



The Corpse That Walked

The Corpse That Walked

Octavus Roy Cohen

1951

Chapter One

THE SKATING pond at Rockefeller Center was crowded.

Hundreds of the idly curious gazed down at a gay scene: a scene of action and color, of skaters who whirled and spun in the center of the smooth gray surface, of others who stroked methodically about the edges of the rink.

There were old people and young people and even children; there were experts and beginners, there was grim concentration on the task of skating, and there was laughter from the lips of those who had mastered a degree of the art and were no longer worried about the elementary problem of remaining upright.

This was a skating pond like no other skating pond in the world. It was backgrounded by tall, austere, and massively handsome buildings that stretched up and up and up into a clear December sky. It was bathed in the soft glow of cleverly contrived lights. At each end there was a restaurant where people sat warmly and comfortably and viewed the merrymaking through huge glass windows.

Some of the better skaters wore startling costumes: young ladies in extremely abbreviated skirts that showed attractive legs to best advantage; young men who wore black tights and close-fitting shirts. But the great majority skated in their street clothes.

Gail Foster and Alan Douglas did. They wore the same clothes in which they had been working all day.

She was only a few inches more than five feet in height. You'd look at her the first time without particular interest, and then you'd look again and say, "There's a pretty girl." She was that sort: slender and attractive and intelligent-looking. Her sports costume of dark-blue woolen skirt, twin sweaters of pale yellow, and dark-blue beret did nothing to conceal a slim but unmistakably feminine figure. She skated well; surely and smoothly and easily. She skated better than the tall man who stroked along beside her, his hands clasped in hers.

About Alan Douglas you'd say, "He's a nice-looking fellow." You wouldn't say that he was handsome, because he wasn't. But he was the sort of man you'd feel

instinctively that it would be pleasant to know. His six feet of muscular body was clad in business tweeds, his attractively homely face was set with concentration on the task at hand. He wasn't a fancy skater, but he gave an impression of sureness.

They were having fun, these two. It was their skating pond, the music played for them alone, the three-quarter moon that looked down from above the towering structures of steel and concrete was, for this evening, their own personal property.

They were young, and very much in love.

They had met after working hours and had dined together in one of the restaurants overlooking the rink. The conversation had been a trifle tight during dinner, as though they had agreed to avoid the subject upper most in the minds of both. They chatted of inconsequential things, even though you'd know by just looking at them that anything that concerned either of them was of major consequence to both.

They finished with their skating and replaced skates and skating shoes with street shoes. She slipped a jaunty gray sports coat over her costume, and he got his topcoat and hat from the check room. They moved through the Promenade to Fifth Avenue, and when he would have hailed a taxi, she suggested that they walk.

They turned north on Fifth Avenue. But it was not until they were moving along the light-studded reaches of Central Park north of 59th Street that she broke the silence. She said, "Thanks, mister. It worked wonderfully."

He grinned down at her. It was an oddly twisted grin that lighted up his whole face. "You needed to be snapped out of the doldrums," he told her.

"Right. And you did a first-rate job. It was fun."

"Why shouldn't it be? No one could help but enjoy my kind of skating."

"You didn't fall..."

"And when you've said that, you've said it all." He changed the subject. "Think you'll sleep tonight?"

“Yes.” Then, as an afterthought, “I hope so.”

He saw the shadow that crossed her sensitive, expressive face. He said, “Chin up, honey. We’ll figure a way out of it somehow.”

“I know.” When her eyes met his he saw that the old apprehension had returned. “I wish you’d stop worrying about it, Alan. It isn’t your headache.”

“Wrong again. Whatever bothers you is very much my headache.”

“But this...” She was leaving her sentences hanging in the air. “There are some things that can be done, Alan—and some things that are impossible for ordinary mortals.”

“But I’m not an ordinary mortal, Miss Foster. You should have learned that long ago.”

“I did.” Her voice was almost humble. “Perhaps that’s why I love you so much.”

There seemed to be no adequate answer to that one. He tried to say something and did no better than “I’m a lucky guy,” and then they were silent again. They did not speak until they had swung eastward from the Avenue and reached the lobby of the remodeled building in which she lived. “Coming up?” she inquired. “I can offer you a nightcap.”

“Coming up,” he assented, “but not for a nightcap. What I need is a kiss.”

They went up to the fourth floor in the automatic elevator. She fished a key out of her bag and unlocked the door. He stepped inside with her, closed the door, and took her in his arms.

They stayed that way for a long time. There was a fierce urgency in her kiss, in the pressure of her body against his. “That justifies everything,” he said. “And now Old Doc Douglas is giving orders. You’ll forget problems for tonight. You’ll convince yourself that if anybody can do anything, I will.” He bent and kissed her hard on the lips. “Night, sweetheart,” he said. Then he opened the door and closed it behind him. He felt very young, very happy—and very worried. It was easy enough to talk bravely about solving a problem that had no solution, and when he was with her he felt that he might accomplish the impossible. But the minute he left he realized afresh that it couldn’t be done: that

the thing weighing her down was something that had to be faced with a courage that, however admirable, was nevertheless hopeless.

His own apartment was less than a mile away. He walked briskly through the chilly night. At twenty-eight he was too young to remain whipped down by doubt. He had almost everything he might reasonably expect to have at his age: the beginnings of a promising career, a fair salary, the love of a girl whom he adored. If only the cloud of trouble were not hovering over her... If only he might be privileged to make her smile with her eyes instead of with her lips alone...

The building in which he lived wasn't far from the East River. The doorman nodded, smiled, and said, "There's a gentleman waiting to see you, Mr. Douglas. He's in the lobby."

Alan said, "Thanks," and walked inside. A man rose from a leather club chair and advanced toward him. He was a compact, well-groomed man about fifty years of age. His hair was iron gray, his gaze level, his black eyes keen. A gentleman, obviously. There was the faintest suggestion of a smile on his lips.

"Mr. Douglas?"

"Yes?"

"My name is Hamilton. Wayne Hamilton. I've been waiting to see you."

"So the doorman said." Alan instinctively liked this chap. He was clean-cut, direct, crisp. "Won't you come upstairs?"

"Glad to."

Hamilton preceded Alan into the elevator and stepped out first when the cage stopped at the ninth floor. Alan unlocked the door of his pleasant apartment, flashed on the foyer light, and led the way into the living room. He shoved a cigarette humidor toward his visitor, opened a closet door and deposited his skates inside, and then seated himself. He said, "Well, here we are."

Wayne Hamilton was regarding the younger man shrewdly. He said directly, "I hope you're not too tired."

“For what?”

“For a long talk that might prove to be quite important.”

Alan smiled and shrugged. “I’m a healthy animal. I never get too tired.”

“Good.” Hamilton’s attitude was formal yet friendly. He said, “Are you easily startled?”

“I don’t believe so. Why?”

“You’re likely to be.”

“Suppose you try me out.”

“Very well.” The iron-gray man met Alan’s eyes squarely. He said, “Let me explain something about myself. I’m a lawyer. Tomorrow, if you’re interested, you can get all the information you want concerning me. I believe I can say that you’ll discover that I am what I appear to be.”

“I’ll take a chance on that.”

“I had a very good reason,” Hamilton stated, “for dropping in to see you this way instead of arranging the usual meeting—luncheon or that sort of thing. But before I begin I have a rather odd request to make.”

“Go ahead.” Alan was intrigued by his visitor. The man’s voice was level and direct, his words close-clipped and precise. He gave the impression of driving straight toward an important goal.

“The first thing that may surprise you, Mr. Douglas, is that you are no stranger to me. No, we haven’t met before. But I know all about you, right down to the last intimate detail.”

“So?”

“The reason I do is because I’ve taken the trouble to investigate. I’ve been investigating you for a long time. A very long time. By that you may gather that the thing that brings me here is of great importance.”

“You’ve got me interested,” stated Alan. “I didn’t think I rated that much attention.”

“Perhaps you do. Perhaps not.” Wayne Hamilton puffed thoughtfully on his cigarette. “I’m going to state a certain fact, Mr. Douglas. It will sound very complimentary, but it’s not meant that way.”

“I promise to discount it properly.”

“The most important thing I have learned about you is that you are a man of unimpeachable integrity. You apparently have a standard of honor so high as to be considered a trifle old-fashioned.”

Alan flushed. “That’s one way of putting it,” he said. “I usually play it pretty straight, I suppose. But that doesn’t seem to be a unique virtue.”

“It’s more unique than you think. And to me it’s of paramount importance.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to start off with an odd proposition. My mission tonight is quite unusual. If I did not know that I could trust you implicitly, I wouldn’t be here. Before I begin I’d like to exact a promise. It is this: Permit me to start talking. I’ll quit at any moment you say the word. If you let me finish, you may accept or reject the proposition that I wish to make to you. But I want your word of honor that if you say no, you’ll forget this entire conversation.”

Alan Douglas looked thoughtfully at his visitor. “O.K., Mr. Hamilton. That seems reasonable.”

“Good. And now, Mr. Douglas, I’ve got to tell you a lot of things about yourself. Not that you don’t know them,” he smiled thinly, “but rather because I want you to understand that I might have taken infinite pains to learn things about you.”

“Go ahead.”

“I shall. One of the things I’ll tell you is that you are engaged to a charming young lady named Gail Foster. Her father is in a jam. He’s facing the possibility of a prison term for embezzling a sum of money slightly under twenty thousand dollars. She believes in her father’s innocence and so do you. Frankly, I also do.

But the fact remains that whether or not he has been framed, he hasn't a legal leg to stand on. The company for which he works has offered to drop the prosecution if he returns the money he is charged with embezzling. You and Miss Foster have been trying frantically to raise that money. You've recently come to a dead end. You're not admitting it to each other, but you both know it's impossible."

Alan Douglas was staring at his visitor as a youngster gazes at his first magician. The man had promised to startle him, but this was more than he could possibly have anticipated. Alan spoke as calmly as possible. He said, "I couldn't have stated it more clearly."

"I know that. And I know something else that neither of you know." Hamilton paused briefly, for effect. "There is one person who will cheerfully give you that amount of money—in return for services rendered."

Alan leaned forward. "Look," he said, "I know I'm not being kidded; you're not that kind of person. But you're talking in riddles, just the same. Who would be crazy enough to pay me twenty thousand dollars?"

"I would," said Wayne Hamilton quietly.

Alan shook his head. "Don't think I'm being rude. But I'm not accustomed to this sort of thing. How do I rate a job that pays off in that kind of money?"

Hamilton was smiling. "You're measuring up according to specifications, Douglas. This is the way I expected you to react. Can you take another jolt?"

"I wouldn't promise."

"I'll risk it." The attorney spoke sharply and impressively. "The price I'm offering you for the job I want done," he stated, "is one hundred thousand dollars!"

"Wow!" Alan rose abruptly. He said, "What in the world have I got that's worth a hundred thousand?"

"Your honesty. It's a rare thing these days to find a young man whom one can trust implicitly."

“Trust implicitly,” inquired Alan, “to do what?”

“Something very unusual. I’ve come to you,” explained Hamilton, “for two reasons. First—and I cannot emphasize this too much—because you can be trusted. Second, because you have physical courage.”

Alan’s face became serious and he nodded. “I figured that must enter into it some way.”

“It certainly does.” Wayne Hamilton made no attempt to soften the effect of his words. “This proposition I’m offering you contains a considerable element of danger.”

Chapter Two

SOMEWHERE on the street below the brakes of an auto screeched, and then there came the muffled sound of angry voices. A tug hooted mournfully on the river as it moved with infinite patience toward Hell Gate with its tow of laden barges. It was far past midnight and most of New York slept, but there remained a faint echo of the activity that never ceases in the great metropolis.

Its sounds were all normal and natural, and they helped to convince Alan that this interview was actually occurring, that by some miracle a strange man had sought him out with the answer to the one great problem he ever had been called upon to face.

Alan chose his words carefully. "A hundred thousand dollars is a lot of money, Mr. Hamilton. Ordinarily a young man doesn't have the opportunity of earning that much without..." He hesitated. "Well, unless the person offering it..."

Wayne Hamilton nodded. "I told you that your most important asset was your integrity, Douglas. Is it likely then that I'd approach you with any proposition that was not honorable?"

"I suppose not."

Wayne Hamilton asked deliberately. "Have you ever heard of Lewis Hartley?"

"Yes."

"What do you know about him?"

"Nothing much except that he's a very wealthy man. A sort of promoter, I believe."

Hamilton smiled. "Your description isn't exactly adequate. Hartley is worth many millions of dollars. He owns or controls dozens of large and small enterprises. But it's not surprising that you don't know more about him. I doubt whether he has more than three or four intimate friends in the world." He paused long enough to light a fresh cigarette from the stump of the one he was finishing. "Lew Hartley is my most important client. He is the man behind this offer."

“Why?”

“I’m coming to that. But about yourself, Mr. Douglas —let me state a few facts. I’ve been looking for you for many months. Oh, not you specifically, but for some young man who filled all the requirements. Finding you hasn’t been easy. You’re twenty-eight years old. You’re a mining engineer, and your present job is quite all right, but it doesn’t offer a very brilliant future. Your parents live in Ohio and are comfortably fixed, but far from wealthy. You have no brothers or sisters, and no financial responsibilities until, and if, you marry Miss Foster. Right so far?”

“Check.”

“As to your personal life, it is what is conventionally called ‘clean.’ You take an occasional drink, but never get drunk. You smoke in moderation. You’re slightly better than average at most sports. You won your baseball letter at college. You’re studious, but not a stuffed shirt.” “I could blush,” laughed Alan. “But perhaps that would be out of line.”

“Now,” said Hamilton sharply, “I’m going to give you a piece of information that will show clearly how implicitly we trust you—I and my client Mr. Hartley.”

“Go ahead.”

“With the world in its present state, you certainly understand the importance of manganese.”

“Naturally.”

“Well, what looks like an important new manganese deposit has been discovered in the interior of South America. Two companies, one European and one South American, are trying desperately to acquire control. The value runs high into the millions. Lew Hartley is also trying—and for the moment he’s got the inside track. He knows things that the others do not know. Every move he makes is being watched by representatives of those other two firms. They’re not sure how actively he may be interested.”

“So?”

“As long as Hartley makes no definite move, their hands are tied. He’s being

watched. He proposes to go about his life in the customary way. That is to say, he wishes to open his place in Miami Beach this winter, and to spend there his usual three months of relaxation. These other firms, once they are sure he is doing that, will relax. They'll continue to grope for the information they need at its South-American source, but they won't feel rushed. That will give Hartley more than sufficient time to clinch things his way. I won't bore you with details—they're financial rather than technical. Do you follow me so far?"

"Fairly well, but I don't see where I fit into the picture. It can't be simply as a mining engineer, because they're a dime a dozen."

"Right." Hamilton went off abruptly on a new tack. "Have you ever seen Lew Hartley?"

"No."

"You might be interested."

"You mean he looks like me?"

"Not at all. That's what makes this interesting. You see, Douglas, Lew Hartley wishes to spend the season in Miami, but he also wishes to spend it in South America."

"That would seem to be rather difficult."

"Yes." Wayne Hamilton spoke carefully. "Difficult. But not impossible. You see, a rather elaborate scheme has been concocted so that Lew Hartley's hands may be kept free. He knows and I know that the most perfect scheme in the world is fallible. We reduce the chance of error to a minimum by placing absolute trust in the man we engage to help us. So if you see flaws in the scheme, remember that we see the same flaws. We feel that we're simply taking a minimum of risk by trusting you. That's logical, isn't it?"

"Very."

"Now for some interesting dope. You've never seen Hartley, and even if you had, what I'm going to say would not have occurred to you—because normal people simply don't think that way. You're twenty-eight and he is forty-two. His appearance is utterly different from yours. But you are almost exactly his size

and weight. You have the same color hair and eyes. The quality of your voice is amazingly like his. Your teeth would look the same to anybody but a dentist. But it happens that Lew has certain distinctive features that you haven't. One is the fact that he wears a mustache. Another is that he has a very noticeable scar about one and a half inches long over his left eye. This gives him a rather sinister appearance that I believe he rather likes. There is, furthermore, that difference between you that fourteen years of time can give. But the chief difference is in the most prominent feature of any man's face. The nose. Your nose has an exceedingly low bridge. Lew Hartley's nose is of the pronounced Roman type. On the other hand, the bone contour of your skulls is about the same."

He stopped talking and Alan Douglas laughed. "This sounds like a lecture on anatomy," he said.

"That's what it's intended to sound like. Because this is the point I'm driving at. Right now you look entirely different from Lew Hartley. But..." He paused impressively, and then spaced his words with care. "But, Douglas, your basic bone structure is so similar that a clever plastic surgeon could make you look so much like Hartley that nobody but his most intimate friends—and he has damned few of them—would ever see the difference."

Alan said, "I believe I'm getting the idea, Mr. Hamilton. But it's so incredible..."

"Not when you analyze it. We will pay you twenty thousand dollars in cash now. We know you need that amount of money badly. It will settle a lot of problems for you. You tell Miss Foster that you've been engaged on an important job in the interior of South America. You make it clear to her that she will not hear from you for three to six months. You then board a ship for Valparaiso, Chile. But you don't go there. You get off in Havana, and fly back to Miami.

"There will be someone with you, someone who knows the whole setup and whom we can trust. You will reach Miami on the afternoon of December twelfth. One of the finest plastic surgeons in the country will have fixed up a surgery in Lew Hartley's Miami home. He will operate on you. When it's over, you will look so much like Hartley that no one but a few insiders—all of whom will be in the know—would suspect anything.

"You will then spend the winter in Miami, looking like Lew Hartley and acting

like him. There will be a trusted man there to keep your foot from slipping. You'll do everything he would do in just the way he would do it. You will be kept away from people whom Hartley knew before. Meanwhile, these other two companies will be watching you, thinking that you're Hartley—and believing that you're allowing too much grass to grow under your feet. And all the time Lew will be working on the manganese proposition without their knowledge. When the deal is successfully concluded, you will receive the balance of eighty thousand dollars, and you will be given a second plastic operation that will make you look pretty much like yourself again."

"What do you mean, pretty much?"

"Your nose won't be the same. Technically, in order to build your nose up, they'll take a piece of bone from the leg. This will be transplanted to raise the bridge of your nose. They can reduce this afterward so that you'll have a pretty good nose, but certainly not the one you now have. Otherwise you'll be back where you started. You will then return to your charming Miss Foster."

"She'll ask questions."

"Naturally, and by that time the deal will be all wrapped up and you can tell her the truth. How does it strike you?"

Alan shook his head. "It seems to be full of bugs," he stated frankly.

"How?"

"First, no man can act exactly the way another man would act. It simply isn't possible."

"That's partly true. It applies less to Lew Hartley than to any other man I know. As I mentioned before, he plays a lone hand. He has practically no intimates, and those few that he has will all be on the inside. The staff of servants will be recruited in Miami—none of them will ever have worked for him before. He's noted as an exceedingly gruff and unpleasant person; rather rude, in fact. Learning to conduct yourself that way might prove to be the most difficult part of your job. The chief danger to us would be a double cross, but that is a chance we are compelled to take. What else have you got on your mind?"

Alan met the other's eyes squarely. "You must have felt sure I'd do this for a lot

less than a hundred thousand. Why do you offer me that much?"

"Two reasons. First, I wanted to make sure you'd be tempted to say yes. Second, as I said once before, there is an element of danger."

"What sort of danger?"

"There is the possibility that one of these other groups might feel much happier if you were out of the picture altogether."

"In other words, they might take a pot shot at me?"

"Frankly, yes. Mind you, I do not believe that's likely. I'd say the odds were a hundred to one against it. But it's one of the chances you're taking."

Alan was thoughtful. "I appreciate your frankness," he said at length.

Wayne Hamilton leaned forward. "And your answer is—"

Alan Douglas said a single word. He said, "Yes."

Chapter Three

LOOKING AT a floor plan of Gail Foster's apartment, you'd have said, "Small, isn't it?" and the answer would have to be yes. There was a single room that looked like a sitting room by day and was converted into a bedroom at night by the simple process of opening a door and dropping a bed down from the wall. There were two moderately adequate closets, and a cubicle that bore the elegant title of dressing room. There was a bath and a tiny but completely equipped kitchen.

Gail was at work in the kitchen now, preparing an evening meal for two. She worked lightheartedly, wondering why the sound of Alan's voice on the telephone late that afternoon should have exhilarated her so much more than usual. He had spoken about a celebration, he had insisted that she prepare his favorite dishes as a reward for successful endeavor, he had demanded a mixed green salad such as only she knew how to mix, and he had done it all with an exuberance that had raised her own hopes beyond reasonable bounds.

She moved back and forth between kitchen and living room, setting the table, and then—waiting for the sound of the buzzer—she stood back and surveyed her handiwork.

But when the buzzer actually sounded, the summons startled her. Though she had been waiting impatiently for a half hour, she moved to the mirror and touched the tendrils of soft brown hair that seemed always about to escape. She gave a last critical scrutiny to her simple make-up. Then she moved swiftly across the room and flung open the door. She said, "Welcome, stranger," and stood back so that he might enter.

He came in behind a long green box. "Which will you have first," he demanded, "the floral offering or the kiss?"

He did not, however, wait for the answer, and for a few seconds she was lost against his big body. When she came up for air it was to take from him the dozen magnificent yellow chrysanthemums.

He dropped into his favorite chair and watched her as she arranged the flowers and their accompanying autumn leaves in a tall vase.

Occasionally as she worked she looked at him. He gave an impression of triumph, of accomplishment, and of a boyish pride in that accomplishment. That was one of the things she most loved about him. She knew that he had never really quite grown up and most likely never would.

“Do you get it now,” he asked suddenly, “or do we wait until after dinner?”

“Is it worth waiting for?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then we’ll wait.”

She broiled the steak to perfection, charred on the outside and rare within, and the balance of the dinner was attuned to its excellence. He helped her to clear the table and wash the dishes. They brought coffee and seated themselves side by side on the big, comfortable lounge. She touched his hand and said, “You may fire when ready, Gridley.”

“O.K.” He smiled at her. “You won’t mind if I do it the dramatic way, will you?”

“I promise.”

He took an envelope from his pocket, and from it he extracted an oblong bit of greenish paper. Gravely he handed it to her.

There wasn’t anything elaborate about it. It was a check—a certified check. It was made out to the order of Gail Foster, and it was for the amount of twenty thousand dollars.

She held it in her slender fingers and stared at it. She moistened her lips. Twice she started to say something and changed her mind. And then she asked, quite simply, “What does it mean, Alan?”

His huge hand closed over her tiny one. “It means just what it says, honey.”

“But it can’t!”

“It does, though.” Then, gently, “Perhaps you’d like to telephone your father.”

Something caught in her throat and her eyes felt hot. She said, “Things like this don’t happen.” But she knew that they did happen, that they were happening right now. She did not know the whys or the wherefores, she only knew that the impossible had been accomplished and that Alan Douglas had done it. And so she acted in a manner that was most unusual for her. She broke down and cried; not hysterically, but softly and terribly and briefly. And then she dabbed at her eyes and apologized for being so very feminine and telephoned to her father—rather incoherently, perhaps, but certainly so that he understood that he might sleep this night. And it wasn’t until long after that, long after she had settled herself on the couch beside Alan, with his arm about her, that she asked any questions. They were that way, these two. Even the incredible was not to be wondered at; there could be no doubt even where doubt was logical.

He was feeling very happy. She had reacted pretty much as he had known she would. Like a thoroughbred. He watched her take hold of herself, snap herself back to normalcy. She said, “How did it all happen, sweetheart?”

He laughed. “I’m not entirely sure myself. It came from nowhere and slapped me down. Somebody offered me a job. I got twenty thousand dollars in advance. It isn’t sensible, but it’s certainly simple.”

She said, “You’re a grand young engineer, mister—but even I didn’t suspect you were that good.”

His eyes became serious. “I’m not.”

“And yet...”

“Look, honey, this thing has angles to it. I’m doing half and you’re doing the other half. Your half is to accept what I tell you without too many questions.”

She quoted Alice. “Curiouser and curiouser.”

“There’s one part of it I hope you won’t like.” He looked away for a moment. “I’ve got to go away.”

“Where?”

“South America.”

“How long?”

“From three to six months. Probably closer to six than to three. And that isn’t all. You won’t be hearing from me during that time.”

“Why?”

“There are reasons... only one of which might be said to be the inadequacy of the mail service.”

She was fighting against a feeling of apprehension that she couldn’t understand. But she waited for him to go on.

“It’s this way, Gail. There’s something brewing down there. I can’t give you details, but it’s important and it involves a heap of money. They’re paying me an average wage for being an adequate mining engineer and a great deal extra for being trustworthy. So trustworthy, in fact, that I can’t even tell you any more than that.”

She stared at the tip of one tiny foot. “Would you have accepted the job if I hadn’t been in a jam?” she asked.

He nodded. “Probably. But I can’t say for sure. All I do know is that I’m doing it because I want to and because it’ll make me even happier than it makes you.”

She edged closer to him. “I’m all choked up, Alan. Mind?”

“Not a bit,” he answered, and so for a few minutes they were just two young people, very much in love.

“You see,” he explained later, “I’ve given my word to say nothing. All I can tell you is that I’m sailing on a ship called the Tropicana at eleven o’clock on the night of December eighth. I can’t even tell you precisely where I’m going, except that my getting-off point is Valparaiso, Chile. You’ll get a letter from me there, and not another until I’m practically home.”

“Six months is an awful long time,” she said.

“It isn’t, really. I won’t be worried about you, and—”

“I’ll be worried about you.”

There was a tense undertone in her voice that surprised both of them. He looked at her sharply. “What makes you say that?”

“I don’t know. I just have a sort of odd feeling... Oh, don’t misunderstand me, Alan. It almost sounds as though I didn’t think you were worth that much money for six months’ work, and that isn’t what I mean. It’s just that it seems out of line. It seems to indicate...” Her voice trailed off.

“It indicates what, honey?”

“Something I can’t pin down. Danger, perhaps.”

He laughed shortly. “The whole world is dangerous these days, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so. And I suppose I’m foolish and ungrateful.” Her fingers tightened on his. “I’d be hit pretty hard if anything happened to you, Alan.”

“Forget it, A bit of hardship will do me good. And between now and sailing night I want you to fill me up with pleasant memories.”

She faced him. She was smiling with her lips but there were tears in her eyes—tears that she could neither understand nor control.

“I’ll try,” she promised. “Beginning right now.”

Chapter Four

LEWIS HARTLEY stood at the window staring down at the lights of Central Park. He had been that way for ten minutes now: solid, immobile, powerful. Wayne Hamilton, his attorney, leaned back in a comfortable club chair and puffed calmly on a fragrant Havana cigar.

The room was furnished with severe elegance. There were no knickknacks, no gentle, beautifying touches. It was essentially a man's room in a man's apartment. It was a room of dark tones, of somberness almost. And yet it was comfortable.

Lew Hartley turned from the window. Now, as always, Wayne Hamilton experienced a slight sense of shock at sight of the other's face. He had often wondered—and secretly believed—that Hartley deliberately cultivated the Mephistophelean expression that was so vividly heightened by the jagged, slightly puckered scar over his left eye and by his unusually prominent, high-bridged nose.

Lew Hartley had few intimates, no friends, and innumerable enemies. His brown eyes were keen and shrewd and expressive. His voice had a quality that might have permitted it to be gentle, but it never was. He was gruff to rudeness, even with those closest to him.

The man was immensely wealthy. Only he and the suave, well-groomed attorney who was with him tonight knew just how many millions he possessed, and how he had amassed them. The investment world knew Hartley as a promoter of enterprises that were located chiefly in South America. He had formed dozens of companies and had incorporated them under dozens of names. Few of them made money for their investors; all netted considerable cash to Lewis Hartley.

He moved toward his visitor and dropped heavily into a chair. He said harshly, "All right, Wayne, let's have it."

Wayne Hamilton prided himself on the fact that even so brusque a man as Lew Hartley could not ruffle his own composure. He took one more placid puff on his cigar and said, "You've been in Chicago?"

“Yes.”

“Things all right?”

“Yes.”

“They’re all right here, too. Better than all right.” Wayne Hamilton was talking imperturbably, his eyes focused on the hawklike face of his most important—and most unscrupulous—client. “I landed this lad Douglas. Doc Greer has seen him several times. Physically, he’s the perfect choice. In other respects, he’s even better. He’s abnormally honest.” The delicate, sensitive lips of the attorney expanded into a slight smile. “Odd, isn’t it, Lew, that the most important commodity you’re buying is integrity?”

Hartley’s eyes narrowed unpleasantly. He said, “Don’t play cute. Keep talking.”

“You’re a gentle soul, Lew. You love to frighten people, don’t you?” Hamilton flicked the ash delicately from the end of his cigar. “At any rate, my story must have sounded plausible, because Douglas—who is a long way from a fool—fell for it a hundred per cent. Perhaps because he was so eager to rescue the damsel in distress. I’ll pay myself a compliment, Lew, since you won’t. My idea of getting control of the company for which Alan Douglas’ prospective father-in-law works, and then framing him so as to create the emergency that would make the boy willing to listen—it was rather neat, don’t you think?”

“You get paid for being smart.”

“You buy everything, don’t you?”

“I trust nothing but money. Not a damned soul. You included.”

“Splendidly spoken.” Wayne Hamilton appeared to be perfectly at ease, but he wasn’t. He’d never been able to get deep behind those burning eyes of Lew Hartley, never been able quite to fathom the man.

“Since we’re about ready to start the ball rolling,” said Hamilton, “I’ll sum things up for you. I’ve been doing more investigating on this end. The state and federal district attorneys are about ready to light on you with both feet. You’ve carried your various iniquities too far, too fast. You’re probably safe until March or April. There are some loose ends they haven’t quite gathered up. I’m making

it as difficult for them as possible. But when they do hit, Lew, you won't have a chance. You'll get anywhere from ten to thirty years, and money won't buy you out."

Lew's voice crackled across the room. "Quit making speeches. What the hell do you think I am—a jury?"

