, Norah thought, sure. The terrified victim had been only too eager to put the money in his hands, thinking thereby to buy her life. "Let's get on to victim number two: Bernice Hoysradt. She was suffocated by a gag stuffed too far down her windpipe."

"She had no strength at all. After Miss Laifer I expected more resistance. I only brought the gag to prevent her screaming, and I guess I forced it down too hard. I was still new at it."



Norah hurried on. "Estelle Waggoner." He frowned. "I don't remember her." "She was stabbed."

"No. I never stabbed anybody. I wouldn't do that. I told you, I tried to make it as easy as possible for them."

"Mrs. Waggoner was seventy years old, blond, she'd been in vaudeville."

"A performer? I wouldn't take money from another performer. Never."

"You couldn't know her past history."

"After Miss Laifer I made it a point to find out as much as I could about them. I sort of arranged to run into them and talk a little before the final decision."

"So that when you rang the doorbell you were no stranger. They weren't afraid to let you in. Mrs. Swann even served you tea. In her best china," Norah added bitterly.

He flushed at that, as though he'd been accused of a breach of etiquette.

Norah sighed. "You're sure about Estelle Waggoner?"

"I never stabbed anybody. I never took money from another performer. I did take money from Miss Laifer and that little bony Miss Hoysradt and Mrs. Swann. There were, I think . . . four others . . . I think. I'm not sure. I'm sorry, I can't seem to remember. Suddenly I can't remember them individually. It was so easy, you see, after the first two or three. But I should remember. I owe them remembrance. I owe them that." He appeared both confused and distressed. "I do know that I was as gentle as I could be with each one. I didn't spill blood." Then, to prove that he was telling the truth, he added, "I can't stand the sight of blood."

Norah shuddered. She had never been completely satisfied with Doc Osterman's theory that the killer had been experimenting with various MO's. Floundering, yes, but always within the same style.

"So how about it, Norah?" Eilbott broke into her reverie. "Can we shoot now?"

"What? Oh, yes, sure. Go ahead."

He metamorphosed before her eyes—from a loser he became a winner. Shoulders back, stomach in, head tilted at an insouciant angle, he strolled to his position in front of the camera. "Sorry to have kept you all waiting," he announced, then called to the director, "Do we need another run-through, Stan? Why don't we make this one a take?"

"If you think you're ready, Leon, sure."

"I'm ready."



"Okay. Quiet on the set. Quiet, please. This is a take."

Within the silence there was an uneasy stirring. David Link slipped to Norah's side. "You think this is a good idea?"

"I promised." She shrugged. "Where can he go? What can he do?"
"Action."

Aware that everyone's eyes were on him, the actor began to play his part. He walked slowly and deliberately into camera range, waved to the girl, speaking softly for the boom mike alone. Then Eilbott turned and looked directly into the lens, holding the pose for what Norah supposed would be a close-up.

"Cut! Cut and print," Sadler announced with considerable satisfaction. "Nice work, Leon. Nice work, everybody. Thank you."

On the instant, the job of packing up began. Not that there was much to it, just the stripping of the camouflage from the camera, dismantling it and the sound equipment. Sadler and the actress scurried out of the way, but Leon Eilbott seemed to be in some kind of trance. Standing in place, he was jostled and shoved—his moment in the spotlight over.

"Look at him, David," Norah murmured. "He looks lost, confused; he's a totally different person now that the scene is over. What is he? Some kind of schizophrenic? A psycho? What?"

"He's a killer," the detective replied coldly, without compassion. "A homicidal maniac. Let's get him."

Leon Eilbott smiled when he saw them coming and backed off a couple of steps. He had his own script to follow. "Where are the rest of your people?" he asked Norah. "I don't see all those detectives. Where's the fuzz? Where are you?" he called in his most booming actor's voice, and looked around the sunken plaza and up at the pedestrians along the promenade. "Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

Baum and Schmidt instantly ran down and took positions at the foot of the stairs. Brennan, dropping all pretense of working with the crew, moved to within a couple of feet of Eilbott. Arenas materialized on his other side.

"That's better." Eilbott nodded approvingly and, before either Norah or Link could make a move, jumped up to the parapet around the statue's base as though he were leaping up on a stage.

Whereas she had been anxious to attract as little attention as possible, attention was what Eilbott wanted, Norah realized.

"Come and get me!" he yelled gleefully.

Instantly the detectives formed a half circle in front of him, guns drawn. Everybody else scattered—fast. Once again Leon Eilbott was the center of attention.



The actor smiled broadly.

"That's more like it," he said. "Okay, here's the way we're going to play it." He pointed to Norah, who was picking herself up. "On cue, you, Sergeant Mulcahaney, will step forward and put the cuffs on me. As soon as you hear the click, you too"—he indicated Brennan and Link—"will fall in one either side of us. Then you"—he indicated Schmidt and Baum—"in front, with you"—Arenas—"in the rear. When we're all formed up, we'll march past the camera and up the stairs." He frowned. "What are you waiting for?" he demanded of the cameraman. "Set up the shot."

The cameraman hesitated.

"Set up the shot," Eilbott snarled.

"What the hell!" David Link grunted and started forward, but Norah put a hand out to hold him back.

"We'll do it his way."

"Quiet!" Eilbott called. "Quiet on the set. Everybody stay where you are," he ordered.

It wasn't necessary; everybody was frozen in place.

"Action. Come on, Norah."

And Norah did as she'd been instructed, and so did everybody else.

"They won't dare replace me now," Eilbott murmured in her ear as they passed the camera. "This will be terrific publicity for the picture." There was a demonic light in his eyes as he added, "The trial will be even better."

By the time she was through with the arraignment and got back to the precinct it was nearly five o'clock. Norah was exhausted, which was natural, and depressed, which was not. Part of the reason she felt so low was the letdown inevitable at the end of a long, hard investigation and the disbanding of the unit, but principally it was because she hadn't heard from Joe. Not a word. All day. No matter how he felt about their personal relationship, no matter what decision he might have reached, she had certainly expected he would call and offer congratulations.

She got them from every man and woman in the squad room—even Augie Baum. In fact, her entrance caused a mild stir. It was a moment to be remembered, incomplete because among the sheaf of messages on her desk there was none from Joe. Was it possible that he didn't know what had happened? Hardly. News like this was picked up and passed along the grapevine almost at the instant it happened. If he hadn't called by now, he wasn't going to.

Norah slumped into her chair, propped elbows on the desk, and



buried her face in her hands. It was over then. Finished. And yet, it didn't hurt as much as she'd expected. Probably she was too tired to feel the hurt. Tomorrow it would hit her. But by tomorrow she'd already have started getting used to the idea that she and Joe were through. In fact, she was used to it already. Hadn't she been getting used to it these past weeks? She'd survive; she'd adjust. Marriages broke up all the time, every day of the week, and nobody died of it. The only thing was she never imagined it could happen to her and Joe. It would have been nice if they could have stayed friends, but that wasn't in his temperament. She'd get used to that, too.

She got up, set her chin, and walked out of the squad room without a word to anyone. As she closed the door behind her, she heard the ringing of her phone—at least it sounded like her phone. She paused for a moment. All phones sound alike. She was off duty. Let someone else answer.

This was one night when Norah didn't want to be alone. She needed companionship. She thought of calling her father, but the situation with Eileen Fitzgerald was still awkward. Dolly Dollinger was on duty. Of course, she could call David and Marie. In fact, David had suggested she dine with them, but their happiness would be too sharp a reminder of what she was losing. Then she thought of Signora Emilia and felt an unfamiliar need for an older woman's comfort. Odd Fridays had been the days that she and Joe had visited his mother, and she supposed that he had been keeping to the regular schedule during the separation. Today, being Saturday, it was not likely she'd run into him.

Signora Emilia took one look at her daughter-in-law standing forlornly on her threshold and embraced her.

"*Figlia mia*, how happy I am to see you. Are you all right? I heard all about it on the six o'clock news. What an experience!" She peered past Norah into the hall. "Where is Joe? Parking the car?"

"He's not with me."

Signora Emilia's face darkened.

"I don't know where he is. I haven't heard from him all day." She hadn't meant to say anything about that. "Maybe I shouldn't have come?"

"You are my daughter; nothing can change that," Signora Emilia replied firmly, drawing Norah into the apartment. Then she led her into the living room, where she looked her over. "I can tell that you have not eaten, *cara*. So, I am at this moment preparing *gnocchi alla romana*. How does that appeal to you? With plenty of butter and fresh *parmigiano*?"

"It sounds delicious, Mamma, but I'm not really hungry."



"Because you are tired. So, you will go into the bedroom and rest for half an hour—it will take that long for the *gnocchi* to be ready. Then you will eat a double portion."

"I could use a little rest. Are you sure you don't mind, Mamma?"

"Come." Signora Emilia simply took Norah's hand and led her to the bedroom. At the door she stopped. "He did not even telephone you?"

"Maybe he hasn't heard."

According to Signora Capretto, once an event made the six o'clock news it wasn't possible for anyone not to be aware of it. For Norah's sake, she didn't say so. It cost her a prodigious amount of willpower to remain silent and was an indication of how highly she'd come to regard her son's wife. She gave Norah a slight push into the room, then quietly closed the door on her.

It was still daylight when Norah pulled back the chenille coverlet of Signora Emilia's bed, took off her shoes, and lay down. When she awoke it was dark. She didn't need to look at her watch to know that she'd slept much longer than the agreed-on half hour. She yawned, sat up, reached under the fringed shade of the bedside lamp for the pull chain. The first thing she saw was the bedside clock. Ten-thirty. She bounced to her feet. Signora Emilia shouldn't have let her sleep this late. Hastily Norah slipped into her shoes, straightened her sweater down over her hips, ran a comb through her hair, and opened the bedroom door.

"Mamma? Mamma! I'm up. Where are you?" She went into the living room.

Joe stood by the window.

She felt groggy from the nap; she knew her eyes were puffy and her clothes rumpled. She wished she'd taken the time to wash her face, at least to put on some lipstick.

"I wish your mother hadn't sent for you."

Joe thought she'd never looked more beautiful.

"She didn't. I phoned her. Not that I expected you to be here, but I hoped she might have heard from you. I'd tried everywhere else. I just missed you at the precinct. I called you at home several times. I figured you must be out for dinner, so I waited and then tried again. I spoke to your father. He thought I should go over."

"To the apartment?"

He nodded. "But I didn't think so. I mean, I didn't want to just barge in on you. . . ."

Norah looked questioning.

"In case you . . . in case you had somebody over . . . visiting. Dolly or somebody."



She didn't understand his embarrassment. "That was very considerate."

"But I was starting to worry about you."

Now she got the drift and suddenly felt a lot better. "Why?"

"Well. . . ." He shrugged. "David said you were going straight home." It implied the question, Why didn't you?

Jealous! Joe was jealous. How wonderful! "I changed my mind." Norah tossed it off lightly, let him suffer, just a little. She had no intention of saying more, but somehow it slipped out. "There was nothing to go home to."

"I know."

He'd been lonely, too. Norah's hopes rose further.

"As I said before, I was getting worried, so I decided to call Mamma as a last resort before. . . ."

"Before what?"

"I don't know. I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't found you." His face was drawn, his body tense in the remembrance of his anxiety. Then he relaxed and was his usual easygoing self. "Of course, as soon as I heard Mamma's voice I knew you were here. She wouldn't admit it, though. When I arrived, would you believe she wasn't going to let me in?"

Norah put a hand over her mouth to hide her smile.

"She wouldn't believe that I was tied up all day and didn't have a chance to contact you."

"I don't either."

He sighed. "Okay, you're both right. The truth is I was kind of hoping you'd call me."

Norah's eyes widened. "I never thought of it. I waited all day and it never occurred to me. . . ." The old female conditioning: The man calls first; the man is the pursuer. In this instance, though. . . . "You were the one who walked out."

"I wasn't sure you wanted to hear from me."

"That's ridiculous! How could you possibly think I didn't want to hear from you?"

He hesitated. "I saw you come in from your date the other night."

"What date?"

"How many dates have you had?"

"None."

"Norah, please. I know you've been dating somebody. I told you, I saw the two of you arrive home."

"What are you talking about? When?"

"A couple of weeks ago. In fact, exactly two weeks ago tonight." She shook her head.



"I was standing right there, Norah! I was right across the street from the house, in the doorway of the florist's shop. I saw the cab pull up; I saw the two of you get out, and I saw the way he said good night to you." With an edge of bitterness, he added, "I also saw you come to the window and wave to him."

Now she knew what he meant. Now she wanted to laugh with relief and joy, to tell him how unfounded his suspicions were, except that she recalled Eilbott's suggesting that her husband was keeping watch on her. "What were you doing in the doorway of the florist's? Were you checking up on me?"

"I was not. I just happened to be passing by and I noticed the cab." He took a deep breath. "That's not true. I was coming to see you."

"You were? Oh, Joe. . . ." It was her turn to be honest. "That was no date. That man was the suspect. That was Leon Eilbott. I'd been over to his. . . ." Too late. She tried to fix it. "Uh . . . I'd been interrogating him . . . sort of. . . ."

"You'd been interrogating a mass murderer . . . sort of? And he brought you home in a cab? Then you went to the window to wave him good-bye? That's an unusual relationship between a detective and a suspect, isn't it? Where did this 'sort of' interrogation take place?"

Norah winced. "Ah . . . in his apartment. But he didn't know I was a police officer." That hadn't helped either.

Joe was aghast. "I don't care whether he knew or not. You knew. You knew or had good reason to suspect what he was. You knew the risk involved."

With all the good intention of admitting her fault and accepting the reprimand, Norah had to defend herself. "That's the point: I was aware of the risk. I was prepared."

Joe was not assuaged. "It was foolhardy. Irresponsible. What's more, it was contrary to procedure. You know better. The only time you walk into that kind of situation is when you've got a backup."

"Yes, Joe."

"Look, I'm not chewing you out just because you're my wife. I'd say the same thing to any officer who pulled that kind of stunt, and you know that. Suppose Eilbott had made you. It could have blown the whole case."

"Yes, Joe. It won't happen again."

"Till the next time. I suppose I'll have to learn to live with it."

Norah's hopes soared; she waited expectantly.

But he returned to the lecture. "I'm not saying you didn't do a good job. You did. I'm proud of you. The investigation was first-



rate. The psychology behind the interrogation was good; you had him figured just right. I'm not crazy about the location, but I realize you had no choice."

"We would have preferred to do it inside a studio, naturally," Norah admitted. "But then logically it would have had to be done in Hollywood, and then how would I explain my presence?"

"Hold it. Wait a minute. . . ." Joe thought it out very carefully before speaking. "The whole thing was a setup? They didn't need any retakes? The picture was complete?"

"Oh, sure. I thought you knew."

"No, I didn't. Nobody told me. Nobody told me that." A new possibility now occurred to Joe and it made him gasp and at the same glare at Norah. "You didn't just go ahead. . . ?"

"On my own? Of course not! I used to do things like that when I was a rookie; I know better now." The twinkle in her eyes belied the indignation; Norah was enjoying herself. "Besides, how could I? You don't think Stanislas Sadler would move his whole crew back to New York on the say-so of a simple sergeant. Even Captain Felix had a hard time convincing him."

Joe sighed with relief.

"In the end we provided the equipment and the crew. Sadler was so cheap he wouldn't even spring for film in the camera."

"No film?" Joe stared at her, then he started to laugh. "No film! Beautiful, really beautiful. That's my Norah, that's my girl, always one jump ahead."

"I'm not too happy about that part of it. Eilbott's confession, everything he did, the whole performance was for the camera. I knew there was no film in it. I cheated him."

"Ah . . . well, don't feel bad, love. It's the punishment he deserves. It may be the only punishment he'll understand."

"Probably."

There was an awkward pause.

"*Cara?* I shouldn't have walked out on you the way I did," Joe confessed.

"No, you shouldn't," Norah agreed.

That surprised him, but he went on. "I was wrong."

"I don't know what else you could have done that would have got through to me. I don't know how else you could have made me understand once and for all how much I'd hurt you." She sighed. "The whole thing went to my head—making sergeant, getting command of the squad. . . . I was too smart for my own good."

"There's nothing wrong with being self-confident."

"Except that I put everybody's back up."



"If you're talking about the job, you don't apologize for giving an order."

"I was going to get you reinstated, just me, single-handed. I ended up making things worse."

"No, you didn't."

"I wish I could believe that."

"You got Eilbott to confess to the crimes he committed and to disclaim guilt for the stabbing of Mrs. Waggoner."

Norah shrugged. "So?"

"So, I turned up a suspect for that one."

"You?"

"Why not? It was my case—once upon a time."

She flushed deeply. "I didn't mean it like that. I'm sorry. It's just that . . . well, you were supposed to be off the case. . . ." Then she saw that he was grinning. "What happened?"

"You remember that the very first reaction to the homicides at the Westvue was that they'd been committed during a robbery but that we couldn't prove it because we had no way of knowing what, if anything, had been taken. Okay. Now, do you remember the photos and posters Estelle Waggoner had of herself all over her apartment?"

"Of course."

"Did you happen to notice her wearing a big ornate brooch?"

"Sure. It was a great gorgeous piece of . . . junk?"

"That's what I thought at first," Joe agreed. "Fake, stage jewelry. She wore it in the poster she had of *The Merry Widow*, and it appeared in a couple of the other photos. Then, going through her theatrical scrapbooks, I spotted this same gold-and-ruby brooch again and again; didn't matter what the part was or the costume, the brooch was there. . . ." His smile broadened. "Right up front. So, on the chance, I checked through her insurance policies, and sure enough, it was listed."

"But you couldn't find it among her effects?" Eyes bright, Norah got to the point. "The killer stole it."

"Right. So I got a detailed description from the insurance company, had blowups made of the best of the pictures, and put the pawnshop detail on it. A couple of weeks ago they notified me that they'd located the brooch. That was one of the things I'd intended to discuss with you the night you were out on your date."

Norah opened her mouth to object.

"Of course, if I'd known who your date was. . . ."

"If I'd known you had a lead. . . ."

"I didn't even know you were back on the case. . . ."



They both stopped.

Joe took a breath. "Actually, I didn't have a suspect then, and I still don't. The guy who hocked the brooch gave a phony name."

"Naturally."

"But the pawnbroker remembers him and gave a pretty good description. As soon as Jim Felix realized that no way could your man and mine be one—"

"Why not?"

"Mine's black."

"Oh." Norah knew that Joe had had to pass the information on to Felix first, but what disturbed her was that the captain had not then told her.

Joe knew what she was thinking. "It was Chief Deland's decision not to tell you. Once we'd managed to separate at least one killing from all the others, Deland wanted to keep them separate. That way everybody saves face."

"It wouldn't have hurt to tell me," Norah said, then she recalled the moment when Eilbott had offered to lie to clear Joe. Joe had already been cleared. She was glad she'd been able to turn Eilbott down without knowing it.

"With at least one other perpetrator involved in the Westvue killings, the chief can justify reinstating me."

Norah stared. "You've got your job back?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Your same job? At the Fourth?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll be back on Monday. And I thought . . . well, I know that the unit's been disbanded, so I thought you'd want to come back to Homicide. That is, you'd be working for me again. . . . Would you want to do that?"

"I'm not sure, Lieutenant." Norah took a deep breath. "I'd have to consult my husband. I could let you know . . . later tonight maybe?"

THE END

CATCH A FALLING SPY

BY

LEN DEIGHTON

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Chapter One

"Smell that air," said Major Mann.

I sniffed. "I can't smell anything," I said.

"That's what I mean," said Mann. He scratched himself and grinned.
"Great, isn't it?"

There's not much to smell when you are one thousand miles into the Algerian Sahara—not much to smell, not much to do, not much to eat.

For those travelers who know the swimming pools and air conditioning of the government hotels along the northern edge of the Sahara, Adrar comes as a shock. Here the hotel has no more than tightly drawn curtains to protect the tourist from the sun, and the staff has noisy arguments about who should siesta on the cold stone floor of the entrance hall. Only Europeans stayed awake all day, notably four bearded Austrians who, night and day, played cards in the shuttered dining-room. They were waiting for a replacement gas pump for their truck. Between games they swigged sweet, warm cola drinks. There was no alcohol on sale, and smoking was frowned upon.

Even on this winter's evening the stones and the sand radiated the heat of the desert day.

There was no moon, but the stars were so bright that we could easily see our vehicles, piled high with stores and sextant and a sign that said "Dempsey's Desert Tours". They were parked on the huge main square of Adrar. Mann walked around the vehicles just to make sure the supplies had not been plundered. It was unlikely, for they were outside the police station.

Mann stopped and leaned against the Land-Rover. He took out a pack of cheroots; there were only four left. "Look at those stars," he said.

"The Milky Way—I've never seen it so clearly. A spaceship traveling at 100,000 miles per hour would take six hundred seventy million years to cross the Milky Way," I said. "There's a hundred thousand million stars there."

"How do you know?" said Mann. He put a cheroot in his mouth and chewed it.

"I read it in the *Reader's Digest Atlas*."

Mann nodded. "And do you know something else? . . . The way they're

going, in another few years there will be another million stars there—enough spy satellites to put both of us out of business."

"Twinkle, twinkle, little spy," I said.

Mann looked at me to see if I was being insubordinate. "Let's go back inside," he said finally. He decided not to light the cheroot. He put it away again. "I'll buy you a bottle of Algerian lemonade." He laughed. Mann was like a small, neatly dressed gorilla: the same heavy brow, deep-set eyes, and long arms—and the same sense of humor.

The dining-room is large, and although the big fans no longer turned, it was the coolest place for hundreds of miles. The walls are whitewashed light blue, and crudely woven striped rugs are tacked to floor and walls. Overhead, the wooden flooring rattled like jungle drums as someone moved. There was the sudden roar of the shower and the inevitable violent rapping of the ancient plumbing. We helped ourselves to soft drinks and left the money on the till.

"That Limey takes a shower every five minutes."

"Yes, about every five minutes," I agreed. Major Mickey Mann, U.S. Army Signal Corps, Retired, a CIA expert on Russian electronics and temporarily my boss, had shown no sign of discomfort during the heat of day in spite of his tightly knotted tie and long trousers. He watched me carefully, as he always did when offering criticism of my fellow countrymen. "That particular Limey," I said quietly, "is sixty-one years old, has a metal plate in his skull, and a leg filled with German shrapnel."

"Stash the gypsy violin, fella—you want to make me weep?"

"You treat old Dempsey as though he were simpleminded. I'm just reminding you that he did four years with the Long-Range Desert Group. He's lived in Algeria for the best part of thirty years, he speaks Arabic with all the local dialects, and if it comes to real trouble in the desert we'll need him to use that sextant."

Mann grunted. He sat down at the table and began toying with the Swiss army penknife he'd bought in the souvenir shop at the Geneva airport. "If the wind starts up again tonight"—he balanced the knife on its end—"sand will make that road south impassable. And I don't need your pal Percy to tell me that."

"Even in the Land-Rover?"

"Did you see that three-tonner down to the axles?" He let go of the knife and it stayed perfectly balanced. "Sand that bogs down a three-ton six-by-six will bury a Land-Rover."

"They were gunning the motor," I said. "You bury yourself that way."

"You've been reading the camping-in-the-desert section of the Boy Scout handbook," said Mann. Again he banged the folding knife down onto the table, and again it balanced on its end. "And in any case," he added, "how do we know the Russkie will be able to steal a four-wheel

drive? He might be trying to get here in a Moskvich sedan for all we know."

"Is he stupid?"

"Professor Bekuv's intellect is not universally admired," said Mann. "During the time he was with the Russian scientific mission at the UN he wrote two papers about little men in flying saucers, and earned his reputation as a crank."

"Defecting cranks don't get the Department's OK," I said.

"Looking for messages from little men in flying saucers probably motivated his work on masers," said Mann. "And Bekuv is one of the world's experts on masers."

"I'm not even sure I know what a maser is," I said.

"You read the Technical Brief?"

"Twice," I said. "But not so as to understand it."

"Maser," said Mann. "It's an acronym—*m* for microwave, *a* for amplification, *s* for stimulated, *e* for emission, *r* for radiation."

"Do you mind if I take notes?"

"Listen, dummy. It converts electromagnetic radiation—from a whole range of different frequencies—to a highly amplified, coherent microwave radiation."

"Is it anything to do with a laser?"

"Well, a maser is a laser, but a laser is not necessarily a maser."

"Is it anything to do with that guy looking in a mirror who says 'Brothers and sisters have I none'?"

"Now you're beginning to get the idea," said Mann.

"Well, somebody must be very interested in masers," I said, "or they wouldn't have sent us two down here to provide Bekuv with a red-carpet reception."

"Or interested in flying saucers," said Mann.

"If this Russian is such an idiot, what makes anyone believe that he's capable of escaping from that Russian compound, stealing a roadworthy vehicle, and getting all the way up here to meet us?"

"Don't get me wrong, pal. Bekuv is crazy like a fox. Maybe he is a flying-saucer freak, but when he was in New York with that UN scientific setup he was reporting back to the KGB. He joined the 1924 Society—crackpots maybe, but they have some of the world's top scientists as members. Bekuv was only too keen to read them long papers about gabfests through the galactic plasma by Soviet scientists, but he was listening very carefully when they told him what kind of work they were doing with their radio telescopes and electromagnetic wave transmisions." Major Mann ran his fingers back through his wispy hair that each day was going grayer, since he'd used up the last of his dark rinse. Almost without being conscious of what he was doing, he pushed hair over the balding patch at

the back of his head. "Professor Bekuv was a spy. Don't ever forget that. No matter how you dress it up as being a free exchange of scientific know-how, Bekuv was skillfully digging out a whole lot more than rumors about flying saucers."

I looked at Mann. I'd seen plenty of such men all the world over from the Shetlands to Alaska, and all the way through Communist Algeria, too: footloose Americans, their linen clean and their livers tormented, soft accents blunted by a lifetime of traveling. It would have been easy to believe that this wiry fifty-year-old was one of those *condottieri* of the oil fields—and that's what was written in his nice new passport.

"Where did Bekuv go wrong?" I asked.

"To be sent down to Mali, as part of Soviet aid to underdeveloped African countries . . . deputy head of a six-man team of Soviet scientists?" Mann reached for his hip flask. He looked around the room to be sure he was not observed before putting a shot of whiskey into his sweet, fizzy Algerian cola. "Nobody knows for sure. The latest guess is that Bekuv's flying saucers began to be an embarrassment for the Soviet Academy, and they sent him down here for a spell to concentrate his mind on political realities."

"I thought the Soviet Academy was very enthusiastic about flying saucers," I said. "What about this big radio telescope they've built in the northern Caucasus—the RATAN-600?"

"Now you reveal the depths of your ignorance," said Mann. "There's a whole lot of difference between the respectable scientific work of searching deep space for signals from extra-terrestrial intelligences and the strictly infra-dig pastime of looking for unidentified flying objects, or what the sci-fi freaks call ufology."

"I'm glad you told me that," I said, waving away Mann's offer of the flask. "So Bekuv was kicked downstairs into the foreign-aid program, and that's why he decided to defect. Well, that all fits together very neatly."

Mann swallowed his drink and gave a grim smile to acknowledge that such a verdict was seldom intended as a compliment in the circles in which we moved. "Right," he said.

"Last one in the shower is a sissy," I said. As I got up from the table I noticed that his knife was not balanced there after all; he'd driven its short screwdriver right into the wood.



Chapter Two

The Trans-Sahara Highway is a track that goes south, through In-Salah and Tam, to the Atlantic. But we were using another Trans-Sahara highway: the lesser-known route that runs parallel to it, and many miles to the west. This was the way to the least-known parts of Africa. This was the way to Gao and to Bamako, the capital of landlocked Mali. This was the way to Timbuktu.

It was four-fifteen the next morning when we left the hotel in Adrar. Mann and Dempsey were in the Land-Rover. I followed in the VW bus with Johnny, an extra driver from Dempsey Desert Tours. We drove through the marketplace in the gloom of desert night. It was damned cold, and the drivers wore scarfs and woolly hats. The big trucks that cross the desert in convoy, loaded with dried fish and oranges, were nearly ready to move off. One of the drivers waved us past. Desert travelers have survival in common; you never know when you might need a friend.

We turned south. I followed the rear lights of the Land-Rover. The road was hard sand, and we maintained a good speed past the roughly painted signs that pointed to distant villages. In places, loose sand had drifted onto the track, and I braked each time the Land-Rover's rear lights bounced, but the drifts had not yet built up into the humps that tear an axle in half.

The gun-metal sky lightened and glowed red along the horizon until, like a thermic lance, the sun tore a white-hot hole in it. This road skirted the edges of the Sahara's largest sand seas. To the west the horizon rolled like a storm-racked ocean, but to the east the land was flat and featureless, as gray and as hard as concrete. Sometimes we passed herds of moth-eaten camels, scratching for a bite of thornbush or a mouthful of scrub. The route south was marked by small cairns of stones. Often there was a solitary Arab riding astride some wretched beast so small and bowed that the rider's feet almost touched the ground. In one place, an Arab family was rearranging the burdens on the saddles of their three camels. We saw no motor traffic.

We were three hours out of Adrar by the time we reached the end of the track. Six dented oil drums blocked the way, and a sun-bleached wooden sign indicated that we should follow the tire tracks in a diversion from the marked route.

The Land-Rover bumped off the hard edge with a flurry of sand as the

wheels slipped into a soft patch. My smooth tires took hold and then followed slowly along the pattern of tracks. I kept close behind the others, lining up our vehicles to simplify the problems of winching, for there was little doubt that I would be the one who got stuck. Their four-wheel drive would get them out of this kind of sand.

The detour was marked each hundred meters or so by an old oil-drum. Some of them had been blown over and rolled far away from their original positions. Two were almost buried in drifting sand. It was easier to watch the tire tracks.

After about eight kilometers the Land-Rover stopped. Mann got out and walked back to me. It was fully light now, and even with sunglasses I found myself squinting into the light reflecting from the sand. It was still early morning, but now that we'd stopped I felt the heat of the sun and smelled the warm rubber, evaporating fuel, and Mann's after-shave lotion.

"How far was that last drum?" asked Mann.

"A couple of hundred meters."

"Right, and I don't see another ahead. You stay here. I'll mosey around a little."

"What about these tire tracks?" I asked.

"Famous last words," pronounced Mann. "Tracks like those can lead you out there into that sand sea, and finally you get to the place where they turn around and head back again."

"Then why tracks?"

"An old disused camp for oil prospectors, or a dump for road gangs." He kicked at one of my tire marks.

"These tracks look fresh," I said.

"Yeah," said Mann. He kicked one of the ridges of impacted sand. It was as hard as concrete. "So do the tank tracks you find in southern Libya—and they've been there since Rommel."

I looked at my watch.

Mann said, "I hope the diversion is well marked on the highway to the south of here, or that Russian cat will come wheeling past us while we're stuck out here in this egg-timer factory."

It was then that Percy Dempsey got out of the Land-Rover and limped back to join us. He was a curious figure in his floppy hat, cardigan, long baggy shorts, and gaiters.

"God!" said Mann. "Here comes Miss Marple."

"I say—old chap," said the old man. He had difficulty remembering our names. Perhaps that was because we changed them so often. "Mr. Antony, I mean. Are you wondering about the road ahead?"

"Yes," I said. "My name was Antony: Frederick L. Antony, tourist."

Dempsey blinked. His face was soft and babyish, as old men's faces

sometimes are. Now that he had taken off his sunglasses, his blue eyes became watery.

Mann said, "Don't get nervous, Auntie. We'll dope it out."

"The oil-drum markers continue along this track," said the old man.

"How do you know that?" said Mann.

"I can see them," said the old man.

"Yeah!" said Mann. "So how come I can't see them, and my buddy here can't see them?"

"I used my binoculars," said the old man apologetically.

"Why the hell didn't you say you had binoculars?" said Mann.

"I offered them to you just outside Oran. You said you weren't planning a trip to the opera."

"Let's go," said Mann. "I want to make camp before the sun gets high. And we have to find a place where the Russkie can spot us from the main road."

The Dempsey Desert Tours VW bus was equipped with two tent sides that expanded to provide a large area of shade. There was also a nylon sheet stretched across the roof, and held taut above it, which prevented the direct sunlight from striking the top of the bus and so turning it into the kind of oven that most metal car bodies became.

The bright orange panels could be seen for miles. The Russian spotted them easily. He had driven nonstop from some prospecting site along the Niger River east of Timbuktu. It was a grueling journey over poor tracks and open country, and he'd ended it in the fierce heat of early afternoon.

The Russian was a hatchet-faced man in his early forties. He was tall and slim with cropped black hair that showed no sign of graying. His dark suit was baggy and stained, its jacket slung over his brawny shoulder. His red check shirt was equally dirty, and the gold pencil clipped into its pocket was conspicuous because of that. Pale blue eyes were almost sealed by fine desert sand, and his face was lined and bore the curious bruise-like marks that come with exhaustion. His arms were muscular, and his skin was tanned very dark.

Mann opened the nylon flap and indicated the passenger seats of the VW bus and the tabletop fixed between them. In spite of the tinted windows, the plastic seat covering was hot to the touch. I sat opposite the Russian and watched him take off his sunglasses, yawn, and scratch the side of his nose with his car key.

It was typical of Mann's cunning, and of his training, that he offered the Russian no chance to rest. Instead he pushed a glass and a vacuum flask containing ice cubes and water toward him. There was a snap as Mann broke the cap on a half-bottle of whiskey and poured a generous measure for our guest. The Russian looked at Mann and gave him a thin

smile. He pushed the whiskey aside and from the flask grabbed a handful of ice cubes and rubbed them on his face.

"You got ID?" Mann asked. As if to save face, he poured whiskey for himself and for me.

"What are ID?"

"Identification. Passport, security pass, or something."

The Russian took a wallet from his hip pocket. From it he removed a dog-eared piece of brown cardboard with his photo attached. He passed it to Mann, who handed it to me. It was a pass into the military zone along the Mali frontier with Niger. It described the Russian's physical characteristics and named him as Professor Andrei Mikhail Bekuv. Significantly the card was printed in Russian and Chinese as well as Arabic. I gave it back to him.

"You have the photo of my wife?"

"It would have been poor security to risk it," said Mann. He sipped at his drink, but when he set it down again the level seemed unchanged.

Professor Bekuv closed his eyes. "It's fifteen months since I last saw her."

Mann shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "She'll be in London by the time we get there."

Bekuv spoke very quietly, as if trying to keep a terrible temper under control. "Your people promised a photo of her—standing in Trafalgar Square."

"It was . . ."

"That was the agreement," said Bekuv, "and you haven't kept to it."

"She never left Copenhagen," said Mann.

Bekuv was silent for a long time. "Was she on the ship from Lenigrad?" he said finally. "Did you check the passenger list?"

"All we know is that they didn't come in on the plane to London," said Mann.

"You lie," said Bekuv. "I know the sort of people you are. My country is filled with such men as you. You had men there waiting for her."

"She will come," said Mann.

"Without her I will not come with you."

"She will come," said Mann. "She is probably there already."

"No," said Bekuv. He turned in his seat to see the road that would take him a thousand miles back to the Russians in Timbuktu. In spite of the tinted windows, the sand was no more than a blinding glare. Bekuv picked up the battered sunglasses that he'd left on the table alongside his car keys. He toyed with them for a moment and then put them into the pocket of his shirt. "Without her, I am nothing," said Bekuv reflectively. "Without her life is not worth living for me."

Mann said, "There is urgent work to be done, Professor Bekuv. Your

chair of Interstellar Communication at New York University will give you access time on the Jodrell Bank radio telescope—and, as you well know, that has a two hundred fifty-foot steerable paraboloid. The university is also arranging time on the one thousand-foot fixed radio telescope they've built in the Puerto Rican mountains near Arecibo."

Bekuv didn't answer, but he didn't leave, either. I glanced at Mann and he gave me the sort of glare that was calculated to shrivel me to silent tissue. I realized now that Mann's joke about little men in flying saucers was no joke.

"There is no one else doing this kind of cosmology," Mann said. "Even if you fail to make contact with life in other solar systems, you'll be able to give it a definite thumbs down."

Bekuv looked at him scornfully. "There is already enough . . . *proof* to satisfy any but the most stupid."

"If you don't take this newly created chair of Interstellar Communication, there will be another bitter fight—and next time the cynics might get their nominee into it. Professor Chataway or old Delahousse would jump at such an opportunity to prove that there was no life anywhere in outer space."

"They are fools," said Bekuv.

Mann made a face and shrugged.

Bekuv said, "I have a beautiful wife who has remained faithful, a proud mother and a talented son who will soon be at the university. Nothing is more important than they are."

Mann sipped some of his whiskey and this time he really drank. "Suppose you go back to Timbuktu, and your wife is waiting in London? What then, eh?"

"I'll take that chance," said Bekuv. He slid across the seat and stepped down from the VW into the sand. The light through the nylon side panels colored him bright orange.

Mann didn't move.

"You don't fool me," he said. "You're not going anywhere. You made your decision a long time ago, and you're stuck with it. You go back there now, and your comrades will stake you out in the sand and toss stale *piroshkis* at you."

Bekuv said nothing.

"Here, you forgot your car keys, buddy," Mann taunted him.

Bekuv took the keys that Mann offered but he did not step out into the sunshine. The sudden buzzing of a fly sounded unnaturally loud.

"Professor Bekuv," I said, "it's in our mutual interests that your family should be with you."

Bekuv took out his handkerchief and wiped sand from the corners of his eyes, but he gave no sign of having heard me.

"I understand there is still work to be done, so you can bet that the American government will do everything in its power to make sure you are happy in *every* respect."

"In its power, yes . . ." said Bekuv sadly.

"There are ways," I said. "There are official swaps as well as escapes. And what you never heard about are the *secret* deals that our governments make. The trade agreements, the loans, the grain sales—all these deals contain hundreds of secret clauses. Many of them involve people we exchange."

Bekuv dug the toe of his high-laced boots into the sand and traced a pattern of criss cross lines. Mann reached forward from his seat and rested a hand on Bekuv's shoulder. The Russian twitched nervously.

"Look at it this way, Professor," Mann said, in the sort of voice that he believed to be gentle and conciliatory. "If your wife is free we'll bring her to you, so you might as well come with us." He paused. "If she's in prison . . . you'd be out of your mind to go back." He tapped Bekuv's shoulder again. "That's the way it goes, Professor Bekuv."

"There was no letter from her this week," said Bekuv.

Mann looked at him but said nothing.

I had seen it before: Men like Bekuv are ill fitted for the conspiracy of defection, let alone years of conspiracy that threatened the safety of their families. His grueling journey across the Sahara had exhausted him. But his worst mistake was in looking forward to the moment when it would all be over; professionals never do that.

"Oh, Katinka!" whispered Bekuv. "And my fine son. What have I done to you? What have I done?"

I didn't move, and neither did Mann, but Bekuv pushed the nylon flap aside and stepped out into the scorching sun. He stood there for a long time.

Chapter Three

The next problem was how to lose Bekuv's vehicle. It was a GAZ 59A, a Russian four-wheel drive field car. It was a conspicuous contraption—canvas top, angular bodywork, and shiny metal springs showing through the seat covers. You couldn't bury it in sand, and setting it ablaze would probably attract just the sort of attention we were trying to avoid.

Mann took a big wrench and ripped the license plates off it and defaced the RMM sign that would tell even an illiterate informer that it was from Mali.

Mann didn't trust Percy Dempsey out of his sight. And Mann certainly didn't trust Johnny, the ever-smiling Arab driver. It was only because he couldn't come up with a better idea that he agreed to Johnny heading back north with the GAZ while we followed with Bekuv in the VW. And all the time he was turning to look at Bekuv, watching Dempsey in the Land-Rover behind us and telling me that Percy Dempsey wasn't half the man I'd made him out to be.

"It's damned hot," I said.

Mann grunted and looked at Bekuv, still asleep on the bench seat behind us. "If we dump that GAZ anywhere here in the south, the cops will check it to make sure it's not someone dying of thirst. But the farther north we go, the more interest the cops are going to take in that funny-looking contraption."

"We'll be all right."

"We haven't seen one of those heaps in the whole of Algeria."

"Stop worrying," I said. "Percy was doing this kind of thing out here in the desert when Rommel was in knee pants."

"You Limeys always stick together."

"Why don't you drive for a while, Major?"

When we stopped to change seats, we stayed there long enough to let Johnny get a few kilometers ahead. The GAZ was no record-breaker. It wasn't all that far advanced from the Model A Ford from which it evolved. There would be no problem catching up with it, even in the VW.

In fact, the old GAZ came into view within twenty-five minutes of our resuming the journey. We saw it surmounting the gentle slope of a dune, and Mann flicked his headlights in greeting.

"We'll keep this kind of distance," Mann said. There was about five hundred yards between the vehicles.

Behind us, Dempsey came into view, driving the Land-Rover. "Is Percy a fag?" said Mann.

"I never gave it a thought," I said.

"As long as they do their job," said Mann, "that's all I ask." He glanced in the mirror before taking a pack of Camels from his shirt pocket, extracting a cigarette, and lighting up, without letting go of the wheel. He inhaled and blew smoke before speaking again. "Just get us up to that damned airstrip, that's all I ask." He thumped the steering-wheel with his big, bony fist. "That's all I ask."

I smiled. The first hint of Bekuv's possible defection had been made to a British scientist. That meant that British Intelligence was going to cling to this one like a limpet. I was the nominated limpet, and Mann didn't like limpets.

"We should have moved by night," I said, more to make conversation than because I'd thought about it carefully.

"And what do we tell the cops—that we're photographing moths?"

"No explanation necessary," I said. "These roads probably have more traffic at night, when it's cool. The danger is running into camels or people walking."

"Look at tha . . . Hell!"

Mann was staring ahead, but I could see nothing there, and by the time I realized he was looking in the rearview mirror, it was too late. He was wrenching the steering wheel and we were jolting into the desert in a cloud of sand. There was a howl of fury as Bekuv was shaken off the back seat and hit the floor.

I heard the jet helicopter long before I caught sight of it. I was still staring at the CAZ, watching it disappear in a flurry of sand and white flashes. Then it became a big molten blob that swelled up, and, like a bright red balloon, the fuel exploded with a terrible bang.

The helicopter's whine turned to a thudding of rotor blades as it came back and flew over us with only a few feet of clearance, its blades chopping Indian signals out of the smoke that drifted up from the CAZ.

The Plexiglas bubble flashed in the sun as it banked so close to the desert that the blade tips almost touched the dunes. It was out of sight for a moment, and by the time I heard the engine again I was fifty yards from the track, stretched out on my stomach and trying to bury my head in the sand.

The pilot turned tightly as he came to the roadway. He circled the burning car and then came back again before he was satisfied about his task. He turned his nose eastward. At that altitude he was out of sight within a second or two.

"How did you guess?" I asked Mann.

"The way he was sitting there above the road. I've seen gunships in Nam. I knew what he was going to pull." He smacked the dust off his trousers. "Okay, Professor?"

Bekuv nodded grimly. Obviously it had removed any last thoughts he might have had about driving back to Mali to kiss and make up.

"Then let's get the hell out of here, before the cops arrive to mop up the mess."

We slowed down as we passed through the smoke and the stink of rubber and carbonized flesh. Bekuv and I both turned to make sure there was no last chance that the boy could have survived it. Then Mann accelerated, but behind us we saw the Land-Rover stop.

Mann was looking in the rearview mirror. He saw it too. "What's that old fool stopping for?"

I didn't answer.

"You got cloth ears?"

"To bury the kid."

"He can't be that dumb!"

"There are traditions in the desert," I said.

"You mean that's what that dummy is going to tell the cops when they get there and find him carving a headstone?"

"Probably."

"They'll shake him," said Mann. "The cops will shake Percy Dempsey, and you know what will fall out of his pockets?"

"Nothing will."

"We will!" said Mann, still watching in the mirror. "Damned stupid fruit."

"I make it twenty kilometers to the turnoff for the airstrip."

"Unless our flyboy was scared dumb by that gunship and went back to Morocco again."

"Our boy hasn't even faked his flight plan yet," I said. "He's only fifteen minutes' flying time away from here."

"Okay, okay, okay," said Mann. "I don't need any of that Dunkirk-spirit crap." For a long time we drove in silence.

"Watch for that cairn at the turnoff," I said. "It's no more than half a dozen stones, and the sand has drifted since we came down this road."

"There's no spade in the Land-Rover," said Mann. "You don't think he'd bury him with his bare hands, do you?"

"Slow down a little now," I said. "The cairn is on this side."

An aircraft came dune-hopping in from the northwest. It was one of a fleet of Dornier Skyservant short-haul machines, contracted to take Moroccan civil servants, politicians, and technicians down to the phosphate workings near the Algerian border. The world demand for phosphates had made the workings the most pampered industry in Morocco.

The pilot landed at the first approach. It was part of his job to be able to land on any treeless piece of hard dirt. The Dornier taxied over to us and flipped the throttle of the port engine so that it turned on its own axis and was ready to fly out again. "Watch out for the prop wash!" Mann warned me.

Mann's father had been an airline pilot, and Mann had a ten-year subscription to *Aviation Week*. Flying machines brought out the worst in him. He rapped the metal skin of this one before climbing through the door. "Great ships, these Dorniers," he told me. "Ever see a Dornier before?"

"Yes," I said. "My uncle George shot one down in 1940."

"Just make sure you lock the door," said Mann.

"Let's go, let's go," said the pilot, a young Swede with a droopy mustache and Elsa tattooed on his bicep.

I pushed Bekuv ahead of me. There were a dozen or more seats in the cabin, and Mann had already planted himself nearest the door.

"Hurry!" said the pilot. "I want to get back on to my flight plan."

"Casablanca?" said Mann.

"And all the couscous you can eat," said the pilot. He opened the throttles even before I had locked the door.

The spot from which the twin-engined Dornier climbed steeply was a disused site left by the road-builders. There were the usual piles of oil drums, two-tractor chassis, and some stone markers. Everything else had been taken by the nomads. Now a bright new VW bus marked "Dempsey Desert Tours" was parked in the shallow depression of a wadi.

"That's screwed this one up forever," said Mann. "When the cops find the VW they'll be watching this airstrip constantly."

"Dempsey will collect it," I said.

"He's a regular little Lawrence of Arabia, your pal Dempsey."

"He could have done this job on his own," I said. "There was no need for us to come down here."

"You're even dumber than you look." Mann glanced around to make sure that Bekuv couldn't hear.

"Why then . . . ?"

"Because if the prof yells loud enough for his spouse, someone is going to have to go in and get her."

"They'll use one of the people in the field," I said.

"They'll use someone who talked to the professor—and you know it! Someone who was here, who can talk to his old lady and make it sound convincing."

"Bloody risky," I said.

"Yep!" said Mann. "If the Russkies are going to send gunships after him and blast cars out of the desert, they're not going to let his old lady out of their clutches without a struggle."

"Perhaps they'll write Bekuv off as dead," I said.

Mann turned in his seat to look at the professor. His head was thrown back against the seat. His mouth was open and his eyes closed. "Maybe," said Mann.

Now I could see the mountains of the High Atlas. They were almost hidden behind the shimmer of heat that rose from the colorless desert below us, but above the heat haze I could distinguish the snowcapped tops of the highest peaks. Soon we'd see the Atlantic Ocean.

