

*You're trying to look at her actions in the best light because you wouldn't be here now, rocketing out to Greenwich, if she hadn't risked her own life to save yours. Use some common sense! That plant meant she was trying to put you in the middle. To make it look as if you had slugged old Press!*

All the way to the Connecticut state line he brooded about his part in the ransom deal. If anything should go wrong with the delivery of that fifty thousand, it would be taken as convincing proof that he was in cahoots with the kidnapers. And there were a thousand ways in which it might go wrong.

There was only the slimmest hope that Sibyl would be able to dig up enough information about Missus Chadbourne in time to trace her before the money had to be handed over. Sib would be up at Sari Soeurs now, describing the brunette and the mink, but even if the swanky store came through with an address, it was far from likely that Missus Chadbourne would be found there. Besides, the probabilities were that the mink, too, had been acquired from My Cousin.

It was after four when he cut off the highway, raced over black-top roads to the estate section of Old Town Point. A query to a rural mailman brought the answer:

"Mister Rettjer's place? Why, this is it, right here. All this, here"—with a wide sweep of hand—"but the entrance is half a mile along, on the right. Sign at the gate says *Old Town Farm—Registered Angus Cattle*. Y'can't miss it."

Don drove on. Long white fences, fat black cattle in still-green fescue, gray sheep moving slowly against a brown hillside, a high ornamental iron gate barring the winding drive. The gate was locked.

He parked, got out of the car. There was no gate tender's house, no bell to ring, no box-housed telephone.

*They don't seem to expect visitors. But you haven't come this far to be balked by a gate.*

He climbed over the fence beside the Angus sign, slogged along the sleety gravel between bare-limbed oaks and elms to a white Georgian house with spruce and cedar guarding the tall columns, the deep porch beneath the balcony. There were two cars in a big garage, but no sign of life.

The brass knocker made a resounding clatter. For a minute he thought he was going to be ignored; then a butler gotten up in genuine British country-house style opened the door, regarded Don with eyes like a halibut's.

"Missus Rettjer?"

The butler's eyes searched the driveway for the conveyance which had brought the visitor. "The house is not open, sir."

"I didn't take the trouble of hiking in here to look at the antiques," Don said. "Tell Missus Rettjer that Cadee of Ambletts wants to see her about her daughter. Go on. Skip the protocol. Tell her."

"I . . . ah . . ." the butler opened his mouth, closed it. "You will excuse me . . ." He shut the door also.

The sleet rattled against the whitewashed brick and the storm windows; there was no other sound for a good two minutes.

*What do you do if they give you the complete brush-off? Try the back door? Go in a second-story window? Offer to poke that butler in the nose?*

The door opened abruptly. "Missus Rettjer is indisposed. But she will see you for one minute." Puffy lids closed over the halibut eyes. "If you will come to the library . . ."

Helen Rettjer did not seem ill. She seemed haughty and tense and bitter. She wore the tweed skirt and a heatherish sweater; Don noticed with surprise that her hair was a glossy chestnut, combed back severely from a high forehead. It made her look younger but heightened her expression of aristocratic distaste. She remained standing beside a cherry es-critoire.

"I understand the reason for your wishing to see my daughter, Mister Cadee. That is neither possible nor desirable. Joyna is in a private sanitarium under the care of our physician, Doctor Volney; she will be there for a considerable time. I think it unnecessary to add that she has hurt her father and mother far more than she hurt your store. For that, of course, I am ready to make full payment"—she touched

an open check book on the writing desk—"if you will tell me the amount of the damages."

Don shook his head. "I can't tell you what the amount will be, Missus Rettjer. I didn't come here as a collection agent. You will hear from our Accounting Department on that. But there are other charges much more serious than slashing merchandise."

Missus Rettjer held up a hand imperiously. "My daughter has been pronounced by thoroughly competent psychiatrists as in no way mentally responsible for her actions. The child has been brought to the verge of a nervous collapse because of a situation which your store helped to bring about. No, no"—she fluttered her fingers—"don't contradict me. Ambletts was morally responsible for a betrayal of one of its good customers—I've dealt with you since I was married—in order to make a few thousand by selling a fur coat to my husband's mistress. Don't deny it; I know all about it; my daughter knew all about it . . . she was driven half crazy by the knowledge that her father was willing to break up our home on account of this cheap little actress. Joyna knew your store was helping this tawdry affair along, for a profit, by making up an extravagant crown sable coat. In her childish way she attempted to prevent her father from making a fool of himself. Failing in that, she flew off the handle and tried to take her resentment out on the goods on your counters. I certainly can't condone her actions; still I don't blame her in the least. I myself have considered taking much more stringent action in the matter."

"Up to and including murder?" Don said.

She froze into a sort of cataleptic rigidity, absolutely motionless except for the widening of her eyes, the slight flaring of her nostrils. The patrician features became rosy pink, deep red, almost purplish.

"Murder?" Her lips formed the word but he could not hear her until she said in a choked voice: "*Who was murdered?*"

• • • • Chapter 27

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DON SAID, "THE GARMENT YOU BLAME MY STORE FOR SELLING was stolen last night. One of the robbers was found beaten to death in a house in New York this morning."

Helen Rettjer put a hand on the escritoire to steady herself, turned away so he could only see her profile. Then she stepped around the desk, sank into the chair behind it.

