

MURDER ON DELIVERY

Spencer Dean



TALES OF MURDER PRESS

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CHAPTER I

YOUR LAST CHANCE ...

THE ATTENDANT AT THE TOLLGATE PUNCHED HIS register, held out a handful of change. "Little colder tonight."

"Yeah." The driver slid the station wagon away.

The man in the middle seat blinked at stinging sweat trickling off his eyebrows. He resisted the impulse to reach for his handkerchief; the watchful teenager at his right might misinterpret the movement.

That was your last chance, the man told himself bitterly. You'll never have another. Never in this life.

All he'd have had to do was cry out. Help! Or Kidnap! That would have done it. The driver might have made a fast getaway, but the attendant would have notified the state troopers; the chase would have been on.

Yet he'd lacked the nerve—just as he'd not been able to summon up the courage to fling open the door and dive out onto the highway at that stop light

a few miles back. That couple in the other car across the street would surely have seen him, would have come to his aid.

But fear of his captors had paralyzed him absolutely; he was the helpless rabbit staring, fascinated, at the beady eyes of the snake. Knowing what the end would be, yet powerless to prevent it.

It was not because they had actually threatened him. What had dropped back there in Buckinghurst—that had been more effective than any spoken threat. What had half hypnotized him had been their matter-of-fact brutality and ruthlessness.

There was also the numbing recognition of the inference to be drawn from the fact that his abductors had made not the slightest effort to keep him from seeing where they were taking him. Evidently they were not worrying about what he might say, later.

The headlights funneled down a dark, grove-guarded slope, flashed past a white barn and a farmhouse, touched the pale cement of a creek bridge, bored on through the pine-shadowed gloom of the next rise.

He knew these Berkshire foothills well; this was the way he'd driven to the Tanglewood festival only a few months ago. But he could think of no reason for them to be bringing him up into these lonely hills in November.

"If you're going to kill me—" he began, shocked at the harsh queerness of his voice.

The driver laughed tolerantly. "Don't be silly. Kill you? We need you in our business."

The youth beside him, the teenager with the eyes

that looked like peeled grapes, added: "You want to look at it this way, doc. We're taking you into partnership. You could make a sensational score outa this."

The man felt the muscles of his throat constrict. Partners with this cold-blooded pair? He knew what that meant: it was only a question of time before the partnership would be abruptly ended with bludgeon or bullet. Yet until that time came there was margin for hope, even though slim. He would hold onto that hope as long as he could; he would string it out as long as possible.

"As businessmen"—he tried to keep the terror out of his voice—"you know you can't ever sell it."

The driver chuckled softly. "Try to get your mind out of the conservative channel, pard. We're thinking of a radical approach."

"But how can you sell it?" the man asked. "It's the only one of its kind in the world. There'll probably never be another like it. It's not like a diamond necklace; you can't sell the skins separately. You can't dispose of it the way you might an old master; it's only valuable when the public sees it."

"We heard," the youth with the green-grape eyes said affably, "it's worth a king's ransom."

"It is," the man said bleakly. "There's no way to put price on it; it's priceless—because it can't be duplicated, now. Possibly never. But—"

"That's all we want out of it," the driver said over his shoulder. "That's what you're going to get us."

The teenager sniggered. "Just a good, average king's ransom ... and if you play ball nice, we'll cut you in for a big, fat slice."

The station wagon slowed at the crest of a hill. The headlights swerved to touch a low building flanked by two rows of blue cottages, holding in bright illumination:

MOUNTAIN VIEW—LODGE & COTTAGES
Country Fare ... City Conveniences

CHAPTER 2

JIM HASN'T COME HOME

THE TALL MAN WHO CAME THROUGH THE SWINGING doors from Lexington Avenue had the lean, keen look of a marine, the prematurely white hair and mustache of some distinguished diplomat. He had been a marine; since then he had found himself exercising what diplomacy he could muster as Chief of Store Protection for Ambletts Fifth Avenue. Sometimes, as on this particular day, he wondered what an ex-leatherneck was doing in a job that called for lecturing precocious pilferers, questioning suspected employees, and sending shoplifters to the House of Correction. But there were compensations; this evening had been one of them.

The night clerk smiled a greeting, reached toward the 1709 pigeonhole. "Lady's been calling, Mister Cadee."

"Business or pleasure, Stan?" Don Cadee quirked an eyebrow shaggy-white as a chicken feather. "Must be pleasure, this 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 switchblade, 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 Buckinghamst 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!"

"They're having a birthday party over there, Ruth. That kind of celebration might call for corks a-popping. ..."

"But you know Jim. He might take a drink or two ... but he'd have called me if he was staying any length of time, Don."

"Few glasses of champagne will make anyone forgetful," He made it sound more reassuring than he felt "Don't fret about it. I'll check and have him call you back ... or I will."

"All right I ... I've been so upset." She sniffled. "He's never done this before, all the years we've been married."

"All the more reason you should forgive him for one little lapse. Take it easy, Ruth. You'll be hearing from one or the other of us before long." He hung up, went out of the booth, brooded at the row of telephone directories in the rack.

Quickest way would be to ring up the lady's apartment, ask if Press is still there. He thumbed the Manhattan book to the I's.

Inesco, Inetta, Ineval, Inew, Iney ... no Inez.

He looked under Lily. Dozens of Lilys ... but no Lily Inez.

Well, hell, that's her stage name. Nobody'd have Inez for a last name. Chances are, too, she'll have a private number, unlisted, to avoid the autograph pests, the charity cranks. But the apartment building would know.

He found the number, dialed.

A suave voice, with a faintly British accent, said: "The Buckinghurst. Whom do you wish?"

"Connect me with Miss Lily Inez?"

"Very sorry, sir. We have no line to that party."

"This is urgent," Don said. "I have to get hold of her in a hurry. Can you give me her number?"

"Very sorry. We are not authorized to give out any information of that sort." The accent hung up.

Don swore softly. Myron Grolheim had been right. Amblett's fur buyer had emphasized the sub rosa nature of the affair, had insisted that he never had known who the customer was, had never even been notified as to the identity of the recipient until a few days ago. "Whole deal is classified top secret, Don. Hush-hush and double-shush." It seemed to be so.

Still, there were other ways to find out what was delaying Jim Preston's return home ... And no time to be lost trying them, Don realized.

He caught a cruising cab in front of the hotel. "Amblett's Fifth Avenue," he said.

The driver craned his neck. "You must be one them winda dressers, going to work this time night, hah?"

"We try to put on a show." Don answered irritably.

He was annoyed with himself for not having taken the fur buyer more seriously. He might have expected Grolheim to be a little jumpy; having the

responsibility for safe delivery of a hundred-thousand-dollar item might put any store executive on edge. But the man had been more than apprehensive; he'd really been scared. You saw that, but you discounted it. You thought he was a worry wart, that his overactive imagination had brought him to the point of seeing things at night. But what if Grolheim had been right about someone trailing him every time he stepped out of the store?

Don hadn't laughed at him, of course. But neither had he taken any stock in the mysterious shadower who hadn't been seen clearly enough for identification; what he had done was to agree to convoy the jumpy buyer and his precious cargo the short distance from Ambletts to the Buckinghurst. Then there had been a hitch.

Grolheim had been instructed—by no less an authority than Bob Stolz, the general manager himself—to make delivery precisely at eight-thirty.

Unfortunately that had been curtain time for Love Life ... for which Don had previously managed to wangle two in the sixth row center. He hadn't wanted to disappoint Sibyl, had said as much to Press, who had been in the Protection office when Don came back from the fur salon. Old Press had agreeably taken over what had promised to be a routine assignment with possibly the added fillip of seeing the sexiest star on television in the flesh. At the time, Press had joked about that. Now it didn't seem much like a kidding matter.

Maybe there would be an explanation at the store.

The austere gray monolith of Ambletts was

silhouetted like an ancient temple against the cold, star-glittering sky; there were, even at that late hour, a few window-shopping worshipers at the sidewalk shrine of fashion.

Don paid the cab driver, walked the forty steps down the side street to the Employees Entrance, rang the night bell.

The watchman, who answered, saluted smartly:
"Little tour of inspection, Chief?"

"No inspection, Mike. Just looking for Press. Seen him?"

"Not since he left with Mister Grolheim. Around eight-fifteen, that was. I checked 'em out with that fancy-wood case."

"Grolheim been back?"

"No, sir. He didn't say anything about coming back."

"Um." Don went to the night elevator, waited for the car to come down with its usual group of chattering cleaning women and glass-polishing porters. His concern about Press had become suddenly coupled with an uncomfortable feeling about Myron Grolheim.

He wasn't as well acquainted with the fur buyer as with most of the store's top men; Grolheim had only been with The Store Superlative since Sol Davidson's death, a matter of a year and a half. But any man who could make the grade with Ambletts had to be a good sound man to begin with. Yet there was something odd about Myron Grolheim, something Don found it difficult to define. The man was so intense, so high-strung as to seem almost fanatical at times.

As clearly as if it was just happening, Don could

recall the feverish glint in the man's dark eyes, the scarcely suppressed excitement in the tense voice:

"You think I'm exaggerating, Don? Well, you really have to see it to understand. It does something to you. Come in my office. You'll see what I mean."

CHAPTER 3

A RUSSIAN CROWN SABLE

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 Amblett's?"

"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 Eugenie assigned one of her

ladies-in-waiting to do nothing except care for Eugenie, 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 Peerage to bid for one, but it helps if you're in the upper brackets of the American Social Register, Poors Manual, or Moody's."

Don said: "I see. Sables have a social significance beyond that of, say, mink?"

"Why, a Russian crown sable is as far superior to the finest pastel mink—in the social scale of furs, that is—as a mink is superior to a muskrat! Sables are for women who are tired of two minks in every closet. You can't simulate a sable, it's impossible to imitate it. That's why it takes patience as well as a fat purse to get one. It took six months to match out the skins for this beauty." Grolheim whisked away the cloth, disclosing a cabinet of amber-colored wood. "That was comparatively swift work. All the pelts have to be brought halfway round the world from that one small Siberian town of Barzuin. It took more than a year to assemble the Duchess of Windsor; even longer to put Barbara Hutton together."

"If you have to rate in the Blue Book to qualify for one of these items, how did Lily Inez crash the

charmed circle, My? I know she's had a billion-dollar build-up as Queen of the Kilocycles, but still ... "

"You misunderstand, Don. It's the purchaser who has to rate, not the recipient." Grolheim fitted a golden key into a gilded lock. "That's because nobody can tell what a crown sable coat is going to cost until after it's been made. That's why you never see a crown sable advertised; there's no way to quote a price on it. Oh, maybe once a year some house, just for the hell of it, will show a little clutch cape at twenty thousand or so ... but even then it's Kamchatka fur, not the genuine Yakut. What I mean is, the furrier has-to know in advance that his patron is able to come up with a hundred thousand or more, without squawking, when the garment is ready for delivery."

"Who is the patron? ... Or shouldn't I inquire?"

"Doesn't make a bit of difference. I don't know, myself. Fact, I'm not even sure who does know, Don."

"Shouldn't be too difficult for some of the keyhole peepers on the gossip columns to find out which of the lady's admirers is able to pick up a six figure tab," Don said thoughtfully.

"I expect there'll be some guesses but they won't be answered at Ambletts. All my instructions were verbal from the beginning, nothing on paper at all, nothing. My orders came direct from the general manager and he made it clear from the start that the whole deal is classified top secret ... hush-hush and double-shush." He opened the door.

The Lily Inez swung out into the spotlight beams; the magnificent coat hung from a satin-padded shoulder form fixed to the back of the cabinet's door.

Under that bright light the sables seemed alive. The deep blue pelts quivered with constantly shifting high lights of rich chestnut; the shimmering of the silver-tipped guard hairs gave the uncanny effect of sinuous animal movement.

"You're right, boy." Don was impressed. "I've never seen anything like it. It's sensational."

"Glorious, absolutely glorious." The fur buyer caressed the shoulder of the garment. "It is more than probable that this is the finest crown sable ever made. I can scarcely wait to see if the wearer is worthy of the coat." He ran the tips of his fingers down the sleeve. "On the other hand, I can hardly bear to part with this lovely thing. You can't imagine what this does to a man who has spent his life with furs."

Don said to himself: You sound like a guy making love to a girl. As if you'd like to sleep with that set of sables. Aloud, he remarked: "I expect you'll be glad to be rid of the responsibility, boy."

Grolheim closed the cabinet with the air of one shutting the door of a mausoleum. "That's quite true; it is a bit of a sword of Damocles hanging over my head until I see it safely delivered to the lady. It's insured ... but only in her favor. If anything happened before she signed the receipt, it would be the store's loss."

Don asked: "What you worrying about, My?"

"Nothing, actually," the buyer said. "Nothing I can put my finger on, at least." He switched off the spotlight. In the late afternoon grayness and without the dazzling sables, the office again seemed suddenly gloomy; the buyer, too, appeared glum

and depressed; the flush of anticipation, the gleam of excitement were gone. "I suppose you'll think it's pure hallucination, but I think I've been followed the last two or three days."

Don said: "Here at the store?"

"No. From the time I leave the store at noon ... at night. You know that crawly sensation you get sometimes, when you're being watched ... ?"

"You've seen this watcher often enough to recognize him?"

Grolheim replaced the covering cloth. "I know what you're thinking: The little man who wasn't there. Hell, it hasn't been one little man ... there have been two."

"Tell me about 'em. And don't get the idea I'm putting you down for a psychopathic case. I'm not," Don assured him.

"One is older ... the one who picks me up when I go out to lunch. Dark, maybe Italian, hard to be sure, never get a really good look at him, he's always ducking into doorways or into a crowd. But I've seen him at least half a dozen times—he waited outside the Heidelberg today while I had lunch, he was across the street near our Employees Entrance when I came out."

"And the other one?"

"I'm not so sure about him. But he ... he bothers me, more than the older one. I've only seen him once. Last night, as I left to go over to Stel-lenhachts'—who make up most of our silver fox. I didn't see him when I reached the street, though perhaps he was around—I was expecting the other fellow, you understand. But between Broadway and

Seventh, I stopped and made a bluff to peek in a store window so I could look behind me. And there, twenty feet away, was this zoot-suiter—not even bothering to duck into a doorway or turn his head.” Grolheim became agitated. “Now I know I’d never seen that kid before. Yet somehow I felt as if I recognized him. It was almost as if I’d seen him in a dream and waked up to meet him on the street.”

Don nodded. “You’d probably seen him before when your mind was preoccupied so you didn’t pay any attention to him. Then when you did notice him, the previous impression came back to you. Did he follow you the rest of the evening?”

“Only to Stellenhachts, I guess. He couldn’t very well have trailed me away from there; Leo Stellenhacht drove me uptown in his limousine. Not that I didn’t look for this youngster on the street when we came out of the Stellenhacht Building. I did. But neither of them were around.” Grolheim rubbed his nose with thumb and forefinger in obvious embarrassment. “But I dreamed about the little son of a bitch last night.”

Don grinned. “Go ahead. I’ll be your analyst. Pretend you’re lying on a couch. Get it off your mind.”

“It’s been weighing on my mind, I won’t deny that. I dreamed this kid was strutting down Fifth Avenue in that crown sable ... and I was trying to catch him but the crowd kept getting in my way.” He smiled apprehensively. “Schizophrenia? Or dementia praecox?”

“Neither,” Don said solemnly. “Plain, old-fashioned over strain. Too much concentration on this big coat deal. We’ll make delivery to the lady tonight

and then you can go tie one on and forget it."

CHAPTER 4

THE FUR BUYER'S ANXIETY

NOW, THIRTEEN HOURS AFTER THAT conversation, Don could see things in a different light. Then it had seemed natural to discount the buyer's anxiety.

Worry over the coat had weighed on Grolheim's mind, left him prey to the delusion of the chronically apprehensive, that of being followed by some sinister figure. A casual glimpse of a teenager had been enough to make the youth seem a skulker on an evil errand. The subsequent nightmare had merely confirmed the fact that Grolheim was overwrought.

Now Don was not so sure. The fur buyer might not have been dreaming up trouble. Maybe the menace had really been there all the time, lurking in a darkened doorway. If so, Don had made a bad mistake.

You didn't exactly give him the laugh-off. But neither did you take much stock in his story about being trailed. No use to claim, now, that you gave him your best man to see that shipment across town; maybe you should have arranged for an armored truck.

At Grolheim's desk, his hand moved toward the phone. Then he realized there wouldn't be a night line connected through the board for a buyer's office. But he checked, anyway; the instrument was dead.

Except for a heavy crystal ash tray and an onyx-base clock that said twenty to one, the only noteworthy item on the desk was a cabinet photograph framed in Florentine leather. A handsome boy, about ten, in the dress uniform of some military school. Stiff-braided collar, bell buttons, full tailcoat, white trousers creased to a knife edge. Beneath the visor of the military cap the boy gazed straight ahead with fierce pride, not unlike the expression in Grolheim's eyes when speaking of the crown sable.

In the top drawer of the desk was a jumbled miscellany of papers. Proofs of Amblett's Festival of Furs ads; memos from comparison shoppers in Philadelphia and Washington; glossy prints of the new dolman sleeve designs. Also—tucked under a clip holding an item from a trade journal about Fox up at Edmonton—there was a long buff envelope, one of the twice-a-month missives from the payroll department.

The envelope was still sealed; the buyer hadn't bothered to open it. Don slit the envelope. The gray-green check said that The Store Superlative was prepared to pay to the order of Myron A. Grolheim the sum of \$741.66 after deductions. It was dated November 19.

Whatever Grolheim's worries were, evidently they couldn't be money worries, if he could leave two weeks' pay lying around since day before yesterday without taking the trouble to deposit it in his bank.

Don replaced the check, tucked it under the clip, tried the side drawers of the desk. They were locked, as they should have been, according to Standard Operating Procedure.

Don glanced up at the ceiling: the Display crew had removed the spotlights. Had Grolheim taken those color shots? What, exactly, had the buyer meant to do with the photographs? Other questions, too, suggested themselves with stroboscopic speed as he hurried across the fur salon, down to his own office on the Third.

If the Lily Inez deal was so damn top secret, why had Grolheim brought Don into it at all? Had that been the buyer's idea? Or Stolz's suggestion?

Suppose someone had figured on hijacking a sable coat worth better than a hundred thousand ... where could he dispose of the loot? Who would dare wear it? Could you fly it out of the country to sell it to some South American dictator? Some oil mogul?

In his own office, Don dug out the Confidential folder on Grolheim. There wasn't much in it that helped. Man was a widower with one child. Lived at 2874 West End Avenue. Had been with Neiman Marcus in Dallas and later with I. Magnin in Beverly Hills before joining the staff of The Store Superlative. There was a phone number. Don dialed it on his outside line.

No answer. He kept trying. Nothing but the burr-burring of the automatic ringer.

Well, hell. Fellow may be in the habit of staying out till dog's hours. Or could be he's shacking up with some lady love. He may be home in half an hour. Lots of possibilities. Some not so good!

He rang the Stolz home. A maid answered sleepily: "No, suh, Mister Stolz not home yet, nor neither Missus Stolz. No, suh, no idea when he get home. Who you say speakin'? Mister Cadee? Yes, suh, I tell him to call you.... At your hotel? Yes, suh."

Leaves it strictly up to you, boy. You can't stall around any longer on account of this hush-hush angle.

He put the Confidential folder back in the file, switched off the lights, went out to the elevator.

The watchman on Employees' Entrance unlocked the street door: "Get hold of Press all right?"

"Not yet, Mike. What kind of car was Mister Grolheim driving?"

"Ponty. Green and brown station wagon. Fifty-six, I'd say. They couldn't have squeezed that fancy-wood box in anything except a station wagon, 'less it was a panel truck."

"No. Sort of clumsy thing to handle." Don touched the watchman's arm. "Don't say anything about Press until I clear it, right?"

"Right, chief. Hope there's nothing wrong with him ... "

"Hope so too." He knew, now, how Ruth must have felt for the past three hours. She must have been sure there was something wrong or she would have heard from her husband. Don was beginning to believe she was right. The important thing was to find out for sure, to find out fast.

A cab dropped him at the Buckinghurst in three minutes. There was no station wagon in front of the avenue's newest cooperative building or on the side street to the north.

The doorman was inside the lobby warming himself by the log fire in the great hearth; he intercepted Don halfway to the night super's desk.

"Good evening... . You wish to see ... ?"

"Miss Lily Inez," Don said. "Which apartment?"

The doorman passed the buck to the night superintendent. The super looked pained. "Are you expected, sir?"

"Think I am. I'm from Ambletts."

"Ah ... ?" The super recovered his poise. He waved languidly. "The service elevator is closed at ten."

"That's all right. I'll use the same door as the white folks. Call your tenant. Tell her Mister Cadee of Ambletts is on his way up. And get the lead out. I'm in a rush." Don pushed the doorman aside firmly, stepped toward the bank of autotronic cars.

The super huddled with a headphone for a moment. Then: "She says to come right up, Mister Cadee. Apartment Seventeen West."

The doorman leaped into action. "This car. Mister Cadee. Just press Seventeen."

The door of 17W was held open by a diminutive blond maid in a smart, Frenchy uniform. She stared, puzzled:

"You have not brought it yet? Mamselle's birthday present? What is the matter!"

"I don't know," Don said softly, "but I damn well mean to find out."

CHAPTER 5

THAT DAMNED COAT

DON HAD SEEN THE STAR ON TELEVISION OFTEN enough to be an admirer of her brash mannerisms, her bouncy vitality. He felt she was better than her publicity men managed to have her pictured, which was usually in such a way as to emphasize her ample bosom. Sexy she undoubtedly was, but she was more than the possessor of the biggest pair in Albuquerque, as the naughty nightclub lyrics put it.

For him, Lily Inez always managed to make even the corniest comedy routine seem fresh and funny. But now, as she came across the big living room to meet him, he sensed that something had dampened her customary high spirits. In spite of a dazzling electric-blue gown cut as low as any censor would allow, she seemed much older than when he'd last seen her on the big bulb—older and either tired or depressed.

Perhaps, he thought, it was because the rose and gold splendor of the lush décor took away some of the glamour from her. Or possibly it was because she

didn't have on all that television make-up. The impudent turned-up nose, the mischievous, overworked dimples, the wide mouth that seemed to be made for hearty laughter, the wild mop of apricot-colored hair that had started the newest fad in coiffures—they were all strictly as advertised on twenty-five million sets every Sunday night at nine. But the bright blue eyes did not have that sparkle which had been referred to in press releases as like the sun glinting on wave tops; they were dull, red-rimmed. She might, he guessed, have been crying.

There was no indication of it in her voice, however. "You are a bad boy to spoil my birthday party." She dimpled at him. "I wanted to show off before my guests but now they've all gone home—except Elton." She waved at the man standing before the Carrara fireplace. "Elton Hadley, my manager. Mister ... Cadee."

"Evening." Don bowed.

Hadley was a tall, stout man with a head which was large even for one of his bulk. He had no visible eyebrows and a high forehead from which the dark hair had receded so that his frontal appearance was oddly like one of those elongated images in an amusement park's trick mirror. He flipped a hand in casual greeting; a hand remarkably small in contrast with his huge limbs—small and pudgy like that of an over fat baby. "What's holding up the parade, friend?"

Don said: "Mister Grolheim hasn't been here?"

Lily Inez pouted. "No one from your store has been here, though delivery was promised positively by nine at the latest, so I kept delaying dinner and

pouring martinis into people until everyone was practically crocked. You've made me so unhappy... ."

You're unhappy, Don said silently. What about Ruth Preston? "You haven't heard from Mister Grolheim at all?"

Hadley stroked the lapel of his dinner jacket with a tiny thumb. "We haven't heard from anybody connected with your store until you showed up just now."

"Your coat left the store at quarter-past eight, Miss Inez." Don decided that Hadley didn't look like the sort of individual who could finance a hundred-thousand-dollar gift. "Two of our most trusted men were bringing it over. I appreciate your concern about the sables but I want to know why our employees didn't get here."