Chapter Four

I never discovered whether New York University realized that it had acquired a chair of Interstellar Communication; certainly it was not mentioned in the press analysis. The house we used was on Washington Square, facing across the trees the university buildings. It had been owned by the CIA—through a land-management front—for many years, and had been used for various clandestine purposes that included extramarital exploits by certain senior members of the Operations Division.

Technically, Major Mann was responsible for Bekuv's safety—which was a polite way of saying custody, as Bekuv himself pointed out at least three times a day. But it was Mann's overt role of custodian that enabled Bekuv to believe that the interrogation team were the NYU academics they pretended to be. The interrogators' first hurdle was to steer Bekuv away from pure administration. Perhaps it was inevitable that a Soviet academic would want to know the floor-area his department would occupy, his spending restrictions, the secretarial staff he was entitled to, his voting power in the university, his access to printing, photography and computer time and his priority for student and postgraduate enrollment.

The team was becoming more and more fretful. The reported leakage of scientific information eastward was reflected by the memos that were piling up in my "Classified Incoming."

Pretending to be Professor Bekuv's assistants, the interrogators were hoping to recognize the character of the data he already knew and to trace the American sources from which it had been stolen. With this in mind, slightly modified data had been released to selected staff at various government labs. So far, none of this "seeded" material had come back through Bekuv; and now, in spite of strenuous protests from his "staff," Bekuv declared a beginning to the Christmas vacation. He imperiously dismissed his interrogators back to their homes and families. Bekuv was therefore free to spend all his days designing a million-dollar heap of electronic junk that was guaranteed to make contact with one of those super-civilizations that were sitting around in space waiting to be introduced.

By Thursday evening the trees in Washington Square were dusted with the winter's first snow, radio advertisers were counting Christmas shopping time in hours, and Mann was watching me shave in preparation for a Park Avenue party at the home of a senior security official of the United Nations. A hasty note on the bottom of the engraved invitation said "and

bring the tame Russkie." It had sent Mann into a state of peripatetic anxiety.

"You say Tony Nowak sent your invite to the British Embassy in Washington?" he asked me for the fourth or fifth time.

"You know Tony," I said. "He's nothing if not tactful. That's his UN training."

"Damned gab factory."

"You think he knows about this house on Washington Square?"

"We'll move Bekuv tomorrow," said Mann.

"Tony can keep his mouth shut," I said.

"I'm not worrying about Tony," said Mann. "But if he knows we're here, you can bet a dozen other UN people know."

"What about California?" I suggested. "UCLA." I sorted through my last clean linen. I was into my wash-and-wear shirts now, and the bathtub was brimming with them.

"And what about Sing Sing?" said Mann. "The fact is that I'm beginning to think that Bekuv is stalling—deliberately—and will go on stalling until we produce his frau."

"We both guessed that," I said. I put on a white shirt and club tie. It was likely to be the sort of party where you were better off English.

"I'd tear his toenails out," Mann growled.

"Now you don't mean that," I said. "That's just the kind of joke that gets you a bad reputation."

I got a sick kind of pleasure from provoking Major Mann, and he rose to that one as I knew he would: He stubbed out his cigar and dumped it into his Jim Beam—and you have to know Mann to realize how near that is to suicide. Mann watched me combing my hair, then looked at his watch. "Maybe you should skip the false eyelashes," he said. "We're meeting Bessie at eight."

Mann's wife, Bessie, looked about twenty years old but must have been nearer forty. She was tall and slim, with the fresh complexion that was the product of her childhood on a Wisconsin farm. If beautiful was going too far, she was certainly good-looking enough to turn all male heads as she entered the Park Avenue apartment where the party was being held.

Tony greeted us and adroitly took three glasses of champagne from the tray of a passing waiter. "Now the party can really begin," said Tony Nowak—or Nowak the Polack, as he was called by certain acquaintances who had not admired his spike-booted climb from rags to riches. For Antoni Nowak's job in the United Nations' security unit didn't require him to be in the lobby wearing a peaked cap and running metal detectors over the hand baggage. Tony had a six-figure salary and a three-window office with a view of the East River, and a lot of people typing letters in triplicate for him. In U.N. terms he was a success.

"Now the party can really begin," Tony said again. He kissed Bessie, took Mann's hat, and punched my arm. "Good to see you—and God, what a tan you guys got in Miami."

I nodded politely. Mann tried to smile, failed, and put his nose into his champagne.

"The story is you're retiring, Tony," said Bessie.

"I'm too young to retire, Bessie, you know that!" He winked at her.

"Steady, Tony," said Bessie. "You want the old man to catch on to us?"

"He should never have left you behind on that Miami trip."

"It's from a lamp," said Mann. "Bloomingdale's, Fifty-four ninety-nine, with three sets of dark goggles."

"You could have fooled me," said Tony. "I thought it was a spray job."

Behind us there were soft chiming sounds, and a servant opened the door. Tony was still gripping Bessie's arm, but as he caught sight of his new guests he relaxed his grip. "These are the people from the Secretariat," he said.

"Go look after your new arrivals," said Mann. "Looks like Liz Taylor needs rescuing from the Shah of Iran."

"And ain't you the guy to do it," said Tony. He smiled. It was the sort of joke he'd repeat between relating the names of big shots who had really been there.

"It beats me why he asked us," I told Mann.

Mann grunted.

"Are we here on business?" I asked.

"You want overtime?"

"I just like to know what's going on."

From a dark corner of the lounge there came the hesitant sort of music that gives the pianist time for a gulp of Martini between bars. When Mann got as far as the Chinese screen that divided this room from the dining-room, he stopped and lit a cheroot. He took his time doing it so that both of us could get a quick look around. "A parley," Mann said quietly.

"A parley with whom?"

"Exactly," said Mann. He inhaled on his cheroot, and took my arm in his iron grip while telling about all the people he recognized.

The dining room had been rearranged to make room for six special backgammon tables at which silent players gambled for high stakes. The room was crowded with spectators, and there was an especially large group around the far table, at which a middle-aged manufacturer of ultrasonic intruder alarms was doing battle with a spectacular redhead.

"Now that's the kind of girl I could go for," said Mann.

Bessie punched him gently in the stomach. "And don't think he's kidding," she told me.

"Don't do that when I'm drinking French champagne," said Mann.

"Is it okay when you're drinking domestic?" Bessie asked.

Tony came past with a magnum of Heidsieck. He poured all our glasses brimful, hummed the melody line of "Alligator Crawl" more adroitly than the pianist handled it, and then did a curious little dance step before moving on to fill more glasses.

"Tony is in an attentive mood tonight," I said.

"Tony is keeping an eye on you," said Bessie. "Tony is remembering that time when you two came up here with those drunken musicians from the Village and turned Tony's party into a riot."

"I still say it was Tony Nowak's rat-fink cousin Stefan who put the spaghetti in the piano," said Mann.

Bessie smiled and pointed at me. "The last time we talked about it, you were the guilty party," she confided.

Mann made a vampire face and tried to bite his wife's throat.

"Promises, promises," said Bessie, and she turned to watch Tony Nowak moving among his guests.

Mann walked into the dining room and we followed him. It was all chinoiserie and high camp, with lanterns and goldplated Buddhas, and miniature paintings of oriental pairs in acrobatic sexual couplings.

"It's Red Bancroft," said Mann, still looking at the redhead. "She's international standard—you watch this."

I followed him as he elbowed his way to a view of the backgammon game. We watched in silence. If this girl was playing a delaying game, it was far, far beyond my sort of backgammon, where you hit any blot within range and race for home. This girl was even leaving the single men exposed. It could be a way of drawing her opponent out of her home board, but she wasn't building up there yet. She was playing red; her single pieces seemed scattered and vulnerable, and two of her men were out, waiting to come in. But for Mann's remark, I would have seen this as the muddled play of a beginner.

The redhead smiled as her middle-aged opponent reached for the bidding cube. He turned it in his fingers as if trying to find the odds he wanted and then set it down again. I heard a couple of surprised grunts behind me as the audience saw the bid. If the girl was surprised as well she didn't show it. But when she smiled again, it was too broad a smile, and it lasted too long. Backgammon is as much a game of bluff as of skill and luck. The redhead yawned and raised a hand to cover her mouth. It was a gesture that showed her figure to good advantage. She gave a nod of assent. The man rattled the dice longer than he'd done before, and I saw his lips move as if in prayer. He held his breath while they rolled. If it was a prayer, it was answered quickly and fully—double six! He looked up

at the redhead. She smiled as if this were all part of her plan. The man took a long time looking at the board before he moved his men.

She picked up her dice and threw them carelessly, but from this moment her game changed drastically. The man's home board was completely open, so she had no trouble in bringing in her two men. With her next throw she began to build up her home board, which had been littered with blots. A four and a three. It was all she needed to cover six points. That locked her opponent. Now he could only use a high throw, and for this his prayers went unanswered. She had the game to herself for throw after throw. The man lit a cigar with studied care as he watched the game going against him and could do nothing about it. Only after she began bearing off did he get moving again.

Now the bidding cube was in her hands—and that, too, was part of the strategy. She raised it. The man looked at the cube, then up to the faces of his friends. There had been side wagers on his success. He smiled and nodded his agreement to the new stakes, although he must have known that only a couple of high doubles could save him now. He picked up the dice and shook them as if they might explode. When they rolled to a standstill, there was a five and a one on the upper sides. He sighed. He still hadn't got all his men into the home board. The girl threw a double five—with five men already beared off, it ended the game.

He conceded. The redhead smiled as she tucked a thousand dollars in C-notes into a crocodileskin wallet with gold edges. The bystanders drifted away. The redhead looked up at Bessie and smiled, and then she smiled at Major Mann, too.

But for that Irish coloring she might have been Oriental. Her cheekbones were high and flat, and her mouth a little too wide. Her eyes were a little too far apart, and narrow—narrower still when she smiled. It was the smile that I was to remember long after everything else about her had faded in my memory. It was a strange, uncertain smile that sometimes mocked and sometimes chided but was nonetheless beguiling for that, as I was to find to my cost.

She wore an expensive knitted dress of striped autumnal colors and in her ears there were small jade earrings that exactly matched her eyes. Bessie brought her over to where I was standing, near the champagne, and the food.

When Bessie moved away, the girl said, "Pizza is very fattening."

"So is everything I like," I said.

"Everything?" said the girl.

"Well . . . damn nearly everything," I said. "Congratulations on your win."

She got out a pack of mentholated cigarettes and put one in her mouth. I lit it for her.

"Thank you kindly, sir. There was a moment when he had me worried though, I'll tell you that."

"I know," I said. "When you yawned."

"It's nerves—I try everything not to yawn."

"Think yourself lucky," I said. "Some people *laugh* when they are nervous."

"Do you mean *you* laugh when you are nervous?"

"I'm advised to reserve my defense," I told her.

"Ah, how British of you! You want to know my weaknesses, but you'll not confide any of your own."

"Does that make me a male chauvinist pig?"

"It shortens the odds," she said. Then she found herself stifling a yawn again. I laughed.

"How long have you known the Manns?" I asked.

"I met Bessie at a yoga class, about four years back. She was trying to lose weight, I was trying to lose those yawns."

"Now you're kidding."

"Yes. I went to yoga after . . ." She stopped. It was a painful memory. "I got home early one night and found a couple of kids burglarizing my apartment. They gave me a bad beating and left me unconscious. When I left the hospital I went to a yoga farm to convalesce. That's how I met Bessie."

"And the backgammon?"

"My father was a fire chief—Illinois semifinalist in the backgammon championships one year. He was great. I almost paid my way through college on what I earned playing backgammon. Three years ago I went professional—you can travel the world from tournament to tournament. There's no season. Lots of money—it's a rich man's game." She sighed. "But that was three years ago. I've had a lousy year since then. And a lousy year in Seattle is a *really* lousy year, believe me! And what about you?"

"Nothing to tell."

"Ah, Bessie's told me a lot already," she said.

"And I thought she was a friend."

"Just the good bits—you're English . . ."

"How long has that been a 'good bit' among the backgammon players of Illinois?"

"You work, with Bessie's husband, in the analysis department of a downtown bank that I've never heard of. You—"

I put my fingers to her lips to stop her. "That's enough," I said. "I can't stand it."

"Is your family here in the city with you?" She was flirting. I'd almost forgotten how much I liked it.

"No," I said.

"Are you going to join them for Christmas?"

"No."

"But that's terrible." Spontaneously she reached out to touch my arm.

"I have no immediate family," I confessed.

She smiled. "I didn't like to ask Bessie. She's always matchmaking."

"Don't knock it," I said.

"I'm not lucky in love," she said. "Just in backgammon."

"And where is your home?"

"My home is a Samsonite two-suiter."

"It's a well-known address," I said. "Why New York City?"

She smiled. Her very white teeth were just a fraction uneven. She sipped her drink. "I'd had enough of Seattle," she said. "New York was the first place that came to mind." She put the half-smoked cigarette into an ashtray and stubbed it out as if it were Seattle.

In the next room the piano player drifted into a sleepy version of "How Long Has This Been Going On?" Red moved a little closer to me and continued to stare into her drink like a crystal gazer seeking a fortune there.

The intruder-alarm manufacturer passed us and smiled. Red took my arm and rested her head on my shoulder. When he was out of earshot she looked up at me. "I hope you didn't mind," she said. "I told him my boyfriend was here; I wanted to reinforce that idea."

"Any time." I put my arm round her. She was soft and warm, and her shiny red hair smelled fresh as I pressed close.

"Some of these people who lose money at the table think they might get recompense some other way," she murmured.

"Now you've started my mind working," I said.

She laughed.

"You're not supposed to laugh," I said.

"I like you," she said, and laughed again. But now it was a nice throaty chuckle rather than the nervous, teeth-baring grimace that I'd seen at the backgammon table. "Yes, you guessed right," she said. "I ran from a lousy love affair." She moved away, but not too far away.

"And now you're wondering if you did the right thing," I said.

"He was a louse," she said. "Other women . . . debts that I had to pay . . . drinking bouts . . . no, I'm not wondering if I did the right thing. I'm wondering why it took me so long."

"And now he phones you every day asking you to come back."

"How did you know?" She mumbled the words into my shoulder.

"That's the way it goes," I said.

She gripped my arm. For a long time we stood in silence. I felt I'd

known her all my life. The intruder-alarm man passed again. He smiled at us.

"Let's get out of here," she said.

There was nothing I would have liked better, but Mann had disappeared from the room, and if he was engaged in the sort of parley he'd anticipated, he'd be counting on my standing right here with both eyes wide open.

"I'd better stay with the Manns," I told her.

She pursed her lips. And yet a moment later she smiled, and there was no sign of the scarred ego.

"Sure," she said. "I understand."

But she didn't understand enough, for soon after that she saw some people she knew and beckoned them to join us.

"Do you play backgammon?" one of the newcomers asked.

"Not so that anyone would notice," I said.

Red smiled at me, but when she learned that two onetime champions were about to fight out a match in the next room, she took my hand and dragged me over.

Backgammon is more to my taste than chess. The dice add a large element of luck to every game, so that sometimes a novice beats a champion, just as it goes in real life. Sometimes, however, a preponderance of luck makes a game boring to watch. This one was like that—or perhaps I was just feeling bad about the way Red exchanged smiles and greetings with so many people around the table.

The two ex-champions were into the opening moves of their third game by the time Bessie Mann plucked my sleeve to tell me that her husband wanted me.

I went down the hall to where Tony Nowak's driver was standing on guard outside the bedroom. He was scowling at the mirror and trying to look like a cop. I was expecting the scowl but not the quick rubdown for firearms. I went inside. In spite of the dim lighting, I saw Tony perched on the dressing table, his tie loosened and his brow shiny.

There was a smell of expensive cigars and after-shave lotion. And seated in the best chair, his sneakers resting upon an embroidered footstool, there was Harvey Kane Greenwood. They had long since ceased to refer to him as the up-and-coming young senator: Greenwood had arrived. The long hair—hot-combed and tinted—the chinos, and the batik shirt, open far enough to reveal the medallion on a gold neck-chain, were all part of the well-publicized image, and many of his aspirations could be recognized in Gerry Hart, the lean young assistant he had recently engaged to help him with his work on the Scientific Development Subcommittee of the Senate Committee on International Co-operation.

As my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, I saw as far as the Hep-

plewhite sofa, upon which sat two balding heavyweights, comparing wrist-watches and arguing quietly in Russian. They didn't notice me, and nor did Gerry Hart, who was drawing diagrams on a dinner napkin for his boss, Greenwood, who was nodding.

I was only as far as the doorway when Mann waved his hands and had me backing up past Tony's sentry and all the way along the corridor as far as the kitchen.

Piled up along the working surfaces there were plates of leftover party food, dirty ashtrays, and plastic containers crammed with used cutlery. The remains of two turkeys were propped up on the open door of a wall oven, and as we entered a cat jumped from there to the floor. Otherwise the brightly lit kitchen was unoccupied.

Mann opened the refrigerator and took out a carton of buttermilk. He reached for tumblers from the shelf above and poured two glassfuls. "You like buttermilk?"

"Not much," I said.

He drank some of it and then tore a piece of paper from a kitchen roll and wiped his mouth. All the while he held the refrigerator door wide open. Soon the compressor started to throb. This sound, combined with the interference of the fluorescent lights above our heads, gave us a little protection against even the most sophisticated bugging devices.

"This is a lulu," said Mann quietly.

"In that case," I said, "I will have some buttermilk."

"Do we want to take delivery of Mrs. B.?" He did not conceal his anger.

"Where?" I asked.

"Here!" said Mann indignantly. "Right here in Schlockville."

I smiled. "And this is an offer from Gentleman Jim Greenwood and our friend Hart?"

"And the two vodka salesmen from downtown Omsk."

"KGB?"

"Big-ass pants, steel-tipped shoes, fifty-dollar manicures, and big Cuban cigars—yes, my suspicions run that way."

"Perhaps Hart got them through Central Casting."

Mann shook his head. "Heavy," he said. "I've been close to them. These two are really heavy."

Mann had the mannerism of placing a hand over his heart, the thumb and forefinger fidgeting with his shirt collar. He did it now. It was as if he were taking an oath about the two Russians.

"But why?"

"Good question," said Mann. "When Greenwood's damned committee is working so hard to give away all America's scientific secrets to any foreigner who wants them, who needs the KGB?"

"And they talked about B.?"

"I must be getting senile or something," said Mann. "Why didn't I think about those guys on that Scientific Cooperation Committee—Commies the lot of them, if you ask me."

"But what are they after?"

Mann threw a hand into the air and caught it, fingers splayed. "These guys—Greenwood and his sidekick—are lecturing me about freedom. Telling me that I'm just about to lead some kind of witch hunt through the academic world."

"And are we?"

"I'm sure going to sift through Bekuv's friends and acquaintances—and not Greenwood and all his pinko committeemen will stop me."

"They didn't set up this meeting just to tell you not to start a witch hunt," I said.

"They can do our job better than we can," said Mann bitterly. "They say they can get Bekuv's wife out of the USSR, by playing footsie with the Kremlin."

"You mean they'll get her a legal exit permit, providing we don't dig out anything that will embarrass the committee."

"Right," said Mann. "Have some more buttermilk." He poured some without waiting to ask if I wanted it.

"After all," I said in an attempt to mollify his rage. "It's what we want—I mean—Mrs. B. It would make our task easier."

"Just the break we've been waiting for," said Mann sarcastically. "Do you know, they really expected us to bring Bekuv here tonight. They are threatening to demand his appearance before the committee."

"Why?"

"To make sure he came to the West of his own free will. How do you like that?"

"I don't like it very much," I said. "His photo in the *Daily News*, reporters pushing microphones into his mouth. The Russians would feel bound to respond to that. It could get very rough."

Mann made a face and reached for the wall telephone extension. He capped the phone and listened for a moment to be sure the line was not in use. To me he said, "I'm going back in there, to tug my forelock for ten minutes." He dialed the number of the CIA garage on Eighty-second Street. "Mann here. Send my number-two car for backup. I'm still at the same place." He hung up. "You get downstairs," he told me. "You go down and wait for the backup car. Tell Charlie to tail the two Russian goons, and give him the descriptions."

"It won't be easy," I warned. "They are sure to be prepared for that."

"Either way it will be interesting to see how they react." Mann slammed the refrigerator door.



The conversation was ended. I gave him a solemn salute and went down the hall to get my coat.

Red Bancroft was there, too: climbing into a fine military-style suede coat, with leather facings and brass buttons and buckles. She winked as she tucked her long auburn hair into a crazy little knitted hat.

"And here he is," she said to the intruder-alarm manufacturer, who was watching himself in a mirror while a servant pulled at the collar of his camel-hair coat. He touched his mustache and nodded approval.

He was a tall, wiry man, with hair that was graying the way it does only for tycoons and film stars.

"The little lady was looking everywhere for you," said the intruder-alarm man. "I was trying to persuade her to ride up to Sixtieth Street with me."

"I'll look after her," I said.

"And I'll bid you good night," he said. "It was a real pleasure playing against you, Miss Bancroft. I just hope you'll give me a chance to get even sometime."

Red smiled and nodded, and then she smiled at me.

"Now let's get out of her," I whispered.

She gripped my arm, and just as the man looked back at us, kissed my cheek. It was too early to say whether it was nice timing, or just impulse, but I took the opportunity to hold her tight and kiss her back. Tony Nowak's domestic servants found something needing their attention in the lounge.

"Have you been drinking buttermilk?" said Red.

It was a long time before we got out to the landing. The intruder-alarm man was still there, fuming about the non-arrival of the elevator. It came almost at the same moment that we did.

"Everything goes right for those in love," said the alarm man. I warmed to him.

"You have a car?" he asked. He bowed us into the elevator ahead of him.

"We do," I said. He pressed the button for ground level, and the numbers began to flicker.

"This is no city for moonlight walks," he told me. "Not even here on Park Avenue."

We stopped, and the elevator doors opened.

Like so many scenes of mortal danger, each constituent part of this one was very still. I saw everything, and yet my brain took some time to relate the elements in any meaningful way.

The entrance hall of the apartment building was brightly lit by indirect strip-lighting set into the ceiling. A huge vaseful of plastic flowers trembled from the vibration of some subterranean furnace, and a draught of cold

wind from the glass entrance door carried with it a few errant flakes of snow. The dark brown carpet, chosen perhaps to hide dirty footmarks from the street, now revealed caked snow that had fallen from visitors' shoes.

The entrance hall was not empty. There were three men there, all wearing the sort of dark raincoats and peaked hats that are worn by uniformed drivers. One of them had his foot jammed into the plate-glass door at the entrance. He had his back to us and was looking toward the street. The nearest man was opposite the doors of the elevator. He had a big S. & W. Heavy-Duty .38 in his fist, and it was pointing at us.

"Freeze," he said. "Freeze, and nobody gets hurt. Slow now! Bring out your billfold."

We froze. We froze so still that the elevator doors began to close on us. The man with the gun stamped a large boot into the door slot and motioned us to step out. I stepped forward carefully, keeping my hands raised and in sight.

"If it's money you want," said the alarm manufacturer, "take my wallet, and welcome to it." He was frantically reaching into the breast pocket of his camel-hair overcoat. His voice was such a plaintive whine of terror that the man with the gun smiled. He turned his head so that the third gunman could see him smiling. And then his friend smiled too.

There were two shots: deafening thumps that echoed in the narrow lobby and left behind a whiff of burned powder. The man with the gun screeched. His eyes popped wide open, he gasped and coughed blood. There was a brief moment before the pistol hit the carpet with a thump, and its owner slid slowly down the wall, leaving a long smudge of blood. Red Bancroft gripped my arm so hard that it hurt. The second shot hit the man watching the stairs. It went in at the shoulder, and smashed his clavicle. He threw his gun down and grabbed his elbow. They say that's the only way you can ease the pain of a fractured collarbone. He couldn't run very fast with that sort of wound. That's why the alarm manufacturer had time enough to put his gun up to eye level. He got him in the spine with the third shot. It was enough to tumble him full length onto scattered particles of impacted snow on the plastic sheet that had been put down in the outer lobby to protect the carpet. He died with his head resting on the word "Welcome." There wasn't much blood.

It was the body of the second man that obstructed me as I opened the glass door, which had an electric solenoid lock. I had to push the override.

The intruder-alarm man collided with me in the doorway, but we both scrambled out in the street in time to see the third man running. He was hatless now and halfway across the avenue. I heard a car being started. The alarm man raised his gun for a shot at him but slid on the ice and lost his balance. He tumbled. There was a clatter and a curse as he fell

against a parked car. I ran out into the empty street. On the far side, the door of a black Mercedes opened to receive the gunman. The Mercedes leaped forward while the door was still open. I saw a flurry of arms, and one leg trailed, and cut a pattern in the snow before the man was inside and the door closed. As the Mercedes reached the cross street, the driver switched his lights on.

"Fulton County plate," said the voice of the intruder-alarm man. "Did you see that? It was a car from Fulton County. Did you get the number?"

He was breathless from the tumble he'd taken, and I was breathless, too.

"Three digits and FC," I said. "It was too dirty to get it all."

"Damned weather," said the man. "I would have plinked him but for that damned patch of ice." He turned and we walked back to the lobby.

"I think you would have," I said.

He slapped me on the back. "Thanks for taking his attention, young fella," he said.

"Is that what I did?"

"Raising your hands and acting scared—that took his attention. And that was cool." He stepped over the body that was sprawled in the doorway. I followed him.

"Spread that around," I said. "But just between the two of us—I wasn't acting."

He laughed. It was the strangled sort of laugh that releases a lot of suppressed tension. He toyed with the .38 revolver that was still in his hand. It was a blue-finish Colt Agent, with the hammer shroud that prevented it from snagging when drawn from a pocket. He must have thumb-cocked the hammer, for there had been no time for the double action between the movement of his hand and the sound of the shots.

"I'd put that away," I said. "Put it out of sight before the cops arrive."

"I've got a permit," he said indignantly. "In fact, I'm president of my local gun club."

"They come down the street and see you standing over two corpses with a hot shooter in your hand, they're likely to shoot first and check the permits afterward."

He put the gun away, but not before bringing the next loaded chamber into position. He unbuttoned his overcoat and jacket and placed his gun in a highly decorative Berns-Martin spring-grip shoulder-holster. As we got back to the lobby, Mann arrived with Tony.

"You stupid nut," said Mann to the alarm manufacturer, although I had the feeling that some overfill was intended to splash onto me.

"What am I supposed to do," said the alarm man, looking in a mirror and combing his hair, "let those punks drill me? I'd be the laughingstock of the whole intruder-alarm business."

"They're both dead," said Mann. "You shot to kill."

The alarm man turned to look at Mann. Then he looked at the two corpses and back to Mann again. For a moment I thought he was going to express satisfaction at what he'd done, but he knew too much about the law to do that.

"Well, that's something you'd better talk about with my lawyer," he said finally. Some of the bubbly elation that always follows such a danger was now fading, leaving him flat and a little frightened.

Mann caught my eye. "No, I'm getting out of here," he said.

"I'm not Wyatt Earp," said the man. "I can't shoot guns out of guys' hands."

I took Red's arm. "I'd better get you home," I said.

"The police will want to talk to me," she said.

"No. Tony will fix that," I said.

Tony nodded. "You get along home, Red. My driver will take you. And don't lose any sleep about those guys. We've had a whole string of muggings here over the past month. These are rough customers. I know the deputy inspector—I'll get him to keep you out of it."

I thought the girl was taking it all with a superhuman calmness. Now I realized that she was frozen with fear. Her face was colorless, and as I put my arm around her, I felt her body twitch violently. "Take it easy, Red," I said. "I'll have to stay on here."

"They're both dead," she said, stepping high over the body of the man in the doorway without looking down at him. Outside in the swirling snowstorm she stopped and wound her knitted scarf around her head. She reached up for me and planted a sisterly kiss on my lips. "Could it work out to be something special . . . you and me?" she said.

"Yes," I said. While we stood there a police car arrived, and then a car with a doctor.

Tony's driver opened the door of the Lincoln for her. I waved, and stood there a long time until the car could no longer be seen. By the time I got back to the lobby the cops were there. They were stripping the dead gunmen naked and putting the clothes into evidence bags.

Chapter Five

Tony Nowak's apartment is in the Seventeenth Police Precinct, but dead bodies from those plush addresses go down to the Twenty-first Street morgue and are put in the chilled drawers alongside pushers from Times Square and Chinese laundrymen from the Tenderloin.

"Can we smoke?" I asked the attendant. The cold room had an eerie echo. He nodded and pulled the drawer open, and read silently from the police file. Apparently satisfied, he stepped back so that we could get a good long look at the holdup man. He came out feet-first with a printed tag on his toe. His face had been cleaned of blood and his hair combed, but nothing could be done about the open mouth that made him look as if he'd died of surprise.

"The bullet hit the windpipe," said the attendant. "He died gasping for air." He closed the file. "This has been a heavy night for us," he explained. "If it's okay with you guys, I'll go back to the office. Put him away when you're through with him." He tucked the clipboard under his arm and took a look at his pocketwatch. It was two-fifteen in the morning. He yawned and heaved the big evidence bag onto the stainless-steel table.

"Medical examiner had them stripped at the scene of crime—just so Forensic can't say we lost anything." He prodded the transparent bag that contained a peaked hat, dark raincoat, cheap denim suit, and soiled underwear. "You'll find your paperwork inside." He twisted the identification tag that was on the dead man's toe so that he could read it. "Died on Park Avenue, eh? Now there's a goon with taste." He looked back at the body. "Don't turn him over until the photographer has finished with him."

"Okay," I said.

"Your other one is in drawer number twenty-seven—we keep all the gunshot deaths together at this end of the room. Anything else you want and I'll be in the ME's office through the autopsy room."

Mann opened the bag and found the shirt. There was a bullet nick in the collar.

"A marksman," I said.

"A schmuck," said Mann. "A marksman would have been satisfied with the gun arm."

"You think this holdup might have a bearing on the Bekuv situation?" I said.

"Put a neat little mustache on Bekuv and send him up to Saks Fifth Avenue for a four-hundred-dollar suit, gray his temples a little, and feed him enough chocolate sodas to put a few inches on his waistline, and what have you got?"

"Nothing," I said. "I've got nothing. What are you trying to say?"

"Mister snap-shooting damn intruder alarm—that's who you've got, stupid."

I considered for a moment. There was a faint, superficial resemblance between Bekuv and the intruder-alarm man. "It's not much," I said.

"But it might be enough if you were a trigger-happy gorilla, waiting in

the lobby there—very nervous—and with just an ancient little snapshot of Bekuv to recognize him by."

"Who'd think Bekuv would be with us at Tony's party?"

"Greenwood and Hart. Those guys wanted him there," said Mann.

I shook my head.

Mann said, "And if I told you that thirty minutes after we left Washington Square last night Andrei Bekuv was in his tux and trying to tell the doorman that I had given him permission to go out on his own?"

"You think they got to him? You think they gave him a personal invitation to be there?"

"He wasn't duding up to try his luck in the singles' bars on Third Avenue," said Mann.

"And you agreed?" I asked him. "You told Hart and Greenwood and Nowak that you'd bring Bekuv to their party?"

"It's easy to be wise after the event," said Mann defensively. He used his tongue to find a piece of tobacco that was in his teeth. "Sure I agreed, but I didn't do it." He removed the strand of tobacco with a delicate deployment of his little finger. "These guys in the lobby—they didn't ask for cash, wristwatch, gold tiepin; they asked for his wallet. They wanted to check—they were nervous—they wanted to find something to prove he was really Bekuv."

I shrugged. "Wallet, bill-fold—a stickup man is likely to ask for any of these things when he wants money. What about the Fulton County license plate?"

"Do you know how big Fulton County is?"

"On a black Mercedes?"

"Yes, well, we're checking it. We've got the guy from the Department of Motor Vehicles out of his bed, if that makes you feel better."

"It does," I said. "But if we'd found that 'ancient little snapshot of Bekuv' among these personal effects, that would make me feel even better still. Until we've got something to go on, this remains a simple, old-fashioned New York holdup."

"Just a heist. By tomorrow, when we tell our pal Bekuv about it, I'm going to paint it to look like they're gunning for him."

"Why?"

"We might learn something from him if he thinks he needs better protection. I'm going to tuck him away somewhere where no one's going to find him."

"Where?"

"We'll get him out of here for Christmas. It's too dangerous here."

"Miami? Or the safe house in Boston?"

"Don't be a comedian. Send him to a CIA safe house! You might as well take a small ad in *Pravda*." Mann rolled the body back into the

chilled case. The sound set my teeth on edge. "You take the backup car," Mann told me. "I'll drive myself."

"Then where will you put Bekuv?"

"Don't make it too early in the morning."

"You've got my sworn promise," I said. I watched him as he marched through the rows and rows of cold slabs, his shoes clicking on the tiled floor and a curious squeaky noise that I later recognized as Mann whistling a tune.

I suppose Mann's insouciant exit attracted the attention of the mortuary attendant. "What's going on, Harry?" He looked at me for a few seconds before realizing that I wasn't Harry. "Are you the photographer?"

"No," I said.

"Then who the hell are you?"

"Seventeenth Precinct knows about me," I said.

"And I'll bet they do," he said. "How did you get in here, buster?"

"Calm down. I saw your colleague."

"You saw my colleague," he mocked in a shrill falsetto. "Well, now you're seeing *me*." I noticed his hands as he repeatedly gripped his fists and released them again. I had the feeling he wanted to provoke me so that he had an excuse for taking a poke at me. I was keen to deprive him of that excuse.

"It's official," I said.

"ID, fella," he said, and poked a finger at my chest.

"He's all right, Sammy." We both turned. The other mortuary attendant had come in by the center door. "I talked to Charlie Kelly about him. Charlie says okay."

"I don't like guys creeping around here without my permission," said the pugnacious little man. Still murmuring abuse, he studied his clipboard and wandered back upstairs with that twitchy walk one sees in punchy old prizefighters.

"Sorry about that," said the first attendant. "I should have told Sammy that you were here."

"I thought he was going to put me on a slab," I said.

"Sammy's all right," he said. He looked at me before deciding that I should have a fuller explanation. "Sammy and me were cops—we joined the force together. We were both wounded in a gun battle near Delancey, way back in the 'sixties. Neither of us was fit enough to go back on the force. He's a good guy."

"You could have fooled me," I said.

"Saw his fifteen-year-old kid brought in here one day—hit by a truck coming out of school—that happens to you once and you remember. You start getting dizzy every time you unzip a body bag." He turned away.

"Anyway, it was okay for you, was it? I hear you were right in the middle when the shells started flying."

"I was lucky," I said.

"And the third guy took off in a black Mercedes. I was reading it all on the report. You get the plate number?"

"FC," I said. "They tell me that's a Fulton County registration."

"Well, at least you didn't get suckered by the Fulton County plate."

"What do you mean?"

"Any cop who's been on the force a few years will tell you the way those people from Fulton County used to come into the city and double-park all over Manhattan. And no cop would ever give them a ticket. Hell, the number of times I saw cars—would you believe treble-parked on Madison, jamming the traffic? And I just walked on and forgot about it."

"I don't get it."

"Well you wouldn't, being from out of town, but a Fulton County plate is FC and then three numerals. Not many cops noticed any difference between that and three numbers followed by FC—I mean, a cop's got a lot on his mind, without getting into that kind of pizzazz."

"And what is it about a car with a license plate that has three numbers followed by FC? What is it that makes it okay for him to treble-park on Madison Avenue?"

The mortuary attendant looked at me sorrowfully. "Yeah, well, you've never been a partolman, have you? Three digits FC means a car belonging to a foreign consul—that's an official car with diplomatic immunity to arrest, and I mean including parking tickets. And that's what all those smart-ass drivers from Fulton County were betting on."

"Got you," I said.

He didn't hear me; he was staring into the sixties and watching one of those nice kids we all used to be. "Midnight to eight," he said. "I liked that shift—no dependants, so what's the difference—and you make more money, overtime and payments for time in court. But it was a rough shift for a cop in those days."

"In those days?" I said.

"This was an all-night city back in the early sixties—bars open right up to the legal four A.M., all-night groceries, all-night dancing, all-night you-name-it. But the city got rougher and rougher, so people stayed home and watched TV. You go out there now, and the streets are dark and empty." He picked up a piece of cloth and wiped his hands. His hands looked very clean, but he wiped them anyway. "Streets are so empty that a perpetrator can take his time: no witnesses, no calls to the cops, no nothing. Midnight to eight used to be a tough shift for a cop . . ." He gave a humorless little laugh. "Now it's a tough shift here at the morgue." He threw the rag



aside. "You should see some of them when we get them here—kids and old ladies, too . . . ah! So you're from out of town, eh?"

"Yes," I said. "Three thousand miles out of town."

"You got it made," he said.

Outside, the night was cold. The sky was mauve and the world slightly tilted. Around the access points for the city's steam supply, the crust of snow had melted so that the street shone in the moonlight, and from the manhole covers steam drifted as far as the cross street before the wind whipped it away. A police car siren called somewhere on the far side of the city. It was a pitiful sound, like the repeated cries of a thrashed animal crawling away to die.

Chapter Six

The Washington Square house is "twinned" in the CIA style—divided vertically—so that the back of the house, shuttered against telescopes and double-glazed against focusing microphones, is all offices, while the front half provides apartments for the staff, and so presents all the outward appearance of domesticity.

I lived on the second floor. Bekuv lived above me. Bekuv's appearance had changed during those few days in New York City. His hair had been cut by some fancy barber, and he'd had enough sleep to put some color back into his cheeks. His clothes were transformed, too: tailored trousers, a blue lambs-wool shirt and bright canvas shoes. He was sitting on the floor, surrounded by loudspeakers, records, amplifier components, extra tweeters, a turntable, a soldering iron, and hi-fi magazines. Bekuv looked despondent.

"Andrei was screwed," Mann told me as I went in. I found it hard to believe that Mann was sorry about it.

"In what way?"

"Coffee on the warmer," said Bekuv.

I poured myself a cup and took a *blini*.

"All this damned hi-fi junk," said Mann.

Bekuv applied the pickup to one of his records, and suddenly the whole room was filled with music.

"God almighty!" Mann shouted angrily.

Delicately, Bekuv lifted the pickup and the music ceased. "Shostakovich," he said to anyone who was seeking that information.

Mann said, "Andrei spent nearly two thousand dollars on all this stuff, and now he's been reading the discount-house ads."

"I could have got it for five hundred dollars less," Bekuv told me. I noticed that several of the hi-fi magazines were marked by red pen, and there were little sums scribbled on the back of an envelope.

"Well, perhaps we can do something about that," I said vaguely, while I drank my coffee and thought about something else.

"Andrei is not going out," said Mann, "and that's that." I realized they had been arguing about whether Bekuv was allowed to go out on the street again.

"Now *this* loudspeaker is buzzing," said Bekuv.

"Listen, dummy," Mann told him, bending forward from his chair so that he could speak close to Bekuv's ear. "There are citizens out there waiting to ice you. Didn't you hear what I told you about the shooting last night? We spent the small hours downtown in the city morgue—I don't recommend it, not even for a stiff."

"I'm not frightened," said Bekuv. He put the pickup arm back on the record. There was a loud hissing before he reduced the volume a little. It was still very loud.

Mann leaned forward and lifted the pickup off the record. "I don't give a damn whether you are frightened or not frightened," he said. "In fact I don't give a damn whether you are alive or dead, but I'm going to make sure it happens after you are moved out of here and I've got a receipt for you."

"Is that going to happen?" said Bekuv. He began looking through his loose-leaf notebook.

"It might," said Mann.

"I can't go anywhere for the time being," said Bekuv. "I have work to do."

"What work?" I asked.

Bekuv looked at me as if only just realizing that I was present. "My work on interstellar communication," he said sarcastically. "Have you forgotten that I have a chair at New York University?"

"No," I said.

"I've calculated for the initial programme of transmissions. It would cost very little money, and it will focus attention on the work we are doing."

"Transmissions?" said Mann.

"In space there are clouds of hydrogen. They vibrate to make a hum of radio noise. You pick it up on any radio set at 1,420 megacycles. My theory is that this would be the best frequency to use for our first messages to outer space. Other civilizations are certain to notice any change in that hum of hydrogen vibrations."

"Sure to," said Mann.

"Not on that exact wavelength," added Bekuv. "They would be obliterated. We must transmit *near* to the wavelength, not on it."

"Near to it; not on it," said Mann. He nodded.

"It would cost very little," said Bekuv. "And I could have it working inside six months."

"That's well before the flying-saucer men go to summer camp," said Mann.

Bekuv looked up at Mann. His voice was harsh, and it was as if he were answering a long list of unspoken questions when he shouted, "Twice I have attended meetings of the 1924 Society. Only twice! The last time was nearly five years ago. Science is not the cozy little club you believe it is. Don't keep pressurizing me. I recognized no one, and we did not exchange names and addresses for obvious reasons."

"For obvious reasons," said Mann. "Because those sons of bitches were betraying the whole of America's military electronics program."

"And will it get your secrets back if you keep me a prisoner here?" yelled Bekuv. "Not allowed to go out. Not allowed to make phone calls."

Mann walked quickly to the door, as if frightened he would lose his temper. He turned. "You'll stay here as long as I think fit," he said. "Behave yourself, and I'll send you a packet of phonograph needles and a subscription to *Little Green Men Monthly*."

Bekuv spoke quietly, "You don't like cosmology, you don't like high fidelity, you don't like Shostakovich, you don't like *blinis* . . ." Bekuv smiled. I couldn't decide whether he was trying to needle Mann or not.

"I don't like Russians," explained Mann. "White Russians, Red Russians, Ukrainians, Muscovite liberals, ballet dancers, or poets—I just don't like any of them. Get the picture?"

"I get it," said Bekuv sulkily. "Is there anything more?"

"One thing more," said Mann. "I'm not an international expert on the design of electronic masers. All I know about them is that a maser is some kind of crystal gimmick that gets pumped up with electronic energy so that it amplifies the weakest of incoming radio signals. That way you get a big fat signal compared with the background of electronic static noise and interference."

"That's right," said Bekuv. It was the first time Mann had shown any real interest.

"I was reading that your liquid helium bath technique, which keeps the maser at minus two hundred and sixty-eight degrees centigrade, will amplify a signal nearly two million times."

Bekuv nodded.

"Now I see the day when every little two-bit transistor could be using one of these gadgets and pulling in radio transmissions from anywhere in

the world. Of course, we know that would just mean hearing a DJ spinning discs in Peking instead of Pasadena, but a guy collecting a royalty on such a gadget could make a few million. Right, Professor?"

"I didn't defect for money," said Bekuv.

Major Mann smiled.

"I didn't defect to make money!" shouted Bekuv. If Mann had been trying to make Bekuv very very angry, he'd discovered an effective way to do it.

Mann took my arm and led me from the room, closing the door silently and with exaggerated care. I didn't speak as we both walked downstairs to my sitting room. Mann took off his dark raincoat and bundled it up to throw it into a corner. From upstairs there came the sudden crash of Shostakovich. Mann closed the door to muffle it.

I walked over to the window and looked down into Washington Square. It was sunny—the sort of New York City winter's day when the sun coaxes you out without your long underwear so that the cross-town wind can slice you into freeze-dried salami. Even the quartet, echo-singing under the Washington arch, had the hoods of their parkas up. But no street sounds came through the double-glazing; just soft Shostakovich from upstairs. Mann sat in my most comfortable chair and picked up the carbon of my report. I could tell that he'd already been to his office and perused the overnights. He gave my report no more than a moment or two, then he lifted the lid of my pigskin document case and put a fingertip on the Hart and Greenwood files that had arrived by special messenger in the early hours. They were very thin files.

"The car had a foreign-consul plate?"

"Yes," I said.

"And you read that stuff on the Telex?"

"The two Russians are staying in a house leased to the second secretary of the Soviet trade delegation. Yes, I read it, but that doesn't make them KGB or even diplomatic. They might just be visiting relatives, or subtenants or squatters or something."

Mann said, "I'd like to bring in the owners of that car and sweat them."

"And what would you charge them with? Leaving the scene of an accident?"

"Very funny," said Mann. "But the foreign consul plate on that car ties them to the stickup artists."

"You mean KGB heavies lend their official car to three hoods?"

Mann pouted and shook his head slowly, as if denying a treat to a spoiled child. "Not the way you'd arrange it, maybe," he said. "But there was no reason for them to think it would get all fouled up. They figured it would be a pushover, and the official car would provide them with the kind of getaway that no cop would dare stop. It was a good idea."

"That went wrong."

"That went wrong." He ran his fingers through the urgent paperwork inside my document case. "Are we going to get some of this junk down the chute today?"

"Does that 'we' mean you're about to break the seal on a new box of paper-clips?"

Mann smiled.

I put the case beside me on the sofa and began to sort the contents into three piles: urgent, very urgent, and phone.

Mann leaned over the sofa back. He lifted a corner of a pile of neatly stacked documents, each one bearing a colored marking slip that explained to me what I was signing. He sucked his teeth. "Those typewriter commandos downstairs don't know a microdot from a *Playboy* centerfold but give them a chance to bury you in paperwork, and—damn it, what an avalanche!" He let the paperwork slip out of his hands with enough noise to illustrate this theory.

I moved the piles of papers before Mann decided to repeat his demonstration; the slips and paperclips were already falling off.

"Well, I'll leave you to it," Mann said. "I've got to catch an airplane. Anybody wants me tell them to try the Diplomat Hotel, Miami, Florida."

"Don't use your right name," I said.

"I won't even be there, birdbrain. That's just being set up."

I reached for the first pile.

"Before I go,"—Mann was still standing in the doorway watching me—"Bessie says will you spend Christmas with us?"

"Great," I said without looking up from my work.

"I'd better warn you that Bessie is asking that girl Red Bancroft along. Bessie is a matchmaker."

"You're checking out a place to hide Bekuv, aren't you?" I said.

Mann bared his teeth in the sort of fierce grimace that he believes is a warm and generous smile.

I worked until about noon, and then one of the I-Doc people looked in. "Where's Major Mann?"

"Out." I continued to go through the documents.

"Where did he go?"

"No idea," I said.

"You must know."

"Two little guys in white coats came in and dragged him out with his feet kicking."

"There's a phone call," said the man from downstairs. "Someone asking for you." He looked round the room to be sure I wasn't hiding Mann anywhere. "I'll tell the switchboard to put it through."

"There's a caller named Gerry Hart coming through on the Wall Street line," the operator told me. "Do you want us to patch in through to here, and connect you?"

"I'll take it," I said. If it had taken Hart only twenty-four hours to winkle out the phone number of the merchant bank in Wall Street, which I was using as my prime cover, how long would it take to pry open the rest of it? I pushed the police documentation to one side.

"Let's have lunch," suggested Hart. His voice had the sort of warm resonance contrived by men who spend all day speaking on the telephone.

"Why?"

"There's a development."

"Talk to my boss."

"Tried that, but he's in Miami." Hart's tone of voice made it clear that he didn't believe that Mann was in Miami.

"You could just make that flight where they serve free champagne in tourist," I suggested.