"I don't think anything about you, Lew. I know. You're the most unpleasant man I've ever met."

Hartley said something. It was grossly profane and insulting, but it elicited nothing more than a smile from Wayne Hamilton.

"Right now," the lawyer went on calmly, "the legal authorities are content to keep an eye on you, to see that you don't slip out of their grasp. Alan Douglas supplies the answer to that. He's sailing for Havana Friday night. He returns from there to Miami, where he will have the unenviable distinction of being made over to look like you. Then, and for the winter season, the infamous Mr. Lewis Hartley will be visible to the naked eye of any detective who might be interested in making certain that he doesn't get away. And of course our honorable young friend believes that he is masquerading for manganese. If he ever suspected he was fronting for a crook, the whole deal would be off."

Lew Hartley jerked his head around. "I don't see how I put up with you all these years, Hamilton."

"I know you don't like me. You don't like anybody. But I have a good reputation in my profession, and I'm just as free of scruples as you are. You need me, and therefore you have me. Otherwise, you'd kick me out of the front door."

"With pleasure."

"So we understand each other. And we both fully understand the business setup."

Hartley nodded. Much as he disliked his attorney, he admired the man's shrewdness, and Hamilton had planned well for Lew Hartley's future.

It was more than two years since Wayne Hamilton had notified his client that he was facing the possibility of prison. For more than two years he had been arranging matters so that when the time came, Lew Hartley could step into a new

existence under a new name and with a new identity.

In four Pacific-coast cities—Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, and Seattle—general trading companies had been organized under four different names, the only point of similarity between them being that a man named Joel Kent was president of each.

Lew Hartley was to become Joel Kent.

Although he never had been personally seen by anyone in any of the four western cities, Joel Kent already had a reputation as a solid businessman. His four trading companies had conducted dummy business with each other, and checks had passed through the banks, each signed with the name of a trading company and countersigned by the president, Joel Kent. The banks had long known the signature, and bit by bit, over this two-year period, funds had been transferred to each of the companies from Lew Hartley's personal fortune so that there was now available to Joel Kent, through these sources, more than two million dollars of Lew Hartley's fortune—more than he could spend during a couple of lifetimes, yet not so great an amount that its absence from the Hartley accounts would be noticed.

The scheme from that point onward was magnificent in its simplicity. As soon as Alan Douglas had been operated on to resemble Lew Hartley, Hartley himself was to be subjected to plastic surgery that would make him look like somebody else. Nobody in particular. The only essential point was that he should not resemble himself. His nose was to be reshaped and made smaller, the jagged scar was to be removed from over his left eye. He would emerge as Joel Kent, and would immediately go west and personally assume charge of the four companies that were operating under his name. The banks would welcome Joel Kent; no doubt about that.

Wayne Hamilton was smiling. "We're thinking the same thing, Lew," he said. "You can live the balance of your life as a substantial and honest citizen instead of as a number in a penitentiary. The plan is perfect."

"No plan is perfect."

"Granted. There is always the element of human fallibility. It isn't possible to foresee every contingency. Therefore I didn't make the mistake of trying. I concentrated on finding one person, then of creating conditions that would

virtually compel that person to say yes, Alan Douglas fills the bill in every particular. Accepting the big money from you, he'll play it straight across the board. Honest men may be stupid, but they're honest."

"Suppose he got wise?"

"He won't. Of course, if he knew, he'd talk. He's that kind of honest. But before any slip like that happened you'd be lost in the Joel Kent identity." Hamilton glanced at his watch. "Isn't Chuck Williams late?"

"Chuck's never late."

"Lovely lad. He's the only person I know who is more dangerous than you. And almost as unpleasant."

The buzzer sounded. Lew Hartley didn't move. He said to his lawyer, "That's Chuck. Let him in."

Hamilton opened the door and Chuck Williams entered. He shoved past the attorney as though that individual did not exist. He tossed his hat onto the foyer table and walked into the room where Lew Hartley sat. He said, in a flat, toneless voice, "O.K., Chief. I'm here."

Chuck Williams might have been twenty years of age. He might have been forty. Actually, he was twenty-eight. He weighed 140 and looked smaller. His hair was of that peculiar shade of blondness which is almost colorless. His cheeks were pallid. His nose was small. His mouth was a thin red slash across an expressionless face.

But it was the eyes that demanded attention. They looked straight at you, saw everything, and betrayed nothing. At times they were agate and at times they were the color of steel. They were dangerous, inhuman eyes.

The young man moved gracefully. He gave the impression of a coiled spring. If he was capable of emotion of any sort, it certainly was not reflected on his face.

Lew Hartley said curtly, "Sit down, Chuck."

The visitor did not move. He said, "I'm doin' all right."

Even Lew Hartley's personality was dimmed by the dangerous sureness of the youthful visitor. Lew gestured toward Wayne Hamilton and said, "He'll talk. He loves to shoot off his mouth."

Hamilton flushed. He said to Chuck, "You're sailing for Havana Friday night at eleven on the Tropicana. The name of the man you're covering is Alan Douglas."

Chuck made no answer at all. He merely waited.

"He's a rather good sort, Chuck. After he assumes the role of Lew Hartley, it's your job to keep his foot from slipping. But what is most important is that you're to keep any former acquaintance of Lew's from getting close to him."

Chuck said, "You don't have to tell me things twice."

"Any extra instruction you need—anything unusual that comes up—get in touch with me. When the season starts, see that Douglas keeps in circulation, just as Lew used to do: gambling houses, night clubs, Hialeah, the dog tracks, jai alai games. The feds will think it's Lew, so they'll be satisfied. And then..." He hesitated and Lew Hartley broke in coldly, brutally, cruelly.

"Then," he said, "an accident is going to happen to the man who is posing as me. He's going to be found dead some morning. My will will be probated and my estate divided. You fellows will get yours. I'll be safe. Nobody will ever look for Lew Hartley because Lew Hartley will be dead."

Hartley's brown eyes burned into the colorless ones of Chuck Williams.

"That's where you come in, Chuck," he said. "You're to wait until Hamilton gives the word. Not before. Then you're to kill Alan Douglas."

Chapter Five

THE STEAMSHIP Tropicana, 6,924 gross tons, looked tiny at a pier that had been designed for transatlantic aristocrats six times her size, but there was a large element of excitement, of eagerness, of noise and hustle and bustle, as crew and passengers made ready for departure.

In Cabin B-17, on the deck below the promenade, Alan Douglas and Gail Foster looked around the tiny, two-berthed room. Gail cast a glance at a heavy unfamiliar suitcase that had been shoved into a corner. She said, “I see you’ve got a roommate.”

Alan nodded. He had known that he was to have a traveling companion, but he did not say so. He said, “These ships are crowded every trip.”

“It isn’t much of a boat, is it?”

He grinned. “I’ll have fun. I’ve never traveled much, you know.”

Gail was trying to be gay, casual, cheerful. She did not want him to know that she was not entirely free from apprehension. The feeling that persisted was so utterly silly that it annoyed her. But there was an inexplicable electric tension in that little cabin.

Alan sensed her unrest and put his arms around her. He said, “You don’t look very happy.”

“Am I supposed to, with my best fiance deserting me for six months?”

“I’m flattered—and sorry. I hoped you’d enjoy your vacation from me. I hoped...”

Her fingers brushed his cheek in quick caress. “I know, Alan. I’m a bit of an ingrate. I don’t mean to be, really. Believe me, dear—there isn’t a moment I’m not grateful to you. You ought to see Dad these days. And you know how different you have made the whole future look. It’s all your fault, Mr. Douglas, if I’ve fallen much too much in love with you.”

He tried to laugh it off, but his efforts did not meet with any outstanding success. He was sorry that the element of deception entered so importantly into this unusual mission. He said, "Think of what's in store for you: a long letter from Valparaiso telling you of my travels. What gal could ask more?"

"I could."

He caught her to him suddenly and kissed her hard on the lips. "That's how I feel," he said. "I just talk the other way." He kissed her again.

Their embrace was interrupted by the hoarse bellow of the ship's siren, by the earnest gong-banging of a steward, and by a voice that bellowed for all visitors to go ashore.

They walked along the crowded corridor and up the narrow stairs to the promenade deck. She didn't kiss him again because this would have been a different sort of kiss, and she wanted to remember the last one down there in the cabin. Besides, she didn't want him to know how she really felt, and so she said something very gay and pressed his fingers and scurried down the gangplank to take her place in the cold night air where she could stare up at him as he lounged against the rail and the Tropicana began to back from the pier.

When Alan could no longer see Gail on the pier, he went below, partly because he was tired and partly because he wished to meet the man who was to be his companion, his tutor, and his bodyguard.

He walked into B-17. He saw a slender, wiry figure standing in front of the inadequate hanging closet. He said, "Good evening."

Chuck Williams turned. His agate eyes took in the tall, rangy figure of Alan Douglas from head to foot. It was a deliberate, impersonal inspection, accompanied by no change of expression, no word of greeting.

Alan experienced a moment of shock. There was something frightening about the smaller man. Then Chuck spoke. His voice was as colorless as his eyes. He said, "Hello," and let it lay there.

Alan tried not to become annoyed. He forced a measure of geniality into his tone as he said, "I'm Alan Douglas."

“Yeah.” Chuck finished hanging a suit in the miniature closet. Then he said, “Chuck Williams.”

Alan hesitated. Normally he would have offered his hand, but something restrained him. Queer lad, this bodyguard. Cold as a fish. Alan shrugged. If he didn’t want to be friendly, that was his business.

It was Chuck who broke the silence. He said, in that same emotionless, flat voice, “You’re built just like Lew.”

“I wouldn’t be knowing. I never met him.”

Chuck Williams made no answer, and in an effort to put things on a more cordial basis, Alan said, “How about a nightcap?”

“O.K. by me.”

They walked upstairs to the bar. Alan ordered a brandy and Chuck asked for plain carbonated water. “You’re not a drinker, are you?” Alan said.

“No.”

Something about the situation struck Alan as funny. He threw back his head and laughed with genuine amusement. “Are you always this way, Chuck, or is this something special?”

Williams’ eyes flickered. “I don’t get it.”

“We’re traveling together. We’ll see a lot of each other. I was wondering if you ever warm up.”

“I’m supposed to teach you.” Chuck’s voice was flat. “Not kiss you.”

Alan paid the check and rose. “All right, if that’s the way you want it. I’m going to catch some sleep. Coming?”

“Yeah.”

They walked back to the cabin. As they undressed Chuck Williams said, “You can be tough, can’t you?”

“I suppose so.”

“That’s good.”

“Why?”

“Because Lew is tough. He growls all the time. You got to practice being that way with people you don’t know.”

“I understand. But isn’t it different with you?”

“You don’t know me.”

Chuck’s words were more than slightly sardonic. He was thinking that Alan Douglas certainly did not know him. He wondered what Alan would think if he suspected that he was trying to make friends with the man who was eventually to murder him.

Chapter Six

AT THE MOUTH of Havana harbor, the Tropicana stopped its engines and waited for the pilot boat. The sea was like glass, and at five o'clock in the afternoon the warmth of the subtropical sunshine was more than pleasant.

Alan Douglas leaned over the starboard rail and gazed at the fascinating vista of the great, sprawling, cosmopolitan city with its miles on miles of white and yellow houses, the great hotels, the dome of the Capitol.

Alan felt a desire to talk, and so he addressed a remark to the taciturn young man at his side. He said, "That's lovely, isn't it?" and Chuck Williams answered tonelessly, "So what?"

The pilot swung aboard from the snub-nosed little pilot boat, and the engines of the Tropicana started turning again. The ship moved into the harbor, so close to shore that Alan could see people waving from the sea wall, and could even hear the deep-throated cries of the street vendors hopefully calling their wares: piruli, manis, and fritos. He caught a brief, breath-taking view of the great esplanade stretched between the presidential palace and the river front, and then found himself glancing up incredibly narrow little streets on which trolley cars shoved unconcerned pedestrians out of the way. Then they were nuzzling into a huge pier without benefit of tug. The Tropicana was tied up and stewards raced along the decks announcing that the immigration officials were on board and all passengers must have their landing cards stamped.

Less than forty minutes later, Alan and Chuck Williams had passed successfully the casual examination of their luggage and were whirling through a maze of narrow streets toward the Sevilla Hotel. They registered and were assigned a room together on the sixth floor. Alan flung open the window and looked down fascinatedly at the magnificence of the Prado, then returned his gaze to his uncommunicative traveling companion. He said, "Nothing excites you, does it, Chuck?"

Mr. Williams shrugged and lighted a fresh cigarette. "I been here before."

"Well, I haven't, and I like it." Then an idea struck Alan. "I forgot to ask you—did you turn my letter over to the steward?"

“Yeah. I slipped him five bucks. He’ll mail it in Valparaiso.”

That was the only feature of this whole affair that Alan hated: the necessity for lying to Gail. He had squirmed throughout the writing of the letter. But, he reflected with a smile, it had been a good one. He had equipped himself with travel folders and had given vivid descriptions of each port at which the Tropicana would stop, and—from his own imagination—had supplied anecdote. He was thinking, when she learns the truth—someday—she’ll never trust me again. And I shan’t blame her.

At a few minutes before ten the next morning they went to the terminus of Pan American Airways, made their declarations, signed them, and stepped aboard the Clipper for the flight to Miami. With almost boyish enthusiasm Alan gazed down at the sapphire waters of the Gulf, and then later at the long, narrow keys at the tip of the Florida peninsula. Within an hour and a half after leaving Havana they were circling the Dinner Key airport at Miami.

They went through the customs formalities quickly, neither man having made any purchases in Havana. They walked into the enormous waiting room and there were greeted by a tall, thin, grave man. Chuck said, ““Lo, Doc. Meet Alan Douglas.” To Alan he said, “This is Doc Greer. He carves you up tomorrow.”

Dr. Sherman Greer had a pleasant smile. Alan sized him up quickly and experienced a feeling of confidence. As they rolled away from Dinner Key in Greer’s car with its New York license, Alan and the surgeon chatted. It was a relief, reflected Alan, to talk to someone—anyone— who spoke in other than monosyllables. He had tried ineffectually to break through Chuck Williams’ reserve. The white-faced, expressionless young man spoke only when he had to.

The car skirted the water front of Miami on Biscayne Boulevard and then swung to the right over the Venetian Causeway. In Miami Beach they turned northward along Collins Avenue. They passed 44th Street, drove a few more minutes past lovely estates, and then Dr. Greer stopped in front of a particularly attractive place and said, “Here we are. Open the gate, will you, Chuck?”

Chuck did as he was bidden. Watching him, Alan had the odd feeling that in these past few minutes his bodyguard had assumed certain qualities that were almost human. There was a spot of color in Williams’ cheeks, the faintest bit of warmth in his hard eyes. They drove inside and Alan looked around and drew a

deep breath. If Chuck had warmed up to this place, Alan felt that it was only natural.

Lew Hartley's estate was not one of the show places of Miami Beach, but it was definitely and lavishly beautiful. Lew had spent about a quarter of a million dollars on it, and he had received a dollar of value for every dollar expended.

The sprawling two-story house was of modified Spanish architecture, its austere whiteness relieved by vivid splashes of color. It rose from the midst of a velvety lawn, and was shaded by magnificent trees. In well-ordered beds there was a profusion of flowers: roses, carnations, sweet peas, snapdragons, petunias, delphinium, larkspur. Along the east and south sides of the house the azaleas and japonicas were beginning to come into radiant bloom. The driveway was lined with royal palms and there was a screen of rambler roses cutting off the swimming pool from the street.

Far beyond the house Alan could see the ocean and hear the steady, pleasant booming of the surf. The beach was broad and white—and private. A decorative stone wall separated the property from Collins Avenue, and from the neighbors on either side. There was a garage, which architecturally matched the big house. The second floor of this garage contained rooms for the male servants. The women servants lived in a small, neat cottage on the grounds, yet shielded from the garden by high hedges and flowering shrubs.

And so from the avenue to the ocean, the property belonged to Lew Hartley. And across Collins Avenue he owned a strip of property covering the narrow stretch between the avenue and Indian Creek. On that side there was a small boathouse and a dock at which was moored a seventy-five-footer, as well as a smaller and speedier craft.

Sherman Greer walked about the grounds with his prospective patient. He said, "Well, what do you think?"

Alan spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "That's a tough one to answer. I've never come in personal contact with luxury like this. The idea of spending the winter here... Boy!"

Dr. Greer led the way inside. There were no servants about, nor were there to be any until Alan had recovered from the operation and all traces of the improvised surgery had been removed. He showed Alan his room: a huge one with two

windows overlooking the ocean and two facing south. It was furnished handsomely, and attached to it was a dressing room and a luxurious bath. "It's Hartley's room," explained Greer. "That's why you inherit it."

Alan seated himself on the edge of the bed and lighted a cigarette. He said, "Mind if I ask you a few questions, Doctor?"

"Certainly not."

"This operation... What's the program?"

"You'll eat a reasonable dinner tonight. We operate in the morning, fairly early. It won't be nearly as bad as you think. I'll use local anesthesia. You won't feel the slightest pain. You see, I didn't want to use an anesthetist. The fewer people who know..."

"I understand."

"As a matter of fact, you'll have a rather odd nurse. It'll be Wayne Hamilton, Hartley's attorney. I believe you met him in New York. I've trained him to help me, and he'll do pretty well. And I will remain here myself to take care of the postoperative treatment."

Alan said, "That sounds O.K.—but formidable. I suppose the patient is always a trifle apprehensive."

"No need to be, Douglas. You may have a slight swelling at first, but with only moderate discomfort. There will probably be a low-grade temperature. If I'm half as good as I'm supposed to be, you'll be right as rain and enjoying yourself within four weeks."

"Will I look like Mr. Hartley?"

"Approximately, yes. Precisely, no. That would be an impossibility. You'll let your mustache grow, of course. Your size, weight, bone structure, color of eyes, formation of teeth, plus the scar I'll give you and the prominent nose—well, you'll look so much like Lew Hartley that no one but an intimate would ever suspect the masquerade, and Hartley's few intimates—such as myself, for instance—are in the know."

Alan said, “And afterward?”

Sherman Greer glanced at him sharply, then looked away. The thought flashed through his mind that there would be no afterward; that this rather pleasant young man was slated to play the role of Lew Hartley not only in life, but in death as well. He said carefully, “I can bring you back to where you started, Douglas. All but the nose. And if you’ll pardon my saying so, you’ll wind up with a much nicer nose than you have now.”

Alan laughed and rose. “Mind if I take a look around?”

“Help yourself. I’d keep away from the road, though.”

“I understand.” Alan walked downstairs, trying to accustom himself to this luxury. He found himself smiling at the thought that his role for the next few months would be that of master of this place. He was to be Lew Hartley, the servants and casual visitors would think he was Lew Hartley. The prospect was far from unattractive.

He walked out of the front door and turned toward the beach. The day was clear, the sun unusually hot for this time of year. He saw someone swimming toward Lew Hartley’s private beach. The swimmer emerged and ran lightly across the hard sand toward Alan.

The young man looked once. He looked a second time. He said, “Wow!”

The girl who was coming toward him was—to put it mildly—spectacular. She was tall and she carried herself well. As for figure, nature had not been merely generous; it had been lavish. The curves were ample, and superbly distributed—yet the impression was one of slimness. Voluptuous slimness, if there is such a thing, decided young Mr. Douglas.

She continued walking toward him, moving with an easy, graceful stride. Apparently she had not yet seen him. She raised her arms and pulled off the swim cap. A mass of hair, the color of new pennies, cascaded about her neck. She was close enough then for him to see that her complexion was blonde—flawlessly, strikingly blonde—and that her eyes were of clearest blue.

She saw him then, and approached him deliberately. She was apparently unmindful of the brevity of her swim suit. He knew that she intended to speak.

She came to a halt in front of him and eyed him from head to foot with a deliberation amounting almost to insolence. Then she said matter-of-factly, "You're the guinea pig."

His brown eyes met her blue ones. He borrowed a page from Chuck Williams' book and said nothing.

"You're Alan Douglas, aren't you?"

He smiled and shrugged. "Maybe I'm supposed to ask who you are."

She smiled radiantly. "Smart lad, aren't you? Cagy." Then she said, as though she were sure he'd understand, "I'm Sunny Ralston."

He said, "It fits."

She laughed ringingly. "Come off it, fella. I'm in on this too, you know."

He said, "I'm afraid I don't know very much."

"You mean they haven't told you about me?"

"No."

"Well, what do you know about that?" The idea seemed to amuse her. She said, "How do I shape up?"

"I think you know the answer to that one."

"I've been told." She eyed him again. "You're not so bad yourself."

"Thanks."

"You look better as you are. But I can see... yeah, they can make you look like Lew."

Again he remained silent.

She smiled. "You're supposed to like me, mister. Think you can make the grade?"

“That shouldn’t be hard.”

“We’ll be together a lot.” Something seemed to strike her as highly amusing.
“Well, why don’t you ask me who I am?”

“All right—who are you?”

“I’m Lew Hartley’s girl friend.” She came close to him and spoke softly. “His own personal property. I go with the house.” She paused a moment, to let her words sink in. “I’ll be living in the room next to yours for a few months. And whether you like it or not, you’ve got to pretend to be crazy about me.”

Chapter Seven

WITHIN ONE week after the operation, Alan Douglas began to enjoy himself. The postoperative pain had given way to what could not be termed more than a slight discomfort, there had been no complications, the trifling fever had vanished, and he was not limited as to diet.

True, his face was swathed in bandages and there were times when he became acutely aware of the fact they had done things to his nose and leg and forehead, but it wasn't too unpleasant to relax in this luxurious room, to gaze out at the blue and white surf, and to be waited on by so decorative a creature as Sunny Ralston.

The huge house was virtually empty. Dr. Greer was present, of course, and Wayne Hamilton was very generally in evidence. Occasionally the expressionless and taciturn Chuck Williams eased into the room, remained for a few brief moments, and vanished again as silently as he had come. Theoretically, they shared the housework; actually, Sunny Ralston did most of whatever was done.

Alan Douglas had lived an average life. He was neither too sophisticated nor too innocent, but Sunny was a new experience for him. He had read of girls of her type, but this was his first contact with one—and he admitted to himself that the experience was far from unenjoyable.

There was something essentially pagan about the girl. Most of the time she wore slacks and at other times she walked about the sickroom in bathing suit and house coat, the latter revealingly open. Under all conditions she wore nothing more above the waist than a halter.

The quartet remained on the Hartley property. Excursions were barred to them because the house had not yet been officially opened, and it was no part of their plan to attract attention until Alan should be in condition to appear before the world as Lew Hartley. Dr. Greer and Wayne Hamilton spent endless hours instructing him on how to act when he did commence to circulate. Hamilton seemed to have the greater faculty for making himself understood.

"It's this way, Alan," he explained: "Hartley is an unsociable person, and even

when you've said that, you haven't said half. I doubt if anybody has ever really liked him. He knows that and appears to relish it. He barks at everybody. He's rude to waiters. Acting that way will be your hardest job."

Alan nodded. "It won't be easy."

"But you've got to do it. Lew Hartley acting decently, or showing respect for the feelings of others—that really would attract attention."

"How about here—inside the grounds?"

"You can act pretty much as you please. But you must watch the servants. We're going to hire colored help from Miami. I suppose it's all right to be moderately decent to them—although to make it look good, you've got to fly off the handle once in a while."

"I'll try." Alan hesitated a moment, then asked a direct question: "What about Sunny?"

A glint of amusement showed in Wayne Hamilton's eyes. He said, "I thought she'd startle you."

"That doesn't begin to express it." Alan chose his words carefully. "I'm trying to get the setup, so I won't stub my toe."

Wayne Hamilton said, "I suppose you've figured out the relationship between Lew and Sunny."

"Yes."

"She's attractive—and expensive. Very expensive. Lew makes it a point to go everywhere with her. You'll have to do the same thing."

"That doesn't sound unpleasant."

"It won't be." Wayne Hamilton's eyes narrowed. "But remember one thing: When you're out with her, your name is Lew Hartley. When you get back to this house, you're Alan Douglas."

Alan flushed. "I don't think I needed that warning."

“Maybe not. But Sunny is volcanic.”

Wayne Hamilton went downstairs and strolled toward the beach. There he found Dr. Sherman Greer lolling in a cabana. He pulled up a chair, slipped on a pair of sun glasses, and lighted a cigarette. He said, “I’ve been talking to little Rollo. He was asking where he fitted into the Sunny setup.”

Sherman Greer laughed. “The young lady has a way with her. I think she’s the only thing I’ve ever really envied Lew Hartley.”

The lawyer’s glance flicked across the face of his companion. “Do you understand the legal setup in this case, Doc?”

“Not entirely.”

“Let me straighten it out for you. Lew has taken care of us handsomely—but he doesn’t trust us.”

“Why should he?”

“That’s a debatable point. Anyway, there are precisely four of us who know any of the truth. Chuck Williams and Sunny Ralston know about the masquerade. They also know that a very fatal accident is going to happen to our pseudo Lew Hartley. They have been told that Lew has made adequate provision for them in his will, which is true. But that’s all they do know, Doc. They are not to know what he will look like after you finish altering his appearance. They won’t know where he’s going and they’ll never know what name he assumes.”

“In other words, he’s ditching them completely.”

“Yes. But they don’t suspect that. And even if they did, I doubt if it would make much difference. He’s leaving them a lot of money.”

“And us?”

“We know the whole business. It had to be. I’m his contact with the old life. I made all the preliminary arrangements. Aside from myself, you’ll be the one person in the world who will know exactly what he will look like. You could make trouble any time you wanted. So he has insured against that.”

“How?”

“In his will, he has set up two trust funds. I’m the beneficiary of one, and you of the other. They run into the millions. The only way either of us could cause Lew any real trouble would be by proving that he was alive. The minute either of us did that, the trusts would cease to be, since they’re created under his will, and a will only operates after a man is dead. So he trusts our desire for money considerably more than he trusts our loyalty.”

“He’s a shrewd man,” observed the doctor. “A very shrewd man. He takes with him all the money he can. He leaves the rest in such a way that we’d have to cut our own throats if we wished to cut his. The stakes are big, Wayne. They’re worth the risk.”

Hamilton shrugged. “The risk is a minimum,” he said. “That’s where our young friend Alan comes in. He’s too honest himself to distrust anybody. And before he can begin to suspect anything...” Hamilton paused significantly.

“Chuck will make it look like an accident, of course.”

“Naturally. And, so far as the world is concerned, Lew Hartley will be dead... and we’ll all be happy.”

“Except young Douglas.”

“Yes. Except him. But he won’t be around to worry about it.”

Dr. Greer asked casually, “What’s he doing now?”

“Just as I came out, Sunny was breezing into his room for some gin rummy.”

“They get along well together.”

“Yes. But Chuck Williams doesn’t like it.”

Greer leaned forward. “What do you mean?” he inquired.

“Don’t you know?” Hamilton tapped the ash from the end of his cigarette. “Chuck has been crazy about Sunny ever since Lew acquired her. But he’s the sort of lad who’d never dream of two-timing his employer. It isn’t honor, it’s

simply that he doesn't think that way. I believe he even admires Lew. But he is as much in love with Sunny as he could be with any woman, and I don't believe he would relish the idea of her stepping over the line."

The doctor nodded. "Fits in rather neatly, doesn't it? Chuck is employed as young Douglas' executioner. But because of jealousy, he'll inject real enthusiasm into his work."

"Something like that. At least we have nothing to worry about."

And at that moment neither Alan nor Sunny was worrying. She was sitting at his bedside, house coat open, disclosing her pale yellow fragment of a bathing suit. Between them was a checker board, which they used as a table for their daily session of gin rummy. He was saying, "You know, you don't have to be this nice to me."

She shrugged shapely shoulders. "You're not so hard to take."

"Wait till you see..." He touched his bandages.

"So what? So you'll look like Lew, and that certainly couldn't be called a novelty for me." She eyed him speculatively. "You know," she said, "you weren't so bad-looking before they started carving you up."

"Thanks, lady."

"You weren't handsome, but you looked... well, regular. I'll remember that."

"What do you mean?"

"When you're playing up—like you got to do. You know, yelling at people in public, shoving 'em around... that was always tough to swallow with Lew. It'll be easier now because I'll remember that this really ain't you at all, see?"

"You mean, he used to embarrass you?"

"And how! Not that I got any kicks coming. Lew always treated me swell."

He was frankly interested. He said, "Look, Sunny... and don't answer i💎 you don't want. But I'm curious."

“Most men are.”

“You were on the stage, weren’t you?”

A smile appeared on her lips, her eyes crinkled at the corners, and then her laugh swept through the room. “My Gawd!” she gasped. “On the stage, he says. Look, Alan, it wasn’t the stage. I was a night-club showgirl. You know, one of the dames that they put shoes on one end, feathers on the other, and a small sarong in between. And that’s about all I ever did. I can’t sing and I can’t dance. Nature fixed things up somehow so I’ve got these and those. I had enough of ‘em so I caught Lew Hartley’s eye. That was three years ago. Now look at me: automobiles, sables, diamonds... I ain’t saying I’m all I ought to be, Alan, but believe me, I have a lot of fun.”

“You’re a darned nice girl.”

Her face went dead suddenly. “Stow it!” she said harshly. “And get me straight. I’m not nice. I’m tough and I’m hard. I’ve got a body but no conscience. I don’t ask favors, and I never dish ‘em out. Down here”—she touched a spot just below her left breast—“I haven’t got a heart. It’s a ruby. And up here is a head—but it isn’t soft.” She got up abruptly and walked across the room. At the door she turned. “Get that straight, mister—and keep it straight. Don’t ever expect me to be decent, and you won’t be disappointed.”

The door slammed behind her. She walked down the hall, and almost collided with a slim, wiry, gray-clad figure. Chuck’s voice was dangerously soft. He said, “Just a minute, sister. What gives?”

Her eyes blazed hotly into his. “On your way, Chuck,” she snapped. “I’m in the mood to be alone.”

“You ain’t been alone for the last hour.”

“So what? I been playing nursemaid.”