Lily Inez frowned daintily: "Perhaps they misunderstood my address ... ?" She glanced at Hadley doubtfully.

"Don't be silly," the manager said. "How could you misunderstand an address like the Buckingham? Mister Cadee thinks these men may have decamped with your birthday present."

"No." Don had the feeling that neither the star nor her manager was really surprised by the non-arrival of the sables, that she was following a prearranged script and that Hadley was improvising as he went along. "I don't think they ran away with the merchandise. But someone may have intercepted them before they reached here."

Hadley said: "You're from Amblett's investigating bureau, Mister Cadee?"

"I'm Chief of Store Protection. One of the men

who started over here was my assistant, Jim Preston. The other was the fur buyer, Myron Grolheim. Nothing can make me believe they would have been mixed up in anything crooked." Don thought Lily Inez was waiting for a cue before saying anything else. "Only alternative is a hijacking ... a matter for the cops."

Lily Inez cried: "Oh no!"

Hadley held up one of the ridiculously small hands: "Now, just a minute, friend. We can't have any police publicity, coat or no coat, see?" He came toward Don with the false geniality of a politician about to buttonhole a voter.

Watch your temper, boy. You can't handle these people the way you'd deal with some coked-up shop-lifter. This is a kid-glove deal. "Amblett's isn't anxious for any publicity, either," he said. "It's our policy to avoid it, to protect our customers from it. But if a crime has been committed, the authorities will have to be notified. No way out of it."

Lily Inez put both hands to her cheeks in a stock gesture of despair. "For God's sake, don't do anything about it tonight! There may just have been some stupid mistake ... I'll probably have the coat by morning. Promise you won't do anything about it until tomorrow, at least!"

Hadley beamed approval. "Now that's good common sense, Lil. You'll admit that, Mister Cadee. Get the newspaper men in on this now, no telling what kind of story they'd cook up. One thing sure, it wouldn't do your store any good. On the face of it, there must have been carelessness somewhere, if nothing worse."

Lily Inez clutched Don's arm. "Wait till tomorrow!"

Don said: "I can't promise that, Miss Inez. I have a responsibility to my people. I'm not going to go to sleep and forget about them. But I'll let you know before I get in touch with the law."

"Fair enough." Hadley clapped him on the shoulder. "Better all around that way. Even money it's just as Lil says, some dumb mishapenstance. Lil will get in touch with you, first thing in the morning."

"Oh yes," she agreed. "And no matter what was wrong, I won't blame your Mister Preston or Mister Grolheim. I'm sure it was just one of those things."

Don found himself being urged toward the door—Hadley at one elbow, Lily Inez at the other.

The blonde held the door open. "The elevator is here, sir."

He stepped in, pressed the Lobby button.

They had their story all set, he told himself. They were expecting someone to throw questions at them and they had the answers figured in advance. They know something about that damned coat. But what?

Down in the lobby, the doorman broke off an argument with the night super about an entry in the fifth at Hialeah, hurried to open the street door.

On the sidewalk Don paused: "Wouldn't be anyone on the service elevator this time of night?"

"Oh no, sir. The night man quits at ten."

"But if a couple of people from Amblett's had delivered a package here around half-past eight, they'd have had to use the service car?"

"Yes sir, regulations."

"When did you come on duty?" Don asked.

"Eight o'clock. I saw your two men deliver that

package ... only it seemed more like a packing case, it was so big."

"That's right. It was quite a bundle." Don tried to keep his tone matter-of-fact. "Did they take it up to Miss Inez' apartment?"

"Well, of course, I couldn't actually say. But they went in the service entrance and they were gone, oh, perhaps ten minutes before they came back with the young man."

"A third man?"

"Yes, sir. I was busy at the moment, helping Missus Farley in with her wheel chair, so I didn't really pay much attention. But there were three of them and I supposed someone had come down from Miss Inez' apartment to help them put the packing case back in the station wagon—"

"They took it back to the car?"

"Yes. As I say, I wasn't watching, being so busy with Missus Farley because the slightest jounce causes her the greatest distress—but I did notice that even with three of them lifting it was hard work getting that packing case back into the station wagon; it must have been pretty heavy."

CHAPTER 6

A HEAVY PACKING CASE

"PRETTY HEAVY, EH? MUST HAVE BEEN, TO NEED THE three of them to lift it" How much would Grolheim weigh? Or Press?" You get a good look at these guys?"

"Can't say I did." The doorman considered. "Come to think of it, believe they all had their backs to me, while they were putting that packing case back in the station wagon."

"Your man on the service elevator would have talked to them, though?"

"I suppose. Why? Some difficulty about the delivery to Miss Inez?"

"Seems so. What's the name of your night man on the service car?"

"Salvatore. We generally call him Sally. Don't remember ever having heard his last name. He's a tough old bird. Dark ... big nose, black-a-da mustache." The watchman smiled at his attempted dialect.

"Know where he lives?"

"No. But," the doorman added helpfully, "he's a

wop. Chances are he lives in some Italian section."

"That narrows it down," Don said drily. "Wonder if your superintendent can pinpoint it a little closer." He went back into the lobby.

From behind the barricade of the desk the super regarded him warily.

Don said: "This Salvatore on your service car, what's his last name?"

"How should I know? I don't make out his checks." The man squinted suspiciously. "What's it to you, anyway?"

Don scowled. "Someone around here pulled a fast one tonight when a delivery was being made from Amblett's. This Sally may have been in on it."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the super said defensively. "And I don't know anything about Sally, either. You have any complaint, you'll have to take it up with Mister Wexberger, the manager. He'll be in the office at eight."

"How about getting him on the phone right now?"

"I couldn't possibly do that. If you'll stop around in the morning ... ?"

"Look, I'm acting for one of your tenants in this matter," Don said bleakly. "It was her property that was sidetracked or hijacked. If you don't want to cooperate, I'll have Miss Inez put on some pressure." He started for the elevator.

The superintendent came running out from behind his barricade. "You'll have to wait until I see if it's all right for you to go up again." He grabbed Don's arm.

Don clamped a hand on the man's wrist, hauled him into the car, swung him around, backed him into

a corner. "Come along and see, then." He punched the Seventeen button.

The doorman rushed over. "Hey, now!"

The elevator door closed; the car began to rise swiftly.

The superintendent glared. "Who for crysake you think you are, muscling people around!"

Don made a pushing-away movement with his palm. "First thing you know, you'll have me believing you're conniving with this hijack crew."

"I haven't been out of the goddamn lobby all night," the other retorted. "I don't even know what was stolen!"

The car slid gently to a stop.

Don crossed to the Seventeen door, thumbed the buzzer, ignoring the superintendent, who stayed in the elevator.

The blond maid opened the door, cried "Oooh! It's not Mister—" She looked horrified, tried to slam the door. "It's that store detective!"

Don held the door open easily. "Sorry to barge in like this, sister, but I haven't any time to waste."

Lily Inez sat cross-legged on the moss-thick carpet beside a Carrara coffee table, with a highball glass in her hand. She scrambled to her feet like a tomboy, disdaining Hadley's assistance.

"Hello there." She brought the dimple into instant play. "I was just saying to Elton how sweet you were about this ridiculous mix-up." She smiled, but not with her eyes.

Don nodded to the manager. "Told you I'd let you know before I went to the police. I'm going to have to do it now, unless you can give me some help."

Hadley answered for her. "Anything we can do, friend, anything at all."

Lily Inez spoke sharply to the maid. "That will be all, now, Frances."

At the door the maid hesitated. "The superintendent ... he's out here... "

Don said: "Show him in here; he's part of the problem."

The comedienne murmured doubtfully: "Why, of course. Ask him to come in, Frances."

But the superintendent took the car down in a hurry.

"He didn't want to come in," the maid reported sullenly.

"He went back downstairs." She closed the door, eyed Don disapprovingly as she left the living room.

Don refused a wigwagged offer of a drink from Hadley.

"No thanks. I don't feel like celebrating. Just learned from your doorman that Mister Grolheim did bring your sable to the Buckinghurst around half-past eight. My assistant was with him."

"But they didn't come here," Lily Inez protested.

Hadley shook his head. "We haven't seen hide nor hair of 'em."

"They were here," Don repeated. "The two of them carried the case with the coat in it, to your service elevator. Then after ten minutes or so the case was brought back out to the street. Only this time there was a third man with them. Possibly a fourth. They put the case back in Mister Grolheim's car and drove away with your coat." And with something else that was heavy ... heavy as Ruth Preston's burden of

worry, perhaps.

Lily Inez turned to set her highball down on the coffee table, spoke over her shoulder. "Who—who were the other men?"

"That's what I want to find out." Don saw a flicker of irritation cross the manager's face, as if warning her about something. "The doorman wasn't watching closely enough to identify them. But your night operator on the service car—Salvatore something—must have seen them, talked to them. So I have to get hold of him, only that super claims I can't get any information until tomorrow morning. I'll have the cops looking for Amblett's men long before then if I can't find a shortcut on my own." He spread his hands. "Maybe you'd prefer to get hold of the Buckingham manager, dig up the dope on Salvatore, save me some time."

Hadley rattled ice cubes in his glass. "No reason you shouldn't do that, Lil, no reason at all." He gazed moodily at his star. "If that doorman was right, it certainly does sound like a grab, doesn't it?" He took a gilded handset from a Neapolitan credenza, plugged a long cord into a baseboard socket, trailed it twenty feet across the carpet to the cocktail table, handed it to Lily Inez.

"What shall I say to Wexberger?" she asked querulously. "I don't want to tell him about ... my birthday present."

"You don't have to," Don said. "You want Salvatore's name and address and phone number if he has one. It's not necessary to explain why." He made a mental note of the number on the gilded dial she held.

"Wexberger'll think I'm schwocked"—she made a face—"calling at half-past one in the morning."

"Probably," Hadley made an attempt at joviality, "he'll want to come up and join in the revels."

"Probably," she lifted the receiver, "his wife will think I'm trying to seduce him ... hello, Jimmy? See if you can get Mister Wexberger for me ... all right, Jimmy, it's all right, I know you couldn't keep Mister Cadee from coming up ... just get Mister Wexberger, that's a sweet boy."

Hadley came over to Don. "Your people will be covered by insurance on a thing like this, I expect?"

"I'm not in a sweat about the sables," Don said. "I want to know what's with our two employees. Sometimes people get hurt in a stick-up."

"That's true," Hadley agreed. "But don't you think you're taking a pretty gloomy view of the whole thing?"

"I'll be glad to look at it from another angle, if you'll show it to me." What the hell is it that these people knew before I first came in this damn apartment!

Lily Inez hung up the phone, held out a small memo pad. "Salvatore Buccini, Seven Twenty-one East One Hundred and Sixth, the Stromboli. Wexberger says he doesn't have any phone number for the fellow."

Don tore the sheet off the pad. "This will do for a starter, Miss Inez. Much obliged."

She patted her explosion-effect hairdo in distraction. "Do you really think my coat is gone for good, Mister Cadee? I'll be the most disappointed woman in this world... "

He went toward the door. "I haven't had much experience with the class of thieves who steal crown sables; I can't guess what they'll do. But I'll let you know as soon as I know."

He went down in the autotronic.

The super glared at him. The doorman chided him: "Jeez, I wouldn't have wised you up to begin with, if I'd thought you were going to stage a strong-arm act."

"I'm not the one who staged the strong-arm stuff." Don was bleak. "That was a couple of other guys. You may get a chance to identify 'em in court."

Ten minutes and eighty cents later a cab dropped him in the heart of Little Italy. Rows of three-story brownstones with cobblers' shops, bars, candy stores, delicatessens, cafés, groceries, fish markets, pharmacies, a jumble of small commercial establishments on the ground floors. At 721, which he had expected to find a rooming house, a neon sign shimmered violently—a volcano in quivering eruption. Beneath this glowing red and blue display the twisted tubing said:

CAFÉ STROMBOLI

He peered through partly curtained windows. A small bar, a dozen crowded tables, half a dozen booths, perhaps thirty men. Older men mostly, bald heads, black mustaches against olive skins. Stevedores, truckers, plasterers, men who worked with their hands. Drinking, smoking, playing cards, laughing, eating. And all, whatever else they were doing, talking, jabbering, arguing at the top of their lungs.

Don went in.

The torrent of conversation ceased as if someone had shut it off at a faucet as soon as the door closed behind him. The air in the place was hot; the odor of fish and garlic and cheap wine was suffocating.

A score of faces turned toward him inquiringly, but no one spoke.

"Good evening, gentlemen." Don moved toward the bar behind which a very stout man wearing a stained apron was rinsing wineglasses. "I'm looking for Salvatore Buccini."

There was a sound as of wind passing through a grove of pines. A stirring of feet. A couple of the biggest men laid down their cards and shoved back their chairs.

The stout man wiped his hands on his apron. "What was it you wished to see this Buccini about?"

CHAPTER 7

SALVATORE

"IT'S A PERSONAL MATTER." THE SMELL OF THE place reminded Don of dingier cafés he had known in the war days, only then the customers at the tables had been much older, or else too feeble even to wear the Duce's uniform. Also, in those dens there had been many women, both young and old. Here there were only the hard, suspicious faces of the men, staring at him from the mirror of the back bar. "Salvatore's boss at the Buckinghurst said he would be here."

"He sometimes drops around." The stout man polished a wineglass with a dirty towel. "If you wish to leave your name?"

Salvatore must be here, Don thought; otherwise the fat boy would have said so, straight off. "Name's Cadee. Don Cadee." He laid a dollar on the bar. "Un bicchiere di vino, per favore."

"Certainly." Some of the antagonism left the stout man's eyes. "You speak the Italian?"

"Un tantino. Enough to find my way around

Napoli. I was there during the war." The doorman's description of Salvatore wouldn't be much help, Don decided. Most of the faces he could see in the mirror were swarthy, three out of four were adorned with large, black mustaches, all seemed to have large, bony noses. A majority of the men were middle-aged. "A beautiful city, Napoli. Magnificent bay."

"The finest in the world, that is true." The stout man permitted himself a thin smile as he poured the grappa. "This matter of which you wish to speak. It has to do with Buccini's job, perhaps?"

"Yes." Why had there been such a stir when he had mentioned Sally? Were his pals expecting someone to walk in off the street, gunning for the guy? "Salute." He raised his glass.

"Salute." The stout man made change. "You like to leave a message for him?"

"No. I have something to say privately, a warning."

"Ah?"

In the mirror Don could see faces turning, heads swiveling toward one of the booths in which three men sat. "He may lose his job if I don't get a chance to talk to him."

The youngest of the three in the booth got to his feet heavily, marched toward the bar with the muscle-bound stride of a man who does much lifting. "We are all Salvatore's friends, mister. You can speak freely to us." There was an insolent challenge in his manner. "You tell us this warning."

"Fair enough." Don carried his glass to the booth; the other two watched him with sullen hostility. "You are ready to go to bat for your friend; good, fine. Reason I am here is, I'm going to bat for a couple of

mine."

The younger man caught up with him, put a hand on his shoulder roughly. "What is this about losing a job, then?"

"Mind if I sit down?" Don didn't wait for a refusal, slid into the seat opposite the older of the two in the booth. The man at his side was surly but showed no sign of fear. The other, as Don sat down facing him, was plainly alarmed. "I'll tell you why this Salvatore is in danger, so he will understand why I am worried about my friends."

The younger man kept his hand on Don's shoulder until the one at Don's side spoke gruffly: "Si accomodi, Luigi. We will hear what he has to say."

Luigi dropped into the empty seat.

Don set his glass down. "I work for a department store, Amblett's, on Fifth Avenue; so do these two friends of mine. Earlier tonight they went to the Buckingham to deliver a packing case. They had to use the service elevator run by your pal Salvatore. But there was some trouble. A couple of crooks were waiting for them, probably up on the seventeenth floor, after they'd gotten out of Salvatore's car."

The man opposite Don scowled, scratched at his shoulder.

He's your man, for sure. All you have to do is needle him enough. "There was a scuffle of some kind up there; one of my friends got hurt. These hijackers heaved him into the packing case along with the stuff they were stealing. Then they made my other friend go back down in the service car, help them lug away their loot."

Luigi growled: "You call Salvatore a thief?"

Don looked at him gravely. "No. You are not the kind who would have a thief for a friend." He turned to the man beside him. "I believe Salvatore is honest, just as you do. Chances are he didn't know just what was going on. My friend who wasn't hurt wouldn't have been able to say anything about the steal. So there might not have been any reason for Salvatore to think there was anything wrong. But he saw the hijackers; he can describe them. They may be afraid of that; they might try to fix him so he can't tell anyone about them."

The man beside him grunted: "He is in no danger as long as he keeps his mouth shut."

"Hell he isn't." Don was aware that others in the booths on either side were listening. "That's one reason I came to warn him. I'm going to find out what's happened to my friends, one way or another, whether Salvatore helps or not. And when I do run these crooks to earth, they will think it was because he described them. Then they will try to fix him so he can't testify against them."

The man opposite him wiped his face with a blue bandanna. "You are with the police, no?"

"No. I work for the store. No connection with the cops." A couple more jabs with the old needle may do it, boy. "But if I can't locate my friends in a hurry, the cops will get in on it. That will make it bad for anyone who holds back information. Anyone who does that could get a stretch in the pen."

Luigi said: "You making threats?"

"Not at all." Don drained his glass. "Just trying to help your friend out of a jam. See, there were others who saw these men; the doorman at the building

where Salvatore works, for one. So we'll catch up with them, only a question of time. But time is important; I want to catch up with them before anything happens to either of my pals. There's where Salvatore can help." He lifted the empty glass. "Mi si secca la lingua ... how does it go?"

"... dal parlare?" Luigi chuckled, deep in his throat. "My throat gets dry, too, listening ... vino!" He raised his voice.

The other two hastened to empty their glasses before the stout man arrived with the bottle.

Don took his time about reaching for his wallet. The man beside him saw the movement, flapped a callused hand, grunted: "Non costa nulla... "

No charge, gratis? A good sign. They wouldn't buy you a drink unless they were buying your argument, too. But Salvatore might need one more jab.

"If I can get a good description of these hijackers"—he looked around after the glasses had been filled—"I'll have 'em in jail in short order. If not, they will still know they're being hunted. Your friend Salvatore will have to keep looking over his shoulder for a couple of months. Watching and waiting for somebody to come out of a dark alley, stick a knife between his ribs—"

"Dio!" the man opposite him burst out. "If I speak, they say they will get me. If I keep quiet, you say they will finish me, anyway!"

Luigi put a hand on his sleeve. "Coraggio, Salvatore. I think you can trust this Cadee."

There was a murmur of approval from the adjoining booths.

Don said: "You are an honest man, Salvatore.

An honest man is not a coward. Now tell me, you saw my two friends come in ... the big one with the shoulders like your Luigi and the red face, the other shorter and dark and nervous. Which one came back down in the elevator with you and the other two?"

"The short one with the quick eyes." Salvatore drank off his wine hastily. "The big man I did not see again. I did not know it, if as you say, he was inside this box. I swear I did not know it."

"No. I expect you didn't" What will you say to Ruth, now? What can you tell her, except that Press went out on a job you ducked and may not be back? He kept the lid on his sudden anger, asked calmly: "What about the other two?"

Words poured out of Salvatore Buccini like wine from the bottle. "One was tall, thin, skinny almost, with a nose that had been broken and a smile like that of a man telling a dirty joke. Thirty, maybe a year or so older; his eyes were like those of the little dogs the rich women in the Buckinghurst carry in their arms, brown and bulge-out, shiny and nasty. He did most of the talking; I do not think the boy spoke at all."

"A boy?" Don was astonished.

"No more than a tween-ager, yes," Salvatore babbled wildly. "He was like those who hang in the poolrooms and rob handbags from old women. Long black hair plastered close to his head with those things like Rudolfo Valentino used to wear, long beneath his ears. He was pale, almost the white of chalk, and his eyes, they were pale, too, the green of small grapes. There was also something wrong with his teeth—two of them stuck out in front like

the fangs of a wolf. It was this boy who saw that I wondered why the dark man—your friend—did not speak, although he had talked much on the way upstairs in my elevator. It was the older man, the dog-eyed one, who told me to forget that I had ever seen them; he said to me: 'Zip the lip, old man. or else.' And he drew his finger across his throat ... like this."

CHAPTER 8

JIM PRESTON

DON CAME OUT OF THE STROMBOLI TO THE BITING wind whistling in from the East River, grateful for that fourth glass of vino which Luigi had insisted on. But no amount of alcohol would offset the chill inside him.

There was no longer any margin for doubt; Press had been hurt, maybe worse. Either there had been a scuffle up there on the seventeenth floor outside Lily Inez' apartment—or else Press had been slugged out in cold blood. If the curious pair Salvatore had described were stupid enough to think they could cash in on a crown sable coat the way they might have sold a truckload of liquor, then they'd be the kind who would think they could get away with murder, too. Maybe by this time Grolheim was in as bad shape as Press. But that was conjecture; about Press there was now only the question of how badly he had been hurt.

Don strode westward, away from the sidewalk stores, the kids hollering around the oil-drum

bonfires, thinking of the times Press had come through in the clutch. The morning when that coked-up old biddy had whipped out the hatpin and stabbed at Don's eyes; Press would carry that scar to the grave. That afternoon during the Christmas holidays in jam-packed Aisle Six on the First Floor when the cornered bag-snatcher had pulled out an automatic and started blasting at Alice Stern; the psychiatrists had ruled that the gun-boy was a maniac who didn't know what he was doing—but Press had known what he was doing when he'd walked into that muzzle. A good man in the clutch, Jim Preston.

Now someone would have to pinch-hit for him. It was up to the precinct boys; running down a pair of stick-up thugs wasn't a job for a store protection chief. Don had gone as far as he could go without the cooperation of the force. One or the other of those hijackers would probably be in the Bureau of Identification files.

Sally had given them the complete treatment, once he had started to talk. The old man had a remarkable memory, too; he had noticed more details about that duo than most plainclothes men would have seen if they had watched the pair at a line-up. Overcoats, hats, shirts, neckties, even the suede shoes the "tween-ager" had worn—Sally had been able to recall them all. Including the huge star sapphire on the tall, skinny one's right hand ... spotting a ring like that was almost as good as having a name and address to go on. Someone at headquarters, or in the fur district, or in the circle of Lily Inez' acquaintances, would be able to put the finger on

one or the other of those crooks.

All he had to do was take a cab to Centre Street, speak his piece, let the cops take it from there. But maybe it wasn't quite that simple. Maybe a little caution was called for. The hair at the back of his neck was prickling in that uncomfortable way he'd almost forgotten, a sensation he hadn't experienced since those nights on patrol, hunting for prisoners to be interrogated by Intelligence. How many times, when there had been no other indication of danger in the quiet darkness behind enemy lines, had that prickling at the back of his neck suggested instant caution ... and been justified a moment later?

Extrasensory perception, the medical sharps had called it, not believing in it at all ... but he had no objection to their calling it whatever they liked. It had never failed him; he was here, alive, and so were a dozen or so of his company who might not have come back from those routine patrols if it hadn't been for that cautionary crawling of his skin.

So now once more he would go slowly, watch his step. He'd made one mistake, not heeding Grolheim's apprehensions: It was clear that the youth Grolheim had thought was trailing him had been the one with the plastered-down hair and buck teeth. Don couldn't risk a second blunder; that pair had taken Press along with Grolheim, so there was a possibility both Amblett's men were being held as hostages. Don't go blundering into it blind a second time, boy. Don't let the blues in the night mess it up, either.

A cruising taxi slowed. He waved it to the curb, gave Sibyl Forde's Christopher Street address. Sib

wouldn't care much for the job he had in mind for her, but she would do it ... and there was no one else who could.

He pushed the button over the 4D mailbox in the lobby of her apartment building, waited, buzzed it again.

A sleepy drawl came from the perforated brass talk-back:

"Who is it?"

"Wake you up, sugar?"