*She didn't know that . . . or else she's putting on a very good act.* "The victim was a teen-ager named Max Tillson, only a couple of years older than your daughter. When the police find out that Miss Rettjer slashed a lot of our merchandise because she was sore at Ambletts for selling the coat to her father, they'll be likely to inquire whether she knew this dead boy. Whether she had put him up to hijacking the coat."

"Joyna had nothing whatever to do with it, I can assure you. Nothing." She regained some of her poise. "My daughter's resentment took a different course. To be absolutely frank, she did consider inflicting an injury upon this oversexed creature with whom her father is infatuated." The apoplectic color faded from the haughty features. "As a matter of fact, last Sunday Joyna actually went to the studio where this person rehearses, with the intention of doing her bodily damage. Fortunately she didn't find the notorious woman, so no harm was done. However, when I learned what Joyna had intended, I immediately put her under Doctor Volney's care and tried to keep her here at home. But this morning she managed to slip out and hitch a ride to the city. So I had to rush in to the studio myself, to warn this woman to beware of my daughter."

"I'm a store detective, Missus Rettjer, not a policeman.

I'm only concerned about two of Ambletts' men who were kidnaped last night while they were delivering this coat. But if I were a cop, I'd wonder if a girl with your daughter's tendency to violence might not also have planned the hijacking, the kidnaping."

"No, no, no! My child has no unnatural tendencies at all. She only meant to protect me, to prevent her father from breaking up her home." Her shoulders sagged, her head bent forward, she sounded whipped, defeated. "Nothing that happened was my daughter's fault. The blame rests entirely on her father and on me. Though I will say in my own defense that whatever I did was entirely for Joyna's sake, so she should not lose her inheritance in the event of a separation between Norman and me."

"What did you do?"

She lifted the lid of the escritoire, reached into the compartment beneath. "I didn't actually do it myself. There are things one prefers to pay others to do." She brought out a typed sheet of paper. "I arranged to have this woman put under surveillance so I might be prepared with evidence of the extent to which she would go to alienate my husband's affections . . . not that there has been any real affection between us for a long time."

"You hired a keyhole snooper?"

The corners of her mouth curved down. "I prefer to say a reputable investigating agency, recommended by my lawyers."

"I know that kind of detective." He was purposely caustic.

"It is my impression that all detectives are much alike," she retorted wearily. "In any event, this is one of the later reports sent to me. It is dated November sixth from Las Vegas, Nevada." She read rapidly in a taut voice:

"Operative learned last night from conversation between subject of investigation and Mister R. that he is having made for her a crown sable coat worth in neighborhood of one hundred thousand to be presented on occasion of her birthday, November twenty-first. Item is being

made up by Ambletts Fifth Avenue. Subject of investigation protested she would rather have hundred-dollar ring for the proper finger than gift referred to. Reply of Mister R. was blurred on tape by radio then turned on in room."

She refolded the sheet, replaced it in the compartment, closed the lid. "I had no intention of telling Joyna this, but the child came in my room while I was telephoning. She found it and read it. It nearly drove her crazy to discover that her father was planning to leave me."

"What did you do after you learned about the crown sables?"

"Nothing." She lowered her eyes. "What could I do? Make a scene in my husband's office? Pull the creature's hair? All I wanted was to lead my own life quietly here in my home . . . to see to it that Joyna's future was not jeopardized. What do you think I could have done?"

He eyed her steadily. "A wife who'd hire a snooper to spy on another woman might not be above hiring someone to steal a hundred-thousand-dollar gift meant for the other woman."

She didn't lift her head. "Draw whatever conclusions you please about me. But be careful. If you attempt to accuse my daughter of complicity in this . . . this theft and kidnaping and murder . . . you will be wrong and you will be sorry."

"I'll be sorry if you're holding back any information that might help us to get Ambletts' men back safe and sound."

"I must ask you to leave now."

The butler was in the doorway instantly.

Don scowled at him, followed him to the front door, strode across the porch, down the sleeted driveway.

*She was doing her damnedest to protect her daughter. Rettjer had covered up for his wife, handing out all that hoopla about how disinterested she was. Hadley's hell-bent to shield his star, his bread and butter. While the ones who really need protection are Jim Preston and My Grolheim. And time is running out on the clock. . . .*

He thought about Las Vegas, the private eye, Missus Chadbourne. Maybe Broken Nose was someone she had picked

up out there, a stick man in a gambling house, perhaps. Yet Max had been a local.

He had climbed the rail fence, had almost reached the car before he saw the girl, huddled down in the front seat.

"Hey," Joyna called. "I thought you were never coming."

"I thought you were in a booby hatch somewhere."

"Don't be silly. Mother told you that. She's such a liar. You've no idea the lies she tells." She beckoned. "I owe you an apology. Drive me to Greenwich while I explain."

He opened the door, edged beneath the wheel, was putting the key in the switch before he noticed the blued muzzle peeping from under her raspberry-colored raincoat.

"Another stick-up?" he asked quietly.

"Far be it. This is to keep you from having me arrested again. And don't fool yourself: it's loaded and the safety's off and I know how to use it and I will if you don't behave."

"I never make passes at a girl with a gun."

She giggled. "You're cute. You're a bastard but you're cute."

He started the sports car, got it rolling. "What were you going to explain?"

Joyna sniggered again. "First of all, that you're going to drive me in to New York, not Greenwich."

"Your mother will have the troopers after you in nothing flat."

"Sure. So we'll go over to the Post Road and in on the Bronx River Parkway. They won't be looking for me there . . . and anyhow they don't know what kind of car you're driving. Is this your car? It's cute."

"End of explanation?"

