

"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 Cadee . . . 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

"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 Stoltz 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 Amblettes Fifth Avenue." He described her as carefully as he could. "A good-looking teen-ager, 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

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 Ambletts 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 Stoltz 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 Ambletts, 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 teen-age 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 co-operate 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 Psyk 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 overwrought teen-ager is likely to make. It may have no relevance whatever."

"I'd say it's loaded with relevance," Don said gravely.

• • • • Chapter 23

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 banquette, 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 Psyk 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 melee at Greenwich."

"She was arrested? In Connecticut?"

"With a bunch of other teen-age terrors. They were having one of those juvenile open-house shindigs . . . and they began to outdare 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 Ambletts?"

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 teenager 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 damnedest 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 troublemaking teen-ager, 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

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 kidnapers 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. "Stars 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 teevee 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 Nelly may be able to help you, Miss Forde. Miss Nelly sold that sequined turquoise you asked about."

Miss Nelly 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 kidnapers 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 somewhere 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**

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 it. 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, kidnaping, 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 Chadbouren 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 holding 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

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 kidnaping.

The pattern was plain. Two of Ambletts' 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 Ambletts' 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 Ambletts employees conning 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 murderer 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.