"Don! Is this love in bloom or something more serious?"

"I need some advice."

"Hm. Is that all! How uncomplimentary. Come on up."

He went up.

She greeted him satisfactorily, but held him off at arms length, afterward: "What, for heaven's sake, have you been drinking?"

"Chianti." He admired the fluffy white lounging robe which set off her coppery hair and innocent blue eyes. "Dago red. Not bad, either. Even when taken professionally." He kissed one of her more prominent freckles. "I should have talked to you on the phone; in pajamas, you distract me."

Sibyl frowned. "You never carry on like this unless something is really wrong. What's up?"

He told her, beginning with the call from Ruth Preston, ending with Salvatore's description of the two holdup men.

She interrupted only once. "A crown sable coat! Why, it must be worth a fortune."

"It cost a fortune," he said, "but what it's worth to

a couple of hijackers, I wouldn't be able to guess."

Sibyl disappeared into the bedroom before he had finished telling her about the queer reaction from Lily Inez and her manager.

"Keep right on," she called through the open door. "I can hear you while I'm dressing."

There's my gal! She knows you want her to be with Ruth Preston if any bad news breaks. You didn't even have to ask her.

She emerged in a tweed suit that made her look more like a Junior Leaguer at a hunt club meet than the best floor operative on Amblett's Protection Staff. "I'll chuck a few things in a bag, only be a minute. Press lives in Flatbush, doesn't he?"

He nodded. "Be better if you went right over without calling to let her know you're on the way."

"Why, natch; she'd say she didn't want me to come. But don't you think you ought to let Bob Stolz know what's happened?"

"I'll ring him again while you're packing." He dialed the Stolz home. The general manager of Amblett's answered the phone.

"Bob? Don. We've had a bad break."

"Oh, for God Almighty's sake! Now what?" Stolz sounded as if he might have had one martini too many.

"That little item Grolheim had made up for Lily Inez—"

"I know about it. Don't tell me—"

"I had Jim Preston go over to the Buckinghurst with Grolheim, to play it safe. But the coat was hijacked somewhere inside the building." He gave a terse account.

"You mean they got away with a hundred thousand dollars' worth of sables?"

"They got away with Grolheim and Press, too. Seem to have snatched both of them. From what I can find out, Press was hurt in the scuffle. May have been killed. I got a pretty good description of the stick-up pair, to turn over to the police—"

"No! Great Jesus H. Christ, No! We don't want any publicity about this at all, understand, Don? You handle it on your own; keep the cops out of it. Hear what I say?"

"Listen, Bob. There are other people to be considered— Jim Preston's wife, Grolheim's family. They have more at stake than Amblett's." Don was blunt.

"You don't know for sure that there was a kidnapping." Stolz was less belligerent. "Wait until you have some more dope before you call in the police."

"Well, hell." Don was surly. "I'll see you in the morning about it."

Stolz howled into the phone. "You do what I say, goddamn it!"

"'Night, Bob." Don hung up.

Sibyl said: "I gather that The Store Superlative is more interested in protecting the reputation of the television tootsie than in protecting its own employees?"

"That's right. I'm not sure it's the smart thing to ring in the blues just yet, but I don't like to have him tell me to hold off. And you know something?"

"What?"

"I don't think it's the lady's reputation that's got him in a stew, Sib."

CHAPTER 9

A BRUNETTE IN A TURQUOISE DRESS

SIBYL ADJUSTED A COCKY LITTLE TAM-O'-SHANTER before her vanity. "What scares Brother Stolz is the hot breath of scandal. This princely giver must be a friend of his or the coat wouldn't have been bought through Ambletts. And, of course, he's a married man, or there wouldn't be any need of all the hush-hush. So if the hounds of the law get to sniffin' around and nose out the name of this big shot, it'll embarrass our Gee Em horribly with his café-society chums."

"He was more than embarrassed, snug; he was sweating up a head of steam. My guess, there's a personal angle involved. Maybe Bob's been wenching around with this boy in the background, staging parties with Lily Inez and some of her cuties on that Painting the Town show, while Ma Stolz was down in Nassau." He took her overnight bag. "However, the only damned angle that bothers me is the one Ruth

Preston's worrying about."

"How much should I tell her?"

"Not too much. Not until we know more. Press and Grolheim were shanghaied along with the sables. Maybe they're being held as hostages. If that's the ticket, we ought to hear from the hijackers before long." He put his arm around her shoulders. "You'll have to play it by ear, Sib. I don't know how she'll take it."

"How do you suppose I'd take it if a couple of kidnappers abducted you, darling?" She squeezed his arm. "Ruth will be frantic."

"You stick with her till we get something definite."

"Where do you expect to get it from?"

"I'm going up to Grolheim's place, first."

"You thought there was something offbeat about him, didn't you? That he might have been giving you a build-up in case something like this happened?"

"I don't know how to put it, Sib." Don held back the door of the little self-service elevator to let her go in. "This afternoon, he was as tensed-up as if he'd known the hijack was coming. Still, he certainly didn't strike me as the sort of guy who would connive with the kind of tough lugs Salvatore described. It was more as if the sight of those crown sables knocked Grolheim off his rocker."

"That fits," she said. "The whole business is on the insane side. Only someone who is a little cracked could possibly expect to cash in on a coat as conspicuous as the Kohinoor ... "

"That's what I thought, at first. But they may have had that figured out in advance..." He didn't elaborate, but added: "If I don't get a lead at Grolheim's,

I'm going down to headquarters, see if I can make either of those characters in Cap O'Berry's picture gallery. Here's a cab, hon."

He helped her in.

"Remember what I said, darling." She touched his arm lightly. "About how I would feel if anything happened, to you."

"Look! Don't you start worrying, Sib."

"I don't like what you've told me about ... these characters. Be careful, Don."

He waited until the cab had started the long run to Flatbush, then headed for the subway entrance.

It was ten minutes before an uptown local rolled into the chilly station; he spent it debating how much help he might get from headquarters, how much he would have to tell about the case to get it.

His car was nearly empty, except for two dance-weary couples up at the other end. He propped himself in a corner, found himself staring absently at a familiar face on an advertisement opposite:

Laugh—and the World
Laughs with You at
LILY INEZ
Painting the Town
On Channel 19 at 9 p.m.
This and Every Sunday

He scowled at the merry blue eyes, the saucy snub nose, the beguiling dimples. You weren't so amusing tonight. The chuckle meter didn't click off any new records. You weren't as surprised about what happened to your crown sables—and to Press and My

Grolheim—as you wanted me to think you were, either.

He was sure of that much, but beyond that no conjecture seemed plausible. She was one of the very few people who could have known when the crown sables would be delivered; she could have tipped off the hijackers. But why should she have? Does a woman about to receive a practically priceless gift arrange to have it stolen from right under her nose?

That big-dome manager, Elton Hadley, might have been the finger man. Might have done it out of jealousy or spite, not wanting any other man to rank higher than he did in his star's favor. If Lily Inez had known that, or suspected it, she might have acted as she had, covering up for him. But, in that event, why had the manager been at the scene of the crime when he could easily have contrived to be somewhere else? Moreover, why would a professional man like Hadley, with a considerable reputation in his own field, put himself in a position where he could be blackmailed by a couple of kidnappers who might have to pay the chair price for a snatch?

Neither possibility seemed to make sense. Yet there was no doubt in Don's mind that the heist had taken place right outside the star's apartment or actually inside it, or that both the comedienne and her manager had learned something about it before Don had gone upstairs at the Buckinghurst.

He thought about that blond maid as he got off the train, climbed to Broadway, walked toward West End. It might be worthwhile to talk to her again.

He had expected Grolheim to have an apartment in one of the majestic edifices towering fifteen or

twenty stories and flaunting burnished granite, weathered bronze, and polished plate glass at the street level. Like the one halfway up the block there. But that was 2870; there didn't seem to be any other building beyond, other than an ancient brick warehouse.

The street was empty, though there had been plenty of activity on Broadway, a short distance eastward. The only car in sight was a sleek black limousine with a chauffeur asleep behind the wheel, a newspaper over his face to keep out the glare of the street lights.

He didn't want to wake the man; headed north in the hope of finding a night watchman at the warehouse. Had My Grolheim given Amblett's a phony address?

No ... a dozen paces further he saw the house, one of the old three-story brownstone fronts set back twenty feet from the curb line and thus half hidden to anyone entering its more imposing neighbors. The 2874 showed brassily against the weathered stone.

There was a waist-high iron rail above a sunken areaway and steps leading down; the entrance was four steps up. The house was dark. Evidently the buyer lived here alone; if there had been any elderly relatives or even a housekeeper, the phone would have been answered. But he might as well ring, to make sure.

With his thumb on the pearl button, he paused. The street door was solid oak, but there were two long glass insets on either side. Through the right-hand glass a spark of light showed, danced about briefly, expired.

Someone in there with a flashlight! That was a reflection along a varnished banister. Nobody who had legitimate business in there would be using a hand torch.

He backed off the stoop quickly, went down to the shadowed areaway.

Shielded by the gloom, he waited for someone to come out, waited and listened, heard nothing.

Behind him he felt cold metal, iron bars guarding the glass in the upper half of the basement door. He gauged the width between the grillwork. It would be a tight squeeze but he thought it could be done.

He took off his hat, shoved the crown between the two bars at the right, above the doorknob. A quick jab with his stiffened forefingers brought a faint tinkle of glass. Another jab, a brittle crash. He put his hat on, slid his hand between the bars, squeezed his wrist through the aperture in the pane as far as he could, felt around for the key.

It was in the lock, as he had hoped. Most people did lock their basement doors and leave the key inside. He turned the key, withdrew his hand, pulled the door open.

A bakery truck went by at a fast clip, but there were no pedestrians on the street.

He stepped inside, into pitch darkness, listening.

You're not too well equipped to stage a break-and-enter job. No jimmy, no flashlight, no gun. Well, hell, Press hadn't been carrying a gun, either.

His eyes became more accustomed to the darkness. He could make out a storage room, a boiler, stairs at the back of the basement.

The stairs creaked a little even when he put his

weight close to the wall. The door at the head of the stairs was unlocked.

He took a good half minute to open it as noiselessly as possible, another full minute standing stock-still when the door was open.

From somewhere above him there was a dull bumping; it was repeated a couple of times at quarter-minute intervals. He thought it sounded like someone closing the drawers of a desk or a bureau. Means you weren't seen, boy; you haven't been heard, either, so far.

It was easier to see, there in the first floor. A little light filtered in under the drawn blinds. Enough to let him tiptoe through a big, old-fashioned kitchen, down a long narrow hall to the staircase.

He glanced out through the long glass panel beside the front door. Nobody on the street.

A door opened somewhere in the second floor but no light showed. Closet, probably.

He went up quickly; the stairs were carpeted.

From the top of the stairs he could see a slit of light beneath a door. He decided it was a bedroom at the back of the house.

Someone was moving around in there, making no particular effort to be quiet.

He got his hand on the knob of the door, turned it slowly, opened the door fast.

A girl in a gown sparkling with sequins backed out of a closet with an armful of clothing on hangers. A brunette with a figure that was made for the strapless turquoise gown. Her shoes were turquoise, too, the French heels studded with brilliants. She turned to lay the stuff on Grolheim's mahogany four-poster,

saw him.

"Jesus!" She flung the clothes on the bed. "Jesus Christ, but you startled me! What the hell are you doing in this house?"

"You beat me to it." He noticed she was wearing short white kid gloves. "You took the words right out of my mouth. That's what I was going to ask you."

CHAPTER 10

THE "TWEEN-AGER"

SHE RETREATED, STOOD WITH HER BACK TO THE bureau. "You won't find much worth stealing. My fiancé's clothes wouldn't bring more than a few bucks at a hock shop."

"Don't know about that; Myron wears the best." He glanced at the pile of clothing on the bed, at the shorts and shirts and neckties heaped helter-skelter in the open Pullman case at her feet "But burglary's a bit out of my line. I'm on the other side of the fence. I work at the store with Myron."

"Oh—you do!" She sidled toward her mink coat, draped across the pillows on the bed.

"Must have heard Myron speak of me. I'm Don Cadee." He let her see he admired the décolletage, the way the silver sequins against the turquoise emphasized the attractive lines of her figure. "And if you're his fiancée you must be Esther."

"Of course," she smiled brightly. "I have heard him mention you, Mister Cadee. But he never suggested I'd run into you, here, tonight."

"My apologies for startling you." Look at those sparklers on her fingers, boy! If they're for real, they're worth as much as this house.

"You don't have to make excuses. Only Myron didn't tell me anyone else had a key." She held her hands out to the disarray, in mock despair. "He sent me to get some of his things ... to take on our honeymoon. We had a little smash-up tonight. A car sideswiped us on the Saw Mill River road; the window broke and the glass cut him so he had to have nine stitches taken."

"Sorry to hear that. But glad he wasn't hurt seriously." She can't possibly think I'm buying this boloney. "Where is he now?"

"At my house in Brewster." She waved at the coats and trousers. "I wonder if you'd pick out a couple of suits he could wear in Mexico; I haven't the least idea which to pack. You see, we weren't going to be married for a month but when he knew he'd have to keep this bandage on his face for a couple of weeks, I talked him into having the ceremony tomorrow and flying right down to Acapulco."

She must have a gun in the pocket of that mink; if you fool around with that clothing she'll go for it. Better call her bluff now. "I don't think he'll need any of this stuff. He won't be taking that plane in the morning."

"No? Why?" She kept her dark eyes on him but reached out to the mink, her fingers feeling along the soft fur for the slit of the pocket.

"There'll be detectives at every airport looking for him, that's why." He grabbed the coat, yanked it off the bed as if to hold it out for her to put on.

The black and silver label behind the gold chain for hanging up the coat was that of Sari Soeurs, a fashionable Fifty-seventh Street couturier; from the lining he judged the mink to be almost new.

"You bastard!" She struggled to pull something out of the pocket. "You lousy bastard!"

"You phony." He held her wrist tightly. "I never heard of any Esther. Where'd you get My's key? Who sent you here to corral his clothes?"

"I did." The voice was soft and elaborately casual; it was only inches behind his ear.

Don turned slowly, seeing first the polished cordovan puttees, then the flaring uniform pants and the chauffeur's jacket, finally the grinning, juvenile face. Salvatore had pictured this "tween-ager" perfectly—the chalk-white complexion, the sideburns, the insolent eyes beneath the black visor like the soft, pulpy, gray-green inside of grapes.

"Leggo the doozie's coat before I shoot off your thumb." The boy held the muzzle of the automatic high, ready to chop down with it.

"Maxie!" The girl was shrill. "That was too close for comfort. I thought you were asleep at the switch!"

The boy pointed the pistol at Don's kidneys. "You haven't bitch sense, doozie. Handing my name around like a tip sheet. Now I have to cool this cookie, because you told him my name."

"No, no! No, Maxie! Don't!" Terror dilated her eyes; she clutched involuntarily at his arm. "For God's sake, none of that!"

Don watched for his chance, but the boy took a quick step sideways to avoid her; the muzzle never

moved more than a foot from the small of Don's back.

"Keep away from me," the boy snarled at her. "You're so freaking sensitive, you can stick your fingers in your ears."

He's going to gun you, sure. This is the kid who got Press, probably. One of these thrill killers. If you don't want to stand still for being shot down in cold blood, you'll have to make your play right sudden. "How you going to cash in on those crown sables when you and your partner will be busy ducking a six-state alert, Junior?"

The boy sniggered. "You're nothing but a crummy burglar. I saw you bust in that door. They'll give me a citation for cooling you."

The girl clutched the coat in her arms, moaning. "I can't take it, Maxie. Don't do it, for God's sake!" She thrust an arm toward Don. "Swear you won't say a word about either of us! Swear you won't go to the cops! Maxie'll let you live."

Don watched the boy's eyes; they were basilisk, unwinking. "Don't believe he'll take advice from you any better than he will from me, sister."

"Advice?" The youth chuckled. "I can take the stuff or I can leave it alone. Sure. What I wouldn't take is your word, not if you swore on a stack of wheat-cakes. What I trust is a promise from this—" His lips flattened against his teeth, the gun jumped forward a couple of inches.

"Max!" The girl screamed. "I'll turn you in, myself! I will, so help me; I'll holler cop the minute I get out of here. And if I don't get out you know what'll happen when—"

"Beat it, babe-o." The boy flushed angrily. "Fan your pants out of here. Go on. I'll bring the clothes after I've taken care of Whitey, here."

"I won't," she flared. "I don't trust you. I'm staying until you go."

A glint of amusement came into the narrowed greeny eyes. "Okay. Hop downstairs, get me something to bundle up the baby."

"Use the cords off the Venetians," she retorted. "Give me your knife, I'll cut them down."

"Doozie, now you taught me. Never fuggle around with a doozie. They'll put you in the corner pocket every—"

Don lunged as the boy stretched out his left hand toward her with the switch blade. He struck at the fingers holding the knife, snatched at the barrel of the gun, expecting to feel the muzzle blast if not the final shock. The girl screeched.

The boy wrenched the gun free, rocked back on his heels, clubbed the barrel like a machinist using a mallet.

Don tried to roll away from the blow. The front sight of the automatic caught him above the left ear. The screeching was drowned out by an explosion behind his eyes. ...

The roaring subsided, became a faraway ringing. He tried to put a hand up to the source of the sound. His muscles didn't respond. He tried opening his eyes, could see nothing. The ringing kept on. ...

He didn't knock your brains out, else your head wouldn't be aching as if you had a pneumatic hammer stuck in each ear. The ringing stopped abruptly. That sound wasn't inside your skull; it was a telephone

downstairs.

He was cold, shivering cold; realized he must have been unconscious for some time. He tried to move his hands again; they were trussed up behind his back. His ankles were cord-bound, too.

The second time he opened his eyes he twisted his head a little, saw a faint line of light above him. Reflection on the window sill from the street lights. Anyhow, you can see and hear.

He rolled over, feeling a carpet scraping bare skin. They stripped you, boy. Took your pants, shorts—he thumped one foot on the carpet—and your shoes. No wonder you're half frozen. Hell, you're lucky to be half alive!

It wasn't easy getting up on his knees, for his muscles were stiff and didn't seem to respond any too well to orders from his brain. He lost his balance and fell heavily on the first attempt to rise, banging his head against the open closet door. But on the second try he made it and stayed erect, leaning against the wall. Hobbling slowly and using the wall for support he made it over to the light switch, turned his back to it, put on the light.

From the mirror across the room a Halloween mask leered back at him. A mask crusted with blood, black with bruises. He went to work on you after he slugged you out. Maybe that's what happened to Press. Maybe Press is still alive, too.

It took five minutes of spine-jolting agony to hop out to the stairs and down, clinging to the banister. By the time he'd hobbled to the kitchen he was drenched with cold sweat. The next move was simpler. Back up to the kitchen table, pull out

the drawer, fumble around for a bread knife, jam its blade between the edge of the table and the closed drawer, saw the cord at his wrists.

After his ankles were free he put his head under the tap at the sink, used a dish towel.

In the pantry was an unopened bottle of slivovitz; he opened it, took it back upstairs with him. After the third drink the pneumatic hammers made less racket.

There were none of Grolheim's clothes in the closet. They'd carted every last stitch away. Not even a pair of shorts had been left. The suitcase had been taken; all the suits on the bed had been removed. You don't think you could make it back to your hotel in a bedspread, do you?

He went back downstairs. There was a hall closet there, but it, too, had been cleaned out except for a raincoat. He tried it on; it didn't reach to his knees.

Well, hell ... he could always call the hotel, get one of the bellhops to bring up or send up a suit and a pair of shoes. He went to the phone in the living room. It rang before he picked it up.

"Hello," he said.

"Don! I've been ringing you ever since three o'clock!"

"What time is it, shugie?"

"It's quarter past four. Are you crocked or something? You sound so queer!"

"A little cracked tip. But not crocked."

"Are you all right?" Sibyl was worried.

"I'm in my right mind, even if I'm not fully clothed."

"Don! What happened?"

"Made contact with some of the hijack squad, shugie."

"So did we!" she exclaimed. "That's why I've been calling you. I talked to Mister Grolheim ... and he says everything is going to be all right and Press will be home in a day or so if we just sit tight and take it easy."

He stared incredulously at the instrument in his hand. "Are you sure you were talking to My Grolheim?"

"Of course I'm sure. I know his voice. He called me Sibyl and he was just as reassuring as he could be, under the circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

"Well, he couldn't explain exactly. But he did say things would all be straightened out in a day or so—including the return of the coat to Lily Inez. And Press would come back when he did."

"Um—where was he calling from?"

"A bar somewhere. Not in town. He called from a coin booth. Ruth talked to him, too, for a minute."

"Are you staying there with her?"

"No. She feels better about Press now; she's going to take a phenobarb, get some sleep."

"Then you can be a nice St. Bernard dog and come over here with a keg."

"You sound stewed!"

"I don't mean a keg of brandy. I have a supply of slivovitz. But you stop at my hotel and Stan will have a keg there for you to bring up here. Know the address? Twenty-eight Seventy-four West End."

CHAPTER 11

I SUPPOSE YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT PRESS

PALE STREAKS OF LIME AND RASPBERRY WERE showing across the rooftops to the east by the time Sibyl's taxi pulled up in front of Grolheim's house. The cabman helped her with a heavy suitcase as far as the steps but then she waved him away, though she eyed the unlighted entrance doubtfully.

Don opened the front door. "All quiet on the West End front. I'd help you with the bag, only they might run me in for indecent exposure."

"Darling!" Sibyl ignored his bath-towel-and-blanket costume, winced at his swollen face, now showing bruises in more colors than the dawn sky. "Have you had a doctor?"

"All I need is the beautiful nurse." His grin was a little lopsided, due to the swelling at the left-hand corner of his mouth where the gunsight had gashed the skin. "Come in the kitchen; I've made coffee. Ever try black coffee laced with slivovitz?"

"Don't be flippant. You frighten me. What happened to you, for God's sake?"

"Call it careless driving, shug. I forgot that only a hackie would go to sleep behind the wheel with a newspaper over his face to keep the light out. A uniformed chauffeur wouldn't have done that and I should have noticed it. When I got to horsing around with a busty brunette, her chauffeur chum came out from behind his newspaper, put a gun to me, stripped me stark nekkid."

"You mean—while she was right here?"

"Oh yes. I have no sense of shame. I'd say if she hadn't been here then, I wouldn't be here now. The chauffeur wanted to cool me, as he put it." He poured coffee for her. "Tell me what Grolheim said."

Sibyl inspected his battered head. "You must have a doctor! You might be walking around with a fractured skull."

"It's not as bad as it looks."

"It looks perfectly frightful."

"You should have seen me before I took a shower." He set the suitcase on the sink and opened it, nodding with satisfaction. Stan had followed instructions pretty well, except he'd put in the brown shoes. "How come it was you who happened to talk to Grolheim?"

"I made Ruth take a hot bath, hoping it would help her get to sleep. While she was in the tub the phone rang. I recognized Grolheim's voice, though probably I wouldn't have if we hadn't just been talking about him. He asked if he was speaking to Missus Preston and I said no, it was Miss Forde on the line. He said 'Why, hello, Sibyl' and 'I suppose

you're worried about Press' and I told him we certainly were."

"Was it a local call?"

"No. Long distance. Coin phone; I heard the quarter drop. Bar or restaurant, there was a juke box playing while he was talking." Her eyes showed alarm when he fished his service pistol out of the suitcase. "Do you think this chauffeur is coming back here?"

"Not likely." He stepped into the hall, out of sight, to put on the shorts Stan had sent. "But it wouldn't surprise me if I ran into him somewhere; next time I would rather be on more of an even footing with him. Go on about Grolheim."

"He said there was really nothing to worry about; he'd be back at the store sometime today—or at the latest by tomorrow—and Press would be with him. There'd been an attempt to steal the sables but it had been due to a misunderstanding and he was helping to straighten it out. In the meantime, no one should report the temporary detention—that's what he called it—of Press and himself to the police or the FBI or any detective agency. If we just sat tight everything would come out all right"

"Um." Don put on his shoes. "Did he sound as if he was talking with a gun in the small of his back?"