“And loving it.”

Her eyes got hard, almost as hard as his. “I don’t like that crack, Chuck. Not even a little bit.”

“And I don’t like how things been going.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning you’re supposed to remember that this guy ain’t really Lew Hartley.”

She stared at him, then whirled and vanished into her own room. Chuck Williams stood staring after her. He was trembling. The relationship existing between this gorgeous creature and Lew Hartley was one thing. It was something he understood. But if she were falling for Alan Douglas...

He looked long and hard at the door of Alan’s room. He reached up under his left armpit and touched the ugly little snub-nosed automatic that always rested there.

“It’ll be a pleasure,” he told himself softly. “A real pleasure.”

Chapter Eight

THE PRE-CHRISTMAS season in New York was gay, but for Gail Foster there was a strange emptiness. Day after day she went to her office and efficiently discharged her duties as confidential secretary to the president of an important real-estate company; she attended the usual parties and went to her customary number of theaters and movies. She loved the magnificence of the Yuletide decorations in Rockefeller Center; but even there her appreciation was tainted by poignant memories.

Alan had been gone for scarcely more than two weeks, yet she missed him with an acuteness that defied analysis. It had been on Christmas Day, one year before, that Alan had blurted out—very unexpectedly—a proposal of marriage. He had said, abruptly, “It would be wonderful if you’d marry me,” and she made a reply that always had struck them as the height of absurdity.

She looked up at him and said, “What made you say that?”

“I don’t know.” He seemed as startled as she was. “Maybe it’s because I’m in love with you.”

And so they had become engaged, and they had spent Christmas Day together wondering how it happened, and why they hadn’t even suspected that it was going to. It was a Christmas to top all Christmases, a day of happiness and also of thanksgiving. No, it would never again be just Christmas. It would be always the anniversary of their engagement.

And so late on the night of December twenty-fourth, Gail sent Alan a wireless. She addressed it to him as a passenger on the steamship Tropicana at sea somewhere off the coast of Ecuador. It was a rather crazy message, but it would reach him Christmas morning and he would understand.

HAVE YOU YET DISCOVERED WHAT MADE YOU SAY THAT? AND DO YOU MISS ME AS MUCH AS I MISS YOU? THIS IS ALSO CHRISTMAS, ISN’T IT?

Having sent the wireless, Gail felt better. She attended a tree-trimming party, and through all of it she was thinking, Tomorrow Alan will get that wireless. I

wonder what he'll answer.

But Christmas morning came and went and Christmas dinner was eaten with her father, and all that afternoon and evening she waited for the answer that Alan was certain to send from the Tropicana.

When, by lunchtime on the twenty-sixth, she had heard nothing from him, a touch of the old fear returned. This wasn't at all like Alan. Even if he had forgotten the day or simply hadn't thought about sending her a wireless, her message demanded an answer. And no answer had come.

She was too much in love to have any silly pride, and so late that afternoon she sent another wireless to the ship:

IS SHE BLONDE OR BRUNETTE, LATIN OR AMERICAN? HOW COME YOU AIN'T ANSWERED THE PLEA OF MISS LONELYHEARTS? ME AND TIME WAIT FOR NO MAN.

That night and the next day seemed interminable. She felt the faintest sense of resentment, but she cast that aside as unworthy.

But facts were facts. She had sent Alan two messages, two light, gay messages that carried the undertone of her love for him. And he had not acknowledged either.

There had to be a reason. She considered every possibility, and only one seemed logical: Alan must be ill. She couldn't visualize him as being so ill that he couldn't dictate an answer to the wireless operator, yet it was possible, and no other explanation seemed adequate. She waited most of the twenty-eighth, and then in desperation sent a wireless to the purser of the Tropicana:

HAVE SENT TWO MESSAGES TO ALAN DOUGLAS WHO IS PASSENGER YOUR SHIP. HAVE RECEIVED NO ANSWER. PLEASE WIRELESS MY EXPENSE WHETHER HE IS ILL AND IF HE RECEIVED MESSAGES.

The cablegram was waiting for her when she got back to her little apartment the next day. It was from Callao, Peru:

YOUR TWO WIRELESSES RECEIVED BUT NOT DELIVERED. ALAN

DOUGLAS LEFT THIS SHIP HAVANA DECEMBER ELEVENTH.

GERALD GRAVES, PURSER, S.S. TROPICANA

Gail stood staring down at the message. Its import was clear, but there was no explanation. The more she thought about it, the more certain she was that Alan must be ill. He had got off the ship in Havana almost three weeks ago. He was too considerate not to write her of any change in his plans, and an airmail letter would have reached her in a day. The only possible explanation seemed to be that he was ill and unable to write. Perhaps at this very moment he was desperately ill in some Cuban hospital....

Gail spent a restless night, and in the morning she went to her office for only a half hour: just long enough to request and be granted a leave of absence. Her employers were surprisingly cooperative, and so was the airline reservation clerk, who gave her a seat on a plane flying to Havana the next day.

Chapter Nine

GAIL HADN'T the faintest idea what she expected to find in Havana. She wouldn't have wagered that she would find anything at all. But here she was, definitely embarked on a quest that she herself admitted was not quite sensible—and she had no single regret. Whatever she learned in Havana—even if she learned nothing—this was better than staying home and waiting, waiting...

When the big silver plane landed in Cuba the next afternoon, she got through the customs quickly and was whirled out to the Hotel National, which the stewardess had recommended. She was given a neat single room on the fourth floor. She unpacked the smaller of her two suitcases, and then went downstairs for a consultation with the taxi starter.

A few minutes later she found herself arranging for the services of an interpreter. This gentleman, slim and dapper and acutely aware of his client's gender and attractiveness, insisted that before she commenced attending to whatever business had brought her here, she should devote one day, at least, to seeing the sights—a suggestion that she politely but firmly declined. She explained her basic problem, and he was instantly sympathetic.

"Is very difficult," he said.

"Yes, I know."

"In Havana are many clinicas, many hotels."

"We'll visit them all."

"Will take much time."

"O.K."

He smiled brightly. "That is the same like Spanish," he complimented. "In Havana also we say O.K. when we mean O.K."

They hired a car and went first to the office of the local agent of the line that operated the ship on which Alan had sailed. The gentleman in charge became

exceedingly affable after taking a long, lingering look at Gail. He said that he surely would consult their records, and had she yet visited the Casino?

The results there were definite but not precisely informative. Alan had left the Tropicana at Havana on the eleventh of December, despite the fact that he originally had booked passage for Chile. Beyond that... "Quien sabe, senorita? Who can say what happen after that?"

"Can you find out whether he was ill when he left the ship?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no. I ask my friend who is one of the medical inspectors."

"Now?"

"Mariana, senorita. Today, he no work any more."

And that was that. Gail sensed that she must curb her impatience, must adjust herself to the bland indifference to speed that was most definitely a national trait.

Her next visit was to the Anglo-American Hospital, where she talked long and earnestly with a pleasant superintendent and a starched and highly efficient British head nurse. They assured her that Alan had not been a patient at their institution. They both promised to do a little investigation and to communicate with her at the hotel if they learned anything.

That was the beginning of five days of hectic and unavailing search. Ramon, her interpreter, was very friendly, very sympathetic, and moderately efficient. He took her to every hospital in and around Havana, even to the maternity hospital, which struck her as carrying efficiency just one step too far.

But the hospitals yielded no evidence of Alan. At the hotels, she was more fortunate. On the register of the Sevilla, she found Alan's signature as of December eleventh. There was no question then that he had left the ship and checked in at the hotel. She learned that he had left the Sevilla on the morning of the twelfth, but the clerks could give her no further information. They did not remember Mr. Douglas, and certainly they did not recall whether he had been ill. But the evidence pointed the other way. Obviously he had not been too ill to come to the hotel and to register for himself.

She visited all the steamship agencies and learned nothing new. Then she went to

the Prado office of Pan American Airways. No, Mr. Douglas had not booked passage for South America. But in response to the question as to whether he might have flown back to the States, the clerk came beaming to her with their records of December twelfth.

Alan had flown to Miami on the ten-o'clock Clipper that morning. Quite positively. The clerk saw a tragic light in the clear gray eyes of the pretty girl, and he went with her to the immigration office. There they found the landing card that had been issued to Alan when he stepped off the Tropicana and had been taken from him when he boarded the Clipper for Miami.

Beyond that? Gail was bewildered. The more she thought, the further away she seemed to be from a solution. Alan had been well enough to spend an evening in a Havana hotel. Alan had been back in the States from the twelfth of December until today, which was January fifth. And in all that time he had neglected to get in touch with her: no message, no letter, not even a post card.

She booked passage for Miami that night on the Florida. Somebody spoke to the genial purser of the ship, and he saw to it that she had a room alone. And all through that night as she lay awake and listened to the swish of the sea against the sides of the sleek little liner, she thought. She was hurt, bewildered, and worried. Somewhere, somehow, there was an answer—if only she could find it.

And then she remembered a man in Miami she had known for years: the sort of man it is a privilege for any girl to know. She hadn't thought of him before because she had not planned to visit Miami. Thinking of him now, she regarded herself as a most fortunate person.

Vance Crawford had always been in love with Gail. He was big and bluff and enthusiastic. She knew that she could trust him implicitly.

And so it was that when she finally dozed off for a few brief hours of fitful sleep, Gail Foster, was thinking not so much of Alan as of this other man: this Vance Crawford, to whom she could pour out all her worries, all of her bewilderment.

"He'll help me," she told herself. "And I need help."

Chapter Ten

THERE WAS something very comforting about Vance Crawford. Sitting there opposite him at a corner table in the restaurant, Gail Foster felt that she had never been quite so grateful to anybody in her life.

Vance was a big fellow. His waistline already had commenced to expand, and you knew instinctively that ten years from now, at forty-one, he'd be paunchy unless he did something about it; but you also knew that he'd never take that much trouble.

His hair was a shade lighter than Gail's, his eyes were blue, and his mouth was pleasant. For all his size and maturity, he had an impish quality. It showed in the way his mouth twisted when he smiled, by the way his eyes crinkled at the corners, and in his lazy, Southern drawl.

Vance was local representative of a company that produced a line of retail electrical appliances ranging from refrigerators to vacuum cleaners. He was an all-year resident of Miami and boasted that he knew pretty nearly every regular citizen and a heap of the winter transients. He had hundreds of friends and no enemies. And the fact that he was single could be explained only by the fact that years before, when he was living in New York, he had fallen in love with Gail Foster and had never got over it.

Over coffee and liqueurs, Gail told him her story. She talked with a frankness and freedom that made her feel guilty because she more than suspected that this big, easygoing St. Bernard of a man was still fond of her, and she hoped that she wasn't hurting him. Once she interrupted her recital to suggest something like that, and he put his big hand over hers and said, "Listen, sugar, I took my place in the back row long ago. And if there's any way I can help you to be happy..."

She talked for a long time, finding relief in expressing all of the doubt and worry that had tormented her. She brought her story up to the moment, and then leaned back in her chair and looked straight at him.

"Tell me the truth, Vance," she begged. "Am I crazy?"

A quizzical little smile twisted his mouth. He said, "I wouldn't say that, Gail. If

anything's loco, it's the setup, not you."

"You're not simply saying that to make me feel better?"

"Not entirely. Of co'se..."

"Of course, what?"

"Maybe they just changed their plans and wanted to have one more talk with Alan before he took off for Chile. So he got off the ship, flew back heah, and then maybe went right on about his business."

"But wouldn't he have told me?"

"Why? 'Specially if they asked him not to? He'd figure you wouldn't be worryin' about him, so he'd let things ride as they were."

"You're saying that, Vance, but you don't believe it."

"I never said so, honey."

"Do you believe it?"

His head moved slowly from side to side. "Maybe I don't," he confessed. "Maybe I think it looks kind of funny. S'pose we discuss what you've got in mind, and what we can do about it."

"All right. We know that Alan flew from Havana to Miami on December twelfth. Maybe we can double-check that by going over the records at Pan American, and perhaps even seeing his customs declaration. He must have signed that himself, and that would prove he actually got here."

"You sure are thorough, Gail. You know he left Havana on that plane; now you want to be sure he got heah. You reckon maybe he jumped out on the way over?"

She laughed with genuine amusement. "I must be slightly nuts."

"You're mighty sweet, that's what you are. It's a pity you got to waste it all on a mining engineer instead of a nice, steady young man like me. But since you did, why, I reckon we got to produce him out of the haystack."

She said, “The only trouble with you, Vance, is that you’re much too nice.”

“Yeah, I know. I was destined to be the best friend of a lot of nice girls. Nobody seems to take me real serious. But go ahead.”

“I will. And promise not to laugh. I have a crazy feeling that I might find out something here in Miami. The same intuition that sent me on this wild-goose chase. Even if you think I’m crazy, you will help me, won’t you?”

“You got no call wastin’ breath like that.”

“I know. Maybe that’s why I came to Miami in the first place—because you’re the one man I need most.”

“You quit flingin’ compliments at me. Just tell me what time tomorrow morning I’m to pick you up.”

“Nine o’clock?”

“I’ll be sittin’ right down in the lobby,” he smiled, “from eight-thirty.”

When Gail went downstairs to the lobby the next morning, he was already there, hoisting his ponderous figure out of a club chair, coming forward to greet her. “The chariot awaits without,” he announced. “So let’s get rollin’.”

They rolled. All that day and the next and the next. They proved facts that they already knew, and then found themselves at a dead end. Yes, Alan had arrived in Miami. He personally had signed his customs declaration. So far as they could discover, he had not checked into any hotel or hospital. There was no record of his having left Miami by plane or steamship. And so when they drove back to Gail’s hotel on the night of the fifth day, she announced that she was through.

“There’s nowhere else to look, Vance. You don’t have to tell me. I’ll go back to New York tomorrow—and wait. I’m bound to hear from him sooner or later.”

“I reckon so.” His fingers closed on her arm. “I sure am sorry, Gail. But maybe you were all wrong in the first place. Maybe there was a little change in plans. But you shouldn’t worry. You haven’t got the faintest idea what his bosses might have told him.”

“That’s the point, Vance. I don’t even know who his bosses are. I only know that they gave him twenty thousand dollars when they knew perfectly well he’d have taken the job for less than half that amount. It doesn’t add up right and it never will.”

“You’ve done your best, Gail. Nothin’ mo’ you can do. Now, tell me: Have I been a good boy?”

“You’ll never know what you’ve meant...”

“I’m askin’ a favor, honey.”

“What is it?”

“I want one evenin’ of fun with you. I want to take you places an’ show you things. We’re havin’ a great big season an’ you haven’t seen any of it. I want to take you around so when you do go back to New York you won’t be thinkin’ of Miami as just a lot of hospitals and hotel registers and things like that. So what do you say?”

She said yes, and promised to have a good time. After all, she had done everything possible, and Vance deserved a break. He wanted to take her places. Very well, she’d go, and she’d darn well see to it that he enjoyed himself. It was the only way she knew of saying thanks.

As a matter of fact, once they started, she found herself having a good time without making a conscious effort. Vance was bright and gay; he knew everybody everywhere. She was introduced to scores of people, and was flattered by the pride that Vance seemed to take in her.

She saw Miami in all its gaiety and glitter and madness. They went to night clubs, they saw some jai alai, they went to more night clubs. And they wound up shortly after midnight at the gaudy, tinsel spot that at that moment was perhaps most in favor with the winter crowd. There was a gambling room in the rear of the place, and they drifted in to watch the play.

One dice table at the far end of the room was jammed. Every available inch of space about it was taken, and the crowd of onlookers gave mute testimony to the fact that there was some heavy play going on. Vance said, “This ought to be interesting.”

They approached the table. Gail could see the faces of the croupiers and the backs of most of the players. Vance was saying, "Sometimes they have a real big play..." and then he realized that she had stopped walking. He turned toward her, smiling, and the smile left his lips.

Gail was staring at the crowd clustered about the dice table. She was gazing at the back of a tall man who was standing motionless in the midst of that throng. Her face was pallid, her eyes wide. Vance said, "What is it, honey?"

She moistened her lips and pointed toward the tall man. "That," she said, "is Alan!"

Vance whistled. He started to say something, then changed his mind as he caught the strained, bewildered look on the girl's face.

Gail started forward. She felt sensations of relief, surprise, and more than a hint of resentment. Of all the wild possibilities she had considered, this was the most remote: Alan Douglas in Miami, obviously enjoying himself, concentrating on a dice game!

Gail Foster shouldered her way through the crowd. She touched the tall man on the arm. She said, "Alan! What in the world..."

The man whom she had called Alan turned slowly from the dice table. He turned so that he faced her.

She experienced an instant of shock. The man who had been Alan was Alan no longer. Alan's eyes looked straight into hers, but it was not Alan Douglas' face.

The face into which she gazed was an evil face. A scar over the left eye imparted an oddly sinister appearance. The nose was large and hooked. There was a black mustache. She had the uncomfortable, almost terrifying sensation of a nightmare. And then the man spoke. His voice was gruff, harsh, rude.

He said, "What do you want?"

The color flooded back to her cheeks. She dropped back a step. She said, "I'm sorry... I thought..."

Other people were looking at them. She saw that this man was holding a stack of

red and green chips. He said, “Don’t touch me when I’m gambling.”

The rudeness was inexcusable. It was like a slap in the face. Vance Crawford moved forward, his face flushed. He took Gail by the arm and drew her away.

“That’s Lew Hartley,” he explained. “He’s coarse as mud. Everybody dislikes him.”

“That’s understandable.” She said that only because she felt that she had to say something. The whole thing was unreal. Vance said, “Let’s go back and dance,” but she wasn’t listening.

She was staring at the back of the tall man, who once again was absorbed in his gambling. Instinct was battling against cold logic. She saw Hartley raise his right hand and rub it against his cheek. She saw him nod at something that was said. She saw him light a cigarette, using one hand—not two—to shield his match.

Those gestures belonged to Alan Douglas. Little, inconsequential mannerisms, but they were his. The longer she looked, the more certain she became. She turned to Vance Crawford.

“You’re sure that’s Lew Hartley?” she said.

“Of course I’m sure, honey. Everybody down here knows him.”

Her voice was tight. She said, “That isn’t Lew Hartley. That’s Alan.”

Vance laughed. “You’re crazy, Gail—plumb crazy.” “Listen, Vance,” she said, “and call me crazy again if you want. But I’m not crazy. That man you call Lew Hartley is Alan Douglas. And I’m going to stay right here in Miami until I prove it.”

Chapter Eleven

BISCAYNE FRONTON was crowded. Out on the tremendous three-walled cancha some of the greatest jai alai players in the world were performing brilliantly in what: is probably the fastest and most dangerous game in the world.

This particular elimination contest was unusually exciting. Two recently imported Cuban players, the thin, bespectacled maestro, Epifano, and his doubles partner, Macala, had started from nothing and were now within a point of winning the contest and of paying off heavily on the mutuel machines. The spectators were yelling, some for the brilliant Cuban team, others for the Basque pair that opposed them for the playing of the final point.

The rally was sensational, and it ended abruptly when the young and shrewd Macala made a dead kill in the lower left corner of the 168-foot playing arena. There was a burst of cheering, accompanied by the groans of those who had lost their bets. Gail Foster, sitting with Vance Crawford, pointed to a man who was seated in the first row. She said, "Look—Alan lost."

The man she called Alan, and whom Vance Crawford still insisted was named Lew Hartley, tossed a sheaf of mutuel tickets to the floor. Vance said, "He bet heavy on that one."

"Alan can't afford—"

Vance turned to the girl at his side. He said, "I don't know much about Alan's finances, honey, but Lew Hartley, who just pitched those losing tickets away, can afford a thousand times that much."

Gail refused to argue. She gazed down at the group in the box just behind the protection screen. They had come in during the playing of the third of seven games: the tall, hawklike man whom they called Lew Hartley, the vividly beautiful copper-haired girl, and a rather inconspicuous young man who moved with an oddly light, effortless stride.

Since that first startling glimpse of the man called Hartley, Gail had managed to see him many times—always at a distance. On each occasion he had been accompanied by Sunny Ralston and also by the agate-eyed young man who

Vance identified as Lew Hartley's personal bodyguard.

Gail had made no further attempt to speak to this tall man who she believed was Alan. She had placed herself always so that she could study his unconsidered gestures. Each day she became more certain and more bewildered.

She tore her glance away from the trio in the box and turned to the big man at her side. She said, "You're not enjoying the jai alai, Vance. You look exhausted."

A slow smile creased his lips and he shook his head. "That isn't hardly the right word, honey. If it was anybody but you, I'd say I was plumb exasperated. For three days we've been traipsin' all over Miami, you and me. We've been to horse races, dog tracks, jai alai, gambling houses, and night clubs. And you're just as crazy now as you were at the beginning."

A shadow appeared briefly in her clear gray eyes. "You haven't much faith in feminine intuition, have you?"

"No, ma'am, I sure haven't. Not any more." He leaned forward and spoke earnestly. "Look, Gail, ever since the other night when you saw Lew in that gambling house, I've been doin' a heap of investigatin'. Lew's house was opened on the sixth of January, like it is every year. He got heah the next day. Everybody that knows him says it's Lew."

Gail said, "I've been trailing him for three days and nights, Vance. I've seen him when he didn't know he was being watched." She laughed, but there wasn't much mirth in it. "I know he looks like Lew Hartley. I know he lives in Hartley's house. I know he does all the things Hartley is supposed to do. But, Vance, you've got to believe I'm not demented when I still insist that it isn't Lew Hartley at all. It's Alan."

He sighed. "I don't know how I keep on bein' so fond of you, Gail."

She pressed her point, almost as though she were trying to convince herself. "When you know somebody as intimately as I know Alan—well, you see things. Little gestures, little mannerisms. I've seen those day after day when we've picked him up at the tracks and other places. I know it's Alan. I couldn't be wrong."

"You ain't bein' right reasonable either, Gail. Mind you, I'm not kickin'.

Anything that keeps you in Miami is grand with me. But I don't like to see you getting all hot and bothered over any idea as absurd as this one." He lighted a cigarette and gazed at her reflectively through the thin haze of fragrant smoke. "I reckon heaps of folks would be surprised at the suggestion that Lew isn't Lew. Sunny Ralston, for instance."

Gail looked away for a moment, and her voice was a shade deeper when she spoke again. "What is her relationship to Hartley?"

Vance Crawford shrugged. "That's pretty obvious, isn't it? I don't reckon I got to start teaching you the facts of life. Sunny's been comin' heah with Lew for three seasons. Keeps house for him, you might say. Gives parties and all. Gave one last night, as a matter of fact. Now, if you can give me one good reason why they should make Alan look like Lew Hartley and send him down heah to have fun... if you'll tell me where Lew Hartley is... if you'll make me believe it's possible that Lew's girl friend is playing house with Alan but still thinks it's Lew—honest, Gail, I get peeved at myself for even arguin' about it."

She said, "I don't blame you. I get angry at myself."

"But you're still sure."

"Yes. And no." She looked down at the box again. Sunny Ralston had turned slightly so that Gail could see her exquisite profile. She was talking to Hartley, and she was laughing.

Spectators were drifting in from the betting booths. An obsequious attendant approached Hartley and said something. Gail saw the boy back away suddenly as though he'd been slapped. That seemed to fit in with Lew Hartley's reputation.

Then she saw Sunny Ralston shrug into her ermine wrap. She saw the tall man adjust it about soft, bare shoulders. She saw the bodyguard get up and stand motionless, looking at nothing.

Gail caught a clear view of the face of the man with Sunny Ralston. It was a grim, unpleasant, frightening face. It was stern and cold and hard.

Gail's uncertainty returned. This wasn't Alan. It couldn't be Alan.

Then the man raised his eyes, as though he had felt hers upon him. Across the heads of restless spectators the eyes of Alan Douglas looked straight into the eyes of his fiancée. And it was at that instant that Gail Foster reached a definite, irrevocable decision. She turned to her companion and said quietly, "I'm staying in town, Vance, until I find out for sure."

"I'm not unhappy about that, honey." She said, "That job you said you could get for me—" "I can get it, all right. It won't pay much." "That doesn't matter. I have some money saved. The thing about this job is that it'll give me an entree—perhaps even to one of Miss Ralston's parties at Mr. Hartley's place."

"Uh-huh. It'll do that. But you sure are stickin' your neck way out, Gail." He glanced at his watch. "'Tain't as early as it was. S'pose we start travelin'. Tomorrow mornin' we'll go see Lee and Niki about the job."

Lee Thorpe was a former newspaperman. He was thirty-three years of age, tall, angular, pleasant, perpetually worried, and ridiculously in love with his wife. And Niki Thorpe was everything that her husband wasn't. She was short and stout and always about to embark on a rigid diet. She bubbled over with chronic good humor. She was six years her husband's junior, and adored him. They owned a cozy little cottage, two Boston terriers of assorted sexes, a garden full of flowers, a somewhat asthmatic car that they were always intending to trade in on a new one, a modest mortgage, and a magazine called Surf and Sunshine.

Surf and Sunshine was a hardy perennial. From April first to January first each year it lay dormant. From the beginning to the end of the Miami season it sprang into blossom and brought headaches and income to the unpredictable Thorpes.

It was a class publication, issued weekly on the finest grade of paper. Its art work, which was supervised by Niki, was excellent; its format unusually attractive. It had a small but important circulation among the winter colony, whose comings and goings and carryings-on it chronicled at great length. It printed lots of names and lots of pictures, and specialized in glowing accounts of the social activities of wealthy winter residents. It made a valiant—and fairly successful—effort to be smart. It existed by virtue of its advertising.

Vance Crawford conducted Gail into the tiny office that was shared by the irrepressible Niki and her thin and worried husband. Vance said, "Howdy. This is the Gail Foster I was telling you about."

Gail liked them both instantly. Niki shook hands and said, "It doesn't pay much," and Gail said, "I'll take it," and Niki waved toward a battered oak desk in a tiny cubicle and stated, "It's yours, Miss Foster, if you can stand working for two people who aren't quite normal."

Vance said, "She'll fit from that angle. And at first I'll squire her around. Not because she's any fun, but I'm an eagle scout and I need another merit badge."

Niki said, "Vance knows the ropes. We dish out publicity to those who have enough money to patronize those who have enough money to advertise in Surf and Sunshine. So when do you start?"

Gail said, "I've already started. And if you happen to get caught in a jam, don't forget I'm an expert stenographer."

Vance said good-bye and drove back to his office in Miami, leaving Gail with her new employers. Niki was called to the telephone and Lee Thorpe perched his lanky figure on Gail's desk and gave vent to sage advice.

"The job's a cinch," he told her, "if you keep your eyes and ears open. Don't forget that there's hardly a man, woman, or child who doesn't crave publicity. You've got two strikes on 'em to start with. Sometimes they play cute, as though they didn't want it. Just back away from that kind, and you'll usually discover that they run you ragged to say they've changed their minds.

"Everything I've told you goes double down here in Miami. The swank places and hot spots are all glad to co-operate. They live on publicity. You won't have any trouble finding out that Mr. and Mrs. Big gave a party. The managers will get all the dope for you and beg you to print it."

Gail said, "This may sound silly, Mr. Thorpe, but does social standing count?"

"Nope. Just bank accounts. Our job is to tickle the vanity of the spenders. Then they patronize the firms that advertise in our sheet. But remember this: we're not a newspaper. We print nothing but pleasant inanities."

"I'm beginning to get the idea. You're a sort of social register."

"But phony."

“I understand. If it’s a big, expensive party, you print it.”

“Right.”

“Even if it’s given by somebody like—well, say, this fellow Hartley?”

“Hartley? Sure. Especially him. He spends plenty. He and his girl friend, Sunny Ralston.”

Gail picked her words carefully: “There’s no question about their relationship, is there—hers and Hartley’s?”

“Good Lord, no. That checks ‘em out of a lot of the nicer private homes, but they’re welcome everywhere else—including the columns of Surf and Sunshine.”

He rose as Niki walked back into the room. He said to his wife, “I’ve been giving her the lowdown. She gets the slant all right. We were just talking about Lew Hartley and that blonde bombshell of his.”

Niki laughed. “You’ve got to meet her, Gail. Sunny’s an experience. And she loves publicity.”

Gail said, “She must be interesting. But how about Hartley?”

Niki made a grimace of distaste. “You’ll probably meet him. Sunny’s always entertaining. Just remember he’s a natural-born louse. Don’t let him make you mad.”

Gail Foster smiled. “I’ll be on guard,” she said. “As a matter of fact, I have a hunch that Mr. Hartley and I will get along very well together.”

Chapter Twelve

IN THE solitude of Lew Hartley's impressive bedroom, Alan Douglas finished his morning coffee, relaxed against the pillows, and gazed through the window at a sundrenched beach and a sapphire sea. He stretched lazily and sighed.

Here was luxury such as he had never before experienced. Temporarily, he was master of this beautiful estate, his every command was fulfilled, his every wish gratified. Despite the odd role he was playing, despite the fact that he was called upon to be a thoroughly unpleasant person in public, he was enjoying himself hugely. He touched his mustache, to which he had not yet become accustomed, and reflected that if it were not for one thing, he'd be supremely contented.

In all this lovely ointment, there was only one fly. In a life more placid and calm and delightful than anything he'd ever known, there was only one worry. But that worry was growing with each passing day, and now—as always—the thought of it banished the smile from his lips.

Gail Foster! He'd seen her again last night at the jai alai games, and all through the evening he'd felt her eyes boring into the back of his head. Nearly every day he saw her: at the races, the dog tracks, at night clubs, and in restaurants.

Somehow, some way, she had come to suspect something. Here was the person who knew him best, and she obviously had set herself the task of breaking through his disguise.

The necessity for fooling Gail made him unhappy and definitely uncomfortable. He hadn't the faintest idea how she'd happened to come to Miami in the first place, or what she was doing here now. He didn't know the identity of the affable and rather stout young gentleman in whose company he invariably saw her. He didn't know anything except that Gail suspected that he was not Lew Hartley.