"No, there's more. But first I have to know what lies mother told you."

"That you were under a doctor's care."

"Hoh! She's the one who's a mental case. Not me. I suppose she told you she didn't know anything about the present my father is giving that television bitch."

"She read me a report from a private detective in Las Vegas."

"Yeah?" She sneered skeptically. "Where?"

"At Miss Inez' apartment."

"No kidding! You mean that? Can you get in the Buckinghurst? I couldn't. They even put me out of the elevator when I tried to go up to tell her off." She was excited.

"I'll get you in, all right. Your father's going to meet me there at six."

"What for?"

"We have some business to discuss."

"Is it about that goddamn coat?"

"That's right. You'd like to have those sables yourself, wouldn't you?"

"No," she snapped. "You think I'm envious of her. Well, I am, but not about any lousy coat. Shows how smart you aren't, you just don't understand me. Nobody does, not even mother." She sulked, shrinking as far away from him as possible.

He made no attempt at conversation. The sports car crossed the bridge into Manhattan, sped down the East Side expressway.

Not until they had turned westward in a press of early-evening traffic did Joyna speak again:

"You're trying to trick me."

"Why should I?"

"Because you want to keep me away from Silly Inez."

"I want to keep you from causing any more trouble. If it hadn't been for you, a couple of my friends wouldn't have been kidnaped last night."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He braked down for a red light at Park Avenue. "You know Max Tillson, don't you? Friend of yours, wasn't he? Kid who got killed last night?"

"Oh!" She flung open the door at her side, sprang out, leaped in front of a car just beginning to roll; the light had changed. Half a dozen horns began honking impatiently.

Don reached over, closed the far door, let in the clutch. He couldn't hop out and chase her, leaving Sib's car to block traffic. Even if he should corner the girl, there was the to consider.

*You should have taken the pistol away from her. She believes all that guff she was giving you about getting off easy if she uses that gun. She has no more moral sense than a cobra.*

But he couldn't decide whether or not she had fled on account of his mention of Max Tillson. By the time he parked at the Buckinghurst he was still debating the possibility that she had spark-plugged the series of crimes.

The big doorman, who had told him about Sally, was on duty but the night super was not yet at the desk. The day man phoned upstairs, gave him the nod to the elevator.

Frances let him in. "Miss Inez is not here. But she told me you were expected. Please make yourself comfortable." She was polite but no more. "May I bring you a drink?"

"Scotch, if you have some. On the rocks." He dropped into one of the low-slung chairs, thinking how much more pleasant than this lush *décor* was the warm coziness of Sibyl Forde's place.

The crystal clock on the mantel said five minutes to six.

When the maid brought the whisky, he said: "You know a private eye has been keeping tabs on your mistress and her admirer, Frances?"

"No." She was startled. "I did not know this."

"He knows all about the Las Vegas goings on. You went to Nevada with Miss Inez?"

"But of course. I go everywhere she goes."

"Remember meeting a woman name of Chadbourne?"

"I don't know anyone named Chadbourne."

He sampled the scotch. "No? Thought you might. She was one of the gang that stole Miss Inez' birthday present. I've been told Missus Chadbourne was in Las Vegas same time you were."

Frances tossed her head defiantly. "If you imagine I gave this woman any information, you are crazy. I keep my mouth shut. I talk to no one of Miss Inez. And of this stealing, I know not one thing."

"You must have heard something out in the corridor last night." He finished the liquor. "There'd have been quite a

commotion out there, a fight. One man was knocked out. And you were expecting someone to arrive just about then."

"Yes, Miss Inez was." She hesitated, then the words tumbled out. "I will tell you, even if it costs me my job—I will tell you the truth. I was in the dressing room, hanging up some things." She gestured. "The dressing room is next the hall, what you call the corridor. I hear a bump and a shout, then another bump. I hurry to hang up the things I have, then I go out to the kitchen and listen at the service door. It is all quiet. I open the door and there is no one there. No one. Nothing. I think it must be gremlins or my imagination. But when I come back to the living room to tell Miss Inez, there is Mister Richard."

"Richard?"

"She calls him that so no one will know his name. He has just come in from the other elevator. He is explaining something to Miss Inez but he stops when he sees me. His tie is untied, his collar is unbuttoned. And there is blood on his chin."

A buzzer sounded. She ran to the foyer, opened the door. "Good evening," she said.

The phone rang. Don went to the gilded handset, lifted it.

A faraway voice said: "West Cornwall is calling Mister Norman Rettjer. Is he there?"

Don said: "One minute. He's just come in."

He held out the instrument as Rettjer hurried across the room.

"Hello? . . . Yes, this is Rettjer speaking . . . Oh yes, Mister Grolheim, I can hear you plainly. . . . Yes, I have the exact amount in the denominations you specified. . . . Yes, yes, I understand . . . to the studio . . . and turn it over to—? Hm. . . . Very well. . . . The instructions shall be followed to the letter. . . . Yes, I will wait here for your later call." He hung up, a puzzled scowl creasing his forehead.

Don said: "You timed that nicely."

"I was delayed," Rettjer said shortly. "That was your man Grolheim. I must say that if he is acting as an unwilling go-between, he manages to conceal his reluctance remarkably well."

"The money is to be taken to the television studio?"

"I can't fathom it." Rettjer shook his head, baffled. "It's to be delivered to Miss Inez."

• • • • Chapter 29

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DON SAID: "SHE'S AT THE STUDIO NOW?"