"You really in Wall Street? Or are they patching this to some number in Langley, Virginia?" He gave a little chuckle.

"What's on your mind, Gerry?"

"Listen! I wanted to avoid Mann. It's you I want to talk to. Spare me thirty minutes over a cream-cheese sandwich. You know the Cookery? University Place? Say one o'clock? Don't tell Mann—just you alone."

He had chosen a restaurant about as close to the CIA safe house in Washington Square as it was possible to get. It could have been just a coincidence—the Cookery was one of my favorite haunts, and Gerry Hart might well have known that—but I had a feeling that he was trying to cut me down to size before hitting me with his proposition.

"O.K.," I said.

"I wear a mustache nowadays. Will you be able to recognize me? I'll be reading today's *New York Times*."

"You mean with two peep-holes cut in the front page?"

"Just make sure you don't bring Captain America with you," said Hart, and hung up.

Gerry Hart pinched his trousers at the knees so that he wouldn't be putting any strain on his twelve-ounce wool-and-mohair suit. That done, he eased his shirtsleeves down far enough to reveal his cuff links, but not so far that his black-faced Pulsar wrist-watch was hidden. The file said he was an authority on New Orleans jazz. "Can't be all bad," Mann had remarked at the time.

"I'm in politics now," Hart said. "Did you know that?"

"I thought perhaps you were playing the horses."

"You always had a great sense of humor." He smiled for just a fraction

of a second. "I'm not so touchy as I used to be in the old days," he said. He fingered his new mustache self-consciously. I noticed the manicured fingernails. He'd come a long way from that nervous, opinionated State Department clerk that I remembered from our first meeting.

The drinks came. I put extra Tabasco in my Bloody Mary and then offered the same to Gerry.

He shook his head. "Plain tomato juice doesn't need flavoring," he said primly. "And I'm certainly surprised you need it with all that vodka."

"My analyst says it's a subconscious desire to wash my mouth out with disinfectant."

Hart nodded. "Well, you have a lot of politician in you," he said.

"You mean I approach every problem with an open mouth," I said. I drank quite a lot of my Bloody Mary. "Yes, well, if I decide to run, I'll come and talk to you."

I knew it would be foolish to upset Hart before I knew what was on his mind. His file said he was a thirty-one-year-old lawyer from Connecticut. I regarded him as one of the first of that growing army of young men who had used a few years' service in the CIA as a stepping stone for other ambitions, as at one time the British middle classes had used the Brigade of Guards.

Hart was short and saturnine, a handsome man with curly hair and the sort of dark circles under deep-set eyes that made you think he was sleepy. But Gerry Hart was a tough kid, who didn't smoke and didn't drink, and if he was sleepy it was only because he stayed up late at night rewriting the inaugural address he'd deliver to Congress on the day he became president.

He sipped a little of his tomato juice and wiped his mouth carefully before speaking. "I handle more top-secret material now than I did when I was working for 'the company'—would you believe that?"

"Yes," I said. Hart liked to refer to the CIA as 'the company' to emphasize that he had been on the inside. His file didn't mention service in the CIA but that didn't mean a thing.

"Did you ever hear of the 1924 Society?" he asked me.

"I'd rather hear about it from you," I said.

"Right," said Hart.

The waitress came to the table with the menus. "Don't go away," he told her. He ran his eye quickly down the list. "Club sandwich, mixed salad with French dressing, regular coffee, and I'll take the check. Okay?"

"Yes, sir," said the waitress.

"The same," I said. That made Gerry Hart feel very secure, and I wanted him to feel very secure.

The waitress closed her pad and took the menus from us. She came back with our order almost immediately. Hart smiled at her.

"We've penetrated the 1924 Society. That's why we can do it," Hart explained when she had gone.

"What's inside a club sandwich?" I said. "Do what?"

"Bring Mrs. Bekuv here."

"Is it like a triple-decker sandwich?"

"Bring Mrs. Bekuv out of the USSR, officially or unofficially."

"How?"

"What do you care how?"

I took the top off my sandwich and examined the filling. "We don't have club sandwiches in England," I explained.

"Even Greenwood hasn't been told that this is a CIA operation," Hart said. "Sure, we'll try to get Bekuv's wife by asking the Russians through the Senate Scientific Development subcommittee but if they won't play, we'll make it work some other way."

"Wait a minute," I said. "What is this CIA operation you're talking about?"

"The 1924 Society."

"I don't even know what the 1924 Society is," I said truthfully.

Hart smiled. "In 1924 Mars came very close to Earth. Scientists said maybe Mars would try to communicate with Earth. It caused no end of a ruckus in the scientific press, and then the newspapers joined in the speculation. Even the U.S. Army and Navy ordered all their radio stations to reduce signals traffic and listen for extraterrestrial messages. The 1924 Society was formed that year. Twelve eminent scientists decided to pool information about communications from outer space and plan ways of sending messages back."

"And it's still going strong, is it?"

"Now there are twenty-seven members—only three of them founder members—but a lot of people take it seriously. In 1965, when three Russian astronomers picked up radio waves on a hundred-day cycle from quasar CTA-102, the 1924 Society was considering the report even before the Soviet Academy got the news, and before the Kremlin ordered them to retract."

"And the CIA has penetrated the 1924 Society?"

"How do you think we got the first indication that Bekuv was ready to defect?"

I polished my glasses—people tell me I do that when I'm nervous—and gave the lenses undue care and attention. I needed a little time to look at Gerry Hart and decide that a man I'd always thought of as blowing the tuba was writing the orchestrations.

Hart said, "This is a big operation, make no mistake. Bekuv is only a tiny part of it, but we'll get Mrs. Bekuv here if that's what you want."

"But?"

He stabbed a fork into his sandwich and cut a small triangle of it ready to eat. "But you'll have to prevent Mann from putting his stubby peasant fingers into the 1924 Society. His abrasive personality would really have them all running for dear life, just at a time when we've got it ticking along nicely." He changed the fork over to his other hand and fed himself some sandwich.

I picked my sandwich up in my fist and didn't reply until I had a big mouthful to talk around. "You've been frank with me, Gerry," I said, "and I'll be frank with you. You think we're worrying ourselves sick about getting Mrs. Bekuv here? I'll tell you, we don't give a damn where she is. Sure, we've made the right sort of noises and let Bekuv think we're pushing hard on his behalf, but we prefer things the way they are."

"You can't be serious," said Hart.

"Never been more serious in my life, old pal."

"I wish someone had told us this before," he said irritably. "We've spent a lot of money on this one already."

"On what?"

"We've paid some money to a couple of Russian airline people—we have organized travel papers for Mrs. Bekuv. There was talk of getting her here by a week from Saturday."

"This is a good sandwich, Gerry. They call this a club sandwich, do they? I must remember that."

"Is your pal Major Mickey Mouse really planning to tear the 1924 Society apart?"

"You know what he's like," I said.

Hart forked through his salad to find the last pieces of cucumber. He dipped them into the salt and ate them before pushing the rest of the salad away. He wiped his mouth on his napkin. "No one would believe that I was trying to help you guys," he said. "No one would believe that I was trying to solve one of your biggest headaches and trying to stop you from giving me one."

"Are you serious about being able to get Mrs. Bekuv here—getting her here by next week, I mean?"

Hart brightened a little. He reached into his vest pocket and got out a tiny chamois purse. He opened it with his fingertips and dropped the contents into the open palm I offered him. There were two gold rings. One of them was old, and burnished to a condition where the ornamentation was almost worn away. The newer one was simpler in style, and inside, where there was an inscription in Russian, I could see the gold was only a thin plating.

Hart said, "Bekuv's wife's rings. The plated one is their wedding band—with suitably euphoric Komsomol slogan—and the other one is Bekuv's

mother's ring, inherited when she died." He reached out, and I returned the rings to him. "Good enough for you?" he asked.

"A wonderful piece of foresightedness, Gerry."

"I know it's all part of your technique," said Hart. "I know you're trying to irritate me, but I'm not going to be irritated."

"I'm delighted to hear that," I said.

"But there is a time factor," he said. "And if you don't give me a tentative 'yes,' followed shortly by a suitable piece of paper, I'm getting to my feet and walking out of here."

"Yes, well, don't forget to pay for the sandwiches," I said.

"There's nothing in this for me personally," said Hart. "I'm trying to prevent a foul-up bewteen two separate investigations."

"Why don't you make an official report?"

"You've got to be joking," said Hart. "It will take weeks to go through, and at the end . . ." He shrugged.

"And at the end they might decide that Major Mann is right."

"There's nothing in this for me," said Hart again.

"You're too modest, Gerry. I'd say there was a lot in this for you. You tell me that Greenwood doesn't know you're up to the neck in a CIA investigation of the 1924 Society. You're too smart to hazard the main chance in search of a little career garnish. I'd guess you keep your boss fully informed. And I'd say that you plan to come out the other side of this one having demonstrated what a powerful man you are, and what important connections you have with the CIA and how you can mangle its policies if you feel inclined. If Greenwood was impressed with that—and we both know that he might be—you could wind up in Congress, or maybe in the White House. Now don't tell me you didn't think of that possibility."

"Don't you ever get depressed?" he asked. "You always talk like everyone is on the make. Don't you ever get depressed?"

"I do, Gerry. Each time I turn out to be right, which is practically always."

"Do you hate me so much? Would you prevent Mrs. Bekuv from joining her husband just in case I might get some political mileage out of it?"

"You're not talking to a junior cipher clerk, Gerry. I've been there; and I know how the wheels go around when jerks like you press the buttons."

"Now, I've heard—"

"I've listened to you through a Bloody Mary, a club sandwich, and a cup of coffee, Gerry. Now you listen to me. I'm not preventing Mrs. Bekuv from making a journey anywhere, because I'll put my pension on an old underwear button that Mrs. Bekuv has already made her journey. She's in Manhattan—right, Gerry?"

"We've got a leak, have we?"

"No leak, Gerry," I said. "Agents in the Soviet Union—the ones who survive there—don't send messages to guys like Gerry Hart explaining what kind of travel arrangements they might be able to get for the Mrs. Bekuvs of this world. They see an opportunity open up, they make a snap decision, they act on it, and disappear again."

"I suppose so," said Hart.

"And I picture Mrs. Bekuv as a hard-nosed Party worker, as smart as Stalin but only half as pretty. I see her pushing her absent-minded husband into his high-paid, top-secret job, in spite of his theories about flying saucers. I don't picture her as the sort of woman who hands over her wedding rings to some strange creep who might be a KGB man who likes a little hard evidence. No. But she might lend them out . . . for an hour or two."

Hart didn't answer. He poured cream into the last little drop of his coffee and drank it slowly.

"We'll take her off your hands, Gerry," I said. "But no pieces of paper, and I can only advise Mann about the 1924 Society: no promises."

"Do what you can," he said. For a moment the bottom had dropped out of his world, but even as I watched him, I saw him coming up at me again as only soft rubber balls and politicians know how to bounce. "But you're wrong about Mrs. Bekuv," he said. "Wait until you see her."

"Which of you asked for the check," the waitress said.

"My friend asked for it," I said.

Chapter Seven

Gerry Hart and I were both right. He delivered Mrs. Bekuv to us within five days and had to be content with Major Mann's worthless assurance that any investigation of the 1924 Society would be conducted by men wearing velvet gloves. But I was wrong about Mrs. Bekuv. She was in her middle thirties, a cheerful strawberry blonde with a curvaceous figure that no one would ever persuade me to classify as plump. It required a superhuman faith in departmental files to believe that she'd been an earnest fourteen-year-old Young Communist and had spent eight years touring the Soviet Union lecturing on fruit-crop infections. Gerry Hart was right—Mrs. Bekuv was quite a surprise.

Elena Katerina, like her husband, Andrei, had prepared her shopping list long before her arrival in New York. She was complete with a caseful

of Elizabeth Arden creams and lotions, and a full range of Gucci matching luggage containing a wardrobe that would cope with any climate and a long time between laundries.

Sitting up front in Mann's Plymouth station-wagon, in suede pants suit and white silk turtleneck, her blonde hair gleaming in the lights of the oncoming traffic, she looked more American than Bessie Mann or Red Bancroft sitting in the back on each side of me.

Mrs. Bekuv was wide awake but her husband's head had tilted until it was resting on her shoulder. Mann had left it too late to avoid the holiday traffic buildup, and now it seemed likely that we should arrive late.

"Should we call them, honey—tell them to save dinner?" said Bessie.

"They know we're coming," said Mann. He pulled out and took advantage of a sudden movement in the fast lane. Bekuv had found a radio station in Baltimore that was playing Latin American music, but Mann reached over and turned the volume low.

"They say Virginia is like England," said Red, trying to see into the darkness.

"I'll let you know, when it gets light," I said.

"Anyone wants to drive," offered Mann, irritably, "and they've only got to say so."

"And see where it gets them," said Bessie. She leaned forward and patted her husband on the head. "We all have great faith in you, darling," she cooed.

"Don't do that when I'm driving."

"When shall I do it, then? It's the only time you turn your back."

Red said, "Whenever my father asked my mother what she wanted for Christmas, she'd say she wanted to go away to a hotel until it was all over. But we never did spend Christmas in a hotel." She lit up one of the mentholated cigarettes she liked to smoke and blew smoke at me. I made a face.

"Because of all the work," said Mann over his shoulder. "She wanted to get away from all the cooking and the dishes."

"Men see through us every time," said Bessie Mann, feigning admiration.

"That's what she meant," insisted Mann.

"Of course it is, darling." She leaned forward to touch his cheek, and he took her fingers so that he could kiss the back of her hand.

"You two hide a torrid affair behind these harsh exchanges," I said.

"Hold it, Bessie," said Mann urgently. "We've got two romantic kids in the back."

"Why is it called Virginia?" said Mrs. Bekuv suddenly. Her English was excellent, but she spoke it in a curiously prim voice and with poor pronunciation, like someone who had learned from a textbook.

"Named after England's virgin queen," said Mann.

"Oh," said Mrs. Bekuv, not sure if she was being mocked. Mann chortled and shifted gears for the steep hill ahead.

It was certainly a remarkable hideout: an old house set in four hundred acres of Virginia countryside. As we came up the potholed road our headlights startled rabbits and deer, and then through the trees we saw the hotel, its windows ablaze with yellow light and the façade strung with colored bulbs, like a child's Christmas tree.

Parked in the blacktop space alongside the barn was a bus. It was a shiny metal monster, left over from the days before buses got tinted windows and air conditioning. Next to it there was another car, and as we came to a stop our headlights caught the shiny bodywork of a vintage Packard convertible, reconditioned by some enthusiast.

Mann switched off the lights and the radio. "Well, here we are," he said. "Plenty of time for supper."

"Eight-twenty," said Bessie. Bekuv yawned, and his wife eased her shoes on and opened the car door.

"Happy Christmas," I said, and Red kissed me on the ear.

"You'll love this place," said Mann.

"We'd better," said Bessie, "or I'll never believe you again."

As I climbed out of the warm car the cold of the open countryside bit into me.

"Isn't that beautiful," said Red. "It's been snowing."

"Is that like home, Professor Bekuv?" Bessie asked.

"I was born in the desert," said Bekuv. "I was born in a region more desolate than the Sahara—the USSR is a big place, Mrs. Mann."

"Is your home in the desert, too, Katerina?" said Bessie.

Mrs. Bekuv wrapped herself in a long red cape and pulled the hood up over her head to protect her from the chilly wind. "America is my home now, Bessie," she said. "I loved New York. I will never leave America."

Mann was locking the doors of the car, and I caught his glance. Any fears we'd had about Mrs. Bekuv's conversion to capitalism seemed unfounded.

"Just take your pocketbooks and the cameras," Mann told anyone who was listening. "They'll send someone out for the baggage."

"You always lock the car," said Bessie. "He's so suspicious," she announced to a world that already knew.

We went into the lobby of the hotel, and I thought for a moment that Mann must have chosen it to make the Bekuvs feel at home. The furniture was massive, and there were old-fashioned floral curtains and cracked linoleum on the stairs. Behind the reception desk there was a framed photo of Franklin Roosevelt and a litho reproduction of U.S. Marines

raising the flag on Iwo. The receptionist might have been chosen to match: She was a cheerful little woman with carefully waved gray hair and a flowered dress. "There's still time to catch the second half of the movie," she said.

Mann picked up the menu from the desk. "I think we'd rather eat," he said.

"He changes the reel on the half-hour. The lights go on; you won't disturb the show."

"You want to send some food up to the rooms?"

"Whatever you say," agreed the old lady.

"The homemade soup and steak—rare—and salad," said Mann. "And give us a bottle of Scotch and a bottle of vodka with a few mixers and ice."

"I'll do it right away. Everyone the same?" She smiled. "There's an icebox in your rooms."

We mumbled agreement, except for Mrs. Bekuv, who wanted her steak well done.

"The best steak this side of Texas," said the old lady. "That's what they all tell me."

The two single rooms, booked for Red and me, were at the far end of the corridor. One had a shower and the other a tub. "Shower or bath?" I asked as we looked into the rooms.

"I hate showers," she said going into the room that was equipped with it. "Especially these tin-sided contraptions. They make such a racket."

She went over to the single bed and prodded it to see if it was soft. Then she pulled the blankets back and pummeled the pillows. "No," she said coming back to where I was standing and putting her arm through mine. "I think we'll use the room with the tub." She took me to the other room.

She sat on the bed and pulled off the silly woolen hat she liked to wear. Then she undid the buttons of her dress. Her long red hair tumbled down over her shoulders. She smiled. She was the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen, and her happiness warmed me. She kicked off her shoes.

I picked up the phone. "Can I have a bottle of champagne," I asked. "Yes, French champagne. On second thoughts, better make that two bottles."

It was a long time before we got back to the sitting-room that the Bekuvs shared with the Manns. There was a boy in starched apron and black bow tie smoothing the tablecloth and setting out the cutlery.

"Thought you two were hungry enough to give dinner a miss," said Mann archly.

"Mickey!" said his wife. "You haven't ordered the wine."

"You got red wine?" Mann asked the young waiter.

"Only California," said the boy.

"I like California," said Mann. He put a flattened hand over his heart as if swearing to it.

The proprietor's wife had fixed the dinner. The homemade soup was clam chowder and the steaks were delicious. Mann praised the buttered corn. "You can keep all that lousy French chow," Mann offered. "You give me American cooking every time."

Bessie said, "You like it, you got it." The Bekuvs smiled but said nothing.

From downstairs the louder parts of the movie's sound track were sometimes audible. We heard exploding bombs and wartime melodies.

I suppose Bekuv must have been anticipating the pep talk that Mann decided was due. When Mann produced a box of cigars and suggested that we smoke them down the hall rather than wake up to the aroma of stale tobacco, Bekuv readily agreed, and I went with them.

The lounge was furnished in the same downbeat way as the lobby. There were several large sepia photographs of men with goggles standing around old racing cars and grinning at each other. I guessed that Pierce, the proprietor, was a vintage-car freak and probably owned the finely preserved Packard outside, and maybe the vintage bus, too.

Bekuv chose the dilapidated sofa. Mann leaned over him to light his cigar. "There have been a lot of new developments since you arrived stateside," said Mann.

"What kind of developments?" Bekuv asked cautiously.

"At first we were asking you to tell us about the scientific data you were handling before you defected."

"And I did that," said Bekuv.

"Up to a point you did it," said Mann. "But you must have realized that there was another motive too."

"No," said Bekuv, drawing on his cigar and facing Mann quite calmly.

"For God's sake, Bekuv! You must see by now that our work on masers is way ahead of anything being done in the Soviet Union. We don't need you to tell us about masers."

Bekuv had no intention of admitting anything like that. "Then why ask me?"

"No one can be as dumb as you pretend to be at times," said Mann.

I interrupted them before Mann blew his top. "We know that American scientific data is being betrayed to the Soviet Union."

Bekuv turned to look at me. He frowned and then gave a despairing shrug. "I don't understand," he said. "You will have to explain."

"We're hoping to recognize the form in which you recall the material. It might help us to trace the source of it. We might be able to find where it's coming from."

"Much of it came from published work," said Bekuv.

"Now don't get smart," said Mann. He stood up, and there was a moment when I thought I was going to have to step between them. "We are not talking about the kind of stuff that Greenwood and his committee are giving away. We are talking about military stuff."

"What began as a scientific leak has now become a flood of material." I said. "Some of it is intelligence data. There is British material, too. That's why I am involved."

"I wondered about that," said Bekuv.

"I'm being squeezed," said Mann, "and when I get squeezed, you go through the wringer."

"I'm giving you the material as fast as I can recall it," said Bekuv.

"And that's not fast enough," said Mann. There was an element of threat there.

"I can't go any faster," said Bekuv. I watched his face. Perhaps this was the time he started to realize that his assistants at NYU had been trying to interrogate him.

Mann straightened and threw his head back. He held the cigar to his lips and put his other hand in the small of his back. It was a gesture both reflective and Napoleonic, until he scratched his behind. He strode slowly across the carpet in front of the log fire, staring all the time at the ceiling and puffing smoke. "It was July of seventy-one. Berlin was stinking hot—you know the way it can get in that town, Bekuv. We'd included one of our kids in a party of union officials who were being given the treatment: that apartment block on the Allee that they pretend is full of workers' families, and the crèche near the Wannsee, and the banquet where they drink the dudes under the table with endless toasts to the unity of the proletariat. Silly to put one of our boys into a situation like that. It was an American union lawyer from Pittsburgh who reported him to the Russians. When we got him back, his ass was raw with untreated cigarette burns, and his bloodstream was full of pentothal. We flew him back to the best surgeon in the States, but he never got the full use of his right hand again." Mann smiled one of his cold smiles at Bekuv.

Bekuv had never taken his eyes off Mann as he paced up and down. Now he said, "It's not so simple to recall the details."

"I was trying to help," said Mann.

"I need more time," said Bekuv.

Mann smiled again. He consulted his watch. "Just look at the time. We'd better finish these cigars and join the ladies." He threw his cigar away and ushered us out.

"It's a beautiful place," said Red. She was looking out of the window, cupping her hands to keep out the reflections. "The moon is coming out. It is a wonderful evening for a walk."

"It's freezing," I said.

"Wrap up well, Pop," she said scornfully. "You can put on that nice new leather coat."

I nodded my agreement, and I saw Red and Bessie exchange that sort of knowing look with which women greet the downfall of a male.

The movie ended at ten minutes past ten. Red and I were walking through the cobbled yard at the rear of the house to get a closer look at the vintage bus and the old Packard. We'd heard "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" and "Change Partners" coming faintly through the heavily curtained room where the movie was playing. As the finale music swelled, the back door opened and some men came out into the cold air. One of them coughed, and another slapped his back helpfully. Two others lit cigarettes.

"London!" said one of the men. "That's where I first saw that movie. I was a gunner, nineteen—youngest top kick in the group—and I'd met this shy English kid. We went to a movie with her mother; can you imagine—with her mother! I was crazy about her."

"What was her mother like?" said a second man.

The first man laughed politely.

"I saw it with my daddy and ma," said another voice. "I was a shave-tail, just out of flying school. I was on leave before joining a bomber group in England. My folks just smiled and listened to me tell them how I couldn't wait to get into the fighting—and all the time they were figuring the odds against my getting killed. It's only now, when I've got kids of my own, that I understand what that cost them."

"We all came back," said another man. "Sometimes I wonder why."

"Not all of us," said the man who'd been a pilot. "I lost a lot of real good buddies."

"They shipped the squadron from England to France without warning," said the first man. "I forgot how to find the house in Manchester where she lived, and I never took down the address. I went back twice and walked the streets, but it was no use."

"Wartime romance," said the second man.

"It was more than that," said the first man. "I still think about her. Every week or so I remember her. That proves it, doesn't it."

The door opened again, and some women came out into the yard. "What are you doing out here?" one of them asked shrilly. "It's so cold!"

A second woman said, "Telling dirty stories. I know what they're doing. Admit it now, Norm. You were telling dirty stories."

"That's right," said the pilot. "That's what we were doing."

The proprietor's son was taking down the shutters from the room in which they'd been watching the movie. As he did so, the light from inside lit up the yard. It was bright enough to see the men and women standing

there. They were all in their late forties or early fifties. The women wore old-fashioned party dresses, and the men were in army uniforms. But the uniforms were not those of the modern army; they were the pink trousers, olive-drab jackets, and soft-topped flyers' caps of the U.S. Army Air Corps, circa 1943.

Chapter Eight

It was breakfasttime on Christmas Eve. Low-angled winter-morning sunshine made slatted patterns on the wallpaper. "Nostalgia isn't what it used to be," pronounced Mann. He'd been reading aloud from the brochure that was included on our breakfast-table in the sitting-room. "Nostalgia Inn," said the heading and there was a photograph of the hotel taken the previous summer when a vintage-car club had used it for a convention. The furnishings, the recorded music, the movie shows and even the menus had been chosen to give the clientele a chance to wallow in their memories and their illusions.

"This month and next month are the World War Two period," Mann said. "But last Christmas they did a 1914 week, and I hear it was terrific." He was wearing a tweed jacket, white turtleneck sweater, and khaki cotton trousers. It would do for World War Two.

"All we're saying," repeated Bessie patiently, "is that you should have told us."

"And had you buying special gowns and hairdos?"

"Well, why not?" said Bessie.

"It would have loused up the security," said Mann. "This is supposed to be a way for our Russian friends to stay incognito. You telling every store clerk in Bloomingdale's about it would have blown us all wide open."

"You never trust me," said Bessie.

"Damn right," agreed Mann cheerfully.

"Give me the car keys," she said.

"Where are you going?" said Mann.

"I'm getting a 1940 hairdo and a party dress."

"Don't curb those new radials," said Mann.

Bessie aimed a playful blow at her husband's head. He ducked and grinned.

Red touched my hand across the table. "Shall I go, too? I need cigarettes."

"Buy a dress and give me the bill," I said. "Happy Christmas."

Red leaned over and kissed me.

"Break it up, you two," said Bessie.

"Listen, honey," said Mann, "take a cab into town, just in case I need the car."

Soon after Bessie and Red left to go into town, Mrs. Bekuv emerged through the connecting door. She was dressed in a blue silk pants suit. It was a little flashy for my taste, but it showed her blonde hair and full figure to advantage. Mann poured coffee for her and offered her the butter. Only two warm rolls remained under the starched cloth in the basket. Mrs. Bekuv broke one of them open and chewed a piece of its crust. She was still looking down at the plate as she spoke. "You'll never get anywhere with my husband by threats, Major Mann."

Mann put his coffee down and turned on his full, unabated charm. "Threats?" he said as if encountering the word for the first time. "Is that what he told you, Mrs. Bekuv? Perhaps he misunderstood. A long drive . . . all the strain of the last few days . . . he is looking a little tired."

"Neither of us like threats, Major Mann," she said. She buttered another roll.

Mann nodded his agreement. "No one does, Mrs. Bekuv. No one I've ever met."

"That's why we left the Soviet Union."

Mann raised his hand as if to shield his eyes from a bright light. "Now that's not quite true, Mrs. Bekuv. You know it's not quite true. Your husband defected because he'd been passed over for promotion on four successive occasions, and because he was finally posted to that lousy little job in Mali, where he didn't get along with his boss."

"That boss," said Mrs. Bekuv with great distaste, "was a junior assistant to my husband only five years ago."

"Exactly," said Mann. "And that's why your husband defected—nothing to do with living in a police state, or being threatened, or wanting to read Solzhenitsyn in the original Swiss."

"You have my husband's defection all worked out, Major," said Mrs. Bekuv. "So what about me? Why do you think I defected?"

"I'm not sure," said Mann warily. "But you certainly look like a million dollars in that Saks Fifth Avenue pants suit, and Tiffany gold wristwatch and bangle."

"You were having me followed?" She seemed very surprised, and turned to see him better. The sunlight made her screw up her eyes, but even squinting into the light she was still a beautiful woman.

"Just making sure you weren't accosted by any strange men, Mrs. Bekuv." Mann leaned over and moved the slats a fraction to close the sun's rays out.

"Men from the Soviet Government, you mean?"

"Any kind of men, Mrs. Bekuv."

"It's not *me* you need to watch," she said. She drank her coffee and put butter on the last piece of roll as if to signal that the conversation had ended.

"You mean I should be watching your husband?"

"He will not respond to pressure, Major Mann. Andrei is a gentle person. If you bully him, he will run from you."

"You're asking me to do business through you, Mrs. Bekuv?" Mann had hit it, and she was disconcerted.

"It would be worth trying," she said.

"Well, you must get your husband to co-operate, Mrs. Bekuv."

"But he already writes millions of words for you."

"He has given us a great deal of scientific material—as close to verbatim as his memory will allow—but that's not what I call real co-operation, Mrs. Bekuv."

"What more do you want?"

"A man like your husband can get a lot of information from the style of a report and the procedure of the experiments and analysis. He knows which of the world's labs are concerned with the development of masers and could probably name the men working in them—I think he knows where the leaks are."

Mrs. Bekuv drank some coffee.

Mann continued his thesis. "No Soviet scientist has been allowed more freedom than your husband has over the last few years. He has attended nearly thirty scientific conferences, lectures, seminars, and symposiums outside the Soviet Union—now that's unusual, Mrs. Bekuv, you must admit. It's tempting to guess that he's been getting a lot of his material on a person-to-person basis, while talking with other scientists at these international conferences."

"I'll talk to Andrei," she promised.

"Me and my friend here," said Mann, pointing at me with his spoon as I poured another cup of coffee, "we're an easy-going couple of kids. You know we are. But we've got to start scribbling a few picture postcards for the fellows in the front office. Otherwise they're going to start wondering if we are on some sort of fun fest down here. They'll assign us to permanent night duty guarding the Lincoln Memorial. You get me, Mrs. Bekuv?"

On the floor below us someone switched on the radio to hear a Christmas carol service, "While shepherds watched their flocks . . ." came softly to us at the breakfast table.

"I get you, Major Mann," she said. I watched her carefully, but the slight smile she gave him revealed nothing besides good-natured amusement.

Mann picked up his orange juice and sipped some. "You know something, Mrs. Bekuv. It's getting so that freshly squeezed orange juice is just not available for love or money. You'd be amazed at how many five-star hotels serve canned juice."

"In the Soviet Union every hotel and restaurant serves freshly squeezed orange juice," said Mrs. Bekuv.

For a moment I thought Mann was going to challenge that contention, but he smiled his most ingratiating smile and said, "Is that so, honey? Well, I always knew there must be something good about that crummy wasteland."

Mrs. Bekuv pushed her cup aside and got to her feet.

"See you later," said Mann affably.

Mrs. Bekuv left the room without replying.

We were still sitting there when Bessie and Red phoned us from Waterbridge. They were almost through at the hairdresser's, and the new dresses were gift-wrapped and ready for collection. All we had to do was to bring our checkbooks into town and take the women somewhere smart for lunch. To my surprise Mann readily agreed. He even invited the Bekuvs to go with us, but Andrei was going to record a Christmas concert on his Sony recorder, and Mrs. Bekuv shook her head without looking up from *Dr. Zhivago*.

Downstairs in the dining-room the hotel staff were hanging ancient tin toys and celluloid dolls on a Christmas tree. On the stage a ten-piece orchestra from Chicago was arguing with Mr. Pierce about where the colored spotlights should point.

Mann drove all the way to the end of the property and halfway up the hill before speaking. "You don't approve of my little talk with Frau Bekuv?"

"I wouldn't put it into the anthology of psychological triumphs."

"What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing," I said. "You obviously want her to put the finger on the 1924 Society so that you'll have an excuse to turn them over. Well, I'm sure she got that message, and she will probably oblige you."

"Why would that make you so mad?"

"If you're sure that the leak is through the crackpots in the 1924 Society, why not move in on them right away? If you're not sure, you are only confusing the situation by using Mrs. Bekuv like a hand puppet."

"Ah!!" said Mann. "Why not move in on the 1924 Society right away, you say. Well, I knew it was only a matter of time before you handed me a question I could answer." He turned his eyes away from the road long enough to stare at me. "The 1924 Society is a secret society, kiddo. No one's exactly sure who is a member of the 1924 Society."

"Except the other members."

"Like the Bekuvs. Yes, well now you're getting the idea, pal."

"Suppose that while we're all away the Bekuvs call a cab and scram?"

Mann smiled as we pulled to a stop in a newly vacated parking space in front of a pawnshop filled with saxophones and shotguns. I could see the hairdresser's a few doors away. "You got a couple of quarters?" he said.

I gave him some change for the meter, but he didn't get out of the car immediately. He said, "I've put a couple of my boys to watch the back door."

"You'd like them to skip," I said accusingly.

"It would simplify things," said Mann.

"Unless they succeeded," I said.

Mann made a face and got out.

The Bekuvs were still in the hotel when we got back. Mozart's *Jupiter* was on the hi-fi. Andrei was still doing the calculations that would put messages into outer space, and his wife was sleeping with *Dr. Zhivago*. Mann dropped onto the sofa and heaved a sigh.

It's one of the many things I don't understand about women that the moment they return from some expensive beauty parlor they stand in front of a mirror and comb the whole thing out again. Red and Bessie did that while Mrs. Bekuv, evidently having decided that she'd missed out on a good thing, joined in the fun. With seeming reluctance, she allowed herself to be persuaded into a new hair style too. Red swept her hair up into a fashion of the forties, and held it while they both admired it. Deftly, Red pinned it into position and arranged curls and fringe with loving care.

Mann watched it all with interest, but his wife seemed strangely disquieted. It provided a revealing insight into Mrs. Bekuv—and a portent of Red too, but I didn't see that at the time.

I ordered tea for us all, but even before I'd put the phone down, Mann in his autocratic manner told his wife that he wanted a private word with the Bekuvs. Bessie said she'd prefer to take her tea into her room, and even Red—no admirer of Mann's patriarchal moods—meekly agreed to do the same, even to the extent of leaving Mrs. Bekuv's hairdo unfinished. That didn't please the Russian lady, and after the others had gone she fixed Mann with a steely stare, told her husband to turn the music down, and said, "Dr. Henry Dean. He lives at a house called 'La Grange' in the village of Saint-Paul-Chauvrac, Bretenoux 46, Lot, France. Do you want to write that down?"

Mann said, "Dr. Henry Dean, La Grange, Saint-Paul-Chauvrac, Bretenoux 46, Lot, France. No, I don't want to write it down."

"He is not a scientist," said Mrs. Bekuv, "not an important one, anyway. But he is the contact between the 1924 Society and Moscow." She

smiled and twisted a strand of blonde hair in her fingers. It was the artless gesture of the *ingénue*, inappropriate for this Rubenesque wife and mother, and yet she had more than enough charm to carry it off.

"That's fine," said Mann tonelessly. He turned to me. "Get on to that, will you?"

I looked at him closely. There was something in his voice that I couldn't recognize.

"I'll do what I can," I said. I knew that my request to Langley for archive searches at five o'clock on Christmas Eve would not be received with great enthusiasm.

"Don't try too hard," said Mann. "I wouldn't like to be ready to go by tomorrow morning."

Mrs. Bekuv looked from one to the other of us. "You will go to France?"

"Dr. Henry Dean, you say. Well, that's interesting," said Mann. He said it in a louder voice. It was obviously intended to bring Andrei Bekuv into the conversation.

Bekuv nodded but did not turn around to meet Mann's eyes. He was toying with his new tape recorder and trying to pretend he had nothing to do with the conversation.

Mrs. Bekuv said, "Andrei and I were talking about the investigation."

"And I appreciate that," said Mann.

She ignored his sarcasm. She went on. "Our complete co-operation would be not only good for America, it will be very good for you, too."

"I'm not sure that I'm following your implications," said Mann, who was not only following the implications but well ahead of them. He pressed a splayed hand upon his heart. I saw now that what I had always thought was a spiritual gesture was done to check that his collar was buttoned down.

"Promotion and a better pay scale, more power, a better posting—you know what I mean," said Mrs. Bekuv. "This first name we give you freely, but if you want more we must have a new agreement."

Mann grinned. "You mean you want *your* share of the prosperity—promotion and pay scale."

"Otherwise," said Mrs. Bekuv, "we will simply say nothing until you are fired and a new team is sent to work on us."

"How do you know that I won't get out the rubber truncheons long before I get fired?"

Bekuv shifted uneasily and fiddled with the volume control so that a few chords of Mozart escaped and ran across the carpet.

"We'll have to take that risk," said Mrs. Bekuv.

"How much?"

"We didn't realize how expensive it is to live in New York," said Mrs.

Bekuv immediately. "With all those smart people at the university, I'm going to have to look my best, you know." She smiled as if we all shared some secret joke.

"I'll see what I can do," said Mann.

"I couldn't resist all these new clothes, Major Mann," she said. "After all those years in the Soviet Union I was dazzled by the shop windows, and Andrei insisted that I buy a whole new wardrobe, from shoes to underwear. He said it was all part of starting our new life."

"I understand," said Mann.

"Forget what I said just now. With or without an increase in the money, we will both help you all we can." Mrs. Bekuv slapped a menu into *Dr. Zhivago* and slammed the book closed. Then she stood up and smoothed her cornflower-blue silk dress, running her fingers down over hips and thighs in the sort of gesture used by nervous contenders in amateur beauty competitions. She smiled at both of us, and was still smiling as she leaned over her husband and kissed the top of his head.

The waiter arrived with a tray of tea and toast just as Mrs. Bekuv went out of the room. Mann took the tray from him and began to pour the milk and offer the homemade cherry cake.

Bekuv took a slice of lemon in his tea and declined the cake. "My wife gets very nervous, Major Mann," he said. "She misses the boy."

"You knew your son would never join you. He'll be taking his exams next year—you wouldn't want us to try to bring him out against his will."

"No, no, no," said Bekuv. "What you say is true—but it doesn't change the facts. My wife can't get used to the idea of never seeing her son again." He looked away. "And to tell you the truth, I can't either."

"Sure," said Mann. "Sure." He patted Bekuv's arm as one might try to calm an excited poodle.

Emboldened by this gesture of friendship, Bekuv opened his loose-leaf notebook. "I have completely changed my work on interstellar communication."

"Have you?" said Mann. "That's good. No more humming hydrogen, you mean?"

Bekuv made some vague noises while pointing at the pages of closely written numbers. "At first we were looking for some means of communicating through the galactic plasma without dispersion. Obviously this meant using electromagnetic waves. We knew x rays were no good . . ."

"Why?" I said in an attempt to join in.

"They can't be focused," said Bekuv, "and gamma rays have too limited a range."

"How limited?" I asked.

"About one hundred thousand miles," said Bekuv. Mann made a face. Bekuv smiled and said, "But now I am beginning to believe that we should



abandon the idea of any sort of electromagnetic waves. After all, we will never be able to converse with another civilization, because each message will take twenty years getting there and another twenty to get back."

"Sounds like the British telephone system," said Mann.

"Now I believe we should simply seek to make a mark in the universe—a mark that some other civilization will detect and thus know there is some kind of sophisticated life on planet Earth."

"What kind of mark?" said Mann.

"Not plowing patterns in fields. There has been a lot of talk about that, but it is absurd. The canals on Mars that Schiaparelli reported in 1887 and that the *Mariner* spacecraft revealed as a complete misinterpretation have ruled out that idea." He turned the page to where there were diagrams and more calculations. "I am thinking of a cloud of material that will absorb a chosen wavelength of light. This would leave a pattern—no more than a line perhaps—in the spectrogram of a star's light. This would be enough to tell any civilization that there was scientific achievement here on Earth."

I looked at Mann. He raised his eyebrows. "What's the next step?" Mann asked with evident trepidation.

"To put this before your government," said Bekuv. "It will cost quite a lot of money."

Mann was unable to completely suppress a sigh. "Well, you'd better put this all to me in the form of a report. Then I'll see what I can do."

"I don't want it filed away and forgotten," said Bekuv. "I want to talk to someone about it. You have a Senate Committee on International Co-operation. Could I talk to them?"

"Perhaps," said Mann, "but you'll have to write it all down first."

"One more thing," said Bekuv. "It's Christmas Eve. Could I take my wife to the midnight mass tonight?"

"It doesn't say you are Catholics on the dossier," said Mann. He was disconcerted and slightly annoyed. Or perhaps he was feigning annoyance.

"We have lapsed in our churchgoing, but not in our faith," said Bekuv. "Christmas Eve has always been a special time for us."

"Someone will have to go with you," said Mann.

"I'll go," I said.

Bekuv looked at Mann. Mann nodded.

"Thank you," said Bekuv. "I will go and tell Katinka. Thank you both." He went away wagging his tail.

"Sometimes I don't know how I keep my hands off that jerk," said Mann.

"And it shows," I told him.

Mann sat down in the soft armchair and closed his eyes tight.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"I'm all right," said Mann, but his face had gone gray, and he looked as if old age had overtaken him suddenly. I waited for him to speak. I waited a long time.

"Henry Dean." I reminded him of the name Mrs. Bekuv had given us. "Dr. Henry Dean."

"Hank Dean," said Mann. He tightened his tie.

"You've heard of him?" I asked.

"Hank Dean: airline executive's son, born in Cottonwood, South Dakota. High school athlete—track star, truly great pitcher—tipped for pro baseball until he got injured."

"How do you know so much about him?" I asked.

"We grew up together in a village just outside Cleveland. My dad was a pilot and his was sales manager for a tin-pot airline, flying contract mail between Chicago and New York. The airline families lived alongside the airfield, and the village kids beat the hell out of us. The war came, we both went into the army. Hank was a bright kid, came out a captain in the airborne, but he'd done a few drops in civilian clothes. At the end of the war, the army kept him on, but sent him to MIT to get his master's. He wound up with a Ph.D. before he got back into uniform. Next thing I heard he was working in Berlin for a little company that made high-voltage electrophoresis machines for medical labs—you're beginning to get the picture?"

"I get the picture," I said. "This little engineering company had a very lenient policy about employees who disappeared for long weekends and came back with their hair slightly ruffled and a hole in the hat."

"Yeah, a CIA front, and a very active one. Henry Dean was making quite a name for himself. They switched him back into the army and gave him the police desk in Berlin. Then they began saying that Dean would be running Operations in Langley before he was thirty-five—that kind of crap, you know."

"I know."

"But Dean got into the juice. His old man was a lush, I remember. That's why his dad quit flying and went to sales. Hank was very close to his dad: he used to hide the bottles, argue with him, plead with him, but it was no use. Poor Hank—and Berlin is a bad place for a guy who is easily tempted."

"Yes," I said.

Mann passed a hand across his eyes as if trying to see into the past. When he spoke again, it was with the voice of a man half asleep. "Got into the juice. There was some kind of foul-up—a row about some documents being given to the East Germans. There was an inquiry. I don't know the details, but Dean was never the same again after that. They



gave him a second chance. The next thing was a backup assignment for a routine crossing. It was unlikely that he'd be needed, but suddenly he was, and they dug him out of a bar on the Kudamm, stoned out of his mind. There was a lot of static from Langley, and a lot of promises from Dean. But it was the third time that ended his career.

"Berlin in the late fifties—it was heavy stuff, and two really good guys went that night. Those two had a lot of friends, and the friends blamed Hank Dean. He was finished for that kind of field-work. He went back to Washington, but he couldn't handle a scene like that. It needs a light touch—Washington 'A list' hostesses, all that muscle from the satellite embassies, too many whiz kids chasing your job. No, that wasn't Hank Dean."

I tried to pour some tea. There was only a trickle left, and that was cold. There were no lights on in the sitting room, and Mann was no more than a silhouette against the darkening sky. The silence lasted so long that when he spoke again it made me start.

"He stayed on the wagon for years," said Mann. "And then finally Special Services found something for him in Vietnam. They wanted me to sign a chit sponsoring him." Mann sighed. "I thought about it all day and all night. I was sure he'd foul up. So I said no."

I tried to ease some of the guilt off his back. "Hindsight reveals a wise decision," I said.

It did nothing to cheer him. Against the wintry light from the window, I saw him pinch the bridge of his nose. He was slumped lower now, his chin almost on his chest. "Can't be sure of that, can we?" he said. "Maybe if I had signed it we wouldn't be running our pinkies down the Christmas airline schedules."

"Maybe," I agreed.

"There comes a time in your life when you have to do the human thing—make the decision the computer never makes—give your last few bucks to an old pal, find a job for a guy who deserves a break, or bend the rules because you don't like the rules."

"Even in this job?"

"Especially in this job, or you end up as the kind of dispassionate, robotic type that Communism breeds."

"Are you going to bring Dean back, or try to turn him?"

"I've embarrassed you, have I?" said Mann bitterly.

"Because if you're going to bring him back, there will be a lot of paperwork. I'll want to get started on it as soon as possible."

"You like baseball?" Mann asked. "He was second baseman one time. I saw the whole thing—a double play, and this little fink put a set of sharpened cleats into his knee. He would have turned pro, I'm sure. He'd never have come into this lousy racket."

"Turn Dean," I said, "and perhaps we could do without the Bekuvs."

"Hank Dean. Big, noisy lumox . . . full of funny stories . . . untrimmed beard, dirty dishes in the sink, rotgut in flagons, and a sleeping bag in the bathroom if you're too drunk to drive home. You'd never recognize him for this bright kid who got the sharpened cleats in his leg. Funny how a thing like that can change a man's whole life."

"This is just a way of getting at you," I said.

"It looks like it," said Mann. "I wonder how long ago they started working on it."

"What are you going to do?"

"Poor old Hank. A KGB operation—I can smell it from here, can't you? Payments into his bank balance, witnesses who can identify him, microdots pasted into his copy of *Thunderball*—you know what they get up to. I've got the choice of handing it over to another investigating officer, the way the book tells it, or of bending the rules to try to make it easy on him."

"If the KGB has set it up, they will have dotted every 'i' and crossed every 't.' They dare not risk something like this blowing up in their faces."

"They've not necessarily framed him," said Mann calmly. "They might have just offered him enough dough to get him working for them."

"You don't believe that."

"I don't *want* to believe it," said Mann. "Do you know something? For a moment there I wasn't even going to tell you that I knew Dean. I was just going to press on with the investigation and keep quiet."

If the Russians wanted to compromise or discredit Mann, they'd chosen a racking dilemma for him. But they'd misjudged their target. Many would have folded under such pressure; most would have handed the file over to someone else. But not Mann. He was shaken, but not for long.

"Already it's working," Mann said. "Already there's a gap between us."

The neon signs and the lights of the nearby town were turning the night sky fiery.

"No gap," I said.

"No gap," said Mann scornfully. "Already you are getting nervous—worrying about your pension and trying to decide how much you can afford to play along with me."

"No."

"Why no?" he asked. "Why no, Frederick Antony, old buddy?"

He deserved some warmer reassurance, something that reflected the times we'd had together. Something that told him I'd stake my life upon his judgment—be it good or bad. But I was too English for such extravagances. Coldly I said, "Because I trust you more than I trust Mrs. Bekuv. For all we know, she could be planted by the KGB—acting on their instructions and giving us the *spielmaterial* they want to feed to us."



The phone rang, but Mann made no attempt to answer it.

I said, "That will be the girls reminding us about the dance they've dressed up for."

Mann didn't move, and soon the phone stopped ringing. "The side of his knee," said Mann. "His left leg. He still limps."

