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ROBERT ARCHER

A DOCK-FRONT MURDER CREATES PANIC IN

DEATH ON THE WATERFRONT

DEATH ON THE WATERFRONT is a particularly notable first book because, in a field congested with innumerable stories, the author has succeeded in discovering an original setting for a mystery yarn.

The locale is the waterfront of New York, a world to itself, which is practically isolated from the city proper. Here, where for generations there has been a bitter struggle between steamship owners and the longshoremen, Mr. Archer has laid the framework for a most unusual first mystery.

The discovery of a body whose throat was pierced by a longshoreman's hook constituted the opening move in a game of murder destined to shift from the waterfront to a New Jersey country home, and which was to involve personal hatreds as well as labor conflicts.

Robert Archer has produced an exceptionally wellplotted and realistically written story with excitement and drama enough to satisfy the most demanding reader.

DEATH on the Waterfront



By ROBERT ARCHER





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FIRST EDITION

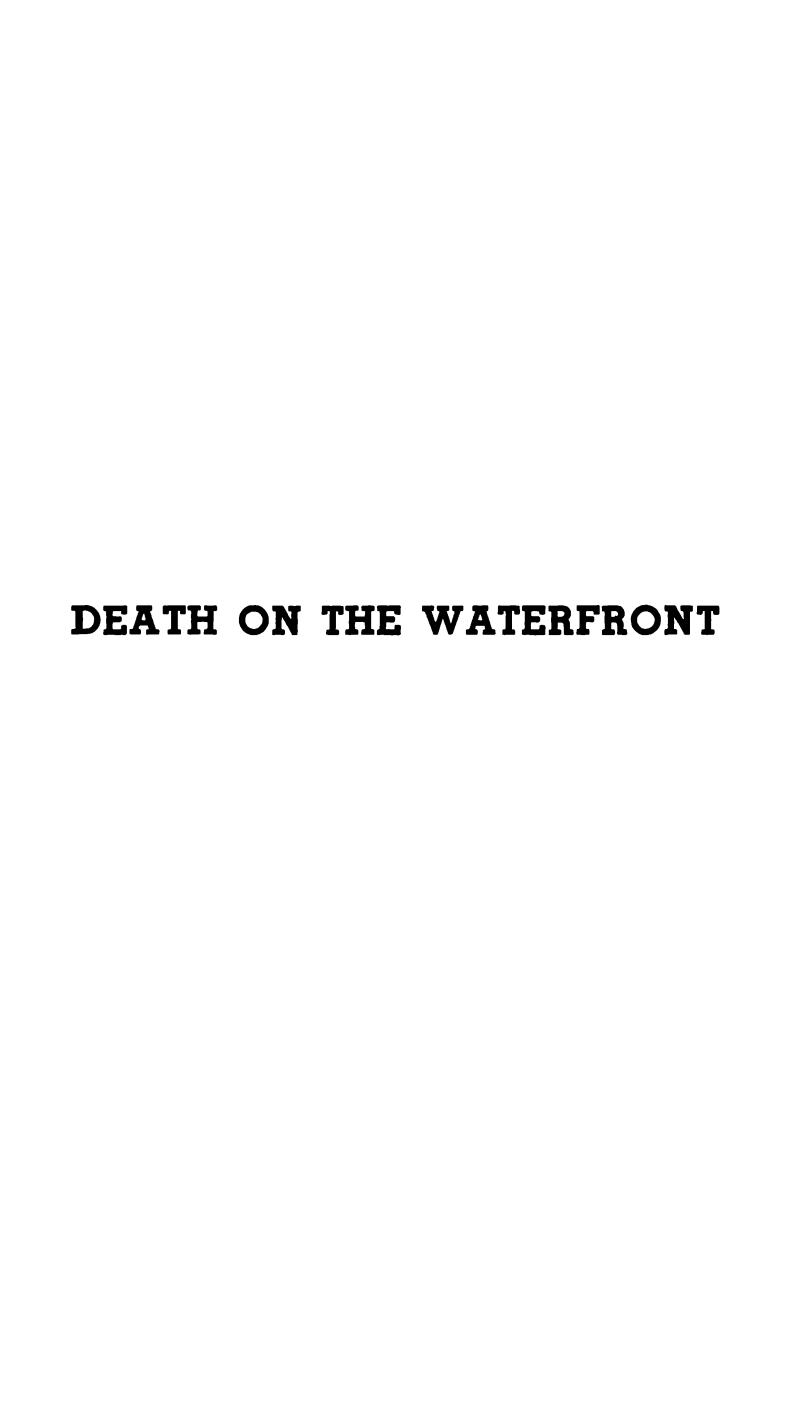
This is a work of fiction, in which the characters and incidents are wholly imaginary.

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PART ONE

1. Accident

A WHISTLE SHRILLED out of the darkness of the forward hold, and the winchman's assistant, standing with one foot on the hatch combing, gestured upward with the palm of his right hand. The winch operator pushed a lever, and the steel cable began to move out of the shadowy hole, glistening iridescent as the morning sun struck rusted metal. The winch engine coughed asthmatically, causing the even flow of the cable to become a series of spasmodic jerks. The winchman's lips formed the word: "Easy." His face was worried.

The engine coughed again, jerking the cable; there was a sharp twang, and a steel strand parted and unwound, the frayed end lashing out like a striking snake. The signalman leaped back from the hatch combing. He shouted an agonized warning:

"Look out below!"

From the dockside someone shouted: "There she goes!"

The winchman jockeyed his controls, trying desperately to ease the heavy sling load over the combing of the hatch onto the ship's deck. The sling rose past the edge of the hold, swaying slightly; it seemed that she was going to make it, but the unraveled strand of cable caught in the pulley block above, and the sling swayed and bumped against the hatch combing. The weakened, rusty cable parted. The sling load struck the hatch combing and turned over, raining metal bars down into the hold like shrapnel.

There was a second of interminable, paralyzed silence, as though some invisible force had stopped the plunging metal and held it suspended in the still air of the hold, just as the watchers held their breath locked in their chests—then the bars landed in a series of hollow, muffled booms, and, rising out of the dark mouth of the hold, heard on the dockside even above the cannonading of falling iron, scream after scream, too sharp and agonized to imagine coming from a human throat. The screams stopped suddenly. A bustling confusion followed the accident.

Presently, out in East Street, an ambulance came jangling its way through the halted traffic and swerved in at the big double doors of the dock. In the pool hall directly across the street from Pier 40 longshoremen crowded to the door and windows, some with cues still in their hands. A tall, slim-hipped man wearing a leather windbreaker and blue serge pants laid his cue carefully on the green table top and elbowed his way through the men at the door.

"I'm going over to see what happened," he said.

"Go get 'em, Jack. That's the third in three days."

"God damn Murdock and his lousy, rotten equipment to hell."

"Damn bosses in general. Why discriminate?"

"There's good and bad. I worked in Frisco and Galveston. Murdock and Eastcoast stink so's you can smell 'em clear out there."

The man who had damned all bosses laughed. "It's not the bosses that's different—it's the unions. They got real organization out there: decent wages and working conditions and even hiring halls. You don't have to scrap each other to get a job out there, and the union refuses to work with worn-out equipment. What the hell anybody that ever worked out there ever came East for is more than I can see."

"You talk like a Red. What'd you come East for yourself?"

"I didn't. I've lived on this water front all my life. I got a wife and two kids. This is my home."

A dark-skinned, squat little man said earnestly: "You tella me just one thing. We gotta union, too, is so? We gotta rid of the labor fakers and the racketeers now, is so?"

"You got Jackson to thank for that." The speaker nodded in the direction of the pier gates through which the man in the leather windbreaker had disappeared.

"Sure, Colletti," one of the men said to the squat man, "you're right's far as you go. Jackson drove Fink Weller and his goons out of the union. But how do we know Jackson's any better? How do we know he won't sell us out just like Weller did? That old potbellied pie-card artist Mellus is still president, ain't he?"

"Sure, he'sa president," said Colletti. "You elected him, is so? You got union meeting regular now, is so? You elect who you want."

"Boy, he's got something there. Weller never held one union meeting in all the time he ran the union. You took what he told you and liked it."

"You got meeting now," Colletti insisted. "You got no more kickback. You vote for what you want; you get it."

"Right in the neck," laughed another longshoreman. "You're screwy, Wop."

"You see!" Colletti nodded his head vigorously. "Jackson beata Fink Weller. He beata Murdock, too, pretty soon. We get new contract, good pay, no more accidents. You come union meeting. You vote; you see."

The figure of the man in the leather windbreaker appeared in the pier door and came threading his way toward them through the rumbling traffic of East Street.

"Shut up, you mugs. Jack's comin' back."

The men surged out and surrounded Jackson as he reached the sidewalk.

"What happened?"

"Anybody hurt bad?"

"What'd you tell the boss Stevie, Jack?"

Jackson held up his hand, his face serious and unsmiling. "Cable

broke," he said. "Dumped a couple of tons of scrap iron back into the hold. Old man Kelly's dead. That Negro kid, Marty Jefferson, got both his legs broken. Is there somebody here knows Kelly's old lady?"

"I do." It was the man who had cursed all bosses.

"Go on over there," said Jackson. "Better somebody she knows tells her than have her get it from a cop."

"Jefferson?" asked one of the men. "That's the kid won the Golden Gloves, ain't it?"

"Yeah. He won't fight no more for a while."

"How long is this going to keep up, Jack?" asked one of the men. "God Almighty, can't we do something?"

Jackson looked at the man. "This is your union as well as mine. What do you think we ought to do?"

"Strike," shouted someone. "That's what I say."

Jackson turned his head. Then he turned back to the man who had asked the question.

"Someone said, 'Strike.' Is that what you think?"

"I don't know," said the man. "That's for you fellows on the Negotiating Committee to decide."

Jackson sighed. "I'm going up to the hall to see Mellus," he said. "Any of you men want to come along?"

He turned without waiting for an answer and strode off up the street. Several of the men followed.

Jackson pushed open the door marked "Office" at the rear of the Union Hall. Fat Mellus, the union president, sat at his desk leaning back in a swivel chair, reading the morning paper. He looked up and said, "Hello, Jack. Hello, boys. What is this—a delegation?"

The men who had followed Jackson crowded into the room. They stood silent in a semicircle while Jackson explained tersely what had happened on Pier 40.

"Christ, that's too bad," said Mellus. "I knowed old man Kelly

all my life. His missus'll take it hard." His chins quivered. The small eyes peered up out of the red face at the men standing behind Jackson. There was a grease stain on his bulging vest.

"It's too much," said Jackson. "It's the last straw. I'm going to see Murdock and I thought you might want to come along."

"Now, now," said Mellus, "you know we can't do that, Jack. Murdock's a busy man. Besides, we got a meeting with him for two o'clock this afternoon to discuss the new contract. We can take it up then."

"I'm taking it up now," said Jackson. "You want to come?"

"Kinda highhanded, ain't ya, Jack? Undemocratic. Seems to me the committee should discuss this thing before we go barging in on Murdock."

"The committee has discussed it. We've raved about overloaded slings and rotten equipment till we're black in the face. Now it's time to do something."

"It'sa not time," said Colletti. "It'sa past time."

Mellus pushed up on the arms of his chair and got slowly and heavily to his feet. "Okay," he said. "Whatever you boys say. But I wouldn't want to be the one responsible for upsetting Murdock and making him refuse to sign that contract."

"He'll refuse anyway," said one of the men. "Murdock don't want to sign no contract with anybody but Fink Weller and his goon squad."

Mellus looked at the man. "Weller and his goon squad's gone," he said. "This is a real union now."

"He'll be back. I'm from the Southwest," said the man. "A Missouri mule, that's me."

"You're a jackass," said Mellus heavily. He continued to look at the man with his hard little eyes. The man looked away.

"Come on," Mellus said to Jackson. "You want to talk to Murdock. We'll go talk to him. I'm president of this union, and you're a business agent. I guess between us we got a right to speak for the membership."

"Wait a minute," said Jackson. "Collettil" He turned to the little

Italian. "You're a member of the Negotiating Committee—come along."

Jackson strode through the business-office entrance to the pier and took the steps two at a time to the second floor. Mellus puffed and panted in his wake, with Colletti, his swarthy face dark with righteous indignation, bringing up the rear. The union president's movements, conditioned by his girth, were usually slow and ponderous, and he had had difficulty keeping up with the younger and fitter men on their walk from the Union Hall. Jackson looked back, and his eyes crinkled at the corners, watching the fat man heave laboriously up the stairs.

"How long since you did an honest day's work, Jim?" "Go to hell," wheezed Mellus.

Jackson laughed. "Age before beauty." He propelled Mellus ahead of him through the swinging doors into the outer office of the shipping company.

A middle-aged clerk with tired eyes stood up behind the gate in the railing which divided the office in half. Mellus said: "We'd like to see Mr. Murdock. It's important. We're from the Longshore Union."

"He's busy," said the clerk shortly. "Perhaps his secretary will see you."

Mellus hesitated, and Jackson pushed by him and confronted the clerk. "We'll pass up the pleasure of talking to Nellie Cosimo," he said.

A stenographer giggled, and Jackson paused to grin at her. She lowered her eyes demurely, and Jackson turned back to the clerk. "Look, brother. You've got your job, and we've got ours. You can't keep us out, so just stand aside." He reached over and unhooked the gate and strode through, followed by the protestations of the clerk. Mellus caught his sleeve.

"This ain't smart, Jack," he said. "The old man's liable to lower the boom on us for this."

Jackson removed the fat man's hand from his sleeve. "Not on you, Jim," he said. "He wouldn't do that to a nice old guy like you."

Colletti grinned, and Mellus' face purpled, but Jackson turned his back on him and went through the door marked "Private," into a large, square office with windows facing East Street. A square-headed, square-shouldered man with a mop of sandy hair sat behind a big desk. A woman seated beside the desk had her head turned and was looking over her shoulder at the door. She was a big black-haired woman with snapping eyes.

The man and the woman both spoke at once. The man said, "What do you mean barging in here like this?"

The woman said: "Get out, you roustabouts, before I call the police."

Jackson paid no attention to them. His eyes were on a side door of the office that was just swinging shut. He had just a glimpse of a man's shoulder and one trouser leg. The man seemed to be in a hurry. Jackson took two long steps across the room and snatched at the door, but it was locked, and by the time he got it open the hall was empty. The hall led around a corner to the stairs, and the man was probably halfway down to the street by now. Jackson closed the door and dashed to a front window, but here a projection obstructed the view, and he could not see the entrance to the dock. He shrugged his shoulders and turned back into the room.

A tableau of startled faces—Mellus, Colletti, and the clerk at the door, the man and the woman at the desk—greeted him. The faces registered emotions varying from surprise to outrage. He grinned. "Sorry, Murdock, I thought I saw a friend of mine."

"You big ape," screamed the woman. She was standing now, nearly as tall as Jackson and all but inarticulate with rage. "You belong in a cage, and I'm going to see you're put there." She caught up the receiver of a desk phone, but the sandy-haired man reached out, took it from her, and replaced it.

"Sit down, Miss Cosimo," he said. "I'll handle this if you don't

mind." He jabbed a blunt forefinger at the clerk. "Get out and close the door."

The clerk exited with alacrity; the secretary relaxed into her chair slowly and unwillingly, her hot, black eyes on Jackson.

"I'd hate to meet you in a dark alley, Nell," said Jackson.

"All right," said the big man at the desk, "cut out the monkey business. Now that you are in here what do you want?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Mr. Murdock-" began Mellus.

Jackson cut in. "You heard about old man Kelly, didn't you?" Murdock nodded. "I thought that might be it. That's why I can overlook your slamming in here the way you did. I don't blame you boys for being a little upset. I'm upset myself. Kelly worked for Eastcoast a long time."

"Twenty backbreaking years," said Jackson, "and what did he get for it? His brains knocked out with an iron bar."

"Take it easy," said Murdock. "I told you I know how you feel, but accidents will happen. And I'll tell you boys something else. I've already arranged to see that Mrs. Kelly is taken care of. There's a job for her right here in my office."

"A job," said Jackson. "Scrubbing floors?"

"Well," said Murdock, "what do you want me to do, make her general manager?"

Colletti growled deep in his throat, and Jackson glanced at him and shook his head warningly. The little Italian was a firebrand and had to be controlled to keep him from going berserk.

"The union'll take care of Mrs. Kelly," said Mellus with heavy dignity. "You don't have to do anything about her, Mr. Murdock. What the union wants you to do is something that will prevent these accidents. The men are getting pretty hard to handle because of them."

"Negligence," said Miss Cosimo, "gross negligence—that's what it was. We received the report this morning that the winchman was responsible."

"Winchman?" exploded Jackson. "Rotten cables, worn-out ma-

chinery, overloaded slings—that's the answer. Now let's quit stalling. What are you going to do about it, Murdock?"

Colletti nodded his head violently. That was the kind of talk he had come to hear.

"I could say I don't like your tone and to get out of here," said Murdock, "but I won't. All our equipment is tested and examined regularly, but I'll order a special investigation, and if anything is found that endangers the men it'll be replaced immediately. That satisfy you?"

"We don't wanta satisfaction," Colletti burst out. "We wanta new rigging, that's all."

"I think that's fine," Mellus said hastily.

Colletti looked at him in disgust.

"Will you write a clause specifying new equipment and maximum sling loads into the new contract?" asked Jackson.

"I'm discussing the new contract with your Negotiating Committee this afternoon. You can take that up then. You boys'll have to get out of here now. I'm busy."

"How about that winchman? The police don't think he was responsible. Do you?"

"If the police are satisfied I am," said Murdock. "Just an unavoidable accident, I'd say."

As they turned to leave Colletti said something to Nellie Cosimo in rapid Italian. The woman's face darkened, but she bit her lip and did not reply.

Outside the office Jackson grinned and asked the little Italian what he had said.

"I say I think maybe she's adouble-cross Italian working people." Colletti's brown eyes flashed angrily. "I say maybe I cut her heart out."

Jackson put his hand on the little man's shoulder. "That's no talk for a union representative," he said, trying to keep the amusement out of his voice.

Colletti shook his head. "I don'ta say it as union man. I speaka Italiano. She understand."

Jackson patted his shoulder and gave up.

Mellus said, "That old redheaded pug-ugly Murdock was pretty meek, considering the way we busted in on him."

"He'sa maybe scared a little bit," said Colletti proudly.

Jackson pursed his lips thoughtfully. "We kept him from firing the winchman anyway. As far as the rest of it goes it doesn't mean a thing till it's down on paper."

"I guess you're right." Mellus heaved his big bulk out through the street door into the sunlight. He was sweating and he took out a big blue handkerchief and mopped his face. "Think he'll sign that contract?"

Jackson shook his head.

"What'll we do if he don't?"

"I don't know," said Jackson.

"I think we ought to strike."

Jackson looked into the little hard eyes, and this time it was Mellus who looked away. A ghost of a smile curled Jackson's lips. "I know you do," he said.

Mellus left Jackson and Colletti in front of the Union Hall, walked west two blocks, and caught a bus. In the bus he sat wheezing and drumming nervously with his hairy fingers on the seat. The interview with Murdock had upset him. He was getting too old for this sort of thing. Fight, fight, fight all the time—he was tired of it. He looked wistfully out the bus window at the shop fronts. If Mollie had only lived maybe he would have gotten out of the union and bought a little business like she had wanted him to. Then he would have some peace and quiet. But Mollie was dead, and it was too late to get out now. He hadn't saved any money and he didn't know anything except trade-union work. His self-pity slopped over, and his eyes became a little moist. He sighed gustily and then looked around to see if anyone was watching him.

He climbed out of the bus after it had gone a dozen blocks,

walked west again a half block, and grunted his way up the steep stoop of a frowzy four-story brick house that had a sign in the window that said, "Vacancy."

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Mellus," said the woman who opened the door. She was of indeterminate age with traces of former attractiveness that she made the most of. She was not the type of woman who runs to fat, and her figure, though a little angular, was still passably good. She had a sharp, thin face and a voice to match.

"Uh-huh, it's me," puffed Mellus. "Doc Painter in?"

"He's asleep. He worked overtime last night."

Mellus pushed past her into the hall. "I'll go up and rout him out. He's got a meeting this afternoon."

"Is he working for the union now? He didn't tell me anything." Mellus gave the woman a sly look. "He's workin' for the union but he ain't gettin' paid for it. Them days is gone forever. Tough, ain't it?"

"What do I care as long as he pays the rent?" The woman turned her back huffily and disappeared down the dingy, smelly hall. Mellus was chuckling wheezily when he banged his fist on a door upstairs.

A key turned in the lock, and a face that was mostly nose peered out. "Oh, it's you, Jim," said the face. "Come in."

Painter was wearing tight-fitting dungarees and a singlet. His bare arms were long and lean, with a black matting of hair on the forearms and wrists and hands. There were a lot of jokes about what a shame it was that Doc Painter couldn't grow hair on his head the way he did on the rest of his anatomy. His high, narrow forehead continued straight up over a bare, bumpy scalp, and the bald dome, long-beaked nose and scrawny, corded neck made him look like a bird of prey. His rapacious appearance was offset, however, by a record that had won him the respect of his union brothers despite the fact that he had been a paid business agent under the old racketeering leadership. Even in the old days Doc Painter had earned the reputation of being a square shooter, never taking a kickback or selling a union card or pulling any of the other

phony rackets that were expected of labor-faking union officials as a matter of course. As a result, when the racketeering Weller was finally exposed and thrown out of the union Doc had been elected as a member of the committee to negotiate a new contract with the Eastcoast Steamship Company.

Having swung the door wide to admit Mellus, Painter closed it again and stood rubbing the back of a thumbnail across his stubby chin and looking at the union president.

"What induced you to cart your fat carcass all the way up here?" he asked.

Mellus did not answer immediately. He lowered himself into an overstuffed chair with a long sigh and looked around the large, well-furnished room.

"You've got a nice place here, Doc," he said. "What's it set you back?"

"Eight bucks a week."

"And I pay seven for that joint of mine." Mellus sighed again. "You've got a pretty nice-looking landlady, too, and I've got an old hag. Say, Doc, you wouldn't be puttin' out anything besides cash for this joint, would you?"

Painter said without rancor: "Why, you fat, evil-minded old son of a bitch, Kate's a respectable woman. She's an old friend of mine." He paused and looked thoughtfully at Mellus. "You didn't come up here to insult my landlady. What's on your mind?"

"Nothing much. Just wanted to talk to you about that meeting this afternoon."

"What about it?" Painter started the hot water running in the washbasin in one corner of the room and took a shaving mug, brush, and straight razor from the medicine cabinet above the bowl. While they talked he lathered his face and shaved, drawing the keen edge of the razor over his leathery skin in long, sure strokes.

"Crane cable broke on Pier 40 this morning," said Mellus. "Old man Kelly was killed and another fellow had his legs broke."

"It's happened before," said Painter bitterly. "We got to do something about these accidents."

"The boys are getting pretty impatient. They're talking strike." Mellus looked at Painter out of the corner of his eye.

Painter apparently didn't see the look. "I'm for it myself," he said, speaking out of the side of his mouth opposite the razor. "That is, if old Murdock doesn't sign the new contract."

"He won't," said Mellus.

"I know it."

Mellus didn't say anything, and Painter turned and looked at him. "Well?"

"Jackson's against it. He says we're not ready."

"You're president of the union, ain't you?"

"Yeah. But Jackson's the one the men'll listen to. They think he's a regular tin Jesus since he led the fight against Weller."

"Too bad you didn't have a little more guts yourself," said Painter dryly.

"It wasn't guts—I was dumb. What's that the Reds always say? No confidence in the masses."

"Crap," said Painter. He put down the razor and wiped his face on a towel. "How many of the committee'll vote strike? There's you and me and that hotheaded little wop, Colletti. And young Burke, too, probably. How about Jackson's buddy?"

"Whitey Gordon? He's for strike. He told me so a couple days ago."

"So that's five out of eight. That leaves Riorden, Sangster, and Jackson. You talk to Riorden, and he'll probably see it our way. So we call a meeting tonight and outvote Jackson. That's all."

"It's got to be ratified by the membership," objected Mellus.

"The membership'll back up the committee. They're hot for strike anyway."

"How'll we handle it so the committee members don't change their minds when Jackson gets to work on them?"

Painter kicked a chair around and sat down in front of Mellus.

"Here's how we handle it," he said. "You and me don't start the strike talk, see? We let young Gordon handle it. Then it'll develop into a battle between Jackson and his side-kick, and when we side with Gordon that'll settle it."

"Okay," said Mellus. "I think we gotta strike. It's a chance, but we gotta take it."

"So do I," said Painter. "Jackson's wrong, that's all."

"You think he's okay?" asked Mellus.

Painter's face showed surprise. "Don't you?"

Mellus stood up. "I don't know," he said.

"It stands to reason Murdock's got a stool pigeon in the outfit somewhere," said Painter quietly, "but I don't think it's Jackson. You better not let him or the boys hear you."

Mellus nodded. "No, I guess it ain't Jackson," he said. He moved toward the door. "I gotta get on back to the hall. When'll I see you?"

"Soon as I get some breakfast," said Painter. He winked. "My landlady makes it for me."

2. Rat

There was a shiny black car with sporty trimmings parked in front of Danny's Bar when Jackson turned the corner into East Street. He slowed to examine it. A car like that on East Street, on a night when there were no sailings, spelled racket with a capital R, and so did the man in the black chesterfield and pearl-gray snapbrim hat who sat in the open front door.

The man was playing with a half-grown brindle puppy, cuffing and tumbling it, his white hand darting in and out like the head of a striking snake, but always avoiding the small, sharp, snapping teeth. He did not speak or laugh as the average man does under similar circumstances but was serious and intent, as though it were of prime importance to him to be able to worry and annoy the dog without being bitten. Jackson knew the type and felt sorry for the little dog if it should succeed in catching the deftly moving hand.

Jackson paused in the doorway; the man looked up, his eyes like red glass in the reflected light of Danny's neon signs. There was something familiar about the face, and Jackson wondered where he had seen it before.

Inside Danny's the tables in the front room were empty, but a dozen customers lined the long bar, and a lone hooker sat in the rear room, drinking beer and peering out through the archway in the latticed partition with predatory eyes. Jackson walked past a drunken longshoreman and a water-front burn trying to wheedle a drink and squeezed himself in beside two seamen from the pier of the Holland American Line who were jabbering Dutch at each other.

"Beer," he grunted at the white-coated bartender.

He passed a long-fingered hand over his face and looked at his reflection in the bar mirror. The blue eyes of the reflection peered back at him quizzically from a leathery, tanned face.

"Has Whitey Gordon been in?" he asked as the bartender slid his beer over the wet bar.

"Haven't seen him. He'll be along though. He always comes in for a beer before a union meeting."

Jackson nodded. He drank half of the beer and then set the glass down and stared thoughtfully at the amber contents. Had it really been Whitey whose trouser leg he had seen going out the private door of Murdock's office? What would Whitey be doing hobnobbing with the boss?

Jackson thought of the tight spots he and Whitey had been in together. They had organized the first rank-and-file group in the union two years ago when they had to meet in cellars and back rooms to keep Weller from finding out who the leaders were and blackballing them. All through those tough days youthful, stubby, pug-nosed Whitey had fought with him shoulder to shoulder against the union's racketeering leadership, never once faltering

or crying quits. Now that the fight was practically won it was ridiculous to think of Gordon turning yellow. It was worse than ridiculous—it was a breach of faith. And yet, why was Whitey in Murdock's office?

Jackson frowned and shook his head at his reflection. If you don't trust Gordon whom will you trust? he asked himself. You've got to trust someone, you suspicious idiot.

A voice at his elbow said, "Hi, Jack," and he looked down to see Gordon's round face, topped by its pale yellow thatch, grinning up at him.

"What were you doing in Murdock's office this morning?" he asked without preamble.

Gordon acted as though he had been half expecting the question. "I guess I was kinda out on a limb, Jack," he said. "I blew my top because the boss Stevie on Consolidated Fruit threw me off the pier for collecting dues during working hours. So I went to Murdock and told him he couldn't get away with that stuff. Hell, when Weller was running things his goons would have dumped you off the pier if you were a month behind—and the boss Stevie, too, if he got tough. Then while I was there in Murdock's office the news of the accident came in and—"

"Wait a minute," Jackson interrupted. His tone was quiet and conversational, but his eyes were hard. "Since when do you handle grievances all by yourself?"

Gordon did not look up. He ran his finger along the edge of the bar, following a long scar in the wood. "I was sore," he said. "I didn't stop to think."

"You thought pretty fast when you heard Mellus and me outside the door."

Gordon started. "Mellus didn't see me, did he?"

"I came in first," said Jackson. "Lucky I did. If Mellus had got a squint of your tail going through that door he'd sure paint a pretty picture for the union membership. One union leader sneaking out of the boss's office when another one comes in. Anybody but you, and I'd say it looked like the old double cross." Whitey looked up and met Jackson's eyes for the first time. "You big lug," he said, "are you hinting—?"

"Keep your shirt on. I said anybody but you. You're just about the one guy I trust in this yellow-bellied outfit." He downed the drink setting in front of him and turned his hard blue eyes on the smaller man. "But don't think I'm excusing you for acting like a damn fool. Hotheads may have the best intentions in the world, but sometimes they can hurt a union damn near as much as stool pigeons."

Gordon winced and opened his mouth to reply angrily.

"Shut up," Jackson snapped. "You got it coming and you're going to listen and like it. You didn't hurt the union this morning but the next time you might damn near wreck it, and if anything like that happened I'd be the first one to crucify you. Don't think I wouldn't. Remember that next time you lose your head."

"All right." Gordon choked down his anger. His voice took on an injured tone. "You're right but you don't have to be so damn righteous about it. Some guys are human, not cold-blooded fish like you."

Jackson's eyes crinkled at the corners. "Never mind that," he said. "You going to behave yourself from now on?"

The two men looked at each other, and both began to grin. "Okay, Papa, you old pain in the neck," said Gordon. "I'll stay in line."

He ordered a beer.

"Who's the punk parked out front, Max?" he asked the bartender.

Max craned his neck over the half curtains. "Bennie Augustino."

"Bennie Augustino?" Jackson arched his brows and cocked his head quizzically toward the front curtains. "You don't say."

"You look like a bird dog," grinned Whitey. "You know him?"

"Sure. He was with Swede Jensen when we ran the Swede off the Frisco water front. I thought there was something familiar about him."

"You think Weller's got him down here cooking something up?"

Jackson shrugged. "Could be. Weller'll make a final play before he's through."

Gordon leaned his elbows on the bar. "Once we get a new contract signed——"

"Contract!" Jackson interrupted explosively. "With that gang of yellowbellies we got on the union committee! Look!" He turned to Gordon and held up a large, calloused hand. "Who've we got? Mellus and Doc Painter? They were on the committee when Fink Weller was running things. The boys elected them because they're old heads, but I'm wise to them. They missed the gravy train and they're sore: too much work and no rake-off. They'd sell the union down the river tomorrow for a chance to get back to the good old days and the good old graft. Riorden? He's old and needs his job too much to risk it fighting rats. And who else have we got to represent the union? Colletti? He's a nice little guy but he doesn't know what it's all about and that big windbag Mellus has him buffaloed."

He pushed back his hat and ordered another beer. "You ask me," he finished disgustedly, "the committee stinks."

"Don't be like that," Gordon said. "They're the committee the boys elected, and we gotta work with them."

"Okay, I'll work with them but I won't trust them—Sangster and you and maybe pretty-boy Burke, but not the rest of them."

A voice behind them said, "Whatdya mean, maybe?"

Jackson and Gordon swung around. A tall, hatless youngster with black curly hair was standing there looking at them. He was a little drunk and swayed slightly. In his blue dungarees with the bright steel hook shoved through the belt and his khaki shirt open at the throat, he looked like a college boy playing longshoreman.

"Whatdya mean, maybe?" he repeated, "and where do you get that 'pretty-boy'?"

"Hey, Tommy, pipe down," said Gordon, "you're drunk."

Tommy Burke laughed. "Yeah, I'm drunk. I'm just drunk enough to tell this big lug off. I'm sick of his guff. Look, sour puss"—he tossed his head at Jackson—"you've been trying to run things

ever since we got rid of Weller. Who the hell do you think you are, his successor?"

Jackson's eyes narrowed dangerously, then flicked sidewise at the customers lining the bar. He downed his beer and set the glass on the bar. "Serves me right for shooting my face off in a joint," he said. "Come on, you guys. We're due at the Union Hall right now."

He turned to the bar and paid for his drinks while Burke hesitated uncertainly. Gordon took Burke's arm and urged him gently toward the door. He spoke in a low voice. "Shut up, kid, and let's get out of here. How'd it look for two of the union's new leaders to be scrapping in a saloon?"

Burke grumbled but yielded to the steady pressure on his arm. As they approached the door it opened, and the man Jackson had seen playing with the brindle puppy came in.

He was a little man, standing not more than five feet six in his built-up heels and weighing about a hundred and thirty-five, if you discounted the padding in the shoulders of the chesterfield. He stood very straight, as though trying to appear taller than he was, and would have been a ridiculous figure were it not for his eyes. The eyes were opaque and expressionless, as though there was nothing behind them—no emotion, no thoughts. They gave him the faintly horrible appearance of a walking automaton. He ignored the other men in the bar and came straight to Burke, stopping when they were very close but not touching. His hands were in the pockets of the chesterfield.

"Hello, Tommy." His voice was as expressionless as his eyes. Burke stared. "Bennie! What are you doing here?"

"Just trying to collect a little bill. You want to talk to me about it?"

"Why, yeah. Sure. Sure," breathed Burke. He had difficulty speaking. He was very frightened.

Gordon started to speak but stopped when Jackson put a hand on his sleeve. "Hello, Bennie," Jackson said. "Remember me?"

The pale eyes flicked to Jackson's face, then held there for a long minute. Muscles tightened along the line of Bennie's jaw. "You're

Jackson. You had me beaten once. I swore I'd blast you and I ought to do it right now."

Jackson's arms hung loosely at his sides. He smiled. "Why don't you?"

"Hey, you mugs," called the bartender. "No rough stuff here. I'll call the cops."

Without shifting his gaze Bennie said, "Quiet, punk."

"You'll keep," he told Jackson. "Business is business, and blasting you would be a pleasure. I'll see you later." He looked at Burke. "Well?"

Burke said, "Sure, sure," again with a kind of hysterical urgency. "You guys go on ahead. I'll see you later."

Bennie Augustino laughed, a shrill, mirthless sound like the scream of a sea gull. "Yeah, go ahead," he said. "We'll both see you later."

He followed Burke toward a booth at the rear of the room, his shoulders very straight, his hands still in the pockets of his chesterfield.

Gordon expelled his breath in a long sigh. "For God's sake."

They started again toward the door. The bartender leaned over the angle of the bar and whispered to Jackson, "Watch yourself, brother. That guy may be a rat, but he's dynamite when your back's turned and he sure hates your guts."

Jackson nodded: "He's got a right to. He's like the Chinese; he lost face with me once and he'll never get over it."

The bartender looked blank. "I don't get you, brother."

"Skip it, brother," said Gordon ironically. They went out.

They walked south and then east toward the hall. Wind blew against them as they turned the corner, bending their hat brims across their eyes and trailing sparks like a starry banner from the pipe Jackson had lit, so that he had to cup a hand over the bowl. Gordon pumped his short fat legs to keep up with the taller man's rolling stride.

"Whatdya s'pose that heel wanted with Tommy?" asked Gordon.

Jackson mumbled unintelligibly around the stem of his pipe. It was something about bangtails.

3. Stool Pigeon

LIGHT BEAT DOWN on the scarred table top and on the faces of the men seated in the small, bare room. Smoke hung in a heavy pall, and the air was fetid and stale.

Jackson circled the table and threw up one of the two windows. "Might as well have some air in here," he said quietly. "We don't want to be gassed before we get started."

Colletti grinned broadly. "Gassed," he repeated. "Datsa good joke, huh, Jack?"

Mellus' small, hard eyes glittered at Jackson. "If anyone's gassed out it won't be you," he boomed. He pounded his fist on the table, setting up little eddies of dust. "Where the hell's Burke? We're all set to open the meeting except for him."

"Stop bellowing." Painter's chair was tipped back against the wall. His face, shadowed by his hat, looked dark and predatory. "With that window open they can hear you clear down on the docks. This is supposed to be a private meeting."

Jackson and Whitey Gordon sat down at the table on the side nearest the door. Unspoken, under-the-surface antagonisms made the room electric with tension.

"I suggest we get started." Jackson's inquiring, speculative gaze shifted from face to face. "Burke's down in Danny's Bar. He'll be along in a minute."

Sangster, the huge, calm-faced Negro, said in his soft organ voice, "Ah second that."

Jackson glanced at him, and their eyes met. The Negro's big head was like a patient, firm rock in a swiftly moving stream. He wouldn't say much but he wouldn't be moved or submerged easily. "Why didn't you bring him along?" Mellus was asking. "You know damn well we ought to have a full committee for this meeting."

Doc Painter stirred impatiently. "For Godsake, let's get on with it," he said.

Riorden, the small, middle-aged man with the bent shoulders, asked timidly, "Is Tommy drinking again?"

Whitey laughed. "When did he stop?"

"He promised . . ." Riorden's voice trailed off in a sigh, and his watery blue eyes dropped.

"I go bringa him." Colletti popped out of his chair.

"Is this a union or the W.C.T.U.?" Painter asked acidly.

"Sit down." Mellus' hairy fist pounded the table again. "We've got too much business to go chasing around after drunks. It's been moved and seconded . . . Oh, what the hell, let's get going."

He paused and glared challengingly. He had the explosive, dangerous force of an overheated boiler.

"Okay," he continued when no one accepted the challenge. "You all know what we're here for. Murdock and Eastcoast have refused us a new contract. The old one's full of holes, and they'll scrap even that if we don't do something soon. The point is, what are we going to do?"

The front feet of Doc Painter's chair came down on the floor with a bang. He pushed back his hat, and his face showed pale in the fierce light. "Three men have been killed and a dozen badly injured in the last six months," he said. "The Coastwise docks have become deathtraps. Eastcoast pays less than any other union outfit on the water front, but they won't spend the money they save on our wages in new equipment. And there's another thing—these accidents are bad business. Last week a whole sling load went over the side into the drink, and we never did get any of it back—that don't do Murdock or the company any good. If it keeps up shippers are going to take their cargo somewheres else, and Eastcoast is going to whistle. Now that looks like Murdock was cutting off his nose to spite his face, but he isn't—he's just being foxy. He's

willing to lose business to put the union on the rocks and bring back Sam Weller—"

Jackson's quiet, firm tones cut in. "Fink Weller and his goons are through on this water front. He won't come back—now or ever. The men'll see to that."

"That's what you think." Painter's tone was bitter. "I've been in this union longer than you have. I know Sam Weller and his gang——"

"Maybe datsa da trouble," said Colletti softly. "Maybe somea bambino in dis union know Weller too good, huh?"

Painter spoke with slow contempt. "Why, you damned little guinea—"

"Here, here, cut that out." Mellus' red face swung from side to side, and he hammered inevitably on the table. "We got enough trouble without you birds starting in on each other. I'm waiting to hear some suggestions that make sense."

"I'll tell you something makes sense," said Whitey Gordon suddenly. "Strike! That makes sense."

"Datsa what I say," Colletti shouted excitedly. "No contract, no work. We fixa dat Murdock."

Jackson looked from Colletti to Riorden and Sangster. The Negro's jaw was set, his face serious. Riorden's eyes showed apprehension, and his gnarled hands moved nervously. Strike was not a word these men took lightly. It was the ultimate action, the last desperate weapon to be used when all else failed, and these men knew from bitter experience that it could be a two-edged weapon. They were thinking now of the bitter struggle—of hunger and tightened belts and of possible defeat and disaster should the strike be broken and lost. Yet they would strike if he told them that was the correct way and the only way.

Jackson let out his breath in a long sigh. He had never quite been able to accustom himself to this responsibility over the very lives of other working men. He was never able to take leadership complacently.

Gordon was on his feet now, his youthful face flushed, his words

tripping over each other in his eagerness. "We gotta strike," he shouted, "we gotta, that's all. It's the only way to make the docks safe. It's the only way to get decent wages and working conditions. It's the only way to save the union and keep rank-and-file control. It's the only way to keep out Weller and his goons."

Painter took the floor after Gordon. There was a gleam in his eye, but his face was sober, and his voice temporized. What did the men think? he asked. What was the sentiment on the dock? The men would strike if the committee voted it, but they had to be ready. Some of the committee knew more about that than he, Painter, did. He'd like to hear from them.

"We don't want to get swept off our feet and rush this thing," he said, sitting down.

All eyes turned on Jackson. Everyone was through now, waiting for him. He got slowly to his feet.

"It's no secret what the men think," he said. "They don't like these accidents and they don't like low pay and stinking working conditions. Of course, they're dissatisfied. But this strike talk is something else again. That doesn't come from the rank and file of the union membership. The rank and file knows it's barely a month since we finally got rid of Weller and his gang and set up a real democratic union. They know it takes longer than that to establish unity and put the new organization on a firm basis. They know that has to be done before we engage in a successful strike. They know our treasury is empty and that it takes money to carry on a strike. They know that Weller still has his stooges in the union under cover and that Murdock has his stool pigeons. They know that these rats are only waiting for a chance to come out in the open and try to oust the present leadership and sell the local down the river to Weller and Murdock.

"And that brings me to the source of all this strike talk. I think Murdock and Weller are counting on a strike. I think this agitation comes from them and I think we have to be very careful we don't strike before we're ready and play right into their hands."

Whitey turned his flushed face toward Jackson, opened his

mouth to say something, and then closed it when he saw the hard light in Jackson's blue eyes.

It was Doc Painter who spoke. "You wouldn't be calling anyone a stool pigeon, would you, Jack?" he asked softly.

The room was very quiet. Jackson hesitated a moment before he answered, and when he did he spoke slowly, choosing his words with care.

"If I had definite evidence of a stool pigeon in this outfit I wouldn't hint about him. I'd name him and tell what I knew about him and then I'd try to be the first one to get my hands on the rat's throat. The trouble is I don't know anything—I only know Murdock and Weller and how they work and I think that if we have a stool pigeon in the union he's agitating strike."

"That's a fine thing to say," Mellus blustered. "What you're doing is casting suspicion on anyone who believes we ought to strike. You got no right to do that, Jack."

"I'm not casting suspicion on anyone," said Jackson soberly. "I'm simply saying what the boss wants and that if we strike now we'll be playing right into his hands."

"You don't scare me," said Painter. "I'm no stool pigeon and I still agree with Gordon. I say we have to strike and I'm calling for a vote."

"I second that," shouted Gordon. "I don't care who it is—no-body's going to call me a stool pigeon."

Jackson looked at him, smiling a little. "Sit down, you crazy jumping jack," he said. "No one called you anything, and you know it." He spread his hands on the table and made one final appeal. "I'm not against a strike, boys—when we're ready for it. When we're prepared and organized—when we've built up a strike fund and run out the phonies. When that time comes we'll strike and strike fast and then we won't telegraph our punch—"

Riorden laughed suddenly. It was a raucous, grating laugh that made Jackson pause in surprise. He looked at the little man and saw that although he was laughing there was terror in his eyes. Riorden was laughing because he was afraid.

Gordon saw it too. "What the devil's the matter with you?" he asked. "What are you laughing at?"

Riorden's laughter died as quickly as it had begun. He gripped the table and half rose from his chair, speaking with a kind of despairing intensity like the barking of a small dog.

"What am I laughing at?" he snarled. "What am I laughing at? You, you dumb apes—all of you. Sitting here talking and thinking you can outsmart men like Murdock and Weller."

He swung on Jackson. "So we have to be careful and not telegraph our punches, do we? That's a real laugh. Have you ever noticed how Murdock takes the play away from us every time we meet with him? Have you ever noticed how he seems to know just what we're going to say and do? And how each time he takes the wind out of our sails before we have a chance to speak our piece? I'm askin' you, all of you, have you ever noticed that?"

Spittle formed at the corners of Riorden's mouth, and he paused to wipe it away. Some inkling of his meaning was beginning to dawn on his listeners, and the room was tense and very still.

"So what?" asked Jackson softly. "What are you trying to say, Pop?"

"I'll tell you what," answered Riorden. His voice lost some of its intensity and became old and bitter. "I wasn't going to say nothing until I'd found out for sure. But I can't stand it—I can't stand it, see. Some of you've been saying I'm a chiseler and a petty crook, when there's no more loyal union man in this room than me, and one, at least, that's a lot worse."

Mellus said: "What——?" and stopped as Riorden drew a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket and threw it on the table in front of Jackson.

"I'm not sayin' that's yours," said Riorden. "I'm only sayin' where I found it—under the blotter of your desk."