He realized now the soundness of Wayne Hamilton's original pronouncement that no scheme was infallible, that the most carefully laid plans were subject to disruption by the intrusion of things that could not possibly be foreseen. He understood now why Hamilton had insisted that the most important element in this fantastic deal was Alan's integrity. But it was tough to play this role in front

of Gail, to be denied the right to set her mind at rest.

His thoughts were interrupted by a light tap on the door leading to the adjoining room. Almost instantly the door opened and Sunny entered.

Sunny's entrances were always dramatic, and this one was no exception. She wore a ridiculously abbreviated pair of swimming trunks and an intriguingly inadequate halter. Her beach robe was open. She carried a beach bag and a swimming cap in her hand as she walked into the room and said, "I thought we had a date to go swimming."

"We did," said Alan. "And we still have."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

There was something refreshing about this incredible person. The whole setup continued to amaze him: The fact that the public regarded him as Lew Hartley and accepted Sunny as his personal property; the fact that she occupied a connecting room and that the door was never locked; the fact that Sunny seemed to derive a perverse pleasure from the situation.

She was a gay person, and definitely on the pagan side. She had taken life the hard way, and made the most of her natural endowments. He'd never met anybody even approximately like her. She was hard and she was soft, tough and sentimental, unmoral rather than immoral. By certain left-handed standards she was a very splendid person.

He slipped on a robe and went into his dressing room. A few seconds later he returned to the bedroom, clad in swimming trunks and sandals. Sunny eyed his tall, lithe, muscular figure with approval. She said, "You stack up well."

"Thank you, madam."

"And I'm not a madam." She fitted a cigarette into a too-long, too-dramatic ivory holder and puffed reflectively. "You're doing a pretty neat job," she commented. "Are you beginning to feel like Lew?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid I never will."

"Not enough of the wolf in you, is there?"

“I suppose not.”

She said, cryptically, “It’d be interesting if there was.”

“Meaning what?”

She said, “They hired you because you were honest— not because you were dumb.”

“That has all the earmarks of a dirty crack.”

“Maybe it is.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“You wouldn’t. You’re not the type.” She got up and flung open the door that connected his room with hers. “There’s a girl, isn’t there?” she said sharply.

“Yes.”

“And you figure what she doesn’t know would still hurt her?”

“Something like that.”

“And maybe I’m not your type anyway.”

He said, “Look, Sunny, you’re plenty my type. But I’m playing this as I’m supposed to play it. I’m not really Lew Hartley, you know.”

She turned toward the door. “I’m finding that out. Let’s go.”

Alan said, “You trot along. I’ll join you on the beach.” He closed the door behind her, leaned against it, and drew a deep breath. He thought, And there’s another angle Mr. Wayne Hamilton didn’t figure.

Chapter Thirteen

GAIL FOSTER walked into Niki Thorpe's office. It was a tiny compartment in a chronic state of indescribable confusion.

Niki looked up and waved a greeting. Gail perched on the desk and swung one shapely leg as she talked. She said, "How'm I doing, Niki?"

"Fine." The efficient Mrs. Thorpe grinned infectiously. "But why you took this job at this salary is something I can't figure."

Gail shrugged. "Maybe I'm simply allergic to New York winters."

"Maybe. But that isn't the whole story."

"It's enough, isn't it?"

"Sure it is, Gail. But miracles like this don't often happen. You fit right into this screwy outfit and your copy is good. We pay you less than half what you're worth, so we're happy. But you still act like a gal with a mission."

"I didn't think I was that obvious."

"You are." Niki was a direct little person. She said, "Slap me down if this is none of my business, but I thought maybe it was Vance Crawford."

Gail shook her head. "I almost wish you were right."

"Why the 'almost'? Vance is overboard about you."

"Which makes me feel like a heel. I don't know a finer, more loyal person than he is."

"Enough!" Niki raised a restraining hand. "When a girl talks that way about a man, she isn't in love with him. I'm sorry. I hoped maybe we'd add you to the permanent Miami colony." She shuffled through some proofs. "What gives this morning, Gail?"

"I'm going out with Mac for some pictures, if the idea hits you right."

“Who?”

“Fay Ralston.”

“Sunny?” Niki nodded approval. “She’s our meat. Photogenic as the devil, and popular with our advertisers. We can give her a nice spread. Tell Mac not to forget that we want plenty of the human form divine.”

Gail said, “I thought perhaps I might get a couple of shots of Lew Hartley, too.”

“Think again. Hartley never lets himself be photographed. And if you try it without permission, Mac is liable to lose a nice new camera.”

“Hartley doesn’t seem to mind pictures of Sunny or of his estate.”

“Those are things he owns. But if you’re smart, you’ll keep away from him.”

Gail lighted a cigarette. “You’ve known Hartley for several years, haven’t you?”

“Nope. Nobody knows him. We see him, that’s all.”

“Have you noticed him this year?”

“Sure. Why?”

“Does he look the same as he always did?”

“Just as bad. Two good looks at that diabolic pan of his and I wake up screaming.” The telephone rang and Niki waved her hand. “Get going, female. Remind Mac that he knows what we want.”

Driving northward on Collins Avenue with the dour little photographer, Gail made an effort to get herself under control.

She hadn’t slept well the night before. There were too many things to think about, now that the appointment with Sunny was definite. Cold logic told her that she was crazy: that Lew Hartley was Lew Hartley, and that was that. Then instinct got in its inevitable licks and she started thinking of him again in terms of Alan Douglas.

If it were Alan, she wanted to see where and how he was living. Inside the

grounds of the Hartley estate. Perhaps she'd see something that might furnish the clue to the mystery. She might even see him with Sunny Ralston.

It was odd how Sunny kept flashing through her thoughts. She turned abruptly to the man at her side.

"Mac," she asked, "do I look completely crazy?"

"No," he answered. "Not completely."

A few minutes later Mac swung to the right of the avenue and parked. Gail could just barely see over the stone wall surrounding the Hartley place. She thought, Alan or Lew, whoever it is, he's getting a break.

The entrance gate was locked, and they rang the bell. A stocky young Negro in chauffeur's uniform answered the summons. Gail said, "We're from Surf and Sunshine. We have an appointment with Miss Ralston."

"Yes, ma'am." The chauffeur touched the visor of his cap and opened the gate. "She told me she was expectin' you. Just foller me in, please."

They follered him in. The gardens were in full and brilliant blossom; the lawn was velvety in texture and emerald in hue. The royal palms were impressive.

Sunny came out to greet them. She was radiant and beautiful. She loved this sort of thing: her pictures in what she regarded as a society magazine. The Lady of the Manor, she was, and if her status was a trifle on the unconventional side, that did not disturb her in the slightest degree. She came forward and held out her hand. "I'm Sunny Ralston," she said.

"I'm Gail Foster." The two girls clasped hands. Blue eyes looked straight into gray ones. Gail was thinking, She's breath-taking and in Sunny's mind there was the thought, She's pretty. And she's got class!

Gail said, "I was the one who telephoned you. This is Mr. McKinney. We'd like to get a few informal shots."

"The more the merrier."

"Good. Now if we could start here, using the house as a background..."

“You call ‘em, Miss Foster. How’s my outfit?”

Gail said it was fine, and she wasn’t exaggerating. It was a sports ensemble in white flannel edged with the faintest of yellows. Mac got several shots there, and then at Sunny’s suggestion she changed into yachting costume and they walked across Collins Avenue to the private dock where Hartley’s seventy-five footer was moored.

Sunny was bright and vivacious. She had a gay, sharp wit that delighted the other girl, and Gail found herself liking Sunny in spite of herself. Here was a woman of incredible beauty, with a keen brain and a sense of humor. And if, behind those big blue eyes, Gail detected a flintlike hardness, that seemed to her to be only natural.

The yachting pictures finished, Mac grunted, “This is all trimmings. What we want is the beach stuff.”

Gail made the suggestion and found Sunny enthusiastically cooperative. Mac announced that he’d go on down to the beach and pick his angles. Sunny suggested that Gail come upstairs with her while she changed, but Gail said she’d take a look around the grounds. She gave no hint of what she really wanted, which was—if possible—to find the man who called himself Lew Hartley.

And so she was left alone. She drifted toward a vine-covered little summerhouse in which she fancied she had detected the figure of a man. It might be Hartley, she thought; it might be anybody. But it was worth a chance.

She made no sound as she crossed the velvety lawn. And then she stepped under an archway of roses.

The man had his back turned. He was clad in gray flannel slacks and a white sports shirt. He was reading. She saw his body stiffen as she said, “Mr. Hartley?”

For an instant neither of them moved. Then she saw the man put down his book and get slowly to his feet. He turned toward her, and here, at close and intimate range, the sense of shock was greater than ever before.

The face, with its sinister scar over the left eye, the mustache, which made the mouth look cruel, the hawklike beak—these features blotted out all the other

familiar details of figure and gesture. It was a powerful, ruthless, repellent face, and the voice that emerged from it was harsh and unpleasant.

The man said, "What the hell are you doing here?"

She drew in her breath sharply. Anger sent the color flying to her cheeks. At that moment there was no thought of Alan. This was merely an arrogant, boorish individual who made her flesh crawl.

But her intelligence came to her rescue. Here was the opportunity for which she had been praying; here was perhaps her chance to establish once and for all whether this really could be the man to whom she was engaged. And so she made her voice gentle.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't realize..."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Gail Foster. I'm here for Surf and Sunshine, getting some pictures of Miss Ralston."

"All right. Get 'em. But let me alone."

She was trembling. She said, "You're Mr. Hartley, aren't you?"

"Yes. Now, get away."

"I'd like to take a couple of pictures..."

"What kind of damn fools do you work for? They ought to know that I don't go for that stuff."

Gail's anger was mounting in spite of herself. This man was grossly and inexcusably offensive. Her own eyes were flashing and Alan Douglas understood the symptoms and was glad.

He knew that this was the only armor he successfully could have worn. He knew what had brought Gail here, he knew why she had sought him.

This was tough on her, but it was tough on him, too. He was goading her into

fury, because if she happened to be gentle and natural, he was afraid that he might break down. He hoped to play his unpleasant role so well that she would be convinced.

He took one step toward her. His voice seemed harsher and more hostile. He said, "That's the trouble with you newspaper people. Too damned nosy."

He turned on his heel and strode from the summerhouse. Gail, staring after him, was too shaken with fury to remember her doubts. Actually, Alan had succeeded better than he could have hoped. Because she was thinking, Vance was right. It is Hartley, after all. Even if Alan were playing a part, he couldn't be that way. Not Alan!

Chapter Fourteen

ALAN'S WHITE tie and tails had been carefully laid out for him by his valet. He whistled while he dressed. Aside from his worries about Gail, he was frankly and unblushingly having a grand time. The experience was turning out to be more bizarre and exciting than he had anticipated. There were drawbacks, of course. He despised the necessity of making an unpleasant spectacle of himself in public, he hated the fact that he must act the role of a man who had been generally—and deservedly—disliked by everyone who knew him. But it was exciting and somewhat intoxicating to be, however anomalously, the master of this lovely estate, to be waited upon by a staff of servants, to hear a buzz of conjecture whenever he appeared in public.

Chuck Williams was always at hand to see that he did things in a large way. He loathed the ostentation demanded of him: ten-dollar tips to headwaiters for ringside tables, huge bets at race tracks, jai alai games, and gambling houses. But he realized that he would have been less than human had he failed to enjoy this new feeling of affluence.

Sunny Ralston, for instance. He'd never known a girl like Sunny. He knew that underneath she was hard as nails and utterly without any sense of moral values, but the Sunny with whom he came in daily contact was a gay, delightful person, as well as a startlingly beautiful one.

As Alan Douglas he might have felt a certain sense of embarrassment about appearing in public with so vivid a person as Sunny. Everything about her screamed for attention—and got it. Every so often he'd feel a surge of embarrassment, and then a quick glance into the nearest mirror would show him the face of another man on his body, and that made it easier to act as he had been taught this other man would act. Alan was only human: He confessed that he'd be having rather an elegant time if it weren't for the worry in the eyes of Gail Foster when he saw her in public—which was very often indeed.

He walked downstairs. Chuck Williams, clad in dinner clothes, was waiting at the foot of the stairway. Chuck's colorless eyes took him in from head to foot. The stare was insolently impersonal, as one would regard a clothes dummy. Alan felt just a trifle uncomfortable and tried to turn it off lightly. He said, "Do I pass muster, Chuck?"

The pasty-faced man stared straight at him. Then he took out a cigarette, lighted it, and walked away. No word. No gesture of recognition. Alan said, "I'm glad to see you in such a happy mood tonight, Chuck."

He saw the wiry figure stiffen, but Williams made no move, no sign to indicate that he had heard, or that the barb had struck. Alan's face flushed, then he laughed it off. Queer egg, this Williams. Seemed to be always playing the role of toughie. Nobody could be that hard-boiled, Alan figured. Or that unpleasant.

Sunny came downstairs, her splendid body gleaming in a sheath of sequins. Even Alan, as accustomed as he had become to the dramatic nature of her gowns, was startled. He said, "Wow!" and Sunny laughed delightedly.

"Like it?" she inquired.

"As soon as my eyes get accustomed to the glare."

"I like people to notice me."

"Then you'll be happy tonight. You're really gorgeous."

Chuck Williams spoke without turning. His cold, flat voice said, "Come on, you two."

Alan took Sunny's arm. "I think somebody ate up all his porridge."

The chauffeur had driven the car up to the front door. Chuck Williams said, "Get out. I'm driving."

The chauffeur's eyes glowed happily. "You mean I can have the evenin' off, Mr. Williams?"

"I don't give a damn what you have," Chuck snapped.

Alan leaned forward. "You're off for the night, Philip."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Hartley. Thank you, sir."

With Chuck at the wheel and Sunny and Alan in back, they rolled out of the driveway and into Collins Avenue. They were aware that the flat gray eyes could

see them through the rear-view mirror, but they tried not to let Chuck's ill humor put a damper on what promised to be a thoroughly enjoyable evening.

They were headed for the new Cristobal Club, which modestly proclaimed itself to be the swankest night spot south of Manhattan. There was no mistaking the exact location of the Cristobal once you got within a half mile of it. A leaf had been borrowed from the book of Hollywood. Four searchlights fingered the sky; the front of the place was brilliant.

The doorman recognized Lew Hartley's car and cleared a path through the crowd. As Sunny moved from curb to doorway someone said, "I wish Santa Claus had brought me somethin' like that."

The headwaiter was obsequious. Chuck edged close to Alan and whispered, "Slip him a sawbuck," and Alan nodded.

Sunny swept across the floor to their ringside table. She was spectacular, dramatic. She was aware of the stir she created, and she loved it. She seemed to blank out the rest of the crowd, to stand out like a too garish ornament against the ornate decor.

They reached their table. Alan stood while the headwaiter held Sunny's chair, and then helped her shrug a sable coat from voluptuous shoulders.

The place was jammed. Alan looked around the room, remembering that he was Lew Hartley and that he must appear as though none of this meant a thing to him.

It was a good thing that he was on guard. Because his eye came to rest on a table less than twenty feet away. A man and a woman were at that table.

The woman was Gail Foster.

The chap with her was pleasant-looking; a friendly, jolly sort, and apparently solicitous as hell. That part of it was all right. Alan didn't object to the fact that Gail was having a grand time—or a reasonable facsimile thereof—but it was tough being so close to her and having to play his role.

Nor could he quite understand why she didn't seem worried any more. That day in the summerhouse... He must have played his part well. She must have been

convinced that her hunch was wrong and that he really was Lew Hartley.

But why then was she remaining in Miami? Why was she working as a reporter on a seasonal society sheet? Why wasn't she back at her desk in New York? I've been thinking in circles so long, he told himself, that I'm dizzy.

There was still another element that annoyed him. Chuck, always clad in temperament, had been particularly nasty tonight. From the time they'd left the house, Chuck had been riding him. The pasty-faced young man could get more venom into a couple of monosyllables than Alan had ever encountered in all the rest of an average, friendly life. And he was helpless to do anything about it. Chuck's flat, toneless voice cut deeper and deeper; his attitude of studied insolence annoyed Alan even more than he realized. He wondered why Chuck carried things this far; wondered how he handled himself with the real Lew Hartley.

He was grateful when Sunny, her body swaying to the soft, persuasive strains of a slow foxtrot, said, "You ain't a very good dancer, Lew, but how's about shoving me around the floor a bit?"

He looked at Chuck. The smaller man said, "Don't be a fool," and instantly Alan rose. "Let's go," he said.

Sunny's body was warm and eager. For a few seconds, he let himself go. Her husky voice warned him: "O.K. for home consumption, Alan, but you got to louse it up a little. You're supposed to have two left feet."

It was fun trying to dance badly. The whole performance was silly, but it was better than wincing under Chuck's verbal barbs. He mixed himself up deliberately, and kept a straight face about it. Sunny was delighted. "You're doing swell. Even Lew couldn't be worse."

He swung her around. She bumped hard into a woman. They both said, "Oh, sorry!" Both couples stopped dancing momentarily. Then Sunny said, "Oh, it's you!" and Gail Foster smiled and admitted that it was.

Sunny said, "Lew, I want you to meet Miss Foster. She took some pictures of me the other day for Surf and Sunshine. Miss Foster, this is my friend Mr. Hartley."

Gail held out her hand. Her eyes were level, her voice steady. She said, "How do

you do, Mr. Hartley?”

He grunted and dropped her hand. He was thinking about the two girls, as unlike each other as specimen orchid and a valley lily.

Sunny was barging ahead. With Gail’s assistance the men were introduced: “Mr. Hartley, Mr. Crawford.” Vance was saying, “I live right heah in Miami, Mr. Hartley. I’ve seen you lots of times.”

“That so?”

“Yes.” Vance didn’t like this fellow, and that made him try twice as hard to be cordial. “I bumped into you, so I owe you something. Let’s have a drink at my table.”

“I don’t want a drink.”

“Aw, come on.”

Sunny settled the matter by taking Vance’s arm and starting off the floor. “I never say no, Mr. Crawford.”

“To a drink invitation?”

“To anything.”

They walked ahead. Alan was afraid to look at Gail. She was lovely in her simple dinner gown with its minimum of adornment. She disturbed him. She looked too dog-gone much like—well, like Gail. He forced himself to growl, “I suppose we’ve got to,” and they followed Vance and Sunny to the table.

Vance worked like a Trojan to be pleasant to Lew Hartley, chiefly because he disliked the man so intensely. His soft Southern drawl kept the conversation moving; he refused to show that he was perturbed by Alan’s gruffness. He did not suspect that Alan was considerably more interested in him than he was in Hartley.

Alan remembered vaguely having heard Gail speak about a man named Vance Crawford. She had spoken affectionately, as one might mention a very dear friend. Yet at this moment Vance’s attitude did not appear to be that of a friend. It

wasn't anything you could put your finger on; it was a subtle, elusive something that disturbed Alan more than he realized.

He liked Vance. The man was big and bluff and good-natured and very much of a gentleman. If he was in love with Gail, who was Alan to find that inexplicable? As for Gail—well, thank goodness, Sunny's chatter was taking all of Gail's attention. She was giving Gail the address of her own particular beauty parlor (Alan couldn't understand Gail's sudden keen interest in that sort of thing) and she was telling about a party she was planning at the Hartley place. She was insisting that Gail must come, and Gail was saying that she'd be glad to.

Alan was sorry about that. It fitted in with the Hartley plan, all right. They wanted plenty of publicity so that the world would know that Lew Hartley was in Miami and not somewhere in South America trying to swing a tricky manganese deal. But the prospect of meeting Gail frequently, socially, was too dangerous; the part he must play in her presence was entirely too uncomfortable. He heard Sunny ask, "You'll be here all winter?" and was surprised to hear Gail say, "Yes, of course."

Someone walked across the floor and stopped at Alan's shoulder. Sunny said, "Here's bad news," and Alan looked up into Chuck's fishlike eyes.

Chuck said, "Mr. Hartley, don't forget you've got to be back home soon to get that phone call you're expecting."

It was an order, and Alan knew it. He deliberately refrained from introducing Chuck, but he rose and spoke to Sunny. He said, "Come on."

Sunny said good night to Gail and to Vance, and walked back toward their table. She said, "Mister, you're good. Too good."

"What does that mean?"

"I got as mad at you as I get with Lew sometimes."

"I'm not supposed to mix intimately. You know that. My good nature might crop out."

At the table they had just left, Gail asked for a cigarette, lighted it, and regarded her companion quizzically.

“Well,” she inquired, “what do you think of Alan?”

Vance made a gesture of helplessness. He said, “Of all the obstinate, stubborn, pigheaded females I’ve ever been in love with...”

She said, “I think he had a rather miserable twenty minutes.”

Vance sighed. “I’m not arguin’ with you any more, Gail. I been seein’ Lew Hartley heahabouts fo’ three years or more. I know what he looks like and how he talks, and that fellow that just left us—Gail, that’s Lew and nobody else. Besides, I thought he convinced you of that himself the other day.”

Gail said nothing for a moment as she opened her evening bag and drew out an envelope. She placed it on the table before Vance and said, “Here’s something I want you to see. It’s a letter from Alan.”

The letter had been sent to Gail’s New York address and then forwarded to Miami. The postmark was Valparaiso, Chile.

“You’ll notice this is postmarked January seventh, the day the Tropicana arrived in Valparaiso. Alan describes the voyage in detail. He tells all about the ports at which the ship stopped. It’s a lovely, natural, affectionate letter.”

Vance stared at the envelope and then looked up at Gail. He said cannily, “I’m supposed to say that that proves you’re wrong—that Alan really did go to Chile.”

“Yes, you’re supposed to say that. And then I’ll remind you that we both know he didn’t. I saw his Cuban landing card, signed by him. I saw his signature in a Havana hotel register. I saw the customs declaration he signed in Miami.”

“What does it add up to, honey?”

“Plenty.” She was looking straight ahead. “Alan wrote that letter, all right. He had it mailed in Valparaiso in order to satisfy me—or to fool me—whichever way you choose to look at it.” She replaced the letter in her bag. “It means that in spite of the way he behaved in his summerhouse the other day, in spite of what I believed then, I’ve got to swing back to my original hunch.”

Vance shrugged. “I’m not bein’ tricked into any more debate.” He looked across

the room. “Your friends are leaving.”

Alan had paid the check, tipped overgenerously, and was holding Sunny’s wrap. Vance said, “Not bein’ suggestive, Miss Foster, but what’s the angle on this Ralston person?”

Gail said, “What do you think?”

“Well, if that’s Lew Hartley, I know exactly what to think, and I’m not especially interested. But if it’s Alan...” Vance shook his head. “That, I think, would be very interestin’ indeed.”

Chapter Fifteen

WHEN THEY reached the Hartley place, Alan and Sunny got out and Chuck drove the car into the garage. Alan unlocked the front door, held out his hand to Sunny and said, "Good night—and thanks. It was a fine evening."

"Mister, you said it. I like that Foster girl, don't you?"

Alan laughed. "You like everybody. Now, on your way."

She looked at him inquiringly. "And you?"

"I'm staying downstairs for a good-night smoke. Alone," he finished significantly.

She waved and was gone. He stood looking reflectively after her seductive figure as it swayed up the stairway. Then he moved into the living room and snapped on one of the reading lamps. He was standing there when Chuck Williams came in through the back door.

Alan said, "I'd like to talk to you a few minutes, Chuck."

Williams walked into the room. His face, as usual, was expressionless; his cheeks were without color, his eyes blank. He said, "All right. Talk."

"Shall we sit down?"

"I'll stand."

Alan held out a cigarette case. "Smoke?"

"No."

Alan selected one for himself and lighted it. He looked straight at the slender, wiry young man and said, "Why do you dislike me so intensely, Chuck?"

Chuck's eyes were level, but he said nothing, and so Alan went on, grimly determined to have it out.

“I know you resent the position I hold here: playing the part of Lew Hartley, giving orders, acting like master of the house. But that’s what I’m being paid to do, and I’m giving the best performance I’m capable of. Maybe I’ve been stepping on your toes. If I am, I’d like to know just how, so I can change. There seems to be no reason why we shouldn’t at least be cordial.”

Chuck stood there. Then he asked coldly, “That all?”

“Not quite. I’d like to know where you stand.”

“What difference does it make?”

“Just a little matter of comfort, Chuck. I’d much prefer being friendly with you.”

“Things are O.K. the way they are.”

“You mean you won’t try to change?”

“Something like that.”

“I’m still asking why.”

Chuck came one step closer. His voice was tight. He said, “I’m paid to look after you. It ain’t any part of my job to like you.”

“Granted. But there’s no law against it either, is there?”

“I mind my own business. You mind yours.”

A sense of humor came to Alan’s rescue. He smiled with genuine amusement.

“Are you really that tough, or is it an act?”

Two tiny lights flashed in Chuck’s eyes. He said, “I’m tough enough.”

“I suppose you are, or you wouldn’t have been picked for this job. But honestly, you’re not much fun to have around.”

“I’m here.”

Alan shrugged. “Have it your own way. I figured we might talk it out. I keep trying not to get sore at you, but you’re not making it easy. All through the

evening you've been riding me. But good. And without trying to start something, I still want you to understand that I don't like it."

"That's just too bad. Because you're still going to take it."

"I don't know whether I am or not." Alan's temper was commencing to boil.

"I'm not accustomed to being shoved around. And I'm not a damned bit impressed by this hard-boiled attitude of yours. Maybe you can use that dead pan to frighten kids, but I don't scare that easy. I'd rather play pretty. But since you're not having any, I'm telling you now: Don't push me too hard."

Chuck said, "I wouldn't get tough if I was you."

"You're not me, Chuck. You're just a funny little man who's seen too many gangster pictures."

"Better go slow, Douglas."

"I'm still willing to be nice. This whole Florida episode could be lots of fun, if you'd let it. But just why you have to act like a bad dose of poison ivy when even Sunny is taking things in stride..."

Alan stopped talking. Suddenly. He saw a brief, revealing flash in Chuck's eyes. For that fraction of an instant Chuck's guard was down. Alan said, "Well, I'll be damned!"

The lips of the smaller man were dry. His eyes had narrowed dangerously. He said, "What about Sunny?"

"Don't be a fool!"

"I'm asking."

"And I'm explaining to you that she's being sensible. She's saddled with me for a few months, and she's trying to have a little fun."

"How much fun?"

"Your mind is always in the gutter, isn't it, Chuck?"

“I said, ‘How much fun?’ “

Alan was thoroughly angry. “Get this straight,” he said. “Maybe it answers your question. I’m not Lew Hartley. I know I’m not. So does Sunny.”

“How do I know?”

“There’s no way you could. You’ll have to take my word.”

“I don’t take any man’s word where dames are concerned.”

“That’s all right with me, too. But don’t you think that this is Lew Hartley’s worry, not yours?”

“No.”

“Why?”

Chuck made no answer, and so Alan went on. He said, “If you like Sunny that much, that’s your business. I’m not asking any questions. Neither am I poaching.”

Chuck’s voice was flat. He said, “I think you’re a liar.”

Alan’s reaction was instinctive. He took one step forward and his fists clenched. Chuck’s right hand moved to a spot just under his left armpit. He said coldly, “You’re a liar by the clock, Douglas. You’re two-timing Hartley.”

Alan moved forward. Chuck’s fingers tightened on the automatic he carried in the shoulder holster. He said, “Come and get it, sucker.”

Neither of them had heard a sound from the hallway. Neither knew that Sunny, clad in a white hostess gown of velvet, had come down the stairs and was moving into the room. They didn’t know she was there until her voice came, hard and sharp:

“Chuck! Lay off!”

Chuck stood still. He said, “This guy’s been asking for it.”

There was terror in Sunny’s eyes. She moved swiftly between the two men and

faced Chuck. “Scram,” she snapped. “Get out.”

“I’m staying.”

She turned to Alan. “Then you beat it, will you?” She was tense and frightened. “Don’t you see what this is building up to? Look, Alan, this guy ain’t fooling.”

Alan looked at Sunny, and then across her shoulder at the rigid figure of Chuck Williams. His position was, at the moment, inglorious; but common sense was coming to his rescue.

Alan said, “There are a few things that seem to need straightening out, Sunny. But I suppose this isn’t the time or the place. I’ll go upstairs.”

He walked out of the room. He was more disturbed than he cared to admit. This was an unexpected angle. Nothing had been solved. It all came under the head of unfinished business.

And Alan was too sensible to kid himself. He’d laughed at Chuck, accused him of being a funny little man who had seen too many gangster pictures. But those were mere words. They didn’t mean anything. Alan recognized danger when he saw it. And he had seen it in the cold, unwavering eyes of Chuck Williams.

He went to his room, considerably shaken. Downstairs Sunny was taking over. She said, “You poor damn fool! Another twenty seconds and you’d have killed him.”

“I’ll do it sooner or later. Why not now?”

She put her hands on his shoulders. She said, “It ain’t in the cards that way, Chuck.”

“His number is up, ain’t it?”

“Yes, but Lew wants it to look like an accident—not murder.”

“I don’t figure the difference.”

“Why should you take a rap if you don’t have to? Why you should get all hopped up is more than I can figure.”

“Is it?”

She said, “You’re jealous.”

“Yes.” He did not equivocate. “What goes on between you and Lew is out of my zone. That was the setup when I came in. But this guy...”

“There’s nothing going on.”

“There could be. You’ve fallen for him.”

She felt uncomfortable, so she tried to laugh it off. “You get the damndest ideas. Can I help it if I’ve got to act up when we’re out in public together? Be yourself, Chuck. Where do you figure me on this?”

“You tell me.”

“I know Alan is on the way out. I know you’re the lad who does the job. Maybe I’m even a little sorry for him—he’s not a bad guy. But it’s not making any difference in what I do. I know where we all stand—especially me.”

“You’re like all other dames. You fall for a guy and mess things up.”

“You’re figuring Lew’s a fool?”

“Meaning what?”

“He knows me better than you do. I don’t let myself go too far—in any direction.”

“What’s the play, then?”