Chapter Nine

That strange winter afternoon, Mann's soft voice in that darkened room, my lack of sleep, the infatuation for Red that was fast becoming love, the contrived nostalgia of the Christmas festivities, or perhaps those last three whiskey sours, accounted for the way I remember it as a hazy dream. A dream that became a nightmare.

The hotel management lent us two old-fashioned tuxedos. My outfit included a shirt with a pique front, as stiff as a board, and Mann's had a wing collar. The band played Glenn Miller arrangements with suitable verve and sweetness, and the brass stood up and swayed through the choruses.

The Manns were dancing to the tune of "Sun Valley Serenade" when Red and I took the Bekuvs into town for midnight mass. The Catholic church in Waterbridge was crowded, and an elaborate nativity scene occupied the entrance. The nave was lit by a thousand flickering candles. They made the interior warm and yellow, but the upper parts of the church were dark.

The Bekuvs sat close together, and we chose a seat behind them so that I could watch them without intruding upon their privacy. Long after the singing of the choir ended, my mind remained full of the candlelight and the resonant chords of the great organ. And mixing with it came the brassy riffs of the Glenn Miller arrangements and the soft, whispered words of love from Red.

Outside, the first hours of Christmas Day were celebrated in an icy wind and scattered showers of sleet. At the exit people paused to wrap their scarfs tighter and button their thick coats. It was this that created a solid crush of worshipers at the door. We shuffled forward a step at a time.

It was exactly the right place for it.

I heard the strangled cry from Mrs. Bekuv, and the scream of some unidentified woman. Hands flailed, and hats were knocked askew. A man began to shout. The Bekuvs were no more than five yards away from me,

but they might have been five miles away for all the help I could give them.

I swore, and ripped at the crowd, tearing a way between the worshipers like a man demented.

By the time I got to the Bekuvs, the crowd had parted enough to let Mrs. Bekuv sit on the stone steps. She was conscious but she said nothing. She looked heavy and lifeless, the way soldiers do when their battle is done. Andrei Bekuv was bending over her. Both of them had blood on the front of their clothes. Bekuv was pulling at his wife's sleeve so that blood ran down her arm to form a puddle on the step.

"They've killed Katinka," he said.

I reached for her pulse and bloodied my hands. "Get an ambulance, Red. Ask the church to phone."

"They've killed my Katinka," said Bekuv, "and it's all my doing."

I bound my handkerchief tightly around her arm but the blood still came. It marked the cuff of my borrowed tuxedo and dribbled onto my new leather coat.

There were no shadows. Everything in the room was white, and the fluorescent tubes lit it with a cold, pitless glare. My blood-encrusted handkerchief lay coiled and discarded on the cart, like the scaly skin of some terrible red serpent, and alongside it—carefully aligned—were the gold wristwatch and the bracelet that Bekuv had bought for his wife in New York.

My coffee was cold. I tore open a packet of powdered cream, stirred the mixture, and gulped it down. It was a hell of a lousy way to spend Christmas morning.

There was a rap at the door, and Mann entered without waiting for a response. His eyes were bloodshot and his hair imperfectly parted. "You talked with the surgeon?" He unbuttoned his trench coat to reveal a partly buttoned shirt and a cardigan pulled down over his evening trousers.

"No arterial cuts. Her hands will be scarred for life—she grabbed at the switchblade—maybe scars on the abdomen, too, but the thick coat saved her from anything worse than superficial wounds. If the blade had entered her the way it was intended, she would have been dead before she hit the ground."

Mann sniffed, walked over to the cart and moved the wristwatch and bangle with the tip of his finger, as if making a chess move. "Description of the assailant?"

"At least a dozen," I said. "All of them different."

"And our pal Andrei?"



"She stepped between them. It was meant for Andrei, but he wasn't scratched. He's taking it badly."

"My darling Katinka what have I done to you?" "

"That's the kind of thing," I agreed.

"No one could have known that the Bekuvs started talking," said Mann, as much to convince himself as to convince me.

"There must be a few people in Washington suffering sleepless nights."

"There will be a few people in the Kremlin suffering worse than sleepless nights if we break this one wide open," said Mann. "They don't set up Henry Dean situations unless it's really big."

"We should have expected some attempt to kill them."

"I *did* expect it. But not this soon. Who the hell could have known we'd brought them to this godforsaken hole?"

"Gerry Hart?"

Mann scratched his face. He was unshaven, and he touched his beard self-consciously. "Yes, that little guy is certainly kept well informed. Who might be leaking to him? Any ideas?"

I shook my head.

"Well, this is the way it's going to be from now on," said Mann. "We'd better get prepared for more of the same. We'd better move the Bekuvs out of here."

I looked at my watch. "Merry Christmas," I said.

"The better the day, the better the deed. Isn't that what they say?"

"It might look damned funny to the local press boys."

"A mugging?" said Mann. "Nothing to leave the tree for."

"Knifing at midnight mass," I said. "In Waterbridge that's a headline. They'll go for it. You won't shake that one, Major."

"And if I put a security guy at her bedside, it will look even more like a story." Mann grabbed at his face and rubbed hard, as if trying to wake up. "And yet without a security guard, they might try again."

I tried to reassure him. "It was an amateur kind of job," I said. "I never heard of the KGB using a shiv artist who hit the wrong target, and even then let them grab the knife away."

"It damn nearly worked, and you know it," said Mann. "And there was nothing amateur about the way they found out where the Bekuvs would be last night."

"They might have followed us all the way from New York and then staked out the hotel, waiting for an opportunity," I suggested.

"You know nothing followed us," said Mann. "Even in the back seat with Red, you've got to know nothing followed us."

I didn't answer. He was right; nothing had followed us down the highway, and we'd had a helicopter to help check out that fact.

"You get back to your girlfriend," said Mann. "Give me a call here in the morning. I'll have doped it out by then."

Red was half asleep when I got into bed. She reached out for me in dreamy wantonness. Perhaps it was part of an attempt to forget the events of the evening that made us so abandoned. It seemed hours later before either of us spoke a word.

"Is it going to be all right?" Red asked me in a whisper.

"She's not badly hurt. Andrei isn't even scratched."

"I didn't mean that," she said. "I'm glad she's not badly hurt, but I didn't mean that."

"What then?

"This is all part of what you're doing, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said.

"And it's going wrong?"

"It looks like it," I admitted. "Mrs. Bekuv will have to be kept under surveillance, and that will be more difficult now that she needs medical attention."

"In London," said Red suddenly. "What sort of a house do you live in?"

"I don't have the whole house," I said. "I rent the top floor to a friend—a reporter—and his wife. It's a small Victorian terrace house, trying to look Georgian. The central heating is beginning to crack the place apart—first thing I must do when I get back is to get some humidifiers."

"Where is it?"

"That part of Fulham where people write 'Chelsea' on their note-paper."

"You said there was a garden."

"It's more like a window box that made it. But from the front you can see a square with trees and flower beds—in summer it's pretty."

"And what kind of view from the back windows?"

"I never look out the back windows."

"That bad?"

"A used-car dealer's yard."

She made a face. "I'll bet it's the most beautiful car dealer's yard in the world," she said.

I kissed her. "You can decide that when we get there," I said.

"Do I get to change the drapes and the kitchen layout?"

"I'm serious, Red."

"Yes, I know," she said. She kissed me again. "Don't let's be too serious though—give it time."

"I love you, Red," I said.

"I love you, too—you know that. Do you want a cigarette?"

I shook my head. She reached across me to the bedside table and found her cigarettes and lighter. I couldn't resist the chance to hug her close to me, and she tossed cigarettes aside and said, "Well, if I can choose." The cigarette lighter slid down the mattress and clattered to the floor. Red giggled. "Will you always want me?" she said.

"Always," I said.

"Not that, you fool," she said. She kissed me.

Eventually I said, "What then?"

"Would Major Mann let me stay with you?" she asked. "I could make the coffee, and sweep the floor, and look after Mrs. Bekuv."

I said, "I'll ask him tomorrow, if he's in a good mood."

She kissed me again, more seriously this time. "If he's in a good mood," I repeated.

"Thanks," she mumbled.

I reached for her. "You chatter too much," I said.

Chapter Ten

There was no sky, no sun, no earth, until a few hundred square miles of France appeared like a smear on the lowest layer of cloud. And as suddenly it was gone again.

"I don't want to phone from the airport," I told Mann. "But I'll check that there's nothing for us on the Telex."

"Worry about something else," Mann told me, as the stewardess removed the tray containing the dried-out chicken, shriveled peas, and brightly colored pieces of canned fruit. "Worry about income tax. Worry about inflatable life rafts. Worry about pollution. Worry about ptomaine poisoning. Worry about youth. But quit worrying about Red Bancroft."

"I've stopped worrying about Red Bancroft," I said.

"She's been checked out by the FBI, the CIA and her hometown police department. That girl is okay. There's a good security; she'll be safe. It will all be okay."

"I've stopped worrying, I told you that."

Mann turned in his seat so that he could see my face. He said finally, "Bessie said you two were hitting it off, and I didn't believe her." He leaned across and punched my arm so that my coffee spilled. "That's just great," he said.

"There's something wrong there," I confided. "She's a wonderful girl

and I love her—at least I think I do—but there's something in her mind, something in her memory . . . something somewhere that I can't reach."

Mann avoided my eyes as he pressed his call button and asked the stewardess to bring a bottle of champagne. "We're getting awfully near Paris," said the girl.

"Well, don't you worry your pretty little head about that, honey," Mann told her. "We'll gulp it down."

I saw him touch the document case beside him. It contained the paperwork that we would need if Mann decided to drag Hank Dean, screaming and swearing, back to the New World. Mann caught my glance. "I'm not looking forward to it," he admitted. "And that's a fact."

"Perhaps he'll talk," I said.

"Perhaps he knows nothing," said Mann.

The stewardess brought the champagne. Her uniform was one size too small, and the hairdo three sizes too big. "We'll be going down in a minute or two," she told us.

"All three of you?" said Mann. The stewardess departed. Mann poured the champagne and said, "I guess everything depends upon the way you look at it. Maybe if I'd been at college with Andrei Bekuv, I could feel sorry for *that schmendrik*."

"Everything depends upon the way you look at it," I agreed. "But I already feel a bit sorry for Andrei Bekuv."

Mann made a noise like a man blowing a shred of tobacco from his lips. It was a sign of his disagreement.

"I feel sorry for him," I said. "He's crazy about his wife, but she's wrong for him."

"Everybody is wrong for that jerk," said Mann. "Everybody and everything." He picked up his champagne. "Drink up," he commanded.

"I don't feel like celebrating," I said.

"Neither do I, my old English buddy, but we're pals enough to drink together in sorrow—right?"

"Right," I said, and we both drank.

"Mrs. Bekuv is the best thing that ever happened to that creep. She's one of the most beautiful broads I've ever seen—and I'm telling you, pal, if Bessie weren't around, I'd be tempted. Bekuv doesn't deserve a doll like that. She wet-nurses that guy: wipes his bottom, checks his haircuts, demands more dough from us. And she even takes a blade that's coming his way. No wonder he's in a constant sweat in case she kisses him good-bye."

"Well, everything depends upon the way you look at it," I said.

"Don't tell me you haven't felt some stirring of carnal lust for Mrs. Bekuv," said Mann. "Don't tell me you haven't fancied it."

"I've got Red," I said smugly.

Mann repeated his tobacco noise. "You know something," he said scornfully, "you can be very, very British at times."

I smiled and pretended to think that it was a compliment. And I returned to him the biographical abstract I'd been reading. He locked it away in his case.

"Drink up. We'll be landing any minute," he said. But in fact we joined the stack, somewhere over the great wooded region of Compiègne, and circled to await landing permission, which did not come until forty minutes later.

It gave me time to think about Hank Dean. I'd been reading the new format BIO-AB, dressed up to look like a report from a particularly energetic personnel manager. This one was typed on onionskin paper, carrying the logo of a small furniture factory in Memphis, Tennessee. Attached to it was an employee-record punch card and a photo. It had been "styled" to provide a cause-and-effect view of Hank Dean's life instead of being, as the earlier sheets were, a list of dates and a terse summary.

And yet these sheets are always a poor substitute for the sight and sound of the real person. What use was it to know that his middle name was Zacharias, and that some school friends call him Zack? How many school friends remain for a man who is nearly fifty years old? Dean had "a drinking problem." That had always struck me as an inappropriate euphemism to apply to people who had absolutely no problem in drinking. What Dean had was doubtless a sobriety problem. I wondered if that had anything to do with the breakup of his marriage. His wife was a New Yorker of German extraction, a few years younger than Dean. There was one child, Henry Hope Dean, who lived in Paris and spent his vacations fishing with his father.

Henry Zacharias Dean, Ph.D., 210 pounds at last dossier revision, soldier, company executive, failed CIA agent, failed husband but successful father—here we come. And won't you wish you were back in that village near Cleveland, getting punched in the head by the local kids.

"Did you say something?" asked Mann.

"The no-smiling sign is on," I said.

Mann poured the last of the champagne into our glasses.

One Christmas—so many decades ago that I can't remember when exactly—an aunt gave me a book about some children who were captured by the crew of a pirate ship. The pirate captain was a huge man, with a hooked nose and a magnificent beard. He drank rum in copious amounts and yet was never obviously drunk. His commands could be heard from fo'c'sle to crow's-nest, and yet his footsteps were as deft, and as silent, as a cat's. That pirate captain's mixture of bulk and dexterity, cruelty and

kindness, shouts and whispers, drinking and sobriety was also the makeup of Hank Dean.

He would need only a Savile Row suit, some trimming of the beard, and a glass of sherry in his hand to be mistaken for a wealthy gynecologist or a stockbroker. And yet, in a shaggy sweater that reached almost to his knees, denim trousers washed to palest blue, and swilling Cahors, the local wine, round and round in the plastic jar that had once contained Dijon mustard, he would have had trouble thumbing a ride to Souillac.

"Should have done it years ago. Should have done it when I was eighteen. We both should have done it, Mickey." Hank Dean swigged his wine and poured more. He put together the manuscript of his comic detective novel *Superdick*, put it into a manila envelope, and shut it away in a drawer. "That's just my excuse for staring into space," he explained.

The heat from the big black iron stove disappeared up the huge chimney or through the cracks and crevices that could be seen round the ill-paper fitting doors and windows. Only when Dean threw some wax cartons and wrapping paper into the stove did it give a roar and a brief show of flame.

Dean lifted the frying-pan that was warming on the stove. "Two eggs or three?"

"I'm not hungry," said Mann. "Give me a piece of that salami." He picked up a slice of the sausage on his fork and chewed at it.

Dean said, "Hell, of course you're hungry. You've come all the way down from Paris, haven't you? And this is the greatest food in the world. You're having an omelet with truffles—it would cost you a king's ransom in one of those phony New York traps—and that's not salami, damn it; it's pork sausage, smoked at the farm just up the hill there."

Mann stopped eating the pork sausage and put his fork down.

"I miss the ball games," said Dean. "I'd be lying to you if I didn't admit to missing the ball games. But I can hear them on the radio sometimes."

"Shortwave radio?" said Mann.

"And the Voice of America. On a good night, the Armed Forces Network from Germany. But I'm surrounded by high ground here, as you see."

"Sure," said Mann.

I wondered how much of that exchange was about baseball, and how much was about shortwave radio reception—and maybe transmission, too. I took some sausage and tore a crusty piece of bread from the end of the loaf. It would all go on a long time yet, I decided. Mann and Dean would pretend to talk about old times, while talking about new times. And Mann would pace up and down, looking into cupboards and assessing the length of drawers and the thickness of walls to decide whether

something could be concealed behind them. He would judge it all on a basis of infallibility, while hoping for a careless mistake.

"My kids went to camp this Christmas," Mann told Dean. "It cost me an arm and a leg. How I'm going to pay for them when they go to college, like your boy, sometimes scares the ass off me."

Dean was cutting a large truffle into slices as thin as a razor blade. He was using a wooden-handled folding knife, of the type the Wehrmacht issued to special units that had to cut sentries' throats.

"Living here costs me practically nothing," explained Dean. "The company pays me five hundred bucks a month, and I'm still getting ten dollars a week for that ball-game injury back when we were kids. The team carried insurance and that was lucky for me." He lifted the bread-board and carefully bulldozed the truffle slices into the beaten egg, then stood up and walked to the stove. He did limp with his left leg. Whether this was for our benefit, because he'd been thinking of it, or simply a result of sitting too long I couldn't be sure.

"But didn't you say your boy went to some kind of private college in Paris? Doesn't that really cost?"

Dean stirred the egg and checked the heat of the frying pan—by tossing a scrap of bread into it. It went golden brown. He forked it out, blew on it, and ate it before adding some salt and pepper to the egg mixture. Then he stood with the bowl of egg poised above the stove. "You must have gotten it wrong, Mickey," he said. "The boy went to an ordinary French technical school. There were no fees."

With a quick movement, and using only one hand, he closed the knife and slipped it back into the pocket of his jeans. He said, "My old Renault will do more miles per gallon than any automobile I ever used. The running repairs I do myself. In fact, last month I changed the piston rings. Even with the present price of gas, I spend no more than the ten bucks a week that my injury provides—I figure I owe my leg that car."

He turned around from the stove. "As for the rest, that little restaurant next door sells me my lunch at about what I could buy the ingredients for. I don't know how they do it. In the evening I manage on a bit of charcuterie, eggs, bread, and stuff. For special occasions, one of these twenty-franc truffles." He smiled. "Of course, if my book hit the jackpot . . ."

"How often do you manage to get to the big city?" Mann asked him. Dean tipped the egg mixture into the pan. The sudden sputter of the egg in the hot fat made Mann turn his head.

"Paris, you mean?" said Dean.

"Or New York," said Mann. "Or London, or Brussels—even Berlin." He let the word hang in the air for a long time. "Any big city where you can do some shopping and see a show."

"I haven't seen a show—or even a movie—in a lot of years, Mickey," said Dean. He dragged at the eggs with urgent movements of a wooden spoon, twisting and turning the pan so that the uncooked egg would run onto the hot metal that he uncovered. "No time, and no money, for those bourgeois pastimes."

In another place, and at another time, such a comment would have passed unnoticed, but now Dean bent low to the pan and watched the egg cooking with a concentration that was altogether unmerited, and I knew he could have bitten his tongue off.

Dean turned the pan up so that the giant omelet rolled onto a serving dish. He divided it into three equal parts and put it on our plates. Above the table, the lamp was a curious old contraption of brass and weights and green shades. Dean pulled at the strings, and the lights came low over the dining table.

We ate the meal in complete silence. Now that only the table was illuminated, it gave everything near it an artificial importance. And the three sets of busy hands, under the harsh light, were like those of surgeons co-operating in some act of dissection. In spite of his protests about not being hungry, Mann gobbled the omelet. When there were no more than a few smears of uncooked egg on his plate, he took a piece of bread and wiped up the egg with obsessional care before putting the bread into his mouth.

"The reason we came down here to see you, Hank . . ." Mann took another piece of bread, tore it into pieces, and ate it piece by piece, as if trying to find reasons for not continuing.

"You need no reasons, old buddy," said Dean. "Nor your friend, either. Hank Dean—open house. You know that by now, don't you? In the old days, I had parties where they slept under the table, and even in the bath."

"Yeah, I know," said Mann.

"And done a few other things under the table and in the bath," said Dean. He let out a whoop of laughter and refilled the glasses. "Cahors—black wine, they call it here. Drink up!"

"We're squeezing a couple of Russkies," said Mann. Again, his tone of voice made it sound as if he'd stopped in the middle of a sentence.

"Defectors?" said Dean, helping himself to a slice of goat cheese and pushing the plate nearer to me. "Try the tiny round one; that's local." he said.

"Defectors," said Mann.

"I guess I always felt a bit too sorry for those kids who came over the wall, back in my time," said Dean. "They'd toy with their damn transistor radios, and admire their snazzy new clothes in front of a full-length mirror. And they'd come along each day, and I'd write down the sentry details or the factory output, or whatever kind of crap they thought was

worth reporting to us. Then, one day, they'd feel like eating Sunday lunch with Mom and Pop, and suddenly they'd realize there were going to be no more of those Snudays. They'd come over the wall; there would be no more nothing with any of their relatives, or their buddies, or their girls. And they would take it real bad."

"Is that right?" said Mann.

"And I'd wonder whether it was worth it," said Dean. "They were going to get some lousy job in a plastics factory, not unlike the lousy job they had back with the Commies. Maybe they would be stashing away a little more bread and listening to their pop groups—but should we have encouraged those kids? Well, I don't know."

"That's the way you see it, is it?" said Mann.

"That's the way I see it," said Dean.

"No wonder you were such a lousy field-man."

"Now, you know I was pretty good," said Dean. "You know I was."

Mann didn't answer but I knew he'd signed a few reports that said that Dean had been very good indeed. One of them helped to earn Dean a medal.

"These defectors of ours," said Mann, "aren't sitting on sentry-duty timetables, or plastic toilet-seat outputs. These could swing their weight around in Washington, D.C." Mann moved his hand to indicate me. "My friend here has been heard to express the opinion that they will carve a hole in the hierarchy at Langley, Virginia."

"You don't mean that someone as high as CIA Special Projects might be involved."

"They don't call it Special Projects any more," Mann told him. "But apart from that, you catch the exact nuance of my colleague's stated belief."

"Hell," said Dean.

The kettle boiled, and Dean poured the water on to the coffee. He put milk into a saucepan and lit a flame under it. Without turning around he said, "I'm really glad, Mickey. Really pleased."

"What are you talking about?" said Mann.

"This could give you a Class A station, Mickey. Paris maybe. Romp home with this between your teeth, and you'll never look back. Hell, you could get a division even."

Dean sat down and watched the coffee dripping through the paper filter. He looked up and smiled at Mann. It was difficult to understand what was going on between the two men. I wondered if Dean guessed the purpose of our visit, and if he thought Mann was going to turn the investigation into a witch hunt through the CIA, with the ultimate aim of securing a high position in it.

"These two Commie defectors are stalling," said Mann.

"There is always that initial inertia," said Dean. "In the good ones, anyway. It's only the hustlers who come in talking."

"Your name cropped up," said Mann.

Dean watched the milk as it started to bubble, and then poured it into a jug. "I drink it black, like the French do," he explained. "But I guess you foreigners might like milk in your coffee. My name what?" He poured coffee into the thick, brown coffee cups, the sort they use in restaurants because they're so difficult to break.

"Your name was given in connection with the 1924 Society. Your name was offered to us by one of the Russkie defectors. They say you are working for Moscow."

"Common enough trick," said Dean. He drank some of the strong coffee. "Enough people know me as a onetime CIA agent. I guess the story of the foul-up that night in Berlin must be on KGB file."

"It's probably a standard part of their instruction course," said Mann bitterly.

"Perhaps it is," said Dean. He laughed and stroked his beard. "Well, there you are then."

"No, there you are," said Mann.

"Do you mean this is on the level, Mickey?"

"That's what I mean, Hank."

"Working for Moscow—you guys must be out of your minds."

"You haven't asked me what the 1924 Society is," said Mann.

"I haven't asked you what it is, because I know what it is," said Dean. "In the early fifties I did a one-hundred-and-fifty-page report on the 1924 Society. And don't tell me you didn't read my file before you came here. I know you better than that."

It was Mann's turn to look disconcerted. "No mention of it in your file now," he said.

"Well, what a coincidence," said Dean sarcastically. "It's been mislaid just about the time your Russkies fingered me. Now maybe you'll get your mind back into working condition again."

"You mean because someone raided your file, we should write you off as innocent?" Mann asked incredulously.

"Right," said Dean.

Mann dabbed a finger through the tobacco smoke. "You've been too long with the birds and the bees, Saint Francis. When we find there's a chapter missing from someone's personal file, the subject is the prime suspect. Is it all coming back to you now?"

Hank Dean poured himself a large glass of "black" wine but changed his mind about drinking it. In a gesture that Sigmund Freud would have appreciated, he pushed it far across the table, out of arm's reach.

"You're wrong," said Dean. "You're both making a big mistake. It



would be crazy for a man in my position to get involved in any such caper. I'm on the French political file—probably on local police-records even. I'd have to be crazy to do it. . . ." His voice trailed away disconsolately. "But you don't scare me. You go away and dig up some evidence. Until then, I'll sit here drinking wine and eating truffles."

"Not a chance, Hank," said Mann. "Make it easy on yourself. Let's do a deal, while we still need a deal. Play hard to get, and I'll harass you until you weep."

"For instance?" said Dean.

"Tell him," Mann said to me.

"Your pension has already stopped," I said. "You'll get no check this month unless Major Mann signs a chit for the financial director. The money from the insurance will go on for a few weeks, but eventually the insurance company will have a medical report from one of our doctors. He'll certify that your injury is no longer twenty-five-per-cent debilitating. As you remember, there's no award if the injury is less than twenty-five-per-cent debilitating."

"What is this guy," roared Dean, "some kind of speak-your-weight machine?"

"Do you want me to continue?" I asked.

"Go ahead, go ahead," said Dean.

"The State Department has given us permission to declare your passport void and to make this known to the French authorities in any way we choose. That is to say, we can either tell them that it is invalid, or request them to hold you for using false or forged travel documents."

"What are you talking about? My passport is real, issued by the State Department only two years back."

"If the State Department says a U.S. passport is forged, Mr. Dean, I don't think you can hope that the French will argue with them."

"So you'll try to get me stateside?"

"What did you think would happen?" Mann asked him. Dean swiveled to face Mann, his eyes dilated and his teeth bared. He was like some kind of wild animal trapped in a cave while two hunters prodded him with long sticks—and there was a picture of that in one of my children's books, too.

"I'm innocent, damn it," said Dean. He hammered his mighty fist down upon the table so that the crockery jumped high into the air and landed with a rattle.

"Then co-operate," shouted Mann.

"What do you want me to do?" yelled Dean. "Dream up some fairy stories for you?"

"It might be a step in the right direction," Mann growled.

I held up my hands in a gesture of peace making. "Now boys, you know the rules," I said. "No butting, no kicking, no gouging, and nobody slugs

the referee. We've had a skinful of Hank's wine, and he knows he can't get very far, with or without his passport. There's no phone here and by now he probably guesses that we have immobilized his car and ours."

"And I don't mean removing the distributor arm," said Mann.

"So let's get some shut-eye," I suggested. I looked to the end of the table where the three wine bottles we'd emptied stood. "In the morning we can talk some more, and perhaps to better purpose."

Hank Dean's cottage was built in the three-level style typical of rural buildings in that part of France. The ground floor was a cellar that Dean had converted into the storeroom and a primitive sort of bathroom and shower. Stone steps led up to the front door and the living room-kitchen-dining room that opened from it. A creaking old wooden staircase led to the top floor, where there were four cell-like bedrooms, with tiny dormer windows, fitted with the sort of bubbly glass that made it look as if the landscape were melting.

No matter what the scientists say, when the moon is full and low upon the horizon, it is gigantic. This night, colored by the earth's dust, the great golden orb looked as if it were about to collide with our planet. From the upstairs window I could see the snow on the hills that faced us across the valley. Saint-Paul-Chauvrac is a hamlet of a couple of dozen families, dominated by the houses and outbuildings of two middle-sized farms. Two cottages have fallen into ruin. One of them still has the pink lettering of a *boulangerie*, but that faded many years ago, and now the baker visits three times a week in a panel truck. There is also a large house which some hopefups back in the thirties had converted to a hotel and restaurant. But nowadays the Hostellerie du Château provides no more than a clean bed and a wholesome meal. Its management did not strive for stars in the guidebooks they sold in Paris, or for the bright enamel plaques that promise elegance in three languages, but it is popular with traveling salesmen. There were still lights burning at the hostellerie when we all retired to our respective bedrooms. They were the only lights in the village. I heard a rusty catch being unfastened, and the creak as the next room's window opened. I knew that a man of Hank Dean's girth couldn't get through it.

I didn't go to sleep. It was cold, and I took a blanket from the bed and draped it around my shoulders. I heard the bed in Dean's room creak. He wouldn't sleep; he would think things over, and if Mann's plan came to fruition, he would sit down to breakfast singing like a bird. Or perhaps that wasn't Mann's plan; perhaps that was simply the cozy piece of self-deception that had enabled Mann to jump so heavily on his old friend's neck.

My eyes must have closed for a few minutes, because I looked at my watch after hearing the noise and saw it was after 3:00 A.M. There were



no lights in the Hostellerie du Château. The hamlet was in darkness, and so was the whole landscape, for by now the moon was down. Again I heard the sound. This time it was not the creak of ancient woodwork, but a metallic sound. No more than the slightest of vibrations, it was a deep chime, like that of an artillery shell being loaded into the breach of a siege gun.

I waited for a minute, wondering if it was the striking of some antique clock that I hadn't noticed in the house. I wondered if Mann had heard the sounds, too. I even wondered whether Mann had made the sounds, and what sort of reaction he'd have if I made the wrong move—or no move at all. Finally, I was prompted as much by my own curiosity as by reasoning. I had wedged the door with a piece of paper, instead of using the door catch, and now I was able to get to the top of the stairs without a sound. But the staircase would defeat me. Dean would know each creaky step and how to negotiate them, but such an obstacle will always betray a stranger. I bent low and tried to see into the room below. The room was dark, but I could just make out the figure of a man standing with his backside resting against the edge of the table. There was a flicker of light from the stove, and it lit Hank Dean's face. It was a haggard face and deeply drawn. He was bending low over the stove, as he had been the night before cooking the omelet. Again there was a flicker of flame. This time he replaced the circular metal top of the stove so that the flame was fanned by the draft from the chimney. That was the metallic sound that had awakened me.

I jumped down most of the short staircase and stepped across the tiny room. Dean turned and raised his fist. He was a giant, and now he rose above me like the Statue of Liberty. I took the blow of his fist upon my arm. It hurt, but it didn't prevent me from wenching the metal top from the stove. I stuck my right hand into the flames and found the stove filled with papers. There were bundles of paper tied so tight that they wouldn't burn. I smelled paraffin, and as I started to pull the great handfuls of paper from the stove, it all ignited. There was a "woof" of flame that licked up around the saucepans and utensils hanging inside the chimney piece. I dropped the flaming bundle and beat at the flames that were coming from my sleeve.

"You stupid nut, Hank! Why didn't you tell me?" It was Mann's voice. He switched on the electric light to help us see the gun he was holding. I beat out the flames on my sleeve and stamped on the last remains of the burning papers.

"Don't worry about rescuing that stuff," Mann said. "This whole damned house is full of it." I could see now what I was stamping on. The floor was covered with paper money. There were French francs, Swiss francs, German marks, U.S. bills, sterling and even Lebanese and Austra-

lian money. Some of the notes were charred along the edges, some almost completely destroyed, some were crisp, new, and undamaged, some were old and dog-eared. But all of them were of high denomination. There must have been one hundred thousand dollars' worth of currency on the floor of that kitchen, and we found at least as much again when we took up the floorboards.

"Get nothing out of a guy within three hours, and you'll get nothing for three weeks."

"If there's anything to get," I reminded him. It was early. A couple of starlings were pecking at last night's breadcrumbs, and the cows in the next field were moving over to the gate, ready to go to the milking shed.

"Do you believe the money arrived by parcel post two days ago?" Mann asked.

"Hank was poor—broke, in fact. Naturally he'd try to hang onto it, and hope we'd go away."

"I would have called CIA Langley within the hour," said Mann with simple truthfulness.

"You're not natural, and neither am I. And that's why we're investigating Dean, instead of him investigating us."

"Yeah, well, I was wondering about that," said Mann. He was able to smile at the absurdity of having principles that might cost so much.

"Don't worry," I said. "There's no one in Moscow planning to send us a quarter of a million dollars in used paper money."

"I'm more worried by the chance that Hank Dean will . . ."

"Try to do a deal with the French," I completed it.

"He wants to stay here," said Mann. "And he wants that desperately."

"Not much in it for the French," I said. "A probe into our way of working, a bit of I told you so, but they'd have to give it to us in the end."

"In the end," said Mann. "Yeah, that's the place they'd give it to us. What's it going to cost them—one French passport."

"And American good will."

Mann made his tobacco noise. "I hate leaving him down there with those French cops talking to him."

"Well, let's take another look around this place," I said. I moved the corner cupboard that was filled with Dean's classical phonograph records. "The CIA guy from the embassy should be here soon. Then we can go, and take Hank Dean with us, if that's the way you want to play it."

Mann paced up and down. "This is a guy who stays in all the time. We can guess that from the mileage clock in the car. He's not running around Europe like a courier."

"At least not in that car," I corrected him gently.

"Not in any car," said Mann tartly. "Look at him—face fungus, all that hair—he'd stand out like a sore thumb—any place he stopped."

"I agree," I said. Mann moved his thinking on a stage. "So they come here. Same guy or different guy?"

"Same guy—no one knocking on doors asking for Dr. Dean in a foreign accent late at night."

"I buy that," said Mann. He looked around the tiny room. "You know something," he said. "This is just about the dirtiest, smelliest dump I've ever been in." He looked at me to get my reaction.

"Well, you're always complaining about the crummy places you find yourself in," I told him. "If this is the worst, it must be something for the record books."

Mann gave me a humorless little smile. "Look at that frying pan. It hasn't been cleaned in an age."

"It's an omelet pan," I explained. "You never wash omelet pans; it spoils the surface for all time."

"I should have known you'd find an excuse for filth," said Mann. "Now you're going to tell me the downstairs toilet never has to be cleaned, in case it spoils the surface for all time."

"I don't spend as much time in the toilet as you do," I said. "I get in and get out again. I don't spend a lot of time looking around."

"Yuck," said Mann.

"But you start me thinking," I said.

"You mean you're going to start using laundries and showers, and take a haircut from time to time?"

"Suppose Hank Dean's courier felt the same way about this place that you do."

"He'd arrive after lunch and take off at teatime," said Mann.

"Complicated material," I said. "You said it would need six or seven hours of explanation."

"Well, I'll stick by that," said Mann.

"So suppose the courier checked into the hostellerie."

"Hostellerie du Château?" said Mann. "That flea pit at the end of the alley?"

"No other," I said.

"You don't imagine he left a forwarding address, do you?"

"I'll take a look if you don't mind, Major," I said.

"I'll come with you. What have we got to lose?"

The road, surfaced with loose gravel, didn't even qualify for a French map numeral. Not many cars came along here. Outside the hostellerie a battered truck was parked. A mangy dog tried to break from its chain, and having failed to do so, snarled at us. There were two people in the bar, both of them dressed in greasy suits. Behind the bar there was a

fragile-looking man in a threadbare shirt and denim trousers. His hair was wispy and gray, and he peered myopically from behind thick, rimless spectacles.

"Two beers," I said.

He reached behind him, opened a wood-faced refrigerator, found two Alsace lagers, and slammed them on the counter. The men in black suits ended their conversation abruptly. The barman rinsed two glasses under the tap and pushed them toward us. "Visiting the doctor," he said. It was not a question.

"That's right," I said. I had already discovered that all the villagers called Hank Dean "the doctor." It was probably the way he was referred to on his pension envelope.

"Not many visitors at this time of year," said the barman. If he had seen the policemen arrive to collect Dean, he was not admitting it.

"I want to talk to you about that," I said. "There is one particular friend of the doctor whom we must get in touch with."

"Oh," said the barman.

"Came every few weeks," I said.

"Perhaps," said the barman.

"Did he stay here?" Mann put the question too hurriedly.

"Are you the police?" said the man.

"Yes," I said, but Mann had already said no. The barman looked from one to the other of us and allowed himself that vacuous smile which peasants reserve for government officials. "A sort of police," I continued. "A sort of American police."

"The FBI?" offered one of the men in black.

"Exactly," I said.

"What has the doctor done?" asked the barman.

I tried to see in his face whether he would prefer to see the doctor exonerated, pursuing criminals, or taken away in a small black truck. Unsure of myself, I said, "The doctor is accused of defrauding an American bank." I turned to Mann and raised an eyebrow as if seeking his permission to take the old man further into our confidence. Mann, playing along with the game, nodded sagely. I leaned across the counter and said, "Now we're beginning to think he is innocent. We need to find this man who visited the house."

"Why won't the doctor tell you?" the man asked.

It was a hell of a good question. "That's a very good question," I told him. "But it's a rule of the underworld. Even when you can help yourself, you never help the police."

"Of course," said Mann hurriedly. "That doesn't apply to citizens. It doesn't apply to people who obey the law and suffer from the criminals."

"Especially," he added archly, "especially it doesn't apply to licensed inn-keepers."

"The man you seek is young and slim, with hair that covers his ears. He wears the sort of clothes they wear on the Riviera—fancy silk neckerchiefs, tight tailored trousers that show everything, and cheap imitation-leather jackets of all shapes and sizes and colors."

"Shut your mouth, you old fool."

A young man had entered the bar from a door marked "Private." He was about twenty years old, had a large black droopy mustache, and was dressed in a phony UCLA sweat shirt and faded jeans. Around his wrist he wore a studded leather support, the sort that old prizefighters sometimes need. "Tell these people nothing," he said. "They are Americans, capitalist police spies."

"Now hold it, son," said Mann mildly.

I think it was the gentleness of Mann's tone that incensed the boy. Feeling that he was not being taken seriously, he called us "pigs," "reactionary oppressors," and "Gestapo." One of the old men at the other end of the bar smiled derisively. Perhaps he remembered the Gestapo. The boy saw the old man smile. He grabbed my sleeve in an attempt to drag me from the bar. He was stronger than he looked, and I felt a seam give way under his grip.

"Pig, pig, pig," said the boy, as if the physical exertion had driven all reason, and vocabulary, from his head. All the while he was tearing at my coat, so that I had to either move with him or watch it tear apart.

I hit him twice. The first punch did no more than position him, head down and off balance, for the hook that sent him flying across the room. It knocked the breath out of him, and he made that sort of whistling howl with which an express train acknowledges a country station. Two chairs toppled with him and a table was dislodged before the boy struck a pile of crates and collapsed to the floor.

"Paid cash," said the barman, continuing as if nothing had happened. "Never check, or those fancy traveler's things; always money."

"Stayed overnight?" I said. I straightened my clothes and sucked the blood off my grazed fist, which hurt like hell. The boy remained on the floor in the far corner. He was blinking and watching us and mouthing obscenities, but he did not get to his feet.

"It varied," said the barman. "But he seldom had any baggage with him. Just shavings things."

"Give me the car registration number," I said.

"I don't have that," said the man.

"Come on," I said. "A *hôtelier* who takes clients without baggage and doesn't make a note of the car registration! I'm sure you'll find it somewhere. I'll pay you twenty francs for it."

The man reached below the bar to get a battered hotel register. It was a mess of illegible signatures and unlikely addresses. Its pages were creased and ringed with the marks of wine and beer and goodness knows what else. Hank Dean's guest hadn't entered his name here, but the barman was able to find his own scribbled note of the car registration. He read the number aloud, and I wrote it in my notebook and passed him the twenty francs. He smoothed the note carefully and inspected both sides of it before putting it into his bulging wallet.

"Thank you," I said.

"There are more," he said.

"More registration numbers?" I asked.

"Certainly there are."

"Different ones?"

He nodded.

"Damn rental cars," said Mann.

"Ten francs each," I bargained.

"Twenty was the price you yourself set," said the barman.

I looked at Mann. "But no duplicates," Mann warned him.

"We'll have the duplicates, too," I contradicted. "But we must have the dates for each number."

Page by page the man went through the book until we had a list of dates and numbers going back nearly two years. We finished our beers and drank two more.

"The same registration!" said Mann excitedly. "That makes the same number four times." He drained his beer, wiped his mouth, and then made a face. "It could be that it's a small rental company, or that he asks for that particular car."

"I don't think so," I said. "Rental companies usually unload their cars every year or two. Those dates are too far apart. Here it is back at the beginning, soon after Dean moved here, and then again last August."

"Always at holiday times," said Mann.

"Yes," I said. "Always at a time when rental companies might not have had a car available. It must be his own car."

"The first lucky break we've had," said Mann.

"Mine host feels the same way about it," I said as we watched the man tucking a small fortune into his wallet. The man looked up and smiled at us.

"Good-bye and thank you," I said. "I'm sorry about the boy."

"My son had it coming to him," said the barman. "But there's eight francs to pay for your beers."

Chapter Eleven

It took forty-eight hours to trace the car registration. It belonged to a very old four-door Fiat that for over eight years had been owned by Madame Lucie Simone Valentin, a nurse, born in Le Puy in the Haute-Loire, now residing in Paris at Porte de la Villette, across the canal from one of the biggest abattoirs in Europe.

This particular part of northeast Paris is not noted for its historical monuments, cathedrals, or fine restaurants. Madame Valentin's home was in a nineteenth-century slum, with echoing staircases, broken light fixtures and the all-pervading smell of stale food. It was just beginning to snow when we got there. Across the street two yellow monsters were eating walls and snorting brick dust. Number ninety-four was at the very top. It was a garret. Painted up, crowded with antique furniture, and situated so it overlooked Notre Dame, it would have been the sort of place that Hollywood set designers call Paris. But this apartment had no such view. It faced another building, twice as tall and three times as gloomy. There was no chance that Gene Kelly would answer the door.

"Yes?" She had been beautiful once. She wore a handmade sweater that was less than perfectly knitted, and her hair was styled into the sort of permanent wave that you can do at home.

"We would like to talk to you about your car, Madame Valentin," I said.

"I can explain about that," she said. "I thought it would need only new spark plugs. By the end of the month it will all be paid." She paused. From the floor below came the sound of tango music.

"We are not from the service station," said Mann. "We want to talk to you about Mr. Henry Dean."

"You are Americans?" She said in good English.

"Chéri," she called to someone behind her. "Chéri, it is for you." To us she said, "Henri has to be at work at six o'clock." She pronounced his name in the French manner: Henri.

The concierge had mentioned that a man lived with her. I had expected someone quite different from the pink-faced young man who now smiled and offered his hand. He was dressed in a newly pressed set of working clothes, a Total badge sewn over the heart.

"I'm Major Mann, U.S. Army, Retired. I work for the State Department in Washington. I'd like to come in and speak with you."

"I know all about you," said the young man. "Dad sent a message. He

said he's being held in custody by the police. He said it was all a misunderstanding, but that you guys were straight and you'd do the right thing by him."

"You're Hank Dean's son?" said Mann.

"Yes, sir, I certainly am," said the young man. He grinned. "Henry Hope Dean. Do you want to see my passport?"

"That won't be necessary," said Mann.

"Come in, come in," said the young man. "Lucie darling, get the bottle of Scotch whiskey that we were saving for my birthday."

The room was very clean and almost unnaturally tidy, like a holiday cottage prepared for new arrivals. And, like such rented places, this one was sparsely furnished with cheap bamboo chairs and unpainted cupboards. There were some Impressionist reproductions tacked to the faded wallpaper and a lot of books piled on the floor in stacks.

The young man indicated which were the best chairs and picked up his precious bottle of whiskey. I sat down and wondered when I'd have enough strength to get up again. It was four nights since either of us had a full night's sleep. I saw Mann sip his Scotch. I poured a lot of water into mine.

"Who would want to get your father into trouble?" Mann asked.

"Well, I don't know much about the work he once did for the government."

"We'll talk to other people about that," said Mann. "I mean, among the people you know, who would want to see your father in trouble, or in prison, or even dead?"

"No one. You know Dad—he can be exasperating at times, he can be pretty outspoken, and stubborn. I suppose I could imagine him getting into a brawl—but not this kind of scrape. Dad was swell company—is swell company. No one would go to all the trouble of planting a quarter of a million dollars in cash. Why, that's just impossible!"

"It's supposed to look impossible," said Mann. "You send a man a bundle of money so big he can't bear to turn it in, then you tell the cops he's got it."

I watched Mann's face, trying to decide whether he had already pronounced Hank Dean innocent. He saw me watching him and turned away.

"Gee, a quarter of a million bucks," said the young man. "You'd have to be really sore at someone to leave that kind of bread in his mailbox."

Lucie Valentin came into the room with coffee for us. The cheap crockery was brightly shining, and there was a crisply starched linen tray-cover. She put it on the bamboo table and then sat on the arm of the chair young Dean occupied. She put her arm around him in a maternal

gesture. "Perhaps you should go and see your father, darling," she said. "You can take the car."

"If I may be personal," I said to the woman. "How did you get along with Hank Dean?"

"I met him only twice," said Lucie.

"Lucie wanted to get the whole thing out in the open," said the boy. "Lucie and I are going to be married, and real soon, but I've got to make it okay with Dad."

"And he objects to Lucie?"

"He liked her," said the young man. "I know he did, and still does." He patted her arm, looked at her, and smiled. "But the truth is that Dad would like me to marry an American girl."

"Really?" I said.

"Oh, sure. Dad comes on very strong about how cosmopolitan he is, but Dad is an American; his French marks him as an American, and he's very self-conscious about that."

"And your French is fluent?"

"I've grown up here. Most of the people I work with think I'm a Parisian. And I think like a Frenchman—it hurts Dad when I say that, but it's true. I could never be really happy in the United States—nor married to an American girl."

He smiled. The way he'd said "girl" was a way of saying that he preferred a "woman." Lucie was a lot older than the boy; he didn't have to say that Hank Dean didn't like that, either.

"And there is Lucie's divorce," said the boy. "That is the real difficulty. The Church doesn't recognize it?"—he shrugged—"and neither does Dad."

"But your father divorced your mother," I said.

For a moment I thought young Dean was angry that I had mentioned it, but he smiled at Lucie and then said to me, "He wrote that he was divorced on all the official forms and stuff, but the truth is that he's always refused to give my mother a divorce—"that's what caused all the bad feeling."

"On religious grounds?"

"Mom said it was easy for Dad to have religious scruples. He didn't want to get married again."

"But your mother did?"

"They never got along. They separated too long ago for me to remember anything about it, but I can never imagine them getting along together. Mom digs the high life. This guy Reid-Kennedy is just rolling in money. He's always wanted me to take an allowance, but I wouldn't feel right about that. After all, he's not even my stepfather."

"What does he do for a living?"

"He's in electronics."

I said, "That can mean anything from repairing a broken TV to walking on the moon."

"His factories make complicated junk for communications satellites. They did a lot of work for the one French TV uses to get live news coverage from the States. And there are the weather satellites, too. I guess it's not military secrets, if that's what you guys are thinking."

"You'll be too late for the hospital, *chéri*," said the woman.

"I'll skip it today," said the young man. "I was due to give blood at the hospital on the boulevard but I can easily do that tomorrow."

Mann nodded. "You keep in touch with your mother?"

"We write."

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"One, no, what am I saying—two years ago."

Lucie got up from the arm of the chair, walked over to the window, and took a sudden interest in the falling snow.

"And she doesn't write or phone?" Mann persisted.

"A couple of times in this last year," said the young man. "She's beginning to accept the situation for what it is."

Lucie walked back to him and slipped a hand into the pocket of the overalls he was wearing, took his cigarettes out, and lit one. It was an intimate gesture, and yet it lacked the spontaneity that such actions usually have. He felt it too. "What's the matter, darling?"

She turned away from him and shrugged. She puffed the cigarette and said, "Your mother was here yesterday."

"Are you sure?" he said incredulously.