Jackson picked the paper up and unfolded it carefully. It was the thin, flimsy type known as onionskin, and the close single-space typing on it looked as though it had been made with a carbon paper. It bore no date and was headed only by the cryptic salutation: "A to B: Personal."

While the other men, with the exception of Riorden, leaned over his shoulders Jackson read aloud:

"This is to supplement the detailed report received from me yester-day. Strike sentiment is growing fast among the men on Piers 1 and 2, and I've helped it along all I could without having it traced to me. There is also considerable talk on Pier 3, but the workers there, being mostly colored, are not so free about their feelings.

I think we can be pretty safe now in offering the union the old contract, since there is not one chance in a thousand that they will accept and the offer would make good publicity in a strike situation.

The Negotiating Committee of the union meets tomorrow night and will probably vote strike, but the decision will have to be referred to the membership, and that will not take place until Friday night. We should be prepared for action by Saturday or Monday, at the latest.

In line with your suggestion I have sounded out a number of men and found a few that we can count on, but most of them are fed up on the old line, and you'll have to really take your hand off your heart if you expect to get anywhere. Let me know by return mail how much you will lay on the line, and I'll see what can be done."

Jackson finished reading and looked up, straight into the red, scowling face and hostile eyes of Jim Mellus. Their gaze locked, and for a long moment no one in the room spoke.

At last Gordon broke the silence. "I'm damned if I believe it," he blurted. "It's a frame—that's what it is—a lousy, stinking frame!"

"Frame, hell!" gritted Mellus from between his teeth. "The thing's as plain as the nose on your face."

He shook a hairy fist at Jackson. "Why, you---"

"Wait!" Jackson slammed the fist aside. He stood up, his eyes blazing.

"Don't say it, Jim!" He took a deep breath, his eyes moving slowly around the circle. "Don't one of you say it. I've never been called a stool pigeon and I'll break the man in two who calls me one now. This"—he rapped his knuckles sharply and contemptu-

ously on the paper—"this is just what Whitey says it is—a frame—planted by someone so dumb that I'm surprised the rat couldn't think of a better stunt."

He placed his clenched fists on the table and leaned forward, his hot eyes searching the other men's faces.

"You know me," he continued. "You may not trust my honesty but you know I'm not dumb. Would I have written out a spy report and then left a copy of it right here in the Union Hall on my own desk? Look at the setup. Anybody could have put that thing there—that is, anybody who knows this office well enough to know that that old roll-top desk don't lock and that all you have to do to open it is to give it a jerk and spring the catch. Every man on this committee knew that! Riorden knew it! That's how he got into the desk to find this thing—if he did *find* it."

He turned suddenly and glared down at the little man who squirmed under his gaze. "How about it, Riorden?"

"I didn't say it was yours," Riorden mumbled stubbornly. "I only said where I found it."

"How did you find it?" Jackson snapped. "What were you doing in that desk?"

"I—I was looking for something—I don't remember—ink or something like that." Riorden met Jackson's eyes and said with sudden heat, "Everybody uses that desk; you know that. From the way you talk, anybody'd think it was me that had to do the explainin'."

Jackson grunted contemptuously. "Okay, so you found it. You wouldn't have the guts to spring it if you hadn't. But you found it where some rat planted it, and"—his hot eyes swept the circle again—"by God, I'm going to find out which one of you it was."

Painter stood up and stretched his long, lean form across the table. "It won't wash," he sneered. "The thing was found in your desk, and you can't get away from it."

Cords stood out in Jackson's throat, and he started for Painter around the table, but the big Negro, Sangster, planted himself squarely in the way.

"Take it easy, boy. Git hold of yourself," he said gently.

His deep, organ-toned voice was sad and full of sympathy, but his huge torso was like a wall of rock. "If I thought you was a spy," he continued, still in that soft, gentle voice, "either you or me'd never git outta this hall alive. But I don't think so, no more'n Whitey here. Just the same, you got to admit it looks bad, an' callin' names and bustin' people ain't go to help it none. We all got to set down and figger out what to do."

The Negro paused and looked around apologetically. It was the longest speech he had ever made at a union meeting, and he was filled with awe at the sound of his own voice. What was he up to, tellin' these white men what to do?

But the speech had had its effect. Painter and Mellus looked a little shamefaced, and Jackson sank back into his chair and ran a hand across his eyes. When he spoke again his voice was calm.

"Sangster's right," he said. "It looks bad, and you boys have only my word for it that I never saw that thing before tonight."

Riorden said: "It's going to look bad for every mother's son in this union till we get at the truth of this."

"Maybe it's a gag," Mellus suggested halfheartedly.

"A swell gag," growled Gordon. "A guy that'd pull a gag like that—"

"How we fin' out?" asked Colletti plaintively. He looked at the others in bewilderment.

"That's for the membership to say," Mellus decided. "We have to present the whole thing to the membership."

"But that'll tip the bastard off we're wise," objected Gordon.

Painter laughed humorlessly. "Don't be a dope," he said. "He's done the tipping himself, but for the life of me I can't see why, unless"—he paused and thought a moment—"unless it's a trick to keep us from striking. Whoever put that paper there figures that we'll stop everything and go on a spy hunt."

"Whoever put that paper there," said Jackson, "was gunning for me. The men trust me"—his voice took on an edge of bitterness— "maybe they're fools to do it but they do. With me out of the picture there'd be no strike and no union, either, in a little while. Is that true or isn't it?"

The others nodded.

"All right," he continued. "Then there's just one thing for us to do. We've got to keep this thing among ourselves until we get to the bottom of it. I'm not arguing for myself; I'm arguing for the union. After all, there are eight men on this committee, and even if one of us is a rat the other seven ought to be able to smell him out without dragging in the whole union. But get this straight." He tapped his fist on the table, punctuating each word. "This committee is through conducting union business until we find out what's what. Let the membership elect a new Negotiating Committee until further notice. We've got just one job—to find out who's a rat."

When the procedure was agreed upon Painter pointed to the fateful paper. "Who takes charge of the evidence?" he asked.

Riorden said: "Let Jim take it. He's president."

Mellus put his hands behind him. "I'll have nothin' to do with the filthy sheet," he growled.

Jackson grinned slightly. "All right, I'm already contaminated. If I lose it you'll have just that much more on me."

He folded the paper and put it carefully in his pocket. "There's just one more thing," he said, standing up. "We don't talk. Right?"

4. Bar

WHILE THE REST of the committee clattered down the stairs from the Union Hall Painter waited for Mellus to turn out the lights and lock the door.

Mellus said wearily: "We'll have to do some talking, Doc."

"That's right," Painter agreed. "You better hang around with the boys for a little while. I'll tell them I'm going home and light out. I'll be waiting at the White Horse when you can get away." They went down the steel and concrete steps and joined the others on the sidewalk in front of the hall. The night was still chilly, although the wind had died down. There was a tremendous yellow moon high up in the sky.

Sangster took a deep breath and flexed his big muscles. "Boy, look at that moon," he said, throwing back his head. "Ain't that something? Like a thousand-dollar gold piece way up there."

Whitey Gordon punched the big man playfully in his iron-hard midriff. "You, Bullethead," he said. "Got any tickets for the game next Sunday?"

Sangster laughed. The nickname Bullethead had been honorably acquired, and it did not occur to him to resent it.

"Ah got tickets, but they cost dough, Whitey," he said. "One buck a copy."

"One buck," groaned Whitey. "I can see the Giants play for that."

"Who's the Giants?" asked Sangster with good-natured contempt. "Ah ain't never heard of them."

"What are you selling tickets for?" asked Pop Riorden, "a raffle?"

"A raffle?" Whitey shouted. "Listen to Pop, will you? He doesn't know what old Bullethead does with his Sundays."

"You ought to go to a game with us sometime, Pop," said Jackson. "It's a real treat to see that black boy play."

"Play?" Old Riorden was confused and puzzled. "Play what?"

"Why, pro football. Didn't you ever hear of the Black Tigers?"

Riorden looked from one grinning face to the other, suspicious of being ribbed. "There ain't no such animal," he said finally.

"Sure there is, Pop." Gordon slapped Sangster on the shoulder. "Bullethead here's a Black Tiger. Best doggone Negro football team in the country. Come on, big boy, let's show 'em that double reverse where you body-check the tackle and then go on down and slough the defensive halfback. Colletti, you're the center, see. You pass your cap back to me when I say, 'Hike.'"

Gordon swung the Italian around and bent him over an imagi-

nary ball. Then he pulled Sangster into position and squatted, barking signals. Sangster complied protestingly, and the others watched the horseplay with amusement.

"You mean to say he plays football on Sunday after working all week on the dock?" Riorden asked Jackson wonderingly.

"Sure," said Jackson, "watch this. That's the play they used on the Pittsburgh Miners last year. The Miners had a player who was president of the employees' representation plan—that's what they called their company union. I don't know if the boys made it up between them or not, and Bullethead won't talk, but three times the Pittsburgh phony was defensive halfback, and three times the Tigers ran that reverse with Bullethead leading the interference. The play didn't gain much because each time Bullethead missed the body check in his hurry to get to that halfback. But it worked swell as far as the main idea was concerned, because the third time Sangster hit him the halfback didn't get up and they had to carry him off the field. He had a smashed collarbone and three broken ribs, and before he got out of the hospital the company union was on the rocks, and the boys had won a closed shop, and you couldn't even penalize Sangster for unnecessary roughness. Nobody knew what the score was except a few of us in the know."

Even in complying with Gordon's childish pantomime, Sangster did not lose his dignity. Long arms dangling, he stood nonchalant, while Whitey, acting his part as quarterback, barked a string of numbers at random. Then suddenly the Negro became a blur of motion, moving past Gordon with amazing speed and bearing down on Jim Mellus. Mellus bellowed in alarm and staggered backward, throwing up his arms to check the human catapult. A collision seemed inevitable, but at the last split second Sangster swerved and speed by the frightened union president. It was a miracle of timing. Sangster straightened and returned to the group, breathing normally, an enigmatic smile on his full lips.

"You hadn't ought to tell that story, Jack," he said in mild rebuke. "Ah never played a minute of dirty football in my whole life. That Pittsburgh scab herder was out of condition, or he wouldn't have got hurt."

"I know you didn't, Bullethead," said Jackson quietly.

No one spoke for a moment, and then Sangster slapped Colletti gently on the back. His white teeth gleamed in his broad, bronze face. "If you gentlemen will excuse us," he said, "me and Mussolini'll go over and see can we run two bits into a sawbuck."

He pointed to the parking lot across the street, where a crap game was in progress. A dozen men—overland truck drivers, seamen "on the beach," a taxi chauffeur, and one or two nondescript floaters—stood or squatted in a circle under the arc light. Their voices and the click of dice on the concrete carried clearly in the thin air. The game went on almost every evening and was often an all-night affair, the players shifting, some drifting away and others taking their places.

"Mussolini," snorted the little Italian. "Allatime he calla me Mussolini."

He thrust out his jaw and chest and, looking remarkably like the Italian dictator, raised his short arm in derisive salute.

"You better look out, black man. Some day thisa wop'll take you, jousta like Mussolini take Ethiopia."

Tension was relieved, and everybody laughed, including Sangster. The big Negro pulled the Italian's cap down over his eyes, spun him around, and pushed him gently in the direction of the crap game.

"Come on, little man with the loud mouth," he chuckled. "Africa's a great big place. One day some of you little guys gonna git lost there."

The group, watching the two men cross the street, lapsed into an uncomfortable silence. They avoided each other's eyes with an embarrassed and, for them, unnatural sensitivity, like that which normally undemonstrative men display at a funeral. The bitter, brooding resentment of betrayal that was beginning to rankle in their minds was intensified by a sense of helplessness.

Painter spoke awkwardly. "Well, boys," he said, "I'm going home. I'll see you in the morning."

He turned and walked away without waiting for an answer.

Jackson smiled and looked at Mellus. "I'll buy a beer," he said. "Who's coming?"

Mellus mumbled, "Okay." He scowled at Jackson suspiciously. Whitey and Riorden merely nodded.

When they were in front of Danny's Bar Riorden put a hand on Jackson's arm and whispered urgently. Jackson paused in surprise and stared at the smaller man. Mellus, half through the swinging door, turned to watch. His eyes narrowed, but he only asked gruffly, "You coming?"

Jackson answered, "Sure, Jim." He nodded to Riorden, and together they followed Mellus into the bar.

When the bartender took their orders he jerked his head toward a booth at the rear. "That little gangster left a coupla minutes after you did, but your pal's still here," he said, "stinko."

They turned to look and saw Tommy Burke sprawled in the booth, his head on his arms.

Mellus growled. "I wondered what happened to him. That kid's getting to be a regular rum hound."

"He ain't gitting," said Whitey. "He's there."

Riorden went over and shook the sleeping man. "Tommy. Hey, Tommy. Wake up."

Burke only groaned, his head rolling loosely. Riorden came back to the bar.

"I don't like it," he said plaintively. "Old man Burke was a good friend of mine, and I hate to see the kid and his sister both going to the dogs."

"Don't shed any tears over Mayme Burke," growled Whitey. "That's one redhead who knows all the answers."

Jackson looked at Riorden. Despite his suspicions, he felt sorry for the older man. "You been on this water front a long time, haven't you, Pop?"

"I raised a family longshorin'. It's a hell of a way to do it, but a man's got to live."

Jackson nodded: "Yeah. It must have been a tough grind all right."

"It'll be better now that Weller's gone. A man'll be able to make a decent living." Riorden looked up suddenly. "Jack. About that that other business. I hope you don't think I——"

His voice trailed off. Jackson was embarrassed by the appeal in the old man's eyes.

"Sure, sure, Pop, I know. It's okay. Don't you worry."

Mellus downed his drink and pushed his fat stomach away from the bar. "I'm going home," he announced disgustedly, "before you lugs start crying in each other's beer. There's worse rackets than longshoring."

"Sure there are, the way you work at it," said Whitey. "You've been a pie-card artist for so long, I bet you forgot how to handle a hook."

Mellus said, "Listen, squirt, I could still work you off your feet any day on the docks."

When he had gone Jackson said, "You better lay off that guy, Whitey. You give him one more ride like that, and he's liable to take you apart."

"Huh." Whitey was contemptuous. "That belly of his is as soft as lard."

Riorden looked up at the clock over the bar. "I better be going too. The old lady gets worried when I stay out too late."

He glanced over at the sleeping Burke and sighed. "I'd try to take that kid home but I guess he wouldn't thank me."

"Better let him sleep it off," Jackson counseled. "He'll be all right by closing time."

The three men left the bar together. At the corner Whitey stopped. "I feel lucky," he announced. "I think I'll go over and have a shot at that crap game. How about you, Jack?"

"Not me. It's getting too cold for outdoor dominoes."

"They'll take your shirt in that game, son," said Riorden.

Whitey laughed. "They won't get much." He said good night and went off down East Street. When he was half a block away he started to whistle his favorite tune, "Danny Deever."

The dirgelike, off-key piping was carried back clearly to the two men left standing on the corner.

5. Hook

It was twenty minutes past twelve when Patrolman Hanrahan, just coming on shift, passed the Overland pool hall, the lunchroom next door, and paused to glance into Danny's Bar. East Street was deserted and very quiet; the toot of a tug on the river, the intermittent hum of traffic on the overhead highway, or the rattle of an occasional truck only served to accentuate the silence.

Rookies assigned to the graveyard shift on the water front usually hated its loneliness, its deceptive air of innocence, that flared without warning into sudden violence when one least expected it, but to Hanrahan, the water front was home. He had been brought up within sight of it and he had pounded a beat on it in the days of the neighborhood gangs and the river pirates and, later, through the ugly, lawless era of Prohibition. His only son had worked on the docks and had died there in the dim hold of a ship, when a heavy packing case turned over, crushing him against a bulkhead. Hanrahan knew every rathole and dock face, and every turn of the dim-lit, crooked streets that radiated away from them; and he knew also the minds of the men and women who frequented the water front at night—the truckers and seamen and dock-wallopers, the ragpickers and homeless bums, the drunks and prostitutes-knew their outlook on life and understood and pitied, even when he could not sympathize with it. Hanrahan was an oldfashioned type of city cop—a type rapidly disappearing—and some of his contemporaries in the department were wont to speak of him in terms of condescending compassion. "Poor old Hanrahan,"

they would say, "it's too bad he never had enough ambition to dig himself out of that rut on the water front. He might have been a lieutenant or even a captain by now, instead of still pounding a beat." But Hanrahan was content. Being a patrolman had its recompense, and he loved the water front like an old and wellworn hat.

Some sort of altercation was going on in Danny's, and Hanrahan pushed open the door and went in. A tall youngster with black curly hair swayed at the bar, clutching it with one hand as though it were the rail of a ship in a high gale while he pounded it with the other. The stream of profanity he was shouting at the bartender was liquid in its comprehensiveness.

"He wants me to give him another drink," the bartender explained coolly to Hanrahan. "I don't mind puttin' it on the cuff; I know he's good for it. But I think he's had enough."

"Come on, Tommy." Hanrahan put a firm hand on the young man's arm. "You're going home."

Tommy Burke tried to shake off the arm and swung round belligerently, but the fight went out of him when he saw who it was. "All right, Hanrahan," he said in a subdued and surprisingly sobered voice, "I'll pipe down and go home if you make this monkey give me one more drink."

Hanrahan nodded silently to the barkeeper and watched Burke down the shot of liquor. Then he piloted the now uncomplaining longshoreman to the door.

Out on the sidewalk Hanrahan removed his hand from Burke's arm.

"Tommy," he lectured sternly, "I've known you since you were knee-high to a grasshopper. You're not drunk; you're just feeling mean. What's eating you?"

"You should have been a priest instead of a cop," growled Burke. "Lemme alone, willya?"

"Sure," said Hanrahan. "If you'll go home and behave yourself." They walked to the corner in silence, and Hanrahan stepped

into the entrance of the clothing store to try the door. Burke stood watching, swaying on widespread legs. He looked sick.

Hanrahan came out of the store entrance, ducking his head to avoid the low awning. His shrewd blue eyes examined Burke keenly.

"Tommy, it wouldn't be Mayme that's worrying you, would it?" he asked.

Burke made a flat, contemptuous gesture. "That stinking little bitch. I stopped worrying about her long ago."

"That's no way to speak of your sister."

"You asked me," said Burke tonelessly. "You know what she is as well as I do."

Hanrahan waved a gloved hand. "Git on with ye," he ordered indignantly, "git on with ye, now, before I run ye in. You ought t'be ashamed of yourself."

Burke turned and went up the street away from the water front. His walk was surprisingly steady for that of a drunken man.

Hanrahan shook his graying head sadly as he lumbered on down East Street. Two blocks further south he turned away from the water front and proceeded on to the parking lot across the street from the hall. When he put his head in at the door of the little sheet-iron shack that served as an office for the parking lot he was breathing heavily.

Joe Evens (the Evens resulting from the convenient shortening of a multiple-syllable Slavic surname), the parking-lot attendant, looked up from the small table where he had been playing solitaire with a greasy dog-eared pack of cards.

"'Lo, Irish," he greeted the patrolman. "You come to put the kibosh on that crap game?"

Hanrahan sat down in the only vacant chair. He listened for a moment to the noises coming from the far corner of the parking lot, then he grinned and shook his head.

"Why should I chase 'em?" he asked. "They'd just find another place to play and they'd ride the hell outta me. This way, we're all friends, and I know where they are."

"How we gonna have law and order in this country with cops like you?" Evens turned three cards and played a red ten on a black jack. "I'm a public-spirited citizen," he continued disparagingly, "I think I oughtta report you to the sergeant."

Hanrahan's grin became a laugh. "You think the sergeant don't know about that crap game, you're full of hop. The sergeant knows this beat, and he knows me and he don't want much part of either of us. Besides, I don't know what you're talking about."

He took off his cap, scratched his grizzled head furiously, and unbuttoned three buttons of his tunic.

"It's a nice quiet night," he sighed, stretching. "I think I'll just take it easy here till it's time to go and ring the box. That is, if you got no objections, Mister Evens."

Evens grunted and went back to his solitaire. The big cop kibitzed a few moves, then leaned back in his chair, one eye closed, the other open just a slit and shifting warily now and then to the alarm clock hanging from a hook on the wall.

At five minutes to one he arose and began buttoning his tunic. He was adjusting his cap on his head when he paused, listening to a commotion in the lot outside. There was a sound of running feet and a tall, gangling individual, wearing a khaki truck-driver's jumper and a dilapidated cloth cap ringed with brightly colored union buttons, appeared in the doorway. Beside the tall man was a panting youth of about seventeen with popping eyes and a dead-white face.

"Jeez," gasped the tall man at sight of Hanrahan, "I was just coming to call a cop. There's a dead man in my truck."

"Dead man?" questioned Hanrahan incredulously. "You sure you don't mean dead dr---?"

He had been about to say dead drunk when he looked at the boy and the words froze on his lips. The boy was holding out his hands palms up and staring at them. Under the light the fingers gleamed wet and darkly red.

"Holy Mother," breathed Hanrahan. "Where'd you get all that blood, son?"

The boy sucked in air trying to speak. Then he clapped his sleeve across his mouth suddenly and bent over, out the door, trying not to vomit on the office floor.

"Show me," said Hanrahan.

He went around the crouching boy and out the door, pushing the tall man before him and cutting a swath through the onlookers. The truck driver led him down the block, away from the lights of the parking lot, to where a big six-wheel cab-and-trailer-type truck stood in the shadow of an empty warehouse. There were no street lights here, and it was very dark. Hanrahan switched on his flash, ordered the little group of men who had followed them to stay back, and gestured to the truck driver to lead the way.

The tailboard of the truck was down, but a heavy curtain of brown canvas hid the interior of the trailer from Hanrahan's questing light. On the curtain, crudely outlined in white paint, were two arrows, one pointing to the left, the other to the right. Below the left arrow was the inscription, "This Way to the Races," while on the right a companion caption announced sardonically, "This Way to the Morgue."

The truckman reached out toward the curtain, but Hanrahan growled peremptorily, "Wait." He shifted his light, grunting as it picked up dark, glistening splotches on the tailboard and came to rest finally on a black pool at the curb, just behind the right rear wheel.

"Bled like a stuck pig. Okay." He gestured abruptly with the light. "Let's take a look inside."

The truckman picked up a corner of the curtain, and Hanrahan, stooping, played his flash on the black interior of the trailer. The yellow beam fell on a spread-eagled figure lying face up on the floor. The feet, enormous in heavy work shoes, were toward them and not more than a foot from the rear end of the truck.

Hanrahan raised his light. "For Christsake," he said softly. "No wonder he bled—his whole throat's ripped out."

"I know." The truckman did not look. "He's dead all right, ain't he?"

"I never saw anyone deader." Hanrahan stepped back and swung his light suddenly, full in the truckman's face. "You know him?"

The other shook his head. "Never seen him before."

Hanrahan grunted again. "Look, I gotta stay. You go tell Joe Evens to call the precinct. And send the rest of those crapshooters back here."

When the little group of men were assembled at the rear of the truck Hanrahan surveyed them. His light fell on a familiar face.

"You, Bullethead," he snapped. "Come here and see can you identify this guy. Judging from his clothes, I'd say he was a long-shoreman."

It was the Negro Sangster who stepped forward. He bent his long frame and peered under the flap of canvas for a moment, then straightened and nodded slowly.

"I know him," he said, a note of fatalism in his quiet voice. "He's a member of my union. His name's Riorden."

"Riorden? Let me take a look." Whitey Gordon stepped out of the little group and lifted the canvas.

"It's him, all right," he said. "For God's sake."

Hanrahan dropped the flap and waved the men back. "Git over on the sidewalk, you guys, and stay put till Homicide gits here. They'll want to talk to you."

He silenced their protest and herded them against the warehouse wall. "Stay put, now," he warned. "One of you guys can maybe tell us who done this."

A siren wailed and died disconsolately as a prowl car pulled up beside the truck. Two uniformed men sprang out and came to talk to Hanrahan and peer curiously into the trailer. One of them noted the inscription on the canvas.

"This way to the morgue," he read and laughed dryly. "That guy sure musta passed on the wrong side."

He turned and went stomping over to play his flash in the faces of the little group of men now huddled against the warehouse wall. "Whatd'ya mugs know about this? Come on, speak up."

He waited a moment, holding the powerful light directly in their eyes, then when no one answered he reached out and grabbed Sangster by the shirt. "Open up, Shine," he snarled, "before the Homicide squad gets here and goes to town on you."

The fingers of Sangster's left hand encircled the cop's wrist and tightened suddenly. The cop winced and let go of the shirt.

"Why, you black bastard." His hand dropped to the sap at his belt.

"You were tearing my shirt," said Sangster evenly. "You got no right to do that."

"Go back to college," one of the men told the cop. The group moved imperceptibly away from the wall toward the policeman.

Hanrahan came over. "Put down that light, Tim," he said quietly. "What the hell's goin' on here?"

"I'll run these smart guys bowlegged," growled Tim.

"He's a rookie, Irish," said Whitey Gordon. "They oughtta know better than to let him run loose on the water front. He ain't dry behind the ears."

"Pipe down, Whitey," ordered Hanrahan. He turned to his brother officer. "You're acting against regulations, Tim, and you know it. You had no call to git tough with these boys."

The younger officer's eyes gleamed whitely in the darkness, but he only mumbled something and turned away. A moment later a car turned into the street and pointed a long finger of light at the truck from its powerful headlights. It came to a stop behind the prowl car, and another, and yet another, followed it.

Men poured out of the cars and gruff voices began shouting orders. Soon the dark, quiet street was full of light and bustling activity. The canvas covering at the end of the trailer was thrown back and floodlights connected to the police cars by long extensions were set up, turning the boxlike interior into a narrow, unset stage. The actors—policemen in uniform, detectives in quiet business suits, their hats on the backs of their heads, men with cameras and men with notebooks, a doctor with a medical kit and an in-

tern in a white jacket—scrambled in and out of the trailer and swarmed over and about it with the incomprehensible energy of ants. Still others stood over the spread-eagled, bloody figure on the floor, now revealed in all its tragic and pitiful sordidness by the white light that beat down on it, regarding it with their hands in their pockets, their faces showing approximately the same degree of emotion and interest as those of idlers watching a construction project. Occasionally one of them would photograph the figure, the white light of the flash bulb leaping out and lighting up faces beyond the truck with sudden dramatic brilliance; or one of the men would kneel on a knee to poke and prod experimentally, arising again and brushing his hands together—an unconscious, atavistic gesture—as though the corpse had already begun to putrefy.

The little group of spectators lined up against the wall of the warehouse under the benevolent eye of Patrolman Hanrahan, watched the oddly unrealistic, badly rehearsed melodrama, with apprehensive interest. They were workers in industries where sudden death is not uncommon, and most of them had seen corpses as mangled and pitiful as poor Riorden's. It was not the corpse that interested and worried them so much as the law seeking a culprit. They had little faith in either the justice or the efficiency of crime detection—painful experience having taught them that the police were, all too often, prone to seize as victim the first unwary bystander who could not prove his innocence. And so, while they felt sorry for Riorden, they were skeptical of the law's efforts to apprehend his killer and particularly scornful of their own stupid curiosity that had placed them in their present predicament.

"Boy," whispered one of the truck drivers bitterly, "was I a dope? I should hi-balled outta here the minute I saw the blood on the kid's hands."

"We're in the clear," said a taxi driver with somewhat hollow confidence. "We were all shootin' crap when this thing happened. We can alibi each other."

"How the hell do we know when it happened?"

"The blood, ya fathead. It wasn't dry yet. He couldn't abeen bumped more'n a few minutes before the kid found him."

"The doc can tell how long he's been dead, can't he?"

"Sure. I read a detective story——"

"For cripesake, you'll get softening of the brain readin' that junk."

"Why the hell did they have to pick my truck?" the driver who had found the body asked plaintively.

"Eddy okay?"

"Yeah. He's over in the shack with Joe. The cops said he could stay there."

"Look," said the driver who had started the conversation, "we're gonna all stick together, ain't we? We were all shootin' crap when this guy was killed. We musta been."

"What are you so worried about? You better not let the cops hear you talkin' like that, or they'll think you killed him, sure as sin."

"Shh," hissed a warning voice, "here's the big shot."

Conversation ceased, and the group directed its attention to a man in a brown hat and long brown topcoat who had moved into the circle of light at the foot of the trailer. Under the hat the man's hair showed gray at the temples, and he had a long, sharp nose.

"That's Captain Nicholson, Central Homicide," said Hanrahan out of the corner of his mouth. "God help you guys if he goes to work on you."

"Hard, is he?" asked Whitey, sidling closer.

"He gits what he goes after."

"Who's the little guy in glasses?"

"Hell, you oughtta know him. That's Joey Stern from the D. A.'s office."

"Yeah, I thought I recognized him. I've seen his picture in the papers." Whitey looked at the little, round-faced man with interest.

"So that's the racket buster," he whispered softly. "Quite a turnout for one dead longshoreman."

"Murder's murder," said Hanrahan. "Don't make no difference whether it's a millionaire or a bum. Anyway, they're watchin' the water front pretty close these days."

The Homicide captain looked in the direction of the group, and Hanrahan whispered. "Shut up, now. He'll be comin' over here in a minute."

Nicholson, however, turned his back and spoke to a small man in a wrinkled dark suit who was kneeling beside the body.

"What's the dope, Doc?" he asked.

The doctor hopped to his feet, brushed his knees, and dropped off the tailboard of the trailer with the surprising agility of a monkey. His answer to the question was a sharp, staccato rattle that had the speed of a radio sports announcer.

"Wound in throat made by some kind of sharp instrument that entered at the left and tore the tissues from left to right. Looks ugly, and he would have bled to death eventually, but that's not what killed him. Fracture back of skull—iron rod or bar—made before wound in throat. Been dead about an hour. That's all until I get him out of here."

"Thanks," said the captain. He called to one of the men, "Benson, you got the stuff from his pockets?"

The man held up a canvas bag.

"All right, you can take him away, boys."

While the body was being removed he snapped additional orders. "Take the truck in. We'll go over it again in the morning. Sergeant Tripp, you stay here. Take two men and go over every inch of this block and every other block in the neighborhood if you have to. Look for anything, but especially a longshoreman's hook."

He turned to a slender, studious-looking young man with glasses who had been wandering here and there about the truck. "Through?"

The young man nodded. "Not much here, Cap. Blood samples,

a little chalk on the sole of one shoe. Nothing under the nails but dirt. I'll have another look down at the morgue."

"Okay, boys, take your lights. Bring the men that found him over to the precinct. We'll talk to them there."

"Hey," said the worried trucker. "What are you pinching us for? We ain't done anything."

"Shut up, you cluck," growled Hanrahan.

The captain, however, answered quietly, "I'm not arresting you unless you force me to. I'm merely taking you to the precinct station house where I can check your stories." He stood for a moment, patient, smiling a little, then, with a nod to Hanrahan, turned and walked to the big black car with the P.D.H.Q. license plates.

6. Station House

THE DOORBELL JANGLED raucously, and Kate Hefflin sat up with a start. She had been sleeping fitfully, half conscious of street noises that had seemed just outside her ground-floor window. She switched on the light and looked at the clock beside the bed.

"Twelve o'clock," she muttered, "seems like I been in bed for hours. Gol darn it, which of those bozoes forgot his key now?"

She threw back the covers, put her feet into pink mules, the pompons of which were somewhat soiled, and padded across the room to push the button releasing the front-door catch. She opened the door and looked down the hall. When she saw who it was she closed the door until the spring lock snapped and scrambled back to bed so fast she tripped on a trailing hem of nightgown and bumped against the table, almost sending the clock flying through the open window. Clutching the clock, she set it upright and dove under the covers. The barred window beside her bed was open top and bottom, and the room was cold. She huddled in a shivering ball and listened to the heavy feet padding down the hall past the stairs to her door. Someone rapped.

Kate called, "Yes?"

"Doc," said a voice. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, don't tell me," she said. "Let me guess. You forgot your key. When will you guys get it through your thick heads that I go to bed early?"

"I know," said Doc. "I said I was sorry, didn't I? Open the door. I got some mail for you that was in the mailbox."

"Shove it under. I wouldn't stick my tootsies out of this bed again for money. It's probably bills anyway."

"Okay, here it comes." A long envelope appeared on the carpet beneath the door. "Good night, beautiful. I don't see what you're so huffy about. It's only twelve o'clock."

"It's after."

"How much?"

"Ten minutes."

"What a dame," said Doc mockingly. "Make a guy out a liar for ten minutes. You ain't mad, are you, honey?"

Kate's mouth curved in a smile. "Get away from that door and go to bed," she called sleepily.

"All right, it's your loss," said Doc. "I'm going."

She heard his step move away from the door and mount the hall stairs to his room. She turned out the light and rolled herself into a ball, still chilled, and tried to go back to sleep. Her room was at the rear of the house, but tonight every noise seemed just outside the open window. Ordinarily they didn't disturb her, but now for some reason, it seemed that every sound was magnified. She heard every automobile as clearly as though it were passing through the room itself. She dozed and wakened, dozed and wakened but she must have slept longer than it seemed, for when the doorbell rang again the hands of the clock pointed to two.

This time she wrapped herself in a dressing gown and opened her door to peer out into the hall. The broad form with the rocky Irish face, striding toward her, had "cop" written all over it.

"Sorry to bother ya, ma'am," said the cop when he saw her. "Police business."

"Police business," mimicked Kate. "Does that give you a license to wake people up at this unholy hour? There's no fly-by-nights in this rooming house."

"Sorry," said the cop stolidly. "Yah got a man here name of"—he consulted a slip of paper—"Doc Painter?"

"Never heard of him, Lieutenant," said Kate.

The cop looked disgusted. "Look, lady, that's no help. I got his address and his description. Now, do you tell me where his room is, or do I call in the boys and rout out the whole house? Suit yourself."

"You win," said Kate. "Second floor, first door on the right. What's Doc done?"

"What time'd he come in?" the cop countered.

"Twelve o'clock."

"How do you know?"

"The big bum woke me up ringin' the bell, that's how."

"Ummmmm." The cop scratched his ear. "You swear to that?"

"Look, Lieutenant," said Kate. "I wouldn't swear to my own name without knowing what the score was. What do you want him for?"

"Questioning. A union buddy of his was murdered tonight."

Kate caught her breath. "Murdered! Ain't that something? Well, if Doc did it he did it before twelve o'clock. That's the time he came home." A thought occurred to her, and her eyes narrowed. "Unless he sneaked out and bumped the guy after I seen him."

The cop's eyes were on the v of the dressing gown where it had fallen open at the front, and his mind wasn't entirely on his work. "That's no good, sister," he said absently. "This guy was bumped right around twelve o'clock."

Kate pulled the dressing gown together and smiled gently. "Thanks," she said. "Now, will you remove the body and let me get some sleep?"

The cop's face screwed itself into a comical expression of disgust. "You're pretty smart, ain't you?" he growled. "I got orders

to take your friend Doc down to the precinct house. I think you better come along."

Kate said, "You got another think coming, flatfoot," and slammed the door. She went back to bed and presently she heard the cop go upstairs and rap on Doc's door. She listened to their muffled voices and then to their feet clumping down the stairs and out to the street.

Doc and the cop climbed into the back seat of the squad car. The driver was a man in uniform. He turned his head and asked: "Where to now?"

The plain-clothes man consulted a small red notebook. "Bay Street," he said, "number nineteen."

As the car pulled away from the curb Doc said, "You got a crust dragging me out of bed this way. I gotta go to work in the morning, but you wouldn't know about that."

"That's too bad," said one of the cops. "Do you think we enjoy riding around town picking up you lugs?"

Doc grunted. "Where'd you get that?" He gestured toward the red notebook.

"Out of a desk in your Union Hall. Nice of you to keep all your addresses handy that way."

Painter twisted nervously on his seat. "Give me the low-down," he asked. "What's this all about?"

"You wouldn't know, would you?"

"I wouldn't be asking if I did."

"You might." The cop leaned back in the corner of the car, his hat tilted forward over his eyes. "Take it easy, fellow," he advised. "The captain'll tell you all about it."

Painter scowled and gave up trying to pump the cop. There was no further conversation until the car pulled up in front of the second address. The plain-clothes man got out. "I'll be down in a jiffy," he told the driver.

"Ain't you worried I might take a powder?" asked Painter.

Both cops laughed. "You wouldn't get far," said the plain-clothes man.

He was gone about ten minutes. When he came back Mellus was with him.

Mellus climbed into the car pretty fast for a big man. He acted mad. He saw Painter and seemed somewhat mollified. "So they routed you out, too, did they, Doc?" he said. "Did they tell you what it was all about?"

The plain-clothes man got into the car and wedged his bulk between the two. "You guys pipe down," he said. "You can talk all you want when you get to the station house."

"You can't do this," said Mellus. "We've got some rights."

"Want to make something of them, fat?" asked the cop.

Mellus began to splutter, and Painter said dryly, "Shut up, Jim. Squawking won't get you anything."

They went up the steps of the precinct house, past the desk, and into a small room in the rear. There was a row of chairs along the wall, and the plain-clothes man jerked his head. "Sit over there. I'll see if the captain's ready for you."

He went through a door into a larger room where there was a desk and some chairs and a row of steel filing cabinets against one wall. Captain Nicholson of the Homicide squad sat behind the desk, and Whitey Gordon was seated alongside of it. At a small table in a corner sat a police stenographer. Stern, the special labor-rackets man from the D. A.'s office was bending down in front of the filing cases, squinting at the labels through thick horn-rimmed glasses. He did not seem to be interested in the conversation going on at the desk.

"Them two other guys are here, Cap," announced the cop.

"Which two?"

"Guy named Painter and another one named Mellus—the ones you sent us after."

"How about one named Burke?"

"We went after him first. He wasn't home."

"Oh." Nicholson held a pencil in his hand, and he pointed it

at Gordon. "That makes five out of seven," he snapped. "We can't find Burke and we still don't know where Jackson lives—but you do. Are you going to tell us, or do I hold you till we find him?"

"I guess you'll have to hold me, Cap," said Gordon. "I already told you I don't know where Jack flops."

"You're lying."

Gordon said nothing.

"I've got a good notion to go to work on you," said Nicholson. "The way this thing is shaping up, it begins to look like your pal Jackson is the bird we want, and you could be in it with him. Are you going to talk or not?"

"I've talked," said Gordon. "You wouldn't try to scare me, would you, Captain?"

Nicholson threw the pencil down on the desk top. "Take him out of here," he said to the plain-clothes cop. "Put him with the Negro and the other one and keep an eye on them. Then bring me one of those other sons, and we'll find out how their stories click."

Gordon got up and walked out of the room in front of the plainclothes man. Stern looked around and grinned at the longshoreman's back. "Kind of got under your skin, didn't he?"

"What the hell are you doing, checking up on how the precinct keeps its files?"

Stern left the files and came over and sat down by the desk. "I just lost interest," he said. "There isn't enough to go on yet."

"We got this." Nicholson tapped a typewritten piece of flimsy paper that lay on the desk in front of him. "Finding this on the murdered man makes it look like he was a spy in the union. It gives us a swell motive for the killing. This thing is going to be a cinch once we get the whole story, and I'll get it out of these babies before the night is over."

"You've grilled three of them so far," Stern pointed out, "and about all we've got is an alibi for all three covering the time of the murder."

Nicholson snorted. "Grilled? Why, I was gentle as a lamb. You

have to really go to town on these cases to get anything. Let a couple of the boys take 'em one at a time——"

Stern shook his head. "Any rough stuff, and you're on your own. I won't be a party to it, and my chief'll back me up. Besides, anything you got would be repudiated later on and just mess things up."

Nicholson cursed bitterly. "Politics! Politics! How the hell am I going to get anywhere?" He waggled a finger at the representative of the district attorney's office. "That Negro and the Italian are dumbing up. They know plenty they haven't spilled—both of them. And that little towhead Gordon is a smart guy if I ever saw one. You can't handle that type of suspect with gloves."

"You can't manhandle them either," said Stern. "Not with the labor vote as strong as it is in this town." He grinned at the police captain. "The good old days are gone, my friend."

Nicholson opened his mouth to retort but was interrupted by the opening of the door. The plain-clothes man came in, followed by Mellus.

Mellus waddled up to the desk. "What's this all about?" he asked belligerently. "The police can't get away with dragging people out of bed this way. What do you think this is—Germany?"

Nicholson reddened and controlled himself with a visible effort. "You have a right to know why you're here," he said. "A man's been killed—murdered. We have reason to believe that you can give us vital information. The man's name was Riorden. He was a member of your union."

"Riorden!" Either the news came to the fat man as a complete surprise, or he was doing an excellent job of simulating. "Poor old Pop. Who did it? When did it happen?"

"Sit down." Nicholson indicated the chair beside the desk. "I'll ask the questions if you don't mind. When did you last see Riorden?"

"Why, around eleven-thirty, I guess. We had a drink in Danny's Bar."

"And before that?"

"There was a meeting at the hall from about eight-thirty to eleven o'clock. Both Riorden and myself were present."

Nicholson read a list of names from a notebook. "Are those the other men who were present?"

Mellus bobbed his head.

"Now." Nicholson closed the notebook. "Tell us what took place at that meeting."

Mellus hesitated. "Why, nothing special," he said finally. "Just union business."

Nicholson frowned. "Did Riorden quarrel with anyone?"

"Well—yes. There were a couple of words."

"What about?"

Mellus looked up. He gave the impression of a man who had suddenly made up his mind. "I'll tell you," he said. "Pop Riorden was a good union man and a good friend. He was killed trying to expose a stool pigeon. I'll help any way I can to find the skunk who did it."

"That's fine," said Nicholson. "Suppose you tell us what happened from the beginning."

Mellus launched into the story of the meeting and the stenographer's pencil raced. Nicholson and Stern listened with growing interest. When the story was finished Nicholson had a gleam in his eye that said he had made up his mind. He pushed the typewritten sheet across the desk.

"Is this the spy report?"

Mellus looked at the paper, and his eyes widened with surprise. "Where'd you get this?"

"According to your story Jackson had it last," said Nicholson. "That right?"

Mellus gulped. "That's right," he said.

"Thanks," said Nicholson.

Mellus looked a little bewildered. "You want to ask me any more questions?"

"A couple," said Nicholson. "Where'd you go when you left the bar?"

Mellus' eyes shifted. "I met Doc Painter," he said.

"Where?"

"The White Horse, over on Eighth Avenue. We had some union business."

"How long were you there?"

"Couple hours. I left around one o'clock. The bartender'll tell you."

"We'll ask him," said Nicholson dryly. "What about Painter? What time'd he leave?"

"Before I did. About an hour."

"Around twelve?"

"Something like that. I didn't notice exactly."

Nicholson pushed himself back from the desk. "That's all," he said. "We'll check your alibi and if it's straight we won't bother you again. Thanks."

He went to the door with Mellus and called to the plain-clothes man. "Send in the other one, Joe. And let this fellow go home."

Joe came over and said in a low voice, "How about the three downstairs? That little fellow is kickin' up a stink."

"Might as well let them go too," said Nicholson. "No, wait a minute. Let the other two go and hold Gordon till daylight. Then turn him loose with a tail on him. Maybe he'll lead us to his pal."

"Right."

Nicholson held the door open and closed it after Painter. He walked around the tall man and sat down again at the desk. Painter dropped into a chair without being told and waited silently. He seemed perfectly at home.

"Just one or two questions, Mr. Painter," said Nicholson. "I think we've got this thing pretty well straightened out."

"How bad is it?" asked Painter.

"How bad is what?"

"Whatever happened."

"You wouldn't know what happened?"

"I could guess but I'd rather not. I suppose Fat told you about the union row." The last was more a statement than a question. Painter had a quizzical smile, as though he were enjoying himself.

"Let's hear your story of the row," said Nicholson.

"Go fly a kite," said Painter pleasantly. "I don't talk out of school."

Stern intervened suddenly. "How did you know Riorden was dead?" he asked.

"Dead?" Painter's eyes widened, and the smile left his face. "So it's really tough, is it?"

"You bet your life it's tough," said Nicholson. "Riorden's dead—murdered. And all the evidence points to one of you guys that was at the union meeting."

"When was he bumped?"

"Let's hear your story first. When did you see him last?"

"On the street in front of the meeting. Just after it was over. Around eleven o'clock, I guess."

"Where did you go from there?"

"To a bar on Eighth Avenue. I met Mellus there. He probably told you."

"What time did you leave the bar?"

"About a quarter to twelve. It must have been about then because I got home at twelve o'clock."

"Anyone see you come in?"

"Your stooge talked to my landlady when she let him in, didn't he? She knows what time I came in because she saw me."

Nicholson got up and went into the small room, closing the door after him. Painter lifted an eyebrow at Stern. "If you've got the guy who did it," he said, "I'd like to spit in his eye. There were a lot of worse guys than old Pop in the world."

"We haven't got him," said Stern. "How did you know you were going to need an alibi?"

"Have I got one?"