"Rehearsal, yes. Show's all balled up. She wasn't there this morning or this afternoon. Hell of a mess." Rettjer gazed speculatively at the maid, who was waiting by the door to the dining room. "Frances, bring me some coffee-cognac, will you please?"

She left.

The financier paced the floor. "This is a contingency for which I'll have to admit I am completely unprepared. To have this bunch of bandits ask for the ransom to be delivered to Miss Inez."

"It's all of a piece," Don said. "Cut from the same cloth as the phone call from Grolheim. Scheme is to make it seem as if Lily Inez is in on the steal, in on the deal. You can't believe she's mixed up in it. Well, I refuse to concede that any Ambletts man is."

"You may be right, Cadee. I'll go along with that. But I have an uncomfortable feeling that someone is making a fool of me. It's a sensation I don't enjoy."

"Now you know how I felt when you told me, in your office, that Missus Rettjer wasn't sufficiently interested in you to raise a fuss. I've just come from your Greenwich place, where I learned she's by no means as disinterested as you led me to believe."

"Ah." Rettjer stopped pacing. "Trouble?"

"Court trouble, perhaps," Don said. "Not the kind my friends face from the crew that hijacked the sables. Where's the fifty thousand?"

"Brief case is on the table in the foyer there," Rettjer pointed. "You're to hand it to her, ask no questions."

"It won't be that simple." Don went to the foyer, was surprised at how heavy the cowhide brief case was.

"Now I'm sorry I agreed to let you make the contact. I'd like to hand over the money myself. Just to see . . ."

"Too late to change your mind. I'm on my way." Don went out and down.

He had been as much astonished at Grolheim's instructions as Rettjer. It wasn't possible that the star was interested in the ransom. Her weekly income from records, endorsements, movies, guest appearances, *Painting the Town* itself . . . would easily top the fifty thousand which hefted so heavily in the brief case. "Hand it to her, ask no questions." What could it mean other than that the kidnapers had already been in touch with her, told her what to do with the money. The only possible conclusion was that she must know at least one of the kidnapers. That, accordingly, she could be trusted to deliver the funds without betraying them. In which case, certainly she must have suspected the identity of the criminals right from the time of the hijacking last night. Yet she'd kept her suspicions to herself, in spite of the lethal danger to Press, to Grolheim. No doubt this was what had passed through Rettjer's mind too.

Don drove to Telecast Towers, turned the car over to an attendant in the underground parking lot, lugged the brief case up to the eighth floor.

*Strictly up to you now, boy. You asked for this job. A lot depends on keeping your eye on the ball. A lot? Lives!*

The studio blazed with lights, buzzed with activity. Actors in costume and make-up crowded behind and beside the sets. The orchestra leader in full dress flicked his baton at pink-uniformed musicians; a wave of melody surged through the great hall.

Lily Inez sang a *Showboat* tune with the proper air of melancholy. Dressed as a dance-hall girl of the Gay Nineties, she

leaned against an old-time bar, the sultry voice low and clear over the muted brass.

Don spoke softly to a dancer in harlequin: "Where'll I find Elton Hadley?"

The dancer pointed to a huge glass panel in the studio wall. "Control room."

If the star saw him, Don couldn't tell. Though he passed within twenty feet of her, her voice never faltered. But the manager had seen him. By the time Don reached the door marked: DO NOT OPEN THIS DOOR WHEN RED LIGHT IS ON, there was a sudden movement behind that glass panel.

He opened the door. Hadley was coming out of the control room.

"Important package for Miss Inez." Don held up the brief case. "Have to give it to her right away."

"She'll be through the number in a minute. But I don't like—"

"This is urgent. Get me to her."

Hadley said: "What is it?"

"Something from Rettjer. She'll know what it is."

"Okay. We can slip around to the dressing-room entrance. . . ."

Don followed him. "Can anyone barge in here, get to see the members of the cast?"

"Not supposed to. But in rehearsal nobody bothers much."

"You better bother. To watch out for Rettjer's daughter."

"My God! Joyna loose again?"

"With a gun."

"Jesus! Where is she?"

"She said she was coming here, tonight."

"That's all we need," the manager groaned. "That whacky brat, blood in her eye."

"I didn't see her in the studio. But I could have missed her, all those people."

"We'll have to warn the ushers." Hadley mopped perspiration off his high forehead. "There. Lil's finished now. Come on."

A tide of dancers, in turkey-gobbler costume, swept past

them. Two property men maneuvered a pumpkin chariot in their path. Lily Inez saw Hadley, clapped a hand to her ears in dumb show as she came toward him.

"I murdered that one," she cried, then recognized Don. "Oh . . . you."

He nodded. "With a special packet for you." He held out the brief case.

She took it, nearly dropped it. "Why, it's *heavy*."

Hadley reached out to take the burden.

"No." She clung to the leather handle. "I'll keep it."

Don said: "You know what it is?"

"Yes." She didn't look at him. "Excuse me . . ." She walked rapidly away, calling . . . "I'll be back for the apple-bobbing number, Elton."

Don followed her as quickly as he could, dodging around scenery, cameras, actors.

She hurried down a corridor, turned a corner, disappeared.

He was only a few yards behind her. But when he reached the corner, she was vanishing through a door.

It was labeled: WOMEN.

*Well, hell, you can't trail her in there. But you can wait until she comes out with the brief case. Or until some other female does. What an idea for a ransom drop! A manproof meeting place.*

He waited, thinking of the brunette in the turquoise gown. Only in all probability Missus Chadbourne wouldn't be wearing the same gown two nights in succession.