“Be sensible. If you go messing up Lew’s house and start the cops swarming about—not to mention newspapermen—Lew will be sore as a goat... Your play is to take it easy. If Alan steps on your toes, let him step. You’ve got the last line, haven’t you?”

“You mean I got to play cute with him?”

“Why not? What do you lose?”

He said, carefully, “I figured maybe you were going soft on the proposition.”

“Me?” She assumed a hardness that she did not feel. “Since when did you start figuring me for mush? I know all about what’s going to happen to our little playmate. It’s as O.K. with me as it is with you. But just getting mad at a guy and blasting a hole in him because you’re sore...”

Chuck said, “You make me believe things I know ain’t true. But if that’s how you want it, that’s how you’ll have it.”

“You’ll quit riding him?”

“Yeah. I’ll lay off. Unless...”

“Unless what?”

“Don’t you step out of line, Sunny. I wouldn’t like that.” His icy eyes held hers tight. “Don’t try any tricks. One bad move by you, and I ain’t going to wait for word from Lew.”

Chapter Sixteen

SOMETHING WAS happening to Sunny Ralston; something she neither understood nor liked.

Sunny was falling in love.

She left Chuck in the living room and walked upstairs. She was badly shaken, and thought it was because she was angry. In her bedroom, with the door locked against intrusion, she found her thoughts racing to this fantastic conclusion:

Yes, she was afraid—but not for herself. She was afraid for Alan Douglas. And the reason she was afraid... “It’s got me,” she whispered fiercely into the darkness. “God, am I a sap!”

Sunny Ralston, christened Fay by a mother she could not remember and a father she would have preferred to forget, had learned to look out for herself. She distrusted everybody. She taught herself to hate sentiment because she didn’t believe it was healthy. Sentimental people were always being knifed in the back. That was what she had seen, and that was what she believed. Her deity was physical comfort, shelter from the bitterness and cruelty that had warped her childhood.

In her struggle against adverse conditions, she had been generously favored by nature, which had supplied her with a glorious body and a clear brain. It hadn’t taken her long to discover that a girl could travel pretty far with such assets. She gave value received for what she got—but she got it. Until this night she had never been bothered by morals or conscience or gentleness of any sort. If occasionally she had done nice things, it was only because it amused her to do them. There never had been a time when she considered the well-being of anyone other than herself.

Until tonight.

She walked to one of her bedroom windows and stood staring into the moon-drenched night. The window was open and the air felt pleasantly cool against her hot body, protected as it was only by a sheer chiffon gown and a white housecoat of softest velvet. She tried telling herself over and over again that it wasn’t true,

that this had not happened to her; but her fiercest arguments got her nowhere. It was incredible. It was impossible. But it was true.

Here then was a contingency that even so astute a person as Lew Hartley could not have foreseen. Lew knew Sunny; he knew that she was heartless, unscrupulous, and merciless. Those were qualities so akin to his own nature that they appealed to him strongly. In his own hard way, he was fond of her. She had entered without scruple into their bargain, and had fulfilled her part of the contract to the letter. She was an amenable and pleasant companion. She had a beautiful body, a quick wit, and a keen perception. She never nagged, never demanded, never argued. She could be trusted because it paid her to be trustworthy. She made no pretense of being in love with him, or even of possessing the capacity for love. And that was all right with Lew, because it gave him delightful feminine companionship, which he wanted, and did not burden it with sentimentality, which he hated.

So Sunny stood there thinking, and the more she thought, the more bewildered she became. For the first time in her life she knew fear. Fear for what was inescapably in store for Alan Douglas.

Even in the throes of this new and disturbing emotion Sunny was not concerned about morals or ethics. That she was cast in the role of accessory before the fact of a murder not yet committed was something she had taught herself to take in stride—provided she herself was not endangered. It wasn't the idea of murder that frightened her. She was worried because Alan was the prospective victim.

And now she was face to face with an unanswerable question: What to do about it? In the half-world in which respectability is a detriment, the word "smart" means a great deal more than it means in gentler circles. And by the broadest meaning of the broadest mind, Sunny Ralston was smart. She was too smart to stick her own neck out, too smart to drop a monkey wrench into the elaborate machinery that Lew Hartley and Wayne Hamilton had set in motion, too smart to think that anything she might do or say would divert them from their course.

She could save Allen, all right. That was a cinch. A word to him. A word to the police. It'd be easy enough to prove that Alan wasn't Lew Hartley, once someone had been given the lead. But even in this amazing new knowledge that she was in love, Sunny's mind didn't work that way. The hard philosophy of a hard lifetime could not be cast off as one would cast off a garment that no longer

fitted.

The trouble was that it did fit. It fitted Sunny in every particular save one. And even yet the instinct of self-preservation was stronger than any other idea she could imagine. Let her breathe a word of what she knew and she wouldn't have a chance. It required a great deal more love than Sunny was capable of at the moment to invite the fury of a man like Lew Hartley.

After all I've been through, she thought, I've got to fall for Mr. Leonard P. Dope. And just when it's in the books to hurt worst.

Sunny had a logical mind, untrammelled by conventions. She had fallen for Alan. Alan was in the next room. It was simple as the first three letters of the alphabet.

Alan had been lying there wide awake. He saw the door swing open and he reached for the bed light. Sunny's voice came to him. "Don't turn it on, Alan."

She came to him across the room. The moonlight streaming in through the window gave her beauty an ethereal quality. She moved slowly, with easy grace.

She sat down on the edge of the bed. Odd what tricks could be played by this unusual light. Sunny seemed to have the softness of a child, the gentleness of an inexperienced girl. Even the situation, even her revealing costume could not dispel the utter simplicity of this moment.

Alan offered her a cigarette and she shook her head. He lighted one for himself. He waited.

She seemed to have difficulty finding the right words. Finally she said, in a voice so guarded that it was scarcely more than a whisper, "You mustn't make Chuck sore."

Alan said, "I didn't mean to. As a matter of fact, the whole thing started when I tried to straighten him out. You know—'Why don't you like me, Chuck?' That sort of thing. He's a difficult lad."

"He's dangerous."

"Yes, I suppose he is."

“You don’t have to suppose it, Alan. I’m telling you.” She took his hand. Hers was hot and the fingers closed tensely over his. “If I hadn’t showed up when I did, Chuck would have killed you.”

“Now, wait a minute, Sunny! Aren’t you letting your imagination run away with you?”

Sunny said, “How can anybody be as dumb as you, Alan? You think Chuck’s playing tough. I’m telling you he’s not. When a man like Lew Hartley hires a bodyguard, he gets what he’s paying for.”

“But look...” Alan was trying to understand. “Two men can get sore at each other. So they scrap. Then it’s finished and done with.”

“Not with Chuck. That ain’t his routine.”

“It doesn’t make sense, Sunny. I’ve tried being nice to Chuck. I’ve taken his riding without a squawk. Even tonight, I tried to be decent about it. But he wasn’t having any. What I don’t understand is why Chuck dislikes me.”

Sunny’s voice wasn’t quite steady. “The reason he hates you,” she said, “is because he’s in love with me.”

“Then,” responded Alan logically, “he doesn’t hate me. He hates the man I look like. He hates Lew Hartley.”

“No. You wouldn’t understand that, either. He doesn’t hate Lew. Doesn’t even resent him.”

“Then why should he have a mad on against me?”

“Because...” Sunny’s grasp was tighter, her fragrant body was closer. “Because he knows that I’m in love with you.”

It came suddenly. Like that. Alan sat rigidly for a moment, and then—because he had to do something—he reached out to the ash tray beside his bed and ground out the light on his cigarette.

The atmosphere of the room was electric. Sunny hadn’t moved. But it was she who broke the silence.

“That’s how it is, Alan.”

He spoke carefully, gently. “I’m afraid you’ve got me against the ropes, Sunny. Whatever I say is liable to be wrong.”

“Try it.”

“All right.” He lighted a fresh cigarette. “The words don’t seem to fit. But suppose I put it this way: Lew Hartley wouldn’t like it.”

“Would you?”

“I’m human. And you’re lovely.” His voice was steady. “But I don’t trespass.”

“How much do you like me?”

“Plenty. I think you’re aces. But we simply don’t play in the same league.”

She said, “I know you’re in love with someone else. I know you’ll stay that way. What I’m talking about has nothing to do with that. Or don’t I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly.” He nodded. “I’m embarrassed, Sunny, believe it or not. I’d like to laugh it off, but that doesn’t seem the correct thing, either. I’d like to try to convince you that you’re kidding yourself, but I have a feeling you wouldn’t like that. You’d know it wasn’t what I was thinking at all. There happens to be something about you that makes me talk straight.”

“Thanks. You’ve got me figured right, anyway.”

“So I’ll keep on. I said I was human—and we’ll let that ride. I’m not noble. I’m not a stuffed shirt—I hope. But when I was hired to do this little job of play-acting, Wayne Hamilton impressed on me that my chief asset was my honesty. I could be trusted. Well, he had that figured right, Sunny.”

She said, “You’re an awful sap.”

“I certainly am.”

“No man ever turned me down before.”

“That’s not nice, Sunny.”

“It’s true. I didn’t bring any scruples into this room with me, so there’s no use pretending I did.” She gave a hard little laugh. “I’m being as honest as you are. I know when I’ve been told off.”

“Aren’t you being pretty brutal to yourself?”

“Sure. Why not?” She withdrew her hand from his. “It’s the first time I’ve ever been in love,” she said in a voice that he didn’t recognize. “It’s a queer feeling. I don’t think I like it much.” Her laugh was brittle. “Any time you change your mind, just knock three times and ask for Joe.”

Suddenly she bent down and her arms were about him. She pressed her full, generous lips against his.

She said, “Think that over.”

Then she swept across the room and into her own. The door closed behind her.

Chapter Seventeen

THE NEXT day it rained, and the next and the next. Storm clouds descended on Miami, painting everything dark gray. The surf boomed angrily, the majestic royal palms leaned away from the wind, the entire resort colony discarded its holiday raiment and became gloomy. The beaches were empty and forbidding.

Alan saw little of Sunny during those three days, which he figured was just as well. She flung herself into an orgy of shopping, at which she was expert. She vanished each morning and reappeared in the evening in time to dress. They went places at night, of course, that being an important part of the schedule. Sunny was gay—and deliberately impersonal. She carried it off well, although Alan noticed that she seldom met his eyes squarely.

During the three days of sodden bleakness, Alan read. Chuck Williams appeared to do nothing. He sat around the house, his pasty face inscrutable. Time apparently meant nothing to him.

His attitude toward Alan was less forbidding. He spoke only when he had to, and then used a minimum of words, but—however briefly—the open hostility seemed to have vanished. Even when he and Alan and Sunny went out together at night, Chuck remained within himself. He gave no sign of remembering what had occurred that hectic night. His expression was blank and impassive, his eyes told nothing.

Then, on the fourth morning, the sun shone. Alan, looking out at it through his bedroom window, thought he had never seen anything so brilliant or so blue as the Miami sky after three days of downpour. The air was crystal-clear and cool enough to be invigorating. Once again the streets were populated by eager vacationists. The horse and dog tracks were jammed, the beaches crowded.

The return of clear weather seemed to make little difference to Sunny Ralston. She continued to leave the house every morning and to return late in the evening. Alan did a bit of swimming and a great deal of lazing.

He became rather friendly with Captain Swanson, who commanded Lew Hartley's trim seventy-five-footer, which was moored in Indian Creek just across Collins Avenue from the house. Alan suggested to Chuck that he'd like to go

fishing, and to his surprise, Chuck agreed.

The Blue Gull was luxurious. Captain Swanson navigated it. There was a combination engineer and general handy man. There was a steward, who performed magic in the tiny galley.

Chuck didn't fish. He didn't read. He didn't play solitaire. At the house or on the Blue Gull, Chuck sat impassively.

On the second day of fishing, Alan landed a sizable tarpon. He ordered the boat returned to Miami, elated beyond all reason.

Back on the Hartley estate again, Alan dropped into a steamer chair and relaxed. He didn't hear the approach of Sunny. Her voice sounded from above and he looked up into amused blue eyes.

"Ol' rockin' chair got you?" she said.

"It begins to look that way."

She pulled up a lawn chair and seated herself, but he had the impression that she wasn't staying, that there were other things on her mind. She accepted a cigarette, lighted it, and said, "I hear you caught yourself a sardine."

He spread his arms as far as they'd go. "Ten times that big," he lied. He eyed her with approval. "You look niftier than usual. What gives?"

"Shopping. Then tea with that Foster girl."

Alan veiled his eyes quickly, and tried to make his question sound casual and impersonal. "With whom?"

"Gail Foster. You met her that night at the Cristobal Club. She's a reporter on a magazine."

"Oh... that one. Neat little trick."

"She's pretty as the devil." Sunny was invariably generous in her appraisal of other women. "I'd swap what I've got for what she has any day in the week."

He said deliberately, “You’d lose on it, wouldn’t you?”

“Nope. She’s pretty, but really. Class. What I mean, she’ll still have it when I’ve lost mine. And she’s smarter than ‘Information, Please.’”

He arched his eyebrows. “You talk as though you’d been seeing a great deal of her.”

“I have. And darned if I can figure what she sees in me.”

“Looking for a compliment?”

“You know better. I know I’m not a dope. I’m smart enough to know where I fit. This Foster—she’s out of my depth. It isn’t just her job, either. She invites me to lunch... places... you know.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that she simply happens to like you?”

“I got to figure it that way. But it still doesn’t make sense.”

Alan asked, as casually as he could, “What’s she doing down here besides writing magazine pieces?”

“I don’t know. Just that, I guess. Come to think of it, we never talk about her much. We talk about me.”

“And,” suggested Alan tensely, “about me, perhaps?”

“Yeah.” Sunny looked at him. “Funny you should ask that.”

“What’s funny about it?”

“Gail mentions you all the time. You know, like a lady would—not coming right out with straight questions, but sort of hinting around.”

“I’m flattered.”

“Tell you the truth,” confided Sunny, “it ain’t that I think she’s dumb or anything, but I don’t believe she ever before came in contact with a couple...” She laughed. “Every time I meet that girl, I feel naked without a wedding ring.”

She glanced at a tiny jeweled wrist watch and jumped to her feet. "I'm late again. Be seein' you." She waved as she started off. "Be sweet to Chuck."

Alan watched her until she reached the car, which Philip had brought around from the garage. They drove through the gate, and Alan settled back in his chair. But the mood of luxurious relaxation had gone.

So Gail wasn't convinced, after all. That much was clear. It was she who was pursuing Sunny, and there could be only one possible reason. She was seeking confirmation of her suspicions.

It added up to only one thing, and Alan wasn't very pleased. With the two girls becoming more friendly, it would be increasingly difficult for him to avoid Gail; and that meant that he'd have to be twice as gruff as he'd ever been before in order to disillusion her. Any other course was unfair to Lew Hartley. He hated this part of his role. There was one faint satisfaction: Gail would never learn anything from Sunny. Except... His face flushed. Sunny had no embarrassment over her relationship to the real Lew Hartley. She'd certainly do nothing to make Gail think that he wasn't Lew.

Alan did not see the dilapidated old car that stopped just outside the gate. He did not notice the stranger who got out, glanced about uncertainly, and then saw Alan sitting alone in the sunshine.

The man's uncertainty vanished. He walked across the lawn with swift, easy strides. While still a score of feet away he called cheerfully, "Hello, Mr. Hartley."

Alan's senses responded to the alert signal. He stared at a man whom he had never seen before. The stranger had a strong, firm face that was definitely not good-looking. He was perhaps forty years of age. He had the hard, compact build of the trained athlete. His simple summer-weight woolen suit indicated a man in average financial circumstances. He wore no hat, and Alan saw that his sandy hair was getting thin in spots. He came forward more quickly. His big, calloused hand was extended. He said again, in his big, booming voice, "Hello, Mr. Hartley." Then he grinned and said, "Jeez, Lew, it's good to see you again."

Alan was on guard. Here was the sort of thing he'd been dreading. The man had walked confidently into the grounds, which indicated that he felt he had a right to be there. He had addressed him twice as "Mr. Hartley" and then as "Lew."

Obviously it was somebody Alan— as Lew Hartley—was supposed to know. For the first time since arriving in Florida, Alan was sorry that Chuck Williams wasn't around. Chuck would know this man; he'd know how to handle the situation. But now Alan was on his own. He had to think—fast and right.

The stranger stood off and eyed Alan critically. He had a warm, genial personality. Friendly as a pup. He said heartily, "You look good, Lew. Right in the pink. You musta been takin' good care of yourself." He put his hand on Alan's arm, as though to feel his biceps.

Alan hesitated, but only for an instant. He did something that he loathed, but it was the only thing he could do under the circumstances.

He jerked his arm away. "Take your hand off me."

The stranger dropped his hand. His cheeks flushed. Then he laughed uncertainly. "Since when did you get to be a kidder, Mr. Hartley?"

Alan said, "I'm not kidding."

"But look..."

Alan kept his words harsh: "Who invited you in, anyway?"

The big man with the big shoulders shook his head. He was obviously bewildered. He said uncertainly, "I figured you'd be glad to see me, Mr. Hartley."

"Well, I'm not. So get out."

A mantle of dignity settled over the stranger's shoulders. Anger began to show in his level, honest eyes. He said, "I don't get it, Lew. I don't get it at all. And I don't like it."

"I don't give a damn whether you like it or not."

The stranger said, "And I'm tellin' you one more thing. Another crack outa you and I'm goin' to spread you all over this pretty lawn."

Alan glowered at the stranger. He reminded himself that he'd become a pretty

good glowerer these past few weeks. It would have been funny if it hadn't been so embarrassing. Then he realized that he couldn't just stand there staring at the compact, broad-shouldered man, who was getting madder by the minute. So Alan swung around and started for the house.

The stranger followed. He said, "I don't savvy, Lew. And I'm repeating: I don't like it, either."

Alan continued to walk away. Then he looked up and saw Chuck coming out of the front door. He breathed more easily because he realized that Chuck had caught enough to make him understand. He brushed by the dangerously quiet little bodyguard and said, "Get him away from me." Then he continued into the house.

Chuck walked toward the other man. He said, "Hello, Jimmy."

"Lo." The big man was frowning and his fists were still clenched. He said, "What the hell goes on here?"

Chuck took the other man's arm and turned him toward the gate. He said, "Lew's sore as hell this morning. Let's scram."

The man called Jimmy fell into step beside Chuck. He was still boiling, and he didn't care who knew it. He said, "I never seen Lew act like that."

"You wouldn't know him these days."

"I'll say I wouldn't. We was friends, wasn't we? Sure, I always knew he was sour, but that never went for me. I never seen him act like that." There was the thought that seemed to stick. "I sure never did, Chuck. I never seen him act that way. Not to me."

"He was all steamed up about something else."

"Yeah? But it still looks funny, Lew tellin' me to get the hell away from him. It doesn't fit."

Chuck made a gesture. "You never can tell about a guy like him, Jimmy. Nowadays he just goes around biting."

“But not me, Chuck. He ain’t got no call biting me. It don’t seem like Lew at all.”

They were at the gate now. Chuck propelled the man named Jimmy toward his battered jalopy. He said, “Take it easy, Jimmy. Lew’ll cool off.” Chuck lighted a cigarette. “When did you roll in?”

“Yesterday. I figured Lew would be glad to see me. So I come over.”

“How long you gonna be around Miami?”

“Rest of the season, maybe. I’m staying at a little jernt in town.” He gave the name of a third-rate hotel. He climbed in his car and sat there shaking his head.

“It wasn’t like Lew at all,” he said. He stepped on the starter and drove off, still shaking his head.

Chuck moved thoughtfully back toward the house. Alan was waiting for him inside. He said, “I feel lousy, Chuck. On the level, I do.”

Chuck said, “You must have slapped it to him hard.”

“I had to. I never saw him before. Who was he?”

Young Mr. Williams jerked his hand upward. “You acted O.K.,” he said. “That was a guy used to work out private with Lew about four years ago. In New York. You know, come around and give him exercises and box with him and stuff like that.”

“I see. That was why he started off calling me Mr. Hartley and then shifted to Lew.”

“Sure. A man’s personal trainer, he’s different from anybody else in the world. He used to shove Lew around a lot: bark at him and make him do things. Well, that made him different. But he won’t bother you any more. He’s mad enough so he won’t come back, and that’s plenty all right by us.”

Alan shook his head as though to rid his mind of the thoroughly distasteful episode. He said, “What happens this morning, Chuck?”

“I’m driving over to meet Wayne Hamilton. Alone.”

“That’s clear enough. I’ll stick around here.”

“But close. Don’t let no more guys sneak up on you.”

“I’ll try.” Alan changed the subject. “How long will Mr. Hamilton be here?”

“Long enough.”

“You mean you don’t know, or you won’t tell me?”

“You figure it. Anyway, he’s here in time for lunch. He’ll start calling the shots then.”

Chuck drove off a few minutes later in the sedan. He was doing a lot of thinking, and he was still thinking when Wayne Hamilton stepped off the train in Miami. They got in the car together and started off. Hamilton—trim, distinguished-looking—started asking questions.

“How’s our boy scout, Chuck?”

“O.K.”

“Things running smoothly?”

“No.”

Hamilton cast a quick glance at the impassive face beside him. “What does that mean?”

“It ain’t as simple as you and Lew doped it. Things keep turning up.”

“What sort of things?”

“You remember Jimmy Conley, guy who used to come around and give Lew workouts? Big guy, kinda nice?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Well,” stated Chuck laconically, “he turned up this morning.”

“Where?”

“At the house. Walked in the driveway. Douglas was there alone.”

“Where were you?”

“Inside. And don’t gimme that kind of a look. I can’t be holding the guy’s hand every minute.”

“All right, Chuck. What happened?”

“Conley tries to be friendly. The kid don’t know from nothing, so he plays smart. He damn near bites Jimmy’s ear off. When I come out of the house, Conley is about to slug him.”

Wayne Hamilton smiled. “I’m glad to hear that Douglas came through all right.”

“He didn’t,” stated Chuck flatly.

“What do you mean?”

“He played his part. It just wasn’t good enough.”

Wayne Hamilton waited.

“This Conley, he used to shove Lew around. You get to know a guy pretty good that way. By the time I got him out of the grounds, he’d started thinking.”

“Thinking what?”

“He was beginning to get ideas. Smart ideas. He was saying that he couldn’t figure it, that Lew wasn’t that sort of a tomato, that there was something funny about it. This Conley ain’t no dumb bunny. Something didn’t smell good to him. A bird like that starts thinking, you got to be careful.”

“You think he’s likely to carry on from here?”

“Could be. Conley doesn’t take that sort of stuff lying down.” Chuck tapped the steering wheel with his strong, slender fingers. “We don’t want nobody thinking too much about Lew, Mr. Hamilton.”

“I suppose not.”

“So I’ve told you. From now on, it’s your headache.”

“You think it’s dangerous?”

“It ain’t good. What’s more, Conley’s sticking here for the rest of the season. He ain’t gonna leave things lay.”

Wayne Hamilton was silent for a long time. Then he asked, “Do you know where Conley is living?”

“Yeah.”

“Would he go out with you?”

“Sure.”

“Could you make it look like an accident?”

“Easy.”

Hamilton sighed. “I don’t like it, Chuck. But that’s how it seems to shape up. We can’t take a chance.”

“Tonight?” questioned Chuck impassively.

“The sooner the better. But be careful.”

“I’m always careful.”

Chapter Eighteen

ONE AFTERNOON in mid-February a telegram was delivered to Mr. Joel Kent, who lived in a trim little house in Westwood Village, California. The telegram was signed “Robert,” and Mr. Kent recognized that as the code signature for Wayne Hamilton.

Mr. Kent, who looked not at all like Lew Hartley, drove all the way to Pasadena to send his answer. And that answer, signed “Charley,” notified Wayne Hamilton that their meeting would be at the Biltmore Hotel, Atlanta, Georgia, three days hence.

So the man who had been Lew Hartley until he became Joel Kent, and who was, for the purpose of this trip, traveling under the alias of Charles B. Harrison, flew east, checked in at the luxurious Atlanta hotel, and contacted his lawyer, who had preceded him. Lew went to Hamilton’s room. Hamilton said, “It’s still a miracle, Lew. You aren’t you at all.”

Hartley nodded. “Greer did a good job.”

“You look ten years younger and entirely different. Maybe it’s the fact that the scar has disappeared and you’ve shaved the mustache.”

“Greer says it’s the nose.”

“And,” finished Hamilton, “perhaps it’s also your manner. Has cordiality been very hard to learn?”

Lew Hartley looked down at the attorney, who had calmly appropriated the more comfortable of the two easy chairs. He said, “Let’s get something straight before we begin. For years you’ve been riding me. Personally, I think it was a case of little dog barking at big dog. It has been your way of proving to yourself that you weren’t afraid of me. I never liked it, but it did amuse me. Now it’s not funny any more.” His voice took on an edge. “So drop it!”

Wayne Hamilton started to say something, then changed his mind.

Hartley lighted a cigar and inhaled deeply. “What’s wrong in Miami?”

Hamilton said, "Plenty."

"Little Rollo gumming up the works?"

"No. We figured right on him. But there are other things. Important ones."

Hartley waited. He'd tried to change himself since becoming Joel Kent, but he couldn't teach himself to waste words.

Hamilton spoke. "You remember Jimmy Conley?"

"Conley? Sure. Used to work out with me."

"He showed up at the Beach the other day." Hamilton gave details of the visit. Lew Hartley listened impassively, his brain racing behind shrewd brown eyes. When the lawyer paused, he said, "Not so good."

"Damn bad, Lew. It was one of those things that could not be foreseen. It happened once, and it could happen again."

"Where's Conley now?"

"Chuck took care of him. Neat job. The papers played it down. Said it looked like the work of a hit-and-run driver."

Lew nodded. "Chuck's smart."

"Yes. But I don't like the way things are going. There are bound to be other people like Conley, folks whom we couldn't possibly remember. And Chuck can't keep on killing them off."

"Right." Hartley eyed the other shrewdly. "What else?" he asked.

"Something. Maybe you won't like it. It's Sunny. She's fallen for Douglas."

"Two-timing me?"

"Maybe."

Hartley smiled coldly. "What difference does it make? I've seen the last of her anyway. She doesn't know that, but it's true. She and Chuck are being

adequately taken care of under my will. But they won't know where I am or what I look like. So if she wants to have her little fun..."

Hamilton said, "It's more than that, Lew."

"How much more?"

"I don't believe Sunny is fooling. I think she's really in love with our Rover Boy."

Lew shook his head. "You don't know Sunny. She'll never really love anybody except herself. She's no softie."

"I didn't say she was." Wayne Hamilton was talking crisply, as though it were very important for him to make his point. "In one way, Lew, she's tougher than you are. She didn't turn a hair when this scheme was cooked up. It was all right with her to be an accessory, provided she was protected. But somewhere under the Florida sunshine our young lady has commenced to sprout a heart. And there are other angles, too."

"Let's have 'em."

"Did you ever suspect that Chuck Williams was in love with Sunny?"

"Chuck? Hell, no. I never thought of Chuck having any emotions." Hartley's cigar had gone out. He lighted it again with meticulous care. "Looks to me, Wayne, as though you've gone romantic all of a sudden. Sunny's in love with Alan Douglas. Chuck's in love with Sunny. Who are you in love with?"

Hamilton shrugged. "Play dumb if you want, Lew. Maybe Greer lifted your brains as well as your face."

"All right," Hartley said testily, "so Chuck's in love with Sunny. What could he do? Get mad and rub Douglas out?"

"Yes."

"Where do we lose on that? They'd still identify the body as Lew Hartley."

"It isn't that simple, and you know it. We don't want anyone to know that

Chuck's mixed up in your killing. Not that we give a particular hoot about him, but because they'd make it tough on him if he was picked up. Maybe he'd talk and maybe he wouldn't. You never know what a man will do under the third degree, you never know how much real guts a lad like Chuck Williams has got. When they crack, they crack wide open. Chuck's usually under control, but I'd lay twenty to one that when he loses control, he goes all out. Let him run into Douglas and Sunny at the wrong time, and he'd probably blast away and do his thinking in jail. You're an important man, Lew. The police would give your killer a pretty stiff going-over." Hamilton drew a long breath. "But even that isn't as important as the Sunny setup."

"How do you figure that?"

"Sunny knows that Douglas' number is up. Being in love with him, it's logical that she doesn't like it. A single word to the police would crab everything. We know that, and Sunny knows it, too. If she's as crazy about Douglas as I think she is, she might say that word."

Lew lifted his long, muscular figure out of the chair and walked up and down the room. Then he settled down again opposite Wayne Hamilton. He said, "Things should be about ready in Miami anyway, shouldn't they?"

"Just about. You've been seen everywhere. There wouldn't be any question that if Douglas were killed, the body would be identified as you."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

"The right time. The right circumstances."

"That would seem to be now. Tell Chuck to go ahead."

Hamilton shrugged. "I'm not taking the responsibility."

"What does that mean?"

"It was always important for this to happen right. Now it's twice as important. I'm willing to cook up the scheme with Chuck, but I want your O.K. on it."

"You've got something in mind?"

“Yes. I want you to come down to Miami.”

Lew Hartley made no attempt to conceal his surprise. He said, “I don’t get it.”

“It’s simple enough. You show up down there, take a suite in a hotel, register as Charles B. Harrison, and stay in your rooms. Nobody will see you, and even if they did, there isn’t a chance that you’d be recognized. You’ll be right where I can put my finger on you. You’ve got a clear brain on this sort of thing. I trust you more than I trust myself, and certainly more than I trust Chuck. I won’t give Chuck the word until you’ve said the scheme is solid. I’m sticking my neck out far enough as it is.”

“I see.” Lew knew that there was no use arguing. He summed things up. “It’s got to be soon. If you’ve guessed wrong, we don’t lose anything. If you’ve guessed right about Sunny, she still isn’t a fool.”

“Meaning?”

“Sunny might go a long way to keep Alan Douglas from being killed,” stated Hartley. “But once he’s dead, she’ll keep her mouth shut.” He stared at his lawyer. “You’re sure this new face makes me safe?”