"If your landlady's story is on the level you have."

"Thanks." Painter stretched out his long legs. "I'm just lucky, I guess."

Nicholson came back into the room. He carried a bulky package wrapped in newspaper, and there was a light of triumph in his eyes.

"You're clean on that alibi," he told Painter. "But wait a minute.

I want you to do one thing for me before you go."

"Yeah?" said Painter suspiciously. "What?"

"Identify this." Nicholson reached into the folds of newspaper and drew out a longshoreman's cargo hook. There were traces of red-brown stain on the wooden handle and long, wickedly curving steel shank.

Painter looked at the hook. "Those things are all pretty much alike," he said. "I don't see how anyone could tell one from another."

"You can if it has an initial on it, can't you?" Nicholson held up the blunt end of the wooden handle for Painter's inspection. "Ever see that before?"

Painter drew a deep breath. "I might stand for a lot of things."

"Don't stall," snapped Nicholson. "I already got an identification. All I want from you is confirmation."

"All right," said Painter. "It won't be difficult for you to find out anyway. That's an old hook of Jackson's. He had it around the union office."

Nicholson rarely smiled. Now he bared his teeth wolfishly. "That just about clinches it. I want this Jackson. Where is he?"

"How would I know?"

"You know where he lives."

"Not me." Painter shook his head emphatically. "When Fink Weller moved out of the union and over across the river he promised Jackson he'd come back and give him a one-way ride. Since then Jackson watches his step. Weller wasn't kidding."

Nicholson glared at Painter and Painter met the stare with quizzically lifted eyebrows. Finally Nicholson jerked his head toward the door. "On your way," he said.

Painter went out. Nicholson turned to Stern. "Jackson's our man. We'll have this thing cleaned up in no time."

"I hope so." Stern came over to the desk and lifted a corner of the newspaper package. "What else you got here?"

"Monkey suit." Nicholson unwrapped the package and disclosed a brown coverall garment. "The boys just brought it in. The guy wore it to avoid getting blood on his clothes. Then he stuffed it in the nearest garbage can." He spread out the garment and indicated dark splotches on the front and others on the knees and sleeves.

Stern turned the garment over. A legend in red letters on the back read: "Overland Garage." The little lawyer pursed his lips. "Did the boys check with the garage people?"

"Naturally." Nicholson took a cigar from his vest pocket and lit it, scratching a big kitchen match on the scarred desk top. He took a deep puff and gestured with the cigar. "That proves premeditation," he said. "That suit was stolen from the garage sometime tonight. It was an extra they had hanging on a nail in the office."

"I don't like it," said Stern.

"You don't like what?"

"This case. I don't like anything about it. It's all confused."

"Confused?" Nicholson sounded incredulous. "It's as plain as A B C. We know it was premeditated murder. We know the motive. We've got the weapon and we know who owned it. All we have to do now is wait for the boys to round him up." He pulled his hat down on his head and started for the door. "I'm going home," he announced. "I can do my waiting in bed."

Stern sighed. He followed the big police captain out of the station house and down the stone steps to where the headquarters' car waited. He refused a lift and watched Nicholson drive away. Then he went back into the station house and talked to the reporters clustered around the desk. This done, he thought of taking a taxi to his hotel and then, despite the lateness of the hour, decided he would rather walk. Walking was an aid to clear thinking, and he wanted a chance to think.

7. Hotel Room

DAWN WAS TWO HOURS AWAY on the water front; the street lights were still burning, the bars and pool halls and seamen's outfitting stores were still closed. The wide stretch of East Street was empty of traffic, except for an occasional produce truck speeding under the elevated express ramp. In front of the closed gates of one of the pier faces across the street a cop chatted with the night watchman; save for these two, the long stretch of pier fronts was deserted, and everything was quiet as a tomb.

There were still three hours to go to "shape up" at seven-thirty, but the water front would be awake long before then; East Street would be teeming with traffic—cab-and-trailer jobs and big sixwheelers and all the assortment of lesser fry that make up the commercial traffic of a great city. Overhead on the ramp a steady ever-increasing stream would be moving, mostly southward, carrying the white collars to their downtown jobs. The early stream would be small cars and taxis and an occasional overland bus, but later would come the long, slick limousines with the big shots, speeding unconcernedly along over the heads of the workers like a cartoon in the New Masses. Below, on the land side of East Street, the sidewalk would be filled with longshoremen, men of every nationality dressed in dungarees or khaki pants with zipper work shirts and with the steel hook that is the tool and badge of their trade thrust through their belts. They would stand alone or gather in small groups, talk, argue, read newspapers to pass the time, until the boss stevedore's shrill whistle sent them scurrying through the traffic to the pier gates, to line up in a semicircle, while the boss chose those he wanted for the day's job. Then those who were rejected would come trailing back across the street to wait in the saloons and pool halls for the next "shape" or move off to another pier, where a ship was due that would have to be unloaded in a hurry.

Whitey Gordon turned the corner and then ducked out of sight into a doorway to watch a green-and-white prowl car come cruising slowly up the street. When the car had passed he hurried along East River, in the opposite direction, and turned in at a doorway over which was a sign reading "Rooms \$1 Up." He went in through a tiled foyer, took the steep bare steps two at a time, and turned past the empty clerk's cage, down a long dim-lit hall to room seventeen.

He knuckled the door lightly, then harder, finally pounding it with the side of his closed fist.

"Jack, hey, Jack! For Christsake, are you dead in there?"

Jackson was awake. He had been awake for some time. The night before, when he came home to the hotel, there had been a letter waiting for him, and now he was propped up in bed reading it again for the third time.

"Dear Chris," the letter said. "We are finally established here in Washington, and I realize suddenly how long it has been since we have seen or even heard from you. Your sister gave me your address when we left Portland, but in the flurry of moving, like a ninny, I lost it. Fortunately I have found it again, together with the time to write to you.

"Don sends his love. He feels he will be very happy here at the university. He is a full professor now, you know, and the salary, together with his writing, will enable us to live in the style to which we are definitely not accustomed.

"He would be completely happy—and need I say that so should I?—if you were here with us. Ever since you left Portland so suddenly five years ago he has missed you terribly. You were such good friends.

"Frankly, Chris, I feel, to a certain extent, responsible for keeping you apart—and for much more than that—for the way in which you are wasting what Don calls 'one of the best brains' it has ever been his pleasure to know.

"For you are wasting it, Chris dear, despite all your high-sounding idealism. A brilliant student and promising scholar—a labor

leader! Chris, darling, it isn't rational. I'm sorry if I seem to be lecturing you but I can't help it. If Don knew I were writing this way he would be furious. He always says I try to run everyone's life.

"Seriously, darling, I think you owe it to yourself and to all of us who are fond of you to give it up. It isn't too late. Don says the university here might find a place for you on the faculty. And wouldn't it be grand for all three of us to be together again just as we were before Don and I were married?"

There was more—gossip about former mutual friends and long-forgotten details of a design for living, to escape which Jackson had traveled, first to San Francisco and then, because eight hundred miles was still not far enough, across the continent to New York.

The letter was full of poignant memories: Don Fairchild, once his best friend, the cedars on Cortland campus, and the secluded life of a college town. Jackson was a little surprised that he was not more moved and disturbed by it—and by the memory of the writer who had once brought the very stars tumbling about his head by marrying his closest friend. He read it still again, reveling in the fact that everything it represented was over and remote and no longer had the power to hurt.

The pounding on the door finally penetrated his musings.

"Who is it?" he called.

"It's me, Gordon."

"You mean I." Jackson slipped the letter hurriedly into the pocket of the jacket hanging on a chair. "Come in."

A shade flapped in the open window across the room at Gordon's entrance, and the door swung back. Whitey caught it to keep it from banging and closed it gently.

"Boy," he said, "why you live in a dump like this, I'll never know. Don't you even lock the door?"

Jackson swung his feet from under the covers and sat on the edge of the white iron bed, reaching for a pair of blue-striped shorts. His naked, triangular torso, flat stomach, and narrow hips

made him look like a fighter about to climb into the ring. The narrow blue eyes were half closed, and the wide mouth opened in a prodigious yawn. He stretched and scratched his chest vigorously.

"I can't remember to lock doors," he said. He retrieved a black brier pipe and a penny box of matches from a chair beside the bed, tamped the pipe with his little finger, and lit it. His movements were slow and deliberate.

He looked at Gordon, squinting to shut out the cloud of smoke. "What are you in a lather about? What time is it, for the love of Pete?"

"Time? About five, I guess." Whitey picked up a blue tobacco can from the only chair and tossed it on the bed. He sat down.

"What time did you leave Riorden last night?"

"About twenty minutes after you left us on the corner."

"Where?"

"We walked over by the hall. Riorden said he had to meet someone. Why?"

"The cops are looking for you."

"Me?" Jackson removed the pipe from his mouth and yawned again. "What for?"

"Pop Riorden was killed last night."

Jackson's mouth remained open. He said stupidly, "What?" Then, as comprehension began to dawn, his mouth snapped shut, and a dangerous look came into his eyes. "Tell me what happened."

Whitey related the circumstances of the finding of Riorden's body. When he finished Jackson eyed him narrowly. Then he asked a seemingly irrelevant question.

"Why were you so hot for strike last night?"

Gordon frowned. "You're developing into a lousy bureaucrat in your old age, Jack," he snapped. "You're suspicious of everybody who disagrees with you. You and I have been pals for a long time, brother, and if you're not convinced by now that I'm on the level you can go to hell."

Whitey jumped off the chair and started for the door.

"Wait," said Jackson.

Whitey stopped and looked at him with hot, angry eyes.

Jackson made a placating gesture. "I know I'm wrong, Whitey," he said. "You're the one guy I'd swear by in this outfit. But I'm getting so I don't trust myself. I know we got a stool pigeon somewhere. I can smell the stinking rat but I can't put the finger on him. So I have to suspect everybody." He looked up and met Gordon's eyes candidly. "Even you, Whitey," he said.

"You got a lot of guts talking like that," said Whitey. "After the way Riorden put the finger on you last night. And now Pop's dead. But do I fall for that frame? No, I come and tell you what the score is because I know you're on the level. Would I have done that, you bastard, if I was a rat?"

"All right," said Jackson. He got up and held out his hand.
"Let it go at that, will you?"

Whitey shook hands with seeming reluctance. "Anybody on God's earth but you—" he said.

"I know," said Jackson. Still holding Gordon's hand, he looked down at the smaller man. "Who did it, Whitey?"

Whitey did not answer immediately. He returned to the chair and sat down, took out a cigarette, and ran it between his fingers, examining it carefully.

"The cops say you did, Jack." At last he looked up, straight into Jackson's eyes. "Did you?" he asked.

Jackson's jaw clenched, but he did not seem to resent the question. He shook his head slowly. "You know I didn't."

"Yeah." Whitey lit the cigarette and dropped the match on the worn carpet. "But I ain't the cops. Somebody's hung a god-awful neat frame on you, brother. You're hotter than a stove lid." He grinned, his good-nature returning. "You'd be in the clink, right now, only nobody knew your address last night. They put a tail on me this morning when I left the station house, but I lost him." His eyes met Jackson's again, and the grin faded. "Look, Jack," he said, "you still got that spy report?"

"Why?"

"They found one just like it on Riorden."

"What?" Jackson reached for his leather jacket and thrust his hand in the inside pocket. It came out with the onionskin document that had caused so much discussion the night before.

Gordon breathed a sigh of relief. "That's all right then. But that's nothing."

"Wait a minute," Jackson interrupted. "You say the paper they found on Riorden was just the same as this?"

Whitey nodded.

"You're sure?"

"I saw it. It was a carbon copy, on the same kind of paper and everything."

"Then this doesn't mean a thing," said Jackson. "They were both made at the same time by the same person. The cops'll say I typed them both."

Whitey said soberly, "That ain't all they got. You remember that old hook with your initial carved in the handle that you used to keep hanging over your desk? What'd you do with it?"

"Why, it's here—in that suitcase over there." Jackson pointed to the end of a battered leather bag protruding from beneath the curtain which served as a closet.

"Take a look," said Gordon.

The suitcase was empty. Jackson squatted on his heels beside it, a slightly ludicrous figure in the blue-and-white shorts. He looked up at Whitey.

"You mean," he asked hesitantly, "Somebody—used—that—?"

"I'll say they used it. Ripped poor old Riorden's throat open clear to his backbone. The cops found the hook in an ash can a block away from the truck. It and an old pair of canvas gloves were wrapped up in a teamster's monkey suit that had been stolen from the Overland Garage, and there was plenty of blood. They figured whoever did it used the monkey suit and the gloves to keep from gettin' himself bloodied up."

Whitey rose and moved around the bed to the open window. Standing behind the soiled lace curtains, he looked down into the

street for a minute, then snapped his cigarette stub out the window, and turned back to the room.

"You better get some clothes on," he said. "It'll be light in another hour."

Jackson, frowning thoughtfully, began to dress. He put on a white shirt and blue serge suit. Tying his tie before the dresser mirror, he spoke over his shoulder.

"What happened at the station house?" he asked.

"They let the other guys go," replied Whitey, "but they held Sangster and Colletti and me and went over us with a fine-tooth comb. There was a couple of times when I thought they were gonna take the hose to us, but those guys don't work that way. They're smooth. They even blew up our alibi about the crap game by gettin' us to admit that we couldn't swear who was there all the time and who wasn't. But after the flatfoot brought in that hook they laid off us, except for trying to make us admit we knew where you were."

He paused and glanced up at Jackson's back. "Funny thing about that hook," he said. "It was filed."

"Filed?"

"Yeah. The point and the inside curve—somebody had put a cutting edge on it damn near as sharp as a furrier's knife."

Jackson shuddered. "Poor old Riorden. I'm kind of sorry now I rode him so hard."

Shrugging into a shabby but well-brushed, dark overcoat, Jackson asked:

"What about the others? Whom did the cops talk to beside you and Colletti and Sangster?"

"They found Doc Painter home in bed. He was lucky; his landlady alibied him for any time after midnight. Mellus came into the station house just as they were getting through with us, and I guess they grilled him plenty although I didn't hear much of it. They couldn't find Burke and they're still looking for him but not as hard as they are for you." "I don't know who did the killing," said Jackson, "but I know damn well who's back of it."

"I got two hunches"—Whitey got up as Jackson prepared to leave—"and both of them say, 'Fink Weller.'"

Jackson shook his head slowly. "One of Fink's boys may have done the actual killing, although it's not Fink's style. He's too smart and too yellow to mix in murder—but the guy who rigged this frame and who knows the actual killer is John Murdock."

"But why kill Riorden?" Whitey objected. "If anyone wanted to frame you bad enough to commit murder why didn't they go after you instead?"

"Riorden knew something. I tried to get him to tell me what it was last night, but he wouldn't. He was nervous and scared. The way I see it, somebody wanted to get rid of Riorden and got the bright idea of framing me and killing two birds with one stone."

He opened the door and glanced up and down the hall, then closed it again.

"Look, Whitey. I got things to do and I got to do them before the cops catch up with me. You go over to the hall and sit by the telephone, will you? I'll call you as soon as I can."

"Where you going?"

"To blackmail John Murdock," said Jackson shortly.

8. Penthouse

JACKSON RAN down the stairs and turned east, away from the water front, walking at his usual pace, a rolling, long-gaited stride. After two blocks he turned under the el, walking south, his eyes sharp for familiar faces or prowl cars. Headquarters dicks didn't worry him, but he knew that if he ran into one of the precinct men he would be picked up on sight. It was a chance he had to take. Several blocks south he turned again toward the water front along a quiet street fronted with warehouses, machine shops, and

garages. Halfway down the block a narrow driveway ran between two warehouses to the rear entrance of a garage facing the next street.

Dawn was just breaking on a gray day, and a chill mist swirled in off the river. The street lights had been turned off, and the driveway lay deep in shadow. With a quick look back along the deserted street Jackson ducked into the shadows close to the wall and walked rapidly to a point directly beneath the upswung lower flight of a fire escape. A glance told him that the free end of the last flight of iron steps was high beyond his reach. Continuing on to the yard at the rear of the building, he found an empty tar barrel and carried it back. By standing on the barrel and jumping up he was able to catch the end of the iron stairs and swing with them to the ground. The rusty iron squeaked protestingly as it came down, and he waited there patiently for several minutes before he rolled the barrel across the alley with his foot and climbed carefully up to the first-floor landing of the fire escape, easing his weight off the steps so that the iron counterbalance swung them slowly and comparatively silently up behind him. He went up three more flights of iron steps and paused with his head just at the level of the roof. There was a penthouse and garden on the roof, looking particularly dejected and out of place in the gray water-front dawn.

Satisfied that the garden was deserted and that here were no overlooking roofs from which he might be observed, Jackson swung himself over the top rung of the fire escape. Walking noiselessly on the balls of his feet, he went toward the penthouse. He found an open window protected by a screen on a separate frame held shut by a hook. The sharp blade of his knife slashed a hole in the weather-beaten screening, with only a slight grating noise, and in a moment more the screen was unhooked, and he had slid through into the dim room beyond.

Moving against the wall away from the window, he stood still, accustoming his eyes to the half light. He had no sure way of knowing whether the penthouse was occupied or not and, if it was

occupied, whether the occupants might have a gun. He squared his shoulders with a slight shrug, pulled his hat down firmly on his head, and stepped away from the wall.

The bedroom door was unlocked and swung open noiselessly. Half-closed Venetian blinds made the room darker than the rest of the house, but there was still light enough to see the big double bed jutting out from the wall at his left. Jackson had expected a man or perhaps a man and a woman. His eyebrows lifted in surprise when he saw that the bed contained only one occupant—unmistakably female. He closed the door and moved forward cautiously until he stood beside the bed. The girl stirred uneasily, turning her head so that a shaft of light from the Venetian blinds fell upon her face.

Jackson grinned. He reached forward and switched on a reading lamp over the bed head.

"Hello, Mayme," he said.

The girl's eyes popped open, and she sat up immediately. She was a redhead, and her hair, even under the confines of a hair net, looked decidedly attractive. Her eyes were queer-shaped and black, now, in the sudden light, and her wide mouth needed no lipstick to accentuate its fullness. The face was a trifle too square, a trifle too prominent of jaw and chin line for beauty, but it was a handsome face with a challenge that men turned to stare at. Under blue silk pajamas her breasts were high and firm, and the curves of her figure, ineffectively hidden by the silken bed covering, were excitingly seductive.

She put up a hand with long magenta nails to shield her eyes from the light. "John," she said, "you——"

Without warning, her hand darted toward the drawer of a small table on the other side of the bed. Jackson threw himself across the bed and grasped her wrist, but only after she had got the drawer open. Still holding the wrist, he took the gun from the drawer and righted himself to a sitting position on the edge of the bed, releasing his hold only when out of reach of the long nails.

"Easy does it, Mayme," he said softly, slipping the gun into his pocket. "Sorry to rough you up that way."

The girl straightened herself in the bed, breathing heavily, her eyes flaming. She cursed him deliberately and with exhaustive emphasis. Her language exceeded even Jackson's water-front experience. He pushed his hat to the back of his head and cupped a knee in one hand, letting her cuss herself out, grinning appreciatively both at her eloquence and at the strip of very white flesh showing through the front of her pajama top that had become unbuttoned in their brief struggle.

"Not bad, Mayme," he said. "Not bad at all for so early in the morning."

Her eyes followed his, and she halted her tirade abruptly to jerk savagely at the blue silk. The action served to quiet her, and when she looked up again there was speculation and a hint of fear in the black eyes.

"You're Jackson." She appraised him. "I've heard plenty about you. I don't know how you got in here or what you want and I don't give a damn but if you don't get out in one hell of a hurry I'm going to call the cops."

Jackson's grin broadened to a laugh. "Now, baby, how would that look? The cops finding you in Mr. Murdock's bed. You know better than that."

The fear in the girl's eyes grew, and her belligerence collapsed suddenly. "Did Tommy——?"

Jackson shook his head. "No, Tommy didn't tip me. My guess is, he doesn't know."

"Then how——?" She paused and bit her lip. "What do you want? Why did you come here?"

"And how did I know where to come?" Jackson mimicked her. "Look, sweetheart, I've had this layout spotted for months. Not that I like to play this way. This is a free country, and what you do and what Murdock does that doesn't concern the water front is your own business. But I'm not particular when I'm fighting a murder frame."

"Murder?"

"Yes, murder!" Jackson's voice hardened, and the grin left his face. "Look, Mayme, let's cut the horseplay and get down to cases. Where's the boy friend?"

"Boy friend?" Mayme began, but Jackson interrupted harshly. "Cut it, Mayme. You're too smart to play games. Where's John Murdock?"

Again the girl's expression changed. Her eyes narrowed speculatively, and she was silent and thoughtful for a moment.

"Okay," she said finally. "This is Murdock's place, but what does that prove? It's only your word against mine that I was here at all, and any one of twenty girl friends will swear I wasn't. So what have you got, you——" She cursed him again.

Jackson shook his head sadly. "So you're not smart after all. Do you think I'd let you out of here? Look, baby, I mentioned murder. I came up here expecting to find Murdock and maybe you or some other twist and I came prepared to get what I want if I had to beat hell out of whoever asked for it. If you want to play that way say so, but I'm warning you, you won't be pretty when they find you. . . . Think of the scandal and the publicity. Murdock wouldn't like that. 'Night-club Singer Found Beaten in Shipowner's Love Nest.' See the headlines, Mayme? And think of what would happen to Tommy! He knows you have been playing around but doesn't know how far you've gone. He probably thinks you still do it for love. My guess is he'd kill you."

He watched the fear grow in Mayme's eyes. "You know I'm right," he finished. "You're in a spot."

A little crease of concentration appeared between the girl's carefully plucked brows, and white teeth caught her upper lip and worried it. She reached out to a small blue box on the table, offered it to Jackson, and, when he shook his head, took a cigarette and lit it with a chromium-and-gold lighter. During the process her eyes never left his face.

She blew out smoke with a little sigh and nodded slowly.

"You'd do it, wouldn't you," she said. It was not a question but

a statement of fact. Then suddenly her brow cleared, and she held out her hand with a dazzling smile. "Okay. You win. No hard feelings."

Jackson ignored the hand. "No hard feelings," he repeated. "Where's Murdock?"

"I don't know. He was here early last evening but he went out about eleven and didn't come back. What do you want him for?"

Jackson laughed mirthlessly. "Blackmail. Just a little nice, quiet blackmail. He's going to call off that frame on me and turn up the snake who killed old man Riorden and maybe sign a contract with the union while he's in the mood, and I'm going to promise to be a gentleman and not tell his wife about little Mayme."

"You're crazy," said Mayme scornfully. "He'd throw you out of the house."

"That's not my guess. He's too smart."

"But suppose"—Mayme's dark eyes widened as she considered— "suppose John—Mr. Murdock—doesn't know who did it or, suppose he does and can't turn the guy up without being dragged into it himself." She reached out a hand toward the phone. Her wide eyes were innocent.

"Look-let me try to reach him. Perhaps---"

Jackson caught her wrist and slapped the hand playfully.

"Baby makes another move like that," he said, "and I'll black both her pretty eyes."

The pretty eyes glared hate at him. "You'll pay for this, you water-front burn. John Murdock'll—."

"Can the chatter. John Murdock'll play ball like a good little guy."

His jaw thrust out, and his tone became cold as ice. "I'm not fooling, Mayme. I'm desperate. The man doesn't live that can frame me and get away with it."

He reached across the girl's thighs and picked up the phone. "What's that number you were going to call?"

Mayme hesitated, then said sullenly, "Clearfield 3793."

A suave voice spoke from the other end of the line. "Mr. Murdock? I'm sorry, sir. He worked very late last night and left orders not to be disturbed before ten o'clock. Is there any message?"

"Yes," said Jackson. "Tell him I'm coming out there and to wait for me. Tell him Jackson of the I.L.C. He knows who I am. And tell him I'm calling from his city apartment and that I said it was vital that I see him before I talk to the police. You understand?"

"Yes sir," the voice said blandly. "I'll tell him, sir, as soon as he's awake. Thank you, sir."

Jackson replaced the phone. He reached over and took Mayme's left wrist, turning it so that he could see the small diamond-studded watch. It said seven-thirty. He stood up.

"Where's your car, Mayme?"

"Well, of all the nerve," said Mayme. "Take the ferry and the bus, you big lug."

Jackson hesitated, pondering the idea of taking the girl with him. He decided against it. He didn't trust her, and she'd be more bother than she was worth anyway.

He shook his head. "Nope, no ferry and bus for me, sweetheart. You're gonna be a pal and lend me your car. You'll get it back okay if I'm lucky."

Mayme argued, pleaded, and lied, but Jackson was obdurate. Finally she gave in and said disgustedly,

"All right, you stubborn maniac, take it, and I hope you drive it off a dock."

She gave him the keys and directed him to the parking lot around the corner. "Tell the guy I said it was okay. And now get the hell out of here, will you?"

"Thanks," said Jackson, pocketing the keys. He glanced about him. The door of a closet across the room stood open, and he went to it and collected an armload of feminine apparel. There was a small overnight bag on the shelf, and he took that also. Mayme sat up in bed. "What the hell are you doing?" she screamed.

"Just making sure you don't run out on me."

He returned to the bed with Mayme's clothes over one arm and gave the telephone a sharp yank, breaking the wire.

"Okay, now." He grinned down into the girl's furious face. "You'll stay put, sweetheart, unless you want to go parading in your pajamas. They're swell-looking pajamas, but there's a law against indecent exposure—and, sister, are you indecent!"

He left Mayme sitting up in bed, gasping and making incoherent noises. He closed the bedroom door but found no means of locking it. He shrugged, stuffed the clothes into the overnight bag, and stepped through the door into the foyer that contained the automatic elevator.

9. Highway

MAYME'S CAR was a snappy blue Packard roadster. Jackson had remembered seeing her drive it and had chosen it as an effective cover. Even his pals on the force wouldn't recognize him in an expensive job like this.

He got the car out of the lot without trouble, tossed the suitcase containing Mayme's clothes into the rear compartment, and drove east away from the water front. On Sixth Avenue he stopped in a lunch and had wheat cakes and coffee, sitting at the rear of the counter and keeping his hat pulled well down over his eyes. When he had finished he flipped the waitress a half buck and went into the phone booth beside the swinging door that led to the kitchen. He dialed the number of the union and said, "Whitey?"

"Yeah. Where are you?"

Jackson told him. "Listen," he said, "I'm going out to Murdock's. I just thought I'd let you know."

"You crazy fool," said Whitey. "I still think you're making it tough for yourself playing hide-and-seek with the cops. What are you going to do at Murdock's? Commit another murder?"

"I might at that."

"Look, Jack," said Whitey seriously. "I don't think you ought to go out there alone. What about my meeting you? There'll be less chance of the cops picking up the two of us, and I might be some help. I don't get what you think you can do with Murdock but I know you when you get to throwing your weight around."

Jackson laughed. "Come on if you want to. We'll form a delegation. But hurry up. Better hop a bus and come over here. I'll drive around the block a couple of times and park on the north side of the square. Look for a blue Packard roadster."

"Cripes," said Whitey, "a hot car?"

Jackson assured him that the car wasn't hot, told him again to hurry, and hung up. He bought a paper at the stand on the corner and drove north and then east, turning south again and finally west along the park. The tree-lined street was quiet and almost devoid of traffic at this hour, and the likelihood of his being spotted here was slight. He parked in front of one of the old brownstones.

The News had a shot of Riorden's crumpled body captioned "Gang War Flares Again on Water Front" on the cover. Jackson was reading the story when Whitey arrived.

Jackson tossed the paper on the ledge back of the seat and drove through to Sixth Avenue. He turned south, obeying traffic rules meticulously.

"We'll take the Cortney Street Ferry," he said. "Less likely to spot us down there."

As they drove south to the ferry he told Whitey briefly of his visit to the penthouse and what he found there.

"Boy," said Whitey when he had finished, "some fun. You think we got enough to make old Murdock say 'Uncle'?"

Jackson took out Mayme's gun and slid it into the side pocket of the car. "I don't know. Murdock's wife is social-register. He wouldn't want this to get out. I'm going to throw a bluff about how much evidence I have and see if I can make it stick."

They turned into the ferry entrance and stopped to buy a ticket,

Jackson scanning the slip ahead for cops. A ferry had just pulled in, and traffic was moving onto it in a steady stream. Pulling his hat further over his eyes and crouching behind the wheel, Jackson drove into the covered passageway aboard the boat and stopped.

"Keep your head down," said Whitey, peering through the rear window. "There was a dick back there on the slip, but I don't think he spotted us."

A truck pulled up behind them, effectively blocking the ferry slip from view. Jackson set the emergency brake and, opening the door, slid out into the narrow space between the car and the wall.

"Sit tight," he told Gordon. "I'll take a squint at our friend."

He walked back alongside the line of cars to the rear of the boat. The last passengers were scurrying aboard, and two roust-abouts were putting up the chain across the driveway. A man in a gray suit stood to one side of the slip, scanning the passengers as they went by. Jackson waited until the gangplank went up and the ferry began moving out from the slip. The man turned his back and moved unhurriedly up the slip, lighting a cigarette.

Jackson breathed a sigh of relief. He went through the side entrance marked "Men," visited the lavatory, and strolled back to the blue roadster. Whitey was sitting on the back of his neck with one foot through the open window reading the News. He grunted and sat up. "Lot of hooey, this," he said, indicating the paper. "See anything?"

Jackson got in and closed the car door. "That dick's just going through the motions," he said. "I think we're in the clear."

They left the ferry on the other side without incident and turned right along River Street paralleling the water front. For some distance they drove in silence, then Whitey said reflectively, "You know, Jack, there are a lot of angles on this business."

"You mean who bumped Riorden?"

"Uh-huh." Whitey shifted in his seat and crossed his legs with difficulty. "Jeez," he complained, "you'd think there'd be room for a guy's legs in a swanky boat like this. Yep," he continued when

he had finally achieved a degree of comfort, "I've been thinking. There were a couple of guys didn't like Riorden. Any drunken longshoreman with a grudge might have stuck that hook in his neck."

Jackson swung over carefully to pass a lumbering truck before he answered. They were driving up a long slope on a narrow macadam road with a bluff to the left and a slight gully on the right that deepened as the road rose.

Jackson nodded. "I know. It's screwy, but maybe we'll get something from Murdock that'll make sense out of it."

They had reached the top of the slope now and were driving along the winding rim of what had become a thirty-foot ravine. A horn sounded behind them, and Jackson, glancing in the rearview mirror, saw a long black sedan come tearing over the shoulder of the hill. He pulled to the right, and the big car, traveling fast, came alongside. Then, too late, he realized what was happening. Instead of passing, the driver of the other car swung the wheel sharply over, sideswiping the blue roadster and sending it out on the shoulder of the road. Jackson had one glimpse of a leering face in the window of the sedan and cursed the redheaded Mayme. He slammed on the brakes and fought the wheel, but the car had too much headway. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Whitey open the car door and shouted, "Don't jump, you fool." But Whitey was already halfway out. The roadster struck the low fence at the edge of the gulley and hung suspended for a moment, and Whitey's body hurtled out and went rolling over and over down the slope to disappear in the weeds at the bottom. Then the rotten fence gave way, and Jackson was thrown violently forward and to one side. He threw up his arms to shield his face from flying glass, and his head brought up against the side of the car with a sickening thump. The car pitched sideways through the fence and came to a sudden halt against the trunk of a tree.

Jackson was not completely out. Through a red haze of pain and nausea he felt rather than heard the big sedan come to a squealing stop a hundred feet up the road. The rats. Oh, the dirty, scab-herding rats. They were coming back to finish the job, were they? Okay, let 'em come. He fumbled frantically in the side pocket of the car, and his hand closed on Mayme's gun. He had the gun half out of the pocket, was shaking his head furiously to clear his eyes of the blood that ran into them from a cut on his head, when a shadow loomed at the open car door.

Someone laughed, and a voice said, "Will ya look at the crazy bastard?" Jackson was trying to pull the gun free of the pocket and level it at the voice when a weight like a whole sling load of bricks fell on his head, and he plunged forward down a gully ten thousand feet deep into unconsciousness.

A man stood at the edge of the gully looking down to where Whitey had disappeared into the weeds. "What'll we do about the punk who went down into the drink, boss?" he called over his shoulder.

"Leave him," said the man in the black sedan. "Get the other son if he's still alive and let's scram out of here before someone shows up."

"Oh, he's alive all right," said the man on the edge of the gully. "You couldn't kill that thickheaded slug nut with an ax."

He hauled Jackson out of the roadster and dumped him into the back seat of the sedan.

"Easy," said the other with a laugh. "Murdock said no rough stuff."

PART TWO

1. Routine

When captain matthew nicholson, acting head of Homicide, opened the door of his office Sergeant Tripp was sitting in the swivel chair back of the desk. The sergeant had his feet on the desk and was drinking out of a tin pail, a half-consumed sandwich almost hidden in his enormous paw.

Tripp took his feet hastily off the desk and stood up, putting the pail and sandwich on the window ledge.

"Morning, Cap," he said, adding unnecessarily, "I was waiting for you." Then he saw Attorney Joel Stern behind Nicholson, and his broad smile changed to an aggrieved expression. "Well, if it ain't my old pal Joey. Cap, are we going to have this bird on our necks again?"

Nicholson answered severely: "Mr. Stern is working on the Riorden case. We are to give him every consideration. Commissioner's orders." He looked accusingly at the window ledge. "How many times have I told you that this office is not a one-arm lunch?"

"Now that's what a guy gets for doing his duty. I'm up all night, messing through half the garbage cans on the east side and, when I finally get something hot and rush up here without even stopping for breakfast all I get is a bawling out. And you." He finished with a scowl of mock rage at Stern.

Stern's eyes twinkled as he shook hands. "Sorry you're not as glad to see me as I am to see you, Sergeant. I don't know what I'd have done without you in that Washington Market affair."

"Holy smoke," said the sergeant, raising his hands. "He don't know what he'd adone without me. We go down on a nice, quiet little gang shooting with no screwy angles, and this guy don't rest till we're gunning for the political big shot of the district. Boy, there's old pals of mine that still don't speak to me over that case."

"You know I saved you from arresting the wrong man, Sergeant."

"Yeah, and you come near getting me killed or busted, arresting the right one. I still don't understand why the cap and me both ain't out pounding a beat in the sticks right now."

"Okay, Sergeant," said Nicholson, "if you're through reminiscing let's get back to our murder case."

"Huh?" said Tripp. "Oh sure, Cap, sure!" A beatific smile suddenly lit up his homely Irish face. "Cap, it's in the bag. We'll have that guy inside twenty-four hours."

"I hope you didn't tell the newspapers that," said Nicholson dryly.

"Who, me?" The sergeant was aggrieved again. "You ought to know me better than to think I'd tell them guys anything. The pressrooms been buzzin' you all mornin', but I wouldn't give 'em the time of the day."

"All right, all right," Nicholson said with mock resignation. "What have you got?"

"Just the shoes the guy wore, that's all." Tripp dumped a bulky package wrapped in newspaper on the desk. "Take a look."

The package contained a pair of ancient, battered black work shoes that had evidently seen more than their share of service; the tongue of the right shoe was missing, while the left showed a sole finally beyond repair. It was not the disreputable condition of the shoes that interested Nicholson, however. Rusty-brown smudged stains showed on the weather-beaten leather, as though some sticky liquid had been spilled there and a hurried but not

wholly successful effort had been made to wipe it off before the shoe was discarded.

"Hmm." Nicholson was examining the rusty-brown stain closely. "Where'd you find them?"

"One was in an ash can right near where we found the clothes. Benson picked up the other in a vacant lot a block away from the precinct house."

"When?"

"Around five o'clock this mornin'."

"Ye gods and little catfish," shouted Nicholson. "You mean to say you've been lugging these things around all that time without bringing them in to the lab? I've threatened to break you before, you thickheaded harp and by God——" Nicholson spluttered incoherently, and Tripp looked indignant.

Stern murmured: "It was nice knowing you, Sergeant. They tell me the sticks aren't so bad when you get used to the country noises."

Tripp was insulted to the point of insubordination. "Keep your shirt on, will ya, Cap?" he growled. "I've been around Homicide long enough to know routine procedures. Didn't I tell you these were the shoes the guy wore? I brung 'em right into the lab and got a report not more than ten minutes ago. Them stains are blood all right and, what's more, it types with the blood on the monkey suit and on the murder weapon. What d'ya think of that?"

"Well, why the hell didn't you say so?" barked Nicholson. "Where's the report?"

He took the document produced by the sergeant and studied it carefully. Scanning rapidly down the page, his eye picked up an item. "White cotton lint," he said. "That gives us a line on the kind of socks the guy wore."

"Half the longshoremen on the water front wear white cotton socks," objected Stern.

"Yeah, I know. But you never can tell. Those socks may have blood on them." He looked at Tripp and said, "Good work," grudgingly. "I think maybe we got something." Tripp was still indignant. He said slyly, "Maybe. Anyhow, we know who owns them shoes."

Nicholson got very red in the face. "You half-wit son of a sheape. Will you stop horsing around?"

"Yes sir." Tripp's face was a picture of surprised innocence. Stern looked out of the window to hide a grin.

"Well, come on. Who?"

"Jackson," said Tripp.

"Jackson!" Nicholson pounced on the name like a terrier on a bone. He slapped Stern on the back and chortled. "You hear that, you amateur sleuth? I told you I had that guy pegged. What d'ya say now?"

"Wait a minute," said Stern. He turned to Sergeant Tripp. "How do you know they're Jackson's?"

"The big red-faced guy identified them. He said he'd seen 'em around the Union Hall."

"What do you mean around the hall?"

"They were an old pair this guy Jackson wore down to the dock only he hadn't been wearin' 'em lately because they were shot. He left 'em in a closet at the hall."

"So anyone could have worn them?"

The sergeant nodded, and Stern grinned while Nicholson looked at him in disgust. "Of all the God damn luck," he said. "Every time I get a clue in this case you shoot it full of holes. You wouldn't have a cousin in this union, would you?"

Stern's grin faded. "I don't like that crack."

"All right, all right." Nicholson threw up his hands. "Skip it. You!" he said to Tripp. "Go home and get some sleep. It ain't your fault those shoes don't add up."

When Tripp had gone he grabbed up the phone and barked into it. "Any word on those general alarms? None, huh. What kind of cops——? Send Murray in here. Oh, he is, is he? Scanlon? Barry? Okay, okay. Get me a couple of cops if you have to raid the traffic squad. Yeah, when did you think I wanted them?"

He cradled the phone and, taking a cigar from his vest pocket,

bit the end savagely. He sat down in the chair back of the desk and pushed his hat to the back of his head. Stern maintained a discreet silence, and finally Nicholson looked up and grinned ruefully.

"Well, there's one thing you are right about," he admitted. "This murder was premeditated. When I first saw the brutal way the job was done I thought we had one of these maniac murders or else the guy must have been either crazy-drunk or scared stiff. This man Riorden must have been standing on the curb with his back to the truck, maybe leaning on the tailboard which was down. There wasn't any evidence of a fight or a struggle; the killer either came up behind him or, more likely, was hiding in the truck and just leaned out and crowned him with the back of the hook. Then he caught the body by the coat collar to keep it from falling and dug the hook into his victim's throat and hauled him over the tailboard and into the truck as though he were handling a side of beef. But the most vicious part was that when he'd got the body into the truck, instead of easing the hook out of the throat, the killer put his foot on his victim's face and just yanked."

Nicholson paused and looked up as though expecting a comment. When there was none he continued: "That's the way it looked at first—a simple water-front killing, not pretty, but fairly obvious. But now I'm beginning to think there's a lot more to it than that. Whoever pulled this job planned it too carefully—"

He broke off evidently waiting for Stern to comment, but the little attorney only nodded.

Nicholson snorted disgustedly. "I might as well be talking to myself," he complained. "Say something, can't you? Where do we go from here?"

Stern shrugged. "What do you want me to say? I know you and your single-track mind. You're convinced Jackson's the killer, and that's all there is to it. I'll bet you haven't even got tails on the other men who were at the meeting."

Two detectives entered, and Nicholson deferred his reply to

send them combing the water front for information as to Riorden's movements before he was killed. A clerk came in from the outer room with a batch of reports, among which was one from the laboratory experts who had examined the truck, one from the men who had been detailed to search Riorden's flat and interview his wife, and still a third to the effect that the precinct men had found Jackson's room but no Jackson.

Nicholson swore and tossed the reports across to Stern. "Not a clue in a carload," he said. "You can yap 'frame' till you're blue in the face, Joey, but I still say when I get my hands on that bird Jackson I'll crack this case."

"And I still say no man smart enough to head a big labor union would leave a trail a mile wide pointing right at him. He wouldn't choose a weapon that could be traced to him as easily as that hook. He wouldn't leave a spy report lying around loose and he wouldn't pull the stupid stunt of using his own shoes. Five'll get you ten, Jackson isn't our man."

"All right." Nicholson gave him a sour look. "Suppose we play it your way, what have we got?" He pulled out his notebook.

"Burke," he read. "Left bar in company of Officer Hanrahan, twelve-twenty. Talked to Hanrahan on corner and left him at twelve twenty-five, walking west.

"Burke didn't go home, and we don't know yet where he spent the night. He could have killed the guy, but there's not one concrete piece of evidence that says he did.

"Painter. Landlady says he came in and went up to his room at twelve. Claims she spoke to him and looked at her clock.

"We found Painter in bed, and his story checked. There might be collusion there, as I told the commissioner. I liked Painter as a suspect for a while, but there's nothing to go on any more than there is with Burke. And in the other cases there's still less. Mellus was in a bar from eleven-thirty to one, unless the bartender and a couple others are lying, and Colletti, Gordon, and Sangster, the Negro, were together. Of course, any one of them could have slipped out of that crap game and back in again, but you know yourself we went over that ground with a fine-tooth comb last night and found just exactly nothing."

He snapped the book shut and put it away. "And what else have we got? Two or three thousand union longshoremen. Where are you going to start on that?" He shook his finger at Stern savagely. "Boy, you let me take those guys down to the basement one at a time, and I'll blast this thing before it's twenty-four hours old. Otherwise, you better pray it's Jackson."

"And have half the town on our necks howling 'Hitler'?" Stern shifted sideways in his chair and squinted at the police captain. "How about the typewriter?"

"I put a couple of special-duty men on it first thing this morning; the lab says it's a Royal. They'll probably find it, but it'll take time. The bird that used that machine has sense enough to know we can trace him through it."

A buzzer sounded. Nicholson leaned forward and tipped the cam on the interoffice communication system. "Yes," he said.

A voice from the box said, "This is Clark, Captain. Something just came in on the teletype I thought might interest you."

"Let's have it," said Nicholson.

"It's from Jasper County across the river," said the voice. "John Murdock, president of Eastcoast Shipping, was found strangled in his library at ten o'clock this morning."

"What?" shouted Nicholson. "John Murdock?"

Stern sat up straight, his eyes narrow and intent.

"Yeah," said the voice with satisfaction. "That's what it says. Thought there might be a tie-up with that water-front killing last night—"

"Yes, yes," Nicholson interrupted. "Get me the sheriff of Jasper County. If he's not in his office call the Murdock residence. And don't wait to think." He clicked the cam and sat back tensely, a frown that was partly perplexed concentration and partly worry between his eyes.

Stern said nothing, and they waited silently together until the telephone rang. The captain snatched up the phone.

"Nicholson, City Homicide," he barked.

A blurred voice came gruffly over the wire.

"Sheriff Christy, Jasper County. I'm speaking from the Murdock residence. S'pose you know we got a murder on our hands out here?"

"Yeah, I know, Sheriff. Just got the news over the teletype. There might be a connection with a water-front killing we had last night. We'd consider it a favor if you people'd let us co-operate—"

The sheriff interrupted, his low rumble coming faintly to Stern's ears.

"God almighty, Captain, there ain't nothing I'd like better. This is big stuff for Jasper County, and it's kinda got us winging. Might do yourself some good too. We just picked up a wrecked car down the road from here with a fellow carrying a longshoreman's union card in it. He's out cold, but the name on his card is Gordon."

"The hell you say!" Nicholson's voice was eager. "Is he a little chunky guy with blond hair?"

"That's him," said the sheriff. "You think he fits into this mess?"

"Fits in? He's in up to his ears. Look, was there anyone with him—a tall, rangy bird by the name of Jackson? He and the little guy are pals."

The sheriff's phlegmatic growl lifted a little as he caught Nicholson's eagerness. "Coulda been," he said. "We got a description of the murderer that checks with that, only he wasn't dressed like no longshoreman."

"Okay," Nicholson decided swiftly. "I'm coming out there—that is, if you and the county attorney don't mind. Can you hold everything for about three quarters of an hour?"

"Sure, sure. Me'n and the C.A.'ll be glad to have you, Captain. He ain't here yet, but I'll vouch for him. I don't mind tellin' you we need help and we need it bad."