Girls came out, girls went in. Some of them eyed him curiously, but he didn't dare move around the corner for fear of missing the all-important contact.

But he flattened himself against the wall, trying to make himself look as inconspicuous as possible. In that position he could see both up and down the hall leading to the lavatory.

He had only been there a minute when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a raspberry-colored raincoat.

He turned his back swiftly, hoping she hadn't seen him, but half expecting a bullet in the back.

As she came past him, he grabbed her.

She screeched, spun around, clawing at his face.

The raincoat ripped. She tore away, ran wildly back up the hall, the pistol swinging in her right hand. She gained the corner, rounded it.

He sprinted after her.

• • • • Chapter 30

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MEMBERS OF THE PAINTING THE TOWN CAST CAME SWARMING out of a studio exit, surrounding Joyna, blocking her way, pinning her against the wall. She squealed, brandished the pistol.

They laughed at her, considering it horseplay, supposing the gun to be a prop pistol. They kidded her. One of the harlequins made a playful pass at her.

Don closed in. She tried to get room to raise the automatic.

He seized her arm, twisting it until she screeched, dropped the weapon. He bent to pick it up. She stamped on his hand but he got the gun, put more pressure on her wrist until she whimpered.

"Let me go," she moaned. "You're breaking my arm."

"I'm saving your life, you little lunatic." He turned her around, brought her wrist behind her back.

Hadley's imposing head loomed above the crowd. "Got her?"

"For the moment," he said morosely. "Got the popgun, which is more important. Here . . . Miss Rettjer's all yours."

Hadley was pale, sweating, shaken. "What the hell can I do with her?"

Joyna spat at him. "You'll let me go, that's what you'll do.

Or I'll get my father to throw you out of this studio." She fought to get free.

"Shut up, brat." Don motioned to the manager. "Grab her other hand before she claws your eyes out. If I were you I'd get a couple of your advertising agency men to help you cart her back to Miss Inez' apartment. Her father's there. Turn her over to him."

Joyna kicked Don in the shin. "What do you think my father can do with me, you bastard! I'll burn down the goddamn apartment house."

Don thumbed on the safety, held out the pistol to Hadley. "You better take this. Just to show how far off her rocker she is."

Hadley took the gun reluctantly. "Did she really try to shoot Lil?"

"She was on her way. I cut her off." Don released Joyna's wrist. "You're on your own with her, Hadley. I have to get hold of your star." He moved away as Joyna flailed at him ineffectually, snarling and kicking at Hadley simultaneously.

Hadley called: "Tell Lil . . ." The rest was drowned in Joyna's shrieks of rage.

Don hurried back to his post by WOMEN.

A file of females crowded in past him, others came out in groups of two and three. No dance-hall costume among them. But . . . was one of them the kidnapers contact girl?

He spoke to a couple of emerging dancers in cancan skirts and petticoats. "Is Miss Inez in there?"

They looked blank. "Oh no . . . she has her own private dressing room and lavatory. She's not in there, I'm sure."

*You muffed it. Because of that juvenile hellcat. You gambled on making the contact so you could make a deal for Jim Preston, My Grolheim. You lost, lost time the cops might have used to round up the kidnapers if you hadn't tried to lone-wolf it. Now what do you do?*

He remained on watch a moment longer, hoping for a glimpse of Missus Chadbourne. Then he went back to the studio. The rehearsal had stopped. The musicians were "tak-

ing ten." Neither Hadley nor his charge were around. Lily Inez was not there.

*You're not supposed to ask her any questions, but the hell with that, now. You'll put it up to her straight, tell who you gave that brief case to . . . or talk to the police.*

But he couldn't find her. Nobody had seen her since the finish of the *Showboat* number. Nor was anyone sure when the rehearsal would be resumed.

He went down to the garage, turned in his car check. There was one slim hope left . . . in half an hour the hijackers were supposed to notify Rettjer where the sables would be returned. That was the last chance of making contact with them.

He realized that now they had the cash, the danger to My and Press was much greater. If the kidnapers' intention was to frame Grolheim for an inside job, the groundwork had been well done. What grand jury would fail to indict after hearing Morrie Berkowsky's testimony about the phone call from Grolheim, Norman Rettjer's story about the talks he'd had with the fur buyer?

If Grolheim could be accused of connivance, why not Press? Why not Ambletts' Chief of Protection, too?

*It's all of a piece, cut from the same cloth. That's what you told Rettjer. Now if they follow that pattern, where will they have the crown sable coat returned? Why, somewhere that would add to the suspicion of an inside job.*

Not My's house; there would be police on guard; the kidnapers would know that. Not Rettjer's, that wouldn't have any Ambletts connotation. Neither would the Buckinghurst. There were police on watch at the Herford, too . . . so even if that might be the contact spot, it wouldn't help to go there. Besides, they tried that overcoat "plant"; they wouldn't return the sables there too.

Jim Preston's! That might accomplish the tie-up they were after. He considered it carefully. That would be according to pattern, all right.

His car came. He cut across town, drove down to the Brooklyn Bridge, headed for Flatbush.

Maybe he was wrong, coming all the hellangone out here,

solely on the basis of his reasoned conclusion as to what the kidnapers might do with the crown sable coat. There was one last ditch alternative—My Grolheim had phoned from West Cornwall, Connecticut.