Lucie still didn't turn. "Of course I'm sure. She came here looking for you. Of course I'm sure."

"Take it easy, baby."

"I'm sorry, darling," she said in a voice that showed no sign of regret. "She hasn't accepted anything. She's determined to part us. I dreamed about her last night."

"You're being silly."

Lucie turned on him. "I'm not being silly, and don't call me baby." She opened the handbag that was on the window sill and produced a slip of paper from it. "Call her!" said Lucie. "That's what you want to do, isn't it?"

He didn't take the slip of paper. "I love you, Lucie."

She shrugged and turned away.

It was Mann who took the slip of paper from her. He didn't pass it on to young Dean. He read it himself. Neither of them was aware of us any more.

"You should have told me, Lucie."

Lucie dabbed at her eyes with a tiny handkerchief. "She only stayed in France for three hours. She was going back to the airport again. It seemed silly to risk all we have when she was here for only a few minutes."

"She didn't cross the Atlantic just to pay one short visit," said the boy. He was flattered by the idea, and his voice betrayed it.

"No," she said. "They are in Europe."

"This is hotel stationery," said Mann, holding up the note. "No message, just 'Please phone' and the printed notepaper. The Gresham Hotel, Dublin. What would she be doing in Ireland, do you know?"

"No," said the young man.

"Well, think about it!" said Mann angrily. The tension in the room had got to all of us, and now Mann became unreasonably impatient with the boy. "Think about it! Is he interested in stud farms or shark fishing? What's she doing in Ireland in the depths of winter?"

The young man shook his head, and Lucie answered on his behalf. "His mother had come on the Irish Airlines direct flight: Dublin-Paris. She said not to tell her husband about the trip. He thought she was shopping in Dublin and going on to the theatre in the evening."

"So where the hell was he?" said Mann. "Crazy kind of vacation where you send your wife to a show alone."

"She didn't say anything about that," said Lucie.

Mann reached for his hat and buttoned his coat. "You're not planning to leave town, are you?"

Neither of them answered, but as we went through the door that Lucie held open for us, young Dean said, "She's not trying to part us, baby. Quit worrying about that. It's having secrets from each other—that's what does the damage," and after the door closed they switched to a gabble of French.

From below there came the music of the same tango that we'd heard when we arrived. Either the automatic changer was stuck, or they were learning to dance. Mann didn't talk as we went down the narrow stone stairs. Some of the light bulbs were missing, and the ones that worked gave no more than a glimmer of light. There is a false gaiety to the tango, it's really a very melancholy rhythm.

It was late afternoon, but the low clouds darkened the street; some of the cars had their lights on. We walked until we got to our rented Mercedes. The thin layer of snow that had collected on it was colored yellow by the brick dust from the demolition, and someone had drawn a hammer and sickle in it. Mann rubbed it out before getting in. Then he turned on the wipers to make a clear patch of glass but even as he did so there was the thunderous crash from a collapsing wall, and a great cloud of dust enveloped us. We were tightly boxed in but Mann shunted us clear and joined the traffic that sped along the rue de Flandre toward central Paris.

We were in the Place de Stalingrad before Mann said anything. "Suppose the kid really is the courier?"

"I can't believe that was all an act. Those two weren't doing all that for us?"

"And the kid's mother?"

"When a professional network makes a mistake, it's always this kind of mistake," I said. "It's always a jealous lover or a suspicious wife."

"Or a cast-off wife who wants to remarry. So you think the wife framed Hank?"

"It was a way of putting pressure on you," I said. "It was a way of making you vulnerable."

"But was it intended to get us off Bekuv's tail? Or is this a red herring —this junk about Dublin?"

"A good question," I said.

He nodded. We both knew that we'd got to go to Dublin—an investigator follows his lead, no matter how much he suspects it might be a false trail.

By the time we got back to the hotel, near the Ministry of the Interior, the snow was getting a grip on the city. Mann strode into the hotel shaking the ice from his raincoat. There was a message waiting for him. It was via the French police. Someone had been trying to reach us urgently. There was a phone number. I recognized it as one of the accommodation numbers used by the CIA floor of the Paris embassy. Mann called it, and a courier arrived within ten minutes. The message had been through the cipher machine, but it was still enigmatic enough to require explanation.

JONATHAN TO SHOESHINE TRIPLE STAR URGENT.

FABIAN REGRETS PROSPECT DEAN NAMED IN ERROR STOP HE NOW SAYS BETTERCAR CAR RENTALS OFFICE IS IN BOSTON MASSACHUSETTS STOP RED SENDS LOVE STOP BRING COGNAC SIGNATURE JONATHAN ENDS

Fabian was the code name for Andrei Bekuv, and Jonathan was the CIA man responsible for the safety of the two Russians while we were away. "Bring cognac" was the check code that Mann had arranged with Jonathan personally (different for every message and committed to memory by the three of us). How Red had persuaded security to add a personal message of love was beyond my understanding.

"Did you decode Boston, Massachusetts, for me?" Mann asked.

"Yes, sir," said the courier. He was a diffident young man. "I looked it up. It's a little town in Ireland—Drogheda, if that's the way you pronounce it."

"Drogheda," Mann said and nodded. "And I suppose the code for Boston, Massachusetts, is Drogheda, Ireland." The courier smiled politely.

Mann took the message sheet and a pack of matches, and made a thorough job of burning the paper to ash. Mann was like that: he liked a chance to show what a well-trained operator he was.

"Is there anything else?" said the courier.

"Henry Hope Dean. I want his blood group," said Mann. "He's a blood donor, so it shouldn't be difficult."

"Drogheda in Ireland," he said again when the courier had departed. "Well, the Bekuvs are really talking."

"Are you going to tell me what Bettercar is, or are we going to play secret agents all evening?"

"Easy, baby," he said, imitating young Dean's anxious voice.

"I'm going to eat," I said. "See you later."

"Bettercar Car Rentals is the agreed code for the 1924 Society," said Mann, "and I'm buying the drinks."

Chapter Twelve

You turn left out of Dublin airport, following the Belfast road. Major Mann had arranged for an Irish Special Branch officer to meet us at Drogheda. It was only a twenty-mile drive from the airport, and Mann promised to do it in as many minutes; but he didn't count on the narrow, meandering route, the potholed surface, or on the gigantic articulated trucks that had to reduce speed to a snail's pace in getting through the narrow streets of the villages en route. Nor did he expect the thunderstorm that greeted us. He cursed and fumed all the way. Finally he let me drive.

Drogheda, a colorless town of stone and slate, shone under the steady downpour of rain that in Ireland is called "a soft day." A soldier with an automatic rifle and a policeman in a flak jacket took shelter from the rain in the bank doorway. On the wall alongside them was white spray-can writing, "No Extradition."

The Special Branch police inspector was waiting for us with the politeness and patience with which Irishmen meet delay. He was a tall, thin man with fair hair, and was dressed in the sort of dark, plain clothes that policemen wear when they want you to know that they are policemen. He got into his car and sat silent for a moment, wiping the rain off his face with a handkerchief. He removed his hat so that rainwater didn't drip into the document case that he now opened on his knees. He found the papers he wanted and tapped them reassuringly. There was a roll of thunder that echoed through the town like a cannonade.

"Mr. and Mrs. Reid-Kennedy checked into the Gresham Hotel in Dublin four nights ago. His wife stayed there to do some shopping. She checked out yesterday. It's not easy to be sure which nights your man was there with her—the double room was paid for all the time." He referred to his papers again. "Mr. Reid-Kennedy hired a small truck from a rental company on O'Connell Street. He went to a fishing-tackle and sporting-goods shop. They say he didn't buy a shotgun or ammunition, but we can never be sure of that, not in Ireland! He did buy a pair of thigh-length rubber boots. Waders—the sort anglers wear for river fishing. And a waterproof jacket."

"Rod? Line? Flies?" Mann asked.

"Just the boots and jacket. Then he drove the truck up here. He didn't stay at any of the hotels in Drogheda, but two people saw the truck he'd hired. A farm laborer saw it being driven back toward town at seven o'clock yesterday morning. He thumbed it, but the truck wouldn't stop."

"Did he identify Reid-Kennedy?" Mann asked.

"Positively. He was disappointed. In this part of the world, people always stop for a hitchhiker, especially a local man. And it was raining, too. Yes, a positive identification."

"The other?"

"The baker's delivery man saw the empty truck parked in the lane at the entrance to a farm—the O'Connor property. He had difficulty getting past—the lane is very narrow there."

"Tell me about this farm," said Mann. There was a sudden crackle of lightning that lit the whole street, freezing every movement with its cruel blue light.

"A syndicate of Germans owns it," said the policeman. "A farm, beef cattle, about five hundred acres."

There was another rumble of thunder. Down the street came tractors, stray dogs, schoolchildren, dilapidated cars, and a religious procession. Everyone braved the rain as if they did not notice it.

The policeman put his papers away and locked his case. "The only thing that bothers me is the gasoline. The rental company says he used enough to get as far north as Dundalk, or over the border even."

Mann grunted and turned to watch a boy on a bicycle. The boy had a shoulder resting against a brick wall and was flicking the pedals with his toe. "Where is this O'Connor property?" Mann asked. "Let's look it over."

The policeman looked at the rain. "There's nothing hard and fast," he said. "I'd better telephone Dublin if you want to search."

"Nothing doing," said Mann. "The sort of people we're after could pay a thousand dollars for news about your phone call to Dublin."

"I'm surprised you trust *me*," said the policeman irritably.

"I don't trust you," said Mann. "Now let's get on with it—tell them we're looking for blue films or checking foot-and-mouth disease, or something."

Condensation was steaming up the windshield. The policeman produced a handkerchief and wiped a panel clear. "Straight up this road," he said eventually. I turned the ignition key, and after a couple of tries I got the car going. "The next side road on the left," said the policeman.

We turned off the main road and climbed through silent villages and a lonely landscape. The rain-washed hilltops were shiny and unkempt in the afternoon light, but the ruins of some long-forgotten abbey were just visible in the gloomy folds of the valley floor.

"Tell me more about this farm," said Mann.

"This might not be your man," said the policeman. "This syndicate of Germans—Frankfurt, it was—bought the O'Connor farm about two years ago. There was talk of a stud, and then a flying lobsters to Paris, but never did anything come of the talk. People called Gerdings live there now—man, wife, and grown-up son. People come to see them regularly—described as shareholders in the syndicate. Well-dressed foreigners come, not just Germans: Americans, a Dutchman, some Swedes, and a man who said he was from the Argentine, according to what the taxi drivers tell us."

Mann sniffed. "Sounds like what we're looking for," he said.

"No neighbors for miles around," said the policeman. "The Gerdings are Protestants—keep themselves to themselves. Hard-working people, the neighbors say. They go into the village for gasoline and bread and milk, and into Drogheda once a week for groceries." He tapped my shoulder. "We'd better leave the car by the gate. We'll get her stuck in the mud if we try the lane in this sort of weather. Have you got raincoats?"

The farmhouse was on the brow of a hill, with the outbuildings forming a rectangle on the shallower slope to the east of it. The track that was too muddy for our car followed the ridge of the hill. There was a magnificent view from here for anyone prepared to look into the blinding rainstorm. But in spite of the noise of the wind, the dogs heard us. Their barks turned to howls as Mann struggled with the rusty bolt on the farmyard gate.

"Not exactly what the Lufthansa ads would lead us to expect," said Mann. He clawed at the bolt angrily, and its sharp edge took the skin off his thumb. He swore.

The yard was also lacking the sort of orderliness that one expects from a syndicate registered in Frankfurt. The uneven cobblestones were strewn with spilled feed, matted hay, and puddles of rain water over blocked drains. The farmhouse door was locked.

"The birds have flown," said the policeman, but he unbuttoned his coat and loosened his jacket. It was the sort of thing a man might do if he was reassuring himself about the availability of his pistol.

I tried the window and slid it up without difficulty.

"Hullo there," shouted the policeman through the open window. The wind blew the net curtain so that it billowed over his face. There was no sound from within the farinhouse, but the dogs barked as if in response to the call. I tugged at the skirt of my raincoat so that I could get one leg over the windowsill. The policeman pushed me gently to one side. "This is my patch," he said. "I'm used to the kinds of things that might be about to happen." He smiled.

I suppose all three of us had done this before. I covered him. Mann remained outside. We went through every room, and inevitably there was the silly feeling when you look under the beds.

"No one at all," said the policeman as he opened the last cupboard and rapped its wooden interior to make sure there were no hollow sounds.

I went over to the window, raised it, and called down to Mann in the yard to tell him the house was empty. By that time he'd taken a quick look around the outbuildings. They, too, were empty. The rain had almost stopped now, and from this upstairs window I could see miles across the flat countryside of Kells, to where a dying sun was making a pink sky above the lakes of Meath. I saw the farm dogs, too. They were wet and miserable, sitting on the manure heap behind the stables.

"Look at this," called the policeman from downstairs.

I went down to find Mann there, too. They were sifting through the ashes that buried the hearth. They had found some pieces of stiff plastic, about the size of a postcard. A dozen or more of them had fused together into a hard plastic brick. That had prevented their destruction in the flames.

Mann picked a small white block from the ashes. "What's this?"

"A fire lighter," said the policeman. "A compound of paraffin wax. They're used to start domestic fires. They'll get the coal or peat going without the need of paper or wood."

"Is that right," said Mann. He sniffed it. "Well, this baby didn't ignite. If it had, we wouldn't have found anything at all."

"Now, you can tell me something," said the Inspector. "What is this laminated plastic?"

"Microfiche," said Mann. "Microfilm's little brother. Microfilm is on reels, and just dandy for someone who goes to a public library to read *War and Peace*, but if you want to select your material, these are far better." He pried one of the plastic postcards away from the rest and held it up to the light so the policeman could see the fingernail-sized pages of photographed data.

"I'll want to take some of this with me," said Mann. "Just a sample. Okay?"

"As long as you leave enough for the lab to tell us what kind of material it is."

"This is all classified material from U.S. government sources," said Mann.

"Why here?" said the policeman.

"The Irish Republic is accessible—your passport checks are perfunctory, and now that the Russkies have an embassy here, the place is crawling with agents. With Ireland in the EEC, there are few restrictions on Europeans entering. From the United Kingdom there's no check at all. Come on, fella, you know why."

"I suppose you're right," he said.

"Yes, I am," said Mann. He put a couple of the microfiche cards into his wallet.

"Will you hear those dogs," the policeman said to me. "I was brought up on a farm. My father would have sold dogs that fled when strangers entered the house and howled their lungs out behind the raspberries."

I got to my feet without answering and went to the front hall. I picked up the phone to be sure it was connected, and put it down again. Then I unbolted the massive front door. It must have been a century old and designed to withstand a siege. I stood in the porch and stared out across the fields. Cow dung had been spread across the glassy fields, and a few rooks were striding about and pecking it over. They were fine, big birds, as big as vultures, with a shiny blue sheen on their black feathers. But most of the birds were in the sky, hundreds of them—starlings for the most part—wheeling and sweeping, great whirlpools of birds darkening the pink evening sky, chattering and calling and beating the air forcibly enough to make a constant whirr of noise.

"Phone your people," I said finally. "Get a police doctor and some digging equipment. There will be three bodies, I imagine—the people who call themselves 'Gerding'—buried where the dogs are baying."

The policeman said, "So that's why the dogs are howling out there in the rain. I should have guessed that; I've lived in the country. I'm sorry."

"Forget it," I said. "I've never lived in the country but I know the kind of people we're dealing with."

"This man Reid-Kennedy?" said the policeman.

"Panel truck to move the microfiche machine . . . waders and waterproof jacket to shield his clothes from blood splashes . . . two extra gallons of gas to burn papers, and God knows what other material?"

"But why leave the telephone connected?"

"We're not dealing with teeny-boppers," I said. "He didn't want the telephone men arriving in the middle of his shenanigans."

The police inspector said, "Then your man is a foreigner; an American,

most likely. Our lads have learned better than to fear interception at the hands of overprompt telephone men."

Mann looked at him to see whether he was being sarcastic, but having failed to decide, gave no more than a grunt and turned back to his micro-fiche. Almost as suddenly as they had begun, the starlings swooped, settled, and went silent. Now there was only the sound of the dogs.

Chapter Thirteen

From the air, it looks like a clutter of fancy boxes washed up on to a tropical shore. But Miami's ocean was blue and inviting and its sky cloudless. Regardless of all those jokes about the Bahamas being where Florida's rich people spend the winter, arrive in Miami straight from an Irish January and you begin to realize that the oranges are not so stupid.

Downtown Miami may be the usual gridiron of office buildings, shopping plazas, City Hall, and War Memorial. Downtown Miami may be like that, if you ever find it among the tower hotels. But the Reid-Kennedy's didn't live in downtown Miami, and they didn't live in any of the hotel towers, either. They enjoyed a five-acre spread of waterfront, with a Spanish-style eight-bedroom house—and an appropriate number of Spanish-style retainers to keep it polished—a garden filled with tropical flowers, and a place to moor the fifty-foot motor cruiser. And if it was the right sort of conversation they needed, they could summon the light blue Rolls-Royce with the uniformed driver and go to the Yacht Club, which was about one hundred and fifty yards along the waterfront. Mr. Reid-Kennedy was still "on business in Europe," but Mann decided to spread some alarm and despondency through the household.

"If you are a friend of Henry Hope, we are just delighted to see you," said his mother. She called her son "Henry Hope." If he'd come back here to live with them, he would have become Henry Hope Reid-Kennedy, which sounds like a good reason for staying in Paris.

There was soft music playing, and the woman reached behind her to a fluffy pink toy dog, and the music became very quiet. I wondered whether that was a product of the Reid-Kennedy radio company. She smiled at us. She was in her middle forties, but a lot of expensive facials, lotions, massages and steam baths had been devoted to keeping her thirty-nine. It had almost succeeded. For some people, middle age brought a softening of the features, but her skin was tight rather than flabby, and there were white lines along the bone of her nose and her jaw. Yet there was no mistaking

the beauty that she had once been, and her imperious manner suggested that she hadn't forgotten it, either. She stroked the head of a white poodle. "Yes, if you are friends of Henry Hope, we are just delighted to see you."

She said it in such a way that we knew that if it turned out that we were not friends of her son, she would arrange for us to be roasted in hell—very slowly. She smiled again as she looked at the heavy woolen suits that Mann and I had chosen for a Christmas in Virginia, and at the shapeless tweed hat that Mann had bought at the Dublin Airport. She was wearing pale pink silk lounging pajamas, with a Dior label twisted to face outward. The poodle's collar was Gucci.

"You are a major in the American army?" She took a delicate sip at the bright red drink that was in a cocktail glass at her elbow.

"Signal Corps, Ma'am."

"Oh, Signal Corps," said the woman as if that explained everything. It was about this time that the servant decided that we weren't borrowing money or selling encyclopedias. She departed silently.

"Although we have met your son and talked with him, it would be falsely representing ourselves unless I told you that we were here to make inquiries about your husband," said Mann. He held his hat in both hands and turned it like a steering wheel.

"About my husband?" she said. There was a note of alarm in a voice that seldom betrayed alarm. She reached for a pink shawl and tossed it around her shoulders in a way that made me feel that we had brought the temperature down.

"Dr. Henry Dean," said Mann.

"Ah, you mean my ex-husband," said Mrs. Reid-Kennedy. She began stroking the poodle with urgent little movements, quite unlike the measured voice and relaxed smile that she was giving us. "Do put your hat down and be seated." She had that "*Gone With the Wind*" Dixieland accent, but the low voice made her sound more like Clark Gable than Vivien Leigh.

Mann looked at her full in the eyes for a moment and then said, "That's what I meant, Mrs. Reid-Kennedy. About Dr. Henry Dean, your ex-husband." He didn't sit down, and he didn't let go of his hat.

"Is he in some sort of trouble?" she asked.

"Yes, he is," said Mann.

"I'm so sorry," she said. She frowned, but didn't break down and weep about it.

Mann said, "He had a lot of currency with him. So far he hasn't been able to account for it." Mann shrugged. "It could all mean nothing—on the other hand, it could be serious."

"And you are from?"

"The Internal Revenue Service," said Mann. "I thought I told you that already."

"No," she said. She wasn't sure whether to be more relaxed or more anxious. "And what do you do?"

"Are you kidding?" said Mann with a smile. "You know what The IRS does ma'am. We're modern Robin Hoods—we rob from the rich and give it to the poor."

"I mean you personally," she said. She reached for a box with a colored photo of kittens on its lid. The label said "Hand-coated chocolate-covered brandied cherries." She took a bite out of one so that she could see the inside, and then read the label again. Without looking up, she repeated the question. "What do you do personally?"

"Now, I'd have to claim the Fifth Amendment on that one, lady, on account of the way I might incriminate myself." He leered at her, but she gave no sign of having understood. "In an inquiry like this one . . ." Mann paused, hoping that she would look up at him, but she didn't. He continued, ". . . there's a whole lot of purely routine material to be filed. In the normal way of things, I suppose we would have extended the investigation into the business affairs of people associated with Dr. Dean. But personally, Mrs. Reid-Kennedy, I don't like probing into people's private affairs."

She looked up and waited for him to continue, but he didn't. She turned to glance through the huge picture window to where the palm trees cut jagged patterns into the blue water of the bay. Then she gave her whole attention to eating the chocolate-coated cherry and waited and waited.

"What kind of business is your husband in?" Mann asked suddenly.

"Electronics," she said. I had the feeling that she was going to phone her lawyer and say nothing more until he arrived, but if that was in her mind she must have changed it.

"Has he always been in electronics?" Mann asked.

"How do I know you are on official business?" she said.

He didn't answer. Finally she said, "He inherited the business from his father—Reid-Kennedy Radio Components, Incorporated. It was Douglas who saw the possibilities in electronics. The Chicago factory still manufactures pocket calculators and desk models, but most of our business is concerned with very advanced electronic equipment." She stopped stroking the dog long enough to sip at her drink.

"I appreciate your very complete answer, Mrs. Reid-Kennedy," Mann told her. "Can I take it that neither you nor your husband has any connections, business or social, with this man Henry Dean?"

This man—that was a good touch. She brightened considerably at that and fluttered her eyelashes. "None whatsoever, Major," she said. She

frowned as if trying to scrape the very bottom of her memory barrel for us. "I believe my son, Henry Hope, has kept in touch with Mr. Dean from time to time, but neither I nor my husband has been in touch with him personally since the divorce."

"Since 1955, you mean." He walked over to where she was sitting.

"Yes, since 1955," she said, and frowned again.

"Have you got a recent photo of Mr. Douglas Reid-Kennedy?" Mann asked. He picked up a small photo in a leather frame and looked at it. It was an old sepia tinted photo of a man in a wing collar and a boy in Bavarian-style shorts and jacket.

"Where did you get that?" she said.

"Right off your table there," said Mann.

"It's my husband and his father, a photo taken before the war—he usually takes it with him. It's a sort of lucky piece."

"Well, looks like this time his luck ran out," said Mann. "But anyway, I want something recent. A passport shot would do."

"He hates having his picture taken," she said.

"Is that right," said Mann, "Maybe he was bitten by a little birdie."

She took the photo from Mann and replaced it on the table. "Yes, I suppose that was it," she said.

Mann smiled. "Well, stay loose," he said, "we'll maybe be back again."

"Will you?" she said.

"Just tying up a few routine odds and ends," said Mann.

She smiled doubtfully and got to her feet to show us out.

"Thank you again for all your kindness," said Mann, waving an arm vaguely in the direction of the coffee table, which was still as empty as it had been when we arrived—just as the liquor cabinet and cigarette box were no less full. "It's just too bad we can't get out of this dinner at the White House," said Mann, walking to the door.

Mrs. Reid-Kennedy frowned at him.

He stopped, turned, and twisted the Irish tweed hat in his hands until she looked at it. Then he turned it inside out to show her the irregular stitches that held the lining. It was already coming loose. "A more leisurely way of life over there," said Mann. "I bought that in Dublin yesterday, Mrs. Reid-Kennedy." He put the hat on and smiled.

Mrs. Reid-Kennedy wet her lips nervously and said, "It's an Irish fishing hat, isn't it?"

Mann's smile came up slowly and beautifully, like the sun rising from the desert. "Trouble was that while I went there to do a little fishing, the guy I wanted to see was shooting." Before she had a chance to reply, he put on his hat solemnly, took my arm, and we left.

A CIA courier was waiting at the airport. He'd brought a stage-one interim file on Reid-Kennedy, and another one designated Reid-Ken-

nedy, Inc. It included a computer analysis of twelve years of tax returns—personal and corporate—with more to come. There was also time to feed two dollars into a jovial robot that dispensed cold cheeseburgers in warm cellophane and hot, watery coffee in dark brown plastic cups. Mann wolfed his down and said, "Another one you don't approve of, eh?"

"The way you handled the Reid-Kennedy woman?"

"You think she guessed what we were after, eh?" He grinned and bit into the cheeseburger.

"You should have unbuttoned your jumper and showed her your CIA T-shirt," I told him.

"Crude Yankee wrassling, was it? Not the kind of cricket you play at Lords?"

"It might make them run. Or it might make them destroy the evidence, shut their mouths, and phone the lawyers."

"Or she might not even mention it to her husband," said Mann. "Did you think of that possibility? God, this coffee is terrible."

He crushed the disposable cup with the remains of the coffee still inside it. He lobbed it at the bin so that it hit the swing-top and exploded softly. The wreckage steamed.

"Yes, I thought of that, too," I said.

Our gate number flashed on the indicator. Mann threw away the rest of his cheeseburger, wiped his hands on a paper towel, and tossed that after it. "You want a mint?" he said, reaching into his vest pocket for his indigestion tablets.

"I'm getting too old for those formal dinners," I said.

"I don't even know why you're heading north," said Mann. "You should just stay here with all the senior citizens."

On the plane we had the first-class section to ourselves. I settled down with the Reid-Kennedy, Incorporated, file.

The dossier was an American success story: local boy makes good by inheriting his father's factory. The sort of electronic equipment the Reid-Kennedy laboratories designed and made was not secret; it was on sale to anyone who wanted to buy. Included in the dossier were some beautifully printed booklets that were sent to any potential purchaser, at home or abroad. I read the advertising carefully.

Telephone conversations—and a lot of other communication material—can be all jumbled together. One single wire can carry a hundred or more conversations simultaneously, providing that you have the "time division multiplex switch" that Reid-Kennedy's laboratories designed (or, the brochure omitted to say, one from some rival manufacturer). These switches chopped the continuous transmissions into pieces one ten-thousandth of a second long, and then reassembled the pieces so that the hu-



man ear could not tell that it was receiving only "tiny samples" of the voice at the other end.

Most of Reid-Kennedy's profits came from telephone users, and lately from the commercial satellites that on a twenty-four-hour orbit 22,300 miles away from Earth appear stationary. Hovering somewhere over Labrador, such satellites link London with Los Angeles. But the big breakthrough, when it came, would be from a "time-division multiplex switch" that could pack together the wider bands of frequencies that you need in order to transmit tv pictures. Phone users will endure a human voice that sounds like Donald Duck inside a biscuit tin, but a flawed tv picture is useless. R. K., Inc., was working on it, promised the brochure.

"But no military secrets," said Mann.

"Not that I can see," I said.

"Does a guy with this kind of gravy moonlight as a hit man?" Mann held the photocopy at arm's length, as if trying to discern something new there. "Does he?"

"I left the Ouija board in my other pants."

"A man running a multimillion dollar corporation takes a weekend in Europe in order to kill that family in Drogheada?"

"Don't go limp on me," I said.

"A jury will need a lot of proof—better than an Irish hitchhiker recognizing a rented car."

"But you agree Reid-Kennedy must be the one who killed those people in Ireland?"

"You just bet your ass," said Mann.

"You've a wonderful way with words, Major."

Chapter Fourteen

The need for medical care, security, and isolation were all met by moving the Bekuvs to the Commodore Perry U.S. Navy Psychiatric Hospital, half an hour's drive out of Newport News, Virginia. There had been a hospital there before the word "psychiatry" was invented. It was an ugly sprawl of buildings on a desolate site near the water. The north wing was still used as a naval hospital, but all mentally disturbed sailors had been moved out of the inner compound that had been built to hold them. That was now a high-security area, used by the CIA for debriefing American agents, interrogating enemy agents, and sometimes for deciding which were which.

A navy car met us at the airport. It came complete with uniformed driver and an "Official Use Only" sign stenciled on the door. Mann fumed and at first refused to get into the car. "Did you bring party hats and whistles, sailor?"

"There are no plain cars in the pool, sir," said the driver. He was an elderly man with Second World War ribbons on his chest.

"Well, maybe we'll take a cab," said Mann.

With commendable restraint, the sailor refrained from telling Mann that standing outside an airport building arguing with a uniformed sailor was more conspicuous than riding away in an official car. Instead, he nodded solemnly and said, "The trouble with taking a cab is that they won't let you through the main gate without one of these stickers on the windshield. So you'd have to walk right through the hospital to the inner compound—it's about a mile."

"Okay, smart ass," said Mann. "Just as long as you don't use the flashing light and siren." He got into the car. It didn't have a flashing light, and probably didn't have a siren either.

"You're a lousy loser," I told him quietly as I got in beside him.

"Yeah," agreed Mann. "Well, I don't get as much practice as you do."

We watched the scenery go past. Mann put his document case on his knees as if he were about to do some paperwork, but then put it down again unopened. "I should never have agreed to them putting the Bekuvs into this nuthouse."

"Calm down," I said. "You overreact."

"How the hell do you know if I overreact—you don't even know what I'm reacting to."

I decided to let him cool down, but I suppose he wanted to get it off his chest.

"We're losing control of this operation," he said.

"Speaking personally," I told him, "I never had control of it—you did."

"You know what I mean," he said. "I've got these Washington know-it-alls crawling all over me like bugs. You know what the PAD is?"

"Yes, I know," I said. The Psychological Advisory Directorate was a cozy assembly of unemployed head-shrinkers who knew how to avoid every mistake that the CIA ever made but unfortunately didn't tell anyone until afterward. "Twenty-twenty hindsight" Mann had said after one of their cryptic admonishments.

"PAD are moving in on Mrs. Bekuv. They're taking her down to the farm near Petersburg, and Red Bancroft will be with her." He reached into his vest, found some Bufferin tablets, and swallowed two without water. "Headache," he said. I knew it was that sort of headache that comes through official channels from Washington.

"Red Bancroft," I said. I looked at him, waiting for some explanation.

"Red Bancroft works for the Department—did you guess that?"

"No, I didn't guess that," I said. "And I don't remember any prompting from the studio audience."

"Now don't get mad," he said. "I'm disobeying orders by telling you. I'm breaking orders because you're a buddy, and I don't want you caught in the mangle."

"Why the hell didn't she tell me herself?" I said.

"Bessie and I have known her a long time," said Mann. "She's had a lot of lousy breaks, and it's left her in a tangle—know what I mean?"

"No."

He leaned forward and gripped my arm. "Stay loose. She's a nice girl, and I'd like to see her settle down—but not with you."

"Thanks."

"For your sake," he added hurriedly. "She's a tough girl. She's a damned good operative, and she can look after herself. Two years back she infiltrated a Marxist group in Montreal. She nearly got herself killed—she was hospitalized for three months—but she put three conspirators in the hospital, too, and another five in jail. This is a very special kind of girl—and I love her dearly—but do yourself a favor: move on."

"She's working for PAD and going down to the farm with Mrs. Bekuv?"

"Right," said Mann. The car slowed down as we got to the main entrance of the Naval Hospital. A sentry checked our identity cards and waved us through to the inner compound, where another sentry checked them all over again.

The car stopped outside the eight-story building that had been designed to house violent patients. The faded signs and steel shutters still could be seen on the lower floors. Inside there would be that depressing institutional look to it: hard floors, a lack of ornaments, doors that opened automatically and hissed like Japanese slaves, too much light, and far too many bright red fire extinguishers. Even the art reproductions on the walls would have been chosen to dull the senses.

"I get out here," said Mann. "I'm in the duty surgeon's accommodations, top floor. You're in the VIP building."

I looked at him without bothering to conceal my anger. We had exchanged harsher words before, but we'd never come close to a ding-dong row. I said, "Which building is Miss Bancroft in?"

"I don't know," said Mann.

"Then I shall have to phone the gate."

"She left this morning," said Mann. "They moved Mrs. Bekuv, and Red went with her."

My bad temper worsened. "You deliberately moved her so that I wouldn't get a chance to talk with her."

"Are you telling me I should schedule this caper to fit in with your private life?"

I didn't answer.

Mann said, "I'll see you over here about nine in the morning. Maybe by that time you'll be in a mood to understand."

"I understand already," I said. "I understand only too well. The PAD are moving in on you. And you are determined to put Professor Bekuv through the wringer and get results before the PAD gets anything out of his wife. Yes, I understand. Red Bancroft is attached to PAD, and you don't like the idea of me being that close to your opposition. You don't trust me, Major. Well, you've heard of self-fulfilling prophecies, haven't you?"

"Good night," said Mann. He got out and closed the door.

I rolled the window down. "Do I get an answer?"

"Yes. Grow up," said Mann. He buttoned his coat and put on the silly-looking tweed hat, with the brim turned down front and back. "And stay away from Miss Bancroft—and that is an order."

I watched him as he marched into the lighted entrance. The two sets of glass doors opened automatically, but beyond them I could see the newly painted graticule of prison bars and an armored booth for the doorman.

They'd provided me with the comparative luxury of a four-room house normally occupied by a U.S. Navy captain, who was away on detachment to CINCLANT for a couple of months. His books and his furniture were still there. I had no doubt that this was the accommodation intended for Mann, until he swooped it for the cramped duty surgeon's rooms that were so close to Bekuv.

I was tired, very tired. I thanked God for America, where even the poorhouse probably has heated bathrooms. I opened my traveling bag and dumped my dirty clothes into the laundry basket. Then I undressed and stepped into the shower. I stood there a long time, letting the hot water hammer at my muscles, and finished with water cold enough to make my teeth chatter. I grabbed the towel from the warm rack and wrapped it around myself before going into the kitchen. I set up a cup and saucer, filled the electric kettle and plugged it in. While I waited for it to boil, I admired the captain's library. There were a lot of high-powered psychiatry books, papers, and bound volumes. There were war memoirs, too, a *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, and Dickens, and Balzac, and a collection of very old volumes about chemistry.

I walked into the bedroom. It was a large room with a double bed. On one side of the room there were large wardrobes, the doors entirely cov-

ered by tinted glass. Standing in front of the mirror was a tall, slim woman; she was naked except for a triangular frill of black silk. It was Red Bancroft, and she smiled, pleased that her joke had worked so well. Her smile became a different sort of smile as she watched me examining her nakedness. She was beautiful. I began to tell her so, but she came toward me and put her fingers to my lips. With the other hand she loosened the damp towel from my waist and let it drop to the floor. She flinched when we embraced and she felt the cold water against her skin. My wet hair cascaded droplets over her face. We kissed, and she tightened her arms around me. I could not resist a glance at our reflection as we began our love-making.

We had hardly started when there was a shrill scream. Red struggled under me, but I held her. "It's the kettle," I said. "It's sure to have a safety switch." She sank back across the bed. And in due time there was the reassuring plop of the kettle's switch.

We exchanged no words, apart from incoherent cries and murmurs, and afterward, when she got out of bed, I pulled the blanket over my shoulders and settled my head into the down pillows. I was almost asleep by the time she reappeared. I was amazed to see her fully dressed.

"What's going on?" I said.

She sat down on the bed and looked at me as if seeing me for the first time. "I must go."

"Go where?"

She looked at her watch. "We are moving Mrs. Bekuv. I must be ready."

"Nice timing," I said.

"Don't be bitter."

"Do you have to go?"

"Do you have to do the job you do?" she retorted. "This is my job, and I'm damned good at it, so don't treat me like the little woman."

"So why not tell me about your job?"

"Did you tell me about yours? No, you didn't, because you're a secret agent—"

"What's this all about?" I said. I sat up.

She stretched out her hand and touched my shoulder. "I'm telling you good-bye," she said. She shivered as if in apprehension.

"Good-bye for now, you mean?"

"I mean good-bye good-bye."

"Just for the record," I said. "Am I using the wrong brand of tooth-paste?"

"Nothing personal, my darling. For a time you really had me going."

Bessie was asking me how many kids we were going to have, and I found myself looking at recipe books and baby carriages."

I looked at her, trying to decide what could account for this resolute farewell.

"Don't try to puzzle it out, darling," she said, and leaned over and gave me a sisterly kiss on the forehead. "I planned it that way."

"Only a woman would plan to say good-bye in bed."

"Don't believe it, baby. I've had the kiss-off that way more times than I care to remember." She got to her feet, and opened the wardrobe to get her suede coat. For a moment I thought someone was standing inside the wardrobe, but there were only two naval captain's uniforms in cleaner's transparent covers. She put her coat on carefully, watching herself in the mirror as she buttoned it.

I got out of bed and pulled on one of the captain's dressing gowns. It was a little too short for me, but at the time I didn't care. Red went into the living room and picked up a large suitcase, opened the front door, and placed it outside. She turned back to me. "Look, darling, forget what I said just now—let's not part this way."

"Why don't you tell me what this is all about?"

"There isn't time."

"I'll make time."

"And I'm too mixed up to know myself. Let me take a rain check."

"On a love affair?" I said.

"Please."

Before I could answer, there were voices at the door, and two men barged in. They were a tough-looking couple, with longish hair and denim jackets. But the hair was recently washed and carefully parted, and the denims were cleaned and pressed, so that the men looked like the sort of college lecturers who smoke pot.

"Scram," I told them.

They didn't spare me more than a glance. To Red Bancroft one of them said, "Is that your only bag?"

She pointed to another large case and then turned to me. "I've got to go."

"Who are these creeps?"

One of the men turned to me and said, "You sit down and shut up, and you won't get hurt."

"I see," I said. I said it as passively as I could and waited until he bent down to pick up Red's case before lifting the back of his jacket with one hand, while the other hand snatched the pistol from the holster he wore on his belt. "Now let's try all over again," I said, as he dropped the case and swung around at me. I'd already stepped far enough back to avoid any such counteraction, and while he was still off balance I stepped for-



ward and kicked the side of his knee, hard enough to make him yell. Without waiting to see him massaging the graze, I steered the Magnum to where the other one was standing. Even before I said anything he raised his hands. "High," I told him. "Keep those hands very, very high."

I went around the back of him and found his gun, too. "You've got to be quicker than that if you want to keep your gun that far around your belt," I told them. "Now let's see who you are."

"You know who we are," said the first one. "What do you think we're doing in this security area?"

"Keep your hands in the air, fatty," I said, "or I'll come over there and give you a bruise in the other leg."

"We're CIA," said the second man. "We're moving Mrs. Bekuv."

"Well, why didn't you say so?" I said sarcastically. "And then I would have known that I was being threatened by the good guys."

He didn't answer.

"Let's have your Social Security cards," I said. CIA men rarely carry identification papers, but they are assigned a special batch of Social Security numbers that enable them to be identified by fellow operatives, and also by the Social Security computer if they are found floating in the harbor.

Reluctantly the two men reached for their wallets. They did it one at a time, and very, very slowly. All this time Red watched the fiasco, but said nothing. Nor did the expression on her face give an indication of her feelings, until she said, "All right, children, you've all had your fun. Now let's get on with the job."

"Okay," I said. I threw the Magnum back to its owner. His catch was so clumsy that he bared a knuckle on it. I noticed that he pulled the holster around to the front before putting the pistol back into it. "Now beat it while I say good night to the lady."

They picked up the wallets from the table where I'd left them, walked over to the door and left, closing it behind them. There was the sudden noise of a helicopter engine. Red went across to the window. Over her shoulder I could see some lights and activity, and then I heard the helicopter's rotors turning as the clutch was engaged.

Red said, "Mrs. Bekuv swims in the big indoor pool very morning before breakfast. This morning we'll put her in the chopper and be down in Petersburg, Florida, before it's time for brunch." She turned away from the window and put one arm around my waist and hugged me. "Are you going to give me a second chance?" she asked.

I kissed her. She picked up her case and went to the door. I heard the voices of the two men and then the sound of a car engine. Soon after that the helicopter roared and lifted up over the rooftops. I still hadn't answered her.

Chapter Fifteen

Mann gave Mrs. Bekuv no time to say good-bye to her husband: that was all part of his scheme. We sat in Mann's little office—originally intended for the duty nurse—and heard Andrei Bekuv walk down the corridor, calling his wife's name.

Mann sat hunched over a desk in the corner, watching the dark storm clouds come racing in from the Atlantic. The rain beat upon the windows, and the morning was so dark that Mann needed the desk light in order to read. He looked at me and winked as Bekuv came back.

"Here we go," said Mann softly.

Bekuv was silhouetted against the brightness of the corridor lighting as he opened the door and looked in on us.

"Where is my wife, Major Mann? She wasn't at breakfast, and she's not swimming. Do you know where she has gone?"

"We've moved her to Baltimore," said Mann without looking up from the papers he held under the desk light.

"When? When was this?" said Bekuv. He was jolted, and he scowled and looked at his watch. Bekuv was a creature of habit. Breakfast at seven, coffee at ten, a light lunch at one, dinner at seven thirty, in time for him to finish his meal and be in the armchair, with hi-fi tuned, ready for the evening concert. He insisted that the supply of vitamins in his medicine cabinet be replenished without his having to ask for them, and he liked decaffeinated coffee, served demitasse, in the evening, with fresh cream. And he liked to know where to find his wife.

"When?" repeated Bekuv.

"Oh, some time early this morning." Mann turned the desk clock around to see it better. There was a barometer fitted into it, and Mann tapped that. "They should be there by now. Do you want to phone her?"

"Yes," said Bekuv.

Mann picked up the phone and went through a pantomime of asking for a number in Baltimore. He thanked someone at the other end. And then hung up. "Seems like we can't get through to Baltimore from here."

"Why not?"

"I didn't think to ask. Do you want me to call the operator again?"

Bekuv came into the room and sat down. "What game are you playing now, Major Mann?"

"I might ask you the same question, Professor Bekuv," said Mann. From the clutter of papers and objects on the desk in front of him, he

selected a large brown envelope. It contained something lumpy. He passed the envelope to Bekuv. "Take a look at that, for example."

Bekuv hesitated.

"Go ahead, take a look at it."

Bekuv handled the envelope as if it might explode. I wondered afterward if he had guessed what was inside it. If he did, he was in no hurry to see it again. Finally, he ripped the edge of the envelope far enough to slide the contents out. There was a transparent plastic evidence bag with some type-written labels attached to it. Inside the bag there was a switchblade knife.

"The police sent that over here yesterday afternoon, Professor Bekuv. It was found near the steps of the church, during a search made during the early hours of Christmas morning. You remember Christmas morning?"

"It's the one used to wound my wife," said Bekuv. He didn't open the bag. He dropped it back into the envelope as if it might carry traces of some fatal contagion. He tried to pass the envelope back to Mann, but the Major would not accept it from him.

"That's right," said Mann.

"What's it supposed to mean?" Bekuv demanded.

"Supposed to mean?" said Mann. "I'm glad you said 'supposed to mean,' because there's often a world of difference between what things mean and what they are supposed to mean. For instance," said Mann, "that's the knife that caused your wife's wounds. Whether she was trying to knife you with it, or preventing you from knifing her with it, or whether you were both trying to cut each other, or even turn it on yourselves, I wouldn't be too sure."

"A man assaulted us," said Bekuv.

"Yes, sure that's the other theory, isn't it? Didn't I mention that one? Forgive me."

Bekuv looked at his watch. There was no way of telling if he was thinking about his wife arriving in Baltimore, about his ten o'clock coffee or simply indulging in displacement activity that helped him gather his wits.

Mann picked up some papers from his desk, read for a moment or two and then said, "Those gloves your wife was wearing—a shop on Fifth Avenue sells them for twenty-eight dollars a pair and advertises them as real kid, but in fact they make them from the skin of sheep. Now, that's the kind of dishonesty I hate. How about you, Professor?"

The professor did not commit himself: he grunted.

Mann said, "Sheepskin. To make a pair of gloves like that, the tanning process removes the epidermal layer"—Mann was reading from the paper—"to expose the corium minor, or grain layer. It is the nature of this grain layer that enables a scientist to distinguish the age, sex, and species of animal from which the skin originated."

Bekuv said, "I'm not interested."

"Hold on, Professor. I'm not through yet. It gets better. Did you know that the grain pattern from any piece of animal skin is as individual to that animal as a fingerprint is to one individual man?"

"What of it?"

"I'll tell you what of it," said Mann. He put the papers back on his desk, turned to Bekuv, and smiled. "The police forensic lab took leather prints off that knife. They say it was wielded by your bride. They say her Fifth Avenue gloves left prints on that knife as clear and as evidential as if she'd used her bare hands." Mann picked up another evidence bag which contained the gloves, and dropped it back onto the desk again. "The police say your wife knifed herself, Professor. And they say they can prove it."

Bekuv looked away.

"Anyway," said Mann, breathing a sigh. "The fact of the matter is that the investigation is closing as far as you are concerned. My people have lost interest in you—you've cost the American taxpayer too much money already. You'll be allowed to live wherever you like—within reason—but you'll have to find a place for yourself. The same goes for getting a job. No chair at NYU. You'll have to read the ads in the papers. For the time being the two of you are being kept separate, but that's for your own protection. My people say that there will be more chance of your KGB squads killing you if you're together. Next year, of course, the danger will have subsided a little. By then there will probably be no objection to your living under the same roof again."

"Now wait a minute," said Bekuv.

"Sorry it had to go this way, Professor. As your wife understood so well, this could have been a big one for us." He smiled to show that he held no ill feelings. "You'll be able to keep the hi-fi and the recordings and stuff, of course." He picked up papers from his desk and tapped them, edge down on the desk to tidy them.

It was only then that Bekuv seemed to become aware of my presence in the dark corner of the office. He turned to me. "Is Miss Bancroft with my wife?" he asked.

"That's right," I said. "She'll be with her for a little while."

"How long?" he said. "I don't want my wife to be with Miss Bancroft."

"No one tells me anything, Professor," I said.

Mann said, "Your wife wanted Miss Bancroft along for company."

Bekuv nodded. Mann had been making a great play of rummaging around his desk, and as Bekuv turned to leave, he suddenly produced a flimsy sheet of paper, waved it, and said, "Oh, this is something for you, Professor. It's a copy of a letter to your wife."

He passed it to him. It was a carbon copy of a letter. There were a

couple of official rubber stamps on it, and a paper clip. Bekuv took it without a word and moved over to the window to read it by the gray light of morning. He read it aloud in his careful English:

"Dear Mrs. Bekuv, This is to confirm our conversation of yesterday. As promised, I have applied for the necessary documents in connection with your immigration and naturalization. You will appreciate that although you have been admitted to the U.S.A. under the special provisions granted to certain government agencies, your continued stay and permission to take up gainful employment must remain subject to the usual procedures. Yours truly . . ."

"Just a lot of legal evasions and double-talk," pronounced Bekuv when he finished reading.

"I quite agree," said Mann, who had invented the letter and typed it.

Bekuv put the copy back on Mann's desk. He had been close to the security business long enough to understand such a message.