"Thanks, Sheriff, thanks very much. Maybe between us we can clean up both these cases."

Nicholson replaced the desk phone and looked at Stern, a gleam of triumph in his eye.

"You and the commissioner can go fly a kite, you storybook detective," he announced happily. "I said it was Jackson and I still say so. Now he's bumped the only witness who knew he was a stoolie. If I hadn't listened to a lot of fancy talk—"

Stern's eyes were sharp behind his thick lenses. "You're jumping to conclusions again, but I'll admit you got more to go on than you had before. Mind if I tag along so you can say, 'I told you so'?"

Nicholson, barking orders into the dictograph, spoke over his shoulder. "Come on, if you want to," he said. "Only shake a leg. We can't expect Jasper County to hold up their investigation all day for us."

Seated comfortably in the back of a big car with P.D. license plates, while a police chauffeur tooled them skillfully through traffic on the way to the ferry, Stern asked:

"Know McArthur?"

"Who's he?"

"Jasper County attorney. The fellow you're going to cooperate with."

Nicholson turned his head. "Like that, is it? The sheriff sounded all right. What contact we have over there is usually with the township or the state police. I don't know much about the county setup."

"You'll find out," Stern grinned. "It's a one-horse outfit. Christy's okay—been sheriff for twenty years, more or less—but McArthur's ambitious and a stuffed shirt. He'll be jealous as hell at our butting in on the first juicy case he's had in a month of Sundays."

"He can have his case on a silver platter," growled Nicholson.
"All I want is Jackson."

Stern shook his head. "If you're right Jackson's his case too."

2. Library

THE MURDOCK ESTATE sat on the brow of a hill overlooking the river. It was a great square block of a house built in the undistinguished architecture of the 1890s, its majestic ugliness dominating the countryside for miles around. A low stone wall guarding the grounds was overshadowed by rows of poplars, and the state road climbed the shoulder of the hill opposite and swung up and back to the house in a long U curve, straightening to run along-side the wall for over a quarter of a mile. The police car turned in at a gate midway of the wall and followed a winding white driveway to the front of the house where several other cars were already parked.

Christy, the elderly white-mustached Jasper County sheriff, met Nicholson and Stern at the front door.

"Glad you fellers could come," he said, shaking hands warmly. He lowered his voice and jerked his shaggy, grizzled head over his shoulder. "C.A. just got here. He's inside."

He led them through a hall, past a wide, polished staircase curving upward, to a door at the rear of the house.

"This is the library," he informed them. "Everything's just as we found it."

The room they entered was very large, running almost the entire width of the house. It had a low-beamed ceiling and dark, oak-paneled walls, broken by tall bookcases that rose on either side of the enormous fireplace and flanked the french windows at the rear. The furniture was heavy, square and old-fashioned like the house itself; a large, flat-topped table in the middle of the room, tall chairs with carved backs and settles with red leather upholstery in front of the fireplace. A large iron safe managed, somehow, not to seem incongruous.

Confusion and disorder were evident in the scattered papers before the open door of the safe and in the litter of odds and ends on the big table. A smaller chamber, glimpsed through an open door at the end of the long room, was also in an untidy state, the portion visible showing a pile of rumpled blankets on the end of a small couch.

But the thing that dominated that quiet, sunlit room was John Murdock's corpse. In life John Murdock had not been exactly prepossessing; with his huge, flat-skulled head on which the coarse, reddish hair grew low over the brow, and his massive torso and limbs, he had been like his house, too square and blunt and angular for beauty. Now, in death, he was grotesque and hideous, with horrible bursting eyes and a contorted hole of a mouth from which protruded a black and swollen tongue.

Garroting is neither a quick nor a merciful death. Although no longer young Murdock had been a powerful man, and it was evident that he had not succumbed without a desperate struggle; the body hung, rather than sat, in the tall chair, the legs sprawled and twisted far to one side as though in a futile effort to turn and face his adversary. A red braided cord, almost hidden in front by the overlapping folds of the thick neck and knotted tightly against the scrolled back of the chair, held the body in an upright position.

The old sheriff took a proprietary and ghoulish delight in the unnerving spectacle. His gesture toward it was reminiscent of a guide in a waxworks museum calling attention to one of the more realistic exhibits in the chamber of horrors.

"Not much to look at, is he? Choked to death with a cord from the window curtains—looks like he was settin' there and the murderer came through the window and sneaked up behind him."

He turned to a small, dapper man who came forward from before the french windows. "This here's the county attorney."

County Attorney McArthur frowned and extended a limp hand. Nicholson took the hand. "Hope we're not intruding," he grunted.

"Not at all, not at all," said McArthur with hollow cordiality. "Glad to have you. I'm afraid you'll be disappointed though. This

is an obvious case of murder incidental to the commission of a robbery, and I feel sure that an hour or two of questioning will produce both the guilty party and the stolen goods."

"What was stolen and whom do you suspect?" asked Nicholson.

"Ten thousand." McArthur rolled the sum off his tongue with relish. "There was ten thousand dollars in that safe last night, and it's not there now. Only two people, besides Mr. Murdock, knew of its presence—Powers, the butler, and Miss Nellie Cosimo, Mr. Murdock's secretary, and we've already discovered that Miss Cosimo has an alibi."

"And that leaves the butler," murmured Stern.

"Exactly. I haven't had time to question either of them, but the sheriff's preliminary investigation has already brought to light several facts that point directly to the butler. He was the only person in the house with Mr. Murdock last night and this morning. He knew of the money and, we have reason to believe, hated his master. He tells a fantastic story, full of absurd discrepancies—something about a tall dark man dressed in a brown hat and overcoat who was in this room when he came in and who slugged him and got away. The story is made out of whole cloth in my opinion."

"But he was slugged," cut in Sheriff Christy. "You can't get away from that, and it takes a damn clever man to slug himself and make it look real."

Nicholson asked, "Did you have the doctor examine the butler's injury to determine whether it could have been self-inflicted or not?"

"Sure thing," said the sheriff. "Doc was pretty sure that he wasn't faking."

McArthur cleared his throat. "I'll believe he was faking before I swallow that ridiculous story he told you, Sheriff. If you and your men are all through here I suggest you have the body removed and bring Powers in for questioning."

"The boys got plenty of pictures, and they've been over the place for fingerprints." The sheriff turned to Nicholson and Stern.

"Maybe you fellers'd like to take a look around before the inquisition starts."

Stern had already left the little group by the door and was wandering about in an apparently aimless fashion. He had stopped to peer down at the body for a moment, his face looking as though his stomach was turning over at the grisly sight; then he had strolled to the windows and from there to the safe where he knelt and rifled idly through the papers strewn on the floor. When Nicholson joined him he raised his head and nodded solemnly, his eyes owlish behind their thick lenses.

"Looks like the guy didn't find what he was looking for," he said.

"What are you batting about?" asked Nicholson. Five minutes' conversation with McArthur had put him in a bad mood.

"The guy came here for something," insisted Stern, "and it was something he wanted pretty bad. He got Murdock's keys—they're over there on the table now—and he tried the safe first. He did a good job, but whatever he was hunting for wasn't here. Then he went through the drawer of the table and searched the small room. He was interrupted before he'd finished. Probably by the butler, in spite of what our pompous friend says. My guess is that he socked the butler and scrammed—and if I'm right he'll be back."

"Who's jumping to conclusions now? And where do you get that 'back' stuff?" said Nicholson. "That's another one of the things you read in a book. The only murderers who ever revisit the scene of their crimes are the ones dragged there by the cops. The others usually keep going in the other direction."

Stern only grinned, and Nicholson grunted disgustedly and left him, to go across and stare down at the corpse and the littered table at which it sat. Evidences of the search to which Stern had alluded were obvious. The drawer of the desk had been jerked open, and everything in it snatched out and piled on the desk top. Nicholson noted the keys and the fact that Murdock's right trousers pocket was turned inside out. A gleam came into his eye, and he suppressed an exclamation as a possible object of the

search occurred to him. Spy reports. That was what the murderer had been looking for—and that brought Jackson right back into the middle of the picture. Jackson could have been the man who slugged the butler—the description, or as much as they had heard so far, checked—and why couldn't Jackson have a brown hat and overcoat? Better hear the butler's story right away and find out whether he could identify the man who had hit him. Then get Jackson down in the line-up, and the case would be over. The whole business was a cinch.

He turned to the sheriff. "This fellow you picked up in the wrecked car down the road—where is he now? Did you question him?"

"Hospital," grunted the sheriff, suddenly laconic. "Unconscious. Slight concussion, the docs say. Won't be able to talk for several hours."

"What about the car?" persisted Nicholson.

"License plates from your state. We haven't had time to check them yet."

Nicholson asked for the number of the plates and got busy on the telephone. Two husky deputies assisted a white-coated morgue attendant in untying and removing the body. The cord about Murdock's neck had been knotted tightly at the chair back, and they had difficulty loosening it. Released from the fatal noose, the body collapsed limply, with only a slight suggestion of rigor mortis, and was placed on a stretcher.

Nicholson, having completed his telephone call, waited until the door closed behind the deputies and their burden before he spoke.

"That car belonged to a night-club singer, name of Mayme Burke," he announced triumphantly. "She was the sister of one of the union longshoremen that were mixed up in the killing we had last night. We got a general alarm out for him. I'll bet my bottom dollar that either he or this other fellow we're looking for, Jackson, or maybe both of them, were in that car when it crashed—and I'll go further. One or both of them came up here

and bumped Murdock. McArthur, I think that butler's telling the truth."

McArthur bridled and seemed about to explode.

The sheriff said quickly, "I'd like to get more facts before we start in on theories. For instance"—he ambled over and pointed a bony finger at the drawer of the big table—"did any of you gents see anything funny about this drawer?"

"Yeah," said Nicholson. "It was forced. Why would the guy force a drawer when he had Murdock's keys?"

"Probably because he didn't have that particular key," suggested McArthur.

"The key's there, all right." Nicholson picked up the bunch of keys and selected one. "The guy was pretty panicky, the way I see it, and forced the drawer before he thought about searching Murdock for keys. Or maybe he hated to touch the corpse. But when he got to the safe he found out he couldn't force the inner compartment and had to have the keys. By the way, Sheriff, was the safe open when you got here?"

"Just like you see it," said the old man.

"The money was in the inner compartment of the safe," the county attorney said somewhat testily, "and the windows were always kept locked, except in the summer. According to the butler ventilation was obtained through that fan in the transom above the middle window. If you ask me I'd say the windows were opened by the butler himself in order to lend credence to his fantastic story. I confess, gentlemen, this seems to me to be a waste of time. In my opinion, we should interview witnesses."

"I agree with you heartily," said Nicholson, "but there are a couple more questions I'd like to ask first—sort of background, you know. First, about the family and servants. It seems to me I've seen pictures of a Miss and Mrs. Murdock in the papers. Where are they?"

"Florida," said the sheriff. "Wife and daughter and two maids and a chauffeur. Butler's the only left 'cept for old man Shawn and his wife who come in by the day. Shawn's the handy man, and his wife does what cooking there is when the women of the family are away. The butler sorta takes care of Murdock. I asked why Murdock happened to come home last night, and the butler said there was somebody here to see him—to see Murdock, I mean."

"Hmmmm, a visitor, eh? That's interesting. Did the butler say who it was?"

"Not yet," said the sheriff. He grinned. "I didn't get a chance to ask him."

Nicholson returned the grin. "The butler seems to have the answers to a lot of questions," he admitted. "I guess I'll wait with mine until we hear what he has to say."

3. Man in the Brown Coat

Powers was above average height and thick through the chest and shoulders. The wooden, slightly snobbish deference of the well-trained servant hung on him like a transparent cloak and hardly served to hide the emotional strain going on underneath. There were white lines around his mouth and jaw, and his eyes darted restlessly from face to face. He paused for a moment just inside the door, and his head went down like that of a cornered animal about to charge; then he regained control and straightened.

"You sent for me, gentlemen?" he asked the room at large.

The sheriff nodded and indicated a chair placed facing the windows. Powers sat down heavily.

"Thank you, sir. You are very kind." Powers' eyes shifted toward the table and chair in the center of the room and were hastily averted.

"You understand, sir. The—er—morning's occurrences have been almost too much." He lifted his hand and touched the large square of adhesive on his temple.

"Sure, sure," said the sheriff soothingly. "Musta been a shock——"

McArthur squared away in front of the man and glared down at him.

"It's nothing to the shock you're going to get if you don't come clean and tell the truth," he snapped. "Who killed Murdock?"

"The truth——" Powers half rose from his chair. "Why—I—you don't think I know who killed him?"

"You hated him," persisted McArthur. He pointed dramatically. "You knew there were ten thousand dollars in that safe."

"Just a minute." Sheriff Christy's customary drawl was gone and his voice was sharp. His eyes were suddenly a cold blue.

"Mr. McArthur's the county attorney," he said to Powers. "He knew Mr. Murdock and he's kinda upset. These here's Captain Nicholson and Attorney Stern from across the river. We're here to find out who killed your boss and swiped the ten thousand dollars, and I guess you want to help us do that, don't you?"

Powers' reply was somewhat surprising. "Mr. Murdock was a hard man. I suppose Miss Cosimo told this gentleman I hated him." He hesitated. "Perhaps I did. I know that I would have given notice long ago if it had not been for Miss Julia and the mistress—but I did not kill him and I did not take the money from the safe—and I certainly want to help find whoever did." Powers' fingers went again to the bandage on his forehead. "After all," he finished, "he tried to kill me too."

McArthur reddened and cleared his throat vigorously. He seemed momentarily to consider challenging the sheriff's authority to conduct the investigation but he evidently thought better of it for he sat back in his chair and was silent. Stern caught Nicholson's eye and winked.

Sheriff Christy did not seem to notice the byplay. He said to Powers, "Go ahead. Just tell us everything that happened."

"Yes sir," said Powers. "I'll do the best I can. Mr. Murdock got home at eleven o'clock last night. He was usually late when the family was away. There was a—person here waiting for him—a Mr. Weller—I believe he has something to do with the unions on the water front."

"Did this fellow Weller say what he wanted to see Murdock about?" asked the sheriff.

Powers hesitated. "No sir," he said finally.

Stern leaned forward. "Beg pardon, Sheriff. That's probably Fink Weller. He's a water-front racketeer who used to be president of the longshoremen's union until the men kicked him out."

The sheriff nodded, and Powers said, "I don't know, of course, but I believe what the gentleman says is substantially correct."

Stern's eyes twinkled and bowed gravely. "Thank you, Powers."

McArthur cleared his throat again threateningly, and even Nicholson fidgeted in his chair. The old sheriff gave Stern a reproving look, then nodded to Powers to continue.

"Mr. Murdock brought Mr. Weller to the library and requested me to bring them some refreshments and, when I had done so, told me that he would require nothing more and that I might retire."

"Then you don't know when Weller left?"

"I'm a light sleeper, sir. I heard the front door open and close and Mr. Weller's car starting. I didn't look at my watch but I judged it to be about two o'clock."

"Hmm." The sheriff ran a hand along his bristly jaw, as though suddenly aware that he had forgotten to shave that morning. "Where's your room?" he asked.

"Off the kitchen, sir, at the end of the hall."

"And where did Mr. Murdock sleep?"

Powers gestured toward the small chamber at the end of the library. "Down here. He usually slept here when he worked late."

McArthur could contain himself no longer. "How do you know where he slept?" he barked.

"His bed upstairs was not slept in," Powers answered evenly. "And if he had gone upstairs or come down in the morning I should have heard him. As I said, I am a light sleeper."

Sheriff Christy ignored the interruption. "Anything happen during the night? You hear any unusual noise or anything like that?"

Powers shook his head. "Everything was just as usual, sir. I'm sure of that."

"What time'd you get up this morning?"

"At six-thirty. I always arise at six-thirty. I had breakfast in the kitchen, and then at a little after seven there was a telephone call—"

"Phone call, huh? On this phone?" Sheriff Christy indicated the instrument on the library table beside the fatal chair.

"No sir. That's an extension of the house phone in the hall. Mr. Murdock did not like to be disturbed, and I answered all phone calls—that is, all calls that came over the regular house phone. Mr. Murdock had a private, unlisted wire for personal calls with connections in his den here and in his bedroom upstairs."

"You don't say? Were there any calls over the private line?"
"I wouldn't know, sir. Mr. Murdock took those calls himself."

The sheriff rose, crossed the room, and opened the hall door. "Phillips," he bawled, "call the telephone company and get a record of all calls from or to this house last night or this morning. Murdock had a private line beside the regular listed house phone. Be sure you get the dope on both of them."

The deputy answered, "Okay, Jake," and was at the phone before the sheriff closed the door. The old man came back and sat down.

"Go on," he said to Powers, "tell us about this phone call."

"Well, sir, it was a person named Jackson—" Powers paused as Nicholson yelped, "What?" and came to attention like a bird dog. The sheriff looked at Nicholson who sat back and shook his head. Powers glanced from one to the other and then continued: "Mr. Jackson asked to speak to Mr. Murdock, but I informed him that I had orders not to disturb the master before ten o'clock. He then requested me to inform Mr. Murdock that he—Mr. Jackson, that is—would be here at ten. He was very insistent, and I took the message."

Nicholson said, "Look, Sheriff, do you mind taking time out for

a couple of minutes? There's one or two things I'd like to get straight before I hear the rest of the story."

The sheriff nodded, and Nicholson asked, "What time was the body found?"

Christy fixed a cold blue eye on Powers. "You came into this room at ten o'clock sharp, right? And Murdock was dead in the chair by the table there just like we saw him?"

Powers nodded.

"And what time did the doc get here?" asked Nicholson.

"Quarter of eleven," said the sheriff promptly. "I brought him along with me. Powers here phoned my office at ten-thirty."

"What were you doing between ten and ten-thirty?" McArthur asked Powers suspiciously.

The butler met McArthur's glare. "I was unconscious," he replied dryly.

McArthur sniffed. "I think the whole story's a pack of lies," he charged. "It's too pat. This fellow killed his master and took the money."

Powers leaped to his feet. "That's not true," he cried desperately. "You have no right——"

Sheriff Christy put a large brown hand on the butler's chest and pushed him back into his chair with surprising ease.

"Shut up and take it easy," he ordered. "Your story'll be checked and double-checked. If you're telling the truth you're okay, and if you're lying we'll find it out and then your goose'll be cooked proper." He drew the county attorney aside. "I wish you'd stop goin' off half cocked like that, Mac," he complained. "It ain't gettin' us anywhere."

"I think we're wasting time," growled McArthur. "If you'd let me question this fellow——"

The sheriff shrugged. "You can question him all you're a mind to when I get through with him. He ain't gonna run away." He turned pointedly from the county attorney and addressed Nicholson.

"Less'n I miss my guess, Captain, you were tryin' to find out what time Murdock died."

Stern grinned broadly, and Nicholson hid his amusement only by a supreme effort. "Why, yes, Sheriff," he admitted. "That was one of the things I was interested in."

"Doc said he'd been dead between one and two hours. That'd make it sometime between eight-thirty and ten o'clock. If Jackson came out in that car we found smashed up down the road he could have got here shortly after nine-thirty. There was a clock on the dashboard of the car, that had stopped at that time."

"I'd sure like to talk to that guy Gordon," murmured Nicholson.

"One thing about that fellow," the sheriff said thoughtfully, "he's got a pretty good alibi. Even without the bump on his head, he didn't have time to get up here and back to the car before the state trooper that reported the accident found him. Then, too, he don't answer the description of this fellow that Powers saw."

Nicholson laughed. "You have the advantage of us there, Sheriff. We haven't heard that part of the story yet."

The deputy Phillips entered and handed a slip of paper to the sheriff. "Here's the dope on them telephone calls," he drawled easily. "And say, Jake, them newspaper fellows are raisin' the roof. What'll I tell 'em?"

"Tell 'em to keep their shirts on. I'll give 'em a statement as soon as I know what to say." Christy glanced at the paper in his hand and slapped his thigh. "By George, here's something. There were four telephone calls this morning, three incoming calls and one t'other way, and all but one of 'em were on Murdock's private wire." He looked at Powers keenly. "You mean to say you didn't know anything about these other three calls?"

"Nothing, sir, I assure you," Powers insisted. "As I told you, Mr. Murdock took all the calls that came over the private wire personally, and the ring of the instrument cannot be heard from other parts of the house."

The sheriff grunted. "Well, let's get back to what happened this

morning. You had orders to call Mr. Murdock at ten o'clock?" Powers nodded.

"You didn't enter this room before ten o'clock?"

"No sir."

"And no one else did as far as you know?"

"There was no one else here, sir—that is, no one that I knew of."

"Okay. And these windows were locked from the inside?"

"They were locked last night. I assured myself of that before I retired."

"Would Murdock be likely to leave them open while he was working this morning?" asked Stern. It was the first indication of interest he had shown.

"I hardly think it likely," said Powers. He turned back to the sheriff. "If you'll pardon the observation, sir, I am certain that the -er-slayer was someone known to Mr. Murdock for two reasons; first, because Mr. Murdock had very sharp ears, and I am sure no one could enter the room without his being aware of it. If you've noticed, sir, the french windows squeak slightly when they are opened. I spoke to Shawn, the handy man, about them some time ago. Second, and even more important if you knew Mr. Murdock's habits, he was fully dressed except for a smoking jacket. You'll notice there's a shower and lavatory beyond the den there, and the master invariably took a shower on arising and donned a robe. He did not change to street clothes until time to go to the office—usually at about nine o'clock. However, he was very sensitive about appearing before outsiders in his robe and always dressed when he had to see anyone other than the immediate household, even if it were only a tradesperson; also, he had intended to sleep late this morning and would have done so had he not been disturbed. It seems logical to assume, sir, if you'll forgive my presumption, that someone he knew called him this morning on the private phone and made an appointment."

The long speech was evidence that Powers had recovered his self-possession remarkably since he first entered the room; also, that he was by no means unobservant or lacking in intelligence. His

manner was so candid and straightforward that even McArthur seemed impressed.

"That's an extremely plausible explanation, I will admit," the county attorney said, "except for one thing. Why wouldn't a caller come to the front door?"

"I'm sure I can't tell you that," said Powers, "unless it was because he didn't want to be seen. I do know, however, that there have been previous occasions on which Mr. Murdock had callers who came and left by the french windows."

"How did you know that?" asked Sheriff Christy.

Powers hesitated. "It's rather a long story, sir."

"Never mind," insisted the sheriff, "let's hear it."

"Well." Powers stirred in his chair and glanced uncertainly from one to the other of his questioners. "I and the other servants had strict orders not to mention the incident, but perhaps under the present circumstances—"

McArthur snapped impatiently. "Come on, man, cut the stalling."

Powers' eyes flicked resentfully to McArthur's face and back to the sheriff. Finally he sighed. "Very well. The incident happened one night about six weeks ago. Annie, one of the maids, saw a stranger come up the path that leads from a country road back of the garage and enter the house through these windows. She naturally thought the man was a prowler and raised an alarm. Both the chauffeur and myself were in the kitchen at the time, and we came to investigate but when I tried the door it was locked. I knocked, and Mr. Murdock came out in a huff and told us to mind our own business."

"Did the maid get a good look at this fellow?" asked Nicholson. "No sir. She only saw him from an upstairs window and at a distance."

Stern joined the questioning. "But you saw him, didn't you, Powers?" he asked quietly.

Powers looked at Stern a long moment. His jaw set stubbornly, and he seemed about to deny the statement. Finally he lifted his hands and let them fall on the arms of his chair in a gesture of

resignation. "Yes sir," he admitted. "I saw him. I don't want you to think I'm a snooping servant, gentlemen, but I feel that it's my duty to know what goes on in the house. The incident upset me, and I determined to satisfy myself that nothing was wrong, so I went outside and tried to see in through the library windows. The curtains were drawn, but I did manage to get a glimpse of a person sitting here at the table and talking to Mr. Murdock. The circumstances reassured me, and I withdrew."

Sheriff Christy nodded. "Now we're getting somewhere. What did this fellow look like?"

Powers shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir. I only saw the man's back—a fleeting glimpse. Beyond the fact that he was tall and rather thin——"

"Would you recognize him if you saw him again?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. I might and I might not. I really can't say."

"Hell's bells," said the sheriff mildly. "You'll have to do better than that. This might be important."

"If I may presume, sir"—Powers paused and then seemed to come to a decision—"I've been wondering if the man I saw last night was the same as the one who attacked me today. I didn't see either clearly but I've made up my mind now they couldn't be the same."

Nicholson groaned. "Then you won't be able to identify either man?"

"Except to say they're not the same man," said Powers. "I'm positive about that. The man who struck me was heavier and impressed me as being younger than the other."

Stern leaned back in his chair. "That's a help," he said. "Now we got two mysterious strangers to worry about."

"Well, I don't know." Sheriff Christy pulled at his lower lip. "It ain't much help for a fact but it might save us chasin' after the wrong man."

"Eeny, meeny, miny, moe," grinned Stern. "Which one'll you pick, Sheriff?"

The old man looked at him in mild reproof. Nicholson gestured impatiently. "That sort of horseplay doesn't get us anywhere.

Perhaps if we would let the witness tell us the rest of what took place this morning we'd get a clearer picture."

"I think you've got something there," said Stern.

"Yeah, I know," admitted the sheriff. "I been trying to get around to that, but we keep gettin' sidetracked." He nodded to Powers. "Go on."

"Yes sir." Powers smiled a faint, butlerish smile. "Nothing unusual happened after the telephone rang, and at ten o'clock I came to waken Mr. Murdock. I rapped on the library door and turned the knob, but the door was locked. I opened it with my master key and came into the room—"

"Whoa," interrupted the sheriff. "I don't get that about the door. You say it was locked on the inside?"

"Yes sir. There was nothing strange about that. Mr. Murdock often snapped the catch on the hall door when he worked late and did not want to be disturbed. I was the only member of the household who had a key."

The sheriff frowned. "Then there's no way of telling whether Mr. Murdock or someone else locked the door?"

"I wouldn't know that, sir. Of course, at the time I assumed Mr. Murdock had locked it the night before and I unlocked and opened it, intending to come through this room and rap on the door of the den. It was a terrible shock when I saw that—when I saw Mr. Murdock's body in the chair. I stopped and just stood there for a minute not able to move a finger. Then I heard a small noise behind me—somewhat like a sigh—and I turned around—"

"Behind you?" interrupted Nicholson.

Powers inclined his head. "That's right, sir. You see, I had come several paces into the room before I noticed the body. The door swings inward and hides the room until one is past it."

"I see. Did you leave the door open?" Nicholson asked.

The butler's eyes rested on Nicholson's face for a moment before he answered. "You have undoubtedly observed that all the doors of the house are equipped with air-pressure gadgets that close them automatically," he said finally. Nicholson grinned.

The sheriff prompted, "Okay. You heard a noise and turned around . . ."

"That's correct," said the butler. "Well, sir, there was this person standing behind me. It naturally did not occur to me then, but he must have been behind the door when I opened it. He had on a brown hat pulled down over his eyes and a brown tweed top-coat with the collar turned up. There was a handkerchief over the lower part of his face. I just caught a glimpse of him when he hit me with something he held in his raised hand, but it failed to render me unconscious, and I reached out and grappled with him. He must have hit me again then, sir, for that's the last thing I remember until I recovered and found myself lying there on the floor."

McArthur looked a silent question at the sheriff, and the old man nodded.

Nicholson asked, "How tall was the man?"

"About six feet, roughly, I should say, sir."

"Did he wear gloves?"

"Now that you mention it, sir, I believe he did—brown gloves— I had the impression they were pigskin."

Nicholson's eyes sparkled. "What else, man? Think hard."

"His hair," Powers said slowly. "As I told you, his hat was tilted to one side, and I had the impression that his hair was black and curly. That is one of the things which make me think he was not the man I had seen with Mr. Murdock."

McArthur emitted a sound slightly like that made by a trumpeting elephant. "You see," he exploded. "That's sheer embroidery. No man on earth——"

The sheriff's glower silenced him. "You've got a single-track mind, Mac," the old man snapped. "It's a wonder to me how you ever win a case in court. I don't know myself, yet, whether Powers is lying or not but if he is I'll say one thing—he's doin' a damn good job of it."

"I am not lying," said Powers simply. "A servant learns to be observant, sir. It's part of his training."

"I wouldn't know about that," grunted the sheriff. "Does seem like you saw an awful lot while this guy was crackin' you on the head but maybe, for all I know, you're one of these fellows with a photographic eye, whatever that is. Anyhow, if any such guy as you describe was around here this morning we'll find him."

"I sincerely hope so, sir," murmured Powers.

"What did you do after you phoned for the police?"

"I lay down, sir—perhaps collapsed would be a better word on the lounge in the living room."

"You didn't come back into this room?"

Powers shook his head. "I had had quite enough of this room for one morning, if you'll pardon my saying so."

McArthur looked up from his drawings. "You say you served refreshments in this room last night before you went to bed?" "Yes sir."

McArthur jerked his head toward the table. "I don't see any tray or glasses. What happened to them?"

"I found them in the kitchen this morning, sir. Mr. Murdock must have removed them before he went to bed."

"You didn't remove them yourself this morning?"

The butler said wearily, "I've told you over and over again that I touched nothing in this room."

Sheriff Christy rose and stretched. "Okay," he yawned. "I'm sorry but I'll have to hold you as a material witness, Mr. Powers. I guess that'll be all for now though, unless you gentlemen have any other questions." He looked at Nicholson and then across at Stern.

"Just one," said Stern. He addressed himself to Powers. "When you first came into the room did you notice those keys on the table?"

Powers hesitated, then he passed a hand over his eyes and said apologetically, "I'm sorry, sir. My head aches severely. I'm afraid

I can't remember anything about the table. I saw only Mr. Murdock. . . ."

It was the only time during the interview that Powers had pleaded either indisposition or forgetfulness.

4. Secretary

"I DON'T KNOW how you gentlemen feel about it," said Nicholson as the door closed behind Powers, "but this thing is no mystery as far as I'm concerned. Once we find this fellow Jackson—if we do find him before he ships out to China or South America—we'll clear up your murder and ours too. Just take a look at the facts: the man who killed that longshoreman last night wore Jackson's shoes and used a longshoreman's cargo hook with Jackson's initial on it; Jackson was the last person seen with the murdered man; he had quarreled with Riorden earlier in the evening and had been accused, also by Riorden, of spying on the union; he disappeared after the murder and has not been seen since.

"Now tie that in with what we know about this case. Murdock knew who the stool pigeon was—therefore he knew the killer. Jackson called Murdock early this morning and said he was coming out here. Jackson's pal is found near a wrecked car a half mile from this house, and it's established that the car was wrecked at nine-thirty, giving Jackson time to walk up here, strangle Murdock, bop the butler, and walk off with the ten thousand dollars. Why did Murdock have ten thousand dollars in the house? A smart businessman doesn't keep that kind of dough in a tin box like that safe over there. He had it to pay Jackson off, of course, but Jackson outsmarted him—he got the dough and shut Murdock's mouth at the same time. We've got evidence enough to burn half a dozen men there—what more do we need?"

McArthur said reluctantly, "You make a very strong case, Captain Nicholson, a much stronger case, I'm frank to admit, than

we have against the butler, Powers. I'm inclined to agree with you, at least as far as your own case is concerned, but I still say that there's nothing to prove that Powers didn't murder his master. Powers admitted hating his master and also that he knew of the money in the safe. He's a clever, resourceful fellow and could have set the stage to make it look like robbery and cracked himself on the head. He seemed such a logical suspect to me at first that perhaps I was a little hasty, but I still say he could have done it, although I won't say he did."

"Do you mind if I stick my two cents in?" asked Stern lazily, "because I think you're both jumping at the obvious and I think you're both all wet."

"Nonsense," harrumphed McArthur, indignantly, "everyone except amateurs knows that ninety-nine crimes out of every hundred are solved either by direct information or by finding the person with the best motive, plus opportunity, and hammering away at that person until either you've proven him innocent or built up a case that will hold in court. Both Captain Nicholson and myself are being practical. We're not overlooking facts just because they happen to be under our noses. I'll say this much: I wouldn't have the slightest hesitation in going before a grand jury and demanding an indictment on the basis of either of the cases outlined here—and I'd get it; don't think I wouldn't."

"I haven't the slightest doubt of it. You'd probably get a mistrial or a hung jury, too, if either of the defendants had a lawyer worth a hoot in hell," murmured Stern, "but that doesn't disprove my point any more than the rest of your speech. You don't have to tell me about the hit-or-miss methods of modern crime detection— I've seen too many men framed and railroaded to further a political career—oh, don't look insulted and injured, McArthur; I'm speaking generally—or to win a promotion or satisfy the newspapers or just because the law-enforcement officials were lazy or stupid or both. I don't say the average convicted person is framed or railroaded but I do say that too damn many of them are; and I also say that if you got your indictments on the basis of the evidence

we've got against either Jackson or Powers the chances are better than your ninety-nine out of a hundred, McArthur, that you'd be wrong.

"Take Jackson first-you don't have to listen, Nicholson, we've been over this once before-Jackson may be a lot of things, but he is not a congenital idiot—you can't be a complete fool and be a labor leader these days—and yet, if the fellow did these jobs you've got to admit he needs a nurse. He's left a trail pointing to himself that a boy scout could follow. First he has a fight with one victim just before he kills him so that everyone will be sure to see the connection; then he kills the guy with a weapon everybody will be sure to trace when he could as easily have used a piece of gas pipe; then he hides out so we'll be sure to look for him. Next he starts his campaign against victim number two by calling up and identifying himself so that everyone will know he was on the ground when the deed was done; then he hops into a stolen car and takes a witness along, just in case, and he gets subtle and wrecks the car and leaves his witness, who is a pal of his, beside the wreck so the well-known authorities will have a conundrum to sink their teeth into. But the best piece of nincompoopery he saves for the last. After he's bumped his second victim and the butler walks into the room—the butler, mind you, who took his telephone call and knows he said himself that he would be in this very house at that very minute—ten o'clock—he cracks the fellow gently over the head and makes sure he'll be alive to testify. If that guy's guilty he'll never burn as long as there's a nut house left in the country."

"All right, he's crazy, so what?" shouted Nicholson. "These murders could have been the work of a madman—as a matter of fact, they show all the earmarks. Look at the brutal way they were done. Look at the chances the guy took——"

"The guy who committed these murders may be crazy," said Stern, "but he's crazy like a fox. He's got you fellows barking up the wrong tree and if his luck holds and the blessed authorities don't use their heads he'll keep you there. Of course he's taken chances—he's in a hurry and desperate—but he's taken damn few chances he didn't have to take—that's what makes me wonder why Powers is still alive; this guy's not squeamish; he's ruthless, and another murder more or less wouldn't mean a thing——"

"You're ignoring the possibility of Powers' having killed Murdock," snapped McArthur. "I'm damned if I'll sit here and be lectured——"

The sheriff, who had been listening attentively, interrupted: "Wait a minute, Mac," he said sharply. "Don't you get yourself overheated again. This young feller's not being very diplomatic, considering he's out of his own bailiwick, but I never did see much use in diplomacy, myself, except when you're talking to reporters or to a jury. Anyway, listening to him ain't hurt me none. As far as the butler killing Murdock is concerned, I think, myself, you're off on the wrong foot and I'll tell you why. You heard the doc say he'd stake his reputation that those marks on Powers' head weren't self-inflicted? Well, I saw 'em myself while they were being bandaged, and we discussed 'em before you came. Remember, the man was hit twice, and it ain't likely he'd be able to do that himself. Then, too, you take the mark on the right temple; that was a glancing blow, and it glanced off to the right and down. Try hitting yourself that way and see what you get. And the other blow, the one the doc says put him to sleep, landing above the hairline almost on top of the head. It was a good, healthy wallop, too, and the doc says if Powers didn't have a thicker head than most men it would have split his skull. Nope. I'm bettin' Powers didn't have anything to do with killing his boss, unless you want to play around with the idea that the butler was in cahoots with someone and his side-kick crossed him or something. I guess that's possible, but there's one thing we don't want to overlook-Powers could have had nothing to do with the actual murder and still swipe the money." He turned to Stern. "I wish you'd tell me one thing, though, young feller," he said a little plaintively. "What'd you ask the butler about them keys for? That's got me kinda stumped."

"Skip that for the time being, will you?" requested Stern. "I don't quite know what I was driving at yet, myself. I think I'll stop sounding off for a while, until I hear what Miss Whosis has to say. I'll confess I'd like to hear an explanation of why Murdock had ten grand in his safe."

The old sheriff nodded his head. "Yeah, I guess maybe we are wastin' our time 'presumin' as Powers calls it. Miss Cosimo should be able to tell us about that money if anybody can. 'Fore we have her in, though, there's one thing I'd like to say: she's a tartar if ever I saw one, and it's my guess we'll get more out of her by goin' slow and easy than by shoutin'."

McArthur followed his habit of clearing his throat before speaking. Then he said, "It would be best, I think, if someone spoke to the press. If you have no objections, Sheriff——" He moved tentatively toward the door.

"Go ahead and talk to 'em if you feel like it," growled Christy, "but don't say nothin' you'll have to take back later."

"I think I may be trusted to be discreet," McArthur retorted angrily. "After all, this is not my first case."

The sheriff followed McArthur out of the room, returning presently to usher in a large, striking woman with flashing dark eyes and black hair piled high on her head. Nellie Cosimo wore a neat, dark blue dress and flat-heeled shoes. She marched into the room as stiffly erect as a soldier on parade and stood surveying Nicholson and Stern while the sheriff introduced them. Then she nodded curtly to each and sat down in the chair that had been occupied by Powers, her feet flat on the floor, her large, powerful-looking hands folded in her capacious lap. Despite her plain, utilitarian clothes, she looked a little like a mid-Victorian painting of one of the more substantial goddesses of ancient Rome.

The sheriff began a little speech about police routine, evidently intended to pacify this formidable creature and put her at her ease, but he had not completed his first sentence before she interrupted.

"Please," she said in a surprisingly beautiful, well-modulated

voice, "it's not necessary to tell me why you want to question me, though I don't know what I can tell you that will help to find the man who committed this horrible crime."

The sheriff looked a little abashed. "You were Mr. Murdock's secretary," he said. "It seems to me you ought to be able to help us a lot."

Miss Cosimo's chin came up, tilting her head back. "I was Mr. Murdock's private secretary for fifteen years. If there is anything you want to know about his business or his personal idiosyncrasies I think I can tell you but I fail to see how such information will help you find his murderer. As a matter of fact, I fail to see how you expect to find him at all by sitting here. Why don't you get out and do something?"

"Have you any suggestions that might help us?" asked Stern softly. "Any suspicion as to who might have murdered your employer?"

"I?" Nellie Cosimo looked coldly at her questioner. "I know nothing about what happened here this morning except what the authorities chose to tell me." Her voice rose, and her tone became hard and sharp. "But I can tell you what every decent, intelligent citizen will know—that this crime is the work of the Communists—those lawless, Godless creatures who are trying to ruin every honest businessman in this country, just as they were trying to ruin Mr. Murdock."

The sheriff coughed and looked across at Nicholson. Stern's face behind his glasses was bland and disingenuous. "Could you be a little more specific?" he asked.

"I can make no specific accusations because I have no first-hand knowledge," said the woman, "but I can tell you what men I mean—I refer to the leaders of that anarchistic, un-American organization known as the Independent Longshoremen's Club. As secretary to Mr. Murdock I have listened to their threats and intimidations and I know they would not stop at murder to gain their ends. Only in a democracy would such lawlessness be tolerated."

"Now looka here," protested the sheriff hurriedly. "That kinda thing ain't gonna get us nowhere. We all got a right to our political opinions but we ain't here to debate 'em; our job is to find out who killed Mr. Murdock. Can't you give us somethin' more to the point—like who threatened your boss, and when and what he said?"

Nellie Cosimo looked scornful. She closed her mouth in a straight line and shook her head. "I'm sorry," she said, "for American stupidity."

The sheriff's blue eyes flashed wickedly for a moment, but he let it lay. "This money that you say was in the safe over there," he asked. "What can you tell us about that?"

"Mr. Murdock asked me to draw ten thousand dollars from his personal account day before yesterday and bring it to him here. I saw him place it in the inner compartment of the safe."

"Did he say what he wanted it for?"

The woman shook her head.

"Wasn't that a lot of money for him to keep in the house here?"
"Yes," said the woman slowly, "it was."

"Weren't you curious about it?"

"Curious?" The woman looked up as though the question surprised her. "Perhaps. It was none of my business."

"Uh-huh." The sheriff hesitated a moment, as though to frame his next question, and Nicholson took advantage of the pause.

"Do you know what the money was for?" he asked directly.

Nellie Cosimo turned her black eyes in his direction. "No," she said shortly.

"Had you any suspicion?"

"No."

Nicholson leaned forward. "Miss Cosimo, did Mr. Murdock employ a spy to report to him the doings of the labor union?"

The woman's eyelids flickered, veiling her eyes momentarily. Then she opened them wide and looked at Nicholson. "I don't know," she said in a low voice.

"A man named Riorden was killed across the river last night," persisted Nicholson. "Was he the spy?"

"I don't know."

"But you said you knew all about Mr. Murdock's business?"

If Nellie Cosimo had been disconcerted by the sudden trend of the questioning she had recovered, "I was only his secretary," she said tartly. "There may have been some things he did not tell me."

Nicholson asked one or two additional questions, getting nowhere. Stern was quiet, his eyes speculative. It was evident that he was much more interested in Nellie Cosimo than he had been in Powers.

Finally Nicholson sat back and took out a fresh cigar which he began to chew disgustedly. The sheriff tried a new tack: "How come Murdock spent so much time at home during office hours?" he wanted to know.

"He liked to work where it was quiet."

"And you were supposed to work with him here this morning? That it?"

"Yes. He had some correspondence to dictate. He told me to come here this morning instead of going to the office."

"What time?"

"He didn't say. I assumed he meant the same time I report to the office—nine o'clock."

"And did you come at nine?"

The woman's smile was humorless. "I did not. My mother was ill, and I was late. You see, I live alone across the river near my work, but my mother has a house on this side in Lynnhurst. She is very old and has been ailing lately, and I have been staying with her when I could. Since Mr. Murdock wanted me here this morning I stayed with her last night, both because she is ill and because it is nearer. But this morning she was worse, and I spent an extra two hours doing what I could for her. That is why I did not arrive here until eleven." She spoke casually, but there was something

about the explanation that did not carry conviction. It was too pat and too quickly volunteered.

"How did you come up from Lynnhurst this morning?" asked the sheriff.

"By cab. My car was not working properly, and I was late and in a hurry. A state police car was parked just outside the gate, and the officer wouldn't let us drive in."

"And that was the first you knew about what happened here?"
"It was."

McArthur had re-entered the room and stood listening to the last few questions. Now he interposed one of his own. "What can you tell us about the butler, Powers, Miss Cosimo?" he asked.

"Only that he is a coward and a sneak," snapped the woman. "Mr. Murdock was a stern man and a meticulous one; often he had occasion to rebuke Powers, and because of that Powers hated him."

"Do you think Powers killed him?"

The woman shook her head slowly. "No, he had not courage enough for that, but—"

She hesitated, and Stern finished for her—"but he may have taken the money from the safe," he said softly. "That's what you intended to say, wasn't it?"

She glared at him defiantly. "I can speak for myself, young man. You don't need to put words into my mouth."

Stern left it at that. A smile flickered on his lips for a moment and died as McArthur asked:

"Are you acquainted with Mr. Murdock's will?"

She answered quickly. "I am. The bulk of the estate goes to his wife and daughter. Mr. Murdock was kind enough to include a bequest of five thousand dollars to myself, and there are also smaller legacies for the other servants."

Stern's brows lifted, but he said nothing. So the woman referred to herself as a servant, did she? And wasn't there a faintly contemptuous note when she mentioned the sum Murdock had left her?

McArthur thanked the woman and turned to the sheriff. "I believe Miss Cosimo has told us all she knows. I see no reason for our inconveniencing her further." He seemed anxious to terminate the interview.

The sheriff grunted. "For someone who's supposed to know all about Murdock and his business, 'pears to me she's told us doggone little. But I guess we can question her again later on. I got just two more things I'd like to know now, and we'll call it a day. First thing is"—he turned his mild blue eyes on the woman—"you know anyone who looks like the fellow Powers says hit him—tall, with curly black hair, and wears brown clothes? It's not much of a description but it's all we got to go on."

Nellie Cosimo was evidently hearing the description for the first time. As she listened a peculiar expression came into her eyes that might have been recognition, and she wet her lips with her tongue before she answered. But her voice gave no indication that she was not telling the truth. "I know of no one who answers that description," she said.

Nicholson said: "Some of the men you spoke of before, Miss Cosimo—the men from the union who conferred with Mr. Murdock—don't some of them answer that description?"