It was probable that Broken Nose had been there with him, that immediately after the call Grolheim would have been led back to some hide-out nearby. But what were the chances of locating that hide-out, with no more to go on than the description of the two men? It might take weeks to search the surrounding country. All that was left were minutes.

It was five past seven by the dashboard clock when he ran the sports car into the driveway of the two-family house where the Prestons lived.

There were lights on the far side of the house, where Jim lived; the nearer half was dark.

He rang the doorbell over the *James N. Preston* plate.

Sibyl opened the door. "Don! I thought you'd be . . . a prisoner by now."

"Scheme backfired. How's Ruth?"

"Low in the mind. She asked me to come and stay with her, after the store closed. I told her what you were planning to do. She's lying down."

He told her about the call from West Cornwall, the trip to the studio, the transfer of the brief case to Lily Inez, about Joyna and Hadley and the missed contact. "Only other thing is to grab the party who's to turn over the coat, if that's possible." He went to the phone, rang the number on Lily Inez' gilded handset.

Ruth Preston came into the living room as he dialed. She put her arms around him and wept. Don was as big brotherly as possible, until Rettjer came on the line.

The financier was brief and bellicose. "Can't talk long. My daughter's here. So are Hadley and Miss Inez. This place is a madhouse."

"What about Grolheim? Did he call you again?"

"No. Lady did. Said the item in question would be delivered at the home of a Mister Preston, 241 La Verne Place, Flatbush.

That's your friend, isn't it? The one who couldn't have had anything to do with this business?"

"That's right. You want to make a bet, I'll give you any odds you like this wasn't any of his doing."

"I'm just telling you . . ."

"Thanks. I'm at Preston's now." Don hung up.

*You hit it sock on the nose for once. Now . . . if it isn't too late . . .*

He got away from Ruth. "I'm going outside. The coat is supposed to be delivered here. Maybe it has been, already. But if not—" He went to the front door.

Coming slowly along the street was a green and brown station wagon. A late-model Pontiac.

• • • • Chapter 31

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"THAT'S GROLHEIM'S STATION WAGON." HE DREW BACK FROM the curtained glass of the front door. "Girl driving. She's going on past the house. Probably circling the block as a precaution to make sure there's no police trap."

Sibyl said: "Was it Missus Chadbourne?"

"Couldn't see." He opened the door. "But she might have seen me. Can't tell. I'm ducking across the street. If she hasn't been frightened away, she may come back with the sables."

Ruth caught his arm. "Maybe Jim's in that car!"

"Didn't see a man, Ruth." Don patted her hand, disengaged himself. "But if he isn't, I may be able to make the girl drive me to where they're holding Press." He ran.

Sibyl cried: "I'm going to follow you. In my car."

He called: "No, no! You might upset the applecart. Close that door." He gained the shelter of shrubbery beside the

house across the street. The door of the Preston home closed.

Down the block, headlights swung into view, moved toward him. The Pontiac slowed, stopped. The car lights went off. The motor kept purring.

The Chadbourne woman got out. She wore the mink but over her arm she carried the Lily Inez. There was no mistaking those crown sables even under the faint light of the street lamp a hundred feet away.

She crossed the street, hesitated at the Preston porch, turned away, hurried around the side of the house.

Don crept to the side of the station wagon, waited, crouching.

Missus Chadbourne hurried to the sports car, tossed the sables in the front seat, ran back to the Pontiac, jerked open the front door, jumped in.

Don had the door on his side open before she could put on the lights. He slid in beside her.

She gasped.

He held his old .45 so the faint light glinted on the barrel. "Sorry to have missed you at my hotel, Missus Chadbourne. You're getting to be quite a coatroom girl."

Her voice trembled. "I put the sables . . . in the little car . . . across the street . . . as was agreed. What more do you want?"

"There was another point in the agreement. Where are the men you abducted?"

"They'll be back later."

"Sorry not to take your word for that. Have to make sure of it. Get this wagon rolling. Ought to make it out West Cornwall way in an hour and a half."

She switched on the lights, pulled away from the curb.

He looked behind him in the second seats, on the floor. "What'd you do with the boodle? The brief case?"

She ignored the question. "If you make me drive you to Mister Grolheim you'll get me killed; maybe you don't realize that."

"I haven't forgotten you saved my life this morning. I'll try to return the compliment. You don't think My Grolheim would hurt you?"

"He killed Max. In self-defense, but still——"

"Did you see this yourself?"

"No. But Arny told me. And Mister Grolheim didn't contradict him. So you see——"

*Arny? Arnold Broken Nose?* "Didn't Arny get sore at having his side-kick beaten to death?"

"Of course not. Max was a menace to all of us. We didn't know he used H. . . . When he had a load on, he was a fiend. Mister Grolheim never suspected Max would be coked up last night, that's what started all the trouble. Max went berserk, beat your friend Preston over the head. Arny and Mister Grolheim had agreed there wasn't to be any violence——"

"Trying to blame it on Grolheim? To make it look as if he was in on it with you?"

"Why, he was. It was his idea to begin with. But when Max flew off the handle and began to act like a raving maniac, Mister Grolheim wanted to back out. The original plan was to have me fly the coat out to Buenos Aires and sell it there. But after Mister Preston was hurt so badly——"

"Is he still alive?"

"I don't know." She drove in silence for a bit. "I . . . don't think so," she added in a low voice.