“I wouldn’t take the chance if I didn’t think so.”

“Suppose Sunny saw me? Or Chuck?”

“It wouldn’t mean a thing. Besides, you’re not leaving your suite. A guy named Harrison checks in, stays a few days, and checks out. While he’s there Lew Hartley meets with an accidental death. There isn’t any legal red tape because everybody knows it’s Hartley.”

“Sounds safe enough.”

“It is. And don’t get me wrong, Lew. I’m laying this thing right back in your lap. All this stuff I’ve been telling you happened recently. Before we ever get back to Miami, a lot more may have happened. I can’t keep telephoning you about stuff like that. It’s too dangerous. We can’t take a single chance. That’s why you’ve got to be on the spot. When we get things doped out, I outline ‘em to you. If the scheme has bugs in it, you’ll be more likely to see them than I will.”

Lew said thoughtfully, “The original idea we had is no good?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. We never figured on a Chuck who might lose his head or a Sunny who might get hysterical. You dope it out, Lew. From now on, it’s your party.”

Hartley spoke. His voice was flat and emotionless.

“All right. We go to Miami immediately. I’ll register at the Palmtree as Harrison.”

Hamilton said, “You’re being smart, Lew.”

“Maybe.” Lew Hartley drew a deep breath. “I’m going down there for one reason. We’ve got to get Alan Douglas killed off in a hurry.”

Chapter Nineteen

GUESTS CIRCULATED through the grounds and the downstairs of the Hartley home. They said to each other, “This is sure one wow of a party,” and the person addressed invariably answered by lifting the right hand and touching the tip of the forefinger to the tip of the thumb so as to form a circle, indicating unqualified approval. It was that kind of party.

The band, backed up against the patio wall, was filling the soft night with music. The clear, full moon tried futilely to compete with the lighting effects concocted by Sunny Ralston in collaboration with a decorating firm. There were two bars, six bartenders, and a cold buffet that looked like a Hollywood production. The guests—necessarily liberal in their views, since they were the friends of a young lady whose status in this menage was slightly left-handed—had never concerned themselves about the Social Register, but were having an elegant time just the same.

Sunny was hugely enjoying her role of hostess. Her dramatic bloneness was high-lighted by a gown of shimmering metal cloth that clung intimately to the lines of her luxurious figure. She moved from person to person and group to group, greeting guests by their first names, having a smile or a cheery word for each, picking up conversations on the fly, dropping a pungent comment or two, then moving on again.

She encountered Gail Foster and said, “Hiya, Gail. How you making out?”

“Nicely, thanks. Where’s Lew? I haven’t seen him.”

“Lew hates parties. He doesn’t care how often I fling ‘em, or what they cost, but when there’s a lot of people making hi-hi, Lew wants out.”

“You mean he won’t show up at all?”

“Oh, he’ll be here. Ten minutes. Maybe fifteen. He’ll say hello to a few fellers and girls and then scam. He’s slipping away on the Gull so’s to get an early start tomorrow morning on some deep-sea fishing.”

Gail stood stock-still, oblivious of any further words of Sunny’s, unaware when

Sunny left her side. Alan was going on the Blue Gull. If she were ever to have an opportunity to speak to him alone, this was it. She remembered the Blue Gull from the morning when she and Mac had taken pictures of Sunny. Aside from the crew's quarters, there were four cabins. It ought to be simple enough to hide in one of those cabins until the boat was free of the shore. After that... Gail shrugged, and found the gesture turning into a shiver. By tomorrow morning, she thought, I shall be a sadder or a wiser girl. Maybe both.

Once the idea took hold of her, Gail didn't hesitate. She moved unostentatiously toward the gate. Nobody noticed her. No one cared what she did, and that suited her fine. She crossed Collins Avenue and went down the pathway leading to the dock at which the Blue Gull was moored. Her manner was studiously casual.

She had seen a couple of the men from the yacht cross the road and enter the Hartley house. She came close now and listened. There was somebody on board. She could hear sounds, as though a man were fiddling around with machinery. Walking softly, she moved up the gangplank. Maybe the man on board would intercept her, maybe not. If he did, she'd make it sound natural: friend of Sunny's—just wanted to look around...

But she wasn't seen. She descended the aft companionway into the compact, luxurious salon. She knew exactly where she was going. To the cabin that adjoined Hartley's. She'd seen it the day Sunny had so proudly exhibited the yacht to her.

The cabin had not been made up. So far, so good. That indicated that it was not to be used tonight. She tried the door leading into the owner's cabin. It opened readily, and she peered into the handsomely furnished room. She clicked the door shut again and then seated herself on the edge of the berth in her room. She waited.

She was traveling now on sheer nerve. She said sternly to herself, you're an utter idiot, Gail Foster, but try at least to be a consistent one.

Time dragged. She wanted to smoke, and dared not. Party noises drifted to her from across Collins Avenue, and she tried measuring time by the number of dances the orchestra played.

Shortly before midnight the captain and steward came from Hartley's house and boarded the yacht. She could hear them talking, but couldn't distinguish their

words. She continued to stare through the open porthole and a few minutes later saw two other men approaching the Blue Gull. One was the slim, laconic, unpleasant little person called Chuck. The other was Alan.

Or Lew Hartley, she thought in sudden panic.

Alan and Chuck came aboard. She could hear footsteps on the deck overhead. She heard other subdued sounds, a few quiet orders from Captain Swanson. Then came the purr of the motors. The lines were cast off and the graceful prow of the yacht nosed quietly into the calm waters of Indian Creek.

Well, she reflected, here she was. The chips were down.

They glided into the placid waters of Biscayne Bay. She could hear faint sounds from shore, distant wailings of dance bands, auto sirens, the thrrrrr of an occasional motorboat. They were moving toward the channel leading to deep water when she heard Alan and someone else in the corridor just outside her cabin. He was talking, obviously to Chuck. The voice was muffled. Alan's voice. She was sure it was Alan's voice. She heard him say, "Yes, early. 'Night, Chuck." If Chuck answered, she did not hear him.

She heard the door of Alan's cabin as he closed it. He was moving about the cabin. She heard the scratch of a match and the walking stopped, and she figured he'd settled himself in a chair and was smoking.

She waited, tight as a violin string. Through the porthole she could glimpse the silhouettes of great hotels and the outlines of lavish winter homes. She could see the steady stream of traffic along the Causeway. Gay, bright lights: the cheerful glitter and garish brilliance that marked the hectic merriment of a Miami night at the top of the season.

Alan was moving again. Undressing, probably. Then she heard the creak of bedsprings and the rustle of a magazine. He was probably planning to read himself to sleep. There was no other sound save the swish of water against the sleek sides of the Blue Gull.

She allowed herself an extra fifteen minutes. Then, frightened but courageous, she turned the knob, flung open the door, stepped inside Alan's cabin, closed the door behind her, and stood with her back against it.

Alan was sitting up straight in bed. There was no light in the room save the bed lamp by which he'd been reading. He was clad in blue and white striped pajamas. He stared at her, and in the half shadow his face looked startlingly unlike Alan: the jagged scar over the left eye, the prominent nose, the mustache. The shock was intensified because she'd been thinking in terms of Alan Douglas. In that first awful instant her confidence was shaken. She had the feeling that she was here with a stranger, that Vance Crawford had been right all the time.

She was keyed to concert pitch. Frightened as she was, she made her play boldly. She said tensely, "Alan! I've got to talk to you."

She could see that he was thinking fast. He kicked off the sheet and lowered his bare feet to the floor. He reached for a gaudy dressing gown and slipped it over his powerful shoulders. When he spoke it was in a low tone, as though he preferred not being overheard; but the rasping voice and words it used seemed to belong to Lew Hartley.

He said, "What the hell are you doing here?"

His brutality aroused an anger that did something to allay her fear. She said, "You know what I want, Alan."

He opened his lips to say something, then closed them. When he finally did speak, it was carefully, as though measuring every word. He said, "Look here, Miss Foster, there seems to be some man named Alan who is an obsession with you. Now let me tell you a few things. First, I don't know where I fit into the picture. Second, I don't give a damn. Third, you're making a nuisance of yourself."

She spoke with a confidence she no longer felt. She said, "No soap, Alan. From the first, I've known who you are. Now I'm asking—why?"

His voice was harsh. "You're a friend of Sunny's, so I won't have you arrested. Otherwise—"

"Just a minute." She tried to keep her voice steady. "I'm here because there wasn't any other way of seeing you alone. I've tried, and you've brushed me off. What's wrong, Alan? Why have you done this to yourself? Why won't you trust me?"

He said, "I'm giving it to you straight. I'm not taking much more of this."

"That would be the right answer if you were really Lew Hartley. But you're not. I knew it before and I know it now." Her voice was filled with a desperate urgency. "This thing is all tied up somehow with the money you gave me for my father. Believe me, Alan, no matter why you're doing this, I'm grateful. I'll play things your way, if you'll only tell me the truth."

Alan Douglas realized that the situation was getting out of hand. Never before had he loved Gail so desperately, so completely; never before had he so despised the necessity for acting as Hartley would act. He knew that if he let things ride, he'd be the one to break. His courage could not match hers, his disguise could not long be proof against the confidence that her devotion to him had given her.

She was talking again: earnestly, passionately. She was staking everything on her belief that he was Alan Douglas and not Lew Hartley. She was tearing herself to pieces, so that he could not fail to understand. He felt himself nearing the end of his own resistance.

He was thinking, I'm Hartley. What would Hartley do? And then the answer came to him.

He strode past her and flung open the door of his cabin. She shrank against the wall, her right hand pressed against her lips, her eyes wide with disbelief. This, more than anything else he could have done, was shaking her confidence.

Alan bellowed for Captain Swanson. His voice was loud and unpleasant. But before Swanson appeared from above, the door of Chuck's cabin jerked open, and the slender, agate-eyed bodyguard stepped into the corridor. He looked at Alan and the girl. He said, "What goes on here?"

Alan said, "This woman smuggled herself on board."

Chuck's eyes were hostile. He stepped past Alan and into the cabin. He reached out toward Gail, and suddenly her fear vanished and she was coldly angry. She said, "I wouldn't advise you to do that." He dropped his hand.

Alan said, "You've met her before, Chuck. She's a friend of Sunny's. Works for a magazine. Maybe this is her idea of journalism."

“It’s a lousy idea,” said Chuck.

Swanson, who had waited until the sailor relieved him at the wheel, came lumbering down the companionway.

Alan said, “We have an uninvited guest. We’ll put back to Miami and drop her off.”

Swanson blinked, said, “Aye, aye, sir,” and went back to the wheel.

Alan said to Gail, “You’d better go up on deck.”

She looked at him, long and hard. She said, “That’s how it is?”

“Yes,” he answered, “that’s how it is.”

Chapter Twenty

GAIL FOSTER'S apartment was inexpensive, attractive, and cozy. It was on the second floor, rear, of a long, narrow building that had been designed strictly from a utilitarian angle. It consisted of a single room, not radically different from her efficiency apartment in New York. It had a couch, an easy chair, two straight chairs, a table, a mirror, and a bed that appeared out of the wall. There was an infinitesimal foyer and an even tinier kitchenette.

This afternoon she came home early. That had been at the insistence of Niki Thorpe. The rotund, jolly, dynamic co-owner of Surf and Sunshine had descended upon her in a cloud and made gestures. "Get out!" she exploded. "Go home!"

Gail looked up in surprise. "What causes this, Niki?"

"I don't like the way you look. You give me the creeps with those dark rings under your eyes."

Gail tried to smile. "I didn't know I showed it."

"You do. What's the matter? You look like the subject for a bad portrait to be entitled 'Lady with Hangover.'"

"It wasn't liquor," said Gail.

"Emotional," snapped Niki. "That's worse."

So Gail was home. There were things she could have been doing, but she was in the grip of inertia. She relaxed in the easy chair and stared through the open window at a patch of azure sky. The afternoon was warm and pleasant, the air fragrant with Cherokee and Dorothy Perkins roses, which clambered about the apartment building. But Gail was in no mood for the delights of the senses.

No use kidding myself, she thought. I'm whipped down.

Discouragement set heavily upon her. She felt disappointment and more than a little bitterness. But the most persistent sensation was one of uncertainty. Until

last night, she had been positive. She tried to put it into words. “I’m still sure,” she said to herself, “but I’m not certain any more.”

There were too many fantastic angles for which there could be no conceivable explanation, too many doubts, too many incredible circumstances. She was emotionally at rock bottom; mentally and physically ready to give up, to return to New York and wait for whatever might happen.

She scarcely heard the knock on her apartment door. Not until it sounded a second time, more authoritatively, did she connect it with herself. She walked indifferently across the room. She opened the door.

Alan Douglas stood there. Alone.

Of all things that might have happened, this was the most unexpected. She stood motionless for a few seconds, feeling a strange contraction about her heart and a momentary paralysis of her muscles. She stared at the hawklike nose, the scar over the left eye, the mustache, the keen brown eyes. Then she was aroused from her stupefaction by the sound of his voice: “Aren’t you going to ask me in?”

She stood back and he walked into the apartment. She closed the door and turned so that her back was against it. He stood in the middle of the room regarding her gravely.

Her brain was buzzing. Her back was tight against the door, and the palms of both hands were pressed against the panels as though for support. She was prepared for anything—except what happened.

His voice was gentle and soft and sorry: “You were right, Gail. I am Alan.”

It came suddenly, with no warning, no preparation. It hit hard. It left her shaken and voiceless because it was so unexpected.

He was speaking again: “I’ve been awake all night, thinking. I decided that I had to trust you. So here I am.”

Questions. Countless questions flashed through her mind: silly questions, obvious questions, eager questions. But she asked none of them. Out of all the things that she wanted to know, she could find no one single question that demanded to be asked first.

He said, "I shocked you. I'm sorry. But this is the only way I could do it." He moved forward, took her arm, and led her to the easy chair. "I feel like an awful heel," he said. "But it wasn't my fault."

Again she felt that sensation of there being no question big enough or comprehensive enough to ask at a moment like this. She kept her eyes on him, studying him, taking in every detail.

He drew up a straight chair and sat close to her. He did not touch her. His gentleness was incongruous behind the mask of Hartley's face. He started at the beginning, picking up the loose threads of the story that long-ago night when they had gone skating on the pond at Rockefeller Center and he later had encountered Wayne Hamilton. He talked simply, as one might talk to a child who was groping for the answer to a bewildering problem.

His voice acted like a sedative on her jangling nerves. A touch of color came back to her cheeks, her eyes lost their frightened look, her body was less rigid. As his incredible recital went on and on she found herself nodding occasionally to show him that she understood.

He carried his recital through to last night. "That jarred me," he said. "After you had been put off the boat, I went back to the house. I spent the night smoking and thinking. I was debating a single point: of the courses open to me, which was the most fair to Lew Hartley."

He took out a jeweled cigarette case that bore the initials L.H., handed her a cigarette, selected one himself, and lighted both.

"There was no one with whom I could discuss it. Wayne Hamilton has gone away. I had a feeling that neither Chuck Williams nor Sunny Ralston could be relied on for sound advice. It narrowed down to this question: Which was better—for me to violate the letter of the trust Hartley had placed in me, or to let you continue to investigate until you discovered the truth? I decided that even Hartley would approve what I'm doing."

She had herself under control now, but she still did not speak.

He went on, "My reactions last night when you walked into my cabin decided me. You caught me with my guard down. I knew I couldn't hold out much longer." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I had almost forgotten how much I

love you. What reminded me was the look of hurt I saw in your eyes. I knew I couldn't stand that gaff very long. But there was no time to think then. That was why I called Swanson, because I didn't want to be overwhelmed by the problem until I'd had time to think.

His lips expanded into a smile, and it seemed sardonic on this face that was not his. "Later, you can tell me how you happened to be in Miami—what aroused your suspicions. I haven't doped that out any more than you could cook up an answer to why I was playing Hartley. But this was clear to me: If you continued snooping around—and you gave every indication of doing exactly that—you'd be bound to verify your suspicion that it was I. You'd logically tell someone. And that seemed grossly unfair to Hartley, who has something tremendous at stake. He had pledged me not to tell anyone, but here was an unforeseeable condition that had to be handled on the dot. I had to take it for granted that he could trust my discretion as well as my integrity."

His eyes bored into hers. "I knew something that Hartley could not know. I knew that I could trust you. You reminded me of that last night. So long as you were ignorant and inquisitive, you might cause trouble. Knowing the truth, you'd play it my way." His voice trailed off, and he spread his arms wide in a gesture of surrender. "So here I am, sweetheart. And that's the story."

She said, "Would you mind holding me very tight for just a minute, Alan?"

They rose and his arms went about her. He kissed her. But she kept her eyes closed. This was Alan caressing her, and she dared not look at the face of Lew Hartley.

After that it was easier to assume a semblance of sanity. He said, "I was right to trust you, wasn't I, Gail?"

"You know the answer to that."

"You won't try to interfere, now that you know everything is all right?"

"I won't try to interfere, Alan." She hesitated briefly. "But I don't feel that everything is all right."

"What do you mean?"

“I don’t know. Intuition, I suppose.” “Darling, you mustn’t let an archaic thing like intuition knock your common sense out of the ring. If you’re worried about the supposed danger from the rival manganese moguls, I think that was a lot of baloney from the beginning. The risk, I mean.” He smiled. “And I’ve got Chuck. He’s a crummy companion, but a most efficient bodyguard.”

“All right, darling. I’ll try not to worry any more.” A sudden thought struck her. “But how did you manage to slip away to see me?”

“Just walked out. Like a big boy.”

“No one followed you?”

“Certainly not. And even if they had, what difference would it make?”

Her voice had tightened up again. “I was trying to figure that,” she said.

He put his arm around her and drew her close. When she came up for air it was to say, “That was worth waiting for, darling,” and then she got up as he rose to go. She said, “You’ll be careful, won’t you?”

“I’ll be whatever you want me to be.”

He smiled with Lew Hartley’s face and waved good-by. The door closed behind him and she heard him walking down the hall.

She waited. Then she left her apartment and walked the length of the public corridor so that she could see the street and get a final glimpse of him.

She saw him leave the building and walk off down the street. And she saw something else.

There was a car parked down the block. In it was a slender, pasty-faced man with cruel, agate eyes and an inscrutable expression. Chuck Williams.

So Alan had been followed. She saw Chuck drive past the apartment house.

Against all the dictates of logic and common sense, her fear returned.

Chapter Twenty-one

GAIL FOSTER spent a sleepless night. Her valiant efforts to rationalize things got her exactly nowhere.

Now she knew the truth, and by all the rules of common sense she should be content. But she wasn't. She believed that Alan had told her the facts as he knew them, but somewhere within her a warning gong was sounding.

She was even denied the satisfaction of telling Vance Crawford that she now knew she had been right. Alan had tied her hands. He had insisted that no one must know. And then a thought came to Gail just before the first gray finger of dawn crept across the Atlantic.

She had promised Alan not to tell anyone, but it was logical to presume that she might discuss the thing with someone who already knew the truth.

She caught a little sleep before her alarm clock buzzed at seven-thirty. She let the coffee percolate while she dressed, and felt better when she drank it. She was at the office of Surf and Sunshine before nine o'clock, banging out routine stuff on her typewriter, checking over dates for social functions that she had been assigned to cover. At ten o'clock she telephoned the Hartley home.

Gail waited nervously until she heard Sunny's rich, sleepy voice. She said, as brightly as possible, "I hope I didn't wake you, Sunny."

"Nobody can wake me this early. And anyway, I was already." Sunny took a deep drag on a cigarette. "What gives?" she asked.

"Nothing important." Gail hoped her voice sounded casual. "I'm merely overcome by the yen to buy you a lunch."

"Where, when, and is it fattening?"

"Seaspray Club, twelve-thirty, and it isn't."

Sunny said, "Check. I'll be there on time or slightly late."

"Not too late. Don't forget I'm a working goil."

At the Seaspray Club, Gail selected a table on the glass-enclosed veranda. From there she could see the wide stretch of beach and the sand dunes that edged it. Beyond the beach, the surf undulated gently, only occasionally achieving a white fringe before pounding into the shore. It was all very lovely and tranquil.

Sunny, by some miracle, was on time. She sat down opposite Gail and said without preamble, "You look like hell." Gail really laughed. There was something refreshingly spontaneous about Sunny.

"I didn't get an awful lot of sleep last night."

"Miami getting under your skin?"

"It isn't that." Gail pulled herself together. "Cocktail?"

"Martini. Dry." They ordered the cocktails, and twin luncheons of chicken salad. "It's awfully good here," explained Sunny, "if you like tuna fish."

They ate lightly and chatted about nothing in particular. Then the waiter cleared the table and brought a pot of coffee and two tiny cups. Sunny lighted her cigarette and relaxed. She said quietly, "All right, Gail, let's have it."

Gail looked up in surprise. "Have what?"

"Your reason for all this." Sunny was smiling, but her eyes were steady and shrewd. "You've got something on that nifty little bosom of yours."

"Sunny Ralston..." Gail found herself sparring for time. "She sees all, knows all —"

"And don't say nuttin' to nobody, no time."

Gail gave an embarrassed little laugh. "This isn't easy, Sunny. And it's going to sound a bit sloppy."

Sunny leaned impulsively across the table and covered Gail's hand with hers. "You just go right ahead and slop, honey," she said warmly. "Whatever it is, I'm listening."

"I figured we might talk straight," said Gail Foster steadily, "because we're both

in love with Alan Douglas.”

Sunny was startled. “Wow! You sure hit hard.”

“I’m sorry. But that’s how it is.”

“Maybe,” Sunny said guardedly.

Gail said, “I’m talking to you because I know you know. Alan came to see me yesterday morning. He figured the fairest thing was to trust me.”

“So you immediately talk to me?”

Gail nodded. “That’s one way of looking at it. I wish we could take our hair down, Sunny.”

“I’m trying to figure whether it would be smart.”

“It would help me.”

Sunny was tracing a pattern on the tablecloth with the tip of a crimson nail. “Where do you fit into the picture?” she asked abruptly.

“I’m engaged to Alan.”

The eyes of the two girls met and held. Gail went on, “And that goes back to my first statement. I know I’m in love with him, and I believe you are.”

“What do you want from me?”

Gail said steadily, “I believe that Allen told me the truth as he knows it. But I have a feeling that he doesn’t know the whole story. You know whatever there is to know. Maybe it’s nothing, but I think different.”

Sunny was toying with a jeweled cigarette holder. Her lovely face was inscrutable, her eyes shrouded. “Well, you called one shot right: I’m overboard about Alan.”

“I certainly can’t blame you.”

Sunny’s voice was edgy. “How does it hit you, knowing that? And knowing he

and I have adjoining rooms?”

“If you mean, am I jealous, the answer is no.”

“Why not?” Sunny was almost brutal in her directness. “You know where I stand in Lew Hartley’s life. You know that Alan is wearing Lew’s clothes and Lew’s face. What’s to prove that he isn’t playing Lew Hartley straight across the board?”

Gail said simply, “I’d never blame any man for liking you that much.”

Sunny was silent for a moment. Then she said, “I ought to hate your insides, but I don’t. I like you.”

“That goes double.”

“I figure it does, though I don’t know why. You’ve got class with a capital K. I’m a good-looking tramp. We don’t even talk the same language. I’m in love with this guy and he won’t give me a tumble by any rules.” She made the statement without adornment. “And you, it’s according to Hoyle, or else. But maybe...” she paused awkwardly.

“You’ve hit it, Sunny. We feel the same way.” Gail spread her hands, palm upward, on the table. “That’s why I pay so much attention to my hunches. I feel that there’s a lot more to this thing than Alan suspects. Don’t ask me why I feel it. There isn’t any sane reason.”

Sunny said, “You’re a dope, Gail.” But she wasn’t thinking that. She was marveling at the intuition of this girl, and experiencing a new sense of shock at what the truth actually was.

Somehow, Sunny never had paused to analyze things deeply. That might have been because she never had known that she could be soft or sentimental. Gail had made things look different. She had brought home to Sunny the significance of what actually had been planned for Alan Douglas.

She saw herself reflected in Gail Foster’s eyes. Gail had probed deeper than she knew. Sunny didn’t like the feeling, either. She wasn’t at all pleased at discovering that she wasn’t as hard as she had believed. It was one thing to fall for a guy like Alan, and quite something else to say to another person, “Yes, it’s

true. I love him.” Because after you’ve put that into words, it becomes inescapable. No kidding yourself any more; no pretending that it doesn’t matter a damn.

Gail said suddenly, “I was right, wasn’t I, Sunny?”

“About what?”

“There is more to it than Alan suspects, isn’t there?”

“No.”

Gail’s gray eyes were level. She said, “You say no but you mean yes.”

“Have it your way.”

Gail went on: “Just the same, I feel better.”

“Why?”

“Because I know you’ll do whatever you can to help Alan.”

“You understand that I’ll take Alan any way I can get him?”

“Let’s don’t play that way, Sunny.” Gail’s voice was gentle. “I came to you because I figure that Alan is lucky if you’re in love with him. I don’t want to get hurt—naturally—but I’m not crazy about seeing you hurt, either.”

Sunny shoved her chair back from the table. She said abruptly and rather sharply, “I’m running along.” She tried to smile as she walked out of the restaurant.

She stepped into her car and swung violently onto the main highway. Her eyes were hot, her body tense.

Damn Gail! What right had she to seek her help?

Sunny’s lips set in a hard, straight line. How could she help? What could she do?

Things had gone too far. Too much was involved. “They’ve got him,” she said bitterly. “They’ve got Alan so tight nobody can get him loose.”

Chapter Twenty-two

THAT SAME afternoon two gentlemen arrived in Miami. They traveled separately and gave no indication of knowing one another.

The taller of the two, a man who might have been anywhere between thirty and forty, taxied to the Palmtree Hotel, demanded a suite without inquiring the daily tariff, and registered as Charles B. Harrison of Chicago. He tipped the bellboys nicely enough to earn their good will, but not so lavishly as to attract attention to himself. He ordered two packs of playing cards—for solitaire—a box of fine cigars, a dozen magazines, and several popular novels, and settled himself for a stay of indefinite duration.

This was the man who had been born Lew Hartley and face-lifted into the role of Joel Kent.

The second of the two men arriving in Miami that day was Wayne Hamilton: immaculate, well-groomed, distinguished-looking, and slightly nervous under a calm exterior. Mr. Hamilton went immediately to the home of Lew Hartley in Miami Beach, where he was greeted by Chuck Williams, who said, with more than usual emotion, “Jeez! Am I glad to see you!”

Chuck followed Hamilton up to his room, closed the door, and stood regarding the iron-gray attorney with lackluster eyes. Wayne Hamilton, never entirely comfortable in Chuck’s presence, seated himself and asked, “Why are you so glad to see me?”

Chuck never wasted words. “Hell’s busted loose,” he said.

“Let’s have it.”

Chuck talked. He talked flatly and impersonally, but with a tenseness that he did not customarily display. He told of the brief excursion on the Blue Gull and of the girl who had smuggled herself aboard.

“Who was she?” inquired Hamilton.

“Some babe who works for a magazine here. She and Sunny have been pretty

thick.”

“Do you know her name?”

“Yeah. I met her a coupla times. It’s Gail Foster.” Wayne Hamilton winced, but his voice remained steady. “You say you’ve met this girl a couple of times?”

“Yeah.”

“Where—and how?”

“Night clubs. Parties. Like I said, she and Sunny seem to go for each other.”

“Would you say,” asked Hamilton carefully, “that she has been cultivating Sunny deliberately?”

“I wouldn’t know. They been together. That’s all I know.”

“Has Douglas been present at any of their meetings?”

“Yes.”

“How did he act?”

“O.K.” Chuck made the statement grudgingly. “He was all right.”

“How did you find out she was on the yacht?”

“Douglas. He let out a yip for Swanson. Him and me both showed up. Douglas said she busted into his cabin and we should turn around and set her ashore.”-

“He was still playing his part?”

“Oh, sure.”

“And how did she act?”

“She didn’t. Just sat there.” Chuck leaned forward. “Where does she fit in?”

Wayne Hamilton said, “She’s Alan Douglas’ fiancée.”

For an instant Chuck's face looked almost human. He whistled softly and said, "That's a hot one." Then his opaque eyes narrowed to slits. "Does Sunny know that?"

"No. We never figured the Foster girl in, so we didn't mention the name to either you or Sunny." Hamilton did some intensive thinking. "Queer setup, that. Gail Foster working for a Miami Beach magazine, cultivating Sunny's friendship when they're as far apart as the poles, chasing Alan on board the yacht. It spells trouble."

"I think," stated Chuck softly, "that she's got the lowdown by now."

"What gives you that idea?"

"Yesterday Douglas slipped off from here. I tailed him. He went to this Foster dame's apartment and stayed there about an hour."

The lawyer lighted a cigar with a hand that wasn't quite steady. He said, "How soon can you put Douglas out of the way?"

"What do you mean, how soon?"

"I mean just exactly that. Time is important. Can you do it tonight?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. I ain't figuring to stick my neck out. I was supposed to get plenty of notice when you got ready to have the job done."

"You'll have to take some sort of chance or the whole thing will blow up in our faces. Can't you get him to go somewhere with you? Any sort of excuse..."

"I said it once: Maybe. But I ain't asking for any murder rap. Working quick, I got no time to make it look like an accident. Lew Hartley ain't no Jimmy Conley, you know. They find Hartley dead, they're gonna ask questions. So it's murder, and they ask who. Well, I got to be damned sure I got an alibi."

"What's on for tonight?"

"Usual stuff. Dinner out. Couple jernts afterward. Doesn't look like any chance to get the guy off by himself."

“Tomorrow night?”

“That’s different. Gives me time to angle my way out.”

Hamilton’s voice was sharp. “Getting squeamish?”

“You know better. I’m playing safe, that’s all.”

The lawyer couldn’t say what he was thinking. He was thinking that he didn’t particularly care whether Chuck was safe or not. But he couldn’t tell the bodyguard that. He couldn’t do anything except argue him into quick action, because time was pressing in on them.