"They—" Nellie Cosimo hesitated, and a little frown appeared between her eyes. She seemed to be thinking hard. "I cannot say," she said finally. "I don't remember."

Nicholson figuratively threw up his hands, and the sheriff sighed. "Just one more," he said wearily. "Do you know if anything else is missing from the room besides the money?"

"I can't very well answer that until I've had a chance to look," said the woman.

The sheriff nodded. "All right. Suppose you go ahead and look right now."

The woman rose, and they watched her go to the safe and then to the table. Her fingers flew expertly over the papers scattered there. Then she looked up.

"It's such a mess," she said. "I can't be sure but I don't think

there's anything important missing that I know of. Naturally there may have been something——"

"Yeah, I know." The sheriff got stiffly to his feet. "We won't be needin' you any more for a while, Miss Cosimo." He grinned at the woman. "Don't run away though. We might think up some more things we want to ask you."

The woman said tartly, "I won't run away. I'll be at the Eastcoast offices or at home if you want me. I live at 25 Vine Street across the river."

Nicholson looked at the woman sharply, started to speak, and then he changed his mind. Twenty-five Vine Street was a block away from the spot where Riorden's body had been found in the truck the night before.

New developments greeted Nicholson on his return to the city. Sergeant Tripp was bursting with them.

"Hey, Cap," he said excitedly, "who do you think's here? . . . Jackson!"

"What!" shouted Nicholson. "Where is he?"

"I was goin' to tell you. He's down in the squad room," said Tripp. "He's got an old gent and a dame with him. He's all bandaged up like he's been through a rock crusher, and the old guy with him says he's a doctor. The old guy is dynamite."

"You idiot! Get him up here. I want to talk to him right now. I don't care who's with him."

"Shall I bring the old guy and the dame?" asked Tripp.

"I don't care who you bring, so long as it's Jackson. Get the hell out of here."

Tripp went out, and Nicholson turned a face that was almost beaming toward Stern. "Well, son, what do you say now?"

"I'll wait and see," said Stern.

PART THREE

1. Escape

CHRIS JACKSON opened his eyes and closed them quickly as a thousand stampeding horses galloped through his brain. Pain pounded his eardrums, and he groaned involuntarily. After a moment the stampede passed, and he fought nausea and great swirling eddies of unconsciousness. He lay still until the revolutions of his stomach slowed to a halt and his brain cleared; slowly the pain receded to a dull, throbbing ache.

He opened his eyes again and this time he was able to keep them open, gazing up at blackness that slowly resolved itself into a low, grimy ceiling from which hung trailing festoons of cobweb. By turning his head from side to side he could see, on one side of the place where he lay, two small oblong windows high up under the ceiling and, on the other, a flimsy, open stairway leading up. The room had no furniture and was littered with odds and ends of junk—a box or two, an old trunk, a discarded automobile tire; he decided that he was in a basement.

Tentative efforts at movement informed him that he was bound and gagged and that the job had been done with an expert and callous thoroughness; the strands that cut viciously into wrists and ankles at each movement were not rope but wire, and by looking down along his nose he could see the white gleam of the strips of adhesive tape that glued his mouth tight shut.

His mind, now functioning fully, went swiftly back over the events of the morning. How long had he lain here? Was it still the same day? It might have been a week, judging from the aching stiffness in back and shoulder muscles, but he did not believe that the injury to his throbbing head would have laid him out for more than a couple of hours, and his mind was clearing too rapidly for him to have been doped. It was the same day, then, and probably early afternoon, for the shaft of sunlight that straggled through the opaque, dirt-encrusted windows was nearly vertical. He cursed inwardly, thinking of Mayme and his own cocksure stupidity. Somehow she had reached Murdock, and Murdock had decided that this would be a good time to take a certain longshoreman named Jackson out of circulation—either that, or this was part of the same business as the elimination of poor Riorden. There were too many complications, and his head hurt too much to try following them. They all reached the same conclusion anyway. Murdock had finally lost patience with more subtle methods and was out to liquidate the union leadership via the good old gangster route. Jackson pondered the surprising fact that he was still alive. He winced, wondering what had happened to Whitey and whether he was still lying in those weeds at the bottom of the gully, injured or perhaps dead, with a gunman's bullet through his head.

Jackson had no doubt about his assailants. He knew them for who and what they were—vicious, unscrupulous gutter rats to whom a murder or two was all in a day's work. He held his breath and listened for noises overhead—for the opening of a door and the step on the stairs that would undoubtedly mean his finish. Yet if they intended to kill him why had they bothered to truss him up and bring him here?

Listen as he would, he could not hear a sound overhead, not so much as a whisper or the creaking of a board. The basement room in which he lay was deathly still, the only noise a half-heard buzzing of flies in the strip of sunlight. From without came a low, increasing hum, rising to a swish of sound and receding again into the dis-

tance. A car had passed the house so closely that he had seen its momentary shadow on the windows.

That meant that there was a road—a highway, for the car had been traveling fast—just beyond the windows. An idea began to take shape in his mind—a possibility of escape—if he could somehow attract the attention of one of those speeding cars.

Painfully he raised himself, first on one elbow and thence to a sitting position, and examined his surroundings with new interest. His eyes lighted as they fell on a number of bottles in a corner under the stairs. Lying down again, he started rolling over and over, the wires cutting deeper into his wrists with every move. Once his head came in sharp contact with the stone floor, and he almost lost consciousness and lay still fighting for breath through his dust-clogged nostrils. Then the process began again, a slow, lurching roll onto his stomach with neck bent back to keep his face off the floor, a painful hunching of the knees and another roll, this time onto his back, nearer to his objective by twice his body's width. At the stairway another and even more difficult obstacle presented itself. The bottles were far back in the sharp angle formed by the floor and the descending stairs. Infinite exertion was required before he was able to wedge himself crabwise into the angle in order to bring the cramped fingers of one bound hand in contact with the smooth, cool glass of a bottle's neck.

The slight clink of glass was like the pealing of alarm bells in his fear-sensitized ears, and he lay very still, listening. Then, when nothing happened, he edged himself out from under the stairs and into a sitting position. With his elbows as levers on the stair treads he finally achieved his feet, the bottle, its neck slippery with blood from his cut wrists, clutched tightly behind his back. He took one precarious hop, then another—like a sack racer at a country fair—to the center of the room and stood still, the breath whistling through his nose as he gauged the height and distance of the windows.

It was a desperate, an almost impossible chance. He had to hit the window the first time, for otherwise the bottle would crash against the wall, and the noise would bring his captors rushing down the stairs. But it was the only thing he could do—the only thing he could think of—and anything was better than lying here like a trussed chicken and waiting for someone to come and wring his neck. He edged around on his bound feet until he stood sidewise to one of the windows and in line with it. Hunching his shoulders, he swung his bound hands experimentally, wondering if he could throw the bottle high or far enough to hit the window. His wrists were numb now, and he hardly felt the wire that cut deeper and deeper into his flesh. He waited for the hum of an approaching car and when it had grown loud he hunched and swung his body, pivoting like a discus thrower as he released the bottle. Falling, his back to the window, he heard the crash of glass, but whether of bottle or window he did not know, and then a bomb exploded in his brain as he hit the cement floor, and for the second time that day he was completely out.

A vivid dream began to take shape in the void that had been left by the explosion of the bomb. Jackson saw himself lying in the middle of a broad avenue, without knowing how he got there. With a screech of tires and a grinding of brakes an ambulance came jarring to a halt alongside him, and Whitey Gordon and big John Mellus, dressed as hospital interns, lifted him onto a stretcher. He wanted to ask Whitey if he had been hurt, too, but Jackson found that he could not talk, and just then someone whom he could not see struck him a stinging blow on the mouth. He could talk now and he began to swear, but an angelic vision that seemed to be a composite of a nurse, a night-club singer he had once known, and a remembered picture of his mother as a young girl put a cool hand on his head and said, "Quiet." He stopped swearing only to begin again when John Mellus produced a red-hot longshoreman's hook and started burning his hands off at the wrists.

The pain of the hot iron caused him to open his eyes, and he saw that at least one part of the dream was real. His head was in her lap, and her face was turned from him so that he only saw

one rounded cheek above the gentle swell of high, youthful breasts. The heavy mass of her black hair—how black he did not realize in the dim basement light—was cut page-boy fashion and swung forward from under a small black hat with a red feather, veiling rather than hiding the upward sweep of her white throat and the long curving line from ear to chin. As he stared at the vision she raised a white hand pushing the hair from her face and looked directly down at him.

He had just time to glimpse a small, firmly set red mouth and eyes of an undetermined color with black curving lashes when she said severely, "Shut your filthy mouth, or I'll tape it again."

He gulped and went red with the realization that his mouth was open and that language was coming out of it totally unfit for a lady's ears. He said defensively, "It hurts," and, becoming uncomfortably conscious of the firm round thigh under his head, tried to sit up.

The girl put a hand on his chest and pushed him back unceremoniously. "Lie still," she commanded and went on winding white bandage around his left wrist. A quiet, ministerial voice said surprisingly, "Let him swear, Blackie. Iodine in those cuts hurts like hell."

Jackson forgot his embarrassment and looked at a little man with white hair, a huge beaked nose, and a white goatee somewhat like the cartoons of Uncle Sam, who knelt at his feet on the side opposite the girl. The little man was dipping a swab stick with a large wad of cotton on the end into a black bottle. He took the stick out, said, "Lie still now, boy. This is going to hurt some more," and applied the swab.

Jackson gasped and said, "Oww-woo," as the fiery antiseptic came in contact with an open wound.

"All right," said the little old man briskly, patting Jackson's leg, "that's all. Blackie, toss me another roll of bandage."

He wound the bandage expertly around the ankle, fastened it with a strip of adhesive tape, and stood up.

"Let me have another look at that head." He came forward to

run his fingers over Jackson's battered and now bandaged scalp. "That'll do till we get him to a hospital," he intoned through pursed lips. "Possible concussion, but no fracture, I think. Can you sit up, young man?"

"Sure." Jackson raised himself with the aid of the old man's surprisingly strong hands. Pain seared his eyeballs like twin bolts of lightning, and he closed his eyes and grunted. His head wobbled drunkenly.

"Easy, easy." The old man's strong, gentle hands steadied Jackson's shoulders. "You've taken quite a licking, boy, and you've lost a lot of blood. We've got to get you out of here. Think you can walk?"

Realization swept over Jackson. "Those men upstairs! They'll be back any minute. They won't thank you for this." He got to his feet, swaying but erect. "I'm okay," he said, "come on."

The old man smiled and nodded to the girl. "I guess he is, at that. Don't worry," he told Jackson. "This house has been empty for years. I don't think your friends will be back for a while."

Jackson stubbornly refused further help and followed the girl's trim ankles up the stairs. They passed through a bare front room and out a front door that stood open.

Jackson looked curiously at the open door, and the old man explained: "It was padlocked on the outside, but padlocks don't stop Blackie when she's mad."

Jackson managed a grin. "I'll bet. What was she mad about?" "What was I mad about?" snapped the girl. "That!" She pointed to a car that stood off the road by the house. The front tire on the near side was flat and had a jagged rip in the casing. "You darn near wrecked us," she accused, "and I was going to find out who threw that bottle and give them a piece of my mind if I had to tear the house down."

She smiled suddenly. "You're lucky you were in no condition to put up an argument when we found you."

"I'm lucky in more ways than one," Jackson told her seriously. "I'm sorry about the tire though."

"It's all right," said the girl shortly. "Don't stand here talking. Get in the car before you fall down."

Jackson climbed stiffly into the rear of the car, and the old man hopped spryly into the front seat beside the girl.

"I'll have to go easy until we get to the filling station down the road," said the girl, starting the motor. "They'll change the tire for me there if there's any rim left to put a tire on."

As the car bumped slowly over the road the old man turned to lean on the back of the seat and look at Jackson. His small eyes were full of sharp intelligence. "What are you, young man," he asked, "a gangster?"

"I know all about him, Nunky," said the girl before Jackson could answer. "His name is Christopher Jackson; he's a water-front roustabout and belongs to the Independent Longshoremen's Club, whatever that is. And," she added triumphantly, "he's wanted for two murders."

"Heavenly days, how did you find out all that?"

"I looked in his pockets while you were patching his skull," answered the girl brazenly. "And I read the early edition of the afternoon papers." She indicated a newspaper on the seat beside her, and the old man picked it up and scanned the article. He looked from the paper to Jackson questioningly.

"He doesn't look like a murderer."

"I wouldn't know," said the girl. "I never saw a murderer close up." She turned off the road in front of a gas station, set the brake, and opened the side door. "He certainly talks like one if language is any indication. Why don't you ask him, Nunky?"

"Are you a murderer?" said the old man to Jackson.

Chris Jackson grinned. "I was framed," he said.

"You too?" laughed the girl. She turned her back and spoke to the station attendant.

Jackson looked puzzled, and the old man explained. "I'm not sure but I suspect she means that all criminals claim to have been framed."

Jackson thanked him gravely.

When the tire was changed and they were back on the road he asked to see the paper.

SHIPOWNER STRANGLED IN STUDY. UNION OFFICIAL SOUGHT FOR QUESTIONING IN DOUBLE SLAYING.

Jackson's eyes narrowed as he read the story. It told of Murdock's murder, of the wrecked car, and the finding of Gordon. It also gave a résumé of the Riorden killing and laid great stress on the discovery of Jackson's bloodstained hook.

The shrewd eyes of the white-haired man were on him when he looked up. Jackson shrugged in an effort to overcome the daze in which the story had left him. "It's a good story," he said, "and some of it's true. Why don't you stop and turn me over to the cops before you get yourself in a jam for helping an escaped murderer?"

"I'm taking you in to town," said the old man. "I have hospital facilities there, and that head of yours should be X-rayed at once. There'll be time enough to notify the police afterwards."

"But you can't do that," remonstrated Jackson. "Suppose they stop you and find me. Or even if they don't, this last murder was committed on this side of the river, and you're taking me out of the state." He slid forward in his seat. "Better let me out here."

"Where will you go if we let you out?" the old man asked gently. "Go?" Jackson paused and put a hand to his bandaged head. "I don't know. To the Union Hall first, I suppose, and then to the cops." He looked the old man in the eye. "But I didn't kill these men," he said quietly.

The old man studied him for a moment. Without turning he said over his shoulder, "What do you think, Blackie?"

The girl kept her eyes on the road. "He has an honest face, even if he is very dirty and needs a shave."

"Before this conversation goes any further," the old man said gravely, "I think we had better introduce ourselves. I am Dr. Winthrop Stevenson and this"—he indicated the girl with a nod—"is Miss Maeve O'Callighan, daughter of an Irish king who had

the dire misfortune to become my brother-in-law. Not being a romanticist myself, I call her Blackie both because of her coloring and her ancestry. I advise you to call her Miss O'Callighan."

"Nunky," said the girl. "Don't be an old fool. O'Callighan is certainly no aid to conversation. You can call me Maeve," she called to Jackson without turning. "Or Blackie, if you want to. And Nunky's being modest. Whether you've heard of him or not, you can tell your grandchildren that you had your head bandaged by one of America's great surgeons."

"I like Maeve," said Jackson to the back of her black head.

"And now," said the old man gravely, "that we know each other, tell us about it."

There was something about this little white-haired man that compelled confidences—that inspired faith and trust. Jackson told them the story as simply and directly as he could, leaving out nothing of what he knew. He finished by saying: "Someone wanted to stop the union from striking enough to commit murder and someone wants to get me out of the way enough to try to frame me first and kidnap me afterwards. I believe this whole business is tied up with the spy in our union and since I read that newspaper story I think I know who the spy is but I can't prove a thing, and before I get a chance to prove anything they'll have me on a one-way trip up the river to the chair. I've seen union men framed before and I know how it works."

"You say you think you can identify the spy. Why not tell the police who he is? If you're right they would certainly be able to find proof."

"Don't be naïve, Nunky," said Maeve. "He can't do that—that's being a rat."

Jackson looked appreciatively at the back of the sleek black head. "I've got nothing to tell the police," he said, "even if I wanted to. I'm not sure myself that I'm right. The man's my best friend."

"Your best friend?" The doctor was a little shocked. "But surely—"

"Unfortunately that's the way stool pigeons operate," said

Jackson. "They gain your confidence and then sell you out. When you're looking for a labor spy you can't afford to overlook anybody, no matter how well you know them."

"Contemptible," said the doctor. "To be forced to suspect one's best friend. You think this man Murdock hired water-front gangsters—what did you call them?"

"Goons, Nunky," said Maeve.

"Exactly," said the doctor, "... hired some of these goons to run you and your friend off the road and kidnap you?"

Jackson nodded.

The girl asked: "Then who killed Mr. Murdock—assuming, of course, Mr. Jackson, that you didn't?"

"Thank you for the assumption," said Jackson dryly. "I didn't kill him and I don't know who did but I've got a hunch about it. The man who killed Riorden killed Murdock, because Murdock knew who he was and the murderer was afraid he'd turn him in. That's just a hunch, and I may be wrong, but it's my hunch, and I'll stick with it."

"Isn't that a bit like killing the goose that laid the golden eggs?" questioned the doctor shrewdly.

"Not if Murdock threatened to wash his hands of the rat."

"Hmmm, I see. That's excellent reasoning, young man. But why should these men go to the trouble of binding you and leaving you in the deserted house if they wanted to frame you for a murder?" The doctor shook a finger at Jackson. "That doesn't make the slightest sense, my boy. I can give expert testimony that both the marks of the wires and the blows were inflicted not later than ten o'clock this morning, and this paper says that the trooper found your friend and the car at twenty minutes to ten and further, that evidence showed the accident to have taken place shortly prior to that time. The police are fools. You had neither time nor opportunity to commit this second murder."

"You're not so bad yourself," said Jackson, grinning. "Too bad you're not a lawyer."

The girl said calmly. "You're forgetting the police don't know

where Mr. Jackson was, Nunky. And there's also the possibility that he did kill the first man and not the second." She turned her head a little and spoke to Jackson over her shoulder. "Don't mind me," she said. "I'm not saying you did either one of them. Anyway, you might as well know that you're in like a robber. My uncle has decided that you're innocent, and he'll defend you with his life from now on, even if they accuse you of murdering the entire population. I know him and I know the signs. He likes you, but that's not the half of it. You've ceased being an individual and become a 'cause' by now."

Dr. Stevenson said: "You know this boy's telling the truth as well as I do, Blackie."

"I couldn't watch his honest face," said the girl.

"Nonsense," her uncle chuckled triumphantly, "I saw you squirming around to look at him in the rearview mirror. You haven't had more than half an eye on the road since we left that filling station."

Jackson looked up, and for an instant Maeve's eyes met his in the mirror. The girl dropped hers immediately and became very attentive to the road ahead. The doctor's chuckle continued.

Jackson grinned and changed the subject. "Don't think I'm not grateful," he said, "but I still think you'd better let me out. The police are going to make a lot of trouble when they find out I came into town in your car."

"The police," growled the old man. "I'll see Commissioner Boone myself or the mayor, if necessary. They'll not railroad an innocent man to jail if I can help it."

"I told you so," said Maeve vindictively. "He's a bug about the Bill of Rights. And don't worry; he's a big shot. He really has pull."

"Young lady," said her uncle, "you be civil or keep quiet. And pay attention to your driving. I've no time to argue with traffic officers."

Jackson thanked him again and gave up the argument. Conversation lagged as they approached the entrance to the tunnel. The toll officer on duty glanced curiously at Jackson's bandaged

head but said nothing. It was his job to keep the line of cars moving, and he was a busy man; besides, he had seen the emblem of the Medical Association on the car's license plates.

As they sped through the tunnel in that unnatural humming hush that accompanies an automobile underground Jackson leaned forward and tapped Dr. Stevenson on the shoulder. "I'm not going to the hospital, sir," he said.

"What's that?" said the doctor. "Don't be a fool, young man."
"I'm sorry," said Jackson quietly, "I've been thinking it over.
I can't go to the hospital."

"Oho," said Maeve, "mutiny in the camp. The worm turns."

Jackson laughed. "You're a fresh dame," he told the girl. "If it wasn't for your uncle here I'd turn you up and spank you."

"Don't let me stop you, my boy," the doctor chuckled. "She needs it." He looked at his niece whose eyes were straight ahead and caught her self-satisfied grin. "What the devil are you smiling about?"

"Was I, Nunky?" asked Maeve.

The doctor gave her a sternly suspicious glance, but the corners of his mouth twitched. He turned back to an already deflated Jackson.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Headquarters," mumbled Jackson. "I'll take the subway."

"All right," said the doctor grudgingly, "but don't hold me responsible for what happens to your head. Take the south lane," he told Maeve, "we're going to police headquarters."

"What about your appointments?" asked the girl.

"Humph." The old man was contemptuous. "A lot of bored dowagers. There's not a sick woman in the lot. Dr. Maury'll take care of them."

Jackson started to protest, but Dr. Stevenson silenced him with a gesture. "Now don't give me any more arguments, young man, I've had too much trouble with you already not to see this thing through."

2. Accusations

CAPTAIN NICHOLSON and Stern stood up as Sergeant Tripp ushered the girl and the two men into the room. Dr. Stevenson, his goatee bristling, strode forward to the desk and glared at Nicholson.

"I'm Winthrop Stevenson," he stated abruptly. "This is my niece, Miss O'Callighan. We found this young man"—he indicated Jackson—"trussed up in a cellar across the river and brought him into town. He's been badly hurt and should be in a hospital this minute but he himself insisted on coming directly here. I've heard his story, and it's palpably preposterous for anyone in his right mind to think that he had anything to do with these murders you're investigating. As his physician I must insist that any questions you have be as brief as possible."

Nicholson had been caught sufficiently off stride by the old man's vehemence to allow him to finish, but now his brows drew together in a black scowl and he was in grave danger of breaking one of his own cardinal rules of police procedure by losing his temper.

Stern, watching, stepped deftly into the breach. "Of all people," he said brightly. "Dr. Stevenson and Blackie." He beamed as he held out his hand, "How are you, Doctor?"

The doctor, intent on Captain Nicholson, said, "Hello, Stern, I'm glad to see you."

Maeve said, "Hello, Joey, Nunky's on the warpath again," and closed one eye in a broad wink. She shook hands cordially.

Stern turned to Nicholson. "This is Dr. Stevenson of the Astor Foundation, Captain Nicholson," he said, giving Nicholson a warning eye and placing just the slightest emphasis on the doctor's title and connection. "He saved that Dowling case for us with his expert testimony."

"More bright boys like you, Joey," said Stevenson, "and the

D. A.'s office wouldn't have to depend so much on expert rigmarole."

Nicholson growled, "Glad to know you," and shook hands with the doctor and Maeve.

He barked at Tripp to bring chairs and waited until they were seated. Then he swung on Jackson: "I've had a dragnet out for you since last night. I ought to slap you in the clink this minute but I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. Start talking."

"I tell you—" began Dr. Stevenson and stopped when Maeve put a hand on his knee. "Wouldn't it be better to let Mr. Jackson tell the whole story just as he told it to us, Nunky?" she cooed sweetly. "Then Captain Nicholson and Mr. Stern will see for themselves just how ridiculous the charge is."

"Humph," the old doctor growled, "perhaps you're right. However, I must insist that the boy's in no condition to be browbeaten."

Jackson's level voice averted open hostilities. He told his story simply and directly but he was acutely aware of its vague and unconvincing spots. Nicholson listened quietly, but Jackson recognized that the interview would have been far different had the doctor not been present. There was a complacent look on Nicholson's square-jawed face that said more plainly than words what he thought.

After Jackson stopped speaking Nicholson sat for a moment tapping a pencil and saying nothing. When he did speak it was to Dr. Stevenson.

"I know your reputation, Doctor," he said, "and I assure you that this department is deeply grateful to you for your interest in this case, but I can't see one alternative to holding this man for murder."

The old man spluttered. "If you do that, sir, I'll make a jackass out of you. I'll hire the best legal talent in the country. That boy's no more a murderer than I am."

"That is your belief and your privilege, Doctor," said Nicholson calmly. "I still have my job to do. No," he said when both Stern and Dr. Stevenson started to speak, "wait a minute and let me

explain my position. First of all, I am not primarily interested in finding out who killed John Murdock. That murder was committed in another state, and it is for the authorities there to determine the guilt or innocence of this man Jackson. I can see the point which is undoubtedly in your mind, Doctor, regarding Jackson's lack of opportunity to commit that crime. However, we have no proof that these two killings are connected, and I'm sticking to the one that happened in my territory. The evidence against this man in connection with the Riorden killing——"

Dr. Stevenson interrupted: "Stop all this nonsense, man." He leaned forward and pounded his fist on Nicholson's desk. "Look at this fellow. Listen to him speak. Did you ever hear a guilty man tell a story the way he tells his? Did you ever have a guilty man walk into your office as calmly and honestly as this boy did?" He waggled a long finger in Nicholson's face. "I warn you," he barked, "that if any employer interest or political influence is involved—"

Nicholson's poise deserted him, and he started from his chair. "I don't care a damn who you are," he bellowed, "you can't call me a crook."

Dr. Stevenson was unabashed. He waved a deprecating hand. "I'm sorry, Captain, I'm sorry. I had no intention of questioning your honesty. I have eyes and I know a little about cops." The eyes twinkled. "Now suppose we talk this thing over sensibly. What kind of a case do you think you have against this boy?"

Maeve caught Stern's eye and formed the word "Blarney" with her lips. Stern kept his dead pan but almost lost it when Nicholson looked at Maeve suddenly and her impish grimace changed into a bored little yawn which she patted down demurely with a smartly gloved hand.

Nicholson turned back to Dr. Stevenson, looking uncomfortable. "Case?" he said. "Take a look at the facts. You heard his story. Jackson admits being the last man to see Riorden alive."

"Except the man who killed him," said Jackson, but Nicholson ignored him.

"He admits having quarreled with Riorden. He admits owner-ship of the murder weapon. He has evaded arrest for an entire day, wittingly and because of his admitted fear of being charged with this crime, and during that time he has stolen a car in which he drove out of the state. He has given us no satisfactory explanation for that trip except that he believed that Murdock was in some way back of a plot to frame him. For all I know he may not have been going to Murdock's at all, but running away."

"But he came back," objected the doctor.

Nicholson pounced. "Under your protection, sir, and with your assurance of legal aid. He knew we'd catch him in the long run. He was just being smart." A gleam of satisfaction came into his eyes as he saw the shot go home. "Now," he continued, "take the points I have enumerated and look at them in conjunction with the other facts of the case. The most likely suspects for the murder of Riorden are the seven men who were with him when he produced this spy report, for, at least so far as we know, only those seven men knew that he had found it, or had access to it after the meeting—and remember that unless Riorden stole that report back himself, which is sheer nonsense, it was placed on his body by the murderer. And now, this fellow turns up with a carbon copy and says he had it all the time. That doesn't make sense."

"It makes more sense than his planting it on the corpse," interposed the doctor tersely.

Nicholson raised his hand. "Hear me out, Doctor, I'm meeting you more than halfway. I don't have to explain my reasons for holding this man." He drew a notebook from his pocket and rifled the pages. "I questioned five of the seven men at that meeting last night. All five"—he tapped the book with his fore-finger—"have what amount to complete alibis. That leaves two of the suspects—Jackson himself and a man named Burke. For all I know, Burke was involved in both killings or even committed them himself, but, aside from the negative fact of possible opportunity, I have no evidence against him. Jackson, on the other

hand"—he turned and pointed an accusing finger—"Jackson had both motive and opportunity. Remember, the man Riorden had practically accused him of being a spy. Jackson gave evidence of guilt by hiding and trying to run away and Jackson was attacked, possibly—I say only possibly—by Riorden's friends or associates with revenge as their motive. Jackson admits ownership of the murder weapon—he couldn't very well deny it—and the only explanation he can offer for its use and for all the other evidence against him is that he thinks he was framed. Hell, if I paid attention every time a crook hollered 'frame' I'd never arrest anybody."

Nicholson paused for breath and surveyed his audience. "Now look at it another way: I'm a policeman. I can't take into account how a suspect looks or acts when I've got concrete evidence implicating him in a crime. And as a policeman I don't have to try and convict a man before I arrest him. All I need is a case, and by thunder, I've seen plenty of murderers sent to the chair with half the evidence I've got on Jackson. And mark my word"—he pointed to Jackson but this time he did not look at him—"once I get this man arrested and booked he'll break. I've seen his type before.

"I've listened to his story, sir, because I respect your reputation, but, by God, you're a doctor, not a cop. You've accused me of trying to railroad a man to satisfy the newspapers. You've meddled in things that don't concern you, and that's going too far. Sergeant," he snapped at Tripp, "take Jackson down and book him."

As Tripp stepped forward and put his hand on Jackson's shoulder Stern asked gently, "What's the charge?"

"Charge?" Nicholson swung on him. "Murder! What did you think it was?"

Stern drew Nicholson aside. "Look," he whispered, "I don't blame you for flying off the handle when the old boy went to town on you that way. He was certainly out of line a mile, but that doesn't warrant our making monkeys of ourselves. Now I know Jackson didn't kill either one of these guys—"

"You know?" Nicholson looked incredulous.

"Yes, take it from me; I know. Don't ask me how. Call it a hunch—call it anything you like, but I know. If you slap a murder rap on Jackson now I don't say you won't get an indictment—I don't even say you won't get a conviction. But as sure as God made little green apples you'll have the wrong man. And if you try to hold him on any other charge—material witness or anything like that—Doc Stevenson'll have him out on bail in twenty-four hours, and he'll have the commissioner on your neck like a ton of brick. Don't think he won't. Oh, I know the commissioner'll back you up. He'll have to but he won't like it and he'll feel that you acted tactlessly and put him and the administration on the spot—and if Jackson should happen to beat the rap, oh boy, will your name be 'mud.' Use your head, Captain; you know I'm right about that."

Nicholson's anger had cooled sufficiently for him to recognize the logic of Stern's argument, and although he did not agree with the assistant D. A.'s hunch he respected it. He spread his hands helplessly.

"What the hell am I going to do? Sit here and let that old goat shout crook at me?"

"Let me handle it," suggested Stern. "I'll take the responsibility." Nicholson gave him a long, hard look. "Okay," he said at last. "I don't like it but what else can I do? But if that guy hops a ship for China God help both of us."

"Amen," said Stern solemnly.

They resumed their seats, and Stern gave Dr. Stevenson a severe look, the effect of which was slightly marred by the slow drooping of his off eyelid. "Doctor, as the representative of the district attorney's office and as your friend, I want to say that I feel you are being very unfair to Captain Nicholson. That's putting it mildly. The blunt truth is that you're using your prestige and political influence to harass and hamper an officer in the performance of his duties."

At the words "political influence" the old man rumbled warn-

ingly but subsided when he felt the pressure of his niece's hand on his sleeve. Stern took no notice and continued relentlessly:

"Also, I want to assure you that I am in complete accord with Captain Nicholson's evaluation of the evidence against Mr. Jackson and I am convinced that the captain would be fully justified in placing Mr. Jackson under arrest immediately. As a matter of fact, that is exactly what I would advise, were it not for certain aspects of the case which I am not now at liberty to discuss. In view of these factors, I have prevailed on Captain Nicholson to offer you an alternative: since you are convinced of Mr. Jackson's innocence we will agree to release him in your custody if you will accept full responsibility for his delivery to the police upon request. You understand, of course, that this procedure is extralegal and entirely off the record."

"Wait." Jackson shook off Tripp's hand and stood up. "You can't do that. I won't---"

"Shut up," said Dr. Stevenson sharply. He turned to Stern. "You think you're clever, don't you, young man? All right, I accept. I'll be responsible for Mr. Jackson any time the police want him."

Nicholson began, "But-"

"Don't worry, Captain," interrupted the doctor. "He won't run away. I know enough about men to know that I'm not taking the slightest risk."

Nicholson tried again: "But, good lord, Doctor, do you realize what you're undertaking? I tell you frankly I'm more than half convinced the man's guilty, and as I understand it you never saw or heard of him before today. How can you be sure he won't run out on you?"

The old man coughed and spoke with what was, for him, rare humility. "Captain Nicholson, I beg your pardon for what may seem to you to be my presumptuous disregard for your opinion. Believe me when I say that such disregard carries no implication of doubt for your sincerity or distrust in your ability. I am a stanch supporter of the present city administration and I have faith in

the servants it chooses. But you must understand that when I say I am taking no risk in vouching for this boy I am following a course that I have followed all my life. It has been my habit to make snap judgments of human beings and to act on those judgments, and the occasions on which I have been disappointed have been very rare. My evidence is as conclusive to me as yours is to you, and I honestly believe that the time will come when you will thank me for having saved you from making a serious mistake."

Sergeant Tripp said, "Holy smoke," and regarded the doctor with popping eyes.

Jackson started to speak, then changed his mind. His eyes were amused, but his mouth was a firm, straight line. He had few liberalistic illusions and felt that anything he said now would be merely grandstanding. The main thing was to avoid a pinch, and the doc's way seemed to be as good as any.

Nicholson was tapping a pencil irritably on the desk top while he regarded Dr. Stevenson with mingled exasperation and respect. Finally he lifted his shoulders slightly. "Okay," he said. "Suppose we leave it like that, shall we, Doctor? But remember, Jackson has to be on call any time, day or night, if I want him."

The doctor nodded and smiled a frank, pleasant smile that lighted up his old face like sunlight on snow. The two men rose and shook hands, and the girl and her uncle moved toward the door. At a word from the old man Jackson smiled thinly at Nicholson and followed obediently. Stern walked to the door where he talked for a moment before saying good-by. As Jackson passed him the assistant D. A. spoke to him in a low tone, and Jackson paused and looked surprised. Then he nodded curtly and went out, closing the door after him. Stern, his face bland and expressionless, strolled back to the chair he had occupied and sat down.

"Well," exploded Nicholson. "What the hell do we do now?" "Check alibis on this second kill," suggested Stern.

"Sure, we'll do that, but where will it get us? We're checking

background on those union guys, and something may turn up there, but I doubt it. I've got a tail on every one of them, but the man we want will watch his step from now on. He's got away with murder and he knows it. Burke's still missing, and that butler's description sounds enough like him to make me interested, but after this Jackson business I wouldn't be surprised if Burke turns up with the president of the Federation of Churches for a bodyguard. Damn a liberal administration anyway."

"Don't let it get you down, Cap," said Tripp solicitously.

"Shut your trap. Haven't you got anything to do?"

"Who, me? Oh, yes sir, sure I have. I just thought—"

Nicholson started to get up, but the sergeant was already out the door. Stern laughed. "Don't let it get you down, Cap," he mimicked.

Nicholson glared at him. "If it wasn't for you . . ."

Stern continued to laugh, and the police captain threw up his hands in disgust. "What's the use?" he moaned. He settled back in his chair and began searching his vest pockets abstractedly for a cigar.

Stern became serious. He lit a cigarette and got up and took his hat from the rack. "I'd like to stay and chin the case over with you but I've got a date. There's just one favor I'd like to ask though"—he paused until Nicholson's head came up and then continued—"put two good men on our little pal, Nellie C., and tell 'em to keep their eyes peeled."

"I've got two men on her now but I'm damned if I know what for," said Nicholson angrily. "You think she bumped that guy in the truck?"

Stern didn't smile. "No, and I'm not worrying about Murdock's ten grand either," he said somewhat cryptically. He stood looking at Nicholson for another minute, then turned on his heel and went out the door.

3. Hunches

STERN FOUND JACKSON in a back booth of the little restaurant across the street from headquarters. He sat down, and they stared critically at each other.

Finally Jackson asked, "Is this a gag?"

"Uh-uh." The expressionless eyes met Jackson's level gaze. A waitress appeared at the open end of the booth and spread menus with a professional flourish. "Better order first," said Stern. "The steak's okay."

Jackson realized that he was hungry enough to eat a whole cow. He glanced at the menu.

"Stew," he told the waitress, "and a side of potato pancakes."

"What then?" he asked when the waitress had gone.

Stern made a face. "Potato pancakes," he groaned, "in a joint like this. They don't know how to make them. Oh well." He grinned at Jackson. "I just thought it'd be a good thing for us to compare notes. We both want the same thing."

"What thing?"

"The guy who did these killings-quick."

Jackson's lip curled. "That's me, according to your pal, the flatfoot."

"Look at it Nicholson's way," Stern said. "He don'-know-from-nothin'. He puts two and two together just like any cop—and he gets you."

"And you get something else?"

"You're too obvious. All that's lacking is a picture of you doing the killing. The world's biggest dope couldn't frame himself so completely, and I don't think you're a dope."

Jackson extended the tips of his fingers to his bandaged head in an ironical salute.

The waitress came with their orders, and Jackson waited until

she was gone. "Maybe I figured it that way," he said then. "I read a book once—"

"Nicholson didn't read it," Stern pointed out. "You didn't fool him."

Some of the hardness went out of Jackson's eyes. "He's even smarter than I am. He can figure two and two."

"Look." Stern gestured with his fork. "Dr. Stevenson and his niece don't believe you did it. That's good enough for me."

"I'm not so sure about the niece," said Jackson. "The doc's a nice old liberal who believes in Santa Claus. You're different. You're the law."

A familiar feminine voice said, "That's tellin' him, stevedore," and the two men looked up to see Maeve O'Callighan standing in the entrance to the booth. They both jumped up, and Jackson choked on a mouthful of stew.

Stern said, "Blackie! What in the name of common sense are you doing here?"

"Move over." Blackie sat down primly, adjusted gloves and purse on the seat beside her, and unbuttoned her smart heather-tweed sports coat. She wiggled a little to settle herself comfortably in the seat and smiled up at the waitress who came to take her order. "I'll have stew too," she ordered. "It looks delicious. And English muffins and coffee now, please."

Having solved the food problem, she turned her attention to the two men. "It's lucky I have good ears," she told Stern severely. "The minute I heard you tell Mr. Jackson to meet you here I knew I'd have to do something about it. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Joey Stern, trying to pump a man that's been all battered up. Just wait till I tell Nunky about this. He was furious because Mr. Jackson wouldn't go to the hospital with him."

Stern said, "Honest, Blackie, you got me wrong. I'm on his side. I don't think he did it any more than your uncle does."

Maeve's eyes danced, and a devastating dimple appeared in her smooth cheek. "Cross your heart," she commanded.

Stern solemnly executed the required gesture.

The girl sighed, and the dimple blossomed into a roguish grin that wrinkled her nose.

"Then that's all right," she told Jackson. "Mr. Stern is a lawyer, but he wouldn't lie to me. If he says he's on our side he is. Now you two men go ahead and talk, and I'll eat and listen. I want to find out how you're going to catch the murderer."

Problem number two having been settled to her satisfaction, Maeve veiled her eyes demurely with her long lashes and began buttering a muffin. Jackson stared at the bobbing feather atop the silly little hat and tried desperately to regain his equilibrium. He had never known a girl who threw him so completely out of gear; before he had thought her candid and efficient and a little hardboiled; now she was scatterbrained and positively kittenish. He didn't know what to make of her, but she was certainly good to look at. He pulled one ear abstractedly and muttered under his breath, "Well, I'll be—"

"Me too," said Stern with a grin.

Jackson tore his eyes away from the red feather and met the grin. His eyes crinkled at the corners, and he said sheepishly, "I guess we got our orders. You go ahead and talk."

"Uh-uh," demurred Stern. "You first. Tell me what you think about the case."

"Me?" Jackson pushed his plate aside. He avoided Stern's eyes. "I'm no dick."

"My God," Stern snapped, "if you're going to be like that we'll never get anywhere. You know more about this business than any headquarters flatfoot ever will. You know your union. You know the men in it and those you trust and those you don't. You know stool pigeons and how they work. You've been racking your brain every waking minute since this thing broke, trying to figure out who the rat is. Or maybe you knew right off the bat. Is that why you headed for Murdock this morning?"

Jackson looked up. There were little stubborn lines around his mouth, but he met Stern's eyes squarely. "There you're wrong,"

he said. "I didn't know but I knew Murdock did and I was going to find out if I had to choke it out of him."

"And someone beat you to it. That someone is the rat who killed Riorden, and he killed Murdock, either because he was afraid Murdock was going to turn him in or because they quarreled over the pay-off."

Stern took out a crumpled pack of cigarettes. He offered it to Maeve who refused and then held it out toward Jackson. When Jackson took the cigarette Stern asked, "Who was it?"

Jackson scowled at him. "If I knew do you think I'd be sitting here horsing around with you?"

"But you've got a damn strong suspicion. Who do you think it was?"

"You don't think about things like that," Jackson told him. "You either know or you don't."

"But you said you did know, Mr. Jackson," Maeve interposed brightly. "In the car, remember?"

Jackson's eyes flared at her momentarily, then lowered. He wanted to tell this little squirt in the red hat to go home and mind her own business, but the words wouldn't come. He said nothing.

"I thought so," murmured Stern softly. "Just what did the big lug say, Maeve?"

"Why, that he knew who the stool pigeon was. That's the same as knowing the murderer, isn't it?" Her eyes widened wonderingly on Jackson. "Why don't you tell Mr. Stern?" she asked severely.

Jackson turned on her almost savagely. "Because I don't know. Because I can't prove anything—yet."

"But you said you did know before."

"Call it a brain storm," he said. "I was groggy from those cracks on the head."

"All right," Stern said. "Skip it. Tell me this. Who was in that car that ran you and your pal off the road?"

Jackson looked relieved. "Moe Silver I think," he answered. "There was another mug with him, but I didn't see who it was."

"Who's Moe Silver?"

"A little rat that we ran out of the union at the same time as Fink Weller."

"What was it all about? I've got a hunch but I want to hear you tell it."

"Murdock had several reasons for not wanting to see me this morning. I got out on a limb when I called the butler but I had fixed it so he wouldn't call the cops and I didn't think he'd try any private rough stuff. I was wrong. I don't know whether Murdock engineered the frame on me or whether he even knew about it but I'm certain he and Weller were cooking up a kettle of fish that would taste a lot better with me out of the way for a few days—or maybe he just didn't want me blabbing to the tabloids about the love nest."

"Do you think they meant to kill you?" asked Maeve. Jackson shook his head.

"I wasn't sure at first but now I think it's likely they'd have given me a shot of dope or filled me full of liquor and dumped me on an outgoing freight as soon as it got dark. By the time I came to or the cops found me it'd look like I was running away, and then whatever I said wouldn't make much difference."

"Oh," gasped Maeve, her eyes round, "that's the most beastly thing I ever heard. Nunky says they used to do things like that to union men out West, but I didn't think they'd dare try it here. And if they tried it once what's to prevent their doing it again?"

"You forget Murdock's dead," said Stern.

Jackson reddened. "I guess I'm safe enough now, Miss O'Callighan. It's just barely possible that Weller might try something, especially if Moe Silver thinks I spotted him this morning, but I don't think they're that desperate and, anyway, they know I'd be ready for them this time."

"Could it have been Moe Silver or his friend who put that cord around Murdock's neck?" asked Stern.

"Could have been," said Jackson thoughtfully, "but I don't

think so. Those two were acting under orders, and if they'd showed at Murdock's they'd have had some tall explaining to do. Murdock would have been suspicious, and they wouldn't have had a chance to try anything funny. Besides, from the newspaper story I read, it doesn't look like their kind of a job."

"How about Burke?"

Jackson smiled and shook his head.

"Oh, for crying in the rain, we're not going to get anywhere this way," Stern raged. "You suspect someone. Who is it? What's your hunch? Come on, man, spill it."

"Nope." Jackson wagged his head mulishly. "I'll admit I've got a hunch but I'm not sure."

"When you are sure will you tell the police?"

"Yes, I'll tell 'em."

"And they can have what's left of him. Is that it?"

"I didn't say that," said Jackson carefully.

"No, but that's what you meant." Stern groaned in exasperation. "Good lord, man, don't you realize this is murder?"

"Sure," said Jackson. His jaw tightened. "Murderers aren't the worst criminals. Some murderers are pretty decent, but I've never known a stool pigeon that was."

Stern said to Maeve: "You see what we're up against. He's sore and bullheaded. He thinks he knows who the murderer is, and when he finds out for sure the poor fellow will have a terrible accident. Then he'll tell the cops, and they can pick up the pieces if they can find any. Boy, I hate to think what Nicholson would do if he heard about this."

"You're a strange lawyer," said Jackson.

"Yes, isn't he?" Maeve patted Stern's hand. "It's nice to know that you two boys agree. I think it's a marvelous idea for Mr. Jackson to play nemesis. I'm sure the murderer would rather be caught by the police. I know if it were I, I'd come in and give myself up."

"Jackson threw back his head and laughed uproariously. It was the first time either of his companions had heard him laugh like that and it was contagious. Maeve trilled in appreciation, and even Stern could not suppress a responsive chuckle.

"There, you see," said Maeve.