"You're going to send us back to Russia?" said Bekuv. He walked across the room and opened the door a fraction, so that there was a bar of blue fluorescent light cutting him into two halves. "Either we do exactly as you demand, or you will send us back to them."

Mann didn't answer, but he was watching Bekuv's every move.

"This letter is just the beginning," said Bekuv. "It is typical of you, Major Mann. You'll let your official government departments carry out the execution for you. Then you will be able to say you had no hand in it."

"You've got it a little bit wrong, haven't you, Professor? The U.S. immigration Service has no executioners on its payroll. These executions you want to make me responsible for will be carried out after you return. They'll be carried out by your little old KGB comrades. Remember the KGB, Professor? Those wonderful people who gave you the Gulag Archipelago."

"You have never lived in the Soviet Union, or you would know how little choice a man has. The KGB ordered me to work for them—I did not volunteer to do so."

"You're breaking my heart, Professor."

Bekuv stood in the doorway, with the door to the corridor open just an inch or two. Perhaps he wanted to let enough light into the room to be able to see the expressions on our faces.

"Is that all you have to say, Major Mann?"

"I can't think of anything else, Professor—except maybe farewell."

Bekuv stood there a long time. "I should have told you about the place in Ireland . . . I should have told you earlier."

"You jerk," said Mann. "Three people died."

"I was with the trade delegation in London," said Bekuv. "It was years

ago. I had to meet a man from Dublin. I met him only once. It was at Waterloo Station in London. He had some documents. We used the copying machine at the station."

"The maser program?"

"We were falling behind," said Bekuv. "This man brought drawings and calculations."

Mann pulled the desk light so that it shone on a bright blue blotter. Under the light he arranged a row of photos. One of them was a passport picture of Reid-Kennedy. "Do you want to come here a moment, Professor?" Mann's voice was precise and quiet, like that of a terrified parent coaxing a small child away from an electrified fence.

"He wasn't a scientist," said Bekuv, "but he understood the calculations." He walked over to the desk and looked at the photos, arranged neatly, like winning tricks in a bridge game. Mann held his breath until Bekuv placed a finger on the face of Reid-Kennedy.

Mann shuffled the pictures together without commenting on Bekuv's choice. "And the KGB was running the operation?"

"Entirely," said Bekuv. "When the maser program was given a shortened development target, the KGB became responsible. I'd been reporting to the KGB since my time at the university, and I was a senior man in the maser programme. It was natural that the KGB chose me. When the scientific material started to arrive from America, the KGB told me that I would get it first and that the department would not be notified."

"That gave you a chance to shine," said Mann.

"It was the way the KGB always did such things. They wanted their own people promoted, and so they gave their own men the best of the foreign intelligence material."

"And no one suspected? No one suspected when you went into the lab the next morning and shouted eureka?"

"It would have been a reckless fool who voiced such suspicions," said Bekuv.

"Hell," said Mann sourly, "and you corrupt guys have the nerve to criticize us."

Bekuv didn't reply. The telephone rang. Mann picked it up and grunted into it for a minute or two before saying goodbye.

"Why don't you take a coffee break, Professor," said Mann.

"I hope I've been of help," said Bekuv.

"Like a good citizen," said Mann.

"I will be happier," Bekuv said, "when I can read what those duties are, on the back of a U.S. passport." He didn't smile.

"We're going to get along just fine, Professor," said Mann.

Neither Mann nor I spoke until we heard Bekuv go into his room and

switch on the radio. Even then we observed all the usual precautions for not being overheard.

"It was her all the time," said Mann. "It was Mrs. Beckuv. We had it the wrong way around. We thought he was clamping up."

"Without his wife," I said, "he'll be singing his way through the hit parade by the weekend."

"Let's hope so," said Mann. He went over to the lightswitch and put the lights on. They were fluorescent tubes, and they flicked a dozen times before filling the room with light. Mann searched the drawers of his desk before finding the box of cigars his wife had given him for Christmas. "Makes you wonder what kind of hold she had over him," said Mann. He lit the cigar and offered the box to me. Half the contents had already been smoked. I declined.

"Perhaps he loves her," I said. "Perhaps it's one of those happy marriages you never read about."

"I hate those two Russian gold bricks," said Mann.

"Having his wife join him was the worst thing that happened to this investigation," I said.

"Right," agreed Mann. "Just a little more help like that from Gerry Hart, and I fall down dead."

I looked at my watch. "If there's nothing else, I've got a call booked to London."

Mann said, "And it looks like another trip to Florida tomorrow."

"Oh, no!"

"That phone call just now—the CIA duty officer at Miami airport. Reid-Kennedy just got off the London direct flight. His chauffeur met him with the Rolls—looks like his old lady was expecting him."

"What time do we leave?"

"Give the Reid-Kennedys a little time to talk together," said Mann. "What about the 6:00 A.M. plane tomorrow morning? Leave here at four-thirty."

Chapter Sixteen

It wasn't the same when we went back; it never is. The gardener was having trouble with the sprinklers, one of the cars had scraped the fencing and taken away a section of bougainvillaea. Crabgrass was in the lawn, the humidity was high, and there was haze over the sun.

"Mr. and Mrs. Reid-Kennedy are not at home," said the Spanish lady slowly and firmly and for the third time.

"But that's not what we were asking," explained Mann patiently. "Are they in? Are they in?"

I suppose even the ladies who guard rich people's doors learn to recognize the ones who can't be stopped. She let Mann push her to one side, but she failed to look as if she liked it.

"You know we're cops," said Mann. "Let's not fool about, shall we?"

"They are not here," said the woman sullenly.

He looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. He ran his fingers up his cheeks as though he were trying to force himself to smile. "Listen, did I ever tell you that I moonlight for the Immigration Service?" he said. "You don't want us to run all through the house, checking out whether all these people have got permission to work in Florida. You don't want that, do you?"

The lady went as pale as an illegal Mexican immigrant without working papers can, and then shut the door gently behind us.

"Now, where are they?"

"On the *Sara Lee*," said the woman pointing to the big cabin cruiser that was moored to the jetty at the end of the enormous garden.

"*Sara Lee!*" said Mann very respectfully. "And there's me been calling it the *Aunt Jemima* all this time." He smiled at her, and she forced a smile back at him. "Well, you just make sure no one leaves the house, Duchess, or . . ."

We walked through the breakfast room. It faced the lawn and the water. The remains of breakfast were still on the white marble table. There were half a dozen different kinds of bread, a couple of uneaten boiled eggs, and a silver dish loaded with crisp bacon. Mann picked up a piece of bacon and ate it. "Still warm," he said. "They must be here." He went out on the balcony and looked at the boat. There was no sign that it was about to depart. In the distance, across the water, I could see the Goodyear blimp glinting silver against the clear blue sky.

"What the hell would they be doing down there in that boat?" muttered Mann. "They aren't the kind of couple who enjoy decoking diesels together."

I said, "If you've got a dozen servants in the house, I guess you need a long garden and a moored boat to go and have an argument."

I was opening the screen door that separated the polished oak balcony from the raked gravel back drive, when I heard a woman shout. Then I saw Mrs. Reid-Kennedy. She had already come down the gangway from the boat and was hurrying toward us across the lawn. She was shouting.

"Hey there, what do you want? What do you want?" She almost tripped. She was wearing the same sort of silk lounging pajamas that we'd

seen her wearing last time, except that these were pale green, like the silk scarf she had tied around her head. But a lot of that Southern belle had disappeared. That you-all eyelash fluttering and help-yourself-to-the-can-died-yams gesturing had now been replaced by a nasal tone and shrillness that was sauerbraten, *schweinkotelett*, and sour cream, and all the way from Eighty-Second Street.

She was speechless when she reached us. She put a hand on her chest while she caught up on her breathing.

"You shouldn't run like that, Mrs. Reid-Kennedy," said Mann. "A woman of your age could do herself a permanent injury running across the lawn like that."

"You will have to come back," she said. "Come back another day. Any day you like. Phone me and we'll fix it."

"Unless of course, the kind of injury that you might do yourself by not running across the lawn is even more permanent. Then of course, it would make sense."

"We'll talk in the house," she said. "We'll have coffee."

"That's mighty civil of you, ma'am," said Mann. "That's right hospitable of you." He touched his hat at the end of the peak. "But I think I'm going to just mosey down to the levee there and see if I recognize anyone aboard the paddle-steamer. You see, I've always been a gambling man."

"You're too late, Major Mann," she said. Her voice was neither frightened nor boastful. She said it as if she was stating a fact that could not be argued, like the number of kilograms in a ton, or the weight of a cubic meter of water.

"You had better tell us all about it, Mrs. Reid-Kennedy." His voice was gentle, and he took her arm to support her weight.

"If I talk to you, will you promise that it is in confidence? Will you promise not to do anything—at least for the time being?"

"Well, I couldn't promise that, Mrs. Reid-Kennedy. No one could. I mean, suppose you told us about a plot to assassinate the President of the United States. You think we could listen to you and keep a promise about doing nothing?"

"My husband was a good man, Major." She looked up into Mann's face. "I mean, Douglas was—Mr. Reid-Kennedy."

"I know that's who you mean," said Mann. "Go on."

"He's in the boat," she said. She didn't turn around far enough to see the twelve-ton cruiser, but she pointed vaguely at the waterfront. "Douglas went down to the boat about half an hour ago. I thought something was wrong, so after the bacon was almost cold—Douglas loves bacon when it's crisp and warm but he never eats it when it's cold . . ."

"Okay, Mrs. Reid-Kennedy." Mann patted her arm.

"And bacon is so expensive nowadays. The servants could have it, of course, but none of them eats it either."

"Go on, about Douglas."

"Well, that's all," she said. "I found him on the boat, just now. He's shot himself. He's lying there in the engine room . . . the top of his head . . . I don't know who will clear it up. There's blood everywhere. Will the police know someone who will do it? I couldn't go down there again."

"No need, Mrs. Reid-Kennedy. No need to go down there again. My friend will take a look in the boat just to make sure that there are no valves open, or anything like that. While you and I go up to the house and get you a stiff brandy."

"Do you think I should, Major? It's not even eleven-thirty yet."

"I think you need one," said Mann firmly.

She shivered. "My, but it's turned cold suddenly," she said.

"Yes it has," agreed Mann, trying to look suddenly cold.

"It's telling the servants that's the real trouble," she confided.

"Don't worry about that," said Mann briskly. "My friend will do that. He's British; they're terribly, terribly good at speaking to servants."

Many American soldiers kept their guns after the war. It was bad luck for the woman who found him that one-time Master Sergeant Douglas Reid-Kennedy, U.S. Army Military Police, had been equipped with the M 1911 automatic pistol. Even if you can't take it with you, a .45-inch bullet still makes an expensive way to blow your head apart.

He was a big man, and it was easy to imagine him as a military cop, in white helmet liner, swinging a stick. Now his body was twisted, face up, his arms spread as if to keep himself from falling into the oily bilges between the beautifully maintained twin diesels where he now lay sprawled. The floral-patterned Hawaiian shirt was open to reveal a tanned, hairy chest. He wore smart canvas shoes with the yachtsman's grip sole, and around his tailored shorts there was an ancient leather belt with a sailor's clasp knife hanging from it.

The back of his skull had exploded, so that there were blood, brain, and bone fragments everywhere, but most of his jaw was still there, complete with enough teeth to get a positive identification from his dental records. He must have been standing in the lounge at the fatal moment, with one hand on the stair rail and the pistol in his mouth. The force of it had thrown him down the steps into the engine-room. I suppose he'd been taking a last look at the mansion and the gardens, and perhaps at his wife breakfasting. I looked at the jetty and the lie of the land and tried to stop thinking of the different ways I could have come and killed him unobserved.

I went to the forward end and sorted through the radar and depth-sounding gear. It was all very new, and there were screw holes and paint lines to show where previous models had once been. Owning the most modern electronics had now become more prestigious for a yachtsman than having a few extra feet of hull or even a uniformed crew, providing, of course, there was a distinctive aerial for it somewhere in view.

Douglas Reid-Kennedy had left his zipper jacket draped over the throttles. It was blue nylon, with an anchor design and the word "Captain" embroidered on the chest. And it had two special oilskin pockets, in case you were the sort of captain who fell overboard with the caviar in your pocket. In one of the pockets there was a briar pipe with a metal wind guard and a plastic tobacco pouch with a Playboy bunny on it. In the other pocket there was a wallet containing credit cards, yacht-club membership cards, a weather forecast from the yacht-club dated the same day, a notebook with some scribbled notes, including radio wavelengths, and a bunch of keys.

Keys can be of many different shapes and sizes, from the large ones that wine stewards wear round their necks in pretentious restaurants to the tiny slivers of serrated tin that are supplied with suitcases. The keys from Douglas Reid-Kennedy's yachting jacket were very serious keys. They were small, circular-sectioned keys, made from hard, bronzed metal, each with a number but without a manufacturer's name, so that only the owner knew where to apply for a replacement. It was one of these keys that fitted into the writing desk in the boat's large, carpeted lounge.

I sat down at the desk and went through the contents carefully, but Reid-Kennedy wasn't the sort of man who was likely to leave incriminating evidence in his desk. There was a selection of papers that one might need for a short voyage. There were photostats of the insurance, and several licenses and fishing permits. In a small and rather battered leather frame there was the sepia-colored photograph that Mann had remarked on during our previous visit. It was a glimpse of a world of long ago. Reid-Kennedy's father, dressed in a dark suit, with a gold pin through his tie, sat in front of a photographer's painted backdrop. One wrinkled hand rested upon the shoulder of a smiling child dressed in lederhosen. I took the photograph from its frame. It was mounted on a stiff card that bore the flamboyant signature and address of a photo studio in New York City. It had the superb definition of a contact print—the sort of quality that disappeared with the coming of miniature cameras and high-speed films.

I looked at the photo for a long time. The informality of the child's clothes could not conceal the care and attention that had preceded this visit to the photographer. Nor could the stern expression on the face of the man conceal an immense pride in his handsome son. And yet the shutter had caught a moment of tension in the boy's face as he stiffened

in the embrace of his autocratic father. There was an element of tragedy in the gulf between them, and I wondered why this was the picture that the son had carried in his personal baggage for so many years.

There was a bookshelf above the desk. I flipped through the usual array of books about knots and flags and "vessels running free giving way to vessels that are close-hauled." There was a visitors' book, too: a beautiful leather-bound volume, kept in neat handwriting and dutifully signed by the Reid-Kennedys' guests. Some of the pages had been roughly torn from it, and I noted those dates.

Then I replaced everything I'd moved and wiped the things I'd touched, and walked back to the house, where Mrs. Reid-Kennedy was nursing a triple brandy and Mann was pouring himself a soda water on the rocks.

"I told Douglas," she said.

"Told him what?" Mann asked.

"Hello," she said to me. "Told him not to go to Europe this time."

"Why'd you tell him that?"

"I want to phone my lawyer. You've got no right to stop me."

"No sense in phoning your lawyer," said Mann. While she was looking at the phone, he caught my eye. I gave him the least amount of nod I could manage.

"Did you wipe your feet?" she asked me suddenly.

"Yes," I said.

"When the sprinklers are on, the grass marks tread into the carpet," she said. It was a tired voice that had explained that problem many times before.

"I know," I said. I smiled. Perhaps that was a mistake.

"Maybe you could talk to your friend about coming back tomorrow or the next day," she suggested to me. "I don't want to offend you, but a couple of days to recover would be worth so much to me." I didn't answer, and Mann didn't say anything either.

"I'll phone my lawyer," she said. She opened her handbag. It was made from a couple of yards of the Bayeaux tapestry, and had gold handles and a leather strap that went over the shoulder. She searched through it to find a plastic smile, but finally she closed the bag with a lot of sighs and tut-tutting. "I'll phone the yacht club. The people there will know a good lawyer."

"Mrs. Reid-Kennedy," said Mann, "a real good lawyer might be able to reduce the fifty-year sentence you are liable to get by ten years. But I have the kind of authority that could leave you out of this investigation altogether."

She misinterpreted Mann's offer. I suppose rich people have to develop sharp ears for subtle offers of corruption. She said, "A couple of days to

recover from"—she lifted a limp hand—"all this would be worth anything to me. Let me send you away with some little gift for your wives. I have lovely things in the house—porcelain and gold, and all kinds of little things. Your wife would probably love some little treasure like that to add to her collection. Wouldn't she?" She was looking at me now.

"To tell you the truth, Mrs. Reid-Kennedy," I said, "my complete collection of porcelain and gold is here in my dental work. And right now I don't have a wife."

"You mind if I take this jacket off?" said Mann. She didn't answer, but he took it off anyway.

"My husband hated air conditioning. He said he'd rather put up with the heat than have the endless noise of it."

She went over to the small unit in the window and adjusted the controls.

Mann said, "You'd better face up to it, Mrs. Reid-Kennedy. There's not going to be any yacht-club lawyer who can get you off the hook. And if you don't spill it to us right now, there's not going to be any yacht club. Not for you, anyway. Even yacht-club secretaries get sticky about espionage."

She flinched at the word "espionage" but she didn't argue about it. She took a deep draft of her brandy, and when she next spoke her voice was angry. "Ask this one," she said, jabbing a thumb at me. "Ask him—he's been down to the boat, hasn't he? He can see what happened."

"I wish you'd understand that I'm trying to help you," Mann told her in his wanting-to-help-you voice. I recognized that voice because he'd used it on me so often. "Sure, my colleague can tell me a lot of the answers because he's been down to the boat. But if you tell me the same thing, I'll be able to write it down as coming from you. I don't have to tell you how much that could help you, do I?"

"You're a couple of spongers," she said bitterly, but it was the last of her resentment. She sighed. "You ever been to Berlin?" she said.

Probably every life has a moment when it reaches its very lowest. For Marjorie Dean it was Berlin in the summer of 1955. Physically she had completely recovered from a miscarriage, but psychologically she was far from well. And Berlin made her feel rootless. Her fluent German made no difference in the way Berliners regarded her—as a prosperous American of the occupying army. Yet the other Americans could not forget her German-born grandparents and were always reminding her that she should feel at home here. But Berlin was a claustrophobic city—"the island," Berliners called it, a tiny bastion of capitalism in the vast ocean of Soviet Zone Germany. And for her, the wife of a senior intelligence official, there could be no jaunts into Berlin's Eastern Sector, and the long

ride down the Autobahn to the western half of Germany required the special permission of the commanding general.

And she hated this old house. It was far too big for just the two of them; and the Steiners, who looked after the place lived in the guest house at the far end of the overgrown garden, with its dilapidated green houses, dark thickets, and high hedges. It was easy to see why the U.S. army had taken over the house as VIP accommodation, and then as a school for agents learning radio procedures before going over to the East, but it wasn't really suitable for housing Major Dean and his wife. The furniture was still the same as it had been when this was the home of a fashionable Nazi neurologist. The hall still had the paintings of men in Prussian uniforms, and, and, on the piano, there was a vignette photograph of a woman wearing a tiara. The Deans had decided that it must have been the Nazi doctor's mother.

That Thursday, Marjorie Dean stayed in bed until almost noon. Her husband was away for a few days—these trips of his seemed to be getting more and more frequent—and there was nowhere to go until the ladies' bridge tournament at teatime in the Officers' club at Grünwald. But she bathed and put on her favorite linen dress, because at one o'clock the courier would arrive from the barracks.

The coffee that Frau Steiner had brought her was now cold, but Marjorie sipped at it just the same, staring at herself as she applied makeup as slowly as she could to draw out the time. On the bedside table there was a tall pile of novels about romance in America's Deep South. She despised herself for reading such books, but it helped to numb the mind that otherwise would think about the way the marriage was going, her husband's terrible disappointment at the miscarriage, and the all-pervading boredom.

Suddenly from the drawing-room she heard the piano. Someone was playing an old German song about a farmer and a rich merchant. Her father used to sing it to her. She thought her mind was wandering until she remembered that she'd told the Steiners that their daughter could practice on the piano for an hour each morning. She could hear the Steiners talking. It was so hot that the kitchen window was open wide. She could also hear the voice of Steiner's brother-in-law. Marjorie hoped that the brother-in-law wouldn't stay too long. What had started out as only one weekend had now become frequent visits. He claimed to be a master bookbinder from Coburg in Thuringia, but Marjorie's ear for German accents put him in Saxony, now in the Russian Zone. The lilt was unmistakable and slightly ridiculous. As she heard him again through the open window, she could hardly suppress a smile. But as she listened more carefully to what was being said, the smile faded. The argument flared up, and the brother-in-law's voice was threatening and abusive. The

tempo of his speech, the shrill Saxon accent, and the use of much German soldier's slang made the conversation difficult for Marjorie to follow, but suddenly she was afraid. Her intuition told her this visitor was not a relative of the Steiners and that his presence—and his anger—was in some awful way connected with her husband and the secret work he was engaged in. She heard the window being closed, and could hear no more. Marjorie put the matter from her mind. It was too easy to let one's imagination run away in a town like this.

The courier arrived at one o'clock every day, bringing classified paperwork in a locked metal case. He was always punctual. She looked forward to his visit, and she knew that he enjoyed it, too. Usually he would find time to have coffee and a snack. He liked the old-fashioned German *Süssgebäck*, and Frau Steiner was an expert at making a whole range of spice and honey breads, and sometimes more intricate examples, with marzipan inside and a thick coating of toasted almonds. There is a tradition that *Lebkuchen* are exchanged by lovers, and although the relationship between Marjorie Dean and the young master sergeant was proper almost to the point of being staid, there was sometimes an element of tacit flirtation in the choice of these breads and cakes.

On this particular day, Frau Steiner had cooked hazelnut biscuits. There was a plate of them on the kitchen table, covered with a starched napkin. Alongside she had left the coffee and the percolator and a tray set with one of the antique lace tray cloths that were on the inventory of this old house. Usually, she found, Corporal Douglas Reid-Kennedy brought some new snippet of small talk or rumor with him. Sometimes they would talk of their childhood in New York. They had both grown up there, and Douglas insisted that he had noticed the pretty girl who always sat in the same church pew with her parents and brother. Once he had told her all about himself and his family. His father was born in Hamburg. He'd emigrated to the U.S.A. in 1925, after losing everything in the inflation period. His father had changed the name to Reid-Kennedy after meeting some neighbors who didn't like Germans and said so. And yet in the 'thirties it became an advantage to be German. The Jewish man from the U.S. Army procurement office who in 1940 gave them a contract to manufacture radio tuners for B-17 bombers assumed that they were refugees from Hitler.

The army contract brought a change in the fortunes of the Reid-Kennedys. His father rented more space and took on extra workers. From being a four-man radio component subcontractor, he ended the war with a turnover only a few hundred dollars short of two million. Douglas was sent to a swanky private school and acquired a million-dollar accent but was still unable to pass the U.S. Army officers' selection board. He'd been annoyed at the time, but now he had decided they were probably right;

he was too irresponsible and too lazy to be an officer. Look at Major Dean; for instance, he seemed to work twenty-four hours a day and had no time for getting drunk, chasing women, or mixing with the real Berliners.

Mixing with "real Berliners" was one of Douglas's very favorite occupations. It was quite amazing the people he knew; a selection of German aristocracy, a Nazi film star, a professional lion tamer, sculptors and painters, radical playwrights, and ex-Gestapo officers with a price on their heads. And if you were after a new camera or some priceless antiques, Douglas knew where the newly impoverished sold their wares at knock-down prices. Douglas was young and amusing, he was a raconteur, a gambler who could lose a little money without crying too hard. He'd been too young for the war, he didn't give a hoot about politics, and for the army he did only what he had to do to stay out of trouble until the happy, happy day when he went back home. In short, Douglas was as different from Hank Dean as any man could be.

And so it was surprising this day to find a changed Corporal Reid-Kennedy who was serious and downcast. Even his clothes were different. His job with the army permitted him to wear civilian clothes and he liked to dress in the slightly ostentatious style of a newly rich Berliner. He chose silk shirts and soft leather jackets and the sort of handmade hunting clothes that looked good in a silver Porsche. But today he was wearing a cheap blue suit, shiny at the elbows and baggy at the knees. And he wasn't wearing his gold wristwatch, or the fraternity ring, or the heavy gold identity bangle. He looked like one of the Polish refugees who went from door to door offering to do odd jobs in exchange for a meal.

He sat down in the kitchen and left the coffee and hazel-nut biscuits untouched. He asked her if she could let him have a Scotch. Marjorie was amazed at such a suggestion, but she tried not to show it. She put the bottle on the table, and Douglas poured himself a triple measure and swallowed it down hastily. He looked up and asked her if she knew what Major Dean's job was in intelligence. Marjorie knew that Dean had "the police desk," but she didn't know what a police desk was. She'd always assumed that he was a liaison officer between the U.S. Army and the West Berlin police, getting drunken GIs out of jail and dealing with all those German girls who wanted to be wives in the U.S.A. but found themselves alone in Berlin and pregnant. Douglas told her what the police desk really was: Major Dean assembled all the accumulating intelligence material to build a complete picture of the East German Volkspolizei. The trouble was that he'd become so interested in his work that he had gone across to the East for a first-hand look.

She drank some of the fresh coffee and tried the biscuits. Douglas let her have a few minutes to think about the situation before he spoke again. Marjorie, he said finally, you'd better understand that they are holding

your husband in East Berlin, and the charge is spying. And they don't fool around over there; they could shoot him. He took her wrist across the table as he said it. It was a sudden change in the relationship. Until now he'd always called her Mrs. Dean, and treated her with all the deference due to the wife of his major. But now the problem they shared, and the fact that they were very nearly the same age, unified them, just as it separated them from the older man who was at the center of the problem. Suddenly Marjorie began to cry, softly at first and then with the terrible racking sobs of hysteria.

The events that came after had been repressed and repressed until she no longer had a clear idea of the order in which they had happened. Douglas made long telephone calls. People arrived at the house and departed. There was a chance, he said. The East German police had not transferred custody of Major Dean to the Russians at Berlin-Karlshorst. They offered to exchange Dean for a document stolen from the East Berlin police HQ the previous week. She hesitated. The safe was built into the wall and concealed behind the desk in the library. She told Douglas that she didn't have the key and didn't know the combination. Douglas didn't take her seriously. It's your *husband*, Mrs. Dean! Eventually she opened the safe. They looked through the document that the East Germans wanted. There were forty-nine pages of it, mimeographed on poor-quality pulp paper, tinted pink. There had been file numbers on it but these were now obliterated with black ink. The edges of the paper had faded in the sunlight and Marjorie felt that it couldn't be all that secret if it had been lying around in the sun long enough to fade.

She wondered if she shouldn't telephone Dean's senior officer, but Douglas reminded her of what he was like. Can you imagine him taking the responsibility? He wouldn't give the O.K. to hand over a used Kleenex to the East Germans. No, he'll shuffle the responsibility to Frankfurt, and we'll wait a week for an answer. By that time Major Dean will be in Moscow.

But how can you be certain that this document isn't of vital importance? Douglas laughed and said it was of vital importance only to the East German official who'd had it stolen from his safe. Now he wanted to get it back and forget the whole thing as soon as possible. These things happen all the time. Marjorie was still worried about how important it was. Look for yourself, said Douglas, but Marjorie couldn't understand the jargon-heavy officialese of this report on police organization in East Germany. Do you imagine that someone like your husband would keep any really important stuff in his safe at home? Marjorie didn't answer, but she finally decided that it was unlikely.

Marjorie remembered Douglas making her go to a movie. She sat through "Jolson Sings Again." The dialogue was dubbed into German,

but the songs were the original recordings. She didn't get home until late. There was a glorious sunset behind the trees in the Grünewald. When she came through the garden to the front door she thought that the roses had bloomed. It was only when she went to look at them that she discovered that behind the rose bushes the whitewash had been spattered with blood. She became hysterical. She blundered through the back garden to the apartment the Steiners used, but there was no answer to her rings at the doorbell. Then Douglas arrived in a black Opel Kapitan and persuaded her to spend the night in the VIP quarters at the barracks. He had arranged the necessary permission.

She didn't go back to the house until after Major Dean arrived from the East. The Volkspolizei had kept their word: as soon as the returned papers had been verified, Major Dean was brought to the crossing checkpoint. At her insistence the Deans moved to a smaller and more modern house in Spandau. Soon after that, Marjorie became pregnant, and for a time the marriage seemed to go very well, but there was now an abyss separating Hank Dean and his young wife.

The perfunctory inquiry was held behind closed doors, and its findings were never made public. It was agreed that the document passed to the Volkspolizei was a document originating from that East German force. It had already passed across the desk of Dean's analyzers and was in any case of a grade no higher than confidential. Steiner's brother-in-law was found dead and floating in the River Spree, having suffered severe wounding "by a person or persons unknown" prior to death. He was described on the record as "a displaced person." Marjorie Dean's evidence about the man's argument with Steiner was rejected as "inadmissible hearsay." Major Dean was reprimanded for taking official documents home, and was removed from his job. Marjorie Dean was totally exonerated. Master Sergeant Douglas Reid-Kennedy took much of the blame. It was inevitable that he should face the inquiry's wrath, for he was a draftee. He had no military career at stake; he wasn't even an officer. However, his quiet acceptance of the findings was rewarded by a transfer to a U.S. Army recruiting job in New Jersey, promotion to master sergeant and an early release.

And yet for Douglas Reid-Kennedy and the Deans, the events of that week in Berlin were traumatic. Hank Dean knew he would never again be given a job so important and so sensitive as the one he lost. A couple of times fellow officers snubbed him. He drank. When his drinking became bad enough for the army to send him to a special military hospital near Munich to dry out, Marjorie took the newly born son, Henry Hope back to her parents in New York. She met Douglas. The first time it was by chance, but eventually the relationship became serious and then permanent.

It seemed as if the nightmare were over, but in fact it was only just beginning. At college Douglas had been a heavyweight boxer of considerable skill. He had been well on the way to a state championship when by an unlucky blow he severely hurt a fellow contender. Douglas never went into the ring again. It was the same sort of bolo punch that he used to fell the Steiners' bogus brother-in-law. The fact that the man was a black-mailer and an East German spy persuaded the inquiry to skirt around that happening. But the Russians were not prepared to kiss and make up. Three years after the incidents in Berlin, Douglas was visited by a baby-faced young man who presented the card of a Polish company that made transistors. After the usual polite small talk, he said that through nominee holdings, the company for which he worked now owned thirty-seven per cent of Douglas's company. He realized that thirty-seven per cent was not fifty-one per cent—the baby-faced man smiled—but it was enough for them to have a real control over what was going to happen. They could pump money into the company, or turn it over to making razor-blades, or tear it down and go into real estate. The young man reminded Douglas that he had killed one of their "employees," and Douglas realized that his company was now owned by the KGB. They offered to pay Douglas off each year in his own shares if he would work for them. They would tell him exactly which U.S. Government electronics contracts to bid for, and their agents would be able to discover exactly what his business rivals were bidding. In return, they wanted a steady supply of technical information about the whole U.S. electronics industry. If Douglas refused to work with them, the young man told him, they would bankrupt his company and "execute" all of the people implicated in the events of that night—Marjorie, the Steiners, the Steiners' daughter, and Douglas himself. Douglas asked for a week to think it over. They agreed. They knew the answer had to be yes.

As she finished her story, Marjorie Dean poured herself another large brandy and sipped some. Mann went over to the air conditioner and moved the control from medium to coldest. He stood there letting the cold air hit him. He turned around and gave her his most engaging smile. "Well, it's great," he said. "I want you to know I think it's just great. Of course, you've had about twenty years to jazz it up and work in some interesting details, but then so did Tolstoy—thirty years Tolstoy had, if I remember correctly."

"What?" she said frowning hard.

"That story," said Mann. "My buddy here is crazy about all that kind of spy fiction."

"It's true," she said.

"It's literature," said Mann. "It's more than just a lousy collection of lies and evasions; it's literature!"

"No."

"Douglas Reid-Kennedy joined the Communist Party when he was still at school. I guessed that as soon as I knew that his two closest buddies joined the CP and he remained aloof from that merry group of fun-loving raconteurs—am I pronouncing that right, Mrs Dean—raconteurs. That's what your friend Corporal Douglas Reid-Kennedy was on his days off with these Gestapo guys and film stars? Well, as soon as I hear about a guy at school who doesn't go along and sing 'The Red Flag' with his closest buddies, I think to myself, either this guy isn't the kind of young, amusing raconteur that everybody is cracking him up to be, or else the Communist Party has given him a secret number and told him to keep his mouth shut. They do that when they spot a kid who has a job in the State Department, or a union, or has a father who makes electronic equipment for the U.S. Army."

Mann walked across the room and picked up the photo of Douglas with his father. "Great kid you got there, Pop, but just watch out for that bolo punch." He put the photo down. "Yeah, you were right about Douglas's boxing career at school—too modest, in fact. See, Douglas crippled three kids with that body punch—a bolo is an upper cut to the body, but I guess you already knew that, Mrs. Dean, or you wouldn't have used that exact technical word—and Douglas didn't give up as easy as you say he did. He was forbidden to box again, not only by the school but also by the state boxing commission. And don't let's imagine that our Douglas was the kind of guy who didn't develop his natural talents. He graduated from crippling people to killing people. The K.G.B. spotted that more quickly than the U.S. Army spotted it; they knew that he'd like assignments to kill people. Those murder assignments were his rewards, not his work."

"No!" she said.

Mann looked at her as she poured herself another drink. I had watched her drinking all this time and thought that she was using all her willpower to avoid getting drunk. Now I realized that it was just the reverse of that; she wanted to be drunk more than she wanted anything else in the world, but in her present state of mind no amount of drink seemed to do the trick for her.

"Yes," said Mann softly. "While you went on your round trip to Paris, your Douglas stayed in the Emerald Isle. He went to a little farm off the highway and hacked a German family to death with a spade. Three of them; we dug them up from the garbage. It was a wet day in Ireland, so if we're pressing decomposing tissue into your wall-to-wall pile carpet, I apologize, but you've got Douglas to blame for it."

"No," she said again, but it was softer this time, and not so confident.

"And all that crap about that police report. In the mid-fifties, the East Germans were using their 'barrack police' as a nucleus of their new army. Let's define our terms. Those police we're talking about had tanks and MiG fighter planes, Mrs. Dean. The police desk was just about the most important work the CIA did in Germany at that time. That's why Hank Dean was assigned to it, and that's why he gave everything he had, until he was mentally and physically exhausted."

Mann paused for a long time. I suppose he was hoping that she would argue or confess or simply blow her top, but she did nothing except sink lower in the soft furnishings and continue to drink. Mann said, "Douglas Reid-Kennedy was a Communist agent, and he was wearing that cheap blue suit because he'd just come over from the East, where he'd been talking to his pals about putting your husband on the rack. And your cock-and-bull story about Steiner's argument was disregarded because the man who pretended to be Steiner's brother-in-law wasn't an East German agent; he was one of Dean's best men. He was one of the German Communists who fled to Soviet Russia in 1938. Stalin handed him back over the frontier to the Gestapo in 1940 as part of the deal of slicing Poland down the middle and sharing it with the Nazis. That's the man who had his blood spattered over your rose bushes by Corporal Douglas Reid-Kennedy. He had important things to tell Hank, and when he was delayed, Hank was so worried that he went across there to help him. The agent got back, but Hank went into the bag."

"The inquiry didn't know anything about his being an agent for the Americans," she said.

"You think the inquiry is going to blow a network because an agent is murdered? No, they let it go and were happy not to inquire too far into it. And that was a lucky break for Reid-Kennedy."

"Yes," she said.

"And you tell us that the inquiry reprimanded Major Dean and exonerated you. Why do you think they did that? They did it because Hank stood up and took all the shit that they were throwing at you. Sure he was reprimanded for leaving the papers unsafeguarded, because he wouldn't tell them that you and your damned boyfriend opened his safe and betrayed him in every possible way."

"No, they said . . ."

"Don't argue with me," said Major Mann. "I just got through reading the transcript. And don't tell me you believed Douglas Reid-Kennedy and all that crap about returning the papers to the police. You saw that the file numbers were blacked out. That's the first thing an agent does with secret papers, so that they can't be traced back to the place where they were stolen. And even the police chief of East Berlin is going to have a

hard time explaining why the papers in his safe have got all the file numbers blacked out. And you knew that as well as anyone, so don't give me any of that stuff."

He walked up to where she was sitting, but she didn't raise her eyes to him. His face was flushed and his brow shiny. It would have been easy to believe that he was the one being interrogated, because the woman seemed relaxed and unheeding.

"But it wasn't anything to do with the papers," said Mann. "This was all a carefully planned caper designed in Moscow solely to compromise Hank Dean. I'd bet everything I own that he was offered every kind of chance to hush this thing up. Both when he was in the East Berlin prison, and after he got back. But Hank Dean knew that it was just the first step into being doubled, and Hank Dean wasn't the kind of man who ends up a double agent. He'd sooner end up an alcoholic. At least a lush keeps his soul. Right, Mrs. Dean? It's your husband we're talking about. Remember him?" He walked away from her. "Or maybe you'd rather not remember, after all you did to him. Because wrecking his career wasn't enough for you, was it? You had to go screwing your way through the barracks. And you were no snob. You didn't stop at the Officers' Club, did you? You even had to screw the little creep who came delivering the official mail. Of course, you didn't realize then that Reid-Kennedy had drawn you as an assignment from Moscow . . ."

"What?"

"And he eventually got orders to make his relationship with you as permanent as possible: a wife isn't permitted to testify against her husband, right?"

"Hank would never give me a divorce."

"And I think we know why. He suspected the truth about Reid-Kennedy and was not going to give him that final bit of protection."

"No," she said.

"You think it was good breeding, or all that old-fashioned Dixie etiquette you gleaned from those cheap novels. Douglas Reid-Kennedy took the high ground—your bed—and he didn't have to fight all the way. I'd guess that that little conversation over the coffee and *Süssgeback* took place, not in the kitchen but in Hank Dean's bed. That's where you first heard that those men were holding your husband."

"No," she said. "No, no, no."

"And I'll tell you something else that Hank Dean kept to himself . . ."

He paused. She must have known what was coming, for she lowered her head as one might if expecting a blow. "Henry Hope is Reid-Kennedy's child."

"He is not," she said. "I swear it! You say that in front of witnesses and I'll sue you for every penny you possess. I'll make you pay!"

"Yeah, well, I can't prove it, but I looked up Hank's army records to find his blood group. And Henry Hope was easy because he donates blood at the local hospital." Mann scowled and shook his head.

"Did you tell him?" she asked. "Did you tell Henry Hope that?"

"No, I didn't, Mrs. Dean, because it would be nicer for your son to think that a great guy like Hank is his father rather than that a murderous creep like Reid-Kennedy might be. So we'll keep that to ourselves, Mrs. Dean. On that you got a deal."

"Poor Henry Hope," she said softly. Her voice was slurred; at last the alcohol was getting to her.

"You entertained on the boat last week," I said. "Who was it who came aboard on Monday?" She gave me a venomous glare.

She said, "So he speaks, your friend. I was beginning to think he was one of those inflatable dolls they advertise in the back pages of the sex magazines."

I passed to her the piece of paper on which I'd noted the dates of the pages missing from the boat's visitors' book.

She scowled at it and said, "You get a tax deduction for the days when you entertain businessmen on a boat. Douglas always made people sign so he could claim his proper deduction. He was obsessional about that."

"Who was it?" I said.

She scrabbled to find her glasses tucked down the side of the armchair. Having put them on, she read the dates with studied concentration. "I couldn't tell you," she said. "My memory isn't so good these days. Douglas was always ribbing me about that."

I said, "I'd hate you to make a mistake about how important this is to us."

"That's right," said Mann. He pointed a finger down to the boat moored beyond where the palm trees were whipping about in the wind. "You got a time bomb down there, Mrs. Dean. At ten-thirty I'm going to have to blow the whistle on you. This place will be filled with cops, reporters, and photographers, and they will all be yelling at you—right?" He looked at his watch. "So you got just eighteen minutes to decide how you play it—and the decisions you make are going to determine whether you live out the rest of your life as a millionairess, or spend it upstate in the women's prison with a 'no parole' sticker on your file."

She looked at Mann for a moment and then looked at her own wrist-watch, just to check him out.

"Seventeen minutes," Mann said.

"Douglas ran a legitimate business," she said. "You start thinking it was all mixed up with the other business and you'll never unravel it."

"You let us worry about that," I said.

"You don't get these big government contracts by sitting on your butt,

waiting for the phone to ring. Douglas went out of his way to look after his contacts, and they expected that."

"Who was it?"

"People from some Senate Committee."

"Which Senate committee?"

"International Scientific Co-operation, or some such name. You must have heard of it."

"We've heard of it," I said. "So who came here?"

"Only for fishing trips, and you wouldn't get me on that boat when they're fishing. I didn't get to meet any of them. They were just Douglas's fishing cronies. As I told you, it was just social. Douglas only put it down as business so he could get the tax deductions."

"Names!" said Mann. "Names, damnit!"

She spilled her drink. "Mr. Hart, Mr. Gerry Hart. He's helped my husband get other government contracts."

"Mind if I use your phone, Mrs. Reid-Kennedy?" said Mann.

Chapter Seventeen

They are made of marble, steel, chrome, and tinted glass, these gleaming government buildings that dominate Washington, D.C., and from the top of any one of them, a man can see halfway across the world—if he's a politician.

The buildings seem to have no names, only numbers and initials. F O B's are Federal Office Buildings and H O B's are House Office Buildings. This rent-free luxury office suite, in which Senator Greenwood could sip Martinis and trim his toenails while watching the homegoing traffic building up on the Potomac River Freeway and still keep the other eye on the White House, was a Senate office building—a S O B.

The heavy silk curtains had been fully opened to reveal the cityscape through the picture windows. I could see the Potomac and, farther away, the Washington Channel. Mirroring the sky, their waters were colorless, like two icy daggers sunk into the city's gut. Greenwood stood with us, admiring the view for a moment.

"About this time I usually have a bourbon and ginger," he smiled and flicked a strand of hair from his eyes. A senator with enough hair to flick off his face has something to smile about, even without the palatial office, imported furniture, and the rosewood cupboard full of hard stuff. "So what will it be for you boys?"

"A tonic water," I said.

"A bourbon and ginger would suit me nicely, sir," said Mann.

"Thought you were going to say you didn't drink while you were on duty," said Greenwood. He tossed some ice into glasses that were cold enough to whiten and snapped the crown corks from three bottles in a row. They gave three little gasps.

"I'd never get a drink if I pursued that kind of policy," said Mann.

"Right. Right!" said Greenwood in an absent-minded way, as if he'd already forgotten the beginning of the conversation. He set the drinks down on the antique side tables that were carefully arranged for each of the Barcelona chairs facing his desk. It was a modern design—no more than two stainless-steel trestles supporting a sheet of plate glass. He walked round the desk and sat in his Italian swivel chair. There was no front to the desk, and the papers arranged on the glass top seemed to be floating in the air. Perhaps it was Greenwood's way of proving he didn't have a Derringer in his lap.

"Mr. Gerry Hart," said Greenwood, as though announcing that the courtesies were over.

"Yes," said Mann.

"I've got the report," said Greenwood.

"It's not a report, Senator," said Mann. "It's just a private memo to you."

"Well, I'm not very conversant with the jargon of the CIA," said Greenwood, in such a way as to discourage instruction. He smiled. Greenwood's smile used very even, very white teeth. Like his attentive eyes, sincere nods, and pensive silences, Greenwood's smiles were those of a man who was thinking about something more important. He was a handsome man, urbane rather than backwoods, but some women like that better. He'd have to lose twenty pounds before he'd win admiring glances at the poolside, but in his carefully tailored light-gray mohair and handmade brogues, with his manicured hands and a face powdered like a freshly baked loaf, I saw in him a possible ladies' man. On our way to his office we'd played "One-word Who's Who": Mann's entry for Greenwood was "liar," mine was "showbiz," but no doubt Greenwood's entry for himself would be "boyish."

Greenwood gave another of those dazzling smiles and said, "The truth is, fellas, we politicos are too busy shaking hands to spare much time for reading."

"Is that so," said Mann.

"Well, maybe I'd better say in my own defense that I read about one hundred thousand words a day; and that's longer than the average novel."

That's what I like about politicians—even their self-criticism doesn't apply to them personally.

Mann said, "Your influence and importance in the Senate has always made you a target for ambitious and unscrupulous people, Senator." I saw Greenwood begin to scowl. Mann continued, a little more hastily, ". . . And when you joined the Scientific Development subcommittee of the Senate Committee of International Co-operation"—Greenwood smiled to show that he appreciated the way Mann had got the name right—"You became one of the most powerful men in the whole United States, Senator."

Greenwood gave a brief nod. "Before you go on, Major, maybe I should remind you that the CIA has a Senate office that handles all contact between you people and us."

"We want to keep limited access," said Mann.

"Limited access," said Greenwood. "I'm hearing a lot about limited access from your people."

"Any normal application, through the CIA Senate office, would be too likely to alert Mr. Gerry Hart."

"And you don't want to alert him?"

"No, sir. We do not."

"Are we talking about off-the-record material, or press leaks, or are we talking about scientific data that my committee decided to publish but that you guys at the CIA don't like to see published?"

"We are talking about important secret material channeled to the USSR by means of an espionage network."

"Gerry Hart working for the Russians?" Greenwood said. He drank some of his bourbon. "This is a guy who used to work with you people—did you know that?"

"So he'd know how to pass it across. Right, Senator, you got it," said Mann pretending to be grateful that Greenwood was of the same mind. "And now we want to look at this house Gerry Hart owns, up near Brandywine."

"And his apartment in Georgetown," said Greenwood dispassionately.

Mann nodded. "And . . ." He waved a flattened hand in a moment's hesitation. Even through the double-glazing we heard the police siren. It was a Lincoln limousine flying flags and escorted by three motorcycle cops. We watched them as they went over the bridge, probably heading for the airport.

"And his office," said Greenwood.

"And his office," said Mann. "Yes, that's it."

"And yet, Major, you tell me you've no real hard evidence," said Greenwood. He sat back in his swivel chair and kicked gently so that he could spin far enough to see the Potomac. The water seemed very still, and there was the gentle rumble of a jet plane.

"Depends what you call hard evidence," said Mann sadly. "We got his name when following another line of the investigation."

I felt Mann's indecision, as he wondered whether to emphasize our suspicions about Gerry Hart or to minimize them and suggest that we wanted no more than a routine check that would eliminate Gerry Hart from our list of suspects. He decided not to elaborate on it and sipped some of his drink, watching Greenwood expectantly.

Greenwood lifted one of his handmade shoes high enough for him to retie the lace. "What I mean by hard evidence, Major," he said in a soft, husky voice of the sort I'd heard him use in his electioneering, "what, in fact, everyone in this nation means by hard evidence, is something that can find a man guilty by due process of law." He looked up from his shoelace and smiled at Mann.

There was no need to draw any diagrams; we all knew the way it was going to go. But Mann went through the motions. He said, "We are at the preliminary stages of a complex and extremely delicate investigation, Senator. We don't have that kind of hard evidence which you define, but that doesn't mean that no such evidence exists. I'm now asking your assistance so that we can get it, or eliminate Mr. Hart from the investigation."