*So much for all their lying promises! For your keeping Ruth's hopes alive. Old Press is dead . . . and they mean to make it look as if Grolheim is guilty along with Max and Broken Nose. You may not be able to bring Press back home but you can still clear My, bring the others to book.*

She switched on the defroster; the snow had turned to freezing rain once more. "When Mister Grolheim found out that Max had nearly killed you, there at his house, it nearly drove him out of his mind . . . Mister Grolheim, I mean."

"I can believe that." *My's been practically out of his mind for the past twenty-four hours, but not because he's been on a diet of heroin.* "Even if I don't buy that business about his beating Max's brains out. Who took the body back to Grolheim's . . . and why?"

"I took it back."

"You hauled that dead weight into the kitchen by yourself?"

"Yes. You don't think I'm strong enough?"

*I think you lie. You had help, must have had. From the guy who came back from Las Vegas with you.* "I'll tell you what I think, Missus Chadbourne. I believe you when you say no violence was intended; I suppose Arny's plans had to be switched on the spur of the moment after Max ran amuck. But I don't go for that business about My Grolheim's having been in on the scheme from the beginning. You wouldn't have taken the body back to his house unless you'd wanted to make it look as if he was mixed up in it . . . when actually he was the innocent bystander."

"Aren't you overlooking all those telephone calls? Would he have made those unless——"

"I think he might have. Under certain circumstances." He watched a pair of low-to-the-ground headlights trailing along behind. Had Sibyl stuck her neck out and followed in the sports car?

No . . . at the last light before the bridge to Manhattan, the lights drew nearer, pulled ahead. It was a red Jaguar, driven by a youth in motorcycle goggles and a black leather jacket.

He went on. "Contradict me if I'm wrong . . . but I'd say the whole setup got out of hand after Max slugged Jim Preston at the Buckinghurst. Arny had to improvise to protect himself and cover up for you. The kidnaping was an afterthought. And the circumstances I just spoke of, somebody thought those up right off the top of his head."

She drove across Chambers, saying nothing.

He twisted around to look behind at the Broadway stop light. No sign of a sports car. He felt relieved. "Then when Max clobbered me and you told your pal about that, *he* lost his head. He may have acted in self-defense, as you said Grolheim did. But whether it was manslaughter or murder, your chum killed Max. And he helped you carry the body to My's kitchen because, by then, you were all sure your only chance of avoiding prosecution was to lay the blame on My's shoulders."

"No. We had it all set." The reflection from the claret light glinted on the gun, on that star sapphire. "The big boy's paid off; he can afford it. Lily the Dilly gets her coat back, all she wants. Max got what he deserved, who can kick? Nobody else gets smeared, nobody gets hurt."

"Nobody but me," Don said dourly. "Nobody but Jim Preston. And his wife. And My Grolheim."

"Not our fault your buddy got slugged. Sorry about his wife, but she's responsible for the fix you're in. She promised you'd keep hands off. You had to stick your chin out. So . . ."

Don managed to prop himself up against the headboard. "I stuck it out to give you a break. To show you a way out."

"There isn't any. I'm a two-time loser already. They framed me for jumping a whisky truck. So any rap from here in is the big rap for me. Before I let any judge belt me with the book, I'll belt anybody who can swear me in for life. That's you."

"And Grolheim?"

"Nah. If there's any question of extortion, he did all the dirty work."

"Under a gun. Or under——"

"Horse. He's lost most of his marbles. He wanted to keep the crummy sables himself, just to look at."

The door opened. Missus Chadbourne came in. She wore a suede suit, powder gray, smartly tailored; she seemed pleased to see Don sitting up. "Your head must be made of rock, ister."

Arny said: "I'd rather break that kind of rock once, quick, I spend the rest of my life on a rockpile with a sledge. We set this store dick loose like Grolheim."

Don rubbed the back of his hand on the candlewick. "It don't settle anything to fix my wagon. Too many are in on the know. Rettjer knows the money went to somebody Miss Inez knew well enough not to give away. Several people knew Missus Chadbourne was in Las Vegas at the same time Miss Inez was. The police know Max had been a truck-jumper, that most likely he'd have been working with someone he met in that line. The old bird on the service elevator at the Buckinghurst has given a good description of you, Arny. My office

see the bathroom door. "Arny didn't do that." She pointed at Don's face. "We had a smashup. Arny never touched him."

Lily Inez saw the shrouded body on the floor. "Is that Mister Preston?" She held out her hand imploringly to Don. "I'm to blame for that, Mister Cadee. No one else."

Hadley growled, deep in his throat: "Gretchen . . . where's Arny?"

She glanced mutely at the bathroom door.

Hadley brought his right hand out of the ulster pocket, held Joyna's pistol close to his side. He moved toward the closed door.

Gretchen jumped in front of him. "Wait, Elton!"

Don said: "She's right, Hadley. You don't want any more killing on your conscience."

Hadley kept his eyes on the closed door. "My conscience?"

Don said: "You murdered Max. Arny couldn't have. He was out here with Grolheim. Max was with Missus Chadbourne. She threatened to tell you about Max's beating me. When you met them, Max probably resented your bawling him out about Press, about me. So you had to kill him."

"Self-defense," the manager said bitterly. "Kid was a mad dog. I didn't know." He shouldered Gretchen aside, moved to the shut door.

Lily Inez ran to Hadley, clutched at his left arm. "Don't, Elton. It's not up to you. You didn't mean anything wrong . . ."

Don turned, grabbed Grolheim's arm. "Just a good, clean snatch of the sables, that's all you figured on, Hadley. With the best of intentions . . . to save your star from a collapse." He pulled and pushed Grolheim out of the motel room to the gravel driveway.