"No. He was just as casual as if I'd met him by accident while I was strolling through the fur salon." She sipped at the café royale, wondered about the stack of canceled checks in the middle of the kitchen table. "I asked him if there was any way we could get in touch with him and he said that under the circumstances he wouldn't give me a phone number to call.

But he would give you a ring later on today."

"Did he explain why Press wasn't calling his own home instead of getting My to do it?"

"Well, Ruth spoke to him—she came flying out of the bathroom when she heard me mention his name—and he told her that Press was being detained as a sort of hostage for Mister Grolheim's good behavior and couldn't come to the phone. But if no one rang the police or the Department of Justice boys in on the deal, everything would turn out all right. So Ruth sent Press a message: 'We are sitting tight and taking no action until you are safely home.' She wanted me to be sure and get you to keep that promise."

"It's too damned unanimous to suit me." Don came, back to the kitchen, tucking in his shirt. "Lily Inez begged me not to call in the cops. Her manager, Hadley, was sure it would be the wrong thing to do. Bob Stolz ordered me to stay away from the authorities. Now My Grolheim comes up with the same request. And Ruth joins in the chorus."

Sibyl was shocked. "You don't want to do anything that'll hurt Jim Preston's chance of coming back unharmed."

"No. Of course I don't. You know I don't, Sib. But I don't think he's coming back unharmed. My run-in with the junior member of this hijack team makes me a little leery on that score. Neither do I think Grolheim is coming back to Amblett's today or tomorrow. Come on up to the bedroom."

"Sir?" She turned her head to look at him out of the corners of her eyes.

"Want to show you why, shug." He led her

upstairs. "These heisters have a fondness for other folks' clothing. When I walked in on this brunette babe, she was packing Grolheim's suitcase with stuff from his bureau and carting his suits out of the closet there. If they figured on letting him loose sometime later today, why did they go to all that trouble!"

Sibyl stared at the heap of bloodstained towels by the bathroom door. "I can't think of any reasonable explanation, darling. But I'll guarantee that Mister Grolheim thought he was going to come back to the store this afternoon; aside from sympathizing with Jim's wife, he sounded as if he didn't have a care in the world."

"I don't understand it either." Don scooped up the towels, tossed them in the bathtub. "But there's evidently been quite a transformation in the man since yesterday afternoon. He was as jumpy as a gent in a dentist's chair, waiting for the buzz of the drill."

She touched his swollen mouth with a gentle finger tip. "I'm pretty jittery myself; suppose that chauffeur should have come in while we've been up here."

"It's nearly daylight. Doubt if that lad is anxious to show his face around here in the daytime. Let's have one more cup of coffee, then I'll let you pay my cab fare downtown."

"They took all your money!"

"Hundred fifty bucks or so. More important, they took all my master keys for the store. Means we'll have to have a couple of thousand lockers altered. Also"—he patted her arm—"they made off with that wristwatch you gave me last Christmas."

"That can be fixed more easily than those bruises." She followed him downstairs, peering anxiously at dark corners, shadowy doorways. "You're still confident Mister Grolheim wasn't behind ... this whole thing?"

"I'll leave it to you, snug." He took her to the kitchen. "These checks were in a locker drawer in his secretary in the living room: I picked the lock. Look at these...." He flipped some canceled checks across the table to her.

She studied them. Fifty dollars to the St Lucretia Fund for Muscular Dystrophy patients. A hundred to the Children's Hospital. Twenty-five to the Association for the Blind. Five hundred to B'nai B'rith Rehabilitation Program. Six, for eighty-five apiece to the Mercy Home for the Aged in Lee, Massachusetts.

Don said, "There are a bunch of checks made out to the Highland Military Academy up in Worcester. He has a ten-year-old son up there ... or maybe a nephew. I might be a sucker but I can't believe a man who'd send his money on those errands would con-nive with a bunch of crooks."

"Oh no," she agreed. "Still—"

"Still you can't understand why Grolheim seemed so unconcerned about Press. Neither can I. But I'll tell you something, hon."

"Yes?"

"You and I are not going to sit with our hands in our laps waiting for My Grolheim and Press to walk in the Fifth Avenue entrance."

"No?"

"No. We're going to do a bit of researching on our own. And the first thing we're going to look up is the

biggest breakfast on Broadway. That is, if you have enough money with you."

CHAPTER 12

AMBLETTTS

DON LEANED BACK IN HIS SWIVEL CHAIR AS IF HE were at the barber's; the steaming hot towel over his face aided the illusion. He felt the effect of the beating much more now, at half-past eight, than he had at four-thirty. His head throbbed, his eyes ached, his ears rang as if someone were pounding tin pans at his temples.

Sibyl sloshed another towel in the cut-glass punch bowl she'd borrowed from Glasswares; it stood in the center of his desk blotter, full of steaming water. "You think that turquoise gown was an import?"

"Who can tell the difference," he mumbled, "between an import and a copy? All I'm saying is, it looked like a couple of hundred bucks, maybe more. It wasn't the sort of dinner dazzle she could have picked up on Thirty-fourth Street. I'd ask around on Fifty-Seventh. Her mink had a Sari Soeurs label; if you can get a list of their mutation customers for the last year, she ought to be among the elect."

"It will probably take a subpoena from the district attorney's office to make them give up that list—there'll be a hundred kepties on it, most likely." She replaced the cold towel with the hot, waving it expertly to cool it before putting it over his face. "The dinner gown may be a better chance. Daring décolletage, splashy with sequins ... someone might remember who bought a turquoise pretty like that. I'll give it a whirl."

"One more steaming like this and you'll be able to serve me with lemon butter and a claw cracker," he protested. "Let me cool off a little before Baisha Gates gets here; she'll think I'm a fugitive from a Finnish bath."

"If everything about those crown sables was so sotto voce, what makes you think she'll know who styled the coat?"

"From what Grolheim told me there aren't more than a couple of fur houses that could have had the pelts on hand. Most of those Seventh Avenue cutters never handle a sable skin in a lifetime. Miss Gates will know who could have put the Lily Inez together." He was not at all sure that anyone at the fur house would recognize Junior or the older man with the nasty smile or even the brunette. But one of that trio might be connected with the firm that made the coat; he had to check through on it.

"Who'll take my place on the First?" Sibyl asked.

"I'll switch Polly Howarth down there. Problem is, who'll take Press's place here while you and I are out of the store? Think Alice Stein can sit in here all right?"

"Alice can handle anything up to and including a

judo expert. Sure." Sibyl took the towel away. "You do look a bit on the boiled-lobster side, but the swelling has gone down."

A glass button on the intercom glowed red. He touched the Talk toggle. "Yes, Miss Kahn?"

His secretary said: "Miss Gates."

Don straightened up. "Miss Forde will be out in a minute, Becky. Then send Miss Gates right in."

Sibyl picked up the punch bowl. "What'll I say to Ruth if she calls?"

He stared blankly out of the window at the tops of the Fifth Avenue buses, like clumsy green beetles crawling through the tangle of traffic. "Tell her we'll stay away from the boys with the badges—for today at least."

"Thank the good Lord. I thought you'd be hell-bent for headquarters as soon as you had seen Bob Stolz." She kissed him lightly on the ear, marched out, carrying the punch bowl like a tournament trophy.

Baisha Gates came in hesitantly. She was a thin, spinsterish woman in horn-rim spectacles which made her look like a harassed schoolteacher. "Oh, my gracious!" She held up her hands in horror. "You've been in an accident, Mister Cadee!"

"Sort of." He motioned her to the chair beside his desk. "But don't waste any sympathy on me; it was my own fault. Do you know anything about a crown sable coat that Amblett's sold recently?"

Miss Gates took off her glasses, evidently feeling that her appearance was improved by their removal. "As a matter of fact, I do. Though I'm not supposed to. I learned about it only yesterday. Mister Grolheim

told me that if anything happened to him, someone in the department should at least know the bare details."

"When did he tell you that?"

"Right after lunch yesterday." She leaned toward him anxiously. "Has something happened to him, Mister Cadee? He's invariably at his desk by quarter past eight unless he's ill— and then he always telephones me to say he'll be staying home. But I called his house just before I came to your office and I couldn't get him."

"In confidence, Miss Gates, My had to go out of town unexpectedly. He may be in later today. You know who made the sable coat?"

"Wolheim Berkowsky, who else? No other house could touch an order like that. But I must say it's a queer business, all the way round. The largest single sale in the history of the store ... and not a line of publicity about it! Certainly the most fabulous creation the fur trade in this country has ever known ... and our Fur Salon isn't allowed to share the prestige. Why, I told Mister Grolheim it's a sin and a shame; if we could show that coat for three days it would be worth a dozen full-page ads in the papers." She was indignant.

"I expect Mister Grolheim was ready to agree with you."

"No, he wasn't. He"—she hesitated—"seemed afraid to talk about the whole transaction. At least he wouldn't tell me who bought it or who it had been made for."

"He had orders from Mister Stolz not to mention names. But just between us and not to go any

further, the crown sables were for Lily Inez."

She clasped her hands in delight. "How perfectly marvelous! She will carry a coat like that! It takes a personage to wear such a garment. Wonderful!"

"I'll have to let you in on another secret, Miss Gates. The coat was never delivered to the lady. It was stolen."

She gaped at him. "Stolen," she whispered. "Oh, no!"

"Yes. It's just possible that the tip-off to the thieves came from the Berkowsky end. Do you happen to know anyone in the firm?"

"Morry Berkowsky. He's vice president, sales manager. We get most of our broadtail from him."

"See if you can set up an appointment for me to see him at his place soon as possible, will you?"

"Why, yes, Mister Cadee." She put a palm to her cheek, as if she had a toothache. "Do you think Mister Grolheim could possibly have had a premonition about the theft? He seemed so ... well, agitated, I guess you'd say ... yesterday when he spoke to me about it."

"I think the responsibility was getting him down, that's all." He saw the red eye of the intercom wink on and off. "Yes, Miss Kahn?"

"Mister Stolz on One, Mister Cadee."

He flipped the switch, took the phone. "Yes, Bob."

"Any news on that coat, Don?"

"Some. See you?"

"Come ahead." Stolz hung up.

Don took Miss Gate's arm. "You won't mention any of this to anyone outside the Protection Office."

"Oh no. No indeed, Mister Cadee."

"Let Miss Kahn know as soon as you arrange that appointment." He had a troubled expression in his eyes as he watched her leave.

The loud-speaker system was blatting away with its pre-opening pep talk as he went down the corridor to Stolz's office:

... Ambletts' buyers have given you the advantage of being able to offer to your customers merchandise which is in many cases obtainable in no other store. Your attitude should reflect the consciousness of this superior quality ... and if it does, your sales books will reflect it also... .

The bland voice from the electrical mouth irritated him more than usual this morning; he was supposed to think of the store's reputation, too ... but there was something more important at the moment.

Stolz took the fat cigar out of his jowly face. "Christ in the foothills! Who ran you through the cement mixer?"

"A drape-shape teenager. One of the pair who shanghaied Press and Grolheim." He gave a high-spot report of his visit to the house on West End, of Sibyl's conversation with Grolheim. "Comes down to this, Bob. This crew are playing for time. Time to cash in on the steal. My guess is that when that time is up, My Grolheim's time and Jim Preston's time is up, too."

Stolz paced his big office like a panther in a cage. "Your idea is, Grolheim planned the hijack?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Well, then, for God's sake—if you don't think he's working with these crooks, why don't you believe

what he says about our getting back the sables and about his coming back to the store with Preston?"

Don pointed to his face. "I have to believe what I saw up at Grolheim's house. What that juvenile maniac did to me. Maybe they've hexed Grolheim so he believes they're going to let him and Press go. But I don't think they will. And whether you fire me here and now or not, I'm not going to sit on my hands while that bunch of bandits gets ready to bury a couple of good men. I'm going to keep Ruth Preston's promise but I'm going after them myself."

Stolz held up a placating palm. "I won't fight you. And I won't fire you, Don. I'm with you ... but our hands are tied, boy."

Don smiled wryly. "I've had some experience, working with my hands tied. For a starter, tell me—who's paying for that hundred-thousand-dollar jacket?"

CHAPTER 13

BROKEN RAZOR BLADES

"CAN'T TELL YOU HIS NAME, DON." AMBLETT'S general manager doodled fretfully on his desk pad. "Gave my word not to."

"We can find out the hard way." Don tried to hide his irritation; he needed Stolz on his side if he was to get anywhere on this matter. "But it'll hold us up if we have to fool with the scandal scavengers on the newspapers."

"All you'd accomplish would be to stir up a stink, which is what we want to avoid."

"What I want to avoid is sending flowers to Ruth Preston. You're looking at this in terms of saving somebody's reputation, Bob. It's a matter of saving a couple of lives."

"Understand that" Stolz flicked at his intercom set. "Ann? See if you can put me through to Norm Rettjer." He eyed Don blandly. "But I don't understand about Myron Grolheim. My experience with him has been that he's inclined to look on the darkest side of a situation. So if he says this is all going to

come out in the wash ... ?"

"He might be right, Bob. I hope he's right. But I have to play it on the basis of what happened up there on West End." Is he giving you the tip-off? Norman K. Rettjer? The celebrated specialist consulted by ailing corporations? The doctor for sickly dividends? Fellow supposed to be able to sit in on a different directors' meeting every day in the month. That would figure. One of his companies might be picking up the tab for Painting the Town. He might have met the lady.

Stolz said: "How are you going to play it?"

"We have some top cards. I've met two of the hijack crew face to face, I have a good description of the third man. It shouldn't take too long to identify one or the other of them. Maybe one of them worked at Berkowsky's. Lily Inez may know one of them. We're trying to trace the brunette through her mink or her gown. I'm going through the files in the Bureau of Identification; way those guys worked makes me think they may have been run in, at one time or another, for jumping."

"Jumping? Trailing a truck, making off with it when the driver stops at a gas station or a lunch wagon? Don't see the connection. ... "

"Same technique, Bob. A jumper never goes after a loaded truck unless he knows, beforehand, what's in it and how much it's worth and where it's going. The actual snatch only takes a minute—hot-wiring the motor so it can be started without a key. All the work is in getting the dope on the load, the driver, the destination. That's how it was done with the crown sables, too. They had been trailing Grolheim.

They were waiting for him at the destination."

The voice of the secretary was a mere murmur from the intercom: "Mister Rettjer is not at his office, Mister Stolz. His secretary will have him call you back as soon as he comes in."

"All right, Ann." Stolz might have been sitting behind a pile of blue chips with a deuce in the hole, waiting for Don to bet. "Play it cagey, boy. Keep away from those newspapers. Don't stir up a storm when the whole thing may blow over with nobody hurt." He added hasty apology. "Nobody else, I mean."

I'm supposed to take that beating in line of duty and just forget about it, no hard feelings? Hell you say, brother! "I'll be out of the store some. Sib Forde will be, too. Long as Press isn't around, I may ask Alice Stein to take over on the interviews."

On his way down from Stolz's office he was paged over the public-address system to break up a disturbance at the Adjustment Bureau, where an infuriated woman had resorted to flailing a clerk with an allegedly defective toasting fork from a barbecue set. He managed to soothe the enraged customer and to, retrieve the lethal fork before any real damage had been done ... but it made him more conscious than ever of Jim Preston's absence. That was the sort of hassle Press would have handled in ten minutes; it was a good half-hour before Don got back to Protection.

Sibyl was waiting for him. "We had a break."

"About time. What?"

"Baisha Gates knows the fur buyer at Sari Soeurs; she's certain she can get the list of their recent mink customers; she's gone right up there."

"May help." He riffled through the morning batch of flyers from the Stores Mutual Protective Association. Descriptions of confirmed kleptomaniacs, amateur shoplifters and confessed boosters, of bag snatchers and pickpockets who considered crowded store aisles their happy hunting grounds, of hit-and-run workers who calmly helped themselves to garments off the racks and straightaway strolled out. But no flyers about jumpers or hijackers of sable coats. ...

Sibyl said: "And Baisha said you have an appointment with Morris Berkowsky at eleven-thirty, his office."

"Good." The red button on the intercom winked on and off and on; the emergency signal. "Yes, Becky?"

"Miss Stein is in Interview," his secretary said. "I think she needs help!"

It was a dozen steps from his desk, through the outer office; he could hear the screaming before he flung open the door.

Alice Stein's chunky figure was pinning a young girl in the corner beyond the heavy table. The girl's wrists were being held firmly but, between screeches, she was biting at Alice's neck and butting her in the face.

Don reached over his operative's shoulder, got a grip on the girl's hair, held her head back against the wall.

"Watch her nails!" Alice warned. "She's a slasher. She ruined a couple hundred dollars' worth of lingerie before they got wise to her. Broken razor blades under her nails."

She's a handsome little hellion, Don thought. Blond and slim and full of fizz and vinegar. Fourteen, maybe fifteen. That beaver shortie she's wearing set some proud parent back quite a stack of coupons.

The girl sneered. "Lingerie! Wait till you find out what I did to those nylons. And if you want a real laugh, take a look at those seventy-five-dollar crocodile handbags!"

Don spoke over his shoulder. "Miss Kahn. Get the nurse down here. Tell her to bring sedatives. If the doctor's in the store, ask him to come along too."

"I don't want any damned doctor," the girl cried. "You can't make me take any medicine. I won't take any!"

"You act," Don said, "as if you've already had something. You been smoking reefers?"

"Sure." She mocked him gleefully. "I'm hopped up till I'm ready to pop. But don't ever think I'm not responsible for my actions. I knew what I was doing and I'll do it again."

Don let go of the blond hair. "Want everybody to notice how bad you are, don't you? What's the matter? You're good-looking enough to get all the attention you want, without acting like a sulky six-year-old. Who you trying to get even with?"

"You." She showed nice even teeth in pure insolence. "You and everybody else in this crummy old store."

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Jane Doe. And I live in a whorehouse on West Forty-sixth. Anything else you want to know?" She began to laugh, rolling her head from side to side with her eyes closed, the laughter coming in

crescendo bursts, louder and louder.

Alice said quietly: "Faking. And she's no addict, Don."

"I know she isn't, Al. Doesn't she have a handbag?"

"No. May have a wallet in her coat."

The laughter stopped suddenly. "Try and find it," the girl panted. "I live on what I make as a street-walker. I have no visible means of support; you'll have to arrest me and take me to court."

The nurse bustled in starchily, regarded the girl amiably.

Don said: "Young lady fancies herself as a malicious bitch. She's been slashing merchandise. Want to be sure she doesn't slash herself in a fit of remorse, nurse."

"Remorse!" the girl screeched hysterically. "Me ... remorseful? How ridiculous can you be!"

The nurse scolded her. "Behave, now. Sit down. Over there. Stop putting on an act. We're used to those shenanigans."

Alice followed Don to the outer office. "Something screwy about her, Don. She comes from a good family ... at least from a family with a good income. You know what I think? She wants to go to jail... to hurt someone close to her."

Sibyl peered in at the detainee. "You know, I think I've seen that kid's picture in the papers recently—or maybe in a magazine."

Don said: "See if you can find a cleaner's mark on her clothes, Al. We'll have to get in touch with her folks." He hated slashers as much as any store executive, but Al and the nurse could handle that, time

being.

Becky called: "Mister Stolz on One."

Don took it. "Yes, Bob."

"Couple of headquarters men on their way up to see you, boy." Stolz sounded grave. "I passed the buck to you because it's about Myron Grolheim."

"What about him?"

"Cop on the beat noticed his house had been broken into. He called a prowler car. The detectives went in and found a dead man on the kitchen floor."

CHAPTER 14

A DEAD MAN

DON'S KNUCKLES WHITENED ON THE RECEIVER.
They identify the dead man?"

"Don't believe so." Stolz was worried. "I thought of Jim Preston right away, of course. But I was afraid I might cross you up by asking the wrong questions."

"What did you say?"

"Only that Grolheim hadn't showed up at the store this morning, no one in the Fur Salon had heard from him, so you were trying to locate him. Nothing about the ... coat. Are you going to tell 'em you were up there?"

"Depends." If the dead man was Press, I'll have to spill the whole story and to hell with secrecy. If it was My Grolheim, it'll all have to come out, too; the chips can fall where they may. "I'll call you back, soon as I can." He hung up.

Sibyl breathed: "A dead man, Don?"

"Cops saw that broken basement door, went in, and found a body. If they made any identification, they didn't let on to Bob Stolz. Couple of the

Homicide crew are on their way up here now."

She put a hand to her throat as if it hurt her to speak. "Suppose it was ... Press."

"I have to make sure before I tell them about Max and the girl, about my having been up there."

"They'll find it out, sooner or later." Sibyl searched his eyes. "Our fingerprints will be all over the place."

"If Press is dead, that won't make any difference. We'll have to get the machinery going to run down Max and his pals. No sense holding back anything ... unless Press is still alive."

"But if you stall and later on they learn you were at Grolheim's—it'll put you in a corner, Don."

"Both of us ... in the same corner. That's right. You want to take that gamble? It might have unpleasant consequences, Sib."

She was indignant. "You know better than to ask."

"Thought I did." He smiled tautly.

Becky Kahn announced a Lieutenant Dimmock, a Sergeant Quinton.

"One minute," Don told the intercom.

Sibyl said: "Want me to stay?"

"No. Want you to get a line on Mister Norman Rettjer."

"The tycoon's tycoon?" She was surprised. "The princely giver?"

"Shot in the dark. He's a friend of Bob Stolz. You said the customer would be."

"Yes. Also, he'd have that kind of money to fling around. And he'd be scared of scandal too."

"See if you can sniff out some. But sub rosa, Sib."

"Soul of discretion." She went out.

Through the open office door came a screech of

fury from the slasher. "You can't make me take any of your damn medicine! I won't take it!"

Don shook hands with Dimmock, a chesty middle-aged detective whose blue serge seemed to be buttoned around a barrel. He had the suspicious eyes and the hard, expressionless features of a man accustomed to constant contact with deception. The eyes inspected Don's bruised countenance; the lieutenant's face remained impassive.

Quinton, on the other hand, looked like a rangy, young executive in some prosperous advertising agency; he was suave and affable in the best Madison Avenue manner.

Dimmock got right down to business. "Your manager says you're anxious to get in touch with this Mister Grolheim. Expect we're even more concerned than you are. We want to ask him about a dead man found in his house this morning."

Don said: "You sure it wasn't Grolheim you found?"

Quinton answered. "Gentleman we talked to downstairs says your fur buyer is a small man, middle-aged, dark hair, dark complexion. Right?"

"That's right" Don nodded. "What did the dead man look like?"

"Like he'd been picked on by a pile driver," Dimmock said. "Face beat in. Hell of a mess. Now about this Grolheim, Mister Stolz said you might have a photograph."

Don spoke to the intercom. "Mister Grolheim's Confidential folder, please, Miss Kahn." He turned to Dimmock. "From what I know of Myron Grolheim, he wouldn't have the strength or the stamina to beat

up a schoolboy. How old would you say the victim was?"

Quinton smiled skeptically. "Be surprised what a little man can do if he gets mad enough, Mister Cadee. We had a case, only couple weeks ago. Old boy in his sixties, wouldn't have weighed more'n a hundred-twenty in a diving suit, took a hammer to a moving man come to take back some installment furniture. Fella looked like he'd been kicked in the teeth by a mule."

Becky came in with the folder; a shrill scream from the Interview Room came in with her. The Homicide men exchanged curious glances.

Don handed the folder across the desk to Dimmock. "You'll see by the physical description that Mister Grolheim wouldn't have been able to put up much of a battle with a man who was heavier than he was. Did this dead man have a muscular build?"

"Yeah," Dimmock said offhandedly. "With this descrip, we'll have enough to put out a pickup flyer on Grolheim. You got any dope on his relatives, friends?"