Greenwood stared at Mann and said, "Well, I thought I'd let you guys come on down here so that I could get a close look at you. Well, now I've seen you, and I don't like what I see." The two men were staring at each other. "So beat it!" said Greenwood. "And take the bag man with you." He looked away from Mann in order to indicate me.

Mann stood up without saying a word, and I did too.

Greenwood didn't get up. He said, "You really thought that I'd throw Gerry Hart to your wolf pack?"

Mann gave him a cold smile and said, "Into the snow, you mean? Well, Senator, you just better make sure Gerry Hart doesn't toss you off the back of the troika when he wants to whip up the horses."

"You heard me," said Greenwood softly. "Get out!"

He let us get as far as the door before speaking again. When he did, his voice and manner had all the charm that had been there before. "Oh, Major Mann," he said, and waited until Mann turned back to face him. "Just in case you're thinking of filing some kind of report that says I'm not co-operative, just let me tell you again that I deal with you CIA people if it's done in the proper way—through the Senate. So don't let me hear that you are making approaches to anyone working in my office until you've cleared it with me through your office. Have you got that, Major?"

"Yes, Senator. You've made your position very clear."

Mann was silent as we walked out to the car. For what seemed like hours, he drove aimlessly around the city: through the smart streets of

Georgetown, where Gerry Hart had his chic apartment, past the neat lawns of the White House—discolored now by the winter frosts—and through the black ghettos, and back along the Inner Loop Freeway.

When finally Mann spoke—apart from the muttered curses he'd used on other drivers—he said, "Last week there was this foreign minister, from some little West African republic, lunched by the State Department. Next day he took a ride down the freeway and was thrown out of a hamburger joint by some redneck in Virginia."

"Is that so," I said politely. It was one of Washington's standard anecdotes, and like most of Washington's clichés it was undoubtedly true.

Mann's mind raced on. "It's a court here in Washington. It's not a government; it's a court. Know what I mean?"

"No," I said.

"Like a medieval palace—the President brings in his own people and sweeps out the previous ones. Some are elected men; others are outsiders, courtiers: jesters, acrobats, jugglers, and storytellers—plenty of storytellers."

"Knights, knaves, and Quixotes," I added. "Chivalrous men and courtly ladies . . . well, it's one way of looking at it."

The traffic came to a standstill, and Mann cursed. One of the big government office buildings was emptying, and a great flood of secretaries and other civil servants washed through the stationary traffic.

"And what is Greenwood?" I asked him. "Jester, joker, jack-in-the-green?"

"Court favorite," said Mann. "The ear of the King, and a whole army of people to back him up." The traffic began moving again, pedestrians scattered, and Mann hit the horn, accelerated suddenly, and changed lanes with a reckless skill that made a truck-driver yell. "Not only the people who owe him a favor, and the ones who want him to owe them one," said Mann, "but all those bastards who have an obsessional hatred of us. The CIA has a lot of enemies, and no one is going to thank us for mobilizing them under Greenwood's flag."

"But wouldn't you have done what Greenwood did?"

"What did he do?"

"Stalled us," I said. "He doesn't want us in there taking Hart to pieces and spattering blood all over everyone in Greenwood's office. My guess is he'll tow Gerry Hart slowly out into the middle of the ocean and sink him out of sight of land."

"Are you trying to cheer me up?" said Mann bitterly. "If Hart is the kind of high-power KGB agent we both are beginning to think he might be, he could transfer the whole operation by that time. And maybe even get clear himself."

"You're going after Hart direct?"

"Not for the moment."

"Are you going higher?" I asked him.

Mann chuckled. "The President, you mean? As in those movies where some white-haired old actor you thought was dead years ago shakes us solemnly by the hand and says this is the last reel, fellas, go and get lined up for the soft focus. Hah. No, nothing like that, but I can make a shiver run up and down Greenwood's spine."

"How?"

"He's frightened of getting spattered with Gerry Hart's blood? I'll rub his nose in it."

"How?"

"He won't co-operate? Well, I'll show him a few tricks. He's frightened of what his friends might say if he's seen co-operating with the CIA? Well, I'll scrawl CIA on his garden wall, and I'll send him a thank-you through every postal delivery. I'll make him the talk of Washington. I'll make him the famous CIA stoolie."

"He won't like that," I said.

Mann smiled. "Wouldn't it be great if we could get him an official commendation?"

We seemed to be driving around in circles. I said, "Are we staying the night here in Washington?"

Mann bit his lip. "My wife is going crazy in that hotel. It's my wedding anniversary today. Maybe I should buy her some kind of gift."

"Does that mean you're staying?"

"If you see a candy store and somewhere I can park."

They said it was the wettest winter in living memory, but then they're always saying that. The sky had turned a dirty orange color, and now the rain was heavy.

It was the sort of tropical shower that reminds you that Washington, D.C., is nearly as far south as Tunis. Mann switched the wipers on, and there was a breath of steam rising from the metal of the car. He tried to tune in to the news, but static blotted out the transmission. Nervously, he shook a cigarette out of a pack and lit it, using only one hand. I offered to help him, but he declined.

We were on South Capitol Street, heading for the Anacostia Freeway, with Mann still trying to decide whether to stay in town to start fabricating angst for Greenwood, when the car phone buzzed. I took it. It was the information room at Langley. "Carhop," said the voice.

"Cheerleader," I said, "go ahead."

"Message from Jonathan," said the voice. "Fabian attempted suicide at fourteen thirty hours today. He is not in danger. But he will be hospitalized for seven to ten days. Do you read that? Over."

"Five by five, carhop."

"Crazy guy," said Mann.

Langley said, "Jonathan asks will he tell Ambrose."

I looked at Mann. He bit his lip. I passed the phone to him.

Langley said, "Did you read that, cheerleader?"

Mann said, "Loud and clear, carhop. Tell nobody. Over and out." He hung up the phone.

Mann glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. I turned to him. "Yeah, well, I'm sorry," he said. "It's need-to-know."

"Oh sure," I said angrily. "Or is it how much can you pry loose? Who the hell is Ambrose?"

Mann didn't answer.

"Those A-codes personnel are from Operations," I said. "We've got someone else working on this investigation—and you didn't tell me."

"It was a dangerous assignment," said Mann defensively. "And a need-to-know classification means only those who must know are told."

"So that's the way it's going to be from now on?" I said. "Okay, but just don't complain afterward."

"Miss Bancroft," said Mann.

Now it was my turn to go silent, for a long time. "Red?" I said finally. "An A-code agent? It took me ten years to get that."

Mann stubbed out the cigarette he'd only just started "Temporary A-code. Solely with Mrs. Bekuv. No decision-making." He waved a hand at the telephone. "No access—you heard that for yourself—no filing, except through me. Just a nurse-maid job." He put the still-smoldering cigarette stub into the ashtray and closed it.

"How long has she been working for the CIA?"

"Is that still ongoing—you and the Bancroft girl?" The cigarette stub was making a lot of smoke. Mann banged the ashtray to make sure it was closed, but the smoke emerged from it just the same. "Is it? Is it still serious?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Yeah, well when a guy says he doesn't know if a thing like that's still serious."

"I suppose so," I admitted.

"Well, you'll have to forget her for a few days. You get down to that Norfolk nuthouse, and kick hell out of our pal Jonathan. And you tell Professor Bekuv that if he wants to commit any more suicide and doesn't know how, I'll come down there and lend him a hand."

"Okay," I said.

"And twist his arm, show him some more photos of Gerry Hart. He still knows a whole lot more than he's telling us." Mann opened the ashtray again, and gave the cigarette stub the *coup de grâce*.

"I could drive down to Norfolk," I offered. "If I started right away I could be there as fast as the plane."

It was an exaggeration. Mann grinned. "And stop at Petersburg en route, you mean? Stop and see Miss Bancroft."

"Yes," I said.

"Go by plane, kid. I told you to stay away from her. Do I have to put it in writing?"

"But . . ."

He said, "We're friends, aren't we? Real friends, I mean?"

"Yes," I said. I looked at him, waiting for what would follow these portentous and, for Major Mann, unusually personal words. "Why?"

Whatever he was going to tell me, he changed his mind about it. "Oh, I was just going to say, take care of yourself." He changed lanes to get to the freeway exit. "I'll take you to the airport," he said.

I should have obeyed orders. I didn't, and what happened subsequently was all my fault. I don't mean that I could have influenced events—it was far too late for that—but I could have protected myself from the horror of it. Or I could have let Mann protect me, as he was already trying to do.

Chapter Eighteen

After Mann dropped me at the airport I went straight to the car rentals and asked about fast cars. I finally got a Corvette Stingray. While I was waiting for it, I bought a heart-shaped box of chocolate-covered fudge. The old lady behind the counter seemed relieved to get rid of it.

My car was gold with real leather upholstery, a V-eight motor of two hundred bhp, and once on the highway I put my foot down all the way south. I told myself that I needed a fast car to pay a brief visit to Red and still reach Norfolk in time to phone Mann and convince him I'd taken the plane. But looking back on it, I realize that the flashy car was just one more part of my determination to make Red love me as desperately as I loved her.

Red Bancroft, Mrs. Bekuv, and three shifts of heavies were tucked away in a house in the country, not far from Petersburg, Virginia. It was a dark night, and the place was difficult to find. My headlights picked up a sign that said "Hookups for Trailers and Campers." There were only two trailers hooked into the power line, and I heard the door of the nearest one click as soon as I stepped down. On the other side of the road there was a small sign: "Pederson's Herb and Fruit Farm—Private." I parked

off the road close to a billboard that advised me "Next time fly the friendly skies."

With hardly a word spoken, he took me to the trailer, but not before flashing a torch into the back of my car and checking the trunk to be sure I was alone. There were two more of them inside the trailer, big men with heavy woolen zipper jackets and high-laced boots, but their faces were soft and pale, and none of them looked the type who goes camping in the depths of winter. Behind the trailers I saw three cars and a couple of guard dogs secured to a post.

"I suppose it's okay," he said reluctantly. He passed the card and CIA slips back across the table to me. "You follow the path—through the yellow gate near the sign. I'll phone the house to tell them." He switched off the lights before opening the trailer door: he was a careful man.

"Let's make it a surprise," I said.

He looked at me with interest. Afterward I wondered how much he knew about what was happening there, but he wasn't the sort of man who makes free with good advice. "Suit yourself," he said.

I dropped the car keys on to the table and then stepped down into the mud. It was a long way to the house, but as I got near, there was enough light from the upstairs window to help me pick my way along the garden path and across the apple orchard. The kitchen windows were uncurtained. I peered inside. The kitchen clock was at midnight, and I could see a tray set with chinaware and flowers, all ready for next morning.

Softly, as if from miles away, I could hear voices, arguing loudly.

The kitchen door was unlocked—with so much security, there was no fear of burglars—and I went in. I walked through the hall and into the living room from which the voices came. There was an abandoned back-gammon game in the middle of the carpet, and scatter cushions on the floor. All was lit by the dusty blue light of the TV, and the voices were those of a TV quiz show. There were a couple of chords from an electric organ and a round of applause from the studio audience. ". . . and, for ten thousand dollars—fingers ready on the buzzers, all you nice people—in 1929, Douglas Fairbanks made his first all-talking movie. For this two-part question, I want first the name of his female star, and for the second part, the name of the movie."

In the air I could smell the mentholated cigarettes that Red smoked. I switched on the lights—two big Chinese vases with parchment shades. There was no one here. A log fire was dying in the hearth, and near by there was a jug of water and a bowl of melting ice. There was also a whiskey bottle and two glasses, all of them empty. I heard Red and Mrs. Bekuv's voices upstairs.

"Ambrose," I called. "Come downstairs. I want to talk to you."

When Red arrived in the sitting room, she was wearing nothing but a

black silk kimono, and even that was left untied. Her hair looked more auburn than red under this light, and it was still disheveled. She wore no make-up, and her face looked like that of a young child, but her demeanor was not childlike. She strode across to the TV set. I had been sipping a shot of brandy, and staring at the TV screen with unseeing eyes, but now that she was standing there I heard the master of ceremonies say "One of the most shocking crimes of the decade took place in 1929 in Chicago. Now here's your question . . ."

"Are you watching this?" she asked with mock politeness.

I shook my head.

". . . four men, two of them in police uniforms . . ." As she switched the TV off, the master of ceremonies fluttered like a burned moth and collapsed into a small blue flame that disappeared.

"Saint Valentine's Day Massacre," she said. "Al Capone." She tore the cellophane off a pack of Kools, took one out, and lit it.

"Switch it on again and ask for your ten grand."

She walked across to the cupboard, found a new bottle of Scotch, and poured herself a generous amount. This was a different Red Bancroft from the soft, sweet girl I'd fallen in love with. "Do you realize what kind of priority this investigation has got?" she said.

"Don't talk to me like I'm one of your security guards," I said.

She drank a little of her drink, paced across the carpet and back, and then rubbed her face as if trying to decide what she wanted to say next. "I don't know how much you've been told," she said, which was as good a put-down as I've yet come across, "but Mrs. Bekuv is a KGB officer of field rank. Did you know that?"

"No," I admitted.

She drank some more whiskey. "You want a drink?" she asked suddenly.

"I helped myself already," I said indicating the glass of brandy I'd left on the side table. She nodded.

"When they realized that Bekuv had gone and that we had him, Moscow panicked. They tried to kill him that night at the party. Then they changed their tactics. Mrs. Bekuv was sent after him. Moscow sent her. She was sent to control him, to limit, monitor, and modify what he told us."

"The stabbing," I said.

"It was good that, wasn't it?" It was as if she took pride in its expertise. "She grabbed the sharp edge skillfully enough to cut herself without doing too much damage to the ligaments. Then she did a couple of deep slash cuts into her coat."

"A bad cut in the abdomen . . . four stitches," I said.

"This is a professional," said Red. "You don't get field rank in the KGB if you're afraid of the sight of blood." She put the glass of whiskey

to her face and smelled it delicately, as one would an expensive perfume.

"And Gerry Hart brought her out and delivered her to us."

She looked at me with some disdain. "Gerry Hart has been working for the Russians for at least fifteen years. He's a senior officer in the KGB—you know how they give these people military ranks and medals to make them feel important."

"So bringing Mrs. Bekuv out of Russia was entirely a KGB operation?"

"All the way, baby. All the way." She tied a knot in the cord of the kimono.

"Does Mann know all this?"

"I've only known it for thirty minutes," she said.

I heard Mrs. Bekuv moving on the floor above us. I said, "Was sending you to stay with Mrs. Bekuv part of the plan?"

"It *was* the plan," she said immediately. "It was the *only* plan. You and Major Mann chasing here and there across the world were just diversionary. Holding Mrs. Bekuv here, and turning her so that she'd break Hart's network—that was the real plan."

I didn't argue with her; all agents are told that their contribution is the most important part of the plan. I said, "But why not tell me?"

"We fell in love," she said. "You and I—there was no disguising it. At first I wanted to call off everything else, but I pulled myself together and got on with my job. It was then that I discovered the effect that our love affair was having on Mrs. Bekuv."

Red came closer to me and touched my arm. "I loved you," she said. "I loved you. Remember that, won't you?"

Overhead we heard Mrs. Bekuv walk across the floor. "Just for a time I wanted out of this whole business."

"Out of this business?" I moved my head to indicate the upstairs room where Mrs. Bekuv was still moving around.

"I'm still not sure," said Red. She looked me in the eyes, and her voice was calm and level. "Don't blame the Manns," she said. "They wanted the best for both of us."

"And what was the best for both of us?"

There was a long pause. "You got paint on that nice leather coat," said Red. "When did you do that?"

"Christmas," I said. "It's not paint; it's Mrs. Bekuv's blood."

I picked up the glass of brandy I'd poured, drank it in one gulp and left.

Chapter Nineteen

After the baroque night, a rococo dawn. A boiling skyful of turbulent clouds, and a sun that bored a golden tunnel right through it. It needed only a Tiepolo to paint a busty Aurora there and surround her with naked nymphs and some improbable shepherds.

"What are you looking at?"

"You stay in bed, Professor Bekuv. The doctor says you need a complete rest."

"This hospital food is terrible. Could you arrange for food to be sent in for me?"

"That might be difficult, Professor. You are on maximum security now. The people cooking your food may not be graduates of the *cordon bleu*, but they are triple-star security-cleared."

"So you think someone might try to poison my food?"

I counted to ten. "No, I don't think anyone will poison your food. It's a routine precaution that always goes with maximum security . . . people."

"Prisoners," said Bekuv. "You were going to say prisoners."

"I was going to say patients."

"No one tells me the truth."

I turned to face him. I found it difficult to feel sorry for him. The breakfast of which he had complained so bitterly had been entirely eaten. He was now munching expensive black grapes from the fruit-bowl. On the other bedside table his hi-fi controls had been arranged. His condition was a tribute either to modern medicine or to the circumspection of his attempt at suicide. Bekuv slotted a cassette in the player. Suddenly four giant loudspeakers that had been arranged around his bed, filled the little hospital room with the opening bars of the *Rosenkavalier* waltz.

I walked to the table and turned the music down.

"I want to listen to the music," said Bekuv. "I am not feeling well enough to continue talking."

I looked at him and considered all kinds of responses, but I didn't use any of them. "Okay," I said. I went downstairs to talk to "Jonathan."

The Strauss music could still be heard. "Tell me again about the suicide," I said.

"He's in good shape, isn't he?" said Jonathan anxiously.

"Are you sure he took an overdose?"

"They pumped him dry and analyzed it."

"You'd better tell me everything that happened just before that."

"I told you. It was the same routine as every other morning. He got up at six, when the alarm went off. He took a shower, shaved, and we sat down to breakfast at seven."

"An hour to shave, shower, and dress?"

"He listens to the news and reads his mail."

"You let him have mail?"

"Hi-fi magazines, *Newsweek*, *Time*, two sci-fi magazines, advertising crap from the places he bought his record player and stuff, little notes from his wife, a Russian-language weekly from New York—all of it goes via the accommodation address, of course."

"You keep a photocopy of the notes from his wife?"

"And then the envelope is resealed—he doesn't know, I'm sure."

"Let me see it."

"Do you read Russian?"

"And hurry it along, will you."

"You'd better come down to the microfilm reader."

The letters from Bekuv's wife, and even all the pages of the magazines and other reading material, were recorded on microfilm.

"The translator looked at it. He looks at everything. He said it was just the usual sort of thing."

The spidery writing in the labyrinth of Russina script was made even more difficult to decipher when projected in negative on the glass screen of the reader.

My love,

I hope you are well. Don't take sleeping tablets every night, or you might become dependent on them. A milk drink used to be all you ever needed to sleep; why not try that again?

Here the weather is very cold and there is much rain, but they are being very kind to me. I was wrong about Miss Bancroft, she is a really wonderful girl. She is doing all she can to arrange that you and I can have a serious talk, but for the present it is better we are separate. It is important, Andrei.

Your ever-loving K.

I read a rough translation aloud to the man they called Jonathan.

"Nothing there—right?"

"Nothing," I said.

"You don't sound very convinced. You think that they might have some sort of code?" he asked.

"Every man and wife talk in code," I said.

"Don't go philosophical on me, pal. I majored in chemistry."

"It might mean something to him," I said.

"Mean something that would make him want to take that whole jar of goofballs?"

"Could be."

Jonathan sighed. From next door there came the buzz of the Telex alarm and the clatter of the printer. He went to answer it.

I began to see Andrei Bekuv in a new light, and I felt a little guilty at the way I'd treated him. I now saw his querulous complaints, and the studied interest in music and hi-fi equipment, I saw now as desperate attempts to prevent himself from thinking about his wife and how much he needed her. This letter would be more than enough to tell him she was attracted to Red Bancroft.

Jonathan interrupted this line of thought with a Telex that he'd torn off the printer. It was coded and headed with the cipher but the signature was in clear triplicate.

MESSAGE BEGINS MOVE FABIAN TO AIRPORT IMMEDIATELY FOR AIR MOVE-
MENT FOXGLOVE STOP CIA REPRESENTATIVE AT TERMINAL STOP AMBROSE
WILL TAKE LUCIUS THERE STOP YOU WILL TAKE CHARGE STOP AT YOUR
DISPOSAL LIKEWISE AMBROSE JONATHAN AND STAFFS STOP WAIT FOR ME
AND TAKE ORDERS FROM NO OTHER PERSON STOP HOLD THIS AS YOUR
AUTHORITY STOP MESSAGE PRIORITY SANDMAN OPERATION PRIORITY PRESI-
DENTIAL REPEAT PRESIDENTIAL MESSAGE ENDS MANN MANN MANN AC-
NOWLEDGE

"Acknowledge?" said Jonathan.

"Is there anyone there at the other end?"

"Only the operator."

"Acknowledge it. Then ask Langley to give use scrambled Telex facil-
ties at the airport and some backup. What have you got here?"

"Two cars and fourteen men, but six are on three-day layoffs."

"Armored cars?"

"Windshield and gas tank—the usual agency design."

"We'll need more cars. Get a couple of your people to use their own.
Don't tell Bekuv what's happening."

"What is happening?" he asked.

"We're moving, that's what's happening."

"You know what I think?" Jonathan said. "I think this is an alarm. I
think the Russians are going to hit this place and try snatching the pro-
fessor from us."

"Send the acknowledge."

"You mean don't let Bekuv know until we're ready to go?"

"I mean don't let Bekuv know. You're setting up this wagon train, and

I want you to make it look really impressive. Bekuv will be traveling with me in the Stingray, and we won't be anywhere near you."

"I'll want that in writing, you know. It's dangerous. And on your own you might have trouble getting Bekuv to move his ass."

"I don't see why I should," I said. "He's going to see his missus, isn't he?"

Chapter Twenty

Incoming flights were being diverted and delayed. Planes were circling and stacked all the way from Chesapeake Bay to the Allegheny Mountains. Outgoing flights were hours behind their scheduled times. The terminal buildings were a noisy chaos of irate travelers but we were half a mile away, and the airport seemed very still from the service area where Mann had improvised an emergency control room. There were half a dozen phones there, constantly ringing as CIA clerks lied to the press and deflected official inquiries. A quarter of a mile along the apron an Algerian Airways Illyushin jet was parked. It was surrounded by service vehicles, and men were topping up its fuel, pumping its sewage, loading hundreds of plastic meals, respooling its movies, generating its electricity, removing its baggage, and loading its freight.

I delivered Bekuv to a CIA man and went into Mann's makeshift office. Mann was making monosyllabic noises into a phone. "What's going on?" I said.

He indicated a chair, and when he'd hung up the phone, he said, "Gerry Hart is out there, with a Colt Combat Magnum in one hand and Senator Greenwood's necktie in the other."

"You're kidding."

"Yeah, I'm kidding—it's only a Centennial Airweight."

We watched a jumbo lumber past us around the perimeter. "You made him run then."

He gave me a sour smile. "He's taking the four o'clock direct flight to Algiers, and I do mean *taking* it. He wants the Bekuvs with him, and he's threatening to blow Greenwood's head off if they're not delivered to him."

"You're going to hand them over?"

"I'm not going to call his bluff. Everything points to Hart as a long-time Commie agent. He's a pro—I believe he'd do it, don't you?"

"I don't know," I said. I pulled a chair close to where he was sitting at the desk. "This is not an escape. A guy like Hart must have a dozen good

passports under the floorboards. And using Greenwood's name, he could bump his way onto any Air Force jet."

"So why is he in there with a cannon and leaping around like a vitamin-pill endorsement?" said Mann. He put his handmade English shoes, and their overshoes, into the middle of his paperwork, leaned back in the swivel chair and blew a smoke ring at the ceiling.

I said, "He wants the Bekuvs—you just told me that. He's waiting for the Bekuvs."

"Moscow won't give him a medal for this circus," said Mann. "This doesn't fit into the détente crap that the Russians are hardselling Washington."

I took off my leather coat and helped myself to one of Mann's cigarettes. "If Hart wants the Bekuvs, then Moscow wants the Bekuvs," I said.

"Naw," said Mann. "For all Moscow knows, we've milked the Bekuvs dry."

"Not if the Bekuvs knew something so important that we'd be sure to act on it the moment we found out."

Mann nodded reflectively. "And something that Moscow would know we'd acted on the moment we did it." He got up and went to the window to stare at the Illyushin jet. Then he looked to where the jumbo had reached the far end of the runway; it was now no more than a speck of aluminum glinting in the winter daylight.

"How did Hart make contact?" I asked.

"Very cool. He teletyped Langley—Operations—told them that if everyone played along this end, he'd guarantee that there would be no public mention from the Moscow end."

"Always the politician."

"He knew that would appeal to the brass," said Mann. "A chance to brush a foul-up under the carpet—and by going through on the teleprinter he knew that one of the copies would go to the director's office—no chance of us losing the offer between radiator and wall."

Mann was still looking out the window, watching the servicing of the Algerian jet, when there was a sudden roar from the distant jumbo, and it came tottering down the runway at full power. It seemed very close before the nose lifted in rotation, and it screamed across our heads with enough noise to make the windows rattle.

"Flying dance hall!" said Mann, and he turned back to the table that was strewn with his problems.

"Are we following the plane?" I asked.

"To Algeria? So that Hart and the Bekuvs can line up with all those black-power refugees, hijackers, and hopheads from California and thumb

their damned noses at us as the Aeroflot connection disappears into the sunset?"

"It was just a thought."

"What's on your mind?"

I said, "Suppose that what makes the Bekuvs important hasn't happened yet."

"And it is going to happen. Is that what you mean?"

"If you were Bekuv, taking up our offer to let you defect, would you put a little insurance into the safe deposit?"

"Electronic secrets, you mean? Maser equipment?"

"Who knows what."

"So where's the safe deposit?" said Mann.

"Somewhere south of In-Salah. Somewhere in the Sahara Desert, for instance? Somewhere you couldn't find unless Bekuv himself was along to help you."

"God almighty!" said Mann. He picked up a phone and dialed a three-digit number.

"You think I'm right?" I said.

"No," said Mann. "But I can't take a chance that you might be." Into the phone he said, "I'm going to need that airplane after all. In fact, you'd better get me a ship that can get to Algiers a whole lot faster than that Illyushin."

A man came into the room. He had a federal marshal's buzzer tucked into his top pocket and a Smith and Wesson Heavy-Duty .44 sitting under his arm, in the sort of Cuban-hitch shoulder holster that security men wear when they're not feeling shy. He gave a military salute and said, "Miss Bancroft wants to see you, Major."

"Show her in," said Mann.

"Whatever you say, sir," the federal marshal said, and withdrew.

Mann gave me the sort of smile you give to Jehovah's Witnesses before telling them to go away. I realized that he had Red's report of my visit to the house. He said, "Mrs. Bekuv wants Miss Bancroft to go along with her." He turned and saw through the frosted glass panel that someone was waiting outside the door. "Come in, honey," he called.

Red wore a mustard-colored jersey knit dress, with a federal marshal's badge over the heart.

Mann said, "We were just talking about it."

"Gerry Hart is probably taking that plane to Moscow," I said. I looked at her. "Do you know what might happen to you in Moscow?"

Mann said, "Are you sure Mrs. Bekuv doesn't know you are in the CIA?"

"I don't think so," said Red.

"That's like walking into a police station to ask the time just after you stole a million dollars," I said. "Not thinking so is not enough. And besides, what use would you be to us—you have no communications link, no network, not even a contact. You've no field training, and you don't speak Russian—do you?"

She shook her head.

I said, "You could get the greatest breakthrough in the history of espionage, and how are you going to tell us?"

"I'd find a way," she said. "I've had field experience."

"Look," I said as kindly and as softly as I could manage. "Moscow isn't Montreal, and the KGB isn't a freaky group of Marxist dropouts. They won't give you a map of the city and stamp welcome into your passport just because Mrs. Bekuv is crazy about you. They'll take you inside and rip your fingernails out—and that will be just for starters."

"Now take it easy," said Mann.

Red was angry. Her cheeks were flushed, and she bit into her lip to hold back a torrent of protests.

Mann said, "Well, it's my decision, and I figure it's worth the risk." Red brightened. Mann said, "What you tell Mrs. Bekuv about your connection with the CIA is entirely up to you. It's a delicate situation, and I don't want to be a backseat driver. But—and here's a big but, honey—if I tell you to get off that plane in Algiers, or any other place Hart might be taking it, I want you to move fast. And I don't want any arguments—you got it?"

"You can count on that," she said.

"Now you get back to Mrs. Bekuv," said Mann. "And if you've got any doubt about the way it's shaping up, I want you out. Right?"

"Right," she said. She picked up her handbag from the desk and said, "Thank you, sir." To me she gave no more than a nod.

When she'd gone I said, "Whose idea was that?"

"Hers," said Mann. "She's Psychological Directorate; you know what they are like."

"She's overconfident," I said. "We put in an attractive girl to get Mrs. Bekuv away from her husband and away from her KGB duties. But suppose what we're seeing is Mrs. Bekuv taking our girl back to Moscow as a big fat prize—and a way of getting herself and her husband off the hook?"

"Well, don't think that hasn't crossed my mind," said Mann. He moved his feet off the table and swiveled his chair to watch me as I went to the window and looked at the hard gray sky.

"Don't sacrifice the girl in order to prove that the Psychological Directorate is stupid."

"I wouldn't do that," said Mann. He grabbed his nose and wagged it, as if trying to make it rattle. "She's a damned good operative. If we ever get a woman running a division, it will be Red Bancroft."

"Not if she goes to Moscow it won't," I said.

Mann pressed the button on his phone. "Tell Miss Bancroft to take that damn marshal's badge off before she goes down the corridor to talk with the Russians," he said. "I'm going to see Hart." He put the phone down. "We're giving the Bekuvs to Hart now," he told me. "He's not dumb enough to let us take him without Greenwood getting it first—but you never know." Mann sighed.

They were drinking coffee in a freight office at the far end of the corridor. At first glance it was a cozy little scene—until one took a closer look at Senator Greenwood. His high-notch, hand-stitched Cheviot suit was crumpled, and the silk shirt was open at the front to reveal not only a gold medallion, but also a loose collar of string that was attached to an M-3 submachine-gun in such a way that the muzzle was always under his chin and Gerry Hart's finger on the trigger.

Greenwood's face was tight, and his tan had faded. As we came into the room he turned to us and began his loud entreaties. "Get me out of here," he said. "I'll guarantee the departure of the Algerian plane—my word of honor as a senator—now just let's act like reasonable human beings." His voice was hoarse, as though he'd said the same sort of thing many times.

"You're riding with us," said Hart.

Greenwood turned his eyes to Mann. "I hope you're satisfied," he said. "This is all your doing. It was your visit that caused all this."

"Is that so," said Mann politely, and it was his polite indifference that infuriated the senator.

"When I get out of here, I'll come after you with . . ."

"Shut your mouth, Senator," said Mann.

"I won't shut—"

Gerry Hart tugged on the string hard enough to strangle Greenwood's words, and said, "Yeah, do as the man says, Senator."

Hart was wearing a waterproof zipper jacket with an airline badge; he looked like a baggage handler.

"You're flying these people to Algiers, then?" Mann asked Hart.

"I don't know yet," said Hart. The lack of animosity between the two men bewildered Greenwood, and frightened him, but he said nothing.

"Well, you'd better know soon, if you're taking the Algerian flight crew," Mann said. "They haven't got the kind of flying experience that will wing you into any place you stab on the map."

"Why would you worry about that, Major Mann?"

"Because I don't want that airplane blundering across the damned air

lanes and scattering Illyushin spare parts across the countryside, or my ass will be in a sling."

"Well, that'll be a nice way for me to go," said Hart. He smiled.

I looked out the window. The underside of the cloud was flat and featureless, like a sheet of mirror reflecting the wet concrete of the runways. And it was cold, so that in places there was ice underfoot.

Mann had brought in a lot of local help. There were men on the roofs of both maintenance hangars, and more on the freight administration building and along the walkways. The men were in pairs: a sniper with a rifle, and a backup man with a radiophone. There was a large, flat, open space between us and the Illyushin out there on the tarmac. We all knew that Hart would have to walk there—using motor transport would make him more vulnerable—and we were all hoping that he'd make a mistake.

There was a crackle from the radiophone, and Mann said, "Tell the tower to stand by. And tell all units that the party is moving out to the plane." He collapsed the antenna and put the radiophone down, but from it came the continuing noise of procedure.

There was a look of relief on Greenwood's face when the CIA man brought Professor Bekuv into the room. Red came soon after with Mrs. Bekuv. The two women linked arms. It is a common enough gesture in Russia, even between men walking down the street together, but there was no doubt that Professor Bekuv saw it in another light. He smiled at his wife; it was a sad smile.

The little office was crowded now. The two groups faced each other over the tops of the cubicles where the freight office clerks usually worked. Each of these boxes bore the graffiti of its owner: nudes, views, picture postcards, phone numbers, cartoon drawings, and countless impressions of the airline's rubber stamps. The air was thick with cigarette smoke, and condensation clouded the windows. Hart unleashed his hostage so that he had free use of the machine gun.

"Away you go, mister," Mann told Hart. We stood at the door as they filed through. "Stay cool, Senator," Mann said to Greenwood. "Even the Russians will release a U.S. senator unharmed. They might even put Hart on the rack to show their good will."

"They'll stage a press conference," said Greenwood. "They'll put me on show. They'll make me look a fool for having a Russian agent as my assistant." It was typical of a politician that he should look so far ahead, and typical, too, that he should be more concerned with how it would look to the voters than with how his stupidity had endangered his country.

"Can't prevent you from looking a fool, I'm afraid," said Mann. "That's your department." He smiled at Greenwood.

As we stepped out of the door after them, the icy breeze cut through me

like a rusty saber. We kept a distance between us as we followed the party that straggled its way toward the distant plane.

The Algerian airliner was parked on the far side of the heat deflectors. This series of metal scoops, which formed a castellated steel wall, caught the hot gases from the jet engines and threw them, together with their ear-splitting noise, high into the air.

The refueling was finished, and the servicing vehicles had all departed except for the mobile passenger steps. The flight crew was aboard and carrying out the flight checks. Their voices could sometimes be heard over Mann's personal radio.

It began when Greenwood ran. He must have decided to bolt for the protection of the deflector wall. But after he'd run only a few paces, he stopped, and looked back in an agony of indecision. One of the snipers on the roof of a maintenance hangar fired next. The bullet hit the apron, somewhere between Greenwood and the rest of them. It was meant as a way of encouraging Greenwood to run for it, proved a signal failure, for he stood frozen to the spot.

Hart must have thought the bullet came either from me or Mann. He swung around and fired the M-3 at us. We were about a hundred yards behind them. The M-3 had been modified for single shot, and the slugs went high, whining over our heads. Mann was halfway between me and the deflector wall. He went down on one knee, bringing out a pistol as he did so. The gun jerked, but the sound of the shots was lost in the roar of the jets as the pilot opened the throttles of the airliner.

Mann got to his feet and started to run. He was an easy target, and it was inevitable that he should be shot. Hart was struggling with the bolt of the gun. He found the auto switch and fired a short burst at Mann, who was running hell-for-leather across the icy concrete. Mann was hit. He fell, sliding on the ice and then falling flat onto the hard ground. He rolled over a couple of times, but he stood no chance of getting to the cover offered by the metal barrier.

By this time my gun was up, and I fired, but my shots went high, and I heard them hit the metal and sing away into the sky. Mrs. Bekuv snatched at the M-3 in Gerry Hart's hands and swung around to shoot Senator Greenwood. At point-blank range, those big .45 bullets tear a hole in anything, but before she had time to pull the trigger, Hart was standing in front of her, grabbing at the gun to get it back.

I ran. There was ice everywhere. I heard it crack under my toes like paper-thin glass, and more than once I slid and almost lost my balance. I threw myself down alongside Mann. "Are you hit?" I asked him. He didn't reply. His eyes were shut.

I ran a hand back along the side of his head, and it came away covered with blood. I got one arm around him and dragged him toward the metal

wall. The jet engine's piercing scream modulated to a roar, and I heard the cough of a gun and felt chips of concrete hit my face and hands. Mann struggled and became conscious. "Leave me," he said. "Leave me, or they'll get both of us."

I knelt down and turned to see Hart and Mrs. Bekuv still struggling for possession of the gun. He had both hands on it and was getting it away from her. I was huffing and puffing from exertion, and to steady my gun I planted my fist on Mann's shoulder. I aimed and fired twice. Both bullets hit Gerry Hart. He flung his arms out, like a man trying to catch a ball that was too high for him, and his feet left the ground as the force of the bullets knocked him backward full length.

Now I grabbed Mann, and, half dragging him and half carrying him, I lugged him all the way to the big metal blades of the deflector and dumped him there. With both hands clamped around my pistol, I swung it around to where Mrs. Bekuv was standing with the submachine-gun. But she had no eyes for me. With Hart sprawled on the ground, his eyes closed, she was able to bring the gun back to Senator Greenwood again. His eyes opened wide in terror, and I saw his mouth gabbling a torrent of words that were swept away on the gases of the jet noise as the pilot brought all four engines up to full power.

Under the noise of the jets, the cameo was mute, like some parody of a silent film. In the dim light of the overcast day, the submachine-gun made orange fire as it twisted in her hands. Greenwood cowered, holding up a slim hand in supplication, but he was torn in two by the stream of large-caliber bullets. Mrs. Bekuv tightened her hold on the gun to prevent it from spraying upward, and this tension contorted her face with a grimace of rage and hate that one would have expected only from a bad actor.

Greenwood's blood spurted high enough to spatter the underside of the jet plane's wing tip. And then the Bekuvs and Red were lost to view behind a confusion of blue uniforms as the flight-crew surrounded them.

"Run, Red," I yelled, and half expected that she'd bring the Bekuvs back. But Professor Bekuv was pointing a gun at her. My words were lost on the wind, and anyway it was too late.

"Don't shoot," said Mann.

I looked down. He'd rolled over to get a view of what was happening. His trench coat was filthy and his hair matted with mud and with the blood which was also running down the side of his face.

"Hit one of the Algerian flight crew, or even the damned airplane, and we'll have an international incident on our hands."

"I thought we already had one," I said. But I lowered my gun and watched as Mrs. Bekuv pushed Red and her husband up the steps and into the plane. The door clamped shut, and the plane vibrated against

the wheel brakes and the lights winked. Mann's radiophone buzzed. I picked it up.

"Tower to Major Mann," said the radio. "The captain requests that we remove the passenger steps."

Mann was groggy. He gave an almost imperceptible nod. "Remove the steps," I told them.

Mann saw the blood down the front of my shirt and realized that it was his own. He reached up to his head and touched the place where the bullet had nicked his skull. The pain of it made him suck his teeth very hard, but it was only when he turned far enough to see the plane that he said, "Ouch!"

"You saved me," he said after a pause. "And it was close—damned close."

"Yes," I said. "Another rumble like that and I ask for a no-claims discount on my life insurance."

"Chalk up one favor," said Mann, and he punched my arm in appreciation.

"Hart tried to protect Greenwood," I said. "Did you see that?"

Mann gave a grim little smile. "Hart didn't want to lose a good hostage," he said.

"Perhaps," I said.

"And our Miss Bancroft wasn't working hard to jog anyone's gun arm out there, was she?" said Mann.

"Perhaps she didn't get much of a chance," I said.

"And perhaps we've lost her to Madame Bekuv. Perhaps, instead of gaining a defector, we've lost an operative."

I watched as the steps were driven away and the Illyushin released its wheel-brakes on the port side and swung around to face the taxi strip. The rising heat of the jets turned the airport buildings into gray jelly and sent us enough unburned hydrocarbons to make our eyes water. The jets fanned over the apron, making the puddles shimmer and gently ruffling the clothing of the two dead men.

I switched Mann's radio to the control-tower frequency and heard the Algerian pilot say, "Tower—this is Alpha double eight requesting takeoff clearance."

The reply came promptly, "Roger Alpha double eight, cleared to runway three oh, cleared for takeoff. Wind two five oh, at eight knots, gusting fifteen . . ."

I switched it off, and we watched the Illyushin trundle to the far end of the runway.

Mann was bleeding badly. "We'd better get along to the doctor," I said.

"You feeling sick?" Mann inquired politely.

The Illyushin's engines came to full power, one at a time. Then, with all brakes released, it grew bigger and bigger until, then it seemed it was about to roll over us, it lifted. With a brain-numbing roar it passed low over our heads.

"Yes," I said.

Chapter Twenty-one

The town of Algiers fits snugly into the curve of its massive bay. It is a city of narrow alleys and steep staircases, hovels and office buildings, secret gardens and boulevards. At its feet there is a busy port. Behind it, the roads hairpin up into the lush green hills and pine forests, climbing ever higher into the Atlas Mountains. It's an uncomfortable place. Of the whole African coastline, only the Red Sea gets hotter in summer, and few places get as much rain in winter. It was dark by the time we arrived, and raining heavily.

Percy Dempsey was at the airport. He'd brought his own personal Peugeot 504. You'll not see many of those broken down along the desert tracks, polished silver by the sand. Down south in the Sahara, there were only Peugeots and Land-Rovers, and the smart little cars that came in by plane. And Dempsey's was special; he'd taken the crankcase away, to provide a flat underside. The oil was pumped out of a tank in the trunk. It reduced the luggage space, but it was a small price to pay for a desert-worthy car.

Dempsey was wearing a suit—perhaps the cable and the CIA contact man had given him hopes of a long-term contract with the Americans—and a vest, and a public-school tie—Charterhouse, as I remember it. The grubby trench coat let him down—or did he think that was *de rigueur* for agents? The Algiers traffic moved slowly in the night. Yellow headlights glared through the spray and darkness.

"I sent one of my people down to Ghardaia," said Dempsey. "If they're going south to the Sahara they will have to go that way."

"Has he got a two-way radio in the car?" said Mann.

"That would be rather dangerous, Major," said Dempsey. "Only the police are permitted such luxuries. In any of these towns and villages, you can find the police station simply by looking for the only building with a radio mast." Dempsey murmured some gentle Arabic oath as the truck ahead of us stopped and signaled that it was going to turn into the docks.

"How will we know what's happening down there?"

"My man's based in a hotel, Major. We can speak to him on the phone."

A driver behind us sounded his horn, and so did another behind him.

"We don't even know they will go south," said Mann. "They might just transfer to the Aeroflot flight and continue through to Moscow."

"I thought we'd have something to eat," said Dempsey. "They won't be here for hours. You made good time."

The truck turned, and we moved on into the city.

"They sold them only enough fuel to get to London. That will delay their arrival time by nearly two hours," I told him.

"You're not worried that they might change planes in London?" Dempsey asked.

"That will be prevented," I said.

We stopped at a big intersection while a traffic cop twirled a baton and blew his whistle.

"Bekuv will go south, all right," said Dempsey. "I had that feeling when we met him that day. He had unfinished business here in the desert." He turned off the main boulevard into a succession of ever narrower streets.

"Where were you when we needed you?" said Mann sarcastically.

"Hindsight," admitted Dempsey. "Pure hindsight, I admit. But if you think about his indecision that day . . ." He pointed. "This is the Casbah," he said. "That's the big market."

Mann nodded.

Dempsey said, "People only go south if they have a purpose. You don't go into the Sahara to hide. Are they looking for something? Do you know what?" He parked the car in a space marked "Private."

"No," I said.

"Big or small?"

"Big," I said.

"How the hell could you know that?" said Mann.

"Deduction. Something very small and he might have tried to conceal it. Even something of a medium size would have tempted him to take it into a village post office and address it *poste restante* in the U.S.A."

"Screw it!" said Mann. "Maybe they won't even leave the airport."

"Big," I said. "It will be big."

Dempsey locked the car and led the way through a maze of alleys, each one narrower than the one before it. Every third shop seemed to be a butcher, and the carcasses were displayed complete with skin and fur. "Ughh," said Mann.

Dempsey had first discovered this place during the war when he was a young officer with the First Army. He'd returned in 1955, and on and off he'd lived here ever since, right through the fighting and the restric-

tions and difficulties that followed it. Of course, Dempsey spoke Arabic; not just the elegant stuff used by Cairo eggheads who came to the university to lecture on poetry, but the coarse dialects of the southern villagers and the laconic mumblings of the nomad.

The alley in which Dempsey lived was steep and narrow. Most of the windows were shuttered, but a café was marked by bright yellow patches of light and the ululating song of Om Kalsum, the Ella Fitzgerald of Arab pop.

This part of the old Arab quarter must have been unchanged for a thousand years. Only by common consent were the premises defined, for the rooms of one house were the upstairs of the place next door. Dempsey's frontage was no more than the width of his battered old door, but once inside the place opened up to become a dozen rooms with—at the back—a view into the courtyard of a dilapidated mosque.

I heard Dempsey go to the back of the house and tell the servant to fetch food. Then he returned to the front and poured wine for me and a Jack Daniel's for Mann. Dempsey had that sort of memory.

Three of the original cell-like rooms had been knocked together. The changes of level, that provided a step at the entrance to each room, put the dining space on a platform at the end of the living-room. Antique swords were arranged over the fireplace, where smoke rose from a log fire that was barely burning. Over the dining-table—it was too large, and the ceilings too low, for it to fit anywhere—there was a brass chandelier that was said to have been looted from a house in Oran when the French departed. An ornate "Chinese Chippendale" mirror provided anyone sitting at the head of the table with a chance to see into the kitchen. The floor was pine boarding, polished like glass. The carpets were brushed, the books were placed in the shelves according to size rather than subject. The mirror was gleaming as brightly as the brass chandelier and the blades of the swords. And yet there was no coziness. Here was obsessional cleanliness combined with masculine orderliness in a way you seldom find anywhere but in a lighthouse.

Mann lowered himself onto the sofa, holding his drink high so that none of it would spill. "How do you know they will phone in good time?"

Dempsey said, "Just relax for a moment. You've had a long journey."

"Why don't you just check that your telephone is working?" It wasn't a suggestion; it was an order.

"Because I've already done so," said Dempsey. He poured himself a little tonic water and turned to look at Mann. Now that his hat was off, you could see Mann's shaved patch of skull, the stains of the antiseptic, and the large pink piece of adhesive tape that the doctor had applied to the bullet graze. The bruising from its impact reached all the way from his

discolored eye to his stiff neck. Dempsey studied it with interest but didn't comment.

Mann scowled and sipped at his Jack Daniel's. I could tell that he approved of the high standards of hygiene that were present on every side.

Dempsey said, "I hope you like Arab food." He leaned over the dining table to rearrange the cutlery and the glasses. I got the idea that he'd been rearranging them all afternoon.

"I didn't come all this way for fancy cooking," said Mann.

"But this is delicious," said Dempsey.

"Look, pal. My idea of culinary exotica is hot pastrami on rye bread."

Dempsey smiled, but the smile became rather fixed, and he continued to adjust the table setting, in a more mechanical manner.

I walked through the kitchen to the balcony at the back. It was like being in a doll's house—the balcony was no larger than a pocket handkerchief, and it was spitting distance from there to the street. There was a wonderful view. The rain had almost stopped, and stars peered through gaps in the cloud. You could see the old port and the black ocean beyond. The Grand Mosque was outlined against the night sky, and I could hear the same Arab music that I'd heard from the street.