"Uh-huh," said Stern. "I see, all right. I see you two are going to be a lot of help. Now, suppose you stop acting like a spoiled brat, Blackie, and you, Jackson, get this through your head. There's a murderer loose who has killed twice and will kill again at the drop of a hat, and once he gets the idea you've spotted him you'll be next on his list——"

"Not me," Jackson interrupted. "I'll be watching him every minute."

"Let's hope you're watching the right guy," snapped Stern. "And even if you are there are others beside yourself in danger. If you'll start using your head you'll see that."

"I'm sorry, Joey," said Maeve contritely. "Of course you're right. I'll grow up and be good."

"Thanks." Stern smiled at her. He turned to Jackson. "How about some cooperation from you?"

Jackson was noncommittal. "What do you want?"

"I want to find Burke."

"You think he's the murderer?"

"I don't think anything. The butler described a guy that sounded like Burke. Burke's sister was playing house with Murdock, and Burke didn't like it. Burke disappeared. I want to find him."

"How do you think I can find him when the cops can't?" asked Jackson.

"I don't know. Can you find him?"

"Maybe."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" asked Maeve.

"You can't come," said Stern.

Jackson shook his head at her.

"Now who's being childish?" asked Maeve.

"Seriously," said Jackson, "if I agree to look for Burke it means combing half the dives in town. You'd start a riot in any one of them."

"You've got to see that, Blackie," said Stern. "With you along we wouldn't get to first base."

"I'm not a complete dope," Maeve said acidly. "I'll drive and I'll stay in the car if I decide you're not just being masculine and silly."

"Not with me, you won't," said Jackson.

"You've got to go home," said Stern.

Maeve stood up. "All right. Either I go with you or I go to Captain Nicholson. If I do Mr. Jackson will go to jail, and you"—she smiled sweetly at Stern—"will go to the doghouse and stay there. What do you think of that?"

Stern held his head in his hands. "Oh, my God," he groaned.

"Well," said Maeve adamantly. "What do you say, gentlemen?"

"But you can't do that, Blackie," pleaded Stern. "What would Dr. Stevenson say after the scrap he put up to keep Jackson out of jail?"

"Nunky'll understand. I'll tell Captain Nicholson Mr. Jackson didn't kill anybody but he thinks he knows who did and he's in terrible danger. I'm not so sure jail isn't the safest place for him after all."

The two men looked at each other in silence. Maeve tapped her foot. "Well," she said again.

Jackson began to sense the humor of the situation and enjoy himself. He stood up. "Okay, sister," he said. "You asked for it."

"Oh, why did I ever start this?" Stern groaned. "Blackie, you're a pest."

"Am I, darling?" Maeve cooed over her shoulder as she led the way out of the restaurant. "But I'm a nice pest, aren't I?"

4. Cat House

That Night was pure adventure as far as Maeve was concerned. It was her first murder investigation and her first man hunt and it

was thrilling and exciting and exhilarating. Even the danger—glimpsed at first mistily and then more and more clearly as the night sped on—served only to add zest to the experience. Later, on that night when terror invaded the security of her own home, when death came close to her and she was nauseated with dread and apprehension, she recognized more fully the brutal realities of violence and murder and vowed never, never to permit herself to become entangled in such a situation again. But now it was a fascinating game, like the treasure hunts in which she had participated at college; only this was more fun because the game was real and the "treasure" was alive.

In the beginning it was slow and a little dull; a drive cross-town to East Street and then north, threading in and out of heavy commercial traffic, with a stop now and then and Jackson hopping out of the car (sometimes with Stern, but more often alone) and disappearing into a water-front hotel or saloon or pool room or seamen's flophouse, to reappear a little later on with a laconic shake of the head.

This tour of the water front was personally conducted, and Jackson kept his own counsel. Its purpose, of course, was evident. Jackson was warily sniffing the trail, seeking a scent that would lead them to Burke, but as time wore on and no information was forthcoming Maeve began to be a little bored and exceedingly curious. She had promised herself to be as strong and silent as this stubborn longshoreman and she strove heroically to maintain her resolve but, at what was in reality the eighth stop (though it seemed like the twentieth) she broke down and demanded to be taken in.

Jackson put his tongue in his cheek and looked at her. His smile was neither grim nor embarrassed; it was sly, and Maeve, after one glance into his clear blue eyes, averted her gaze hastily, feeling suddenly very young and foolish. Here on the water front, on his own stamping grounds, so to speak, Jackson was neither hurt and bewildered nor diffident and clumsy as she had seen him before; he was calm and confident and self-assured, and she had the un-

comfortable feeling that he was laughing at her. She was convinced of this when he called her "baby."

"Okay, baby," he said rudely. "Remember, I told you before. You asked for it. No comebacks now."

Maeve's self-possession was shaken, and deep inside she was a little afraid. She might have backed down by hiding behind offended dignity, but Stern demurred, and that settled it.

"For Godsake," said the assistant D. A., his eyes wide behind his glasses. "You would have to pick this place. You can't go in there."

"Why not?"

Stern spluttered, and Jackson laughed. "You can't," he told Stern. "This is no place for a respectable young lawyer." He bowed mockingly to Maeve and held out his hand. "Come on, curlylocks, I'll show you the facts of life."

By that time Maeve would have gone if it were her last act on earth. She accepted the hand and stepped jauntily out of the car.

"Thanks, Mr. Bear," she smiled. "No comebacks."

The place was a five-story ramshackle tenement, and Maeve was hardly inside the door when her suspicions as to its character were realized.

"This is Big Edna's," said Jackson, leering at her. "Big Edna's quite a dame. She's famous from San Francisco to Singapore."

"Yes," said Maeve simply, "I know." If he expected her to turn and run he had another guess coming.

Jackson halted with his foot on the first step of the stairs and looked at her. His jaw dropped. "You know?"

Maeve nodded. "Shall we say I surmised?" she asked archly.

"And still you wanted to come?"

"Why not? I've always wanted to see the inside of a bawdy house."

"My God," breathed Jackson.

Mentally, Maeve chalked up a mark for her side. She had won that tilt. He was ready to back out right now but he didn't know how. The big goof.

After all the fuss Big Edna's was a little disappointing. They went up a flight of stairs covered with frayed flowered carpeting and emerged into a foyer with a desk and open register. The stair well continued on up from the foyer, and a long, dimly lit hallway with closed doors on either side led back to the rear of the building. While Jackson tapped the call bell on the counter Maeve peered curiously down this hallway, seeking some sign of crimson vice, but there was none. The place looked exactly like the small-town hotels at which she had stayed overnight when on automobile trips. Perhaps some of them . . . she gasped and giggled a little. "The eminent Dr. Stevenson and his niece were guests last night at Big Edna's Boardinghouse."

Jackson misinterpreted the giggle and put his hand on her arm. "Don't be nervous," he said. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

"Afraid?" cooed Maeve. "With you, Sir Galahad?" She looked up at him, and their eyes met. "Where's all the honky-tonk?" she said flippantly. "The place looks dull as dishwater."

"It is," said Jackson.

A nondescript young man, wearing a pink silk shirt with yellow arm bands, came through a door behind the desk and stood staring at them with dull eyes that brightened like a bird's when they looked at Maeve.

"Yes sir?" he said.

He positively rubbed his hands. He was quite the most disgusting creature that Maeve had ever seen.

Jackson scowled at him. "Tell Edna, Jackson wants to see her," he growled.

The man's eyes narrowed. "I don't know any Edna. I thought you wanted a room."

"Why, you little punk." Jackson reached across the desk and caught the man by his shirt front. "You heard what I said. Get busy and tell Edna she's got company."

The man squirmed, trying to loosen the grip on his shirt. "The proprietor isn't in," he whined.

"Listen, Buddy," said Jackson. "You're new. Don't try to think.

Just call Edna and tell her what I told you to if you value this shirt."

"What are you," the man gasped, "a bull?"

"Sure, I'm a bull," Jackson agreed easily. "I'm the whole damn force. Now get busy and call while you're all in one piece."

"Okay, okay," said the man. Jackson loosened his shirt, and he smoothed it tenderly. "Why the hell didn't you say so?"

He spoke briefly into the phone, then came around the desk and motioned them to follow him. The way led up three flights of stairs to a door at the front of the hall on the top floor.

"You'd think they'd put in an elevator," said Maeve as she puffed up the last flight.

The man sniggered. "I'll take care of that, sugar, just for you." "Shut up," said Jackson.

The man, his hand raised to rap on a door panel, turned and regarded Jackson quizzically. "For cripesake," he complained, "you're the touchiest cop I ever seen. Anyone'd think the dame was a lady."

Jackson looked murderous, but before he could reply Maeve said: "You'd better think so, you weasel, or I'll scratch your eyes out."

The man looked at her with sudden respect. "Okay, sister," he said. "A lady's a lady for my money if she says so."

Maeve looked up at Jackson. "That's what I always say," she whispered. "What do you always say?"

"You're too fresh," he replied in the same whisper. "Remind me I promised to spank you."

The man in the silk shirt looked from one to the other and shook his head. "I give up," he muttered and knocked at the door.

A voice called, "Come in," and he pushed the door open and motioned them through. Then he closed it and went back down the stairs, muttering and shaking his head. At the foot of the flight he turned and looked back toward the closed door. "Screwy," he said. "Nuts. I don't get the pitchur; damned if I do."

The room into which Maeve and Jackson had been ushered was large and cheerful. Three windows, looking out over the docks

and the river, had yellow drapes, and the walls were ivory with original water colors tastefully hung. The furniture had been chosen for comfort and had a used, homey look.

The woman who sat in the big chair by the left-hand window fitted the room perfectly. She wore a well-cut dark woolen dress that was simple and expensive, and her graying hair was piled neatly and unaffectedly on the top of her head. She had on reading glasses that she removed as they entered, and a newspaper lay in her lap. Although she filled the chair to overflowing she had about her an air of quiet dignity that few fat women ever achieve.

She looked up now, her eyes on Maeve, rather than Jackson.

"Hello, Jack," she said. "Who's this?"

"A friend of mine," said Jackson.

The woman looked at him, and he reddened.

"She's a nice girl, Edna," he foundered. "I-I-"

"If she's a nice girl what the hell did you bring her here for?"
"He didn't bring me," said Maeve. "I just tagged along."

"Oho," said Big Edna. "Defending him, are you? Did you know where he was takin' you?"

Jackson said desperately, "You got this all wrong, Ed---"

The woman ignored him. "Well, did you?" she asked Maeve. Maeve nodded. "I told him I wanted to see what a bawdy house

looked like."

"A bawdy house?" Big Edna laughed "Is that what you call it?

"A bawdy house?" Big Edna laughed. "Is that what you call it? Young lady, this is no bawdy house. It's a decent, respectable whore house, and you're a twerp. No nice girl would come here if she knew where she was coming. Not that whores aren't all right. Some of the finest women I've ever known were whores, but there's one thing about a whore, she's got the delicacy to know where she belongs. If a whore came into your house you'd probably throw her out—now get the hell out of here before I do the same thing."

"I'm sorry." There was a stricken note in Jackson's voice that made Maeve look at him. She looked away again quickly because she couldn't stand what she saw. His eyes were pitiful.

"Come on," he said brokenly. "I'll take you out of here."

"No." Maeve disengaged her arm gently from his restraining hand. "No, wait a minute." She looked at Big Edna. "Thanks," she said. "You're right. I was a twerp, if you mean what I think you do. I shouldn't have come, but it's not as bad as it looks, really. Jackson had to see you and I—I— You see, it was sort of a dare—not that he dared me—he didn't want me to come—but—but—I don't know how to say it and I don't know how I can make you understand—and—and I don't blame you for not understanding either."

Maeve stopped. Standing there, she looked very young and very earnest and as though the most important thing in the world to her at that moment was to have the big woman in the chair believe her.

For a moment no one spoke. Jackson put his hand on the girl's arm, and his voice was very tender. "Come, Maeve," he said. "We'll go now."

Neither of them noticed that he had used her given name.

Big Edna rose from her chair like a mountain heaving. "I take it back," she said. "You're just a kid but you've got what it takes. If there's anything I can do for you I'll be glad to. Sit down, both of you, and tell me about it."

Maeve drew a deep breath. She looked at Jackson and nodded. Somehow they both found chairs, and when the big woman had majestically reoccupied her seat by the window Jackson told her why he had come.

"Hmmm," said Edna reflectively. "I thought it might be something like that. You know I'm not a stoolie, Jack. I wouldn't turn up a guy for the cops if he was the worst killer that ever breathed. But if you say it's for you that's different. To tell you the truth, I don't know that Burke was here last night but I think he was. I didn't see him, mind you, and I don't know where he is now."

"Was he looking for a ship?" asked Jackson.

Big Edna wagged her head. "Not that I know of. And," she added, "I'd probably hear if he was." She smiled at Maeve. "There's

not much goes on on this water front I don't hear sooner or later," she explained.

"How long was he here?" asked Jackson. "Was anyone with him?"

"I don't know but maybe I can find out." The big woman reached out for a phone on the table by her chair.

"Has Adelaide come in?" she asked. "Yes, put her on." She waited a minute, her eyes on Maeve's face. "Adelaide?" she said then. "Was Tommy Burke here last night? Don't give me an argument; answer my question. Yes, yes. How long did he stay? All right, that's close enough. Was there anyone with him? Oh yeah? I thought I told you—all right, all right, we'll go into that later. What else do you know? Ummm, like that, eh?"

She hung up without saying good-by and looked at Jackson. "A little punk by the name of Augustino—"

"Hell's bells," said Jackson, "I should have known."

Big Edna continued: "He's a penny-ante yegg, and I gave orders to keep him out of here. They're more trouble than they're worth, his kind. But all they did last night was rent a room. Looks like they rented it to sleep in too. Burke was tight when he came in, but they were quiet and peaceful. They left sometime early this morning."

Jackson stood up. "Thanks," he said. "I think I know where to go from here. We're going to have to do the hot spots."

Big Edna smiled. "Nice work if you can get it," she said. "Sorry I couldn't be more help. Good luck and take care of yourself and this young lady, you big dope."

She turned to Maeve. "I'm glad you came," she said, "but I won't ask you to call again. Next time this lummox dares you to go to a whore house with him don't be a fool. Tell him you're a decent girl and hit him a sock in the eye."

Maeve laughed a little nervously and said good-by. Big Edna did not offer to shake hands with either of them but sat in her chair watching them out the door, a peculiar twisted smile on her wide mouth.

5. Alibis

They found stern slumped down on the back seat of the car, his hat low over his eyes and his fingers linked across his stomach. It was impossible to say whether he had been asleep or merely thinking, but he roused himself as Maeve slid under the wheel and Jackson took the seat beside her.

"I hope you got something," he said querulously. "You were in there long enough."

"What time is it?" asked Jackson.

Both Maeve and Stern looked at their wrists. "Eight o'clock," they chorused.

Maeve switched on the ignition and put her foot on the starter. "Where do we go from here, bloodhounds?"

"Easy does it," said Jackson. "We've got plenty of time, and besides there are complications." He touched his bandaged head gingerly. "How about removing some of this headdress? I feel like a cross between a wild Indian and the Spirit of '76."

Maeve turned and examined him critically. "You look like the 'morning after,' " she decided. "You'd better leave that bandage alone and keep your dirty fingers off it. Nunky's proud of his handiwork."

Stern tapped Jackson's shoulder. "What's all this about plenty of time and complications? Have you or haven't you got any idea where Burke is?"

"I've covered all the logical places," explained Jackson. "I've found out where he was up to early this morning, but from then on no one has seen hide nor hair of him. Either he's making a beeline for the sticks or he's hiding out some place where he isn't known."

He gave Stern a résumé of the information gleaned at Big Edna's and continued:

"I don't know where Bennie Augustino fits, but if Burke's in this thing at all then it's a safe bet that Bennie is too. So my plan is to stop looking for Burke and find Bennie. That means making the rounds, and it's too early for that."

"Looks like a big night," remarked Stern cheerfully.

"Oh sure, sure." Jackson gave him a pitying look. "Only there's the one or two complications I mentioned—minor details like expenses and newspaper reporters. Assistant D. A. and Niece of Prominent Surgeon Celebrate with Radical Labor Leader Suspected of Murder! How'd that look in the headlines? I don't know about you two but I've got a reputation to protect. Why don't you go home and let me play this solo from here on?"

"Hooey," said Maeve expressively. "We started this together and we're going to finish it. I'll finance the expedition, and Nunky can write it off as this year's contribution to the Civil Liberties Union. How's that? And Joey can tell the scandal mongers this is official business. That'll keep them quiet."

Stern nodded, and Jackson said, "Okay. It sounds dumb to me, but if that's the way you want it I won't kick—I'm enjoying myself. Only I got to change clothes, and we have two or three hours to kill. How about splitting up now and meeting somewhere about eleven o'clock?"

"Put the cuffs on him," said Maeve. "He's trying to run out on us."

"You know you've got me hog-tied," Jackson told her. "If I don't show up all you have to do is telephone your pal Nicholson and have him call out the riot squad. The point is we can't start doing the hot spots for another two, three hours. What are you two going to do in the meantime?"

Maeve said icily, "Your concern is very flattering, Mr. Jackson. Don't worry about us. We'll just find one of these modernistic bars they have down here for slummers and sit patiently and wait for you. But if you're gone more than an hour"—she shook a black-gloved finger at him—"I'll consider your suggestion re Captain Nicholson."

"I'll bet you would, at that."

Maeve smiled. "Never doubt it, my friend," she cooed sweetly.

Maeve and Stern sat in the car in front of the bar Maeve had chosen and watched Jackson's long, lithe figure disappear down the street. Stern made no move to leave the car, and Maeve appraised him thoughtfully.

"You're hatching something, Joey," she accused. "I can tell by the tilt of your nose. You always wrinkle it like that when you think you're putting something over—it's a dead giveaway. Come on, tell Blackie. You wouldn't be trying to ditch me, would you?"

"Huh?" said Stern. "Oh no, of course not. Nothing like that."

Maeve sniffed. "Not much, Mr. Injured Innocence. All right, then, what is it?"

"I was just thinking. This might be a good time to go calling."

"Calling? On whom?"

"A couple of landladies."

"I don't like landladies," said Maeve.

"These won't be social calls." Stern smiled at her. "I suppose I might as well let down my hair, seeing I can't ditch you, you little mutt. You see, the thing that worries me most about this case is: there are too many alibis. With the exception of our lanky friend there who just turned the corner, all the suspects in good standing have very neat ones—too neat. So damn neat, they sound manufactured. Burke leaves the cop on the beat at twelve twenty-five, and fifteen minutes later he shows up at Edna's. No time for a murder there. Three of the others are participating in a nice, quiet little crap game in a brightly lit parking lot with a dozen assorted witnesses. One makes sure his landlady knows he's home in bed, and the other has a bartender pal who swears he never took his eyes off him. All those alibis make me doggone suspicious, and I think this might be a good chance to go check up on a few of them."

"Oh, that would be lovely," said Maeve. "Where do we start?"

Stern consulted the back of an old envelope. "We'll go take a look at brother Mellus' boardinghouse first," he decided. He gave her the address.

Maeve swung the wheel expertly and shot the little car away from the curb. A truck driver in front of whom she had cut into the traffic stream cursed her earnestly, but she paid no attention.

"Which one is Mellus?" she asked. "I always have trouble keeping my suspects straight."

"Keep the car straight," said Stern in alarm as she swung from one traffic lane to another. "You're not driving a tank."

Maeve giggled and missed the tailboard of a truck by inches. "You sound just like Nunky, but I love you for it. Come on, Joey darling, tell me about Mellus."

Stern shuddered and closed his eyes. "Mellus is the president of the union," he told her. "He's fat and full of dignity—injured dignity, last time I saw him. I gathered the impression that he was not entirely frank when Nicholson questioned him last night."

"Is he the one whose pal's a bartender?"

"Uh-huh."

"Then why don't we go see the bartender?"

Stern opened his eyes, took a quick look at the swirling traffic, and closed them again. He would have suggested driving himself but he knew that any word from him would only spur the rash young woman to further excesses. He resigned himself and continued the conversation.

"Maybe we will later. Not that I think it'll do much good. The bartender will probably swear he never took his eyes off our fat friend. He'll swear double if the alibi's a phony. That's why the phony alibis are usually the hardest ones to crack. Right now I'm more interested in finding out if brother Mellus has another alibi for this morning around ten o'clock."

"Oh," said Maeve. "That's when the other man was killed, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh." Stern opened his eyes and sat up as the car drew into the curb. "You wait here," he said. "I'll be right out."

"That's what you think," said Maeve. She caught his sleeve and held it in a firm grip as she followed him out of the car. "I'm right behind you, mister."

Stern grinned down at her. "You're not going to miss anything, are you?"

"Not if I can help it," asserted Maeve firmly.

The proprietress of the barrackslike boardinghouse in which Mellus roomed was as clean and neat and institutional as her establishment. She was also as impersonal. She examined Stern's credentials, accepted Maeve without question, and told her story in a terse, detached manner that was eloquent of her respect for the police and the rooming-house code and her determination to keep her own skirts and those of her place of business free from contamination. Her story was simple and convincing. She did not know what time Mellus had come in the night before but she did know that he had not left his room before eight-thirty that morning when he passed her on the stairs. Mellus did not take his meals in the boardinghouse, and the woman assumed that he was on his way to breakfast. He usually ate at the diner on the corner. They might ask there, although the police had already done so. The police had also examined Mr. Mellus' room. As long as her boarders behaved themselves on the premises she did not bother her head with what they did off it. Yes, Mr. Mellus drank occasionally, but he was always quiet and he did not impress her as being the murdering type. But then, she was no judge.

There was a good deal more of this, none of it very profitable, and Stern beat an orderly retreat. He made a quick stop at the diner on the corner and learned from the waitress who had served Mellus his breakfast that he had had four fried eggs, French fries, and two cups of coffee and had left at approximately ten minutes to nine. That wasn't an airtight alibi, but it was a close squeeze. Mellus could have gotten to Murdock's in time to commit the second murder, but he wouldn't have had time to stop and pick flowers on the way. In a way, it was better than an airtight alibi, because two airtight alibis in a row might be suspicious whereas Mellus, by following what appeared to be his regular routine, had given a convincing appearance of innocence. The gist of it all was that you had to give the fat man credit for more

subtlety than you thought he had or wipe him off the list of suspects at least as far as the second murder went. Stern compromised by pigeonholing the problem for further reference and going on to examine the next suspect.

They found Painter having a comfortable cup of coffee with his landlady in her kitchen.

"Sure," said Painter, his eyes straying appreciatively to where Blackie sat with crossed knees, pretending to take notes of the conversation, "I don't mind going over the story I told last night. Mrs. Hefflin here will tell you I came in a couple of minutes after twelve o'clock. From what the papers say about the time poor old. Pop got his, I guess that lets me out, don't it?"

"How about this morning?" asked Stern.

"You mean Murdock," said Painter. "Suppose I couldn't account for every minute of my time; that wouldn't mean I killed anybody, would it?"

"Of course not," agreed Stern, "but if you could it would help a lot. The more people we eliminate, the more we narrow the field. That's the way criminals are usually caught—not by dropped handkerchiefs and fingerprints."

"I get you," said Painter. "Well, you can eliminate me right now. I shaped up this morning and went to work on Pier 44 at seventhirty. I just got home a couple of hours ago. You can check that with the boss stevedore."

Stern studied Painter for a moment. "What do you think of Jackson as a suspect?" he asked suddenly.

Painter looked down his long nose. "You'll have to ask him."

"Do you think he was framed?"

"It's been done before," said Painter.

"You and Jackson were on opposite sides of the fence in the committee meeting, weren't you?"

Painter frowned. "What are you trying to do, mister—get my goat? Sure, we were on opposite sides of the fence. The majority of the committee, including me, wanted to recommend strike, and Jackson wanted to wait. Jackson got kind of nasty about it. Hell,

that sort of thing is always happening in committee meetings. It don't mean nothing. I'll tell you one thing, though, free and gratis, and you can make whatever you damned please out of it. I don't like Jackson and I don't trust him and I guess he feels the same way about me. Neither one of us would be a hell of a lot surprised if the other one turned out to be a rat."

"That's funny," said Stern. "I happen to know that Jackson doesn't suspect you. He's got another candidate."

"You don't say." Painter looked mildly surprised. "Who?" Stern grinned. "You'll have to ask him," he said.

On stools at the chromium-trimmed bar where they were to meet Jackson Maeve turned to Stern and demanded: "Give, Joey. Who-done-it?"

"What makes you think I know?" Stern hedged.

"Don't flatter yourself," said Maeve promptly. "I don't. But you're getting warm, and I'm not going to stand for any holdouts. Come on, tell me whom you suspect and why."

Stern looked around. They were alone at the bar, and the attendant was busily polishing glasses at the far end. "All right," he said. "Maybe, what my so-called mind needs is some exercise. I haven't any particular suspect, Blackie, and that's the truth. What I've seen so far seems to point to one of the members of the Union Negotiating Committee, but there's practically no real evidence to go on, and, if there's something at the bottom of the whole business that we haven't uncovered yet—some other motive beside the stool-pigeon angle, for instance—it could be anybody. The thing that bothers me most right now are these alibis. Take that fellow Painter, for instance. He's smart and shrewd and out to feather his own nest at the union's expense if necessary, I'll bet a dollar. He's got a good record in the union and he's not exactly the type that's usually picked for labor espionage, but other factors could outweigh those objections. What sticks when you start to consider him is that alibi—or rather those alibis, since he just gave us another for the Murdock murder."

"Maybe his landlady is lying," said Maeve. "From her looks I wouldn't put it past her."

Stern shook his head. "No," he said. "She isn't lying. She's like Painter—hard as nails. She wouldn't take a chance on a murder rap unless Painter had some way of forcing her and she's not scared, so that's out. No, there's no doubt, the lady's telling the truth or what she thinks is the truth."

"Well, then, that's that, isn't it?" asked Maeve a little impatiently.

"Uh-huh." Stern sighed. Psychologically he considered Painter the perfect suspect, and, despite the weight of evidence, he could not bring himself to eliminate the man completely from consideration. "Of course we'll check his alibi for the second murder," he said. "But it's a ten-to-one shot that it'll be foolproof. That's not surprising with a man like Painter. He knows he's a police suspect in the Riorden murder and he'd watch his step.

"Now Mellus, on the other hand, isn't smart, and he hadn't got one tenth of Painter's guts. If he committed these murders he did them in a blue funk and he doesn't seem that scared to me. Still, I've been fooled before. . . ."

Maeve nodded, and he looked at her over the top of his glasses. "You don't have to be so all-fired vehement about it," he remonstrated plaintively. "I'm admitting it, am I not?"

"Yes," Maeve agreed, "you're admitting it. Go ahead about Mellus."

"Well"—Stern's tone was a little hurt as he continued—"you understand this is just thinking out loud. Mellus has gotten fat holding a responsible position in the union, and he's no more honest or altruistic than Painter but, aside from his lack of guts, he's got an alibi too. Even a man as big as Mellus can't be in two places at once, and the bartender swears he was in the White Horse Saloon at the time of Riorden's murder."

He picked up his cocktail glass and studied for a moment. "Burke's number three on the list," he said, "and I hope we get

something definite on him one way or the other before the night's over. Then there's Jackson's pal, Whitey Gordon—"

"He's Jackson's suspect," said Maeve. "I remember Jackson telling Nunky it was his pal."

"I know." Stern nodded. "I tried to draw Jackson out in the open to find out why he suspected Gordon. He wouldn't suspect him without good reason and he probably knows a couple of things we don't. Gordon would be my favorite suspect, too, except—well, doggone it, he's a little cocky guy, and I like him. I can't for the life of me picture him being a rat."

"That's a nice objective attitude for a detective—especially when he's a lawyer into the bargain," said Maeve. "I don't see how you ever expect to get ahead."

Stern grinned momentarily. "That's what the boss says," he admitted. "I once made a mistake like that on a guy we had dead to rights, and he almost got away. He got religion and confessed on his way to the chair and nearly got me fired. That's what I call ungrateful. I thought I'd learned my lesson until this Gordon fellow came along." He turned a mock-mournful face on Maeve. "I guess I'm just not made of the right stuff."

Maeve reached over and put her small black-gloved hand on his. "Never you mind, Joey," she said. "I like the stuff you're made of."

"Thanks," said Joey. "That'll be something to remember when I'm unemployed. Seriously though, Gordon's the most likely suspect of the lot in some ways. He's a union business agent, and that's the one job, outside of membership chairman, a rat would want to get elected to and he probably had a better chance to rig a frame on Jackson than any of the others. He was less than a block away when Riorden was killed and he had opportunity in the Murdock case. Even his personality is against him if you look at it objectively. He's a hail-fellow-well-met sort of cuss, and that's just the sort of guy that makes the best kind of stool pigeon. The men are much more likely to suspect a sour puss like Painter than a man

like Gordon. I guess I'll have to get tough and keep my eye on him."

"It'd be awful if Jackson was really right," said Maeve. "After they've been such friends."

Stern made a wry face. "It'd be awful for Gordon," he said. "That would be one murder there wouldn't be any doubt about."

Maeve started checking on her fingers. "Painter, Mellus, Burke, and Gordon—that's four," she said. "What about the other men on the committee?"

"Well, one's a Negro named Sangster. He's as big as a house and plays professional football in his spare time."

"It wouldn't be he," said Maeve. "They wouldn't pick a Negro as a spy."

"That shows how much you know. This union is nearly fifty per cent colored, and there'd be more chance to get something on a Negro that'd keep him in line. He'd know they could frame him any time they felt like it. Besides, even this longshore union isn't free of race prejudice, and the Negroes feel it and resent it. It could be a Negro, as well as a white man."

He drained the last of his cocktail and ordered another round. "I don't think it's this particular Negro though," he continued when the bartender had left them. "He didn't dumb up for the cops as a Negro usually does—he just stayed quiet and watchful and answered questions without really saying anything. Of course he was scared—any Negro is when he runs foul of the law, but I felt, somehow, that he was burning up inside at the same time. I'd stake a lot, he's a good union man."

"Check," said Maeve. "Who else?"

"There's a little Italian, Colletti, who doesn't speak much English unless he's dumbing up plenty. He's an outside possibility. The men seem to trust him."

"They'd trust a stool pigeon," said Maeve. "He'd have to have their confidence to do his dirty work."

"You make it too simple," Stern said, "but never mind, you'll learn."

"I think Mellus is the murderer," said Maeve with conviction. "People always think fat men are nice and easygoing. All the fat men I ever knew were rascals."

Stern laughed and patted her hand. "It must be nice to be a woman," he said. "The only trouble is that Mellus has been a union official for twenty years, and even when the Weller mob was 'in' and everybody was crooked he wasn't caught out of line once. Besides, there's his alibi."

"Maybe he and the bartender belong to the same lodge," said Maeve. "Anyway, I don't care what you say, he's my suspect number one."

"Have it your way," said Stern, finishing his drink. "I'll admit he's on my suspect list, but he's not first."

"Who is?"

"What do you care? You've got Mellus."

"You think it's Burke, don't you?"

"Not necessarily," Stern evaded. "He's sure as hell mixed up in it, but so far I don't know how."

"Do you think we'll find him?"

"How would I know? Maybe it's a wild-goose chase."

Maeve was silent for a moment. Then she looked up out of the corner of her eye. "Joey, you don't think I'm just a thrill seeker, do you?"

"Oh, for Godsake. Be your age, will you?" He looked at his watch. "Jackson ought to be along pretty soon."

"How about another daiquiri?"

"Not for you, little girl," said Stern. "You've had enough."

6. Man Hunt

WHEN JACKSON, bathed, shaved, and dressed in what he called his "shore clothes"—neat, well-fitting blue suit, blue topcoat, and gray

snap-brim hat—walked in they were still spatting like two kids about whether or not Maeve could have another drink.

Three hours later Jackson led the way into the Club Caravan, just around the corner from the theater district. The interim between Maeve's modernistic bar and the Club Caravan had been filled with an assortment of night clubs, cocktail lounges, and dives, some of which Maeve had been to before, or had heard of—"You have been listening to Blah Blah and his Collegians playing to you from the Club Blah"—and some of which she had never known existed. She was having the time of her life and learning things about a big city's underworld—not the sordid back-alley underworld of her imagination, but a sort of fourth-dimensional underworld that existed in familiar places and rubbed shoulders with familiar commonplace people, unseen and unsuspected except by its initiates.

Jackson was, somehow, one of these initiates. He knew a person here and a person there—a taxi driver, a doorman, a hat-check girl, a waiter, a trim sad-eyed youth who was one of the town's most successful professional gamblers—and they had been passed on from one of these to another, the trail leading finally to the Club Caravan. Bennie Augustino was new in town and not too well known, and Jackson's progress had been cautious, but now at last the scent was strong.

"You two wait here," he advised when they had been escorted to a table. "I'm hoping this is our last stop."

Maeve sank wearily into the chair he held for her. "It better be," she sighed. "I'm sick of ginger ale and I'm tired of quarreling with Joey about what another cocktail would do to me."

"Uh-uh," said Stern, "you're not of age." He had switched to rye and had had six straight, according to Maeve's count, but he ordered another without batting an eye. Maeve contemplated him with awe. "Well, well, live and learn."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning you, Joey boy. I'd never have guessed. Where do you put them?"

"Oh, that," said Stern. "It's one of my weaknesses. I can't get drunk; I just get tight—inside."

"I should have such a weakness." Maeve regarded the loathsome ginger ale bitterly. "I'm being such a good girl. I want to laugh; I want to sing and dance and have another cocktail but I don't dare. I feel like a martyr."

Stern's eyes were slits behind the round lenses. He looked sleepy but he sat as stiffly erect as a drum major. "Official business," he said solemnly. "We have a job to do, we three. All for one and one for all. Can't let each other down. Besides, you have to drive."

"Joey, you're a faker. You are drunk."

"Not me." Stern rose and bowed. "If you'd care to dance I'll prove it."

Looking over his shoulder, Maeve saw Jackson weaving in and out of couples along the edge of the dance floor, coming toward them. There was a gleam in his eye that spoke of new developments. She indicated him with a nod, and Stern turned as he came up.

"Come on," said Jackson. "Let's get out of here. We're on the home stretch."

Back in the car, Maeve, driving according to directions, headed west, then south, and pulled in to the curb in front of a row of dingy brownstones with high stoops and half basements. Stern leaned forward in the rear seat, but Jackson made no move to get out.

"Oh, oh," he murmured, his eyes on the rearview mirror, "we've grown a tail. There's a car turning in at the end of the block."

"What'll I do?" asked Maeve. "Keep going or stay here and let them go by?"

"Better pull out," said Jackson. "I don't think they'd try anything in the open street, but you never can tell."

Stern's voice was suddenly authoritative. "Stay where you are," he said. "It's okay."

Maeve hesitated between the contradictory orders, and as she did so the other car drew up alongside. A man sprang out of the

front seat and came over. Stern rolled down the rear window.

"D. A.'s office," he snapped.

"Yes sir." The man touched his hat. "We got your call at the precinct and picked you up outside the club."

"Nice work. Better pull down to the end of the block and then come back one at a time. We don't want a tip-off."

"Right." The man went back to the car, and it pulled ahead.

"Well I'll be damned," said Jackson. "Of all the dirty copper tricks."

"Don't be dumb. I may not know as much as you do about what we're heading into but I know it's a police job. Especially with Blackie here. When you said back at the club that we were on the home stretch I went to the men's room and called the local precinct. I didn't want to take time to explain. Now give me the dope and let me out. You two stay in the car."

"Like hell I will," growled Jackson.

"Like hell you will what?"

"Like hell I'll give you the dope or anything else. Go do your own dirty work, copper."

"Suit yourself. It may take us a little longer, but we'll find whatever's here."

"What about me?" asked Maeve. "Do you two grown babies think I came along for the ride?" She kicked open the door on her side and slid deftly from under the wheel onto the curb.

Jackson grabbed for her and missed. "Hey, you can't go in there. There might be trouble."

"There'll be less of it if you tell us what the score is," said Stern. "All right. You win." Jackson swore bitterly. "Of all the screwy messes! Why the hell didn't I go to jail?"

He clambered reluctantly out of the car, followed by Stern. Half-way down the block a man sauntered leisurely toward them. There was another across the street.

Jackson grunted and held out two fingers close together. "Me and the dicks," he said disgustedly, "like that. It's 328," he told Stern. "The second house down. Augustino and a pal of his share

the basement apartment, and unless I got a bum steer Tommy Burke's there too. If Bennie and his buddy's home there might be some fun."

"And you were going to handle this without the cops," groaned Stern.

"My hero," said Maeve.

Jackson winced and rubbed a knuckle alongside his jaw. "Okay," he said. "Maybe I rated that." He looked at Stern, and his jaw relaxed in a slow grin. "I'm kinda mixed up tonight. Half the time I don't know which side I'm on."

No light showed under the close-drawn shades of the basement apartment. They met the precinct dick in front of the house and summoned his companion from across the street. Briefly Stern explained the situation. "One of you stay here," he said, "and the other come with us. Too bad we can't cover the rear of the house, but I don't think they'll have time enough to blow that way. Jackson, you take care of Blackie and keep her out from under foot." He led the way up the stairs to the first-floor entrance.

"Shouldn't you have a warrant or something?" whispered Maeve.

"That's the law," replied Stern. His voice was suddenly cold and hard. Maeve looked at him in surprise, but it was too dark in the shadows of the doorway to see his face. Light flashed briefly on an old-fashioned bellpull with a brass plate that said "Janitor" beside the door, and there was a muffled ringing inside the house. The door release clicked, and Stern was inside speaking quickly to a man in shirt sleeves who emerged from a door halfway down the hall. The man gulped and nodded. He indicated a stairway leading down. "Two rooms," he said in answer to Stern's question. "There's only one door though. The other one's nailed up."

"Windows?" asked Stern.

"Only the front. The others lead out on a shaft. They'd play hell gettin' out that way. No, I don't know how many of 'em's home. There won't be no shootin', will there, Officer?"

"You get back and play doggo," Stern told him. The man ducked inside, and they heard the key turn in the lock.

The precinct dick led the way down the basement stairs and tiptoed softly along the hall toward a door near the front under which showed a streak of light. Stern halted Jackson and Maeve at the foot of the stairs.

"Keep her here," he whispered to Jackson. "I don't think there'll be fireworks, but we don't want to take a chance."

Jackson started to remonstrate, but Stern halted him with a tight-lipped grin. "Remember, you're a private citizen," he whispered. "I'm the law."

Maeve looked down and gasped in openmouthed astonishment. A short, ugly gun had suddenly appeared in Stern's hand. His gaze followed hers.

"That's another weakness of mine," he whispered. "I like to play cops and robbers."

The precinct dick was a head taller than Stern and fifty pounds heavier. He held his police special in one hand and twisted the doorknob gingerly with the other. The door was locked. He raised a hand to knock, but Stern arrested it in mid-air and made a gesture with his shoulder. The dick looked mildly surprised, then stepped back and drove one of his number twelves against the door just over the lock. The flimsy door flew back with a crash, and the big man followed his foot into the room, almost overturning the floor lamp beside the couch on which Tommy Burke lay. Burke sat up, openmouthed and goggle-eyed, and the magazine he had been reading fell to the floor beside the base of the lamp. The detective took one look at Burke, said, "Hold the pose, Buddy," and went through an open door on his left into the rear room.

Burke closed his mouth, swallowed, and opened it again. "Why you lousy, God damn heels," he said. His voice was high and shrill, without carrying power. He looked and sounded like the end of a week's drunk. He put one foot on the floor and a hand on the back of the couch. The hand was trembling.

"Relax, Burke," said Stern from the doorway. "This is a pinch."

Stern was standing easily with the ugly little gun low at his side and as steady as his voice.

The voice, as much as the gun, stopped Burke in the act of getting up. Terror welled in his bloodshot eyes. "Pinch?" he shrilled. "I ain't done nothing. What are ya pinching me for?"

"Maybe murder, maybe not. If you want my guess it's blackmail." Stern watched Burke's eyes for a moment.

"Uh-huh," he nodded. "Blackmail. But it won't be so bad at that if you talk."

The dick came back from the rear room and shook his head at Stern. "Nobody here but him," he said.

"Fine." Stern put the gun in his pocket and moved away from the door into the room. "You and your buddy wait outside. If we have company bring them in here."

"Yes sir." The man went out. Jackson and Maeve appeared in the doorway.

Jackson said: "Hello, Tommy. You got yourself in one sweet mess this time."

Burke's lip curled. "Well, if it ain't my stinkin' pal," he sneered. "Who's the twist, Jack, a lady cop?"

The moment's respite, coupled with the sight of Jackson running with the hounds, had restored some of Burke's self-possession. Perhaps Maeve had something to do with it, too, for his hands fumbled ineptly with his tie and pushed back the tangles of his curly black hair. He had youth and Irish tenacity on his side and although terror still lurked in the depths of his eyes and his tenacity verged on sheer stupidity as it often does he did not crack as readily as Stern thought he would.

Stern began with a direct question. "Burke, did you kill John Murdock?"

"I'm not talking," said Burke. "You think I'm a sap?"

"You'll talk." Stern arranged three chairs in a semicircle before the couch. He sat down and looked at Burke, his eyes appearing deceptively wide and owlish because of the thick-lensed glasses. "You'll talk now to us if you're smart. But if you're not you'll talk sooner or later—either down at headquarters or on the stand or up in the death house. You've bought your ticket and you're on a one-way trip to the frying pan unless you talk. You know that, Burke, don't you?"

"Don't give me that stuff." Burke's loose mouth tightened defiantly. "I may talk and I may not but I won't talk to you, copper."

"You better talk to me," said Stern softly. "You know I'm not a cop."

"Yeah, yeah, I know you, you four-eyed little shyster." Burke sneered contemptuously. "The racket buster. That's a laugh. They better take that popgun away from you before you hurt yourself with it."

"You had a chance to take it, Tommy. Why didn't you try?"
"And get myself plugged by that big flatfoot? Fat chance."

Stern smiled, and his voice was still soft. "If I thought you were a killer, you thickheaded Irish mug," he said, "I'd give you another chance. It'd save the state some money."

Jackson intervened. "You're not doing yourself any good, Tommy. I don't know whether you killed Murdock or not but somehow I can't peg you for a fink, and a dirty rotten fink killed old Riorden. For Christsake, kid, speak up."

"Fink, yourself," flared Burke bitterly. "I thought the papers had you rigged for this. How'd you get clear? Turn cop lover?"

Jackson choked, and his face purpled. He leaped out of his chair and swung a right that would have kept Burke from talking for some time if it had landed. Luckily, it missed by inches, and Stern was between them, white with rage, before either could make another move. The sheer fury of the little attorney's attack pushed Jackson back into his chair.

"One more move like that, and I'll call in those dicks outside and have them take you both to the precinct," stormed Stern. "And you"—he adjusted his glasses and turned abruptly on Burke—"you listen, and I'll talk for a minute and, by God, if you're still stubborn when I get through I'll know you killed Murdock and I'll turn you over to Nicholson on a silver platter and wash

my hands of you. And if I do that you'll fry. I'll make book on it."
Stern stabbed viciously at his glasses again and sat down. Under other circumstances the gesture with the glasses, the round moonface, and stubby figure might have been funny, but it wasn't funny now. The sudden, unexpected violence of the little man had

left his audience dumfounded. Jackson and Burke stared, and Maeve's lips were parted, and her eyes were round and bright. Joey Stern. Little Joey Stern, of all people. Seven shots of rye and a gun and now this. What kind of liquor did they serve in

the Club Caravan anyway?

The outburst had left Stern a little breathless. He filled his lungs and exhaled audibly through his nostrils before he continued. "You met Bennie Augustino in a bar on the water front last night," he told Burke. "Bennie had something on you. Maybe he caught you in a crap game and took your pants off. I don't know what it was and I don't care—the point is, he was putting the heat on. You had thought up some kind of a scheme—or Bennie had suggested it—to get money out of Murdock. That's got to be so, because it's the only way you fit into this thing and the only way some of the facts make sense. What the scheme was I don't know but I'll even make a guess on that. It had something to do with your sister."

Burke winced. "Leave my sister out of this," he growled.

"Shut up," snapped Stern. "If you've left her out she's out. Bennie told you to meet him at Big Edna's last night because he didn't want any other punks horning in on the play. The two of you stayed there last night, and it's possible that that gives you an alibi for the Riorden killing, although Jackson didn't think to check it when he was down there. There's one thing I checked, though, and that is that you made a phone call from the lunchroom downstairs where you had breakfast. As near as I could verify it, the time fits with the second call over Murdock's private wire this morning, and I'll bet my shirt it was you that made that call. Not very many people knew the number of that private line, but you could get it from your sister. Now the next thing

after that, you turn up in Murdock's library with Murdock dead in his chair. You socked the butler, and the butler gave a perfect description of you, even to the brown topcoat and hat that are in that closet back of the couch there."