Lily Inez moaned piteously. "I tell you it was my fault. I couldn't refuse Norman's gift. But I was terrified to take it. Because of those hideous rhymes. I didn't have any idea who was sending them. Elton didn't know about them but he knew I was at my wit's end. He wanted to save me, that's all. So he arranged to keep the coat from being delivered on my birthday."

Gretchen struggled fiercely to keep Hadley from getting his

hand on the knob of the bathroom door. Lily Inez held onto his arm.

Don seized the collar of the crown sable coat, hauled on it, broke the star's grip, held her, tugged her to the open door.

Hadley said thickly: "Don't talk, Lil. Leave it to me."

Don said: "She's been doing that for the past twenty-four hours. Been better if you'd both talked, then. If you'd told me you got your girl friend here to round up a couple of crooks to hijack the coat. Not to really steal it, just to keep Miss Inez from having to wear it, to run the risk of having Joyna slash her with a knife or put a bullet through her. Sort of a scheme a desperate man thinks up, lets someone else carry out."

Gretchen panted: "It wasn't Elton's fault. Or mine. How could we have known my brother would have rung in a hop-head to help him stage the holdup?"

Don shoved Lily Inez outside. "Bring the cops. Nearest phone. Go on, now!"

The bathroom door flew open, knocking Hadley aside. "No, you don't!" Arny crouched beside the washstand, smiling nastily. "You fine rich folks have all the fun . . . and Arny pays the bill . . . *I—don't—think!*" He held Missus Chadbourne off. "I'm the one who goes. I take the dough, too. And you"—he snarled at Hadley—"you can pick up the tab, you——"

The detonations were almost simultaneous.

Hadley's knees bent, he slumped against the wall.

Arny rushed past his sister.

Don caught Joyna's gun as it slipped from Hadley's hand.

Arny swung around, swung the smoking muzzle.

Don fired point-blank.

Gretchen Chadbourne caught her brother as he fell.

Except for her sobbing, the room in the Mountain View was strangely quiet. Smoke eddied in the winy light.

Don stooped, felt for Elton Hadley's pulse. Then he went to the figure beneath the shrouding sheet, and knelt beside it.

• • • • Chapter 34

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SIBYL CAME OUT OF RUTH PRESTON'S BEDROOM, INTO THE LIVING room where Don lay on the sofa.

"She'll sleep till morning now, poor thing. But you won't need any sleeping pills to do that. Can you stay awake to tell me what happened?" She sat on the floor beside him.

"Sure. Just straighten me out on the sables first. You took them right over to the Buckinghurst, soon's I left in the station wagon?"

"I wore the coat. You should have seen the eyes pop when I walked into that apartment. Lily Inez, her manager, her millionaire boy friend, his goofy offspring . . . they had no eyes for anything except those stunning sables. I might have been a Bergdorf model for all the attention they paid to me. Until I told them you had risked your life to get them back, were risking it again to save Mister Grolheim."

"You look better than any model to me." He stroked her hair. "Then the ball was in their court. Who picked it up?"

"Miss Inez. She refused to put the coat on, as Mister Rettjer wanted her to. Made a real big scene, the little lady did. Said she'd never, never, never wear it unless her manager took her, that very instant, to see his sweetie, to straighten out the whole ugly mess. Of course, I didn't know then that Lily Inez meant Missus Chadbourne . . . but anyway, Hadley agreed to go with her and they marched out. So I came back here to stay with Ruth and bite my fingernails to the quick. How did you guess the girl in the turquoise dress was Hadley's light o' love?"

"I should have guessed sooner than I did. That joe at the High Note told us Missus C. had been at Las Vegas about the time Rettjer and Miss I. were there. My first thought was that

Then Press put up a battle—and instead of explaining the gag Max bludgeoned him."

Sibyl glanced at the bedroom door. "And nearly did the same to you."

"By then the whole plan had been switched. Arny was wild with anger at Max. But wanting to save his own skin, he decided to kidnap Grolheim . . . which wasn't part of the original plan at all. So Press was dumped into the coat box; they forced My to go down to his station wagon with them . . . and Arny had to report to his sister that Max had gone off the deep end, committed murder. There must have been a hurried consultation with Hadley—I haven't checked with Dimmock on that, but he'll get the details out of her—and the three of them, Hadley, Gretchen, and Arny, must have decided to make Grolheim the villain of the piece."

"I never knew anyone less villainish."

"Nor I. But Hadley was desperate . . . and he had an ace up his sleeve. A whole deck of aces. Ataraxics."

"Atar—which?"

"Tranquilizers. No-worry tablets. There are a dozen different kinds on the market, but they're mostly chlorpromazine or meprobamates. He'd been feeding a few to Lily Inez to keep her from running off the rails completely. They'd worked with her, so he figured they might put Grolheim in a frame of mind where he could be induced to make a bunch of phone calls without showing alarm or concern . . . and so would be set up as the patsy who was at the bottom of it all."

"Tranquilizers . . . to make a man ignore a murder! To make him act as if it never happened. That's hideous!"

"They overdid it, though. They couldn't get the same stuff—out at West Cornwall where Hadley owned his motel—that he'd been using to calm Miss I.'s nerves. So Arny bought something called *Careaway—the Pillowtime Pill*: it must have been dynamite. It made him forget all his troubles, all right, but it also made him talk like an entirely different person. The specialist at the hospital said it might take My a month to get over the effects. But a funny thing: they'd been making him take six a day, when the maximum dose is three, yet it still