

late." He smiled to conceal a swift premonition. The only young lady who might call his hotel after midnight would be Sibyl Forde, his best floor operative and severest critic. Yet scarcely a quarter hour ago he'd said good-by to Sib at her Village apartment, after a theater-and-Sardi session which certainly hadn't come under the head of business.

"A Missus Preston, said you know her." The clerk fanned out three phone slips, bearing the Time Received stamp. The first had come in at ten-fifteen. "She'd like to have you buzz her back, no matter how late."

"Strictly business." Bad business, probably, Don decided on the way to the phone booths. Otherwise Press himself would have called. Even if there'd been an accident, Ruth Preston would hardly have called more than once to let Don know about it. Those three phone slips . . . she must be stewing about something!

In the three years since Press had been Don's assistant as Chief of Protection, Ruth had never had any occasion to be alarmed about her husband. That was one of the things Don liked about Press: it was hard to think of an emergency which would cause the big man more trouble than he could handle. No screeching shoplifter, caught with the goods, clawing and biting, had ever rattled him into striking back. No after-closing prowler, flushed out of his hiding place and flashing an open switch blade, had ever panicked old Press. So if there had been any hitch in that assignment tonight it would be something serious, or Press would have been able to handle it.

He dialed the Flatbush number marked on the slips:

"Hi, Ruth? Don."

"Oh, Don!" Worry made her voice shrill. "*Jim hasn't come home!* Do you know what's happened?"

"No, I don't, Ruth. But don't let it get you in a swivet." He spoke soothingly. "He went over to the Buckingham with Mister Grolheim, you know."

"Yes. He called around six to tell me not to wait supper. But he said he'd be home around nine . . . now it's half-past twelve!"