Burke turned his head involuntarily to look at the closet door, and Stern laughed. "Oh, the door is closed," he said, "but the coat and hat are there just the same, aren't they, Burke? You didn't know how good a look the butler got at you. You didn't know he has a camera eye. But he saw you, Burke, and he'll identify you on the stand, and his testimony will cook your goose and cook it brown. Now, damn you, go on from there."

Burke's hands had commenced trembling again, and when he spoke his voice was unsteady, but he was still defiant.

"You think you're smart, don't you, shyster?" he sneered. "Sure I got a brown coat and hat. So have fifty thousand other guys. And that butler'll never identify me or anybody else. He never saw the guy's face."

Stern pounced. "How do you know that?"

"Why"—Burke hesitated and looked at Stern, his brows drawn together in a tiny frown—"why, it was in the papers. The guy was masked."

"Have you got the paper, Burke?" Stern's voice was silky. "Have you got the paper that says the man was masked?"

"Why, yeah. Yeah, I guess so. It's somewhere around here." Burke's eyes shifted about the room.

"Never mind looking for it, Burke. It's no good. You stick to that story, and I'm through—and so are you. The man was masked, Burke, but not one news story carried it. We kept it out." He paused to let the significance of his last statement sink in. "You didn't read it," he continued. "But you knew it, Burke—you knew it because you were the masked man."

7. Drive Home

LATER, WHEN THE THREE were squeezed into the front seat of Stern's car, with Maeve in the middle and Stern driving, Maeve asked: "Do you think Burke really told the truth?"

Stern nodded. "I think so. What Nicholson and McArthur will think when they hear that crazy tale is a horse from another stable. Nicholson thinks I'm normally cracked; now he'll think I'm feeble-minded."

"But if it's true—"

"Uh-huh. It leaves us right where we started. That's what Nicholson will like about it. He hasn't my appreciation for herrings, red or otherwise. That's why I sent Burke over to the precinct and told them to hold him till morning. The captain will be able to take it better after a good night's sleep."

Jackson snapped his cigarette through the open window into the gutter. "Of all the damn-fool stunts . . ." he said thoughtfully.

"Particularly slugging the butler." Maeve had meant to say "hitting" and changed it to "slugging" the last minute. After the night she had spent the word "hitting" hardly seemed sufficiently expressive.

"He couldn't help that," said Stern. "He walked in through that window, and the high back of the chair hid Murdock's body at first. When he did get a glimpse of it, it must have frozen him in his tracks. I know it did me when I first saw it. And then, while he's standing there, Powers knocks. Burke just had time to get behind the door and tie that handkerchief over his face when Powers walks in. Then, when Powers starts to turn, there's nothing left to do but slug him. I suppose the fact that Augustino gave him that sap when he left the car sort of subconsciously influenced the whole action."

"It's too bad Tommy burned the letters," muttered Jackson.
"They would have helped his story some."

"His sister can testify to the letters and so can Augustino when and if the boys catch him. It's going to be kinda hard on Mrs. Murdock and her daughter, coming on top of her husband's murder, but the whole story will have to be told in court."

"I'll bet that little rat knew about those letters before he ever met Burke," said Jackson. "Blackmail's his dish."

Maeve was thinking of Murdock's wife and daughter. "What a home-coming."

They were silent for a moment, then she asked, "Would a hard-headed businessman like Murdock actually pay ten thousand dollars for a batch of silly love letters?"

"He evidently intended to." Stern swung the car off the avenue into one of the lanes leading to the tunnel. They were taking Maeve home over her vehement protestations that she could get there just as easily by bus.

"Murdock was hardheaded, but he was conventional," he continued when they had paid the toll and were speeding through the tunnel. "He hated and feared scandal. The fact that he drew the money from the bank almost immediately after Burke first contacted him makes me think he would have paid rather than have those letters made public. Then, too, Burke was Mayme's brother. Murdock probably didn't want to turn him over to the police."

Jackson swore suddenly. "By God," he said, "Burke and me—we were both planning to blackmail Murdock, and about the same thing too."

"But not with the same motive," said Maeve.

"I wasn't thinking of motive. I was thinking that if Murdock knew I was coming to put pressure on him he may have decided what the hell and told Burke where to get off."

"Uh-huh," said Stern. "I thought of that. And then Burke might have killed him and taken the ten thousand. Of course it's possible, but I still believe Burke's story. I believe it because Burke fits the picture as an unwilling blackmailer rather than a killer—

and another reason is that I think both Murdock and Riorden were killed by the same man and Burke was in that room at Big Edna's when Riorden was killed."

"That's what he says," objected Jackson. "It's pretty close timing."

"That's what he says, and I bet it checks. If Burke had already killed twice he would never have left Powers alive."

"Don't forget Augustino was out in the car while Burke was in Murdock's library," said Maeve. "He wouldn't be squeamish, would he?"

"Bennie wouldn't strangle a man," said Jackson with conviction. "He's too yellow to come that close."

"Yes, and it's too bad," murmured Stern. "From what I've heard of friend Bennie, I don't know anyone I'd rather help fry."

"So you got Burke"—Jackson's voice was disconsolate—"and what have you got? A couple of lousy blackmailers."

"That's true," agreed Maeve. "You're not much closer to the murderer than you were before."

"Don't you believe it," Stern retorted cheerfully. "We've exposed a very annoying red herring and we've practically eliminated at least one grade-A suspect—to wit, Burke. I'll admit we're not out of the woods yet, but Burke's story has cleared away some of the underbrush, and I'm beginning to see daylight. Grant me a couple of slightly shaky premises, and I'll reconstruct these two murders for you, step by step."

"Unless you've been holding out on us," Maeve challenged, "that's sheer braggadocio."

"What are your premises?" Jackson sounded interested.

Stern remembered Jackson's suspicions regarding the identity of the killer. Jackson was in the union—on the ground floor as far as these murders were concerned—and, right or wrong, his suspicions were important. But he was a stubborn clam, and how to open him up was a problem.

"Want to check your theories with mine, do you?" he asked slyly. "Okay, I think we'll agree, at least up to a point. Premise number one concerns motive. My guess is that the motive for killing both Riorden and Murdock was fear of exposure as a stool pigeon."

"Check," muttered Jackson.

Stern permitted himself a slight smile, but he kept his eyes on the road. "And following logically out of premise number one, premise number two is that the same man committed both crimes."

Jackson was silent until Stern glanced at him. Then he said haltingly, "There's a third premise. The murderer is one of seven men."

"Seven?" questioned Maeve.

"I can't go that far," said Stern.

"You've got to." Jackson's voice sounded tired. "God knows I don't want to, either, but I can't help myself. It's there. That committee leaked like a sieve, and the leak had to come from inside, not out. If there's a rat in the union he's on that committee."

"You could have more than one stool," said Stern.

"What good would he be if he wasn't on the committee?" Jackson began chanting names, a doleful, rising litany: "Burke, Mellus, Painter, Sangster, Colletti, Gordon—and me. One of us is a killer and a rat."

"Don't sound so morbid," pleaded Maeve. "And for God's sake, leave yourself out. You didn't do it."

Stern was malicious. "He's the only one who hasn't an alibi of some sort," he pointed out.

"Oh, shut up, Joey Stern," Maeve snapped. "You're just an egotistic windbag. You and your premises. It's—it's not scientific. It's just guessing."

Stern was hurt. "Hell's fire," he gasped. "Do you think I'd have planned this business tonight—"

"You didn't plan it," said Maeve. "I did."

"All right. You did. Have it your own way. Anyway I'm sorry. I seldom expect to be taken seriously."

There was a strained, uncomfortable silence for a time after that. All three kept their eyes straight ahead. The car had long since left the tunnel and was traveling along a broad concrete highway. Ahead and to the left, a beam of light marked the beacon of the municipal flying field, beyond which was the suburban development where Dr. Stevenson lived. Maeve was almost home.

"I'm sorry, too, Joey," the girl said softly at last. She squeezed his arm. "Let's stop being silly, all of us. Suppose you start guessing."

"Don't sniff at guessing, my sweet." Stern's tone was stiffly pedantic. "That's all crime deduction amounts to, practically. So-called scientific methods don't solve one case out of ten. Oh, they help—I don't mean to say that the highly publicized crime laboratory down at headquarters is a complete waste of the tax-payers' money. But criminals nowadays don't go around dropping collar buttons and leaving fingerprints and spilling prussic acid on the tablecloth. They know better and they don't wear collar buttons."

Maeve said meekly, "I wasn't sniffing."

Stern unbent a little. "Okay, I'll cut the lecture. Take the first of these murders. Assuming our premise on motive is correct—and it's all we've got—Riorden was killed by a labor spy because Riorden knew his identity or the spy thought so."

"Wait a minute." Jackson leaned forward. "That hook of mine must have been swiped a week ago. I don't know when the shoes were stolen but I haven't seen them in that broom closet for a month. Whoever stole that stuff had frame-up on his mind a long time before Riorden found that spy report."

"Right," said Stern. "The murder grew out of the frame-up, not the other way around. I doubt that, originally, murder had anything to do with the plan. All the opposition wanted was to start trouble on the water front and then get you and perhaps one or two others out of the way long enough for the old racketeer leadership of the union to come in and take control. But murder became necessary when Riorden threatened to spill the beans."

"Isn't that pretty drastic?" asked Maeve.

Jackson grunted. "Murder's cheap on the water front. Looking

at it the way you do," he said to Stern, "the killer might have been one of Weller's gang."

"Uh-uh." Stern shook his head emphatically. "Weller's mob would use their heads, and this fellow didn't. He got panicky and spoiled the show. Another guess of mine is that he was Murdock's private spy. He went to report direct to Murdock. Maybe he wanted money to get out of the country or maybe he expected Murdock to cover him, but instead, Murdock gave him hell. Anyway, they quarreled about something, and Murdock underestimated his employee. Employers are usually contemptuous of that kind of rat, even if they use them. Then the guy suddenly got the idea that he'd never be safe as long as Murdock was alive. Result: curtains for John Murdock. The details may be wrong, but I'll bet a dime to a doughnut the fundamentals are accurate."

"Simple—like that," said Maeve. "Now all you need is the murderer and some cellophane to wrap him in."

"Proof," growled Stern. "That's the wrapping we need. And we got damn little of it. The polecat's been too blamed lucky so far. Take what happened in Murdock's library this morning, for instance: that room was doggone near as busy as a subway station during rush hour. First, there were a couple of telephone calls, one on the hall phone—that was you, friend Jackson—and another twenty minutes later—that was Mayme Burke—"

"It couldn't have been Mayme," objected Jackson, "unless she did a Houdini. I took her clothes and locked her in."

"Yeah, and you ruined a perfectly good telephone. Maybe she dropped a note out the window like they do in the melodramas. For cripesake, don't bother me. I'm guessing it was Mayme, and if you must know one of Nicholson's men got a statement from Mayme that backs me up. Now let me get on, will you?

"Murdock probably got up when Mayme called. Anyway, he made an outgoing call five minutes later—that was to take care of you, because the order had to come from him and that was the only contact he had with the outside. Then there's another call about eight o'clock. That's Burke. Murdock gets dressed and

sits down at the table to do some work or something and in pops the murderer. Maybe Murdock knew he was coming and maybe he didn't, but in either case the result was the same."

"What time do you think the murderer got there?"

Stern grinned. "About the time Weller's boys ran you off the road. They certainly did you a favor when they carted you away from there. If they had left you there, my friend——"

"Then Gordon could have . . ." Maeve paused as she remembered. "But the trooper came by fifteen minutes after the accident. That gives Gordon an alibi, doesn't it?"

Jackson grunted suddenly: "It does like hell."

"What's that?" said Stern, "you wouldn't contradict a lady, would you?"

"There's something wrong about that clock business," said Jackson in a voice that was barely audible. "I noticed a clock just as we were leaving the ferry, and it said eight forty-five. It didn't take three quarters of an hour to get to the place where Weller's hoodlums forced us off the road."

"Did you check with the clock on the dashboard?" asked Stern quickly.

Jackson said miserably: "I meant to, but Whitey was looking at the paper and had it held so it covered the clock. Later I forgot."

"Then you don't know whether the clock was right or not?"

Jackson said: "It couldn't have been right. I hate like hell to even think it, but it was nearer nine than nine-thirty when that car ran us off the road."

"Meaning," said Stern softly, "that Whitey was in that ditch for forty-five minutes instead of fifteen."

Jackson said nothing. His face in the shadows was inscrutable. "Well," said Stern after a minute, "that's another good alibi gone to the bowwows. Let's get back to the library. The murderer killed Murdock, tried to open that inner compartment of the safe and couldn't, then pried open the drawer of Murdock's desk—that's a grisly thought, with Murdock hanging there at his elbow—and took something—guess what—from the drawer and left by

the windows. A little later—I wouldn't know how much—along comes Burke and Bennie and then Powers and still later, maybe somebody else—remember Burke said he thought he heard a car just after he bopped Powers—and nobody saw the murderer come or go or saw him anywhere in the neighborhood as far as we know. That's what I call nice timing."

He braked the car into the curb in front of a wide, rambling house set back and above the street in a terraced lawn. "I bet you catch hell for being out so late." He indicated a light in the windows of the first floor and grinned at Maeve. "Nunky's still up."

"You know very well he's up till all hours," said Maeve. "Probably playing chess with one of his disreputable cronies." She made no move to get out of the car.

"It's very late," murmured Stern. "Don't bother to invite us in."

"I wasn't going to. It's Joey who's rude, not I," she informed Jackson in an aside. "I want the answers to one or two questions, though, before I go."

"Such as?"

"Well, for one thing, what happened to the ten thousand dollars? How do you know the murderer couldn't get into the safe? Or Burke, for that matter?"

"The keys, my dear, the keys."

Maeve shook her head. "What keys? You've got to be a little more explicit, mastermind."

"In words of one syllable for your limping intellect, my sweet," said Stern, "the dead man's keys. The keys that were on the desk when the law came. The inner compartment of the safe was opened with a key, not forced, although somebody tried to."

"But how do you know?"

"I don't. I'm still guessing. I'm guessing that the safe was still closed when Powers came into the room and that Powers remembers it was. He's very observant, is Powers."

"Then Powers might have taken it."

"Of course. But if he had I think he would have said the safe was open. In fact, I'm sure he would have."

"But—then who?" Jackson had been listening intently.

"I've got it," exclaimed Maeve. "The car Burke heard."

"Exactly," said Stern, "the car."

But though Maeve coaxed and wheedled, Stern would not say who he thought was in the car.

"All right," she said, finally, in exasperation. "You're not so clever anyway. You almost pulled a boner when you questioned Burke."

"How come?" asked Stern.

"That stuff about the mask." Maeve's nose wrinkled contemptuously. "I'd like to have seen your face if Burke had found the newspaper. That story about the mask was in every one of them. I read them myself."

"Ah, but he couldn't find the paper," said Stern insufferably. "I was sitting on it."



PART FOUR

1. Strike

For the second morning in succession fists pounded on Jackson's door. He rolled over sleepily, called "Who?" in a half-strangled voice and found that the sheet had wrapped itself around his neck like a boa constrictor. He fought it with unnecessary savagery. He was always groggy when wakened suddenly.

"Telephone." The voice sounded like Nutsy, the night clerk, a high whining complaint, but it might be a stall. Fink Weller's boys might be around to finish the job they had started before their boss died.

Jackson swung his long legs out of bed, flexed his taped wrists, and looked at a large right fist. The wrists were practically as good as new. Maybe it was a couple of Weller's boys at that.

"Who is it?" he called and, not waiting for an answer, caught up the chair beside the bed and padded silently to the door. Standing to one side, he turned the snap lock and pressed the catch that held it back. He put one hand on the doorknob and held the chair in front of him like a battering ram. Then he flung the door back and leaped into the hall.

There was a frightened cry and a thud, and he was standing in the hall looking down at Nutsy sitting on the floor against the opposite wall. Nutsy was swearing in his usual helplessly vicious fashion and nursing his jaw where a rung of the chair had caught him. Except for Nutsy and himself, Jackson saw that the hall was deserted.

"You crazy bastard," said Nutsy, "I'll cut your throat in your sleep for that."

Jackson picked him up. "Okay, so I was wrong this time. There was a telephone call."

He left Nutsy to take inventory of his bruises and went back into the room for his pants. In a moment he was out at the desk, picking up the telephone receiver.

Bullethead Sangster's deep, liquid voice answered his hello.

"Jack? How you feelin'? I heard you got mussed up some."

"I'm okay," said Jackson. "What's on your mind?"

"You better get down here to the pier if you can navigate," Sangster told him. "We got a strike on our hands."

"Strike?"

"That's what I said."

"Who called it?"

"Mellus. He called a rump meeting of the Exec last night."

"Nuts," said Jackson. "The Executive Committee can't call a strike. What do the boys say?"

"The boys ain't talkin'. You'll find out why when you get here."

Sangster hung up, and Jackson, a bitter gleam in his eye, returned to his room to dress. So Mellus was going to take over the union, was he? Was Weller in it, or was Mellus acting on his own, and how did this fit in with the murder of Riorden and Murdock and the attack on Whitey and himself? In the act of pulling up the zipper on his leather windbreaker, Jackson paused. Mellus! Had Mellus killed Riorden and tried to get Whitey and himself out of the way, so he could control the union and turn it into a racket? That was cockeyed. Mellus could have had nothing to do with the car that bumped Whitey and himself into the ditch. That had been the work of Fink Weller and his men. Still, Mellus could be the stool pigeon; everything pointed to such a possibility. But that would mean that he, Jackson, was dead wrong in his suspicions. He wished to God he was but he didn't think so.

Jackson shook himself and continued his dressing. Too many questions. Too many questions and no answers that made sense. To hell with the whole business, better get down to East Street and see what was happening there.

The brown felt hat with the brim low over his eyes hid the patch of bandage on Jackson's head. The sleeves of the leather jacket covered the taped wrists. His tall, loose-jointed figure with its swinging stride gave little evidence of the previous day's adventure.

He found Sangster with Painter, Colletti, and a small group of men on the corner a block away from the dock. Painter's hawkbeaked face was solemn and uncommunicative, and the little Italian looked bewildered. His eyes shifted when Jackson looked at him. Sangster's massive head stood out like a beacon over those about him, but though rage and bitterness were evident in the faces of the other men his eyes were gentle and sad.

He greeted Jackson eagerly. "Boy, am I glad you're here."

The other men nodded. One of them said, "The men don't like it. They'd vote strike in a minute probably but they don't like being told what to do. This is liable to split the union wide open."

Jackson saw what the trouble was, without asking. The sidewalk was crowded with longshoremen in working clothes, most of them with hooks in their belts, but here and there were tight little groups of an entirely different stamp—narrow-eyed men with hard faces, some with flat noses and thick ears—ex-pugs and strong-arm men and petty gangsters—"goons" in the language of the water front. Jackson knew that each of them carried a lead pipe or rubber hose or blackjack under their form-fitting topcoats and that some of them would have guns. The little groups were like fortified islands in the midst of the eddying sea of longshoremen, solid, efficient, and treacherous. The longshoremen cast black scowls in their direction but flowed around them, milling aimlessly without a unified will or leadership. They were bewildered and confused. They reminded Jackson of newsreel pictures of men

in prison camps. So many men and so few guards, but the guards had authority and guns.

"It's one thing to strike," said Painter, "but bein' ordered off the job by a gang of thugs is somethin' else again."

"What's the sense in havin' a union if you ain't got no say in it?" asked another aggrievedly.

"Weller's men?" Jackson jerked his head in the direction of the little group.

Sangster lifted his big shoulders. One of the others said, "I don't know whose men they are and I never seen 'em before, but they got union cards signed by Mellus. I saw 'em."

Jackson's jaw tightened. So that was it. The old labor-faking stunt of padding union rolls with gangsters so as to intimidate the honest men and take control. They wouldn't get away with it. Not if he could help it. "Where's Mellus?"

A man pointed. "Over there by the dock," he said, "negotiatin'." He spat disgustedly. "Anyway, that's what he calls it."

Several police cars were pulled up in front of the dock face and a squad of uniformed police was stretched across the broad double doors leading onto the pier. Jackson made out Mellus among a small group of men in front of the police. He stepped off the curb and started across the wide traffic-crowded street.

A man detached himself from the nearest of the top-coated groups and started in Jackson's direction. "Hey, you," he bawled, "where the hell d'ya think you're goin'?" The man was squat and had thick lips.

Jackson wanted to wait for him, wanted to swing his fist against those thick lips, but he controlled himself with an effort. One bit of violence now would be the flame that would set off the dynamite stored up in these resentful, frustrated men. That would mean riot, possibly bloodshed with the police charging across the street to take part, slugging the men in work clothes while the topcoats quietly withdrew. And, following that, banner headlines in the papers:

LONGSHOREMEN RIOT. UNION SPLIT IN FIGHT OVER STRIKE.

Jackson had seen it happen too often, so he merely called back to the squat thug, "I'm a union official," and kept going. The thug hesitated, then, deciding that it was not worth while to chase Jackson through the speeding traffic, turned back to his group.

Mellus stood with a half-dozen other men among whom were a police officer and a minor official of the Eastcoast Company. The minor official was saying to Mellus: "You gentlemen must see our position. Mr. Murdock's unfortunate death and now a strike on top of it—it's really too much. There will be a Board of Directors' meeting this morning, but how they can take up the question of a new contract at this time I don't know."

"They'll take it up, all right," blustered Mellus. "This'd be a bad time for the company to have trouble."

"Trouble?" said the company man. Both he and Mellus looked at the police officer.

The officer echoed the word. "There won't be no trouble. We'll see to that."

"Of course we don't want trouble, but—you know what I mean," said Mellus. "The boys are ugly and pretty hard to hold."

Jackson stepped into the circle. "I want to see you, Mellus," he said.

Mellus flushed and hesitated but a flat-faced man standing beside him, whom Jackson knew as a longshoreman only by sight, bristled like a bad-mannered pup, "We don't want to see you, stool pigeon."

Jackson held himself in check with an effort. No matter what the provocation, he must keep his temper. Everything depended on that.

"I'll see you later," he said. "Right now I want to talk to Jim." Mellus took courage from the other's belligerence. "I've nothing to say to you, Jackson. You're a troublemaker and you're under suspicion as a union spy."

"All right, if that's the way you want it." Jackson turned to the company official. "You know me, Goodwyn, and you know I speak for the men. No strike has been voted by the membership of the union, and this action is therefore without authorization. It is the result of intimidation by hired thugs posing as union workers. I'll give you and the police the benefit of the doubt when I say you were not aware of the facts but I warn you that any agreement you make with Mr. Mellus or anyone else that hasn't been authorized to act for the union will not be recognized."

He turned back to Mellus. "I don't know what you are up to exactly but whatever it is I know it stinks. Now I'm going back across the street and call the men to a union meeting and I advise you to come along and call off your phonies so they won't get hurt."

He turned on his heels and walked away without looking back. Would they call his bluff? If they stood pat he would not dare address the men and risk a riot that might be the end of the union for some time to come. But if he could get the men away from the water front into an organized meeting in their own hall there was a possibility that they might wrest the initiative away from Mellus and his crew of thugs and decide for themselves what they wanted to do.

He reached the curb and stood still for a moment. Then he breathed a sigh of relief as Mellus appeared beside him. The bluff had worked.

"Jim," he said, trying to keep his voice level, "as president, you'd better make the announcement."

Mellus cleared his throat and shouted, "All union members to the hall. Special emergency meeting."

The flat-faced man began unostentatiously rounding up the topcoats. Jackson caught the arm of a passing longshoreman whom he knew.

"Slick," he said hurriedly, keeping his voice low. "The hall won't hold half of us, and the phonies will try to pack it. Pass the word to Bullethead and the boys to get up there as fast as they can."

When Jackson got to the hall it was already packed, and men stood on the stairs and in a swelling crowd outside. As he elbowed his way in the men made way for him, asking anxious questions, shouting opinions and advice, trusting him, looking to him for honest leadership in a struggle that meant their bread and butter. It made him feel warm and confident, but when he got inside the hall his heart sank. Almost all the thugs had managed to shoulder their way into the hall and now sat, a compact mass in the front rows, noisy and insolent with their boos and catcalls, while the longshoremen who sat in the rear seats or stood along the walls were sullen and silent. Under such conditions it would be impossible to hold an orderly meeting, and the gathering would probably break up in a fight that would wreck the hall and leave the union confused and split, an easy prey for Mellus and his sellout mob.

And for the first fifteen minutes it seemed as though his worst fears were about to be realized. Everything was turmoil and confusion, the thugs dominating the meeting, booing down all opposition, himself included. Had Mellus been clever he could have settled the thing then and there with a motion of confidence and a quick adjournment, but he was riding high, and they were greedy. He wanted to break Jackson while he had the chance.

Mellus recognized the flat-faced man, whose name was Mead. Mead made a long, rambling speech denouncing Jackson as a stool pigeon, to which Jackson could not answer since he could not make himself heard. Throughout this period tension had been growing in the hall, and Jackson knew that only his presence on the platform and that of Sangster and a few others in the hall kept it from breaking out into violence. He began to resign himself and picked out Mellus as his own special property when the fun started. The union might be in Mellus' hands when this was over, but he would be in no condition to profit by it.

And then a change began. Even before he saw it Jackson felt what was happening. The union longshoremen were ceasing to be a disorganized, futile mass and were becoming a disciplined army. Burly dock workers began to move up along the walls and appear at the edge of the platform. Others edged into seats beside the topcoated phonies. Hooks displayed suggestively in fronts of

belts, they began to hem in the thugs. A murmur ran through the room: someone had started a story—an eyewitness story of what a longshoreman's hook did to a man's throat.

It was the story, more than the sight of the hooks themselves, and the determined faces that did the trick. The thugs grew quiet and shifted nervously. A longshoreman made a motion that all members who had not previously been employed on the East-coast dock be excluded from the meeting, and when Mellus called the motion out of order such a storm of protest arose that he hastily reversed himself. The motion was passed, and a hush fell. For a minute no one moved, then one or two of the thugs got up and began making their way, heads down, toward the door. Others followed under the accusing eyes of the men along the wall until it became a general exodus. Mellus and his phonies were licked.

Not till then did Jackson realize what actually had happened. Then a small, stocky man who had been going quietly from man to man in the back of the hall turned and faced the platform. He pushed back his hat displaying a shock of blond hair and part of a soiled bandage. It was Whitey Gordon.

The rest of the meeting was clear sailing. The strike was legalized by a roar that shook the hall, picket lines were voted, and a strike committee elected. When Jackson heard himself nominated as chairman of the strike committee he rose to speak.

"On Wednesday night two things of great significance occurred: evidence of the fact that a stool pigeon was working in this union was presented to your Negotiating Committee and a member of that committee was murdered. As a result, several members of this union, including myself, have been accused of being stool pigeons and murderers."

An angry murmur ran through the hall, and there were shouts of, "Not you, Jack. We know you're not a rat."

Jackson raised his hand to quiet the tumult. "This is not the time to answer these charges," he continued, "and I am not going to defend myself. I'll simply say for the record that I am not a rat or a murderer. But somebody is, and, until we find out who,

we've got to be careful. I'd like to make a motion if the Chair will entertain it at this time." He paused and turned to Mellus who sat slumped, chin on chest, behind the rostrum.

There were cries from the hall, "Never mind the Chair. Make your motion, Jack. We're listening."

Mellus raised his head and nodded wearily. He was a thoroughly beaten man. Jackson turned back to the audience.

"This is the motion," he said. "I move that no member of the present executive committee serve on the strike committee."

The motion caused another commotion in the hall. A voice bellowed, "We can't do it. We'll be sold out. You saw what happened this morning."

Jackson ignored parliamentary procedure to answer. "That's baloney. You've got Roberts, Padacini, George, Pig Eye"—he indicated various men—"and a dozen others. Select any one of them, and you can't go wrong. You've got to do that or take a chance of having a stool pigeon on your committee and you all know what that means."

Painter's voice boomed out over the confusion. "I second the motion."

Jackson smiled. "Thanks, Painter," he said and sat down. The motion was carried unanimously.

Despite the rank-and-file victory in the union and his confidence that Mellus and Weller's crew of thugs were decisively and finally beaten, Jackson was low and dispirited. The union and its work was a passionate cause to him, and now, when he was most needed in that work, he had to exclude himself from it because of a murdering stool pigeon who had tried to frame him. The fact that he was himself suspected of being the murderer did not bother him, and though the accusation of stool pigeon hurt, he was almost egotistically secure from the charge in his knowledge of the purity of his own motives and the trust which the rank-and-file members of the union had displayed for him. But to be on the side lines when a strike was on—that hurt.

When the meeting was over he wanted only to get away, but

Whitey collared him and insisted that they have breakfast together before they both joined the picket line.

Over ham and eggs in the Silver Dollar Diner they brought each other up to date on the events of the past forty-eight hours. Whitey was effervescent, insisted that he felt like a million dollars, and gave Jackson an ecstatic description of a redheaded nurse who had entered into a conspiracy to help him escape from the hospital.

"Boy, was she a pip? Was she a honey?" he raved. "If it hadn't been for the lousy dick they had planted outside my door and all these murders and stuff——"

Jackson cut him short. "How did you get by the dick?"

"Like I'm telling you—the redhead. Men and dicks are putty in her hands. She just crooked a finger like that"—he held up a finger and bent it twice—"and the poor dope followed her with his tongue hanging out. I got her phone number and everything. What d'ya know about nurses, Jack?"

"Are you hot?"

"Who, me? Nope. I thought any minute they'd throw a pinch on me, but they didn't. When I woke up in the hospital they questioned me some and after that they just let me alone—except they wouldn't give me my clothes." He bit into a piece of toast. "What d'ya know about that phony grease ball, Mellus, trying to pull a fast one? D'ya think he killed Riorden, Jack?"

Jackson looked into the grinning face before him for a long minute. Then he shook his head slowly. "I don't know," he said. "Do you?"

"Naw." Whitey's brows drew together in a frown. "He's too yellow. Say what you want to, that job took guts of a kind. Tell you who I do think might fill the bill though. Doc Painter. Old Eagle Beak. I never did trust him as far as I could throw him. Mellus is a stuffed shirt, but Old Eagle Beak's got what it takes when it comes to dirty work."

"You could be right," Jackson sighed. "I wish to Christ we knew. This thing's getting me down."

Their conversation was interrupted by the waitress bringing their coffee. Whitey looked up at her.

"Hello, babe, can you be union-made?"

"I am," the girl said tartly. She thumbed the Hotel and Restaurant Union button on her white apron. "Anything else for you, gentlemen?"

"Okay, you win," said Whitey.

A teamster sitting at the counter turned his head. "What is that crack, a joke?"

Whitey leaned back and looked at him. "Pipe down, you big ape," he growled. "Who asked you?"

The man was four inches taller than Whitey and many pounds heavier. He swung around from the counter and slid off his stool. "Who's an ape?"

"Easy, pal," said Jackson, "this little guy just got out of the hospital. He's a little slap-happy."

"Just got outta the hospital, eh?" said the teamster. "He's not careful, he'll go back there."

Whitey reddened and half rose, but Jackson reached out a long arm and shoved him back in his chair.

"Quiet, runt," he ordered. "Behave. We got work to do."

Whitey subsided, and the teamster, after a contemptuous glance, turned back to his meal.

Halfway through a piece of French apple pie, Whitey asked, "What are we going to do about Weller and the rat who killed Riorden?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? You mean we're going to let 'em get away with it?"

"Look," said Jackson, "we're longshoremen, not cops. I've already got us in a mess, running around playing tag. From now on I'll have my fun on the picket line, and you'll be right along with me."

"But they got you pegged for it," said Whitey. "You'll have to square yourself if only because the old doc fronted for you. And besides," he added, "nobody's goin' to try to knock me off and get away with it."

"It's no use." Jackson shook his head ruefully. "The best thing we can do is stick to things we know something about."

"I can't make you out. Ain't you even goin' to try to find out who the stool pigeon is?"

"I think I know."

"What!"

Jackson nodded. "But it's only a hunch. And if my hunch is right the stool pigeon is also the murderer. So it's a job for the cops after all." He stood up and picked up his check. "Come on, let's get down on that picket line."

Late that afternoon Jackson left the picket line and returned to the Union Hall. He had bought a paper on the way and, finding the hall temporarily deserted, spread the sheet out on the office table. War in Europe monopolized most of the front page, but there was a story on the strike and a follow-up on the murders, telling of Burke's arrest. Captain Nicholson was quoted as announcing that he had several suspects under surveillance and that he expected to make an important announcement. The article also carried the information that Jasper County had requested Burke for questioning. Jackson was pleased to see that the administration paper had mentioned the union only incidentally in connection with the killing of Riorden and had not tied up the murders with the strike.

He had just finished the article when Doc Painter came in and sat down heavily.

"Hello, Jack," said Painter. "I been lookin' for you."

"Yes?" Jackson did not look up. "What's on your mind, Doc?"

"Well." Painter hesitated, and Jackson looked up curiously. He saw that Painter's long horse face was drawn and worried. With his solemn face and lanky stooped figure he looked like the walking delegate for a gravediggers' union.

He coughed. "It's about this morning, Jack. I had nothing to do with bringing in those hoodlums."

"I wondered about that," said Jackson frankly. "You and Jim were cooking up something."

Painter met his gaze. "I was for the strike. I still am but I'm for the union, first, last, and all the time. I just wanted you to know."

Suddenly all the bitterness and frustration of the last two days welled up in Jackson, and he saw red. His long arms shot out, and his fingers fastened themselves about Painter's throat. "You lie, damn you," he shouted. "You've never been for the union. You've never been for anybody but Doc Painter. You were a ship's doctor once—you'd know how to tear out a man's throat—you'd know how to strangle one with a rope. Damn you, I believe——"

Though Jackson was stronger and younger Painter was no weakling. He broke Jackson's hold on his throat with his elbows and grappled. The two swayed back and forth half out of their chairs and half across the table.

The door opened, and a large, square bulk filled the aperture. "What the hell's goin' on in here?"

Jackson dropped Painter and swung on the intruder. "Who wants to know?"

The large man swung back his coat.

"Oh, I know you're a cop," said Jackson. "I saw you downtown yesterday and even if I hadn't I can spot a flatfoot a block away. Now close that door and get out. This is a private office."

"Smart guy," said the cop. "I gotta notion to do a little work on you myself. I'm lookin' for Jackson. You're him, ain't you?"

"You got a warrant?"

"No," the cop admitted.

"All right then, get out of here until we finish our business."

"You're Jackson all right," said the cop. He grinned. "Okay, make it snappy." He paused at the door. "If there's a murder in here I'll be a witness," he said.

When the door closed Painter was on his feet eying Jackson warily. "What the hell's the matter with you, you crazy bastard," he hissed. "You try a stunt like that again—"

Jackson held up a pacific hand. "Okay, Doc, I'm sorry. I'm jumpy today but I had no excuse to fly off the handle that way. It doesn't get us anywhere. What do you say we shake and call it quits?"

Painter's glance dropped momentarily to the outstretched hand. "Fine thing," he growled sullenly. "First you jump me like a wild man and try to strangle me and accuse me of being a murderer or worse and then you just say shake and let's forget it."

"What else do you want? I said I was sorry, didn't I?"

"All right." Painter extended a grudging hand. His eyes were still wary.

"No hard feelings," said Jackson.

"No hard feelings, only next time you get a yen to rassle, I'll be ready for you. Don't think I won't."

Jackson grinned. "I'll remember."

There was a slightly embarrassed silence for a moment, and then Painter dropped Jackson's hand and jerked his head toward the outer room. "Maybe you better find out what's eating the flatfoot?"

"Those bulls think they run the works." Jackson turned and jerked open the office door. "Okay, Ferdinand," he called. "You can come in now."

The big man came forward scowling, "You're a cop fighter, too, ain't you?" he asked. "One of these days somebody's goin' to wrap a club around your neck, smart guy. I'd do it myself only we got strict orders to stay neutral in this strike ruckus."

Jackson looked him in the eye. "It would be a swell fight while it lasted."

The cop grunted. "Get your hats, both of you. Captain Nicholson wants to see you."

"Pinch?" asked Jackson, closing the office door and following the officer down the stairs.

"Naw," the cop flung over his shoulder. "I got orders to handle you guys with kid gloves so's you can't squawk we're bustin' up your strike."

"My, my," murmured Jackson, "how times have changed."

A squad car was drawn up at the curb with a uniformed chauffeur in the front seat. Colletti and Bullethead Sangster sat in the rear.

"Is the captain giving a party?" asked Jackson.

"He told me to bring in you guys, and I'm doin' it," explained the cop. "Come on, get in there. You're lucky it ain't the wagon."

Jackson and Painter got in, and the car swung around the block and headed south under the el structure.

Sangster said, "Hi, Jack."

"This big baboon pick you up on the picket line?" asked Jackson.

"Yeah. He won't tell us what the score is, except it ain't a pinch." Jackson leaned forward and tapped the cop on the shoulder. "What's it all about, Commissioner?" he asked politely.

"I wouldn't know," said the cop. "I just work here."

2. Blind Alleys

During that morning and early afternoon Stern had been busy in the office. The business had included a session with the district attorney from which Stern emerged sore and disheartened. His boss talked as though he thought Stern carried the water-front labor situation around in his back pocket.

It was three o'clock by the time the somewhat deflated young D.A. got around to visiting Nicholson's office, and in the meantime much had happened. Fingerprints had been found in the old house from which Jackson had escaped. They belonged to the thug, Moe Silver, whom Jackson had recognized in the kidnap car, and Moe had made a statement implicating Weller.

Incidentally, the statement practically eliminated both Weller and Jackson as suspects in the murder of John Murdock. Nicholson had talked to Mayme Burke, and her testimony checked with the statement. McArthur had worked on Tommy Burke for three hours that morning, and although Burke had stuck to his blackmail story McArthur was convinced that Burke had murdered Murdock and stolen the ten thousand dollars.

Stern winced when he heard this last; McArthur was stupid and

pompous, but he had a case against Burke and he would make it stick in court, too, if somebody didn't turn up the real murderer. If anyone did that it would probably have to be Stern himself, since as a result of Silver's testimony Nicholson had become more convinced that the two murders were not connected.

"Coincidence," said Nicholson, "sheer coincidence. There's not one bit of real evidence to show that these two killings were done by the same person. And there's plenty to show they weren't. Now that Jackson's alibied on the Murdock business practically every blamed suspect we've got has an alibi for one murder or the other. Listen to the record."

He flipped the pages of his notebook.

"Mellus: In saloon when Riorden was killed. Home in bed next morning until nine o'clock. Had breakfast at a lunch counter at nine-thirty. One of these alibis could be a phony, but not both of them, and of the two, the Riorden one is the weakest.

"Burke: Hanrahan, the cop on the beat, saw him at twelve-thirty. He got to Edna's at fifteen minutes to one. Fifteen minutes is too short a time for him to have dressed up in a monkey suit, killed Riorden, disposed of the clothes, shoes, and weapon, and turned up ten blocks away."

Stern said nothing. There was a flaw in this reasoning. A man could do a lot in fifteen minutes under pressure. Also, there was a way Burke could have killed Riorden before Hanrahan came on the scene. The back door to the saloon was only two blocks away from the scene of the murder, and bartenders didn't pay much attention to drunks when they went to the toilet. But there was no point in arguing the matter. Nicholson continued with his list.

"Gordon, Sangster, and Colletti alibi each other for the Riorden business, and both Sangster and Colletti were at work on the docks from seven-thirty on, next morning."

"They couldn't have gotten much sleep," murmured Stern irrelevantly.

"They didn't get any." Nicholson turned a page. "I'll say one thing for these babies—they're tough. I guess they have to be." "Gordon couldn't have killed Murdock either," said Stern softly. "Unless there was something screwy about that clock on the dash-board of the car."

"You mean it could have been stopped after the accident? I checked on that, and from the way the clock was smashed Sheriff Christy says it isn't likely."

Stern nodded.

"That leaves two of the union boys," Nicholson went on, "Painter and Jackson. Painter's landlady still swears he was home at twelve o'clock the night Riorden was killed, and he's got the same alibi as Sangster and Colletti for the next morning. He went to work as usual."

"And that leaves Jackson."

"Yes, by God, it leaves Jackson." Nicholson closed his notebook with a bang. "No matter how you chew it, we always come back to that guy. He's still a winner for my money."

"What do you plan to do about it?"

Nicholson looked at his watch. "In about a half an hour I'll tell you. I'm rounding up the whole bunch of them for a little talk."

Stern sighed. "I don't suppose it's any use trying to convince you that there's a tie-up between these two murders?"

"Show me one bit of real evidence." Nicholson spread out his hands.

"There's evidence and evidence, if you know what I mean," said Stern. "I can't produce any snapshots of the crime but I can tell you what happened at Murdock's yesterday morning."

"How do you do it?" asked Nicholson rudely. "Second sight?" "With mirrors." Stern grinned. "Scoff all you please, but here's where I give you a key to the whole case. First, who called Murdock's yesterday A.M. and why. By this time we know most of the answer to that one. Jackson called at seven-thirty, and Powers answered on the house phone. Then at seven-fifty Mayme called Murdock on the private phone, and right after that Murdock made his outgoing call. Burke says he phoned Murdock at eight-ten, and that checks not only with the time the phone company says the last

call came in, but also with what the counterman in the all-night lunch says. I think we have to believe at least that part of Burke's story, and that means that if he did kill Murdock it was not a premeditated murder. But we'll let that pass for the time being and go on to what actually happened in that library yesterday morning.

"The murderer was Murdock's first guest. What time he arrived we don't know, but, assuming it wasn't Burke, he was through with his business and left before Burke showed up a few minutes to ten. Burke came in, took one look at Murdock's body, and heard Powers at the hall door. He didn't stay around long after he slugged Powers but before he left he did hear an automobile out in the drive. That automobile accounts for a lot of things. It accounts for the fact that Powers didn't see the safe open when he came in and didn't see Murdock's keys on the desk top. It also accounts for Burke's story that Murdock's desk drawer was open but the safe was closed. The murderer forced the desk drawer, but he couldn't force the safe. He didn't have the keys and either found what he wanted or didn't have time to search Murdock's body for them.

"After Powers was slugged and Burke left someone came into that room, found Powers out cold on the floor and Murdock dead, calmly took the keys from the murdered man's pocket, opened the safe, and went away with the ten grand."

"Why couldn't Powers have taken the ten grand himself?" asked Nicholson. "That's just an idea. It doesn't mean I'm following you on all the rest of it."

"Powers could have," said Stern, ignoring the remainder of Nicholson's speech, "but I don't think he did."

"Then-"

"Take it easy," interrupted Stern. "All I'm trying to do is outline what must have happened."

"You still haven't shown me any evidence that the two cases tie up." Nicholson didn't like being interrupted, and it made him that much more stubborn.

Stern sighed. "Well, there's motive--"

"Motive! Ten thousand dollars isn't a motive, eh?"

"Supposing I told you the murderer didn't get the ten grand?"

"You'd have to prove that and to prove it—"

"Never mind." Stern held up his hand wearily. "That's the trouble; I can't prove it. So far it's just a hunch. How about a couple more suspects on your list?"

"For instance?"

"I wouldn't know." Stern seemed to have lost interest in the subject. "There's the butler Powers and Nellie Cosimo, but then they're both alibied for the Riorden kill—they were both on the other side of the river. And then there's Mayme Burke—"

"Mayme Burkel" exploded Nicholson. "For Christsake, you're not serious, are you?"

Stern grinned. "Maybe not. But I still say the two murders form a pattern, and you won't solve one without the other."

Nicholson didn't bother to answer. He sat back in his swivel chair and lit a cigar. There was a self-satisfied smile on his face that said as plainly as words that for once he had this young smart aleck over a barrel and was enjoying it. The smile hurt Stern, but his face remained bland and emotionless. They sat silently for a short while, and presently Sergeant Tripp stuck his head in the door.

"We got those union guys downstairs now, Cap," he said.

"All of 'em?"

"The whole kit and kaboodle," nodded the sergeant.

Nicholson had questioned the six longshoremen for hours, and so far it had been time wasted. He had checked their stories against the record from every possible angle, including the statements of other witnesses-Painter's landlady, the bartender in the White Horse Saloon, the other men in the crap game, and so on-without finding one discrepancy that amounted to anything. He had cajoled and threatened; he had lost his temper in a run-in with Jackson and had bluntly accused Jackson of murdering Riorden, and only his own unspoken doubt that the circumstantial evidence against Jackson was sufficient to win a conviction had kept him from making an arrest then and there. But through it all he had not uncovered one fact that he did not already know nor had he come one step closer to the solution of who killed Riorden. And then, when he was about to give it up as a bad job, he finally got a break. It didn't seem like much of a break to Nicholson at the time but it was better than he knew, for later, when all the pieces had been fitted together, it eliminated the one suspect who had bothered Stern most and cleared the way for a solution of the whole vicious business.