He asked sharply, “You’re not figuring to back out, are you, Chuck?”

An expression that was part sardonic, part amused flashed across Chuck’s face. “Finishing that guy off suits me fine.”

“You say it like you mean it.”

“I mean it. It ain’t just a job. It’s a pleasure.” He was thinking of Sunny.

Almost as though he read the thought, Hamilton asked, “What will Sunny do?”

“Squawk her head off.”

“Nothing more?”

“Not after he’s out of the way. She’ll be in up to her neck then, and she’ll have sense enough to know it wouldn’t do him any good. Beforehand—that’s different.”

“Then speed is absolutely essential.”

“I know all that. But I’m looking out for number one.” Chuck walked to the window and stood motionless, looking with icy eyes across the blue expanse of ocean. “We got something else to think about, too.”

“What?”

“This Foster girl. If Douglas spilled, and I think he did, then she’ll yell when she

hears something has happened to him.”

Hamilton’s eyes were cold. He said, “That figures out to be another job for you, Chuck.”

“You mean I got to take care of her, too?”

“Certainly. Douglas gets his first. Then you fix Gail Foster.”

Chuck Williams shrugged. “O.K. Inside thirty-six hours I’ll have them both out of the way.”

Chapter Twenty-three

DINNER THAT night at the Cristobal Club was a bizarre affair emotionally.

At a ringside table sat Alan Douglas, Sunny Ralston, Chuck Williams, and Wayne Hamilton. Of the four, Alan was the only one who actually was enjoying himself, and of the four he was the one who had the least justification.

Glancing at him across the table, Wayne Hamilton was moved to reflect upon the soundness of ancient proverbs: Ignorance is bliss, for example. Accustomed to acting the role of Lew Hartley in public, no longer worried about Gail Foster, Alan actually was having a good time. The atmosphere of the club was gay, the food and service were excellent, the music was good, and the floor show was definitely fine. Hamilton wondered what would happen if Alan had the faintest suspicion that this would probably be the last floor show he would ever see, the last dinner he would ever eat. The handsome attorney tried to extract a sardonic amusement from the situation, but he knew that he wasn't quite getting away with it. Frankly, he was nervous. Having helped astutely to plan what was going to happen, he now found himself entirely too intimately and dangerously involved. Only the fact that the real Lew Hartley was close at hand to assume ultimate responsibility made the evening bearable.

Chuck was no different from his usual self. He was no more laconic than usual, and no less. By not so much as a single word or gesture did he betray what he might be thinking or feeling.

As for Sunny, she was too gay, too bright, too scintillant. She had selected from her lavish wardrobe the most daring gown she possessed. Her voice was a trifle higher than usual, her eyes brighter, her laughter so gay that a keen observer might detect more than a trace of hysteria.

At ten o'clock Wayne Hamilton said, "I've got to leave you," and Sunny said, "Give her my regards," but it didn't seem very funny. As a matter of fact, Wayne Hamilton didn't even hear her. He was thinking, Tonight would be better than tomorrow night. I'd better get away so I won't crab Chuck's style if he thinks of something. After he'd gone, Alan asked for suggestions. To his astonishment Sunny said, "How's about going home? I'm weary."

Alan paid the check and they drove out Collins Avenue to the Hartley estate. The downstairs light was on as usual, but the servants had all been dismissed. Alan said, "I think I'll stay out here and grab a chunk of moonlight."

Chuck's eyes narrowed speculatively as he walked inside with Sunny. She said, "I want to talk to you, Chuck."

His face was expressionless. He said, "Go ahead. Talk." "Not here. Mind coming up to my room?"

He said, "I don't mind."

They walked upstairs together, and she stopped at her door. "Give me five minutes, Chuck. I'll do a strip tease."

Sunny closed her door and ripped off the evening gown. She slipped into a robe of white velvet that clung intimately to her luxurious figure. She kicked off her evening slippers and put on white mules with absurd little white pompoms. She took a quick glance into the mirror, touched fingers to hair and eyes, and found the effect satisfactory.

She felt tight inside. She tried to concentrate on the moment, to keep her thoughts from traveling too far into the future. She had a job to do, a tough job. She scarcely heard Chuck's knock, but she was smiling for him when the door opened.

She motioned to a little flowered armchair, and when he had eased his wiry figure into it she pulled up another so that she was very close to him and facing him. She was carefully negligent of her hostess gown. She was counting heavily on her feminine charm.

Chuck looked straight at her. He did not know that his eyes were not icy, that his face was expressive. Sunny had the power to affect him that way, and she turned it on full force. She put her hand on his knee.

She said, "When does it happen, Chuck?"

His voice was flat. "I expected something like this."

"Sure. I want to know."

“Why?”

“I’m in as deep as you are.”

He said, “Deeper, maybe.”

“I caught it at dinner,” she persisted. “Hamilton must have given you the word.”

“So what? You knew it was coming.”

“I want to know when. Tonight or tomorrow night?”

He made no effort to soften it. “That depends.”

“Why the hurry, Chuck?”

“Things been happening.”

“I thought it was supposed to look accidental.”

“Maybe it will. But no matter what, it’ll be complete.”

There was a desperate urgency in her voice: “You’re leading with your chin.”

“It’s my chin.”

“Hartley gets killed...” It was easier to say “Hartley” than to say “Alan.”

“Hartley gets killed,” she went on. “You get picked up. You’re out of luck.”

He said, “Let’s have it, Sunny. You ain’t worried about me.”

She said steadily, “You know the answer.”

“Yeah. You’ve fallen for Douglas. You figure it’d be better not to go through with it.”

“That’s about it.”

He shrugged. “The chips are down. There’s no other way.”

She said, “You’re in love with me.”

“I’m in love with you,” he said, punishing himself. “But it doesn’t get me anywhere.”

“It will—if you want.” She saw that she had startled him. “Lay off Alan and you can call the shots from now on.”

His voice was low. “Let’s have that so I understand it.”

“All right.” She leaned forward so that he caught the fragrance of her body. “I’m playing straight with you— maybe because you’re too smart to fall for anything else. I’ve gone off the deep end about Alan. I don’t want to see things wind up like they’re planned. I’m willing to pay my share, straight across the board. Lay off and I’ll do whatever you say. I’ll marry you, if you want. If that doesn’t suit, I’ll live with you.”

“You hate my guts.”

“That’s not true. I’m not in love with you, but I like you. I like you more than I ever liked Lew Hartley.” That wasn’t true, but it was plausible enough for her to hope he’d believe it. “We’ll go where you say, do what you want, and live your way. I’ll never squawk, no matter what happens. You know I’ll play square.”

“I suppose you would.” He shook his head. “But there ain’t a chance.”

“Why?”

“Dope it out for yourself, Sunny. You ain’t dumb. We double-cross Hartley, what happens to us?”

“They’d never find us.”

“Don’t kid yourself. No matter what we did, the finger would be on us, but good.”

She said, “There’s one way out.”

“Name it.”

“Suppose we disappear? You and me, we take a powder together. We write two notes, one to Alan and the other to the police. We just set ‘em straight that Alan isn’t Lew Hartley, and once they suspect that, it’s simple enough to prove it. The D.A. in New York clamps down on Lew right away, and nobody’s hunting too hard for us.”

Chuck said, “You want this thing so bad, you ain’t even thinking clear. Hartley sees that somebody gets us. Hamilton arranges it for him. Maybe we’re picked up for conspiracy to commit murder, or to defraud. I ain’t a lawyer, I wouldn’t be knowing the words. But they’d grab us for something.”

She took another track. “You’d be taking chances, Chuck, sure you would. But I’d be with you. I’d stick close. I’d be everything you wanted. Doesn’t that add up to something?”

“More than you got any idea.” His eyes were hot. “But not enough.”

She leaned back in her chair, so that the velvet lay close against her figure. Her gesture was not consciously seductive. It just happened that way. Her eyes were half closed and she was thinking fast. She said, “I’m coming clean with you, Chuck. I’m not going to let it go through. I can stop it.”

“How?”

“If anything happens to Alan, I’m going to spill the whole story to the police.”

He said, “Now you’re talking funny.”

“What’ll stop me?”

“You will, yourself. Alan’s washed up. You talk. So what? So you’re an accessory.”

“You know what would happen to you?”

“I still wouldn’t be worrying. Get this, Sunny, and get it straight: Maybe you’d do a lot for this guy while he’s alive. Once he’s rubbed out, you wouldn’t do a damned thing, because there wouldn’t be any percentage in it for you. You’re soft for him now—you’ll play noble to help him. But you ain’t kidding me. You got common sense. You’re tough. Once you knew you couldn’t help him, you’d

start looking out for number one again. So don't try to rib me about yelling to the cops after it's finished."

"You know me pretty well, don't you, Chuck?"

"Well enough."

"All right, then—try to figure whether I'm giving this to you on the level." Her voice was far from steady. "I've made a proposition to you. It's a better deal than you know, Chuck. Because if you did this thing for me, I could come awfully close to loving you—so close that you'd never know the difference."

He said, "I'd do almost anything for you, Sunny. But not that."

"You know where that puts me, don't you?"

"Behind the eight ball."

"No. It puts me where I've got to handle things my own way." She rose and walked across the room to the little ivory telephone table that stood beside her bed. "If the answer is still no, Chuck, I'm telephoning the police. Now."

He rose. It was a smooth, effortless motion. His eyes were slits, his body tense. He said, "You better not play that way, Sunny."

"I don't want to. But that's how it is. Do you promise to lay off Alan, or do I telephone?"

"Neither."

"You asked for it, Chuck." She lifted the receiver and stretched a long, slender forefinger out toward the dial.

His voice came steadily: "Don't do that, Sunny."

There was a tense instant. Then she spun the dial.

She never saw Chuck move. It came suddenly, devastatingly, and with incredible speed.

His right hand snapped under his dinner jacket as he leaped forward. It came out

holding the vicious little automatic that he always carried. He drew back his hand and reversed the gun with a single deft motion.

He struck hard with the butt of the gun. It crashed against the wonderful hair that was the color of new pennies.

Chuck Williams tossed the gun on the bed, and caught Sunny's sagging body. Then he disengaged one hand and gently replaced the telephone on its stand.

Chapter Twenty-four

THE CIGARETTE case that Alan pulled from his pocket was inscribed with the initials L. H., the face that was limned briefly by the flare of a match was the sinister countenance of Lew Hartley, but the young man who sauntered toward the beach wasn't feeling at all like the man who owned the name.

He stretched out in a beach chair and relaxed, mentally and physically. The rich fragrance of cape jasmine and of roses came to him and helped to create a sensation of supreme well-being.

The apprehension that had lived with him since his first encounter with Gail had been dissipated, and it was good to know that she understood the strange state of affairs and was no longer beset by uncertainty.

He was giving that angle of it some mighty careful thought. He wondered whether he should tell Wayne Hamilton. The decision was not a simple one. He had done what seemed the sensible and proper thing under the circumstances. Yet he wasn't sure whether it would help to let Hamilton know.

He had other thoughts as he relaxed in the fragrant night: thoughts of Sunny Ralston and of Chuck Williams. He felt a sense of embarrassment when he thought of Sunny. Not because she so obviously was what she was, but because he had no ego at all where women were concerned, and never had quite sold himself the idea that Sunny was in love with him.

He hoisted himself from the chair and rambled toward the house. He went in through the front door and walked upstairs to his room. He snapped on the light and reached mechanically for the jeweled cigarette case.

Then he stood motionless, the unopened case in one hand, the other hand poised in the air. He heard sounds from beyond the door leading to Sunny Ralston's bedroom, and the sounds were harsh and unpleasant.

He edged closer to the door. Voices, tight and strained. Sunny and Chuck Williams. He caught only a few words here and there, but there was no mistaking the tension.

He heard Sunny: “You asked for it, Chuck.”

And then came the dangerous voice of the man: “Don’t do that, Sunny.”

Alan heard something that sounded like a telephone dial. And then another sound.

He couldn’t distinguish what that other sound was. Not at first. Not until he realized that it had been followed by what might have been a groan.

Alan flung the door open.

Sunny was in Chuck’s arms. She was wearing some sort of intimate, rich-looking robe, which had fallen open. Her eyes were closed; her head sagged unnaturally. Chuck was easing her onto the bed. Alan looked at the bed.

On top of the absurdly gay coverlet there was a stubby, ugly, black object. A gun.

The room was alive with danger. Chuck’s eyes flashed to the open door, to the tall figure of Alan, still clad in his dinner clothes.

Alan saw something in Chuck’s eyes that he had never seen before. The eyes that stared across that room from over Sunny’s limp figure were the eyes of a killer.

Alan moved forward and asked, “What happened?”

Chuck released the girl and she dropped heavily onto the bed. He straightened and for one interminable instant the men looked at each other. No need here for words.

Alan saw Chuck’s eyes move to the gun. As the smaller man made his grab, Alan leaped in. Their hands closed on the automatic at the same instant. Chuck tried to jerk away and Alan hung on. He knew what would happen if Chuck got that gun free.

They struggled desperately. Alan was astounded by Chuck’s strength. The man seemed to be made of steel. Then Chuck brought his knee up and it crashed into Alan’s groin. The taller man felt a wave of agony, but he did not relax his hold on the gun. He knew now that he was fighting for his life.

That single desperate kick had made the combat about even; had even tipped the scales slightly in favor of the smaller man. Chuck threshed about, using every trick of barroom fighting he knew: head, shoulders, elbows, feet, knees. Alan crowded closer and closer, using his superior weight, feeling the agonizing impact of the butts and kicks that came with rapid-fire frequency.

It was a grotesque scene, a fantastic climax to a fantastic situation. Two men battling silently and desperately for a gun, an unconscious woman sprawled out on the bed.

You find yourself locked in combat with a killer, and you forget the rules. Alan was learning fast. You tolerate agony that would render you helpless under other circumstances. You find yourself employing tactics that come to you instinctively, because you know you never learned them anywhere. You butt with your head and kick viciously with your knees. You stretch out your one free arm for a squirming, dangerous figure that is strong as a coiled spring and elusive as an eel. You catch an occasional glimpse of eyes filled with deadly hatred. You know that if you ever let go that gun the end will have come.

Alan forced Chuck backward against the mirrored dressing table. They crashed into it and a perfume bottle spilled, filling the room with a too sweet, too pungent odor. Chuck had his back to the dressing table, and Alan took advantage of that. He bent his own bruised but powerful body forward, shoving his forehead into Chuck's face, arching Chuck's body backward.

He felt a sudden desperate lunge of Chuck's body. There was fresh strength, amazing new power. Chuck's hand tore the gun loose. Just for an instant. And in that instant Alan grabbed for it again.

He caught the hand, caught the gun. He bent the arm down and down. He crowded Chuck tight against the dresser.

The explosion seemed to come from nowhere. It was sudden and deafening. Alan felt Chuck's body relax. The acrid smell of powder came to his nostrils.

Chuck Williams dropped slowly to the floor. There was nothing dramatic about it; no crash. He settled down like an empty sack and then sprawled out.

Alan stood looking at the gun in his own hand. He looked at the inert figure, not knowing what had happened.

The hall door opened.

Wayne Hamilton walked into the room. His face was ashen. He looked at Alan, whose face and shirt front were covered with blood. He saw Chuck's gun in his right hand, Chuck's figure on the floor.

Wayne Hamilton crossed the room. He bent over the prostrate figure of the pasty-faced bodyguard. He turned him over and felt for the pulse.

Then he rose and looked at Alan Douglas.

"Chuck is dead," he said quietly. "You killed him."

Chapter Twenty-five

THE FACT of having killed a man was not easy for Alan to grasp. And there were so many things about this homicide that were weird: the incongruous setting—a frilly, satiny, perfumed bedroom; the gray figure huddled on the floor; Sunny sprawled unconscious on the bed; Wayne Hamilton, correct and immaculate in dinner clothes. Everything was out of focus.

Alan was aware of pain. He took out a handkerchief and dabbed at his face. He looked at the handkerchief and saw that it was crimson. He felt ill, and was grateful for the steady sound of Hamilton's voice. The lawyer was saying, "Take hold of yourself, son."

Alan tried, but without much success. He'd seen things like this in pictures, on the stage, and the person involved had seemed always to have glib speeches ready, to be capable of thinking clearly, of analyzing the situation, and of discussing it calmly. This was different. His head was whirling, his brain shied from accepting a ghastly fact. He was feeling rather than thinking.

Hamilton said, "Can you tell me what happened?"

But Alan couldn't tell him. Not then. He had to get one idea established. He looked down at Chuck and then at the lawyer:

"You're sure he's dead?"

"Yes."

Simple. Like that. Alan spoke again, and even to himself his voice sounded unnatural. He said, "What about Sunny?"

Hamilton put his hand on Alan's arm. He pressed tightly and looked straight into the eyes of the younger man. "Snap out of it," he ordered, not unkindly. Then he walked to the side of the bed and looked at Sunny.

He felt her pulse and her heart, he listened to her breathing, he looked for bruises. When he straightened up and looked at Alan again, he was shaking his head.

“She’s out cold,” he said. “Her pulse is normal, her breathing is good, I don’t see any marks. Maybe she fainted.”

“No. I think Chuck hit her with the gun.”

“Oh.” Wayne Hamilton nodded. “Then it’s probably concussion; maybe even a slight fracture. With that pulse there’s nothing to worry about.”

Alan said dully, “You’d better call a doctor.”

“I will. But first...” Hamilton took Alan by the arm and guided him into Sunny’s bathroom. He turned on the cold water and spoke quietly. “Get yourself fixed up. You’re a mess.”

Alan glanced into the full-length mirror. Hamilton had not exaggerated. One eye was puffed and discolored, his lip was split, there was blood on his face and on the front of his dinner shirt. His muscles were sore, there was a dull, throbbing ache in his midsection, his right knee felt stiff and swollen, his head hurt, and he was dizzy.

Hamilton said, “Let’s go to your room. Get those things off and take a cold shower.” He opened the doors of a cellarette and poured a stiff drink of Scotch. “Take it,” he ordered, and Alan obeyed. “Now, off with those things and get yourself scrubbed up.”

Alan said, “You’ll phone for the doctor?”

“Sure. Sure I will. Now hop to it. You’ve got to clear your head up before anyone gets here.”

The needle spray was icy. It jabbed at his flesh and snapped him back to a semblance of normalcy. He lifted his face to the overhead shower and turned it on full. He turned every cold-water faucet, so that the invigorating spray spurted out at him from every angle. His body commenced to feel alive again. He stepped out of the shower and rubbed himself briskly with a huge Turkish towel. He slipped into a lounging robe and slippers.

Things were better now. He was thinking more clearly, and that was good, although his thoughts were frightening. He hesitated briefly on the threshold of Sunny’s room, steeling himself to face again the lifeless figure of Chuck

Williams. Entering that room required physical courage, but he went in.

Hamilton said, "That's better. You look almost like a human being now."

"I feel better." Alan moistened his lips. "The doctor...?"

"I haven't telephoned yet. We've got to talk."

"But..."

"Listen, son—and believe me when I say I'm right. Calling a doctor isn't going to help Chuck, and Sunny is O.K."

"You're not a doctor," insisted Alan stubbornly.

"I'm that much of a doctor. I found a lump on her head—not even a break in the skin. It adds up to concussion. She's liable to sleep that way for hours."

Alan said, "It seems to me that we shouldn't wait. Not only a doctor, but the police..."

"We'll do all that, son. But first I've got to find out where we stand."

"It's simple enough."

"No." Hamilton's voice was sharp. "You see, Alan, the man who just killed Chuck is not you, but Lew Hartley. Think that over."

Alan nodded, but he looked straight at Sunny and at what had been Chuck Williams. Hamilton intercepted the glance and said, "Suppose you let me take over. Throw the responsibility on my shoulders."

That seemed plausible enough, and Alan nodded again. He sat down and managed to turn his chair so that he couldn't see what was on the floor. It seemed horrible to leave Chuck there, but he remembered hearing that a body mustn't be touched before the arrival of the police.

No matter what was happening inside Wayne Hamilton, he was outwardly calm, suave, and reassuring. His voice was steady. He said, "What happened, Alan?"

"I'll try to piece it out for you." Alan was speaking carefully. "After you left the

Cristobal tonight, we stuck around a while and then came home. Sunny and Chuck went inside and I walked down to the beach.”

“Why?”

“No special reason.”

“How long did you stay there?”

“I don’t know. Things like that aren’t important at the time, and you don’t remember.”

“All right. Go ahead.”

“I decided to turn in. I walked up to my room. I heard voices in here.”

“Sunny and Chuck?”

“Yes. They seemed to be quarreling. I only caught a few words, and the sound of the telephone dial. I think Sunny wanted to telephone somebody.”

“I see.” Wayne Hamilton’s keen brain was functioning capably. The pieces of jigsaw puzzle were beginning to fit into place. “And then?”

“I heard Chuck say something, and then a blow. At any rate, I thought it was a blow.”

“You were obviously right.”

“I opened the door. Chuck was holding Sunny in his arms. Her eyes were closed. I saw a gun on the bed.”

“What did you do?”

Alan shook his head. “That’s where it begins to sound unreal. I remember what I did, without remembering why I did it. I saw Chuck look at me and then at the gun. I had a queer feeling...” His voice trailed off, and then he started again. “I suppose I’ve let myself get jittery, Mr. Hamilton, but here’s how it was: I got a crazy hunch that Chuck meant to use that gun on me.”

“That’s possible. He was in love with Sunny. He knew she had gone off the deep

end about you.”

“Maybe. But I wasn’t thinking at the time. Chuck dropped Sunny on the bed and grabbed for the gun. I got there at the same time. We started to fight.”

“And the gun?”

“We both had hold of it. We kicked and butted and used our shoulders. He almost got loose. It was right after that that the gun went off. You came in a few seconds later.” Alan lighted a cigarette with unsteady fingers. “It sounds wild, but that’s how it was.”

The lawyer said, “I believe you. And now we’ve got to decide what to do.”

“Yes?”

“At the moment you’re Lew Hartley. The minute the police are called in on this, our whole scheme goes to pot.”

“That doesn’t seem awfully important now.”

“It is, though.”

Alan was clearer now. He said, “Chuck has been killed-”

“In self-defense. Don’t forget that, Alan. He attacked Sunny. Perhaps he meant to kill her. You walked in. He definitely tried to kill you. By all rules of law and ethics, you were justified. There couldn’t be a clearer case.”

“What are you driving at?”

“Just this: We don’t have to rush into anything. If it’s possible to salvage something out of this mess, we’re entitled to do it.”

Alan said, “I’ll ride along part way, Mr. Hamilton. I realize that things have been messed up for Mr. Hartley. But it wasn’t my fault.”

“Of course it wasn’t That’s the point I’m making. If you were in the slightest degree to blame, I wouldn’t be talking this way. But since this was a justifiable homicide, and since the circumstances are so unusual, we’re justified in

protecting ourselves all we can.”

Hamilton hoisted his trim, compact figure out of the chair and walked up and down the room. He was thinking of a lot of things that Alan neither knew nor suspected. He was thinking of the real Lew Hartley, who at that moment was sitting alone in his suite at the Palmtree Hotel; he was remembering that this was no innocuous manganese deal, but a life-and-death-and-safety affair involving the freedom not only of Lew Hartley, but of himself as well. He was beginning to get a wild, fantastic idea. He stopped in front of Alan’s chair and looked down at him.

“There’s no question of right and wrong in this, Alan. Any jury in the world would acquit you. You know that and I know it. I’ve been toying with the idea that perhaps this need never reach a jury.”

Alan said carefully, “Naturally, I’d prefer it that way. But I don’t see how...?”

“I have a friend in Miami,” said Hamilton, “a really influential man. He holds a lot of important political reins. It’s possible that if we could make him understand the truth, he might arrange things so that the world would merely believe that Chuck Williams had committed suicide.”

Alan Douglas was human. What was more, he trusted Wayne Hamilton. He said, “If something like that could be arranged decently and honestly...”

“There’s a chance.” Hamilton was speaking more swiftly now that his idea was taking shape. “I’m going to see this man. I’ll be gone an hour or more—depending. I’ll bring him back with me, provided he’s willing to take any part in it. And so you’ll know everything is on the level, I’ll leave the two of you alone. You can tell your story just as you told it to me. By seeing him alone you won’t have the feeling that I talked either of you into anything. Does that sound reasonable?”

“Yes, very. But...” He looked over his shoulder toward the bed. “Suppose you’re wrong about Sunny? Suppose she’s seriously hurt?”

“She’s not, Alan. Figure it out for yourself. I’m in on this part of it. Do you think I’d stick my own neck out unnecessarily?”

“No, I suppose not. But make it as fast as you can.”

Wayne Hamilton promised. He went downstairs and to the garage. He whirled out of the driveway and into Collins Avenue and started for the Palmtree.

He was thinking about Sunny. He believed that she had sustained a fractured skull. He believed that it was possible that she might die, and he hoped she would.

But most of all he was thinking of Hartley. I'm tossing this right into Lew's lap, he reflected grimly. I'm sending the real Lew Hartley to see the man who looks like Lew Hartley. Alan will think it's a kindly Miami helper. What happens then will be strictly up to Lew—and if I know him, plenty will happen.

Chapter Twenty-six

LEW HARTLEY listened patiently to Hamilton's story.

Hartley's new face, skillfully provided by the deft surgery of Dr. Greer, remained impassive throughout the crisp, nervous recital. Only the eyes were those of the old Lew Hartley: cold, calculating, merciless. They followed the well-groomed figure of the distinguished attorney as he paced the sitting room of Lew's hotel suite. And when Hamilton finished talking, Lew still said nothing.

Wayne Hamilton rubbed his chin with a nervous gesture. "I'm trying to think straight, Lew, but my nerves are shot. What I just saw wasn't pretty. At first I thought the applecart had been completely knocked over. Now I have a hunch that we couldn't have asked for a better break."

"Go ahead."

"We were playing with dynamite. Sunny had fallen for Alan, and there's never any forecasting what a woman in love will do. Douglas evidently told this Foster girl some of the truth about himself. If she believed what he believes, we were safe—but only so long as nothing unusual happened. The minute anything happened to him..." Hamilton shrugged. "Curtains."

"We agreed," murmured Hartley, "that Gail Foster was to be taken care of."

"Sure. By Chuck. Chuck's dead."

"It can still be done. There are men down here from New York..."

"I'm not concerned about Foster now, Lew. She's a cinch. A couple of thousand dollars, and she can be put neatly out of the way. I'm not worried about turning that job over to someone else, because so far as anyone knows, she isn't mixed up with you or me and we'd never be thought of in connection with her death. But our problem is more immediate and serious than that. It's Alan Douglas and Sunny."

"And Chuck," suggested Lew Hartley. "We mustn't forget him."

“I’m not forgetting anything.” Wayne Hamilton’s voice was edgy. “And I know that we haven’t got a hell of a lot of time to waste. Suppose Sunny snaps back to consciousness and starts talking?”

“That wouldn’t be so good. But you said...”

“I think she’s on the way out, Lew. I’d swear it’s more than a simple concussion. But I’m not a doctor. If she comes to and starts explaining things to Alan...”

“She couldn’t prove anything.”

“So what? That isn’t the way we want it. We want this thing to go through. That’s why we took all this trouble. If it slips, what happens? For one thing, your elaborate disguise and this whole Joel Kent setup makes it twice as sure that you’d spend at least twenty years in prison on the strength of what the state and federal D.A.’s already have on you. If they also want to be tough, they can connect you up as an accessory in Chuck’s death, and—”

“And you, Wayne, would not become the beneficiary of a trust that only becomes effective after the world believes me dead.”

Hamilton met the other man’s eyes squarely. “I thought of that, too. But, believe it or not, it doesn’t add up to very much against murder and conspiracy. The idea of prison may not scare you silly, Lew, but it does me.”

“What do you propose to do?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I’m not in so deep that I can’t get out. What happens from here on is your party.”

“You’d throw me overboard?”

“If I were jeopardized, yes.”

“Thanks for telling me what I knew already. Now then, let’s have your plan.”

“You can’t let things ride like they are. You’ve got a perfect setup at the house: Chuck dead, Sunny out like a light, young Douglas scared green because he killed a man. I take you over there, introduce you to Douglas, and then I check out. I stay checked out.”

“You don’t need to repeat that part of it.”

“You’re a prominent Miamian. You talk things over with Douglas. Maybe you think of a smart scheme of your own. If you do, that’s fine. The idea and responsibility will be yours.”

“And if I don’t?”

“If you don’t...” Hamilton bent forward, and his voice snapped. “If you can’t think of anything better, Lew, what’s to prevent your killing Alan Douglas and then finishing Sunny Ralston off?”

Lew Hartley blinked and straightened in his chair. He said, “That’s a little tough to digest, Wayne, even for me.”

“Naturally.” Hamilton became the advocate now, making his plea, hammering home his logic. “But if you’ve got the guts to go through with it, Lew, the setup couldn’t be more perfect. You take a gun—you’ve got one, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You take it with you. If you can’t figure any other way out, you let Douglas and Sunny both have it. It’ll be a cinch because Douglas won’t be on guard against you. You wipe the fingerprints off the gun. You put it in Chuck’s hand. You put Chuck’s gun within reach of Douglas’ hand. And what have you got?”

“All right, what have I got?”

“A perfect situation. More perfect than anything we could dream up in ten years of planning. We leave things that way. I stay away all night. I pick up friends somewhere and fix myself a hundred-per-cent alibi. In the morning one of the servants finds the mess and telephones the police.”

Hamilton had risen and he was talking now with desperate earnestness. “The cops can’t miss. There’s the whole story for them. Chuck Williams in the room of Lew Hartley’s girl friend. Hartley comes in. There’s a battle. The man who looks like Hartley is holding the gun with which Chuck Williams has been killed. The reverse is also true. That’s all proven neatly by simple ballistics tests. They’ve battled over a woman, and all three have been killed in the mixup.

“It’s perfect, Lew, perfect. Then you’re dead. There’s nobody to question it. They even know how you died— what the reason was. Nobody else is dragged in, because the guy who killed you is also dead. Sunny—the only other person who knew anything—is dead, too. Joel Kent is the safest man in America.”