Dempsey came into the kitchen whistling. He lifted the lid from a pot and brought a cooked lobster out of the water. He split it into sections with all the skills and strength of a professional chef. "Your friend," he said, still looking down at the lobster, "do you think that crack on the head affected him?"

"No. He's always like that," I said.
with a mountain of chow."

"Odd chap—and he can't sit still for a moment." There was the sound of the front door opening. "It's my servant with the food," said Dempsey.

From the next room Mann bellowed, "Hey, Pop. There's a waiter here
"Oh, dear," said Dempsey, and he sighed.

By the time I got back to the dining room, the table was arrayed with the tiny dishes that the Arabs call *mezze*. There were miniature kebabs, sliced tomato, shiny black olives, stuffed vine leaves, and bite-sized pies of soft flaky pastry. The servant was a young man. There was rain on his starched white jacket, and I guessed he'd been to some local restaurant to get the food and the strong Arab coffee that I could smell. He was a handsome youth, very slim, with carefully arranged hair and large, sad, brown eyes. He watched Dempsey all the time. At one time I would have been indifferent to Dempsey's choice of such handsome young employees—smiled even—but now I found it more difficult to write it off as just a part of the fascinating spectrum of human passion.

"I don't want a foulup," said Mann. He tucked a napkin into his collar and leaned forward over the table, sniffing at the *mezze* and pushing the

dishes aside until he came to the platter of hot lobster. He speared a large piece of it.

"Nothing will go wrong," said Dempsey. He gave the servant the emptied tray and indicated that he would serve the coffee himself. The boy withdrew. "I'll drive," said Dempsey. "I know these roads. I've spent the best part of thirty years going into the desert. But the roads over the mountains are dangerous and narrow, with hairpin bends, crowded villages and bus drivers who know only the horn and accelerator. If a man is young enough and reckless enough"—Dempsey paused—"to say nothing of frightened enough, he'll outstrip any car that follows him."

"Or get killed himself," said Mann, with a large piece of lobster in his mouth.

"Or get killed himself," said Dempsey, as he picked up a knife and fork. "There's local beer, or ouzo, or you can continue with the Jack Daniel's."

"And when you get over the mountains?" asked Mann. He leaned back in the delicate chair until it creaked, and then held a speared chunk of lobster aloft, chewing pieces from it and nodding approval at the flavor.

"The high plateau, and then more mountains—the Ouled Nail—before you reach Laghouat, where the real desert begins—about four hundred kilometers in all."

"By that time they'll know they are being followed," said Mann.

"My dear fellow," said Dempsey. He chuckled. "He'll know he's being followed before you're in the hills, before you're out of the suburbs even. If you were hoping to be inconspicuous, forget it. At this time of year there will hardly be any private cars down there in the desert. He'll see your dust for a hundred kilometers."

Mann prodded at some cubes of grilled cheese before putting one into his mouth. They were very hot. He tried not to show his discomfort, although tears came to his eyes.

"I think Percy should drive," I said.

Mann clamped a napkin to his mouth, nodded, looked up to see if anyone was watching him, and finally swallowed the burning-hot cheese.

"That's settled then," said Dempsey, and he reached for the same grilled-cheese cubes. He put three of them into his mouth and chewed impassively. I realized then that it was the similarity of their upbringing that made them so antagonistic. Exchange Percy's public school for the Midwest Military academy where Mann's estranged parents had sent him, and each would have become the other.

It was the small hours of the morning before the Algerian jet arrived at the Algiers Airport. Mrs. Bekuv must have known that we'd be waiting for her on the other side of the barrier. Whatever kind of deal the men

from the Russian trade delegation made with the authorities, it included permission for her to leave the airport on the far side. We almost missed her altogether, but Dempsey's pal in Immigration tipped us off, and we gave chase.

They were in a Land-Rover: the two Bekuvs, Red Bancroft, and the driver who had delivered the vehicle. It was that dark hour before dawn that you read about in books; and the windshield was awash with rain, and the car ahead of us no more than a blurred dribble of yellow headlights with a couple of red dots, when the driver stabbed the brakes.

We didn't speak much; the noise of the engine, the heavy rain, and the thrash of the wipers made it necessary for Dempsey to shout. "This bloke's damned good, and I'll tell you that for nothing!"

We were climbing. The villages were shuttered and silent. As we roared through them, there came the answering bellow of our reflected sound. All the time the rain continued. The tires were uncertain on the steep, twisting road. Dempsey clawed at the steering wheel as each hairpin revealed another hairpin, and soon the windshield flashed pink with the raw light of dawn.

"We've got him on speed," said Dempsey, "but he's got the better traction. Damn you!" He blasted the horn as a man on a mule swayed out into our path. "It's like that game that children play—stones, paper, and scissors—there's no telling yet what will prove the most important."

"They know we're behind them," said Mann.

"A driver like that," said Dempsey with unconcealed admiration, "has already calculated our tire pressures and how much I had to drink last night."

The sun came up very quickly, its light intermittently extinguished by the black clouds that were racing across the sky, and its almost horizontal rays shafting into our eyes and twisting with every movement of the car. Dempsey slammed the sun visor fully down, but it didn't help much.

They began to force the pace now, and the road became more difficult. On one side there were steep banks, pine trees, and outcrops of vertical rock; on the other, a sheer drop over an unmarked edge. And not all the road was hard. More than once, a sudden patch of loose surface hammered the metal underside, sent the car sliding, and made the wheels spin.

Dempsey stared ahead, concentrating on the road's near side edge, hitting the accelerator as soon as a curve could be seen to be nothing more than a kink. He used the camber of the road, too, steering up it—at an angle to the road's direction—to get maximum traction and the burst of acceleration that it provided. For one section of the road we were actually leaping into the air from one camber to the next.

"Hell!" said Mann the first time Dempsey did it, but the jarring crash

as the car landed back on the road caused him to bite his tongue and fall sideways across the back seat.

"Hold tight," Dempsey said and gave a fruity chuckle. Mann swore through his teeth.

Ahead of us, the Land-Rover disappeared in a fountain of spray as it hit a rain-filled ridge and was jolted up into the air. Dempsey pumped the brakes, releasing the pressure each time the car's front dipped on its suspension. By the time we reached the ridge our speed was down to forty. The other car had spilled enough of the rain water for us to see the ragged series of potholes. Dempsey flicked the steering to hit on a curving path and so bring the outer wheels—with the lighter loading—over the deepest hole.

In spite of all his skill we landed with a brain-shattering thump and a terrible groan of metal. Mann clasped his hands on his head in an effort to save himself more pain.

But the Land-Rover was also having problems. There were four of them crowded into it, and the big bump must have shaken them up, for they had slowed down enough for us to be eating their spray.

"Grab her ass," said Mann. Dempsey moved up close and now we could see that Mrs. Bekuv was the driver. For a couple of miles we raced along together.

"It's in the soft sand where they'll laugh at us," said Dempsey. "With that four-wheel drive they can crawl off into the desert and come back to the macadam again while we're still digging."

"You brought sand mats?" said Mann, all ready for a row.

"What are sand mats?" said Dempsey, tilting his head to see Mann's reaction in the mirror. Mann gave a humorless smile and said nothing.

Although the sun was up, the rain cloud obscured it. A few yellow lights high on the road ahead of us fast became a village. The Land-Rover's horn echoed in the narrow alleys. Scarcely slowing down, we followed them through the twisting street. A sudden scream of brakes told us that Mrs. Bekuv had seen a huge desert bus parked in the middle of the road, but the Land-Rover raced on, its speed scarcely checked. Avoiding a head-on collision by only the narrowest of margins, the Land-Rover lurched as it climbed on to the footpath and screamed through the narrow gap. Dempsey followed. Men and women scattered. There was a snow-storm of chicken feathers as hens broke loose from the roof rack of the bus and flailed through the air, and a sickening thump as one of them struck the side of the car. Then we were through and on the mountain road again. The surface was loose gravel, and Dempsey dropped back as some of it hit our windscreen.

"Just hold them like that," said Mann, and for a few minutes we did. Then, after the straight stretch, with Dempsey pushing the needle well

past a hundred, the road looped suddenly and dropped away in a tangle of hairpins to run along a short luxuriant valley.

"God!" shouted Mann and I heard Dempsey gasp. Ahead of us the Land-Rover had slowed down, though it was still doing over fifty. It slid sideways a little, wagged its behind, and then picked up speed again as a large piece of it fell onto the roadside. Dempsey's arm came across my chest as he jammed his foot hard on the brakes. We shrieked to a halt. Even so, we had to go into reverse in order to find the bundle that they had tossed out the door.

Mann was out of the car before I was. The rain-soaked grass was high, and the twisted body of a man was tangled in it. We crouched over him, and Mann picked up his limp arm and sought his pulse.

"The driver from the trade delegation—looks like a Russkie, eh?"

"Poor guy," I said. The man groaned, and as he opened his mouth I saw that his teeth were stained with blood. "They've dumped him to lighten the weight," I said. The boy vomited. It was mostly blood.

"Looks like it," said Mann. To the young man he said, "Which of them did it?" But he got only a whimper in reply.

"What kind of people are we dealing with?" I said. I wiped the wounded man's face with my handkerchief.

"Got to go," said Mann getting to his feet.

"We can't just leave him here," I protested.

"No alternative," said Mann. "You know that. They're just counting on us being softhearted enough to stay with him."

I got to my feet. "No," I said. "I think they meant to slow up enough to let him out safely but he misjudged things."

"That's right," said Mann. "And there really is a Santa Claus—move your tail, baby."

There was a growl from the engine as Dempsey flipped the accelerator pedal. The dying young man looked at me pleadingly, but I turned away from him and followed Mann back to the car. Dempsey pulled away before the doors were closed.

"Catch up!" ordered Mann.

"That's not the problem," said Dempsey. "The problem is finding them again if they pull off the road and hide." I realized then that both these men had the sort of honesty and devotion to duty that enabled them to disregard the dying man. I did not admire it.

"There, there, there!" said Mann.

The dark-green Land-Rover was no larger than a toy and difficult to see among the pine trees, the scrub, and mud-spattered rock. But now that Mann had pointed it out, I saw it skittering behind the trees and kicking its heels as it leaped over the humpbacked bridge that marked the bottom of the valley.

Now it was a different sort of driving: steeply downhill in places, with more and more people on the road, and horses, too. At one point some soldiers tried to wave us down. Dempsey blasted the horn, and they jumped aside.

"Was that a roadblock?" asked Mann.

"Hitchhikers," said Dempsey.

"Let's hope you're right," said Mann.

We could no longer see the Land-Rover. It must have been a mile or two along the valley by this time. Dempsey pushed up the speed until we were slipping and sliding in the mud and gravel. Then the road climbed again. It climbed a thousand feet, and here it was drier, except for the rain water that spewed across the road from overflowing gullies. We crossed the brow of the next hill to face a bleak sky, glassy like a pink-tinted mirror. Dempsey screwed up his eyes to see the road that twisted away along the side of a spur. We could no longer see the other car, and Dempsey went faster and faster. For the first time in my life I felt carsick.

Dempsey had an amazing technique for hairpins: he went into them at full speed and shortly before the bend turned the wrong way—to lose speed—and then steered the other way. The pendulum effect flicked us around the curve of the hairpin. And Dempsey was plunging his foot down on the accelerator even before the car had slowed down enough to face the next stretch. We were cannoneering forward so fiercely that the seat back jarred my kidneys. There wasn't room to make a mistake. To the left side of the road there was jagged cliff, and on our right a precipice. All the windows of the car were now plastered with watery mud, and only the area covered by the wipers was clear.

Thin rain continued to fall, but it was not enough to wash the mud from the side windows, and only just sufficient to lubricate the wipers. The next bend brought a tidal wave of mud and loose grit. Dempsey wound his window down to provide better visibility, and on my side I did the same. The cold, wet wind howled through the car.

We were doing one hundred, over a blind hump, when we saw it.

The theory says that if you hit a flock of sheep at that sort of speed, you ride over them like an ice skater in an abattoir. It isn't true.

"This is it," shouted Dempsey. There was no chance of avoiding them; they were all over the road. There must have been hundreds of them, baa-baaing, running, or staring at us, transfixed by fear.

Dempsey jabbed the accelerator and steered directly at the rockface. We hit it with a spine-jarring bang that made the body of the car sing like a tuning fork. That first impact only sliced off a front wheel. Then a mess of suspension and metal-work sheared away from the car. The front dropped and chiseled into the road surface, producing a torrent of small stones that took out the windshield, like the fire from a heavy machine-

gun. We were "rubbing off" speed, and as the car slowed, its back whipped around until we were facing the way we had come.

Dempsey was doing it all according to the book. He kept his foot down hard on the gas, and the spinning wheels began to slow us a little, tearing their rubber into shreds and making a cloud of black smoke that eclipsed everything. But it didn't slow us enough, and with the engine still screaming its protest we raced backward at seventy miles an hour.

I ripped at the door to open it but couldn't find the catch. My seat snapped, and my head hit the roof as we plunged off the edge of the world. The engine shrieked, and the earth turned askew, and we slid down the precipice with a thunderous bombardment of car components and a green snowstorm. Twice the car was almost halted by trees and scrub, and twice it ripped its way through them. But now, with the suspension torn loose and a wheel missing, we were furrowing soft hillside. We slowed, lurched, tipped, and finally stopped at a steep angle, embraced by a tangle of thorns, rocks, and bushes. I was sprawled back in my broken seat, listening to the gurgle of escaping liquids. The air was filled with the stink of fuel, and I would have gagged on it but for the way in which I was being strangled by my seat belt.

Dempsey's eyes were closed, and there was a lot of blood on his face. I couldn't turn enough to see where Mann was. I tried to pull my leg free, but it was trapped in the mangled metalwork between the smashed instruments and the steering wheel. I tugged at my leg; it hurt. Someone was shouting "Fire," but the voice soon softened to a whisper and drifted away into the darkness. It was cold, very, very cold.

Chapter Twenty-two

A blinding light flashed in my eyes, and as I became more fully conscious, I saw its beam flicker across the ceiling, and backward and forward over the brightly colored Islamic texts that were pinned to the wall. The iron bedstead creaked as I moved under the rough blanket that covered my legs. Only slowly did I focus on the man. He was sitting motionless in the corner, a fat man with an unshaven face and heavy-lidded eyes. Behind him there was a broken clock and a retouched color lithograph of a uniformed politician.

The fat man spoke without moving a muscle and almost without moving his mouth. "The man with the hat awakes." His Arabic was from far to the east of where we were; Egypt perhaps, where the man with the hat —*charwaja*—is the non-believer, the infidel, the enemy.

A voice from the next room said, "It is the will of God," without endorsing God's decision enthusiastically.

"Get him," said the fat man.

I heard movements from the next room, and with difficulty I moved my head around until I could see the doorway. Eventually Percy arrived. The blinding light met my eyes again, and I saw that it came from a small wall mirror moved by the draft from the door.

"How do you feel?" said Dempsey. He had a cup of coffee in his hand.

"Lousy," I said. I took the coffee he offered. It was strong and black and very sweet.

"Your friend got another crack on the head," said Dempsey. "He's conscious, but he's sleeping. You'd better come and look at him. I say! Steady on with my coffee."

I got out of bed and found I was fully dressed except for my shoes. I put them on, and as I bent down I suffered pain in a dozen muscles that I never knew I had. "You did a good job, Percy," I said. "Thanks."

"If you've got to hit anything, hit it backward. My old dad taught me that, and he won the Monte two years running."

"Well, he should have tried it driving," I said.

Dempsey smiled politely and showed me to the little bare room where they had laid Major Mann. Someone had removed his tie and his boots and folded his jacket to go under his head. His hair was ruffled and his face unshaven, and the brusing from the bullet nick had now turned one-half of his face into a rainbow of blues, pinks, and purples.

I leaned over him and shook him.

"Waaaw?" said Mann.

"Coffee, tea or me?" I said.

"Beat it," said Mann, without opening his eyes. "Go away and let me die in peace."

"Don't be a spoilsport," I said. "We want to watch."

Mann grunted again and looked at his wristwatch. He moved his arm backward and forward, as if to get it into focus. Finally he said, "We've got to get on the road."

"Get what on the road?" I asked. "Our car is wrecked."

Dempsey said, "You want to buy a car? Eighty-five thousand on the clock, one owner. Never raced or rallied."

"Well, rent another car," said Mann.

"I did," said Dempsey. "I did it about five hours ago, when you were fast asleep. It should arrive any time at all."

"Well, don't sit back waiting for a round of applause," said Mann. "Get on the phone and hurry them up."

"Don't fret," said Dempsey. "I've made contact with my chap down in

Ghardaïa. The Land-Rover filled up there. He's following and will leave messages along the route."

"How?" said Mann.

"This isn't Oxford Street," explained Dempsey. "This is the Trans-Sahara Highway. Either they have to go south through In-Salah, or they take the other route down through Adrar, Reggane, and eventually to Timbuktu."

"The way we came last time," said Mann. He wiped his face with a hand and touched the puffy bruising of his chin and cheek. Then he heaved himself into sitting position and unfolded the jacket that had been under his head. He looked at me. "You don't look so good," he told me.

"And I don't feel so good," I admitted, "but at least my brain is still ticking over. Do you two think Mrs. Bekuv wanted a Land-Rover because it matches the color of her earrings? Or because they were discounted this week? I prefer to guess that she radioed Algiers from the plane and specified that car."

"Why?" said Mann.

"Ah. Why indeed? Why choose a car that can be outpaced by anything from a housewife's Fiat to a local bus? We've been breathing down their necks as far as this—so why didn't she ask for a twcaked-up car? Keep to the macadam and you could do the trip in a Ferrari, give or take a couple of sand filters and a crankcase guard."

"But they couldn't have got past the end of the macadam," said Dempsey. "The made-up road ends at In-Salah on one route, and south of Adrar on the other. After that it's only track."

"Brilliant," I said sarcastically. "You think she's not bright enough to have a desert-worthy vehicle waiting down south? She waves us good-bye, and they get the best of both worlds."

"This is not my day for riddles," said Mann. "Give it to me."

"They will leave the road," I said. "Whatever they are going to do isn't going to be done at the poolside of some government hotel. They're going to drive off into the desert. And if she's as bright as I think she is, they will leave the road at night."

"And that's why Bekuv came north to meet us driving that c a z," said Mann. "It was such a conspicuous vehicle—that's the only c a z I've seen in the whole of Algeria. He took it so that before meeting with us, he could detour out into the desert and bury whatever it is they're going to collect."

"It's too big to bury," I said. "I've told you that."

"If you're right," said Dempsey, "we're going to need a Land-Rover too."

"Yes," I said.

"Or a big truck," Dempsey said. "A lightly loaded truck is as desert-worthy as a Land-Rover."

Mann turned to Dempsey and prodded him in the chest with a nicotine-stained forefinger. "I want to follow them across that desert wherever they go," Mann said. "You fix it so that we can travel across the sand, wadis, rocks—any damn where."

Chapter Twenty-three

Men become mesmerized by the desert, just as others become obsessed with the sea; not because of any fondness for sand or water, but because oceans and deserts are the best places to observe the magical effect of ever-changing daylight. Small ridges, flattened by the high sun, become jagged mountains when the sunlight falls across them, and their shadows, pale gold at noontime, becomes a black, bottomless pool.

The sun was high by the time we reached the desert. A man could stand in his own shadow should he want to brave the heat of noon. Not many did. No goats, no camels, not even snakes or scorpions move at that time of day. Just mad dogs, Englishmen, and Major Mann of the CIA.

Through the car's ventilator there came a constant rain of fine sand. I closed the vent and opened the window—the wind blew hot. I closed it again. Percy Dempsey mopped his brow. Ahead of us the road shimmered in the heat. The sky was not blue; it was a hazy-white, like the distant sand. There was no horizon. The glaring sunlight conjured up great lakes that disappeared only a moment before we plunged into them.

The road south is built along the edge of a sand sea as large as England. The dunes were like scaly, brown, prehistoric monsters, slumbering in the heat and breathing the puffs of sand that twisted off their peaks. And across the road writhed more sand, phantom snakes of it that hissed at the underside of the car as we sliced through them. In places the drifting sand settled on the road, making ramps that were difficult to see. We all had our seat belts as tight as they would go, but they didn't prevent us from striking the roof or window when our suspension hit a big one.

"It will only need one slightly bigger than that," I said after one particularly violent bump from a sand ridge, "to write us off."

"Patrols clear them every week or so at this time of year," said Dempsey. "It's worth a gamble while the wind stays where it is."

"And is the wind staying where it is?"

He lifted a hand off the wheel long enough to show me the smudge of duststorm that he had been watching. "She's coming to meet us, I think," he said.

"Hell," said Mann, "that's all I need." We watched it without speaking, until Mann said, "Is that a village ahead, or an oasis?"

"Neither," said Dempsey.

"Stop anyway," said Mann. "It's time for a leak."

What had looked like trees were a dozen thornbushes, strung out in such a way as to suggest that they marked an underground watercourse, if only you dug deep enough. There was an old Renault there, too, stripped of everything, so that only the steel shell remained. The outside was polished shiny by the windblown sand, and the inside was sooty. It would make a convenient place for travelers to build a fire. I looked inside and found some burned chunks of rubber tire—the nomad's fuel—and some broken bottles, the pieces scoured and white. There was a screwed-up cigarette pack there, too. I picked it up and flattened it—Kool Mentholated Filter Longs, the cigarettes that Red Bancroft smoked. I threw it away again, but I knew I was still not free of her.

"A leak, I said! Not a shower, shave, shampoo, and set." It was Mann treating us to a favorite sample of his army witticisms as he stood by the car door, tapping his fingers impatiently. "And I'm driving," he said as I got in.

"Very well," said Dempsey. "We're not in a hurry."

I stretched out in the back and dozed. Now and again there was a sudden jolt that rocketed me up to the car roof. The sun dropped and went yellow and then gold. The sky turned mauve, and the dunes seemed to arch their backs as they spread their shadows. There were no flies on the windshield now, and the air was dry and the temperature cooled enough to make it worth opening the window. The sand hissed at us, and our license plates were by now raw metal, with no letters or numbers visible; it was the mark of cars that went deep into the desert, and in the villages people noted us.

I slept fitfully, awakened sometimes by oncoming vehicles that forced us off the track, and at other times from falling weightless through terrible dreams. The sun dropped out of sight, and there was only the tunnel that our headlights bored through the limitless night.

"My fellow will be waiting," said Dempsey. His voice was cold and distant, in the manner that all men's voices assume at night. "He'll have camels—if we need them."

"Not for me," said Mann. "I'm trying to give them up." He laughed loudly, but Dempsey didn't join in. Soon after that I must have gone to sleep.

"You can put both the U.S.A. and China into the continent of Africa and still have room to rattle them about," said Percy. He was driving.

"I know some people in Vermont who wouldn't like that," said Mann.

Dempsey gave a perfunctory laugh. Ahead of us the road stretched as straight as a ruler into the heat haze. Only the occasional drifts of sand make Dempsey moderate the speed. "A convoy—parked, by the look of it." Dempsey's eyes seemed myopic and watery when he was reading the newspaper or one of his favorite Simenons, but here in the desert his eyesight was acute, and he could interpret smudges on the horizon long before Mann or I could see them. "Not trucks—buses," he added. "Too early for tea."

The gargantuan trailer-trucks rolled south to Timbuktu in convoy, enough drivers in each rig to eat and sleep in relays. When they did stop, it was usually for only as long as it took to boil water for the very strong and very sweet infusion of mint tea that the desert Arab needs even more than sleep. But as we got nearer I saw that Dempsey was correct. These were the same giant chassis, the wheels as high as a man, but they were buses—fitted with chrome trim and dark-tinted window glass, and their coachwork bore the name and address of a German tourist agency. A small orange tent by the side of the track was marked with a sign, "Damen," but there was no similar facility for the men, most of whom were arranging themselves into a group for a photograph.

"Don't stop," said Mann.

"Might have to," said Dempsey. "If they're in trouble and we pass by without helping, there will be hell to pay." He slowed down as we passed the two buses, until a middle-aged man in a white dust-coat waved us on with a gesture to show that all was well.

"A sign of the times," said Dempsey. "English kids come on these treks in ancient Bedford army trucks."

It was the better part of an hour before we reached the map reference where Dempsey's man awaited us. It was ferociously hot as we got out of the car to inspect the place where the Bekuvs' Land-Rover had left the track and headed west across the open desert. The tire tracks were still visible in the soft sand, but there was a substratum of hard-baked ground that in places had cracked to make pans—depressions—that were sometimes half a mile wide.

We transferred to the waiting Land-Rover, and Dempsey's man continued south with our rented car. It was better that it should pass the next police-post on time. The movements of Dempsey's Arab and this battered Land-Rover would not be so assiduously reported.

"Go slow," ordered Mann. "His tires are the same as ours."

"Less worn," said Dempsey. "And there is one that looks brand new."

"Well, I don't want to be crawling round in the sunshine examining tire tracks with my vest-pocket microscope," said Mann.

"Do you have a microscope?" said Dempsey. "Some of these desert flowers are worth looking at under a glass." There was no telling how much of it was serious and how much was mockery.

We left the flat, hard ground, that the road builders had chosen, and the going changed to the gravelly surface of *erg* and then to rough "washboard," which made the suspension shudder. Dempsey accelerated until he found the speed at which the corrugations seemed to smooth out, and we made good speed for over an hour, until we encountered the first patches of soft sand. Dempsey sped through them to begin with, and each time found some hard surface before getting bogged down; but our luck couldn't last forever, and eventually he had to engage the four-wheel drive and crawl to safety.

The going became softer and softer, until we were threading our way through a series of dunes. The tracks skirted the higher sand hills, but even so, the Land-Rover was careening about like a roller-coaster. The prevailing east wind made the upward side of each dune a gentle slope, but the far side was sometimes precipitous. Yet there was no alternative to accelerating over the brink. No one spoke, but it was becoming obvious that only a marginal difference of sand, or a momentary carelessness on Dempsey's part, would leave us stuck at either the top or the bottom of one of these dunes. We had surmounted one of the gentlest slopes when I heard the sand jamming against the underside of the Land-Rover and then Dempsey wrenched at the steering wheel so that we slithered to the valley of the dune in a sideslip that covered us in a storm of flying sand. We stopped at a steep angle, with Mann cursing and rubbing his sore head. Even through the brown swirling dust I could see what had made Dempsey swerve. There, not fifty yards away, was another Land-Rover—empty and abandoned. Even before the sand settled, Mann was out of the car and following the still-visible tracks that the others had left. Red had abandoned her shoes, and a man—Professor Bekuv—had stumbled and fallen leaving a long scar in the smooth sand.

We followed the tracks for fifty yards or so; and then they were replaced by wide, shallow troughs, ridged with an even pattern of lines. Mann was the first to recognize the strange spoor. "A dune buggy!" He hurried forward until he found a place where the softly inflated tires had ballooned on the ridge of the next dune. "No doubt about it—a dune buggy." The curious little car that Americans used for cavorting on beaches were the only vehicles that could outrun a Land-Rover in country like this.

"A dune buggy?" said Dempsey.

"Lightweight open vehicle," I said. "Molded body, four wheels,

specially made soft tires with a very wide tread, and a canvas top to shield you from the sun. Roll bar for protection, can be used to mount a heavy machine gun."

"What are you talking . . ." said Mann, and then he raised his eyes to the ridge of the next dune, and he saw them, too.

There were three men in the dune buggy. I studied them carefully for signs of their origin or allegiance. They had the very dark skin of the sort you see in the far south. Protecting their heads from the high sun, they wore the *howli*, and their robes were ragged and dirty but had once been the *boubou* style of Mauritania, far to the west. Their faces were impassive, but the man in the rear seat gave an imperious wave of the AKMS machine pistol he was holding. Obedient to it, we scrambled up the burning-hot sand.

They were patrolling, and, after walking another half hour, we caught sight of the pale sand that surrounded it, a great fortress complete with crenellated walls and watchtowers. Ever since the Romans, armies had built such fortified encampments to dominate the caravan trails, wells, and desert tracks. The French had built more and used the Foreign Legion to man them. But there was no flag flying from the mast of this fort, only a tangle of shortwave aerials: dishes, rods, spirals, arrays, loops, and frames, more antennae than I'd ever seen before in one place.

At first sight I hadn't realized the size of the fortress, but nearly an hour later, when we had still not reached its massive doors, I could see that its ramparts were as high as a six-story building. Finally we reached it, and the Arabs herded us through the main entrance.

There were two sets of doors, and looking up I saw daylight through the sort of openings from which boiling oil was poured onto besieging knights. The second set of doors opened onto a courtyard. Parked there were more dune buggies, and beyond them a helicopter. It looked like the little Kamov two-seater gunship that had chased Bekuv down the road on the day he defected and shot up the car with the Arab boy in it. Now its blades had been removed, and a couple of mechanics were tinkering with the rotor linkage. But most of the courtyard was occupied by two huge radio telescopes, the dishes about sixty feet across. Bekuv was there, parading around the equipment and touching the controls and the wiring and the bowl-edge with the sort of tactile awe that most men reserve for very old cars or very new mistresses.

"God!" said Mann softly when he saw the radio telescopes and realized what they'd been used for. He called to Bekuv, "Hey there, Professor. Are you all right?"

Bekuv looked at us for a long time before replying. Then he said, "Come here." It was a command. We shuffled over to him.

"Why didn't you tell us?" said Mann. "Why didn't you say you'd set up this tracking station to milk the communications satellites? Was it your idea?"

Mann was unable to keep the admiration out of his voice, and Bekuv smiled in appreciation. He handed Mann a water flask. Mann drank some and passed it to Percy and then on to me. The water was warm and heavily chlorinated, but it was a welcome relief after our long walk.

Bekuv watched Mann all the time, studying his badly bruised face and the tape—dirty now—that could be seen under the brim of his hat. Bekuv's eyes were wide and glaring, or perhaps I was just being wise after the event. "I thought you were dead," he told Mann. "I thought they shot you at the airport."

"Yes, I'm sorry about that," said Mann. He sat down on a broken packing case and closed his eyes. The hike through the soft sand had exhausted him.

Bekuv said, "I was right not to trust you. My wife guessed that there was no chair at New York University—she guessed that you were telling me all lies."

"And she arranged with Moscow that you could come back here," said Mann. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, we know all that. But why did you *want* to come back here?"

"She said I was to dismantle the apparatus and shred all my records," said Bekuv.

"But you're not going to do that, are you?" I said.

"No," said Bekuv. "I'm going to continue my work. Last night I got signals from Tau Ceti."

"Well, that's wonderful," I said feigning enthusiasm.

"Who's Tau Ceti?" said Mann.

"It's a star," I told him. "Professor Bekuv picked up signals from it last year."

"Is that right," said Mann.

"So you read those books I loaned you," Bekuv said.

"And your lectures and the notes," I said. "I read everything."

Bekuv waved a hand in the air and gabbled some fast Arabic. I couldn't follow it except to guess that he was telling the guards to take Mann and Dempsey away somewhere. Bekuv took my arm and led me to the main building of the fortress. The walls were a yard thick and might have been here for centuries.

"How old is this place?" I asked, more in order to keep him affable than because I wanted to know. He reached into his pocket and brought out a handful of stone arrowheads of the sort that the nomad children sell in the southern villages.

"Roman," he said. "There must have been some sort of fort here ever

since. We have water, you see. The siting leaves a lot to be desired, but we have the only water for a hundred miles." He pushed open the massive iron-studded door. Inside, the fort was dark and even more bizarre. Shafts of hard Saharan sunlight stood like buttresses across from the gaps in the shuttered windows. There was a huge staircase dappled with light that came through the broken parts of the roof, sixty feet above our heads. But the room into which Bekuv went was equipped like a modern office: a sleek desk, three easy chairs, Lenin on the wall, and enough books to require the small folding stepladder. There was another door. Bekuv walked across the room to close it, but before he did so, I caught a glimpse of the gleaming gray racks of radio equipment that amplified the signals from the radio telescopes.

Bekuv sat down. "So you have read everything."

"Some of it was too technical for me."

"Last night I received signals from Tau Ceti." He relished repeating it.

"What kind of signals?"

Bekuv smiled. "Well, I don't mean a news bulletin or a sports report. Contact would be a more scientific description. I always said that the first interplanetary exchange would be some clear suggestion of number and order expressed in electrical activity close to 1,420 megacycles."

"Yes, I remember," I said. "The hydrogen atom spinning around its nucleus vibrates at 1,420,405,752 times a second. The idea of those immense clouds of hydrogen, floating through the galaxy and humming at that same wavelength in the electromagnetic spectrum—that captured my imagination, Professor. If I'd met someone like you when I was young, I might have chosen science."

Bekuv was pleased with me. "And remember, I said *near* to 1,420 megacycles. On that *exact* wavelength you can hear nothing but the hum."

"And you sent a reply?"

"A series of binary digits—pulses and silences to represent ones and zeros—which are schematic representations of the atomic form of carbon and oxygen. At worst it will be interpreted as a sign that there is some intelligence here. At best it will tell them the environment in which we live."

"Brilliant."

Bekuv looked at his watch. He was excited to the point of agitation. "We are preparing for tonight. Both telescopes will be working. One will be aimed at Tau Ceti, and the other at the open sky near it. Both telescopes feed their reception back into the computer next door. That compares both streams of material and cancels everything that is arriving from both telescopes. That's how I get rid of all the background crackle and the cosmic mess. Only Tau Ceti's signals are delivered to the output."

He picked up a long paper roll of computer read-out. It was a maze of incomprehensible symbols. "This was processed only three hours ago. No matter what anyone might say, there is a regular pattern to the pulses from Tau Ceti."

"Quite a dream, Professor."

"Don't deny any man his dream, my friend."

"You deserve an honest reply, Professor," I told him. "You don't seem to understand the dangerous position you're in. You're an embarrassment to the U.S. government and a threat to one of the most audacious pieces of Soviet electronic eavesdropping I've ever heard of. You've helped Moscow set up this place to tap the U.S. communications satellites stationed over the Atlantic. Getting material from the commercial ad government satellites and, unless I'm guessing wrongly, from F E D S A T—the one that carries all the secret diplomatic material and the CIA priority data between the U.S.A. and Europe. You must have given Moscow everything from Presidential phone calls to the Daily Yellows that Langley sends to London, Bonn, and Paris."

"It was a compromise," said Bekuv. "All scientists compromise with power—ask Leonardo da Vinci, ask Einstein. I wanted the electronic silence of the Sahara—it's the 'coldest' place in the world, to use the jargon of electronics. And the only way I could sell the idea to the ministry was by telling them that here we could get far enough west to 'see' your satellites."

I went to the window. The sun was blood red and plunging to earth, and there came the breath of wind that so often comes with sunset. It stirred the sand and made clouds of dust that rolled across the desert like tumbleweed.

"The party's over, Professor," I said. "The hijacking of the airliner, the killing of a U.S. senator, the treachery and death of his assistant—what kind of priority do you think this is getting in Washington? It's just a matter of time before they find this place. Moscow's triumph suddenly becomes a liability, and Moscow will want to snap its fingers and have this place disappear. And have you disappear with it?"

"Well, not even Moscow can snap its fingers and make a place like this disappear overnight."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that, Professor Bekuv."

"What do you mean?" he said.

I waited a long time, watching the sun sink. The desert sky was as clear as crystal, and the stars were packed together like spilled sugar. It was possible to believe him. On a night like this it was possible to believe anything.

"I mean the radio signals might be faked," I said brutally. "Experts—scientific experts, ready to concede their own little compromise, like Leo-

nardo da Vinci—might have designed a series of signals that are the sort you'd like to hear. One of the Soviet Air Force's flying electronic laboratories could probably maintain the right altitude, and circle the place that would be on your direct line of sight to Mars or Tau Ceti or Shrangri-La."

"No."

"And out there in the desert, Professor, there are a couple of big, big desert buses. When they stop, they put up little tents and mark them 'ladies' toilet,' but there are no ladies to be seen anywhere. The passengers are all fighting-fit men in their middle twenties. And there is the address of a German travel agency on the side of the bus, and if you know Berlin street addresses you know it's on that side of the wall without the advertising or the voting booths. They just might be waiting to come in here and sweep up the debris."

"What exactly are you saying?"

"I'm saying get out of here, Professor."

"And go to America or to Britain with you?"

"For the time being, just get out of here."

"You mean well," said Bekuv. "I must thank you for that . . . warning."

"And for God's sake, don't transmit any kind of signal that an aircraft could home in on."

He wiped his nose again. He had one of those viral infections that are common in the desert; the mucous membrane is inflamed by the sand and dust in the air, and once it starts it's difficult to shake off. "That is where I have to be, and this is what I have to do," he said. His voice was hoarse now, and his nose clogged. "All my life has been leading up to this moment. I realize that now."

"You have a life of achievement ahead of you," I coaxed him.

"I have nothing ahead of me. My own people want only that part of my expertise that they can use for the military. I am interested only in pure science—I'm not interested in politics—but in my country to be apolitical is considered only one step away from being a fascist. No man, woman or child is permitted to live this life without political activity—and for a real scientist that is not possible. Your people were no better. I trusted you, and you humiliated me with the forged papers appointing me to a nonexistent chair in a university that had never heard of me and didn't wish to hear of me. My son wants to be a jazz singer, and my wife has betrayed me." He sneezed. "Betrayed me with another woman. It's comical, isn't it? It is the true tragedy of my life that my tragedies are comical."

"Life is a comedy for those who think—and a tragedy for those who feel," I said.

"Who said that?"

"I don't know," I said. "Bob Hope or Voltaire or Eichmann; does it make a difference who said it?"

"I must send the signals tonight. Even if there were a million-to-one chance of communicating with some other world, it would still be a crime—a crime against science—to let it go."

"Other worlds have waited a trillion years," I said. "They can wait one more night. Men who want to kill you will be tuned to 1,420 megacycles tonight."

"Yours is the voice of ignorance and suspicion. Those same thoughts and fears drag civilization back into the Dark Ages. No scientist worthy of the name can put his personal safety before the pursuit of knowledge."

"I wasn't putting your personal safety before the pursuit of knowledge," I said. "I was putting *my* personal safety before it. If you want to stay here and talk to Tau Ceti and prove me wrong, okay. But why not allow the rest of us to move off into the desert?"

"Because you will make for the Trans-Sahara Highway, and from there you will go north and get away. Don't pretend you won't."

"I can't speak for the others," I said. "But speaking personally, I'll try to do exactly that."

Bekuv frowned, got to his feet, and pretended to look at his shelves of books. The daylight was fading rapidly, and the dim yellow lights in the courtyard glowed more brightly as the generators started and made the floor vibrate with a very low rumbling noise.

"Your wife drives a car like no one I've ever seen, Professor," I said.

Bekuv turned to me, nodded, and fetched a pack of cigarettes out of a drawer in his desk. They were American cigarettes, and here in Algeria they were precious. He offered one to me, and I accepted it with thanks. "We are both betrayed," said Bekuv.

I looked at him but didn't answer.

"I'm going to kill them both," said Bekuv.

"Your wife and Red Bancroft?"

"Yes, I'm going to kill them both. It's the only way to regain my honor."

"How will you go about it?" I asked.

"With my own bare hands." He held them up and made a gesture imitating pincers. "And it will be a pleasure," he added.

"You're not being scientific, Professor," I said.

"You mean I'm being childish." He turned to me and stared for a moment before blowing his nose.

"Worse. A child who has his toys stolen runs and grabs them back; he doesn't smash them."

"I love her, I admit it." He inhaled deeply and then let the smoke trickle out of him.

"Miss Bancroft is your problem—eliminate her, and your wife will come back to you."

"Yes, I will kill Miss Bancroft."

"That would make your wife hate you forever."

"I will order one of these Arabs to kill the girl."

"Your wife will guess you gave the order."

"Yes," he said. He stubbed his cigarette into an ashtray. "It must look like an accident."

I shook my head. "Your wife will guess. She is a very clever woman, Professor Bekuv."

"I must get rid of the Bancroft girl. I see that now. You are right. She is the evil one."

"Right!" I said. "And there is only one way in which the Bancroft girl can die, and yet leave you entirely blameless in the eyes of your wife."

"You mean if you kill her."

"Now you are being really scientific," I said.

Bekuv stared at me. "Why should I trust you?"

"If I double-cross you, you'd only have to tell Major Mann what I'd done, and I'd face a murder trial when I got home."

"So you want me to let you go."

"Well, you don't think I want to stay here, do you?"

"I suppose not." Only with an effort of will could he imagine anyone so indifferent to his precious radio telescopes.

"I'll want a dune buggy, some water, and food."

"You can't have a dune buggy."

"Very well, we'll go on foot, but we must leave tonight. Mann is sick. He'd not make it across the desert in the heat of day. It's a damned long way to the highway, and who knows how long we'll wait there."

He nodded.

"There's just that one thing, Professor," I said. "This has got to be done in such a way that Major Mann and Mr. Dempsey—the old man—don't know it was me."

Bekuv's eyes flickered as he smiled. The wariness that is ever-present in the crackpot mind, appreciated such caution. He held out his hand to me. "The two men can go," he said, "but you will not get out of here until the Bancroft woman is dead."

I shook his hand on it.

It was dark by the time I went up to the rooms where Mann, Dempsey and the two women were. Before his defection, this had been Bekuv's living accommodation. The two men were in the sitting-room. It was a comfortable place. There were a couple of rugs to hide the cracks in the wall, a wooden floor so new that it still smelled of antitermite spray, leather-covered armchairs, an old crucifix, a collection of records, and an

elaborate amplifier and speakers. A new American air conditioner purred gently in the boarded-up window.

Percy said, "We've got to get out of here." He was sitting on the sofa. Mann was there, too, but he was asleep. Dempsey said, "Your friend is sick. He should have gone back north after the car crash."

I went over to Mann and stared at him. He looked as if he was running a temperature, but his pulse was strong and his breathing regular. "He'll be all right," I said.

Dempsey didn't answer, but clearly he didn't agree. He pulled a bright red blanket over Mann. Mann didn't awaken.

I said, "You can wake him and get him on his feet. Take him down to the yard and leave through the main gate. Head due west—you've got a compass, haven't you?"

"Is he letting us go?"

"I made a deal with him. Where are the women?"

"Through the kitchen. There's another room. I might need your help with Major Mann."

"Prod him," I said. "I'll catch up with you later."

"You have got a compass?"

"I watched the sun go down. I'll be all right. Wait for me at the highway."

"He's quite a weight," said Dempsey. He grabbed Mann's arm and shook him roughly. "Come along," he said.

I walked through the kitchen to find the women.

Chapter Twenty-four

The still desert night was shattered by the ugly screams of Mrs. Bekuv. She fought her way through the Arabs who were lounging in the doorway at the bottom of the stairs. The violently flaying arms knocked one of the boys off balance and gave another a bloody nose. They had scarcely delayed her as she ran, hysterical and screaming, across the dimly lit compound to the big radio telescopes. The great dish shapes were only faintly discernible in the light of a waning moon and a thousand stars. Only when Mrs. Bekuv reached the place where her husband was standing did her garbled cries become comprehensible. It was Russian. I could pick out a few phrases here and there: "The girl is dead. Who would have done it if not you? Who can I tell, who can I tell? . . . I hate you . . . Why did she have to die? . . . If only it had been me . . ." Many of them

were repeated in that grief-stricken litany with which humans numb their minds to anguish.

"It wasn't me, and it wasn't any of the Arabs," said Bekuv, but his voice did nothing to calm her, and soon he began to contract the very hysteria that he was trying to cure.

He shouted and slapped her across the face—very hard, the way they do in old Hollywood films—but it only made her worse. She was struggling now, hitting, punching, and kicking him, so that he had to hold her very close to restrain her. It was like trying to cage a wildcat. Half a dozen Arabs had come out to watch the struggle, and four men at the controls of the dish—Russian technicians—stopped their work to see what was happening. But none of them did anything to part the couple.

I turned away from the window and looked at Red. "She's done you proud," I said. "No one could have asked for a better performance."

"She did it for me," said Red. Her voice was matter-of-fact.

"And you?"

"I don't love anyone," she said. "My analyst says I'm bisexual. He doesn't understand. I'm neuter."

"You don't have to hate yourself," I said. "You've brought no harm to her."

"No," she said scornfully. "I've taken her away from her husband, she'll never again see her grown-up son. If we all get out of this alive, she'll be a KGB target for ever and ever."

I looked down into the central yard. Two Arab guards were restraining Mrs. Bekuv. She was still talking to her husband, but I couldn't hear the words. Red came to the window and looked down too.

"She'll do it," I said.

"Yes, she'll do it," said Red. "She's incredibly clever with everyone—except with me."

"What's the matter?" I said.

"I can't go down that rope. I'm frightened of heights . . . I get dizzy just looking down into this yard here."

"I'll tie it around you and lower you down. Keep your eyes closed and you'll be all right."

"Will he come up here looking for the corpse?" she asked.

"Perhaps—but not until he's finished his transmission. And that will take hours."

She went to the other window and looked down at the sand far below. Dempsey and Mann had already left but they were not to be seen. "And the sentries?"

"Stop worrying," I said. I went across to her and put my arm around her waist. It was no more than a brotherly gesture, and she did not shrink away from me as she had done earlier.

"I'm sorry," she said. "We both lost out—but now I'm beginning to think maybe I lost more than you did."

"Let's get the rope around you," I said. "It won't get any darker than this."

The night air was cool, but underfoot the sand was warm, and soft enough to make progress slow and difficult. Even with the stars to guide us, we lost our way after the moon disappeared. The sandhills, like some great rolling ocean transfixed forever, shone in the dusty starlight.

There was no sound; it must have been flying very high. There was a flash like that of an electrical storm, and a rumble like thunder. Anywhere else and we would have written it off as a thunderstorm, put up our umbrellas, and waited for the rain. But this was a thousand miles deep into the Sahara.

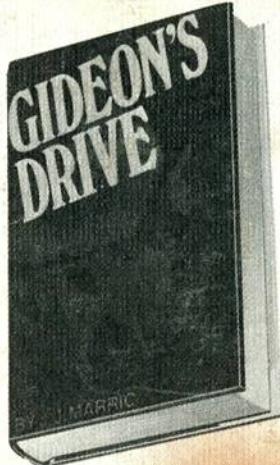
"Smart bomb," said Mann. "You put a laser beam from aircraft to target and let the bomb slide down the beam."

"Unless you can persuade the target to put up a beam for you," I said.

Red said nothing. Ever since we'd caught up with Mann and Dempsey she'd been walking a few paces behind us. Several times I saw her turning around hoping to see Mrs. Bekuv there.

The sound of the explosion rumbled across the empty desert and then came rolling back again, looking for a place to fade away. I waited for Red to catch up. I put my arm out, offering to help her, but without a word she limped past me, sometimes sliding in the soft steep dune. After the explosion she didn't look back again.

THE END

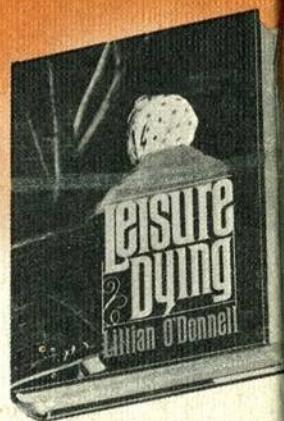


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