

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 mishappenstance. 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 Ambletts 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

"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 Ambletts. 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 co-operate, 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 Amblettes' men long before then if I can't find a short cut on my own." He spread his hands. "Maybe you'd prefer to get hold of the Buckinghurst 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 Wexberg?" 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.

"Wexberg'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 Wexberg for me . . . all right, Jimmy, it's all right, I know you couldn't keep Mister Cadee from coming up . . . just get Mister Wexberg, 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. Wexberg 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 hair-do 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

"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, Ambletts, on Fifth Avenue; so do these two friends of mine. Earlier tonight they went to the Buckinghurst 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

DON CAME OUT OF THE STROMBOLI TO THE BITING WIND WHISLING 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 co-operation 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 plain-clothes 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 Ambletts 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 Ambletts' 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 Ambletts 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 Ambletts." Don was blunt.

"You don't know for sure that there was a kidnaping." 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

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, shug; 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 kidnapers 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 kidnapers 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 slinky 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 Ambletts 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.

• • • • Chapter 10

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*

"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 wheatcakes. What I trust is a promise from this—" His lips flattened against his teeth, the gun jumped forward a couple of inches.

"*Maxie!*" 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 fuddle 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 up. 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

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 Ambletts 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, shug." 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 connive 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

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 busses, 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 Stoltz." 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 Amblettes 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 Stoltz 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 Stoltz 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 Gates'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 blabbing 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 salesbooks 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 teen-ager. 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

"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