Don spread his hands. "I have the records of more than two thousand employees of Ambletts in those files, Lieutenant. You can see it would be impossible for us to keep tabs on all of them." Why are you holding out on me? Is it because somebody saw me leaving the West End house with Sib this morning and you want me to commit myself?

Quinton said: "We don't expect the impossible, Mister Cadee. But we thought you might be able to suggest some reason for your fur buyer's absence."

Don said carefully: "I saw him for a few minutes

yesterday afternoon. As far as I know, he expected to be in this morning. His assistant, Miss Gates, looked for him as usual. His record here has been tops; he's been in responsible positions with leading stores for years. Not the sort to run out on his company."

"Middle-aged men"—Quinton shook his head amiably—"do some peculiar things. Glandular disturbances, you know. We had a case—"

Dimmock broke in sharply. "Think you ought to know that the gentleman has taken all his clothing—suits, shirts, the works—from his house. Sort of thing a man does when he's planning to skip the locality. Makes it hard for us to entertain any suggestion of self-defense. Now if he'd stayed put after the battle he had with this boy, if he'd called the precinct and asked for a couple of officers to come over—there'd been a fight and the kid was dead—why, we'd be able to book him on manslaughter instead of murder."

"Boy?" Don tried to keep the monosyllable from disclosing his feelings.

Quinton answered quickly. "Pretty hard to pin down his age until we get the med-exam's report, you know. Fifteen, possibly sixteen. Did Mister Grolheim have a car?"

"A green and brown Pontiac station wagon, late model." It was Max, not Press! Max, who nearly beat you to death. The little bastard who would have killed you if it hadn't been for the girl in the turquoise dress. A sense of relief flooded over him.

Dimmock said: "Then Grolheim wouldn't have been likely to be hiring a chauffeur? This dead kid had on a chauffeur's uniform."

"I wouldn't know, of course," Don said cautiously, "but Mister Grolheim didn't seem to me like the limousine type."

Quinton took the folder from Dimmock, scanned it swiftly. "Was your fur buyer especially interested in young boys?"

Don kept his temper. "Only in his son who is in a military academy, I believe. A very normal guy, Mister Grolheim, in my opinion. Could this youngster have been a burglar, perhaps?"

"Sure," Dimmock said. "He could have been. It still doesn't explain why a householder who surprised a thief and battered him to death should clear out without notifying the authorities."

Quinton tucked the folder under his arm. "There'll be something more to it than burglary, you can bet on that, Mister Cadee. We'll have the answer within twenty-four hours, you can bet on that, too."

Dimmock said: "Meantime you'll keep in touch with us, Mister Cadee? If you hear from your fur buyer, I mean."

"Sure," Don said. "Excuse me." The red button on the intercom glowed on, off, on, off, on again.

"Yes, Miss Kahn."

"Uh ... call for you on Two," his secretary murmured. "I don't know whether you want to talk to him, now."

"Put him on." He knew whose voice he would hear when he picked up the phone and he wasn't disappointed.

CHAPTER 15

DEAD OR ALIVE?

DON LEANED BACK IN HIS CHAIR, JAMMING THE receiver against his ear. "How you doing, fella?"

"All right, so far," Grolheim said calmly. "I just wanted to let you know that the Lily Inez will go back to town this evening."

"That's fine, fine." No mistaking the timbre of the buyer's voice; still, there was something decidedly queer about Grolheim's way of talking, Don thought. It was almost as if the man had dictated to a tape recording device. But of course that couldn't be, since Grolheim was replying to the remarks made to him. "You'll be coming too?"

"Not right away, Don. Not until tomorrow, probably. Better have Miss Gates get those Fur Festival proofs out of my top drawer and okay them. They have to be in today." The buyer was as matter-of-fact as if the past fourteen hours had been a blank slate.

"I'll take care of that." Don could see Dimmock's head cocked slightly to one side, straining to hear the other half of the phone conversation. The

lieutenant was suspicious; it wouldn't be smart to ask direct questions but there was one query which had to be put—guardedly. "How's Jim making out, boy?"

Grolheim's tone became fainter, as if he had moved back from the transmitter. "Oh ... I nearly forgot to tell you—he's going in with the sables. Might let his wife know."

"I'll do that." Don felt perspiration on his forehead, knew Dimmock had noticed it, was wondering why Don was sweating blood. He couldn't gain much by continuing this restrained double-talk; still he had the feeling that Grolheim was struggling to get through with something more coherent than the casual conversation had provided up to now. "About what time, should I tell, her?"

"Well... I can't say . . . probably—oh, sometime after the rehearsal is over." The buyer was plainly confused. "Eleven or so. Something like that. Well, see you tomorrow, Don." There was an abrupt click.

Don waited a moment before hanging up. "Take it easy, boy," he said to the dead line. He couldn't let it seem as if he'd been cut off cold. "Sorry for the interruption, gentlemen."

Quinton was speaking almost before he'd racked the receiver. "This Grolheim—is he separated from his wife?"

Don said: "He's a widower; it's there in the file. Why?"

The sergeant smiled. "We have reason to believe there was a woman in the house at the time the crime was committed."

Reason? What kind of reason? What had they found

up there on West End? Traces of face powder? A coppery hair? Had Sibyl left a handkerchief? "Maybe the woman wasn't with Mister Grolheim. Couldn't she have been with this youngster who was killed?"

"Yeah," Lieutenant Dimmock said sourly. "She could have been the one who pounded him to a pulp, all we know." He stared with open hostility. "You wouldn't be giving us any run-around, trying to keep your store out of the papers, Mister Cadee? If you had any news about this Grolheim you wouldn't hold it back now, would you?"

Don put on a prop scowl of resentment. "If you have any doubts about the way Ambletts cooperates with the police, ask your precinct captain; he'll tell you we play ball. However" —he slapped the blotter gently with the flat of his hand—"you can understand that the store wouldn't like to have one of our executives accused of murder until he's at least had a chance to defend himself against the charge. We back up our people until we find there's good reason not to, Lieutenant"

"Back 'em up all you want," Dimmock growled. "Just don't buck us."

"On the contrary," Don said, "I'll help all I can. Go down to the morgue with you right now, see if I can identify this kid ... ?"

"You couldn't." Quinton waved the offer aside. "Features were mutilated too much; his own father wouldn't recognize him. We'll have to work from fingerprints, dental charts, clothing, see?"

Dimmock stalked toward the door. "Where'll we find this assistant of Grolheim's?"

"Miss Gates may be out of the store." Don went to

the outer office with them. "Miss Kahn, see if you can get hold of Baisha Gates. These gentlemen want to talk to her."

Sergeant Quinton shook hands. "We'll have to tell your switchboard girls to hold up any outside calls from Mister Grolheim until they can be traced."

"Good idea," Don said evenly. "I was going to do that, myself."

Miss Kahn reported that Miss Gates was out of the store, wasn't expected back until after lunch.

Dimmock grunted. "Leave word we'll be in to see her." He turned to Don. "Sure there isn't anything you'd like to add to what you've told us, before we send in our report to the Prosecutor's office?"

"What could I add," Don said, "except that those of us who knew Mister Grolheim can't believe he'd be guilty of any crime?"

The lieutenant stalked toward the corridor, spoke over his shoulder: "We'll drop in again this afternoon on the chance you may have thought of something."

Becky Kahn waited until they were well out of hearing: "I hope I did the right thing, putting that call through ... ?"

"Right as rain, Becky." He patted her shoulder with more reassurance than he felt. "See if you can get Mister Stolz for me."

He decided not to tell Bob about the call from Grolheim just yet. Time enough for that after the crown sable had been returned, if it was going to be; after Jim Preston had shown up, if that was what Grolheim had meant.

But there was a reservation about that in Don's mind. The buyer hadn't said Press was all right, only

that he was coming in with the crown sable coat. Dead or alive?

Even if the doorman at the Buckinghurst and Salvatore had been wrong about the disappearance of old Jim, even supposing the implication of the heaviness of the amber-colored box didn't mean what Don thought it meant, still—there was no longer any doubt that both Press and Grolheim were in the hands of murderers. If they had killed Max, expecting to lay the crime on Grolheim, they might just as easily have put Press out of the way, with the intention of shifting the blame for that onto Grolheim, too.

The red eye glowed. "Bob? Our friends have gone. Demised party turns out to be the juvenile delinquent who nearly bashed out my brains."

"Oh? So? Well, relieved to know it wasn't Jim Preston."

"So'm I. Still leaves Grolheim with his tail in a crack, though."

"How 'bout you? Do they know you had a run-in with this kid?"

"No. Maybe I should have told them, but I didn't. Keeping my fingers crossed for Press."

"Might get yourself in trouble. Want to be damn careful."

"I am being. Some fat's in the fire already. Can't keep that from spattering onto the front pages. But I'll do my best to see it doesn't burn any innocent bystanders."

"Know you will, Don. Keep me in touch. I'm god-damn upset about this."

Who isn't? Don retorted silently as he hung up.

Only person who doesn't seem to be bothered is My Grolheim. Have we all misjudged the little man?

He rejected the possibility that the buyer had been responsible for Max's death. Whatever might be concealed beneath Grolheim's gloominess, his nervous apprehensions, his apparent nonchalance on the telephone, the man was not the homicidal type.

From what he had seen of the girl in the turquoise dress, she hadn't appeared to be the sort who would have battered a boy's face so it resembled nothing human.

Unless there were still other members of the hijack gang, that left only the man with the nasty smile Salvatore had described. He'd have been with Grolheim during that phone call just now. Would, even before that, have known all he needed to know from the contents of the wallet Max had taken with Don's clothes.

"Want to be damn careful!" Not much need of that warning! Not with a probable murderer in possession of keys to the store, your office, your hotel room, your car. ...

Becky drove in on his thoughts. "Miss Stein says she has to see you right away."

"Be right out."

Alice Stein stood by his secretary's desk, a handkerchief pressed to her ear. "We'll have to get that hellcat out of here, Mister Caddee. She's practically clawed the nurse's eyes out I can't figure what's eating her but she ought to be in a strait jacket."

"Maybe we'll have to put her there, Al." He went in the Interview Room.

The girl sat panting in the straight-backed chair;

the nurse gripped the girl's crossed wrists behind the chair back.

"Ha!" the prisoner sneered. "Where's your hand-cuffs, mister? Or did you bring a rope to tie me? Why don't you have me arrested—why don't you?"

Don said: "We're going to, young lady. But it may not be quite as big a thrill as you seem to think."

"Go on. Send me to jail!" The girl laughed insolently. "I don't mind going to jail. Not so long as they take me into court afterwards."

That's what she's after. A chance to cause a sensation in court, probably hoping to disgrace her parents or maybe to get even with a boy friend. "It may be quite a while before you get to court," he said soberly. "We're not even going to have you charged with malicious mischief for a while. You're going to a psychiatric ward for observation; you're as close to being unbalanced as anyone I've seen for some time."

The insolence left the girl's eyes; the sneer vanished from her lips. "A loony bin?" She cringed. "You can't put me in a crazy house!" Her voice lost its shrillness. "You can't!"

The nurse breathed heavily. "That's where you belong, miss. Wet packs and restraining sheets."

"No!" The girl bit her upper lip fiercely. "You can't do that. Not without my parents' permission. You can't!"

Don frowned. "We don't know who your parents are. If you want to tell us ... ?"

The girl glared up at him. "No!" she snarled. "No, I won't tell you! You can do what you want to me but I won't tell and you can all go to hell!"

CHAPTER 16

THAT MAGNIFICENT HUSSY

BY TEN, A PLAIN-CLOTHES MAN AND A MATRON from the precinct had taken the girl to Bellevue; Alice Stein was listening to the explanations of an indignant dowager who had been apprehended while “simply taking the garment out to the street so she could see how it looked in daylight”; Protection was settling down to its daily procession of amateur pilferers and professional boosters. The show did not divert Don’s attention from the curious problem of My Grolheim’s implausible attitude.

Just now, on the phone, the buyer hadn’t seemed at all concerned about his own precarious situation. Yet less than twenty-four hours ago he had acted like a man genuinely alarmed for his own safety. But yesterday he had been in no actual danger, while today he must certainly have realized his peril. Had he been so numbed by the hijacking, the attack on Press, the death of Max that he could no longer think

clearly? It seemed improbable.

The intercom announced Miss Forde on One.

"Hello," he said. "You'll be glad to know the guy the cops found up on West End wasn't Press."

"It's a black dog off my back," Sibyl said. "Who was he?"

"Teenage torpedo who worked me over. Somebody had worked on him, with more permanent results."

"Police know you were up there, Don?"

"Not yet No. It would have required too much explanation."

"Still will. You're only postponing the evil hour."

"If I can postpone it until tomorrow it may turn the trick. Just had a queer chat with Grolheim on the phone. He claims everything will be straightened out by then."

"By then that coat could be in Rio."

"And Press might be in his—"

"Don't say it!" she cut in sharply. "Speaking of those crown sables, your shot in the dark may have hit the mark."

"Credit our Gee Em for the aiming. What did you pick up?"

"Geoffrey Ruiz, the syndicated tattler. Just had coffee schlagober with him at his apartment."

"Hm. You have to go that far for the information?"

"Don't worry. Geoff's only affair is with his gossip column. He goes for flattery the way I went for that whipped cream. He admitted there were whisperings in so-so-society circles about Miss I. and Mister R."

"Such as ... ?"

"Item: when she made that Magnificent Hussy

picture in Venice last summer, he just happened to spend weekends at the Lido. Of course it's no sin to be seen sun-bathing together. ..."

"No. So?"

"Item: couple weeks ago she flew to Vegas for some guest shots at one of those cushy caravanse-rais—guess who turned up next to her at the roulette tables every night?"

"He'd be a handy man to have around when the chips are down."

"One of his companies buys the commercial spots on the last half of her show. He's always in the sponsors' booth but never brings his wife."

"Doesn't he have any competition?"

"Nothing else but. Dimpled darling goes out with more celebrated spenders than the columnists can keep track of. Cattle barons from the Argentine, French movie stars, last week one of those ruby-rich maharajas. She's never seen with Mister R. in public. But then, as Geoff points out, the most interesting tête-à-têtes are seldom in public. And, by the bye, he owns the Buckinghurst."

"Convenient for all concerned." He considered the possibilities. "Nice, snug job of rounding up the rumors, chum. Now why don't you go home, catch a quick nap? You didn't get any sleep to speak of... "

"Neither did you, unless you count the time you were unconscious. Anyhow I couldn't rest until I knew for sure about Press. I'm going to scout around the exclusive shops to see if I can get a line on that turquoise gown. And if I do get a lead, where will I find you?"

"How about the Red Boar, one o'clock?"

"At the bar," she agreed. "I'll need another pickup by then."

He gave Becky the number he'd seen on the gold receiver at Lily Inez's apartment. The maid answered.

"This is Cadee of Amblett's. Let me speak to Miss Inez."

"She is not here. She is at the rehearsal."

"What studio is that, Frances?"

The maid hesitated. "Twenty Em. But you cannot call her there. She will not be disturbed. You may leave a message with me, if you wish."

"Maybe later, thanks." He put on his topcoat, told Becky where he was going, adjusted his hat so the band didn't press too tightly over the swollen eye.

At the Interview Room he paused only long enough to wigwag Alice that she was to take over at his desk. He thought of getting her to caution Baisha Gates about Dimmock and Quinton but decided there would be plenty of time for that before the Homicide men returned.

He walked to the telecasting building, found the big studio, ran into a uniformed usher at the door.

"No visitors, mister."

"I have a message for Miss Inez," Don said.

"Leave it with me. I'll see she gets it. But you can't come in."

Don took out a business card, wrote "About Mr. R." on it, held it out. "How much do you want to bet I can't come in, if you get that to her right away?"

The usher glanced around to make sure no one was watching. "You're not one of those lousy process servers, are you?"

"She'll tell you I'm not." Don fingered his wallet "Bet you five she tells you to bring me in." He pulled the five halfway out of the billfold section.

The usher made a movement as if to push away the bribe. "I guess you can go in." He slid his closed fist into his pocket "Just don't say I let you through."

Don strolled into the noisy confusion of reflectors, cameras, lights, microphone booms—picked his way over snaking cables, through a crowd of shirt-sleeved technicians, toward a trio of sets at the far end of the studio. A dozen people clustered around a long table where a young man in horn rims and a houndstooth jacket was dealing out pages off a pile of papers.

"New pages eleven, twelve, kiddies. Turn in your old pages, get your revisions. Going to run through it in a minute."

Don spoke to the assistant director at the table. "Where can I find Miss Inez?"

"You can't." The other continued to hand out script pages. "Couldn't find her myself. Just tried."

Don put his hand on the assistant director's shoulder. "Is Mister Hadley here?"

The horn rims looked up at him owlishly. "Who're you?"

"Name is Cadee. Mister Hadley knows me."

"Past that set. Through the little door. Turn left. Office there."

Don followed directions, filed past a queue of musicians returning from a break. There were three men in the office. One hammered at a typewriter. Another leaned over his shoulder. The third was Hadley; he sat hunched low in a swivel chair,

cradling a phone on his chest, fluttering one of the childish hands as he talked. His eyes turned mechanically toward Don; it was a moment before recognition was complete. Then Hadley set the phone on its rack.

"For godsake, what happened to you, my friend?"

"Ran into a bit of trouble about that birthday present." As far as Don could tell, neither of the others noticed the interruption. "Want to make sure Miss Inez doesn't run into the same kind. Have to talk to her right away."

Hadley put an arm around Don's shoulders, drew him out of the office. "Mean to say you were actually attacked?" He looked as if he was on the verge of a sneeze.

"By one of the team that hijacked those crown sables, yes."

"You—tracked them down?"

"Not exactly. I'm not the only one in on the tracking down, either. Police are involved now."

"No!" Hadley was clearly shocked; he dropped his arm. "But you promised—"

"I didn't bring them into it," Don said. "And so far the cops don't know Miss Inez is mixed up in the mess. But they're bound to find out. You can't soft-pedal a murder."

"You ... uh ... said murder?" The pink washed out of Elton Hadley's face as if a gray shadow had fallen over the high forehead. "Who ... ?"

"Look," Don said impatiently, "last night I tried to get Miss Inez to tell me what she knew about this crown sable business; she might have prevented a killing if she hadn't dumbbed up. Now I'm not going

to horse around with her any longer. Either she talks to me here and now, or to the police this afternoon."

Hadley swallowed before he answered. "Friend, you have her all wrong. Lil wasn't dumbing up. She was scared to death. That's the fact. She'll tell you why. Come on. I'll take you to her."

CHAPTER 17

MISERABLE JINGLES AND COMIC VALENTINES

THE MANAGER STRODE ALONG THE CORRIDOR, turned a corner, led the way up a short flight, down a wide hall past a picture-windowed booth with tiered theater seats like a projection room overlooking the confusion of apparatus, the churning activity on the studio floor below. Across the hall from this observation booth was a narrow door with a red-lettered warning:

MAINTENANCE—KEEP OUT.

Hadley rapped on it.

"Had to have her dressing room switched up here," he started to explain. "Last week we had a disagreeable—"

The door opened suddenly. Lily Inez, youthful in white tailored shirt and tight black skirt, gazed in astonishment. "Why, Mister Cadee! You've been in an accident!"

"Nothing accidental, no." Don took in the scanty furnishings of the temporary dressing room—make-up table with mirrors and a clutter of jars, a chaise, a small coffee table with an electric espresso machine, some chairs such as undertakers use. "I took a beating, Miss Inez. Trying to find out who stole your sables."

"Oh, God!" She registered instant sympathy. "I'm so frightfully sorry."

"Sorry?" he repeated dourly. "That's hardly enough."

"Our friend is sore, Lil." Hadley closed the door, put one foot up on a folding chair, crossed his arms, and rested them on his knee. "He thinks you held out on him last night, that if you'd spoken up then you might have prevented a lulling."

"Ah!" she exclaimed. "Who was killed?"

"Police haven't made an identification yet." Don wondered whether her shocked expression was theatrical or genuine. "Body's down at the morgue. But I had a pretty good look at him. Also, Mister Grolheim described him to me yesterday afternoon."

She fiddled nervously with a cigarette while he gave details of his visit to the fur buyer's home, the encounter with Max. He didn't mention the girl in the turquoise gown. "Bastard had buck teeth and pale green eyes and sideburns; his skin was bad and his talk was tough. Recognize him?"

"No." She glanced up at Hadley as if for confirmation. "Sounds as if he was a perfectly hideous monster. I don't believe I'd ever be able to forget anyone so horrible ... if I'd ever seen him."

"Thing is"—Hadley waggled plump little

fingers—"the cops have seen him. They're sure to find out he was one of those who hijacked the coat; then they'll want to know why you didn't report the theft last night. You better set Mister Cadee straight, or I wouldn't blame him for thinking you know a lot more about it than you actually do."

"What I think"—Don was impatient—"is that you'd better realize there's a lot more at stake than any fancy fur piece. Two of Amblett's men are still in the hands of a gang that doesn't balk at anything in the book."

Lily Inez put her hand on Hadley's sleeve. "Elton ... you'll have to tell them I feel too wretched to run through the script this morning. I simply could not make it."

"I fix." Hadley looked unhappy. "It'll mean over-time tonight. But you're in no shape to rehearse." He went to the door. "Don't forget to take your ten-thirty pill."

"All right." She rose to lock the door behind him. "I feel as if I've been rehearsing a nightmare for the last ten days. I'm closer to a crack-up than an egg that just rolled off the table." She shook a small pink tablet from a plastic phial. "A nightmare all day every day and no sleep at night. I wish to Christ I'd never heard of the damn sables." She sat on the bench before the glittering make-up mirrors.

"Does the gentleman who bought the coat know how you feel about it?" Don asked.

"Oh yes." Lily Inez popped the pill into her mouth, poured a chaser from a thermos jug. "But he's not the sort to back down on a promise. And up to last night he thought the rhymes were the work of some

former admirer who was jealous of him." She smiled wryly at her reflection, tilting her chin up to examine a throat shadow, reciting meanwhile:

"The day you wear the sable coat
I promise I will cut your throat."

"Who sent the comic valentine?"

She twisted around on the bench to frown at him. "I thought at first it was a joke, too, when it came in the mail ten days ago. But then I began to puzzle it out—up to then no one but my friend and I knew anything about this wonderful present ... no one at all. He hadn't told a soul, nor had I. Not even Elton ... though he handles all my personal business, my bank account, my mail, everything. The coat was to be an absolute secret until my birthday—yesterday. But it wasn't a secret; the person who wrote that miserable jingle knew. It worried me; I simply couldn't imagine anyone who'd make an ugly threat like that."

Don said: "The generous gentleman had no idea?"

"He knew he couldn't have let the cat out of the bag so he was sure I must have. I couldn't convince him otherwise. But of course I was absolutely positive I hadn't breathed the slightest suggestion to anyone—so I was certain he must somehow have let the secret slip. We batted that back and forth the whole of a distressing evening ... and got nowhere. I dreamed of stilettos and butcher knives all night. In the morning I was so exhausted I could laugh at myself. But when I got a call from Elton at the studio I stopped laughing." She massaged her temples with

the tips of her fingers. "The second rhyme had been sent to me in care of the television network marked 'Private and Personal.' It had been put in with the batch of fan letters and Elton, who takes the fan mail seriously, had opened it." She chanted the words in a depressed tone of voice:

"Once wear the sable that he gave
And then get ready for your grave."

"Hadley have any suggestion who the rhymester might be?"

"No indeed. He thought it was some crackpot because of course he didn't know anything about the coat. But then I had to tell him. It began to get him upset, too ... and he has the occupational disease of the television business, ulcers. It was almost more of a strain on him than on me, with those nasty couplets coming in every day like clockwork.

"But don that garment once and I
Will guarantee that you will die."

"Were these things handwritten?"

She reached for an ostrich leather bag on the chaise, opened it, took out a check wallet, from beneath the pad of checks removed a folded sheet. "This is the last one; day before yesterday."

It was neatly typed in the center of a sheet of coarse white paper, letterhead size:

Let your conscience be your guide
And be not the coffin's bride.

