

• • • • Chapter 3

THE FUR BUYER'S OFFICE, WITH ITS SOMBER WALNUT PANELING, the sample table polished to a dark mirror by countless pelts of seal and fox and beaver, had appeared gloomy on the few occasions Don had been there on business. But this afternoon both office and buyer were transformed.

Grolheim's chronic scowl was replaced by a flush of anticipation; the room blazed under spotlights focused on an object which, beneath its denim shroud, resembled a coffin standing on end.

Grolheim closed the door with the air of a conspirator. "I had the boys in Display rig these spots so I could snap a few color shots of Lily Inez."

"So-ho?" Don was astonished. "The busty beauty makes a personal appearance at Ambletts?"

"I wasn't speaking of the lady herself. Merely the customary manner of referring to a crown sable garment by the name of the woman for whom it was designed. The tradition was already old when the Empress Eugénie assigned one of her ladies-in-waiting to do nothing except care for Eugénie, the coat."

"Do they smash a bottle of champagne on the collar when the coat is launched into society?"

"I know . . . sounds silly, Don. But it's all a part of the regal ceremonials which go with owning the most exclusive article of wearing apparel in the whole world. See, up to a century ago no one but royalty could buy a crown sable. The Czars had a lock on the pelts; they would only sell to kings and maharajas and maybe an occasional lucky duke. Nowadays, of course, you don't have to be listed in Burke's Peer-