Lew Hartley said, “We mustn’t forget Gail Foster. If she knows that Douglas has been wearing my face...”

“I know where to get the man we want,” stated Hamilton. “I’ll contact him the minute I hear from you that things are that way. We’ll pay him any price. The Foster girl won’t see ten o’clock tomorrow morning.” Hartley was thoughtful. He said slowly, “I’ve never killed a man.”

Hamilton shrugged. “You’ve never actually pulled the trigger. That’s the only difference.”

“Suppose when I get there, Sunny has already recovered consciousness?”

“I’ll be with you. You’ll stay out of the picture until I look things over. You won’t meet Douglas at all until I’m sure that Sunny is just like I left her.”

“You think of everything, don’t you, Wayne?”

“I’m thinking of my own skin,” snapped Hamilton, “and the money that’s in it for me. Next I’m thinking of you.”

“Thanks. Now one other question: Why not hire someone to do this job for us? If you’re willing to arrange about Gail Foster, why not this?”

Hamilton said impatiently, “Don’t be a damned fool, Lew. Foster means nothing. But where am I putting myself if I go to one of those torpedoes and pay him to kill you? Of course, I could give this new guy the complete picture, but I don’t believe you’d like that.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Then what’s the answer?”

Lew Hartley walked into the bedroom and unlocked one of his suitcases. He took out an automatic, examined it, and put it in his pocket.

“I might as well get it over with as soon as possible,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Chapter Twenty-seven

FOR A LONG time after Wayne Hamilton left, Alan tried to keep his eyes away from the gray figure sprawled out on the floor. He knew police rules—that a body mustn't be touched when the death has been the result of violence—but there seemed something grotesquely inhuman in just letting Chuck lie there. Finally he went to the linen closet in the hall and returned with a sheet, which he placed gently over the body.

Then he tried working over Sunny, hoping to restore her to consciousness. He bent over the bed and put his ear near Sunny's lips. The breathing was regular and even. He lifted her hand. It was warm and alive. He felt her pulse and found it strong and therefore reassuring. That made it easier to mark time.

Wayne Hamilton probably knew what he was talking about. The attorney seemed to have a great deal of knowledge about many things, and so Alan accepted his medical verdict on Sunny—chiefly because there was nothing else he could do about it.

Except to worry. Sunny looked as though she were sleeping, but he knew better. He moved back and forth from bathroom to bedside, soaking towels in cold water and pressing them against her forehead and wrists, but nothing he did seemed to have any effect.

Time dragged. It was almost three in the morning now, and Alan's ears were strained for some break in the quiet of the night. The sound of each passing automobile brought him to his feet in the hope that this might be Wayne Hamilton.

He found it impossible to relax, even for an instant. The atmosphere within the room was depressing and sinister. His nerves were twitching. He made a futile attempt to keep from thinking, because when he thought he seemed to get nowhere at all.

Once or twice he left the room and tried walking up and down the hallway, but that was no good. He was afraid that Sunny might recover consciousness, and he knew that if she did he must be there to help, to explain, to shield her from too great a shock. He glanced at his wrist watch for the hundredth time, wondering

where Wayne Hamilton might be.

And at that minute Hamilton was driving back toward the Hartley home. Beside him was a tall, rather pleasant-looking man, whose hard eyes stared straight ahead.

Lew Hartley was headed toward his own winter home. His nerves were amazingly steady, considering that he was a man with a purpose, and that purpose was double murder.

Oddly enough, it was Wayne Hamilton who was most jittery. Nervousness made his speaking voice slightly higher than normal. He said, "You might as well be introduced as Charles B. Harrison. You're using it at the hotel and it'll be easier to remember."

Hartley nodded. "It doesn't make much difference. Douglas won't remember the name long."

Hamilton's lips were dry. He said, "I wish to hell I'd never got into this mess."

"You're in it, Wayne."

"But I'm not getting in any deeper." He took his eyes off the road to emphasize his point. "I'm telling you straight, Lew, you've got to give me at least three quarters of an hour after I leave you alone with Douglas. I've got to have time to set up an alibi. If you double-cross me on that, I'm telling you, I'll protect my own neck, no matter what it costs you. Is that clear?"

"It's clear. And not unexpected."

"And I'm not making another move until I hear from you that this job is finished."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not talking to anyone about taking care of Gail Foster. When you've cleaned up your end of things, then I'll take the chance."

Lew Hartley asked, "How will you know?"

“I’ll phone you at the hotel. You can tip me off.”

The taller man shrugged. “All right. I’ll give you plenty of time to get away from the house. The interview with Douglas should be rather amusing.”

“Yes—if you’ve got that kind of a sense of humor.”

They reached the house, and Wayne Hamilton led Lew Hartley upstairs. Alan greeted them at the head of the stairway. Wayne Hamilton said, “This is Mr. Harrison, Lew. Mr. Harrison, Mr. Hartley.”

Lew Hartley and the man who had been made over to look like Lew Hartley clasped hands and gazed at one another, and, despite the tension, Hamilton was impressed all over again with the fantastic situation.

There they were: of approximately the same height and weight and coloring. The face that looked at Hartley was Hartley’s face: sharp black mustache, jagged scar over the left eye, hawklike nose, bone structure of the skull, color of eyes and hair, evenness of firm, white teeth.

Hartley felt a sense of relief. It’s amazing, he thought. They find this guy’s body and nobody would ever suspect it wasn’t me.

There was a grim irony about it. Because Hartley did not look at all like Hartley. He looked like Charles B. Harrison or Joel Kent or Joe Doakes or anybody in the world except who he was. At the moment he looked to Alan like a pleasant, shrewd, confident, and able person who had been cast momentarily in the role of Good Samaritan. There was nothing forbidding about him.

Wayne Hamilton was saying, “I’ve explained everything to Mr. Harrison, Lew. You can trust him implicitly. Tell him anything he wants to know. I’m leaving you two alone. I’ll be back in an hour.”

He said good night to Lew Hartley and started down the steps. Alan followed. He whispered, “I want to get this straight, Mr. Hamilton. You say you’ve explained everything. Does that mean that he knows I’m not Lew Hartley?”

“No. Certainly not. He thinks you are Lew. I simply meant that I told him about what happened here—just as you gave it to me.”

The front door closed behind Wayne Hamilton and a few seconds later Alan heard his car leaving the grounds. He turned and walked slowly upstairs. Lew Hartley was waiting for him at the top of the steps and Alan had the absurd impression that there was a light of amusement in the stranger's eyes. But he forgot that thought almost before it had time to register, and when he reached the hallway and stood facing the real Lew Hartley he was reassured by the quiet, steady voice.

Hartley said, "Where shall we talk?"

Alan jerked his head toward the door of Sunny's bedroom. "In there, I presume. I've been working over Miss Ralston."

"Any luck?"

"No. I'm worried. We ought to get a doctor right away."

"That'll have to wait.

Lew Hartley led the way into the room. He looked down at the white mound on the floor. "Williams?" he asked.

"Yes. I knew I wasn't supposed to touch him, but I couldn't stand seeing him..."

"Natural enough." Lew himself was just as pleased. He walked over to the bed and regarded Sunny critically. It was all very familiar: the room, the girl, even the pungent odor of the perfume that had spilled on the floor.

Lew Hartley dropped into a chair near the decorative fireplace. His back was to the bed, so that he could focus all his attention on Alan Douglas, who drew up a chair and sat facing Hartley. Alan could see the bed from where he was sitting, and that was what he wanted. He couldn't shake off his concern about Sunny. He wanted to be there to help if she gave the slightest sign of consciousness. He drew up his chair to within a few feet of Hartley's and offered his visitor a cigarette from Lew Hartley's jewel-studded cigarette case.

He said, "I hope you can help us out, Mr. Harrison."

"I don't see why I shouldn't. If Hamilton gave me the straight dope, you acted strictly in self-defense. Any jury in the world would acquit you. I can

understand, therefore, that you'd logically wish to keep it quiet."

"Yes, naturally..."

"I have a good many influential friends here, Mr. Hartley," said Hartley. "Whatever I do will be done legally. The authorities will have to know the truth, but still I believe they'll find a way to keep it covered up. That is the way you would wish it, isn't it?"

"Of course. That would be perfect. There are reasons..."

"I understand. And now there are a few questions I want to ask you." Lew Hartley was killing time. He was giving Wayne Hamilton opportunity to get to wherever he was going and to build up an alibi. "Of course Hamilton gave me his version, but that was secondhand. I want to be sure everything checks."

"I'll tell you anything you want to know."

They sat that way for half an hour. Lew Hartley asked questions—logical, plausible questions—and Alan gave simple, unvarnished answers. In one way Lew was enjoying himself, in another way he was tense. He tried not to concentrate on his real purpose. Having sold himself on the idea that he was to kill Alan and Sunny before he left that room, it seemed better to take it in stride—to act when the moment came and not to think too much about it.

He asked all the questions he could think of, and still the time set by Wayne Hamilton had not yet passed. Lew Hartley said gently, "You'll pardon my saying so, Mr. Hartley, but you're not at all what I expected you to be."

"No?"

"No. You have a reputation here in Miami for being a rather brusque person."

Alan shook his head. "Under circumstances like these..."

"I understand." Hartley was thinking, The lad is good. Hamilton's a smart picker.

Harrison interested Alan, too. He was a reassuring person; he made Alan forget the urgency of the moment. And even if Alan had been less interested, he might not have noticed what was happening to Sunny Ralston.

Sunny opened her eyes. She blinked into the light and closed them again. She felt dizzy, and her head ached atrociously. She looked again and saw Alan and a stranger. Her eyes traveled about the room. She saw a white huddle on the floor, a sheet, and then she marked the outline of a sprawled body beneath that sheet.

The dizziness was disappearing. The headache was still there, sharp and stabbing, but Sunny started thinking. She thought back to the moment when she had tried to telephone the police. Chuck had attacked her, and then things had blanked out. She concentrated on the two men by the fireplace. She was thinking, Something happened. That thing on the floor... She couldn't see the face of the strange man who was facing Alan; only his back and a bit of his profile. Maybe he's a cop, she thought. Maybe Alan's in a jam.

She closed her eyes again. It was easier to listen that way. They were talking about nothing important. Then a question of Alan's startled her. Alan asked, "Do you think you'll be able to fix things, Mr. Harrison?"

"I'm pretty sure of it. Of course, when there's been a killing, even in self-defense..."

Alan said, "The whole thing was so bewildering. All the time the fight was going on I was thinking about saving myself. It never occurred to me that Chuck would be killed."

Chuck dead. Sunny began to fit the pieces together. She heard them discussing it, and she caught an important fragment here and there. It began to take shape rather clearly, but something worried her. She had an uncomfortable feeling.

Alan said something and the man called Harrison leaned forward and answered him.

Sunny choked back a gasp. The truth came to her with blinding, frightening clarity.

Lew Hartley!

She listened again. Now she understood why she had known instinctively that things weren't as they appeared to be. Through half-closed eyes she studied Alan's companion.

The voice: that was Lew's voice, for all its calculated softness. The mannerisms: they could belong to nobody but Lew. She felt a tightness in her throat and a great fear because now there was no longer any doubt.

The man was Lew Hartley and his presence there marked danger for Alan.

That sort of thing wasn't easy to digest. There were too many angles to it. She heard them talking about Wayne Hamilton, and she learned that Wayne had engineered this meeting. That picked up another loose end, blended definitely into the pattern of danger.

It was simpler to think after that. She knew Lew Hartley, knew how he lived and thought and acted. She knew that the keen brain of Wayne Hamilton had planned this meeting. She knew that Chuck was dead. If Alan were dead, too... That was when she knew definitely.

She was badly shaken by the impact of her own logical conclusions. And she knew that time was running short, that this amiable conversation was not without sinister purpose, that she must think of some way to warn Alan.

But how? True, Hartley had his back turned toward her, but he never shifted his gaze from Alan. A single untoward move on Alan's part and she knew that Lew Hartley would act. And then it would be too late, because Alan was relaxed. He had no reason to suspect that his visitor was dangerous. She thought of calling out suddenly, "Be careful, Alan! That's Lew Hartley!" but she discarded that idea even before it took definite shape. It was worse than no good, and for several reasons. First, Alan would think that she was out of her head; second, even if that idea didn't strike him, he still wouldn't be able to grasp what she meant; and third—and most important—even if by some miracle he understood that this stranger was Lew Hartley, it would not signify danger. Alan had no reason personally to fear Lew Hartley. Alan didn't know that it had been in the cards for him to be killed. Sunny realized that almost anything she did would warn Lew and merely startle Alan.

She opened her eyes and stared at Alan, trying to attract his attention. He was talking to Hartley when he felt the pull of her gaze. He looked over at the bed and his eyes widened.

Sunny was looking straight at him: But that wasn't all. The forefinger of her right hand was pressed against her lips. It was a plea for silence, a gesture of

warning, and the light in her eyes made it imperative. With that little gesture she was saying, “Be quiet. Be careful.”

The man whom he knew as Charles Harrison was staring at him. He followed the direction of Alan’s gaze and turned his own head quickly. Sunny’s hand had dropped from her lips. She was lying as she had lain before, right arm at her side, eyes closed. That was the clincher for Alan. Her gesture had been studied, and he was too much on edge to ignore it.

She had started him thinking and given him warning. But he couldn’t imagine what it was she was warning him against. He knew now that she was faking—that she was conscious, that she had expected Harrison to look at her, and that for some reason she had wanted him to believe that she was still unconscious.

Alan tried to add it up, but the answer came out different every time. He saw her eyes flutter open again and realized that she was pleading mutely with him. He was tight inside, feeling that there was something important she was trying to tell him, something that she desperately wished him to understand.

He couldn’t figure it out, but Sunny realized from his altered expression that she had succeeded in making him realize that things were not entirely as he believed them to be.

But that wasn’t enough. Not nearly enough. The initiative still lay with Hartley. A hundred crazy schemes flashed through her mind. And then she got her idea.

Inch by inch she moved her hand across the bed until it rested on the ornate little bedside table. On that table was a crystal ash tray. It was hexagonal in shape, and heavy. Sunny knew that when she acted it must be in such a way that Lew Hartley would betray himself; she realized that her task was to startle Lew more than she startled Alan.

Her fingers groped for the ash tray. She prayed that when she made her move she would not be dizzy. Right now she was thinking clearly and seeing straight. She caught an occasional puzzled glance from Alan, which was reassuring, because it proved that he was alert.

And then, suddenly and unexpectedly, she acted. Her red-tipped fingers closed on the heavy crystal ash tray. She picked it up and swung herself sideways off the bed. She drew back her right arm and flung the ash tray straight at the back

of Lew Hartley's head.

Lew saw Alan's eyes open wide with astonishment. He saw Alan start up from his chair. And then Hartley felt the impact of the heavy ash tray against the back of his neck. It wasn't the target at which Sunny had been aiming, but it was enough to shatter Lew's well-ordered plan.

Acting instinctively, Hartley leaped to his feet—half stunned by the missile Sunny had thrown, but still capable of clear thought and quick action. He whipped the gun from his coat pocket. But he did one thing wrong.

He turned in the direction from which the attack had come.

Sunny screamed, "Get him, Alan!" but the shrill warning was not necessary. Alan had grasped the significance of the gun in the stranger's hand. There was no time then for debating whys or wherefores. The picture that Hartley presented was one of instant and immediate danger.

For that split second Lew Hartley had been startled into forgetfulness of Alan, and then Alan was on him. His shoulder crashed into Lew's half-turned figure, football style, and he wrapped his powerful arms around him.

The battle was brief and dreadful. Alan had learned a great deal from Chuck Williams. Things like rules were completely forgotten.

He had the advantage and he held it. The other man had been surprised and hurt. They swayed toward the fireplace. Alan saw the bronze fire set that fitted into the picture as a bit of decoration. He didn't hesitate.

He grabbed the poker and swung it. He swung it hard. It caught the other man on the head, and Lew Hartley dropped, unconscious.

Alan turned. Sunny Ralston was standing near the foot of the bed, shaking. Alan said, "What is all this?"

Her voice was far from steady.

"You saved your own life, Alan. That man is Lew Hartley—the real Lew Hartley."

Chapter Twenty-eight

GAIL FOSTER stirred restlessly. She was dreaming about a fantastic automobile with a flat tire that was banging along a wide tree-lined thoroughfare. In the dream it seemed perfectly natural that the loose, flapping tire should make a great deal of noise for a little while, and then no noise at all.

It started again, but this time it was louder, more insistent. Gail turned over sleepily and opened her eyes for just a second. It was then that she realized that there was no automobile, no flat tire.

Someone was knocking at the door of her tiny apartment. Knocking firmly but gently, so that the denizens of adjoining apartments would not be disturbed.

She stretched her slender figure and rubbed some of the sleep from her eyes. Through the cracks of the Venetian blinds she could see a dull grayness that marked the first touch of dawn. The rapping came again and she slipped her feet into a pair of gray mules and shrugged her figure into a gray and white robe. She walked sleepily across the floor and said, "Who is it?"

A man's voice, deep but with a soft Southern drawl, said, "Miss Foster?"

"Yes."

"I have a message for you. It's impawtant."

Gail cracked the door and peered into the gloomy corridor. She saw a big man with a kindly face. He said, "Can I speak to you a minute, Miss Foster?"

Sleep had been effectually banished. She asked, "What about?" and he answered, "It ain't nothin' to get worried about, Miss Foster. Just a little talk."

He extended a huge hand toward her and she saw in the calloused palm a silver shield.

"Police?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. Sorry to wake you so early, but..."

“What’s wrong?”

The detective smiled reassuringly. “Now, don’t you go gittin’ excited. Like I said, it ain’t nothin’ to worry about. S’pose you git dressed so we can talk better.”

Gail said, “Certainly. It’ll only take a minute.”

She dressed swiftly. And with each tick of the clock she experienced a new worry. She did not know what this visit portended, but she was certain that it had something to do with Alan. The kindness of the big man in the hall did not fool her. Detectives don’t go calling socially at (she glanced at the clock) six in the morning unless it’s pretty serious.

Within ten minutes she opened the door again, eyes bright and clear, every sense on the alert, every nerve tense. She said, “Won’t you come in?”

“No, ma’am.” The detective seemed a trifle embarrassed. “I was wonderin’ if you’d be good enough to take a little ride with me.”

“Where?”

“I ain’t supposed to say nothin’, ma’am. Just fetch you.”

She decided not to ask any questions—then. But it was a thoroughly frightened young lady who wrapped a simple turban around a well-shaped head, who picked up her bag from the dresser and then tried to smile.

He took her arm courteously as he led her down the long hallway and out of the front door. He helped her into the waiting automobile, and wedged himself under the wheel.

Day had not yet come, and in the half-light the neighborhood looked unreal: white buildings wraithlike in the grayness, flowers only partly visible, palm trees stretching gauntly into the gloom. She caught a glimpse of the sea, grayish-looking sand, white lines of surf. On the horizon she could see a single orange finger that indicated that soon the gloom would be dispelled and another glorious Florida morning would have come.

The detective headed north. They approached a drive-in stand and he slowed

down. “You a coffee drinker, ma’am?”

She looked at him gratefully. “Yes. If we have time.”

“Sure we have. There ain’t that much hurry.”

A heavy-eyed boy took their order: two cups of coffee. Gail took three scalding sips, burning the tip of her tongue. Then she lighted a cigarette, inhaled deeply, and said, “You don’t know how much that helps.”

He chuckled. “I sho’ do, ma’am. I ain’t no good at all in the mawnin’ until after that first cup of coffee.”

The beverage had relaxed her nerves and cleared her brain. He started the motor again and they continued north. The Lew Hartley place was in that direction. Alan was in that direction. She said, “I suppose there’s no use asking where we’re going?”

He smiled down at her. “I sho’ like that, ma’am—findin’ a real sensible young lady that don’t go firin’ a lot of questions a feller ain’t allowed to answer.”

Gail said, “I believe I know where we’re going.”

“Yes’m. I reckon maybe you do.”

And beyond that he vouchsafed no information. He was ready to talk about the weather, about the dawn, which was momentarily becoming more radiantly beautiful, about himself, even; but he had a placid, quiet efficiency that warned her that she’d gain nothing by trying to pump him. Once sold on that idea, Gail exerted herself to make him like her. She didn’t know what she was running into, and she felt that a friend—even so casual a well-wisher—might prove valuable.

They hummed along a deserted Collins Avenue, and she paid scant attention to the lavish estates slumbering behind subtropical foliage. She was trying not to disturb herself unduly by thinking of what might have happened. The best course, obviously, was to meet this situation, whatever it might be, with an open mind, with her guard up, with her senses untarnished by preconceived ideas that could not possibly serve any purpose save to throw her off balance.

She was not at all surprised when they swung into the driveway of Lew Hartley’s

estate. She wasn't even surprised to see a stalwart figure in plain clothes and big shoes standing sentinel at the decorative gateway. But she was surprised at what she saw near the house.

There were four automobiles. One of them was a long, sleek convertible that she recognized as one of the cars Alan had been driving about Miami. Another looked like a private car, and meant nothing. A third was definitely a police car. The fourth was an ambulance.

She tried not to show the cold fear that bit at her. She warned herself that, for Alan's sake, she must keep her chin up and her head clear. As they circled toward the other parked cars, she glanced at the garage. Four of the colored servants were huddled there, staring with wide, frightened eyes.

The big detective leaped out of the car and helped her to alight. His solicitude was pleasant, but somewhat terrifying—as though he knew she was in for a shock and wanted to make it as easy on her as possible. They walked up to the front door. Another big man was standing there, and he nodded when Gail's escort said, "This is Miss Foster, Sergeant."

The sergeant smiled. "Don't you go gittin' nervous, Miss Foster," he suggested, and she wondered why they were all so solicitous of her. He went on, "I'm takin' you into the parlor. I don't want you to say anything to anybody. Just sit steady an' answer questions when we ask 'em."

She nodded and followed him into the room. Her lips were tight, her heart pounding. But as she stepped into the room she experienced a moment of infinite relief and of thanksgiving.

Alan Douglas was there, and he smiled at her. It was the face of Lew Hartley at which she looked, but she knew that it was Alan, and her worst fears vanished. Even a second glance, which showed a swollen eye and an ugly, purplish bruise on his cheek, did not frighten her. When you have steeled yourself to face calamity, nothing less than that can seem very bad.

The sun was now streaming in through the eastern windows, but all the lights were on, too, so that the effect was rather weird. The sergeant conducted her to a chair and said to a thin, nervous little man with flashing black eyes, "This is Miss Foster, Inspector," and the little man nodded and smiled, and then instantly looked very severe and formidable again.

Gail looked around the room. In addition to her giant escort and the big sergeant, there was the little man who had been addressed as Inspector and two other men who obviously were policemen.

Alan sat across the room, and now that she knew he was safe, she tried not to concentrate too hard on him, lest it destroy the balance that she knew she must retain.

Next to Alan was a handsome, iron-gray man in immaculate dinner clothes. Gail had seen him with Alan on several occasions, but she had never met him and didn't remember his name.

A few feet away, sitting up straight in a stiff-backed chair, was Sunny Ralston, clad in a lavish sapphire housecoat trimmed with marabou. Sunny's hair was in disarray and she looked haggard and drawn. She made a valiant effort to smile at Gail, but wasn't very successful.

Stretched out in an easy chair just beyond Sunny was a man whom Gail had never seen and did not know, yet she had the unaccountable feeling that he was the most important man in the room.

He had a blank, expressionless face: an almost too perfect nose; thin, sensitive lips, and sharp brown eyes. On a little table beside his chair was an ice bag, and occasionally he pressed the bag against the side of his head and held it there.

There were no other people in the room. Gail thought for a moment. She missed Chuck Williams.

The beady-eyed inspector, whose terse efficiency gave the lie to his definitely charming smile, spoke quietly to Gail. He said, "Sorry to have troubled you, Miss Foster, but we are compelled to ask you a few questions."

Gail nodded and said nothing.

"Naturally, this is important. I do not suppose I need therefore suggest that you consider your answers carefully."

He pointed to Alan, but his shrewd eyes never left Gail's face.

"Do you know this man?" he asked.

Gail hesitated. Alan looked across the room at her, smiled faintly, and nodded his head affirmatively.

She said, "Yes."

"How long have you known him?"

"Several years."

"What is his name?"

She gambled on the truth.

"Alan Douglas," she said.

She saw glances exchanged by the other police officials, and she fancied that there was an element of relief. The inspector was continuing with his examination.

"How well do you know Mr. Douglas?"

"Very well indeed. We are engaged."

"Has he always looked like he looks now?"

"No."

"Then how do you know it is Douglas?"

"He told me himself."

"When?"

"Two days ago."

"Why?"

"He knew that I suspected he was not Mr. Hartley, and he preferred me to learn the truth from him."

"Did he explain the masquerade?"

“Yes. It had something to do with an important deal for South American manganese. He said that he had been engaged to pose as Mr. Hartley so that adverse interests wouldn’t suspect that Mr. Hartley wasn’t following his usual winter program.”

“Did you believe his story?”

She answered carefully. “I believed that Mr. Douglas believed it.”

“But you didn’t?”

“No.”

“Why?”

She shrugged deprecatingly. “No sane reason,” she said. “Just a woman’s instinct.”

The inspector nodded and said, “Thank you.” He designated Wayne Hamilton. “Do you know this gentleman?”

“No.”

“Have you ever seen him before?”

“I believe so, but I’m not sure. I think he is Mr. Hartley’s attorney, but that’s a guess.”

“Why should you guess that?”

“Mr. Douglas told me about him. I’ve seen them together occasionally. At least, I believe I have. He was the one who is supposed to have approached Mr. Douglas originally.”

The inspector’s finger moved toward Sunny. “Do you know this lady?”

“Miss Ralston? Yes.”

“What do you know about her?”

“Nothing definite.”

“Had you heard that she was supposed to be Mr. Hartley’s particular friend?”

“Yes.”

“And you knew that Mr. Douglas was posing as Mr. Hartley?”

“Yes.”

“Did you like that setup?”

She looked straight at him. “I wasn’t worried, if that’s what you’re driving at.”

The faintest suggestion of a smile crossed the inspector’s lips. He designated Wayne Hamilton again. “Did you ever see him with Miss Ralston?”

“I told you that I couldn’t be certain about anything in connection with that gentleman.” She looked across at Wayne Hamilton and fancied she detected relief in his eyes.

Hamilton was holding himself in check with an effort. He knew that his career was ruined, that he faced the probability—almost the certainty—of prison. And he was now thanking his lucky stars that he had proceeded cautiously, and had not arranged for Gail Foster’s death. Had he done so, he’d be in a really ticklish spot. No matter how bad a jam he was in, it wouldn’t be as bad as complicity in Gail Foster’s murder. She had been in danger, and she was now safe. Fortunately for her own peace of mind, she knew nothing whatever about that angle.

The inspector pointed his finger at Lew Hartley. He said, “Do you know this gentleman, Miss Foster?”

She shook her head. “No. I never saw him before.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

The inspector said, “Would it interest you to know that his name is Lewis Hartley?”

Gail straightened in her chair, then shook her head incredulously. “That isn’t

possible!”

“But it is. When Mr. Douglas was altered to look like Lew Hartley, Mr. Hartley had his own face changed so that he would look like somebody else. He was about to be picked up by New York and federal authorities for a dozen major offenses, and he used this device for changing his identity.” The inspector went on smoothly, “You see, Mr. Douglas was to be killed, and the body would be promptly identified as Mr. Hartley’s. So you see, your instinct was right.”

Gail said, “But that’s incredible!”

“It happens to be true. Miss Ralston told us the whole story. She probably saved Douglas’ life. I’ve made her no promises, but I believe she’ll go free. And now,” the inspector came closer, “now that you’ve been so cooperative, Miss Foster, I may as well tell you the rest.”

He spoke simply, swiftly, and clearly. He told her the facts as he knew them, including the story of Chuck’s death. At the end of his recital he said, “There seems to be no question that Chuck Williams asked for what he got. Douglas won’t be in any jam over that. He won’t have any trouble about the masquerade, either, since his own motives were free from any criminal intent. He fell for a smart game, but we are convinced of his honesty. You were important, Miss Foster, because we needed a final checkup on what we had been told by the others. I don’t think you need have any further worry.”

He shoved some papers into a brief case and addressed his men. “We’re taking Hartley, Hamilton, and Miss Ralston down to headquarters. You, Douglas, and you, Miss Foster, will stick around Miami as long as we need you.” He bowed elaborately. “That will be all,” he said.

Sunny rose wearily. She said, “I suppose I can slip into something decent?”

“Sure. One of the boys will wait outside your door.”

Save for the man detailed to guard Sunny, the hallway was deserted when the girl came back downstairs. Gail moved swiftly into the hallway and held out her hands. She said, “You know what I’m thinking, Sunny.”

“Yeah. I know.”

They stood looking at one another, and then suddenly their arms were about each other and they were crying. Gail pulled away and said, "Keep your chin up, Sunny. We'll see that things are made easy for you."

Sunny looked around the room. Her eyes were dull, her manner uncertain. She said, "It's one hell of a mess. But I'm not sorry."

Her head was high as she walked out of the front door with her police escort.

For a long, long time Alan and Gail stood silent, not moving, not touching one another.

Then Gail reached out her hand and Alan took it. They looked at each other, and all of Gail's courage vanished.

For the next few moments she was nothing more or less than a frightened girl who had been subjected to worry and suffering and apprehension and who was just commencing to sense the tragedy that so narrowly had been averted.

Alan held her tight. He, too, was badly shaken and inarticulate.

Finally she drew away from him. She said tremulously, "I'm happy, Alan—and someday perhaps I'll get over being frightened."

He bent to kiss her and saw that her eyes were still filled with fear.

"I'm going to have this face altered," he promised, trying to relieve the tension. "I'll have it done right away."

She clung to him.

"That's important," she said softly. "Because otherwise I'm afraid I'd feel as though I were Lew Hartley's wife."