He fingered the paper thoughtfully. "You haven't made any attempt to trace this?"

"How could we? There are good reasons why my friend does not want any publicity and just as many why it should hurt me professionally." She gestured at the paper. "It's written on studio paper—it's made especially so it won't make crackling noises when you rustle it near a mike. But almost anyone could get hold of a few sheets like that."

"What about the envelopes?"

"They're at home. I kept them all. Plain, dime-store variety." She held out her hand for the jingle. "I know you're supposed to be able to trace a thing like this from the typewriting. He wanted to get a firm of private detectives on it but I wouldn't let him; the whole thing has made me so desperately miserable. All my life I've been fighting for something I never thought I'd have, absolute security. Maybe you don't know it but there aren't too many in show business who do get it. A big salary, yes—but you have to cut it up six ways from Sunday and few of us put enough away to feel safe, no matter if the options aren't picked up. There's always that fear of being old and sick and alone in some cheap rooming house." Her eyes closed. "I really thought I had it made this time. I even thought I might get that jackpot bonus along with it, genuine happiness with someone I honestly care for. But I guess it's not in the cards for me. I told him last night that if it hadn't been for the possibility your store people might have been hurt, I'd be glad the damn coat had been stolen. I meant it."

"It's to be returned tonight, Miss Inez."

She gasped. "To me?"

"I suppose. Mister Grolheim phoned to say it would be brought back sometime late this evening."

"But—then why did they steal it?"

"For money. Only thing that sort of thug steals for."

"Who would pay them?"

"Your Mister Rettjer."

"No!" She came to her feet. "He'd never do a thing like that!"

"Somebody's going to pay, if the crown sables come back. It doesn't seem as if you'd be interested in putting up the money. Who besides Mister Rettjer would you suggest?"

She sat down suddenly as if she was faint. "He doesn't know about the murder. It would almost make him a party to the crime, wouldn't it?"

"Compounding a felony, it's called. Yes. I don't care about that. I'm not a cop. But if Mister Rettjer has made a deal with these hijackers, he'll have made arrangements to get the money to them before the coat is turned over. I want to know what those arrangements are and I want to know in a hurry. You better get hold of your friend and find out."

CHAPTER 18

RETTJER

THE STAR OF PAINTING THE TOWN RAN A DIAMOND-studded silver comb through the famous tousled hair. "How did you find out about Norman?"

"There's been talk about his being in Las Vegas while you were there."

She made a comical moue. "I told him it was a mistake for him to go out there."

"It'll be your mistake if you don't call him now."

"There's a phone booth up on the next floor."

"Think of all the raised eyebrows if I were to be seen crowding into a public booth with you. And I have to hear what you say to him."

"I'm sure you wouldn't crowd me, Mister Cadee."

"I might have to," he said soberly. "There's a phone in that sponsor's booth across the hall."

"He doesn't like me to call him at the office."

"I won't like it if you don't. Tell him I have to see him right away."

She laid the comb down reluctantly. "I hate to do anything that might get him in trouble, Mister

Cadee."

"He's in trouble up to his ears already if he's made a deal with these hijackers. You and I may be able to keep him from getting in deeper."

"Then I'll try to get him to see you."

The phone was on a low table in front of the first row of seats in the steeply tiered booth. The only light in the darkened cubicle came from the great glass window looking down on the bustling activity of the studio. Electricians trailed coils of cable to and fro, sport-shirted cameramen made mysterious adjustments with their cumbersome apparatus, musicians penciled notations on score sheets, a quartet of dancers in ballet costume burlesqued a number from the Firebird.

Lily Inez sat down a yard from the glass partition, dialed. "Mister Norman Rettjer, please... . Tell him Miss Smolyanka would like to speak to him." She smiled impishly at Don. "With a name like that you wonder I want to change it?... Oh, God!" The smile vanished. "Look!" She huddled down in her seat, pointing.

Down by the backdrop of the middle set with its row of Lautrec-like cancan dancers high-kicking at crimson balloons and pink champagne bottles spelling out P-A-I-N-T-I-N-G T-H-E T-O-W-N, he saw Elton Hadley in agitated conversation with a handsome woman in a heather tweed—a woman in her early thirties with a haughty manner, cold, patrician features, and dark glasses hiding her eyes.

"Helen Rettjer! Norman's wife." Lily Inez held her hand over the mouthpiece. "I've never seen her at the studio before. She mustn't see me!"

Don stepped between her and the glass partition. "Go ahead on your call." He thought the imperious lady was telling off Hadley in spades; the manager's huge head was bobbing, his childlike hands were held out in anxious appeal.

"Norman?" The timbre of Lily Inez' voice became noticeably more husky. "That man from Amblett's is here in the studio with me ... yes, yes, I know—but it's absolutely important I tell you now, right this minute ..."

Don observed Hadley beckoning to the assistant director in the houndstooth jacket. The latter hurried over, listened to the voluble lady in the dark glasses; then, he, too, began to shrug and shake his head in obvious denial.

"Mister Cadee," Lily Inez said, "tells me your present is to delivered some time tonight ... Do you know about that? ... Yes? ... Then he has to see you immediately before you complete the arrangements."

On the floor below, Missus Rettjer held up a gloved hand, spoke briefly and bitterly, swung on her heel, and stalked away disdainfully.

"I realize you have other matters which are important, Norman, but this is a matter of life and death, I mean it... . Yes—and by the way—Helen is here in the studio, now. Do you know what she wants?"

Hadley exchanged earnest words with the assistant director before he loped after Missus Rettjer, caught up with her, began an expostulation which stopped the lady in her tracks.

"No, I haven't spoken to her ... I don't intend to, no. What? ... All right, I'll tell him. ... Oh, I'm so

utterly wretched I'm going straight back to the apartment ... Yes, call me there." She hung up. "Is she still here?"

Don moved aside. "The coast is clear. Your manager just left with her. Does her husband know what's on her mind?"

"Not at all. He's flabbergasted. He thought she was on her way to Nassau by plane." She clapped a hand to her forehead. "She must have come here to make a scene. That's all I need, a scene with her. Oh, God!"

"I was right about the coat?" he asked.

"Yes, you were. Though he doesn't believe there's anything to be worried about. He says he talked to one of the men from your store only a little while ago and there isn't going to be any trouble at all about getting the coat back."

All a misunderstanding—wasn't that what Grolheim had told Sib last night? "When will he see me?"

"As soon as you can get down to his office. Do you know where it is? Forty Wall. Intekcom Holding Corporation."

"I'll find it." Don took her arm. "How much does Mister Rettjer's wife know about you?"

"Nothing ... except what she may have heard in the way of rumors from Las Vegas and so on. She knows he doesn't care for her; they've been all but legally separated for a year. But she won't give him a divorce and he won't try to get one. I suppose she may suspect there's another woman—or more than one, for that matter. But I'm sure she has no idea that Norm would marry me tomorrow if he were

free."

"She has ideas about something; she was giving your manager a bad five minutes there."

Lily Inez sighed. "This is the day I've been dreading. Helen wouldn't have come here unless she'd meant to have a showdown." She followed him up the tier of steps. "It makes me think she must have sent me those horrid rhymes. Maybe she arranged to have the coat stolen—though how she could have found out about that ... "Her voice trailed away.

Don thought she was fighting to keep back a flood of tears. "You're not going to rehearse this afternoon?"

"No."

"I may drop around to the apartment later then." He went down the short flight, out to the studio floor. Neither Hadley nor Helen Rettjer was in sight, nor did he see either of them in the lobby of Telecast Towers as he left the building.

The offices of Intekcom were as quiet and subdued as the studio had been noisy and confused. The receptionist was an elderly man who looked like a professor.

"Mister Rettjer is expecting you, Mister Cadee. This way, if you please."

The financier's office was homey rather than impressive. No desk—merely a large table spread with charts. Easy chairs, and logs glowing in a cheerful brick fireplace. A small bar, a giant television set ... and the man himself, a small-boned man with a rock-hard face, smoking a pipe and scrutinizing his visitor through rimless spectacles before offering to shake hands.

"I can understand your store's position in this matter, Mister Cadee."

"Then we won't waste time on that." Don refused a cigar. "I'm here because of my personal interest in two of our men. Not because of the crown sable coat."

Rettjer rubbed the bowl of the briar against the side of his nose. "I'm glad to be able to set your mind at ease on that score. I had a very pleasant conversation with your Mister Grolheim; he anticipates no further difficulties in the transaction."

"What about the other man? Jim Preston?"

"Your fur buyer didn't mention him, Mister Cadee."

"Then you don't know whether he's still alive?"

The financier smiled tolerantly. "Nothing Mister Grolheim said indicated any unpleasantness, so I assume both your men are quite all right and will be back on the job tomorrow."

"I don't assume that," Don said bluntly. "And as for unpleasantness, there's been plenty. I was put through a rock crusher by one of the hijackers last night."

Rettjer showed no emotion. "I knew nothing of that"

"Evidently there are other things you don't know. I have damn good reason to believe Jim Preston was slugged unconscious, probably killed, outside Miss Inez' apartment last night when the sables were stolen."

"She told me you were afraid he had been hurt."

"I'm afraid he's dead. As dead as the member of the gang the police found in Grolheim's house this

morning."

Rettjer knocked the ashes out of his pipe against the brick of the fireplace. "I didn't know about that. And it's quite clear Mister Grolheim didn't know it, either."

Don said: "What kind of a blackmail proposition did he put up to you?"

"Ah ... that's a rather rough term to use, isn't it?"

"What the hell else can you call it?" Don retorted. "You're going to have to pay for the sables a second time, else they wouldn't release the coat ... or our men. Only reason you'd pay would be to avoid publicity. Well, let me tell you, there's bound to be a mess of publicity anyhow, now there's been a murder. I can't help that; what I may be able to do is help get our men out of the hands of some murderous bastards. And the first thing I need to know is exactly what kind of a deal you made with them."

"Even," Rettjer said softly, "if my telling you should cause your friends to suffer for it? Because that's part of the deal, Mister Cadee. That I tell no one of the terms. Otherwise, your employees may regret it."

"You'll tell me." Don was brusque. "You'll tell me here and now. Because I know just how much cause Jim Preston and Myron Grolheim have had to regret it already."

"Suppose"—Rettjer eyed him speculatively—"I think it wiser to refuse your request?"

"I might," Don said, "be able to make you change your mind."

CHAPTER 19

FIFTY THOUSAND IN SMALL BILLS

THE FINANCIER ROSE, SAUNTERED TO THE fireplace. "A lot of people have tried to make me change my mind, Mister Cadee." He picked up a brass poker from the fire set on the brick hearth. "I suppose you would go to the police?"

"To the newspapers," Don said. "No city desk could pass up a story about a prominent industrialist, a celebrated television star, a crown sable coat—and an extortion attempt that involved murder. By the way, if you pay off the blackmailers, you might wind up charged as an accessory."

Rettjer bent to poke at a smoldering log; his face was momentarily hidden. "It seems to me your Mister Grolheim is the accessory, if not the principal. He was one of the very few who knew about the sables, knew when and where they were to be delivered. He practically admitted that he was to share in the ransom if it was paid. Now you tell me one of his

partners in crime was found beaten to death in his house. Yet you claim your interest is in getting him out of the hands of the gang."

"I don't believe Grolheim is a thief or an extortionist, much less a murderer."

Rettjer turned around. "How did you know the sables were to be returned?"

"Grolheim called me up, too."

"What did he say?"

"That arrangements had been made to have the coat delivered to Miss Inez sometime this evening."

"You know"—Rettjer swung the poker idly—"the newspapers might make something out of the facts that a couple of Amblett's employees left the store with the sables and one of them later called you up, notified you that a proposition had been made to me about the return of the merchandise. Doesn't put your store in a very favorable light"

"Depends how it's put," Don said. "There are witnesses who can prove that one of our men was slugged while attempting to protect the store's property. I can testify that I was given a fairly brutal workover while trying to trace the garment. And from the way Grolheim talked to me on the phone, I'd say he was aware that his own life is in danger."

"That wasn't my impression."

"You don't know the man."

"He seemed absolutely unconcerned about anything except the payment demanded, absolutely cold-blooded."

"That's the point" Don said. "Grolheim is anything but coldblooded. He's normally tense and jumpy. They have him buffaloed in some way ... with a gun

at his back. Or a threat of torture."

"Under the circumstances you think it would be foolish to believe he would keep his word?"

"About the coat? They'll send it back. What else can they do with it? It's not negotiable like your securities. But I'm not worried about the sables. I want Jim Preston and Myron Grolheim back ... if it isn't too late."

"Your buyer was explicit on that score; he said there'd be no further difficulties of any kind, once the transaction was completed."

"He may have believed that. He might not know about the murder. They may have kept him in the dark about Jim Preston. But there'll be plenty of difficulties for the other members of the gang—and they know it, whether Grolheim does or not"

"Then you suggest I go through with the plan?"

"How can I tell until I know what you agreed to do?"

Rettjer replaced the poker, straightened up. "I'm to have fifty thousand in small bills packed in a brief case. At six o'clock someone will call me at the Buckingham apartment to tell me what to do with the money. At seven another call will notify me where to pick up the coat." He went to the bar. "Sounds like a Grade-B movie, doesn't it?"

"Did Grolheim say you were to deliver the brief case yourself?"

"No. Only that I should follow instructions to the letter and, of course, refrain from notifying the authorities. Drink?"

"I can use one."

"Scotch?"

"And water. Thanks. How would it be if you gave me the brief case, let me deliver it?"

Rettjer clattered ice cubes into glasses. "I'm beginning to change my mind about you, Mister Cadee. I will admit that my preconception about a department store detective wasn't too flattering. Evidently I was wrong in your case. You have a hell of a nerve to ask me to hand over fifty thousand dollars to a man I've never seen before in my life. But this seems to be a circumstance where a hell of a nerve is needed. How will you operate?"

Don took the highball. "Have to play it by ear. Ill be at the Buckinghurst by six and take it from there."

"Even though it may jeopardize your own men?"

"They're already jeopardized ... up to here. I may be able to convince the contact man for the gang that it will be a break for all concerned if they'll turn Preston and Grolheim loose. Whatever happens, it won't affect your coat deal."

"May affect you."

"Calculated risk. You know about that sort of thing. You're taking a few yourself." Don thought the financier was relieved at the idea of having someone else handle the ransom matter. "Miss Inez suspects your wife of sending those jingles, has an idea Missus Rettjer may have connived at having the sables stolen."

"A natural enough conjecture but without the slightest foundation." Rettjer smiled; the smile transformed his hard features, making him suddenly very likable. "Tell you something, Mister Cadee. A woman has to care a lot about a man to be jealous of him. My wife doesn't care that much about me; she's not

jealous, not even interested."

"Then why did she go to the studio this morning?"

"She thought I might be there. She had been trying to reach me here at the office. I was out. Far as I knew she was flying to the Bahamas ... but she's always changing her mind at the last minute." He waved the pipe stem. "It had nothing to do with the coat, you may be sure. I have told Miss Inez that she might look closer to her own establishment for the author of those creepy couplets."

"As close as ... ?

"Her maid. Frances resents me; I once suggested she should be discharged. She's always asking for increases; she gets more right now than either of my secretaries. Fancies she ought to be paid off for keeping quiet about my visits to the apartment, I suppose. Neither Miss Inez nor I believe in starting that; once you begin to hand out hush money, there's no end to it. Besides, there's nothing in particular for us to hide. I'm fond of Lily; she likes me. We don't broadcast it but we are certainly not ashamed of it."

Don raised his eyebrows. "Not fifty thousand dollars' worth?"

"Oh no. Not at all. The ransom for the coat is another matter. I want her to have those sables; I have gone to considerable trouble and expense to see she does have them. Putting up the additional money may seem like a high premium in order to protect my original investment—perhaps if I had thought I could get a duplicate I might have turned down Mister Grolheim's offer. But there's no such thing as a duplicate. It might be two or three years

before I could have another one made up; it takes that long to have the skins matched. By that time I might be dead. Or she might. I want her to have it now. So ... I will have that brief case ready for you at six tonight."

"You're not telling Miss Inez the details of the arrangement?"

"You are the only one who knows."

"Better that way." Don put his glass on the bar. "You might have another call from Mister Grolheim, before this evening."

"What makes you think so?"

"Afternoon papers will carry the story of that dead man. It may rattle the rest of the gang. They might even want to move up the time for the delivery of the money."

"I'll let you know if that happens."

"At the store. Leave a message with my secretary."

CHAPTER 20

MAX "THE BURNER" TILLSON

PASSING THE NEWSSTAND IN THE LOBBY ON HIS WAY out, Don received a mild jolt; Max's pale eyes and wolfish fangs sneered up at him from a photograph occupying the front page of a pinkish tabloid. The scarehead said:

HUNT THRILL KILLER
IN TEENAGER'S DEATH

Don bought a copy, read the "Story on Page Two" riding uptown in a cab. Evidently Dimmock and Quinton had made quick identification from the youth's fingerprints:

Max "The Burner" Tillson, 16, recently released from Bronx Boys Correctional Institution, was found dead this morning in the West End Avenue residence

of a wealthy fur man, Myron Grolheim. Police investigating a broken areaway door discovered the body, brutally mutilated. Except for the murdered teenager, there was no one in the three-story house. An intensive search is underway for Grolheim, who was known to be in the city yesterday. Tillson had been released from the reformatory November first after serving five months of a six months' term for the theft of a tobacco distributor's truck.

The rest was a rewrite man's sensationalism, a suggestion—in the form of a query—asking whether the boy might have been a victim of some homicidal sadist, without mentioning Grolheim specifically. The background for this seemed to be that Tillson had once belonged to a teenage gang, the Mott Avenue Malays, so known because they liked to boast of running amuck among their juvenile enemies.

You hit it on the nose. The kid had been a jumper. When the cops find out about the stolen sables, they'll figure that Max had inside information from My Grolheim and was put out of the way to keep the fact quiet. That'll be your fault, boy: you had a chance to tell Dimmock about Max and his side-kick trailing My for days ... and you said nothing. The Homicide boys will have good reason to feel you've been covering up an inside job, too.

Getting out of the cab in front of the Berkowsky building, he felt suddenly very weary. The strain of

not knowing whether you're playing it the right way, boy. But you gave your word to Ruth Preston ... and while there's a chance Jim may get out of this all right; you wouldn't want to play it any other way.

The offices of Wolheim Berkowsky & Sons were on the ground floor, facing Seventh Avenue. Gloomy, high-ceilinged, paneled in dark walnut, with old-fashioned lighting fixtures and somber steel engravings such as used to be popular around the turn of the century. But there was nothing out of date about Morris Berkowsky. The junior vice-president was Brooks Brothers and Ivy League and Park Avenue: tall and rangy and briskly businesslike.

He took Don into an office with scores of framed and signed photographs on the walls, a social gallery, ladies of the haut monde.

"Miss Gates didn't tell me just what you have in mind, Mister Cadee, but I gathered it had to do with a certain garment we made for your store."

"That's correct. The crown sable coat was hijacked last night before My Grolheim could deliver it to the customer."

Berkowsky didn't seem to be surprised. "You were covered? By insurance in transit?"

"I'm not certain. But Ambletts isn't trying to evade responsibility for payment. We're told the garment will be returned undamaged; anyhow the purchaser isn't going to renege on the deal. But a couple of our men were taken along with the coat Mister Grolheim and one of my best Protection men, Jim Preston. Ambletts is more concerned about the men than the merchandise, Mister Berkowsky."

"You say Myron is in the hands of these

hijackers?" Berkowsky was puzzled. "I spoke to him only an hour ago."

"I talked to him this morning, too," Don said. "He called up to say the coat would be returned and that he would also be free in a day or so. But I think he was acting under duress."

"It didn't seem so to me. The reason I wasn't too surprised to hear about the theft was that Myron wanted to know if we could suggest another customer who might be interested in buying the coat if the sale fell through." Berkowsky frowned. "It struck me as a queer question, though of course we do run up against instances where the purchaser is unable to take some expensive garment and we do have to look around for another customer. But Myron would be more likely to know of a possible taker for this rather ... extraordinary garment... than I would. So it threw me a bit."

"What did you tell him?"

"Why—that we would make some discreet inquiries, let him know. My first supposition was that the gentleman who ordered the coat had had some disagreement with the lady for whom it had been designed."

"Nothing like that. He still wants to give her the coat even though he's going to have to pay a ransom in addition to your price."

"No kidding!" The frown deepened. "Certainly be the most expensive item of apparel the world has ever seen, then. But I'm more baffled than ever, Mister Cadee. You see, Myron gave no indication that his personal safety was involved. He did sound rather vague, but I laid that to his distress at having

such a large transaction screwed up. As near as I can recall, the closest he came to hinting there might be something wrong was to say his plans hadn't worked out quite as he had expected. You're sure there is no mistake about his having been abducted along with the coat?"

"You mean do I believe he might have been in on the steal?" Don asked. "I don't I think he's in great danger. As soon as the ransom has been paid over, there's a good chance he'll go the way this kid went." He held out the paper.

Berkowsky turned to Page Two, scowling. After a moment he looked up. "This seems to say Myron was the murderer."

"He wasn't. You know him, you know he wouldn't have the heart to kill anyone."

"I would have said that's right Still—"

"The paper's whooping up a sensation. It didn't have the facts because the police didn't have them. I had been warned by My not to give them any dope, otherwise he and Jim Preston might not be allowed to go free," Don said. "Now I'm damn sure that a crook who would kill one of his own partners in crime wouldn't trunk twice about finishing off a couple of witnesses to his misdeeds. These calls from My—he talked to our customer as well as to you and me—add up to just one thing. They're fixing to make him the patsy ... for the hijack and the murder of this Max as well."

Berkowsky nodded. "If I had to testify in court about that phone call, it would certainly make him seem like one of the gang, that's true."

"It comes down to this," Don said. "I have to

locate this bunch of highbinders before they get the ransom."

"If there's any way our firm can help ... "

"Not unless some of your people can recognize the man who worked with this Max Tillson when Preston was slugged outside Miss Inez' apartment." Don described the fellow as Salvatore had—the broken nose, the bulgy pug-dog eyes, the slimy smile, the sapphire ring. He added, "And Grolheim said he might have been an Italian."

"He never worked for us," Berkowsky said. "I'll go further; I doubt if he ever worked in a fur factory. Very few Italians in this business, very few. Of course he may have been a truck driver—but that star sapphire doesn't make it seem likely."

"No," Don agreed. "One more thing. How long have you known My?"

"Ten or twelve years," Berkowsky said. "He's always had a first-class reputation in the trade, not especially in a sociable sense, but as an individual of integrity. I would be unhappy to revise my opinion of him."

"That's all I wanted to know." Don said he'd keep Wolheim Berkowsky & Sons in touch with developments, then said good-by.

As he came out of the building, Baisha Gates rushed across the sidewalk, clutched his arm. "I didn't want to barge in while you were busy with Morrie, but I simply had to catch you before you went back to the store, Mister Cadee."

"Why?" he asked, "Did you latch onto something at Sari Soeurs?"

"Oh, I have the list of their mink minxes"—she

giggled foolishly—"but I can't tell whether it'll be any help to you or not." She took a sheet of crested notepaper out of her coat pocket. "Here ... and don't blame me for all the Miss Joneses and Miss Whites and Miss Johnsons they gave me. I know they aren't the ladies' real names and they know it, too, but what are they to do if some gentleman says a blue pastel is for plain Miss Smith when her name is probably Hortense Hassenpfeffer!"

"You didn't rush over here just to give me this list?"

"Oh no." She whipped off her horn-rims, peered up at him anxiously. "I waylaid you because Miss Kahn said you mustn't come back to the office."

"That so?"

"Not until you've talked to her, anyway. There are two policemen waiting with a warrant for you."

CHAPTER 21

THE SLASHER

DON TOOK BAISHA'S ARM. "LET'S HOP ACROSS TO that drugstore. Unless you're afraid of being seen with a desperate criminal."

"I'm not a bit afraid." She snuggled against him crossing the street "I always said you'd be one of the ten most wanted men, Mister Cadee. But I didn't mean it in the police sense. If there's anything I can do to help you ... "

"There is. Call Miss Kahn from that booth, give her the number of the phone, have her ring back soon as she can get away from my office." He ran interference past the pushing lunch-hour crowd two and three deep at the busy fountain.

In the booth a stout man spoke earnestly to the phone, beating the air with a hairy hand for emphasis.

Baisha said: "What did you do that put the police after you?"

"I went up to My Grolheim's house to see what might have happened to him. They want to know

about it; I don't want to tell 'em until My gets back." He scanned the list from Sari Soeurs. Many of the names he recognized as being on Ambletts' No-Lim-it-to-Credit list. A few were familiar from the financial pages of the daily press. There was a scattering of anonymities, the noms de-jolie for mistresses of men in the uppermost tax brackets. And ... two thirds down the typed column, the name of Missus Norman Rettjer.

The stout man shouted an imprecation, slammed the receiver at the hook, backed out of the booth still muttering to himself.

Don said: "Don't tell Becky you're with me, Baisha. Just have her buzz you back."

She huddled over the phone dial.

Don wondered what might be the significance of Missus Rettjer's ownership of a Sari Soeurs mink. Had she lent it to a friend? Given it to a less affluent relative? Sold it... within a year of purchasing it? None of them seemed possibilities. Anyhow, since the Homicide hounds had made such a swiftly efficient identification of Max, it was more than likely they already knew about the brunette in the turquoise gown, knew who she was and what had been her connection with the dead "Burner."

Baisha said: "That's it, that's fine," started to edge out of the booth.

Don put his hand between her shoulder blades. "Stay there. Stick with it. Others waiting to use the booth. Have to keep 'em waiting."

She nodded. "I'll pretend to be talking ... but I'll hold the hook down so nobody'll notice."

"That's the idea." The pneumatic hammers began

to pound at his ears again. The store was hot, the air was close. Smells of frying hamburger and chocolate malteds mingled with the odors of sweaty clothing and too strong perfumes. An impatient line of the thwarted telephone-minded pressed against him irritably.

It seemed much longer than the four minute his wristwatch indicated before the phone bell rang sharply and Baisha Gates let the hook fly up.

"All alone now, Miss Kahn? ... Yes, yes ... he's right here ... I'll put him on."

Don squeezed past her. "Hello, Becky. Gendarmes still in the offing?"

"Yes indeed." His secretary seemed harassed. "That Sergeant Quinton has been camped beside my desk for the last hour. And Lieutenant Dimmock was at your desk for a while— waiting for you to call in, I suppose—but he left about ten minutes ago to see Mister Stolz. I've been on pins and needles for fear you might walk in so I had Alice posted out in the hall to warn you."

"That's using your head. About Miss Gates, too. Did they tell you what the warrant charges?"

"Dimmock wouldn't utter a peep. But the sergeant loosened up after the lieutenant left. It seems someone saw you leaving Mister Grolheim's house this morning, described your bruised face."

"Did he say who saw me?"

"No. But"—Becky hesitated—"he did mention there was a girl with you. And you were carrying a suitcase."

"Sounds sort of incriminating, doesn't it?"

"Now, Mister Cadée ... I didn't suggest any such

thing!"

"Just jesting, Becky. Did you tell Quinton when you expect me back?"

"After lunch sometime. I had to say something...."

"Of course. You did exactly right."

"Well, I don't know. I really didn't know what to tell the captain."

"Captain? What captain?"

"Eadie. At the precinct. You know him."

"Sure. But I didn't know he was in the act."

"It wasn't about having you arrested. He wanted to speak to you about that girl we sent to the hospital, that slasher."

"What about her?"

"Captain Eadie said that under the circumstances he'd just have the charges against her filed unless he heard from you that Ambletts is going to insist on prosecution."

Don stared at the penciled doodlings and scribbled phone numbers on the wall of the booth. What the hell had Eadie been blithering about? "Did he mention what circumstances he had reference to, Becky?"

"No, he didn't. All he said was that doctors were like lawyers —if you could afford to pay for the right ones you could prove anything you wanted to. He said he thought you'd understand. But I didn't."

"We're in the same boat. It's Greek to me. But I'll see if I can work out a translation. Did Quinton know it was the precinct calling me?"

"Oh no. I took the message in shorthand. The sergeant was looking over my shoulder but I guess it was Greek to him."

"No doubt." He realized that Eadie's crack about doctors must mean that the girl had been certified sane at the Psych Ward. But then why had she been released . . . with a thousand dollars or so of mutilated merchandise still to be paid for? Well, hell, you've more important fish to fry. Her case will have to wait. "Anything else on the fire, Becky?"

"Mister Stolz has been calling about those damaged alligator bags."

"Has he, now?" With a hundred-thousand-dollar coat numbered among the missing, Stolz has to worry about a slasher? What goes? "Just let him stew; it's his normal condition."

"Right. And what'll I say to the sergeant if he asks whether I've heard from you?"

"Lie like a lady. Sib'll get in touch with you after lunch." As he left the booth, he had to sidestep an elbowing woman who muttered something about "people who spend their lunch hour on the phone."

Baisha grasped his arm as they struggled to the street "Why do they want to arrest you, Mister Cadee?"

"They think I know a lot more about My Grolheim than I really do. And by the way, they're looking for you, too."

"Eeee!" She squeaked in excitement "For me?"

"To find out what you know about his disappearance."

"But—I don't know anything about it."

"You do, though. And you have to be careful not to tell them . . . about the crown sable coat"

"If you say I shouldn't, I won't breathe a syllable about it." She quivered with the intensity of her

pledge.

"It may be bad for My if you let anything slip."

"I won't, I won't! Wild horses couldn't—"

"And one thing more. Forget to mention you met me outside the store."

"You know you can trust me, Mister Cadee."

"Sure of it, Baisha. Thanks for your help and your discretion." He gave her a smile, a brotherly pat, hailed a cruising cab, slid in.

The driver looked over his shoulder inquiringly.

"Bellevue Hospital," Don said. "Front entrance."

You may be shooting off at a tangent, checking on Captain Eadie's cryptic message. On the other hand, Bob Stolz is no dope; he knows you're not going to get sidetracked on anything that doesn't affect the safety of Jim Preston and My Grolheim. So there must be some connection... .

He found the Psychiatric Ward, located the supervisor, stated his errand.

But the elderly-lady in the lace cap shook her head. "We have no record of any such admission. You say you don't know the patient's name?"

"No. But the police brought her here a couple of hours ago. From Amblett's Fifth Avenue." He described her as carefully as he could. "A good-looking teenager, nicely groomed, well dressed. She refused to give us any name or address."

The supervisor raised one eyebrow. "Possibly she was taken to some other hospital. We have no such detention patient held for observation." She went to the desk, came back with a typed list mounted on a clip board, held it out for his inspection. "See for yourself."

CHAPTER 22

PROMINENT STRING PULLERS

DON GLANCED AT THE CLIP BOARD. "NAMES ARE NO help. I told you—I don't know this girl's name. But I know she was brought here. If she's not here now, I want to know why you let her go."

"Sorry." The supervisor was aloof, apparently disinterested. "Unless you have the patient's name, we could under no consideration give out any information."

He reached for his wallet, thinking that identification might to some extent offset a poor impression created by his bunged-up face, his fatigue. "Here's my card—" he said, before he realized that he had no wallet, merely a few dollars he had borrowed from Sibyl ... and no Amblett's cards whatever.

She waited a moment before turning away disdainfully. "You will excuse me—"

"Not yet." He tapped her on the shoulder. "Which doctor is in charge of this ward?"

"Our chief psychiatrist is not here at this time of day." She was stiffly resentful at his touching her. "These are not visiting hours, either. I must ask you to leave now."

"I'm not leaving." Don was chagrined and irritated. "Not until I find out why you're stalling about this kid. What's the name of the doctor who's in charge here right now?"

"Doctor Hamlin." She retreated behind her desk. "But he can give you no more information than I."

"We'll see about that. Where'll I find him?"

"He is on a tour of the ward. You cannot disturb him."

"No? He'll have the hell disturbed out of him if you keep on giving me the run-around." He went to the desk angrily, "You can't brush me off with double talk. I deal with too much of that in Protection work. Get hold of this Hamlin before I bring in a court order to have you produce this prisoner."

"We can't produce a patient who hasn't been admitted."

"A police matron and a plain-clothes man brought her in. Their Captain at the precinct advised me that somebody had pulled a fast one to keep her under cover. What are you people trying to hide? A suicide?"

"Really!" Suddenly she was on the defensive. "Really—I am unable to furnish the information you wish."

"Okay. Then call police headquarters on that phone. Let me talk to—" He reached for the phone.

"No! ... Wait! ... Don't!" Her eyes betrayed panic. "Step down the hall to the Visitors' Room. I will ask

Doctor Hamlin to confirm what I have told you."

"That's more like it." He stalked down the corridor, with weariness sweeping over him like heavy surf. The hospital smell was depressing, the sight of a nurse padding into a room carrying a canvas jacket with dangling tapes was ominous.

Maybe this is where My Grolheim ought to be. No man in his right mind would have called up Ruth Preston, Norman Rettjer, Morris Berkowsky and calmly discussed a bloody crime as "some sort of mistake." It wasn't rational to refer to the hijacking, the attack on Press, the murder of Max as a "misunderstanding" which would be corrected to everyone's satisfaction if those concerned simply sat tight and kept quiet. Grolheim must be off his rocker. Or maybe you are, boy! Maybe that clout on the cranium was too much for you!

But he knew better. He was physically exhausted from the beating, mentally weary from lack of sleep, that was all.

There was no one in the Visitors' Room. He brooded at the barred windows, the gray sluggishness of the East River seen far below through the dust-gray windows.

It might have been better, he thought, if he had called Bob Stolz from the drugstore, to learn why Bob considered the relatively slight damage wrought by the slasher as in any way important compared to the loss of a hundred-thousand-dollar coat, to the vastly greater problem of what had happened to Press, to Grolheim. But then, he realized, Stolz would have had Lieutenant Dimmock there at his elbow and couldn't have spoken freely.

A tall, spare man with the stooped shoulders of a professor and a deeply lined face came down the hall at an unhurried gait. He smiled with his eyes. "I am Doctor Hamlin." He held out his hand.

"Don Cadee, Chief of Store Protection at Amblett's, Doctor."

"You've been having a little difficulty with Miss Stevens?"

"Your supervising nurse? She was giving me the brush-off; I can't waste time horsing around with her. We picked up a teenage girl after she'd destroyed a lot of valuable merchandise out of sheer maliciousness. Ordinarily we don't prosecute such cases, gives other delinquents ideas. Normal procedure is to obtain a confession, get in touch with the parents, arrange for payment of the damaged articles. But this kid refused to give us her name. She was arrogant and decidedly unrepentant. She as much as said that what she wanted was to be arrested and paraded in court so she could humiliate someone, get even with her parents possibly."

"Not an uncommon motive with modern youth," the doctor said amiably.

"No. We don't like to cooperate with such vindictiveness, though. But we couldn't turn her loose without some information to help us in collecting for the nylons and lingerie and handbags she'd slashed with bits of razor blades. So I arranged to have her brought here by a police matron and a detective. She was to be committed for observation, under detention, subject to the store's disposal of her case. Now I'm told she was never admitted to the Psych Ward. I know she was. I'm fed up with evasive tactics, with

buck passing. What goes?"

The psychiatrist sighed. "I don't blame you for being resentful, Mister Cadee. But you mustn't blame Miss Stevens, either. She had her orders. So had I. However, I'm sure our instructions don't apply to you; they were simply intended to squelch newspaper scandal."

"The police captain at the precinct suggested there had been some string pulling."

"Quite correct. Rather prominent string pullers. I must admit I was somewhat surprised. Of course it was immediately apparent, at the brief preliminary examination, that the young lady was not a psychotic. Thirty years ago she would merely have been a bad child; nowadays we try to understand such cases before we attempt to punish them. As a preliminary to a later revaluation we administered a mild tranquilizer, one of the new meprobamates."

"I'd say calming down was what she needed most."

"Yes. Well, I chatted with her for a few minutes but she didn't relax her rebelliousness. She was boastfully confident that she wouldn't be here long ... and she was right about that." Doctor Hamlin glanced at his watch. "She hadn't been in the ward much more than an hour when a formidable group showed up here, inquiring for her."

"Lawyers?"

"Oh yes. A brace of attorneys, equipped with impressive writs of habeas and what not. There was also a Doctor Volney, who represented himself as the girl's personal physician of some years' standing. And one of the country's foremost psychiatrists,

Leon Shlemm. Are you acquainted with Doctor Shlemm?"

"Only by reputation."

"A splendid reputation ... and well deserved. Matter of fact, I studied under Doctor Shlemm at Johns Hopkins; my respect for his opinion would be, naturally, of the highest degree. So when he said that he was prepared to certify that Miss Rettjer was perfectly—"

Don broke in: "The financier's daughter?"

"Miss Joyna Rettjer, right. In some way, possibly by promising a reward to that police matron—though that is merely guesswork on my part—the girl had managed to get word to her parents. The battery of learned counsel and medical authority rushed to her rescue."

That explains Bob Stolz's anxiety to get hold of you. Probably Cap Eadie'd talked to him when you couldn't be reached. Stolz would have agreed to having the case filed, all right. That would have made the girl's release from the hospital legal even though irregular. So much it does explain ... but it adds to the pile of puzzles that still need solving. "You couldn't hold her against all that pressure, Doctor."

"Frankly, we didn't want to. Whether it was the influence of the tranquilizing drug, or whether the flame of the young lady's rage had more or less burned itself out—as often happens, it's difficult to sustain an emotional outburst of that violent nature for any great length of time if there is no mental imbalance—whatever the reason, Miss Rettjer was as meek as you please at the time of her release."

"Did she give any reason for her maliciousness in

our store?"

Doctor Hamlin pondered a moment. "You'd better ask Doctor Shlemm as to that. All I can tell you is that when Doctor Volney asked her why she had behaved so badly, Miss Rettjer replied: 'I'd have cut her to ribbons if I'd had the chance but I knew I couldn't so I took it out on them because they started it.'" He smiled again. "Sort of incoherent excuse an over-wrought teenager is likely to make. It may have no relevance whatever."

"I'd say it's loaded with relevance," Don said gravely.

CHAPTER 23

TEENAGE TERROR

THE HAT-CHECK GIRL AT THE RED BOAR TOOK HIS coat with a knowing glance at his bruised face. "And how does the other fellow look, Mister Cadee?"

"Worse than I do, Millie." He thought of the features battered beyond recognition, down in the City Morgue.

"That's one I should have had tickets for," she smiled.

He gave her his hat and went toward the tiny bar.

Sibyl slid off her stool. "Our table is ready." She peered anxiously at him. "You look terribly tired."

"Been dealing with some difficult people." He followed the headwaiter to the banquettes, ordered a double Rob Roy, briefed Sibyl on the interview with Norman Rettjer.

She said nothing until he had finished, then shook her head in disapproval. "You'll only get yourself beaten up again, trying to trap them when you hand over that fifty thousand. They will be expecting something like that or they wouldn't have had

Grolheim warn you about not calling in the police.”

“That’s right,” he admitted. “But I’m not planning to trick them. Only to bargain with them. For Press and My.”

“How can you bargain when you turn over the money? They’ll have the cash and the coat... as well as their prisoners. What can you offer them?”

“Biggest thing in the world, Sib. A chance for their lives. They’re facing that armchair, our modern equivalent of the Iron Maiden. I may be able to show them how to escape that: they won’t turn down a deal, you can bet on that.”

“That’s like betting the lion won’t sneeze when you have your head in its mouth. I don’t like any part of it, Don.”

“I’m not exactly looking forward to it myself.” The smoky bite of the Scotch felt good to his throat. “We may be able to work the thing out another way before that six o’clock deadline ... in which case I won’t need to make that rendezvous.” He told her about the message from Captain Eadie, the call from Stolz, the trip to the Psych Ward, his talk with Hamlin.

She forgot her soufflé and her sherry, listening wide-eyed until he quoted the slasher’s cryptic explanation of her actions.

“I knew I’d seen her picture in the paper recently. Joyna Rettjer. Of course. It was a photograph of that rock-and-roll mêlée at Greenwich.”

“She was arrested? In Connecticut?”

“With a bunch of other teenage terrors. They were having one of those juvenile open-house shindigs ... and they began to out dare each other.”

"The if-you-don't-you're-chicken routine."

"Yes. As I recall it, she and a couple of other haut monde hoodlums drove somebody's foreign sports car along those black-top roads at seventy; finally clipped a truck full of live turkeys and overturned it. This Rettjer hellion and one of the other girls were sporting turkey feathers in their hair when the photograph was taken ... I suppose at the police station."

"Must have embarrassed the bejeezus out of our philandering financier. And from the glimpse I had of his haughty lady, I'd say it would have shocked her right down to her patrician heels." He worked on the London broil a moment. "That might have given the brat an idea. All she'd have to do to get her way would be to threaten another police court appearance."

"But how could she possibly decide on anything as outright vicious as slashing valuable merchandise? And why pick on Amblett's?"

Don gave the waiter their order for baba au rhum and coffee. "Somehow Joyna must have heard about her father's affair with Lily Inez. Maybe felt he was slighting darling daughter in favor of the sexy star."

"Or perhaps," Sibyl suggested, "the girl simply took her mother's side of the triangular argument Happens in the b.f.'s."

"Either way, she'd be burned up at Lily Inez. Especially if she heard about that crown sable coat."

"Girls a whole lot more stable emotionally than a rock-and-roll teener might go green-eyed at learning an older woman was going to get a present like that from Papa. But how could she get even with Lily Inez by ruining our hundred-dollar handbags?"

"I'm going on guesswork," he said. "But I think what she meant by that crack—'I'd have cut her to ribbons if I'd had the chance, but I couldn't'—was that she had tried to scare her father into canceling the order for the coat ... and failed. Then she'd done her damndest to frighten Lily Inez into refusing the sables ... and also failed at that—or was afraid that she hadn't succeeded. So as a last-ditch try, the brat's twisted mind fixed on pressuring her father by threatening another humiliating run-in with the law on a more serious charge than reckless driving."

Sibyl didn't understand. "Are you saying Joyna Rettjer arranged the hijacking?"

"No. Not that I'd put it past her. She may have set the scheme in motion, intentionally or otherwise. ... I can't tell. But I'd better bring you up to date." He related the details of the tête-à-tête in the star's dressing room, recited some of the jingles.

Sibyl repeated one, incredulously.

"But don the sables once and I
Will guarantee that you will die."

It does sound high-schoolish."

"Didn't sound so to Miss Inez."

"Of course not... those horrible rhymes would have made any woman a nervous wreck."

"Couldn't have helped her beauty sleep much," Don said. "Before I left Bellevue I tried to reach Rettjer by phone. His office said he'd left for the day, claimed they didn't know how I could get hold of him. Then I tried the Rettjer residence on East Ninety-Second. Butler there said none of the family were

home, told me that Missus Rettjer had gone to the Bahamas."

"But you said you saw her at the studio."

"I did. She was mad as hell about something. On the hunt for her trouble-making teenager, most likely. Whether Joyna got her message through from the hospital to her mother or her father, deponent sayeth not Doctor Volney could have told me ... but he wasn't listed in the Manhattan phone book ... or Bronx or Brooklyn or Westchester. I did contact Doctor Shlemm. He set me straight. Volney's out in Greenwich."

"Where the Rettjer country place is."

"They live at Old Town Point, right Volney's office gave me that much, though they couldn't say where the doctor might be. And the telephone at Old Town Point was dead as the old gray goose, too. So ... I'm going out there right after I pay this check."

"If you can talk to this girl, you may be able to unravel the whole ball of yarn—I see that." She poked a fork, fretfully, at her baba au rhum. "It seems as if I've wasted my morning."

He reached across the table, caught hold of her hand. "Sorry. Self-centered Cadee they call me down at Centre Street. Please take an apology, Miss Forde."

Sibyl smiled. "I did latch onto something ... though it can't be as important as what you found out about that rock-and-roller."

"Well, tell."

"I made about a dozen calls ... the hauts couturiers on Fifty-Seventh and upper Madison ... but no one could give me a lead about that turquoise gown. Until I had what I modestly think was a middling

bright idea."

"Don't fish. Facts first, pat on the back later."

"All right. I thought where I'd go if I wanted to buy a glamour gown like that... if I didn't work at a high-style store where I can get a discount."

"Where?"

"To a secondhand shop."

"Ah, now ... "

"But a very superior sort of secondhand shop. One that doesn't stock ordinary hand-me-downs. Only the best. Dresses, coats, gowns, that came originally from those swanky stores I'd just been visiting. Where the ten best-dressed women turn in their only-wear-them-onces ... and where a smart woman can sometimes pick up a five-hundred-dollar Schiaparelli or Molyneux for a hundred or so."

"There is such a markdown market?"

"There is. It's called My Cousin. I went there ... and they knew the turquoise gown immediately; they'd sold it only a month ago."

"You're something, Sib. Who bought it?"

"They couldn't tell me. Until, later. Saleslady who sold it won't be in until two. But they have a record of all the original owners. And that turquoise-and-spangles was a Jacques Worth, an exclusive, one of a kind."

"Owned by?"

"Lily Inez."

CHAPTER 24

MY COUSIN

ON THE WAY UP MADISON AVENUE IN THE TAXI SIBYL said: "While I was waiting for you at the restaurant I called up Ruth. I was afraid she might have heard something on the radio about the police being after Grolheim."

"Had she?"

"She'd been out and bought an afternoon paper." "Left her low in the mind." Don made it an assertion.

"Yes. But she didn't say much. Except to wonder if the kidnappers would think you had called in the police. I told her they must know better. Was I wrong to try and keep her hopes buoyed up?"

"Of course not." He thought of Ruth Preston's message to her husband: "We are sitting tight, taking no action, until you get home." He'd agreed to go along with that promise but he hadn't stuck to his word. The action he'd taken up on West End Avenue last night had probably been the spark that touched off Max's murder. Whether it would affect old Press ... that was a chance which had to be taken. "If Jim

is still alive, and if I can have a five minute talk with these hijackers after the ransom is delivered, he'll be home by tomorrow."

"And you? Will you come back safe and sound?"

The cab pulled in to the curb before he could do more than say "Why not?"—then he was helping her out, paying the driver, glancing up at the flowery script letters in white against black glass:

MY COUSIN
(Once removed)

In the modest display window was a single gown of flaming orange tossed carelessly on a Directoire sofa of white satin.

"Not the secondhand store of Second Avenue, you see." She led him inside. "Stan in show business can't afford to wear a dress more than once, publicly. Downgrades 'em professionally. Still they can't afford to buy a three-fifty import and give it to the maid after one wearing. So the TV and film actresses send their 'old' clothes here on consignment; My Cousin takes a percentage and does very nicely indeed."

"Once removed," Don said. "Very neat idea." He gazed at gowns on racks, ermine-trimmed capes on manikins, shimmering silk, filmy lace, gold-embroidered brocade.

Sibyl spoke to a gray-haired woman in a linen smock. The gray-haired woman went to the rear of the store, returned with a small, dark saleslady, also in a smock.

"Miss Nelty may be able to help you, Miss Forde.

Miss Nelty sold that sequined turquoise you asked about."

Miss Nelty was eager to be of assistance. Yes, she remembered the gown, remembered the customer who bought it "Missus Chadbourne. She bought the shoes Miss Inez had made to go with the gown, too."

Sibyl said: "Is Missus Chadbourne a brunette?"

"Oh yes. The gown complimented her coloring perfectly."

"Do you keep a record," asked Sibyl, "of your customers' addresses? Can you tell us where Missus Chadbourne lives?"

"We don't keep any customer records. But we do have a mailing list ... to notify our friends of items which might particularly interest them. However"—the saleswoman was apologetic—"I'm sure Missus Chadbourne isn't in our mail file because she's an entertainer, a singer; they move around so much, you know."

"They certainly do," Sibyl said. "Is she on television?"

"I think she sings in a night club." The saleswoman was vague. "She did mention it but I've forgotten ... The Top Hat? No, that wasn't it, but it was something like that."

Don said: "The High Note, perhaps? On East Fifty-Fourth?"

The saleswoman smiled brightly. "That's it. The High Note. How stupid of me... "

"Easy to get confused," Don assured her. "I suppose Missus Chadbourne has bought a number of gowns here?"

"Quite a few, yes."

"And has she"—he pursued the point—"bought several which had originally been owned by Lily Inez?"

"Yes indeed. As a matter of fact, I believe that all of her purchases were of numbers made especially for Miss Inez." The saleswoman nodded.

"Now, how," Sibyl asked him after they had thanked the saleswoman and were again on the street, "how in the world did you guess that?"

"No guess at all." He smiled. "Scientific probing. Well, maybe not so scientific. When I saw the sexy lady at her apartment last night, I had the feeling she knew more about the hijack than she'd admit. Then, later, when she told me about those cockeyed rhymes, I supposed that had been the information she'd been hiding. That was a dumb diagnosis, though it took me a while to realize it. At the apartment she did her level best to postpone any police investigation."

"Wasn't that a natural reaction?"

"I thought so, at first. She and that big-domed manager of hers claimed they were only concerned about publicity, a scandal. That was the bunk ... I was slow to catch on. She wisecracked about Rettjer's going out to Las Vegas to be with her, said she'd warned him he shouldn't... but didn't seem to mind that it was known to the gossip scribblers."

"Feminine instinct? ... To make the best of a bad situation?"

"Not unless you call Rettjer's instincts feminine, too. He doesn't strike me that way. He made it plain he didn't care too much one way or the other whether it became known he was giving her

a hundred-thousand-dollar gift. And when you come right down to it, it wouldn't actually hurt her professionally. She wouldn't be the first actress to profit by being known as the mistress of a prominent personage."

"I can think of several others," Sibyl agreed.

"Think of how many phony publicity stories have been planted in the press about ladies of the theater having their jewels stolen. It couldn't really hurt her, professionally, to hit the headlines in connection with a crown sable coat. No, it wasn't the possible news break that scared her. But just when I'd managed to figure that out, I learned about the screwball daughter. I thought Lily Inez must have known about Joyna and had been trying to smother that angle to keep Rettjer from being hurt."

"But now you don't think so?"

"Hell, no. I'd told her one of the kidnappers had been killed. Her manager had emphasized that the police were in on the case. If Lily Inez had thought Joyna was involved, she'd have rushed to warn Rettjer right away. Instead she did all she could to keep me from seeing him. So it's a cinch there's something else she's holding back. All it could be is that she knows one of the hijackers. Maybe the brunette who wore her old clothes, hah?"

A frown puckered Sibyl's forehead. "It could be nothing more than the fact that Missus Chadbourne can wear Lily Inez' size without alterations, that she likes the star's taste in clothes. If she bought one of Miss Inez' wear-it-once-and-sell-it-down-the-river garments ... and liked it, she might well go back and buy more from the same source."

"Sure," he said. "Sure. But how would she know when one of the Lily-gilded items would be for sale? She wasn't on My Cousin's mailing list."

"Well, she might haunt the place. If she could get a five-hundred-dollar exclusive for a third of its original price, it would be worth it. I'm only trying to see all sides of it. But the side that impresses me is that the girl who helped to steal Lily Inez' sables also wears her hand-me-downs. You hit the nail on the head, you're probably right about some connection between them. Now all we have to do is locate Missus Chadbourne."

"May not be so simple." He flagged a cab. "Park Avenue and Fifty-fourth," he told the driver.

Sibyl looked at him out of the corners of her eyes. "You seem to know a lot about this High Note; you've never taken me there."

"Never been in the joint in my life, shugie. But I know what it'll be like. Horseshoe bar with a baby grand inside. Raised banquettes so the patrons can see the singer under the baby spot. Dim blue lighting so you can't see the high prices on the liquor list. And very dim, very blue lyrics."

"Doesn't sound terribly attractive. How much would a ... a chanteuse earn in a place like that?"

"No idea. But I shouldn't think it would be enough to pay for many of My Cousin's fancy costumes."

The cab stopped at a sidewalk awning decorated with quarter notes, clefs, piano keyboards. The driver said:

"It ain't open till five. You want me to take you somewheres else?"

Don said: "No, thanks. This is it." He helped Sibyl

out.

The front door was locked. Inside a solitary light showed above a bank of chromium-capped bottles. A figure moved in the gloom beyond.

Don rapped on the glass with a quarter.

A face emerged from the shadows, approached the door. A round, pale, unhappy face with sad eyes. The eyes studied them, examined Sibyl, seemed satisfied. The door was opened an inch.

"We don't open until—"

"We just want to ask a question," Don said quickly. "Girl we know used to sing here ... name, of Chadbourne. Know her?"

"She ain't here no more." The sad eyes showed no interest.

"Can you tell us where we can find her?" Sibyl asked.

"I heard she ain't in the business any more. Somebody said she went out to Las Vegas couple weeks ago, hit all the jackpots in town." The fat face creased into a smile. "Maybe I should go out there, try my luck. Can't be no worse'n it is here."

CHAPTER 25

CAKED WITH BLOOD

SIBYL MUSED: "WONDER IF MY PAL GEOFF MIGHT have some dope on another entertainer who was in Las Vegas at the same time Lily Inez was?"

"Uh-uh. A High Note singer wouldn't interest a columnist like Geoffrey unless she was outstanding ... and I don't mean her figure. Or unless she, too, was letting Rettjer buy her chips." Don steered her toward Lexington Avenue.

"How little you understand the distaff side. No woman who was trying to take Rettjer away from Lily Inez would be stupid enough to buy and wear her rival's discarded gowns. It couldn't have been that way. But what if Rettjer's wife hired this Missus Chadbourne to follow the love birds out there to round up evidence for a divorce?"

"Slim possibility. I'll check on it when I get out to Greenwich. Rettjer went to some pains to convince me his wife doesn't care enough about him to have him trailed."

"Never underestimate a woman who's about to

lose a fifty-million-dollar husband. Maybe she's not jealous; she can still be money-minded. Are you going to drive out to Old Town Point?"

"If you'll lend me the Porsche. I have an idea Lieutenant Dimmock may have one of his boys keeping an eye on my car."

"Why don't you let me drive you?"

"I'd like nothing better, Sib. But we'll have to postpone it. You're needed at the store. Alice will be doing nipups trying to cope with those cops. How about giving her a buzz now? See if you can find out how Baisha Gates made out with Dimmock."

"All right." Sibyl followed him into the cigar store on the corner, left the door of the phone booth open so he could hear.

"Protection Office, please ... Hello, Becky? ... Can you speak freely? Or is that sergeant still in your hair? ... Oh, he has ... Yes? ... Yes? ... And the other one? ... No! ... With Miss Gates? ... I'll tell him ... How's Al making out? ... I can believe it. ... Short-handed is right. ... No, he won't. ... Yes, I will ... Half hour or so Of course 'By."

She pushed the door wide open, stayed on the shelf seat. "They've relaxed the watch on the Rhine. The lieutenant's still with Miss Gates in Mister Grolheim's office; they've been in a huddle for three quarters of an hour, already."

"Don't like that."

"No. But Baisha's not the only one having her troubles. Al's standing on her head. Mister Stolz is raising the roof because he can't get in touch with you. More calls from the aisles than you and I and Press usually handle. Two detainees in the Interview

Room right now. And that Homicide sergeant has been taking all the calls at Becky's phone, up to a few minutes ago."

"Then what?"

"Becky doesn't know. Someone called in. Quinton asked some questions. Among other things he asked 'Hotel Herford?'—then after a bit he hung up, grabbed his hat, and left."

"Hm. I like that even less. Wonder who was telephoning him about my hotel?"

"Becky thought it was a woman calling." Sibyl dropped a dime in the slot, dialed her garage. "Could it have been Ruth Preston?"

"Doubt it."

"She rang you there last night."

"Sure, but she'd be the last person to unburden herself to anyone who might be a police officer. Ruth knows our office routine; she'd recognize a strange voice. No, it wouldn't have been Ruth."

Sibyl spoke to the garage, left orders for the sports car to be ready on the street, hung up.

Don said: "Chances are there's been a plain-clothes man hanging around the Herford for a couple of hours, hoping I'd show up. I don't want to oblige the Homicide squad that much. But I can't forget that Max took the key to my hotel room along with all my clothes."

She stared at him. "You think one of the others may have gone to your room, planted something for the police to pick up?"

"Afraid so."

"Then ... why don't I go there, beat the sergeant to it?"

He said: "I couldn't ask you to stick your neck out like that."

"You didn't ask me. I volunteered."

"It's a real risk, Sib. Whoever spotted me coming out of My's house this morning saw you with me. Maybe the description of you wasn't sufficient for Dimmock to recognize you. But there may have been additional identification by now."

"Don't be silly. If there had been, Quinton would have been asking Al or Becky a million questions about me; he saw me walk out of your office this morning. Let's get a move on."

They caught a cab.

"How will I get in your room?"

"Give me one of your cards, your Protection cards." He scribbled on it. "Don't go to the desk. At the right as you go in the lobby is a little stand like a minister's pulpit."

"The bell captain's station."

"Right. Ask for Tommy. If he's not around, Hap. Either one'll get the key from the desk. Just give 'em this card."

"What'll I look for when I get in?"

He scowled blankly at the photograph of the driver in the license frame. "No idea. My clothes, perhaps; they'd be sort of stained; they might be used to show I'd had a run-in with Max. Just have to use your head. Of course, if there's anything around that doesn't belong to me ... that'll be the plant."

"Do I hide whatever it is?"

"You couldn't hide anything in a hotel room from a fellow like Quinton. He'd know all the places. No. Bring it with you ... if you can." He put his arm

around her shoulders. "I don't like this at all ... but I can't figure any other way to work k. Of course this idea of a plant may be wrong."

She squeezed the hand on her shoulder. "I won't have much time. What if Quinton's there before me?"

"Tommy or Hap will know. They don't miss a trick, those bellhops. But once you're in the room you'll have to hurry."

"Where'll you wait for me?"

"In the cab. Around the corner. On Fifty-sixth."

The taxi stopped at the marquee with the giant Herford in multicolored glass.

Don said: "I've been thinking. The plant might be something of Grolheim's. To tie me in with him."

Sib hopped out. "I won't be long."

"Don't be. Good luck."

The cab rolled on around the corner.

Don smoked a cigarette, keeping an eye out for the sergeant. The twin streams of pedestrians pouring past the cab in opposite directions, crowding, jostling, seemed like the leads that were turning up in this mixed-up, multiple crime—robbery, kidnapping, murder. The motives of the hijackers were carrying them in one direction; they were in it for what they could get out of it in cash; they had been hired or, at least, tipped off to the possibility of stealing the sables. But it seemed clear now that someone had suggested the theft for purposes of his or her own, purposes having nothing to do with the loot, having much to do with jealousies and hatreds.

It shouldn't be difficult to round up Max's companion, the man with the bulgy spaniel eyes and the broken nose and the nasty smile. It certainly would

be easy to bring Missus Chadbourne to book, now her name, her description, and her profession were known. All that was needed was the assurance that Press and My were out of the hijackers' hands ... the rest was police routine.

But how about the instigator of the triple crime? Who' was the original guilty party?

The pneumatic hammers began pounding with venomous fury; he began to feel new aches from the beating. He had an overpowering feeling that Sib wasn't coming back to the cab, that the police were landing her, questioning her ... when he should be the one to undergo that ordeal.

He looked at his watch. Only seven minutes since she'd hurried into the Herford lobby. His watch must have stopped. No, still running.

Then he saw her. She was carrying his suitcase; passers-by were showing astonishment at a pretty girl lugging a suitcase.

He jumped out, took the valise.

"Any trouble, shug?" He helped her in.

"No," she said. "Tommy was fine. He went up with me, stood guard outside in the corridor."

"What's in here?" He tapped the suitcase.

"An overcoat," she said. "It was under your bed. All rolled up."

"Grolheim's?"

"No. It's an oxford gray. With black velvet lapels."

"Jim Preston's!" Don had seen it a thousand times.

Sibyl nodded, leaned toward him, whispering—

"The collar is simply caked with blood!"

CHAPTER 26

OLD TOWN FARM

THE SPORTS CAR TOOK THE PARKWAY HILLS LIKE A swallow, soaring and swooping. A freezing drizzle glazed the windshield, coating the highway with treacherous silver. Nevertheless, Don kept the speedometer at sixty.

He was becoming steadily more gloomy at the probable significance of Jim Preston's overcoat. It could not have been, as he had thought for a while, a warning that any further investigative activity might endanger Press's life. For if that had been the purpose of the plant, there would have been no point in tipping off the Homicide sergeant to a search of Don's room at the Herford. The only other possibility was that someone was determined to connect Don with the kidnapping.

The pattern was plain. Two of Amblett's men had been in charge of the crown sable garment when it had been snatched. Don had known about the plans for its delivery. One of the hijackers had been found murdered in the home of Amblett's buyer.

Grolheim had made at least four phone calls which might be interpreted as putting him in partnership with the criminals. Don himself had been forced into the unfortunate position of withholding important information from the police. The implication of an inside job, with Amblett's employees conniving at the scheme, could scarcely be stronger. If the overcoat had been found by Quinton it would have bolstered the suspicions aroused when someone had recognized Don at the time he left Grolheim's house.

He decided that it had been Missus Chadbourne who must have gone to his hotel room, equipped with the key Max had taken. The other man, the fellow with the broken nose and the bulgy spaniel eyes, would most likely have had to keep watch over Grolheim. Unless the original gang had been composed of more than three, only the brunette would have been available to plant the bloodstained overcoat. Why had she run a risk like that? How could she have dared to gamble that Don would not be in the room? Or had she been prepared to bargain with him if she had found him there?

The odds, he thought, were that if he had caught her in the Herford, she would have tried to talk her way out, relying on the fact that she had almost certainly saved his life. There was even the remote chance that she was ready to break with Broken Nose, unable to stomach the assault on Press, the murder of Max.

Perhaps she sensed that time was running out, that she'd better get on the right side of the law as fast as she could before she landed in a cell. Maybe she had suggested to Quinton that she would turn

state's evidence, had given him the tip-off about the planted overcoat as proof of her intentions.

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 kidnappers. 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 *escritoire*.

"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. Amblett's 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

MISS JOYNA RETTJER

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 teenager 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 Amblett's 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 kidnapped 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 kidnapping."

"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 kidnapping 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 Amblett's 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 damndest 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."

"Did she tell you about the fight I had with my father about Silly Inez?"

"No. When was that?"

"Last night. Outside the apartment house where she lives."

"What time?"

"About half-past seven or so. Oh, I screamed and carried on something frightful. But it didn't do any good. He just told me I needed a good whaling ..."

"He might have something there."

"Hoh! I'd like to see any man try it... unless I wanted him to. Anyway, I couldn't stop my father

from going to her goddamn birthday party but I gave her fair warning what I'd do if she wore that goddamn coat."

"You gave her a number of warnings, didn't you? Those jerk jingles?"

She squealed in delight. "How did you know? Pretty cute, weren't they? Did Silly Inez show them to you?"

"Yep."

"She didn't show you the best one, though. She hasn't even heard it yet." Joyna chanted in a shrill sing-song:

"You think you'll be dressed up to kill
But I'm the one who really will."

"How do you like that?"

"Kid stuff," he said.

"Hoh! You think so? She won't think so. That's what I'm going to recite to her just before I use this gun on her tonight."

CHAPTER 28

DELIVERED TO MISS INEZ

DON SWUNG THE SPORTS CAR INTO THE STREAM OF trucks and tractor trailers on the Post Road. It was almost dark and much colder; the sleet had turned to a hard, gritty snow. "Trouble with you is, you haven't any more sense than to mean it."

"Why shouldn't I mean it!" Joyna cried. "I'm not going to let that Silly Inez steal my father!"

"You won't see much of your father if you shoot her. They'd put you where you couldn't skip out as easily as you did from your home just now."

"They wouldn't do much to me if I kill her."

"Think not?"

"I'd get off easy. They'd have to try me in Juvenile Court; I'm underage. Those judges would be pigeons for me." She put a sob in her voice. "I was brought up in a broken home ... I did it to keep Mommy and Daddy together."

"You were brought up spoiled rotten. You're acting like this because you're not getting as much attention as you'd like. Any judge would see through

your tantrums in a minute."

Joyna laughed. "That's what you think. I'd cry and rave and fall off the stand in a faint. Besides, my father can afford to hire the best psychiatrists to prove I'm not morally responsible for my acts." She moaned piteously. "Everything went black ... I don't remember pulling the trigger."

"You're not going to pull any trigger."

"No? Hoh! Wait and see." She slid away from him. "Think you can get the gun away from me?"

"I'll let your father do that. I'm going to take you to him."

"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 kidnapped 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 gun 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 decor 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 light. 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

PAINTING THE TOWN

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 Amblett's 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 kidnappers 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 kidnappers. 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 man-proof 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

A LATE-MODEL PONTIAC

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 kidnaper's 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 kidnappers 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 "taking 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 kidnappers' 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 Amblett's 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 kidnappers would know that. Not Rettjer's, that wouldn't have any Amblett's connotation. Neither would the Buckingham. 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 kidnappers 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 ... 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

A BLINDING FLASH

"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 applectart. 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. Army had to improvise to protect himself and cover up for you. The kidnapping 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."

The station wagon climbed the ramp, joined the trickle of traffic moving northward on the expressway.

Missus Chadbourne said suddenly: "You know so goddamn much about it, what's the use of my trying

to tell you the truth?"

"Might be a novel experience. Might try it ... just for kicks. And maybe to save your own skin."

"Go to hell." She sulked, refusing to say another syllable.

The storm grew worse. Rain lashed against the windshield. The highway became a sheet of glare ice. Whitecaps showed against the dark mirror of the Hudson. At the parkway toll gates by Spuyten Duyvil the policeman stepped out of his booth, came close to the car on her side.

Is he checking on that alarm Dimmock must have sent out? Man with prematurely white hair, a white mustache, a banged-up face?

But the cop said only: "Take it easy, folks. Road's slippery as greased glass."

Don leaned across her to pay the toll. "We'll watch it, officer."

Later she said: "I could have turned you in then."

"Not without turning yourself in, too."

The clock on the dash said eight, eight-fifteen, eight-thirty. There was no more conversation. Don was glad of the stinging rain, the bitter cold; it kept him awake ... and the sucking of the tires on the wet ice was making him unutterably sleepy.

For just a moment, after they had crossed the Connecticut line, he dozed off.

Awoke to the sickening sensation of a skid.

The station wagon was slipping sideways down a long hill with a curve at the bottom, a white culvert.

He had a split-second picture of Missus Chadbourne, with clenched teeth and contorted face, fighting the wheel.

Then a spinning, a shock which slammed him headfirst into the windshield, pain dissolving in a blinding flash of light.

CHAPTER 32

TOO MANY IN THE KNOW

THE SOFT GLOW FROM A PINK LAMPSHADE SPILLED claret over a white candlewick spread. It took Don a while, after opening his eyes, to realize that the winy light made the fingers of his left hand appear bloody.

He wriggled his fingers. They were caked with blood.

It came back to him slowly. The lurching skid. The sickening spin. Throwing his hand up to protect his eyes. The crash.

He felt as if he ought to be in a hospital. But this was no private ward. Venetian blinds, television set, a door with a white Regulations card tacked to it, a wheat-colored writing table. On the table was a cowhide brief case. Rettjer's brief case.

"Don't tell me," growled an unpleasant voice, "you didn't fracture y' freakin' skull! We were just getting ready to report you as an accident fatality."

Turning his neck brought a sharp pain, but Don twisted around enough to see a bony fist with a sapphire ring as large as brass knuckles. His eyes

traveled up to the stub of cigar drooping from a smirking mouth, the broken nose, the bulgy brown eyes. Arny.

"Been better if you'd cracked up permanently, Cadee. Saved everybody a mess of trouble." The man on the other bed flourished a gun for emphasis. Don's .45.

"Pleasure to disappoint you," Don muttered.

"It won't be any pleasure," Arny answered. "We'll just have to finish what that bang against the windshield started. No other way now."

"Sure." Don shifted painfully to raise on one elbow. "I can tell you a better way."

"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, mister."

Arny said: "I'd rather break that kind of rock once, quick, than spend the rest of my life on a rockpile with a sledge. We can't set this store dick loose like Grolheim."

Don rubbed the back of his hand on the candlewick. "It won'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 knows I came out to Connecticut tonight. If you knock me in the head, it'll only be one more step toward that chair you never get up out of, on your own."

"He's so right, Arny," she said earnestly.

"He's a slick talker, Gretchen." Arny smiled, but there was nothing agreeable about it. "We can't fall for that guff. Once he got in court he'd change his tune. He wants to get even for his buddy."

Don kept anger out of his voice. "I can't do anything for Jim Preston now. But I'll make a bargain with you. Let My Grolheim go. You say you're not afraid he might testify against you. Give him the keys to his station wagon, turn him loose."

Arny asked: "What's your side of the bargain?"

"I'll show you how you can get out of a jam with no more than a slap on the wrist. If you don't think it will work, you can do what you want with me ... so you're not taking any chance."

Gretchen Chadbourne cried: "Arny! Take him up on it! What can we lose?"

Arny said: "Let's have this allagazam—we're-in-the-clear dope first."

"No," Don said. "Let My go, first. And let me talk to him. To make sure he's all right."

"He's not." Arny hefted the gun by the barrel as if weighing its usefulness as a club. "I told you. He's gaga. I'll show you. Bring the whack in here, Gretchen."

She hurried out.

Arny said: "You can give out now, Cadee. She don't have to know."

"For my deal she does. She saved my life once. I told her I'd try to return the compliment. I mean to, if I can. If you bop me with that gun, you'll both be dead ducks. I don't happen to think she's guilty of much beyond agreeing to do a favor for a friend."

She returned, pushing Grolheim before her.

The fur buyer's eyes were bright but his skin was sallow, his facial muscles were relaxed as if he'd just wakened. He walked slowly, stepping carefully as if his feet were sinking into deep muck. "Well, of all

people," he said cheerfully. "I certainly am glad to see you, Don."

He didn't mention the blood on your face, your hand. Maybe he thinks it all came from that beating Max gave you. "They treat you okay, My?"

"No complaints." Grolheim sat down on the other end of the bed from Arny. "I'm a little tired of ham-burg sandwiches, though." He closed his eyes as if exhausted.

Arny said: "We got the dough. It's over there on the desk. I'll give you your share in a minute."

"No hurry." Grolheim flapped a hand up negligently. "No rush. I'm not worried about the money. Everything's all right, now Don's here."

Missus Chadbourne beamed: "You see, Mister Cadee?"

Don said: "Everything's not all right with Jim Preston, is it, My?"

The fur buyer roused himself as if from a day-dream. He shook his head like a dog coming out of the water. "No," he said more loudly. "Of course it isn't, Don." His shoulders straightened. "They killed Preston, you know that? They murdered him in cold blood. They'll have to pay for that, won't they, Don?"

Arny spoke savagely. "You'll pay, you weasly son of a bitch. Take him back, Gretchen. They'll both pay now. This one goes first!"

She cried: "No, no more, Arny! Don't! You'll ... you'll have to kill me, too, if you do it. I won't stand for it—I won't—I won't—"

Strong light filtered in through the Venetians.

"Shut up," Arny whispered. "Car outside. Stopping here." He crept to the window, lifted a slat, peered

out.

Don slid his feet over the side of the bed.

Sib, he thought She followed us somehow!

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8301 lakeview Parkway
Suite 111-164
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