For the third or fourth time Nicholson had returned to the details of the crap game and was going over them patiently and stubbornly, trying to find some chink, no matter how small, in which to insert a wedge.

"Look, you birds," he growled. "Every other guy we questioned in that game said he drifted out of the circle at some time or other. Now you can't tell me you didn't do the same thing. Gordon"—he swung on Whitey as the most articulate of the crap players—"can you swear that neither Sangster nor Colletti left that game from the time you joined it till the kid came back from the truck?"

"I wasn't watching 'em every minute of the time," said Whitey. "I had my own fish to fry."

"If they had been in the game shooting you would have known they were there, wouldn't you?"

This was familiar ground, and they had been over it several times before.

Whitey said irritably, "Like I told you, sometimes they were shootin' and sometimes they were just makin' side bets. That's the kind of game it was."

"Did you leave the game?"

"I told you that too. I left the game once for maybe two minutes and went over behind a truck on the other side of the lot because my teeth were floatin'. I came right back." Nicholson turned to Sangster and Colletti. "How about you two? Did you see Gordon leave and come back?"

"I see him," said Colletti. "He go and come back jus' like he says."

Sangster nodded. "I didn't see him go but I saw him come back. He couldn't have been gone long, or I would have noticed."

Nicholson took a lacerated stub of cigar from between his teeth and tossed it angrily at a cuspidor. It missed.

"Oh yeah," said the captain disgustedly.

Stern asked, "How far is it from the other side of the parking lot to the truck where Riorden was found?"

"About a hundred yards, I guess," said Gordon.

"Could you see the truck from where you were?"

"I don't remember. I wasn't interested."

"You didn't notice anyone around the truck?"

"No, I told you."

"Or anyone coming or going across the street?"

"There wasn't a soul across the street."

Nicholson pounced. "How do you know there wasn't?"

"What d'ya mean, how do I know?"

"Just this," said Nicholson. "There's no light in that end of the parking lot. There's none across the street. There could have been someone over there."

"Oh, for Godsake," said Whitey. "That's what I said, ain't it?" "You were too positive," said Nicholson. "You're lying, Gordon."

"Suit yourself," said Whitey.

"You're damned right, I will," snapped Nicholson. "Either you tell me who you saw, or I'm holding you as a material witness."

Nicholson was clutching at straws and his threat was two thirds bluff. It was not the first threat he had made that afternoon, and he had no confidence in it. He was a trifle surprised when it bore fruit.

Sangster, the big Negro, said calmly, "I'm gettin' sick of this. You want to know who Whitey saw across the street, I'll tell you. . . . It was me."

Sangster's story was simplicity itself. He left the crap game a few minutes before Gordon and for the same reason, the only difference being that he had headed across the street toward the parked truck. Reaching the truck, he had noticed a figure in the shadows and recognized Riorden. Riorden had said he was waiting for someone. They had talked a little, and Sangster had gotten the impression that Riorden was nervous and wanted to be left alone. The Negro had gone back to the crap game, arriving there a minute or two before Gordon. Later, when questioned by the police, Sangster kept quiet for obvious reasons and also because he did not see how his story would help in discovering the identity of the murderer.

Neither Sangster nor Gordon remembered the time of this episode, although both agreed that it was some time before the discovery of Riorden's body and that Gordon's absence from the crap game had not been over two or three minutes and Sangster's ten at most. They had seen no one else and had nothing further to add.

The tantalizing quality of this narrative drove Nicholson wellnigh frantic. It was like a ray of light seen momentarily through the chink of a door that had been suddenly slammed shut. He went over the story from a dozen different angles, only to find it always the same, simple, logical, and almost too flawless to be true. Finally he gave up and went into whispered consultation with Stern.

"I'm licked," he admitted, sucking on a tooth reflectively. "I gotta notion to throw the whole bunch of them in the can."

Stern nodded. "I'd even agree if I could see where that would get us but I can't. You haven't got enough to charge any of them with the murder—and they'd get out on bail on any other charge. Have you got the Cosimo woman covered?"

Nicholson looked at him questioningly. "Yeah, she's sewed up tight—although I don't see where she fits into the Riorden picture."

"I could be crazy." Stern grinned. "Maybe I am. But as far as these birds are concerned I'd give 'em more rope. One of them might get tangled up and trip over it." Nicholson sighed heavily. "Okay," he said aloud, "you guys can go, but don't get the idea I'm through with you. And"—he stabbed at them with a belligerent forefinger—"if any of you so much as looks at a boat or train I'll have him in the can so quick, it'll make his head swim. Just remember that."

The men started filing toward the door, but just before they reached it Stern stopped them.

"Wait a minute." He paused as they swung around and then pointed an accusing forefinger. "Jackson!" he shouted at the big longshoreman, "I'll give you just one more chance to tell Captain Nicholson the truth. I'm sick of playing nursemaid and I don't want another murder."

Jackson looked blank. "What are you talking about?"

"You know damned well what I'm talking about," shouted Stern dramatically. "When you told me that stuff about the clock yesterday you practically admitted you knew the murderer. What's his name?"

Jackson hesitated, then spat toward a cuspidor in the corner. "You're screwy," he said shortly. He turned and went out the door.

Stern shouted at his retreating back. "Okay, wise guy. If we have another killing we'll know where to look."

The remaining men stared at each other and at Stern. Their faces were puzzled and questioning, but when Stern abruptly turned away they followed Jackson out the door.

"That was a swell show," said Nicholson tartly. "What was it for?"

"Bait," said Stern cryptically.

"Bait!" Nicholson snorted.

"Sure." Stern started out the door. "Bait to catch a sucker—only I hope the sucker's not me."

Stern gave Jackson and Whitey a lift back to the water front. Jackson tried to refuse, but Stern snapped crossly: "Don't try to figure it out. If you don't trust me now you never will."

Jackson was inclined to retort in kind, but something in the owl

eyes stopped him. He followed Whitey into the car without another word.

"Miss O'Callighan called me this morning and asked me to give you a message," Stern said as he shifted gears. "Dr. Stevenson would like to have you two come out to visit them over the week end."

"Why me?" asked Whitey.

"He got the idea you and Jack were pals." Stern laughed. "Or maybe Miss O'Callighan wants you for a chaperon."

Jackson reddened, and Whitey guffawed loudly. "She ain't seen me yet. Anyway, Jack'd make a better chaperon."

"Shut up," snapped Jackson with so much vehemence that Whitey's laughter died in his throat. "We can't do that. A couple of suspected murderers. Swell week-end guests we'd make. Besides, the union's got a strike on its hands."

"The strike'll be okay without us," argued Whitey, "and if you want to talk about murderers speak for yourself. If worst comes to worst we'll still get a couple of swell feeds anyway. I'm all for it."

"The doc's taken a fancy to you," said Stern slyly, "and he kept you out of jail. I think you ought to accept the invitation."

Jackson's objections were eventually broken down, and he agreed to call up Maeve and accept her invitation.

Stern stopped at the hall to let Whitey and Jackson out.

"Will you be here a little later in the evening?" he asked when they stood on the curb.

"Either here or over at Danny's Bar," answered Whitey. "Drop around, and we'll have a couple of beers and talk about murders."

"Not a bad idea," agreed Stern. "I was considering it."

3. Breaking and Entering

Stern had dinner and looked up an address he had forgotten. It was sometime after nine o'clock when he parked his coupé in

front of the neat little two-story-and-basement house where Nellie Cosimo lived. He sat for a moment looking up at the red brick façade. The place, though well-kept, was obviously very old, one of the few survivors of the time when this neighborhood had been a residential area. A white-lettered sign just below the parlor-floor windows said, "French Hand Laundry," but the windows themselves were dark and bare. Light trickling through the blinds of the second floor, however, announced that the upper part of the house was tenanted.

Stern scanned the dark doorways of the buildings to right and left. He spotted a man in one of them and got out of the car and went over.

"Hello, Scanlon. Is Miss Cosimo at home?"

"Huh?" Scanlon was startled. He peered into Stern's face. "Oh, it's you, Counselor; I didn't recognize you. You mean the old dame over there? Sure, she's home. Come in this afternoon and hasn't budged since."

"You alone on this detail?"

"Naw. Brumbaugh is parked in the back yard." He indicated a narrow, iron-gated passageway alongside the brick house. "She couldn't get out that way unless she climbed a couple of fences."

"Murderers have been known to climb fences," said Stern cryptically.

"Murderers? You mean this old battle-ax croaked them guys?"
Stern smiled. "I don't know. I'm going to pay her a visit and maybe I'll find out."

"Jeez." Scanlon looked down at the little D. A. "You better watch your step with that dame, Counselor. Maybe I better go widja."

"Thanks. I don't think that'll be necessary. If Nellie makes any passes at me, murderous or otherwise, I'll holler like hell. Then you can come a-running."

Scanlon bobbed his head seriously. "I'll do that, Mr. Stern."

Stern had hope for quite a bit from this interview with the woman who had been Murdock's confidential secretary for fifteen

years. Despite the fact that a man sent by Nicholson to interview her had gotten less than nothing, the assistant D. A. believed that Nellie knew a great deal more than she was telling and that if she could be flushed from cover she would lead them to significant evidence or even, possibly, to the murderer himself.

The moment he faced Miss Cosimo, however, he recognized that he had underestimated her. Nellie was scared, but she was not scared enough—at least not yet. Viewed through the crack of the door on the second-floor landing, her face appeared feverish and congested, but when she grudgingly unhooked the chain and admitted him to the small, low-ceilinged room he sensed wary, alert strength and defiance in every inch of her big-boned frame.

The room was evidently a combination of living and sleeping quarters. The studio couch, to which Miss Cosimo retired after closing the door, was covered with some black, shiny material that, to Stern's unpracticed eye, looked like satin and flanked at side and end by modernistic equivalents of the old-fashioned whatnot. There was a large, reasonably comfortable-looking chair for which Stern headed and two straight-backed chairs upholstered in faded brocade. A low coffee table between the big chair and the couch and bookcases on either side of the door in the rear wall completed the furnishings. Doors and windows were tightly shut, and a gas radiator in front of the bricked-up fireplace gave off waves of smelly, stagnant heat. Stern found it almost impossible to breathe in the congested atmosphere, and his forehead was soon beaded with perspiration.

Nellie Cosimo noticed his discomfiture and seemed to enjoy it. "I suppose this room would be too warm for most people," she said in a flat take-it-or-leave-it tone, "but it suits me. I've got a cold and I can't stand drafts. I'm sorry if you're uncomfortable." She propped pillows on the studio couch and sat down, drawing the quilted house coat closer together about her. "What can I do for you, Mr. District Attorney?"

"Just a couple of points I thought you might help us clear up,"

said Stern. "You probably knew more about Murdock's business dealings than anyone else. Did he have any enemies or did he quarrel with anyone lately?"

Miss Cosimo sniffed. "Don't you people ever get tired asking the same questions?"

"It's the first time I've asked it."

"Well, I'll give you the same answer I gave the others. Mr. Murdock had no enemies except those every businessman has—the Communists."

Stern ignored the comment. The woman had worked for East-coast for fifteen years, and Murdock's conviction that any man who joined a union was a dangerous Red had become firmly implanted in his secretary's mind. By now she was a little cracked on the subject.

"Yes," Stern said. "We've about narrowed it down to one of the union leaders. But we're stuck—we've got nothing to go on. Perhaps you could help us—tell us of some threat or something that would give us a lead."

He watched the woman's eyes harden and grow suspicious. She took a handkerchief from the pocket of the house coat and blew her nose loudly. She was thinking what to say. If she decided he was stupid she might invent a story or even make an accusation.

Finally she made up her mind. "If I had any idea who killed Mr. Murdock don't you think I'd have told the police? I want to see the man caught as much as they do—more, probably."

Stern changed his tactics. "Frankly, Miss Cosimo, I doubt that you do," he said softly. "You see, we have a theory about this case. We believe Murdock had a spy in the union and that the spy is the man who killed him. I think that you, Miss Cosimo, know who that spy is."

The woman had surprising self-control, but just for an instant it slipped, and the furious look she gave him reminded Stern of his favorite black panther at the zoo. Then it was gone, and she did a very creditable job of outraged surprise. "Ridiculous. You're accusing me of knowing who the murderer is and protecting him. May I ask why, in heaven's name, I should do that?"

"Because you're afraid," said Stern more casually than he felt. "You're scared stiff."

Nellie Cosimo was seized with a sudden fit of coughing. She held her handkerchief to her face and glared at Stern over it. A long minute passed before she caught her breath. "Afraid? If I were afraid of the man my best protection would be to turn him over to the police."

"Right. But then you couldn't keep the ten thousand dollars."

This time Stern was near to being attacked, and he knew it. There was a mad streak in the woman—more pronounced because of long years of repression—and if she ever broke . . . How long would it take Scanlon to get through the door and up the stairs? Too long to do any good, probably. But, although white spots appeared on either side of Nellie Cosimo's jaw and cords stood out in her neck, making it suddenly very gaunt and old, she only sat up straight and did not move from the couch. Her voice, when she spoke, was harsh and choked.

"I don't know what you expect to gain by these accusations," she said. "But I do know I don't have to listen to them. Get out of here and don't come back."

Stern went. There was nothing else to do. The woman was still sitting on the edge of the couch, glowering, when he closed the door, but before he reached the stairs he heard the clink of the chain being slid into place. She was scared, all right. He paused to take out his handkerchief and wipe his face. Had he achieved his purpose? Well, the next hour or two would probably tell. As he went out the street door a sudden idea occurred to him, and he snapped back the spring lock so that the door could be opened from the outside.

Scanlon still stood in the building entrance down the block.

"Well, I see you're all in one piece, Counselor," he said. "Have any luck?"

Stern ignored the question. "When does your relief show up?" he asked.

"I came on at eight. I guess I'm good for the night."

"That's fine," said Stern callously. "Do you think the woman knows she's being tailed?"

"She may guess. If you mean has she spotted us-she ain't."

"Okay. Now listen. She may come out in the next few minutes. If she does, tail her and don't let her out of your sight. Better tell your partner to be on his toes too."

"Right."

"If she doesn't go out she may telephone. If anybody goes in you go right in behind him and sit on the lid till I get back. If nothing happens keep covered. Got it?"

"Yes sir," said Scanlon. He repeated the instructions. "And if we have to tail anybody we report in to headquarters every half-hour or as close as we can make it. That's routine anyway."

Stern found Jackson and Whitey in a booth at Danny's Bar and slid in beside them. "Where's the rest of your gang?"

"Around," said Whitey.

Jackson stared moodily into his drink.

"How would you two like to join me in a little breaking and entering?" asked Stern.

"You mean second-story work?"

"No, basement. It doesn't make any difference; they're both against the law."

"You're taking an awful chance," grinned Whitey. "We're murder suspects."

"That's all right. I'll have you where I can keep an eye on you."

"Why don't you get the cops?" asked Jackson. "They're expert burglars."

"Tut, tut." Stern nibbled a pretzel. "What I want you to do is really against the law. Besides, there's nothing in it for you but glory and a chance to catch your stool pigeon."

"I don't get you at all," said Jackson. "How do you know one of us—"

"I don't, really." Stern's eyes were wide and guileless. "But then, how do you know it isn't a trap?"

"That's a dare," said Whitey. "We never take dares, do we, Jack? Where is this crib you want cracked?"

"Let him crack his own cribs," growled Jackson stubbornly. "We're going to show some sense for once and stay out of this thing."

Stern stood up. "I'm sorry," he said coldly to Jackson. "I just thought you might want to help."

Whitey caught his sleeve. "Wait a minute. I'm game."

Stern did not look at him. "Well?" he asked quietly.

"Come on, Jack," urged Whitey. "What have we got to lose?" Jackson looked at Stern. Finally he nodded. "All right. What do you want us to do?"

Stern told him. "We have to wait a while till she's asleep," he said. "I don't want her to catch us at it."

"What are we looking for?" asked Jackson.

Stern shook his head. "I honestly don't know. Maybe nothing. Maybe something that will come close to solving this case."

"Why the basement? Why not the whole house? Why don't you get a search warrant, instead of going at it this way?"

"Because if I got a search warrant and found nothing that would be the end of it," said Stern. "If this doesn't work nobody'll be the wiser, and there's still a chance that somebody'll make a break. That's the only way we'll ever solve this case. Anyway, whatever evidence is in that house will be in the basement. Cosimo's too scared to keep anything connecting her with the murder in her apartment."

Stern ordered a beer, and they talked for another half-hour, then he looked at his watch. It was ten-thirty.

"Come on. Let's go take a look."

When they rounded the corner into the dark, deserted little street Stern motioned the other two back into the shadows and went forward alone. No light filtered through the second-story Venetian blinds, and Scanlon informed him that Miss Cosimo had apparently gone to bed a few minutes after he left. There had been no signs of a visitor. "Not this night or any other night," complained Scanlon. "This is the deadest detail I ever had."

"What about the laundry people?" asked Stern, gazing up at the building. "Do they ever come around at night?"

"There ain't any laundry people," said Scanlon. "That's just a sign. Fellow told me the laundry folded about a month ago."

"Well, well"—Stern rubbed his chin—"I wondered about that." Scanlon looked mildly mystified, but Stern changed the subject.

"Lend me your torch," he requested brusquely, and when Scanlon complied: "Now, here's what I want you to do. Go get your pal and take a walk. Have yourselves a beer or a cup of coffee and come back in about twenty minutes. I'll stand guard while you're gone."

"That's mighty nice of you, Counselor," demurred Scanlon, "but we got orders. You know that."

"Of course I know. It's all right. I'll take the responsibility."

"I don't know." The big man scratched his head. "I don't think we ought."

"You don't want to be a party to a crime, would you?"

"No," said Scanlon.

"All right, then. Scram."

Scanlon moved toward the iron gate reluctantly. "The captain ever finds this out," he muttered, "he'll have our badges—the both of us."

"See that you don't talk then," said Stern. "And convince that partner of yours. I don't want to have to waste time on him."

He waited until the two detectives emerged and, walking with reluctance and protest in every stride, disappeared down the block. Then he signaled to Whitey and Jackson and, after cautioning them against unnecessary noise, preceded them up the steps and into the house. A bolted door under the stairs, halfway down the hall, led to the basement. Stern flashed Scanlon's torch into the dark stair well, found a switch, and snapped it. Light sprang up in the

room below, revealing a cement floor and white walls and a porcelain laundry trough covered with dust. Stern motioned the others onto the unpainted riserless steps and closed the door gently behind him.

The basement partitions had been ripped out, leaving a long, rectangular room with door and windows front and rear. The front windows looked out on a small court that was three feet below street level. The place contained a few pieces of discarded laundry apparatus and odds and ends of broken furniture and packing cases.

"What the hell do you expect to find in this hole?" whispered Whitey.

Stern shook his head. He led the way through the piles of debris to a cleared space in the rear where two planks on rough trestles against the windows formed a sort of workbench. A hand vise was clamped to one end of the planks, and several pieces of iron piping littered the bench top.

Stern looked perplexed. "What do you make of this?" he asked. "Huh," said Whitey. "Looks like the old dame was practicing plumbing in her spare time. What's that got to do with the price of eggs?"

Jackson said seriously, "I still don't know what we're looking for."

Stern examined the iron piping carefully and shrugged his shoulders. Then he played his light down into the shadows under the bench and said, "Ah!" a quick exclamation full of suppressed excitement. "Here's your answer, Jack. I didn't think it would be so easy."

He reached down and dragged out a battered, ancient typewriter frame from which the carriage, type, and keys were missing. He set his find on the bench top and regarded it with blank, myopic eyes.

"It proves we're on the right track but it's sort of academic," he said. "Not much good as evidence. Our friend, the enemy, was just a little bit too smart for us."

Jackson said, "If that's the typewriter and we can prove it-"

"Uh-huh." Stern was examining the enameled surface of the frame under the light of the torch. "Everything else down here is dusty, but this thing's wiped clean. And the roller and type are gone. We can't prove a damned thing with this."

"Maybe the parts are around here somewhere." Whitey began looking in a pile of rubbish in the corner.

"Fat chance. We can look around but we won't find anything. Those parts are in the bottom of the river by now."

"But why all the bother? Why didn't she dump the whole thing in the drink?"

"She?" Jackson looked at Whitey with raised brows.

"Sure," said Whitey. "The old dame upstairs. This is her joint, ain't it?"

Stern smiled. "Whoever did this was afraid of being spotted, carrying a typewriter. Dismantling it and disposing of the parts was a bright stunt. Even if there were fingerprints on this frame now they wouldn't prove anything. Come on, let's see what else we can find."

But a hurried search of the rest of the basement revealed nothing of the slightest significance. The tools in the wall cabinet which they forced open had either been handled with gloves or carefully wiped before being put away, and even the iron piping on the bench bore no evidence of having been touched by human hands. Nowhere in the basement was there the slightest trace of the missing typewriter parts. After a few minutes Stern gave up.

"We're just wasting time," he said. "Those detectives will be back any minute now. I think we'd better get out of here."

The ground floor was quiet, and no sound came from Nellie Cosimo's apartment on the floor above. Stern rebolted the door to the basement stairs and led the way to the front of the house. Just as he was about to step out he drew back suddenly, treading sharply on Jackson's toes.

Jackson swore. "What now?" he asked.

"Someone just came up out of the areaway," whispered Stern.

"He's crossing the street. I think he was trying to watch us through the window."

"That's our baby," said Whitey excitedly. "Let's nail him."

"Take it easy," hissed Stern. "I want to find out who it is first."

He eased the door open a crack, and they watched a shadowy figure moving along the face of the buildings across the street. When the figure reached the corner it was silhouetted briefly in the light of an arc lamp.

"Holy smoke," said Whitey. "A derby hat."

"This is a brand-new angle," said Stern, "but maybe it makes sense. I want to talk to that guy."

When they reached the corner the slightly stooped figure in the long black coat was halfway down the block, walking at a normal gait and not looking back, as though with no fear of being followed. They caught up with the man just as he reached the next corner.

"Just a minute, Powers," called Stern. "I want to talk to you."
The butler turned, his face showing polite surprise but nothing
more, and waited for them to come up.

"Oh, it's you, sir," he said, recognizing Stern. "I was startled for a moment. I hardly expected to be accosted by name in this locality."

"I'll bet you didn't." Stern grinned at the man. "What are you doing down on the water front? I thought you were in jail?"

"I was being held as a material witness, I believe they call it," said Powers with heavy dignity. "I was released this afternoon." He peered down his nose at Stern's companions. "Are these gentlemen from the police, sir?"

"They're friends of mine," Stern said shortly. "You didn't answer my question. What are you doing here?"

"Why—just walking, sir. I'm at leisure, you might say."

"I don't like this monkey," said Whitey.

Powers looked at him. "Nor I you, if I may say so, sir."

"Why you big grease ball-"

"Cut it out, Whitey," said Jackson.

Stern said: "Let's take a little walk. You don't mind, do you, Powers?"

The former butler looked uncomfortable. "I—I don't understand—but, of course, if you say so, sir."

"Right." Stern took Powers' arm and led him back around the corner into the street from which they had just come. Whitey and Jackson followed. When they reached Nellie Cosimo's house Stern stopped.

"Know who lives here, Powers?"

"Why I-no sir, I haven't the faintest idea."

"Think hard. It's an old friend of yours."

Powers started to speak, then evidently changed his mind. "You're acting very strangely, Mr. Stern, very strangely indeed. I see no reason why I should answer your questions. May I ask what this is all about?"

Scanlon and his partner came round the corner and approached the group.

"Any trouble, Mr. Stern?" Scanlon asked.

"Not a bit. Mr. Powers, here, was just about to tell us why he was playing Peeping Tom at Miss Cosimo's basement windows."

"Oh, he was, was he?" Scanlon seized Powers' arm in a hard grip while his partner, Brumbaugh, closed in on the other side.

"Come on, Buddy," said Brumbaugh. "Unbutton your lip."

"I think you'd better tell us all about it, Powers," said Stern gently.

"Perhaps you're right, sir," admitted Powers, glancing from the massive Scanlon to the even more massive Brumbaugh. "It was just that I didn't think it prudent to become involved—not that I have done anything wrong, you understand, or have anything to hide——"

"Skip it," snapped Stern. "You knew this was Miss Cosimo's house?"

"Yes sir."

"What did you come here for?"

"I meant to visit Miss Cosimo."

"What for?"

"Why, really, sir-just a friendly call, you might say."

"I might say but I'd rather you said." Stern came close to the big man. "Do you usually start friendly calls by looking in windows?"

"Oh, that, sir. You see, there was someone else looking in the window, and my curiosity was aroused."

"Someone else?"

"Yes sir. Perhaps I'd better tell you exactly what happened. I came by with the intention of visiting Miss Cosimo as I said but when I saw her apartment was dark I was about to turn back. Just then I noticed a man crouching on the sidewalk here in front of the basement windows and I saw that there was a light in the basement and this man was trying to look in. It aroused my curiosity, sir, and when the man went away I crossed the street to see what he had been looking at. The light in the basement went out, however, before I could see what had attracted the man's attention, and I decided that whatever it was it was none of my affair. That's all there was to it, sir, really."

"That story sounds like the malarky to me," said Scanlon. "There's something screwy about this guy, Counselor."

"Shall we lock him up?" asked Brumbaugh. "Or would you want we should do a little work on him?"

Scanlon approved of the latter suggestion. "It'd be a pleasure, Counselor—the way he talks. Like he had a snout full of hot mush."

"Behave yourselves, boys," ordered Stern. "I believe what Mr. Powers has told us is essentially the truth, although not all of it, perhaps. However, let's get it straight." He adjusted his glasses and looked at Powers. "Where were you when you first noticed this man?"

"Across the street, sir. Some distance down the block."

"Come on. Show us."

Powers led them to a position deep in shadow and well up from Nellie Cosimo's house. Seen from this distance, a man crouching in front of the house would be hardly more than a blacker shadow.

"Okay," said Stern. "Now what did the guy look like? I mean was he tall or short, fat or thin?"

"At first I couldn't tell, sir, but when he rose and moved away I gathered the impression that he was slightly on the tallish side and somewhat thin. It was difficult to tell positively."

"How long was he there—that is, between the time you saw him and the time he left?"

"I watched him for about five minutes, I should say. Then he rose and walked away."

"Fast or slow?"

"A fairly rapid pace. I would say he was a youngish man."

"I don't suppose you would recognize him if you saw him again?"

"I hardly think I could," said Powers slowly, as though trying to revisualize the scene. "He had his back turned to me the whole time but just as he rose he looked over his shoulder, and I saw his face. It was too far for me to see features though, sir. Just a sort of white blur."

Several additional questions failed to elicit any further information, and Stern, his brows creased in a puzzled frown, turned to Scanlon. "Call the precinct and have them send down and get Mr. Powers. I think he'll be much safer in jail for the night."

"Safer?" The butler's face turned slightly gray. "I trust you did not mean that literally, sir."

"That's what you think," said Stern.

Stern paid the taxi driver and went wearily across the sidewalk to the entrance of his small apartment hotel. His eyes, behind the thick lenses, were dull and unseeing; it was late, and he had had a full day and was very tired. The night clerk handed him a message which he took and read listlessly as the elevator carried him upward. Blackie had called. Would he call her as soon as he came in? He pushed the message into his coat pocket. It was too late to call her tonight. The morning would do. She only wanted his

answer to her morning's invitation to visit over the week end. Did she actually realize that one of her two other guests might be a murderer? Perhaps she did, at that. Perhaps that was why she had invited them.

The apartment was neat and very quiet, the night noises of the city rising in a subdued hum that was restful and soothing. The living room with its books and pictures and the fencing mask and crossed épées on the wall was like a refuge from murders and man hunts. He smiled faintly as he closed the door and heard the click of the latch.

Tall ivory and ebony chess pieces set out on an inlaid board gleamed under the light of the desk lamp. They were East Indian in design, elaborately carved figurines of Oriental potentates, knights on prancing horses, and elephants in gaudy trappings with turbaned mahouts perched on their broad necks. The set had belonged to his father and was one of Stern's most prized possessions.

The pieces were set in position for a problem which Stern had been composing for the past week. He left them just as they were when he went to the office in the morning and returned at night to find them undisturbed. All day he never thought of them but when he saw them again he would find that subconsciously the problem had developed and grown since he left them sitting there. When the position was finally complete it would be printed in an obscure little magazine under the pseudonym, Rajah, known and respected wherever chess was played. But few, if any, of the thousands who puzzled over its perplexing subtleties would guess that it was the work of a promising young political appointee. Young lawyers with futures were supposed to have better things to do with their spare time.

Still smiling faintly, Stern paused with poised hand above the chessboard. He stood there in a sort of pre-occupied contemplation that had in it none of the fierce concentration of the traditional chess addict. It was as though he were idly admiring the pieces in a shopwindow or—not seeing them at all—was lost in a dream created by their symbolism and the dynamic movements

they represented—charge and countercharge, the tactics of attack and defense—a mimic battle like some childhood tale out of the *Arabian Nights*. Then the poised hand dropped, moved the white queen one square, and eliminated a pawn from the board. The problem—compact and balanced as a delicate machine—was completed.

Stern went through the swinging door into the kitchen, got himself a glass of milk, and returned through the living room to the bedroom, turning out lights as he went. He undressed slowly, still with that dull, somnambulistic expression that was a combination of physical weariness and a conscious effort to relax taut nerves, drank the milk, yawning prodigiously as he put the glass down, switched off the light, and got into bed.

But once in bed he found that he could not sleep. The thing that had been gnawing at the back of his mind suddenly became clear, and he found that he was filled with a sense of something left undone—something overlooked that might result in serious trouble. For the life of him he couldn't think what it was. He reviewed the events of the day without result until he came to the incidents surrounding the meeting with Powers. That was it. There was something there—but what? It was not Powers himself or his story that was the source of the annoyance; true, Powers was an added complication—a suspect tucked neatly away on the shelf and all but eliminated, who had unexpectedly reappeared with a story that obscured more facts than it revealed—but Stern was sure that he knew most of the facts Powers had sought to hide. Powers was a prudent fellow with an eye for the main chance, as he would probably put it, and he had guessed, even before Stern, what had happened to the money from Murdock's safe. At the first opportunity he had headed straight for Cosimo, intent on a bit of exceedingly circumspect blackmail—at least that was what Stern thought he had done. That made two blackmailers, a thief, and a stool pigeon, besides a murderer, in this nasty business. Stern winced in the darkness at the thought.

Of course it was possible that his tenuous calculations were far

from the mark and that Powers' intentions had been even more sinister—or not sinister at all—but Stern refused to consider either of these possibilities. He had settled on two, possibly three suspects, and, if one of them wasn't the murderer, then it was no use worrying about one thing done or left undone, since everything he had done that day was wrong.

No, it was neither Powers nor his story that was the crux of the matter—what then? What had he overlooked? Then all at once he knew. Cosimo's house had been left unguarded—only for a minute or two, when he and Jackson and Whitey had gone in pursuit of Powers—but those few minutes would have been enough for someone to enter if they had been watching. And someone had been watching just before. There it was—the thing he had overlooked—he had forgotten to make sure that the front door of Cosimo's house was locked. Worse, he had neglected to check up before he turned the responsibility for guarding the house back to Scanlon and Brumbaugh. If anything happened in that little brick house tonight—anything at all—it would be his fault.

And then Stern did a thing that was to haunt him for many months to come. Having discovered his oversight, he turned over and went to sleep and did nothing to rectify it—or what he knew from experience would amount to nothing. Instead of getting out of bed and dragging himself back to that little house on the dark, lonely street, he called a drowsy desk sergeant at the precinct and asked him to make a checkup. The result was delay and another tragedy that might possibly have been averted had he gone himself—at once.

After all, the thing was excusable. Stern had been driving himself hard and had little sleep in forty-eight hours. Once recognized, the mere matter of an unlatched door that had been left unguarded for, at most, three or four minutes seemed little enough reason for dragging oneself from a warm bed. And even if something had happened in those few unguarded minutes (What could have happened to get so excited about?) it was, in all probability, too late to do anything about it now. Why be a fool about an

unlatched door that led only to an empty hall and was guarded by a large and competent detective? Oh, surely, the thing was excusable enough, but Stern never excused himself. Had he not stifled that slight, uneasy feeling—had he gotten out of bed and gone to see for himself—a life might have been saved. Never mind excuses and mistaken details. That was the simple truth, and he had to face it.

4. Locked Room

Stern was shaving next morning when the telephone rang stridently; he wiped away lather as he went to answer it.

Nicholson's bellow seemed to fill the room. "Hello, Stern? We got more grief. Nellie Cosimo committed suicide last night."

"What?" The towel Stern had been holding slipped from his hand to the floor. "That can't be. It's crazy."

"Sure, it's crazy. Tell me what's sane about this case. But it's true, all right, unless a damn good first-grade detective of mine is having nightmares. Scanlon found her. I just got the call."

Stern was silent a moment, listening to a small, inner voice that whispered accusingly, "You see, I told you so. Now, whatever it is, it's your fault."

"Are you sure she's dead?" he asked the telephone. He did not know what else to say.

"Am I sure?" barked the phone. "Hell, I'm not sure of anything about this cockeyed business except that I'd like to forget the whole thing and go back to bed. If this suicide isn't on the level I might as well, at that. One more murder and both me and the commissioner are going to have hemorrhages."

Stern took a grip on himself and asked in a flat, quiet voice: "How did it happen?"

"Gas. Room locked, windows shut tight. Scanlon's got an emergency squad working on her, but he says it's dollars to dough-

nuts she's a goner. Grab a cab, and I'll meet you there in ten minutes. You know the address?"

Stern said, more to himself than to the telephone, "Gas! Oh lord!"

"What the hell are you muttering about? You sound like you were half asleep. I asked if you know the address."

"Yes." Stern smiled grimly. "I know the address."

"Okay. In ten minutes."

"Okay."

Stern hung up and stood looking at the phone. Gas. But how? No one could have gotten into that locked apartment even during those two or three minutes when the downstairs door was left unguarded. Maybe it was suicide after all. "Suicide," the small inner voice jeered. "Was Cosimo the kind of woman to commit suicide? Stop mooning, you dumb, dopey half-wit, and get down and face the music."

The flaming red truck of the city's gas-emergency squad was double-parked with a squad car and an ambulance in the narrow street directly in front of the little brick house. Stern's taxi pulled up behind it.

"How't hell am I gonna git outta here?" the taxi man wailed as Stern handed him a bill. "I can't get around that thing, and this is a one-way street."

"Don't you worry, Buddy," Stern told him. "Hang around. There's going to be a lot of fun here."

The taxi man looked shocked. "Fun? Somebody sick or croaked, and he calls it fun. You must be a reporter, mister."

"Wrong again," said Stern. "I'm the victim."

The tiny living room of Cosimo's apartment was a shambles. The door hung on one hinge. The windows had been opened by the quickest and most efficient method—a chair thrust through them—and most of the furniture had been tossed into a corner. The studio couch now occupied the center of the floor, and two men in white jackets, assisted by a perspiring policeman in shirt sleeves,

were at work over the still form that lay on it. A bored-looking ambulance intern with a stethoscope dangling from his neck was watching them. A wheezy, whistling noise came from the group, but Stern was not sure whether it was made by the pulmotor they were operating or by the panting cop.

"You're standing in a draft," Stern said to the cop. "You're going to catch your death of cold."

The cop looked at him and said nothing, and Stern was ashamed of his stupid facetiousness. He couldn't help it—it was the only way he could stifle that inner voice that kept saying over and over, "A woman is dead because you were too lazy to get out of bed."

Nicholson, followed by Sergeant Tripp and Detective Scanlon came through the door from the rear room. Nicholson looked pleased.

"Hello, Stern," he said. "Well, it's suicide all right. It can't be anything else."

"Sure," said Tripp like an obedient echo. "It's open and shut."

"All right. Let's hear." Stern sagged wearily against the doorjamb. "What makes you so positive?"

"Because her fingerprints are on the gas cock." Nicholson pointed to the gas radiator. "Hers and nobody else. Besides if anyone got into this place they must have crawled through the keyhole. Everything was locked up tighter than a jail cell."

"Uh-huh." Stern shrugged himself upright and threaded his way across the room to the modernistic book shelves that had stood at the head of the studio couch the night before. On the flat painted top stood a glass of water, a squat medicine bottle, and an alarm clock. A spoon lay beside the bottle. Stern pointed to the objects without touching them.

"She took cough medicine and set her alarm clock before she turned on the gas," he said. "Maybe she wanted to be in good voice for shouting 'Hallelujah' when she woke up at seven-thirty in heaven."

One of the white-jacketed figures straightened and said sternly: "We're trying to save a woman's life in here. Why don't you flat-feet find some place else to do your snooping?"

"Ain't you noble?" said Scanlon. "You dumb bunny, that dame's deader'n a mackerel."

"He's right, Jack," said the man who was still bending over Nellie Cosimo. "We've been working over her nearly an hour without a flutter. She's gone, all right."

The hospital intern leaned over and applied his stethoscope. He pushed back the eyelids with his thumb and flexed one of the long bony arms, letting it drop back on the couch with a soft thud. "No soap," he said conversationally. "Eyeball's collapsed, and there's a suggestion of rigor already. Probably started as soon as those windows were kicked in. Take my word for it; this woman was dead when you fellows got here."

The man who had first spoken lifted his shoulders in a slow shrug. Then he dropped them and nodded. The shirt-sleeved cop sighed lustily and began putting on his tunic. He filed out of the room behind the intern and the gas-emergency men. Nicholson shouted down the stairs to ask what was holding up the city medical examiner. Presently a new group of men—photographer, fingerprint experts, and a reporter or two—crowded into the room. Tripp started to chase the reporters and got razzed for his pains. "Look, Gargantua, get back into your cage."

Stern lifted a corner of the sheet and looked down at Nellie Cosimo's dead face. His ears were ringing with that accusing inner voice. As he dropped the sheet his eyes traveled down to the floor beside the couch, and he stooped and picked up a small key attached to a piece of ordinary twine. He held the key up by the twine and examined it closely, his head twisting to one side as the bit of metal turned slowly. Nicholson came up and took the twine out of Stern's hand.

"Where'd you find that?"
Stern indicated the spot with a nod.
"How d'ya suppose it got there?"

"If you ask those gasmen I imagine you'll find they took it off her neck when they started to work on her."

"That's right," said Scanlon. "I noticed it there when I was trying artificial respiration."

"Let's get out of here," Stern said to Nicholson. "Let's go somewhere where we can talk."

The police captain looked at him suspiciously. "You act damn funny," he growled. "Like you had a guilty conscience or something up your sleeve. What's it all about?"

But Stern refused to say more until they were out of the house and seated in the back of the departmental car, leaving Sergeant Tripp to supervise the search of Nellie Cosimo's apartment.

"Now," demanded Nicholson, cranking up the car window to keep reporters and curious bystanders from sticking their heads in, "spill it. You know something about this business I don't. For one thing, I'd like to know how you spotted that medicine bottle and alarm clock so fast."

"First, let me ask a couple of questions." Stern lit a cigarette, took one or two puffs, and pinched it out hurriedly as his breakfastless stomach began to rebel. "How did Scanlon find her?"

"A cat."

A look of surprise, tinged with something a little like horror, came over Stern's face. He repeated the word, "Cat!"

Nicholson chuckled. "Sure, one of these big alley cats they have down here. Probably the old dame had been feeding it or something. Anyway, this cat comes along just about daylight and climbs the steps and starts rubbing against the street door. It miaowed a couple of times, but naturally Scanlon didn't pay any attention until it put up its back and started backing away from the door like it was scared. Then it jumped off the steps and made a beeline out of there. Scanlon takes a look to see what scared it and finds the door open about a half inch and the hall smelling of gas. The cat had got a whiff, and he didn't like it. Scanlon called Brumbaugh, and the two of 'em went up and broke down the door and found the old girl. Scanlon sent Brumbaugh hotfooting it for a

phone and started in on the first aid. That was maybe half an hour before the precinct got around to calling me."

"I called the precinct about two o'clock last night and asked 'em to check up," said Stern dully. "Did they do it?"

"Scanlon said something about a prowl car coming around and stopping for a couple of minutes. Everything was quiet, and they went on."

"Oh lord, the dopes. I told them to try the door. If they had they'd have smelled the gas, and she might have been saved."

"You called 'em?" Nicholson sat up and stared. "How in hell did you know about the door?"

"I left it open," said Stern. "God help me, I forgot it."

"Well for the love of God-" Nicholson stopped, speechless.

"Wait a minute, Cap. Just one more question, and then I'll tell you the whole thing. Did Scanlon or Brumbaugh leave that house uncovered between the time I left and the time the cat came along?"

Nicholson began, "Look, son—" But Stern insisted, "Did they?"

"Hell"—Nicholson took out a handkerchief and wiped his face—"I don't know what this is all about. I don't know what time you left or what you were doing here but if either of those apes left his post for so much as a minute I'll see that he pounds pavement the rest of his life."

"Okay," said Stern. "That means there was just one time anyone could have gotten into that house without being seen."

He told Nicholson of his interview with Nellie Cosimo the previous night and of the events that followed. Several times the police captain tried to interrupt, but Stern would not let him. When the story was finally finished he said: "I take full responsibility for Scanlon and Brumbaugh leaving their posts. They really had no choice. I wish to God that was all I was responsible for."

"I don't see what you're breaking your heart over," said Nicholson. He looked relieved, as though he had expected the story to

be much worse. "You had no business to chase my men off the job, and they had no business to pay any attention to you, but we'll skip that. And I wish I had a dime for every time I searched a house without a warrant or the tenant's knowledge. But as far as saving that old dame from committing suicide, even if you could have, that's nothing to cry about. We save 'em every day, and they go right back and do it over again. It's simpler this way."

"But don't you see?" Stern explained wearily. "Cosimo didn't commit suicide; she was murdered."

"You mean that clock and the medicine?" Nicholson laughed. "That had me going for a minute, too, but it's easy to explain. Nellie was a little bit cracked—anybody could see that. She had no idea of suicide when she went to bed but in the middle of the night she wakes up melancholy and decides to end it all. That's psychologically sound. I remember a case we had about a year ago that was practically the same thing."

"I mean more than the clock and the medicine," said Stern. "I mean the gas. That's one thing I knew that you didn't when you first came. The gas was on when I left, and Cosimo had a cold and hated drafts. She must have left it on when she went to bed. So no one turned the gas on. What the murderer did was to turn the gas off. Then he waited a minute till the pipes were clear and turned it on again."

"What kind of dopes do you think the police are?" asked Nicholson. "You mean the gas was turned off at the meter to put the flame out and then turned on again. That would account for the locked door because no one would have to get into the room—only into the house. Don't you think we thought of that? We didn't take it seriously but we checked the meter just the same. It's got cobwebs on it and hasn't been tampered with for months."

Stern looked surprised. "You mean to tell me that meter wasn't touched?"

"That's what I said."

For a full minute Stern was silent. As he thought, the set expression slowly relaxed until he looked almost happy. Nicholson, watching him curiously, was disturbed somehow by that expression.

"So you see it was suicide and not murder this time," the captain urged. "Trouble with you is you let theories get in the way of facts."

Stern took off his glasses and wiped them carefully. Without the glasses the owlish look was gone, and he became simply a very young man with pale, watery eyes. Then he replaced the glasses and looked at Nicholson.

"All right, you win. It's suicide, if you say so. So where does that leave us on the Riorden case?"

Nicholson shifted uneasily in his seat. "No reason why it should leave us anywhere. Of course Cosimo may have known who killed Riorden, but that's just idle supposition, and if she wouldn't tell us before she certainly won't tell us now, so we might as well stop worrying about it. And that typewriter frame you bright boys found is just supposition too. It might be the machine used to write that spy report, but we can't prove it, and even if we could it wouldn't tell us who the murderer is."

Stern interrupted with one of his seemingly irrelevant questions. "Why do you think she committed suicide?"

"How would I know?" Nicholson said impatiently. "Maybe she had a guilty conscience or maybe she just went off her nut all of a sudden. Sometimes it happens that way with neurotic women, and she was certainly neurotic."

Stern remembered Nellie Cosimo's mad, tortured eyes, glaring at him over her handkerchief, and the picture almost made Nicholson's analysis convincing. However, he only said, "So we're no closer than we were before."

"Not much. For instance, supposing the boys find somebody's fingerprints in that basement . . ." He paused, chuckling. "They'll find Jackson's there and Gordon's and yours, too, but supposing they did find others—what would it prove? Not a goldarned thing. The only thing we've got that we didn't have before, as far as

I can see, is this." He held up the key Stern had found and dangled it from the end of its string while he scrutinized it. "Looks like a safe-deposit key. It'd be nice if we found a safe-deposit box with Murdock's ten grand in it. That's one place where I agree with you. I think you've got the right dope on Powers."

"Speaking of Powers," said Stern softly, "do me a favor, will you? Hold him for a couple of days."

"What for?"

"Well, for one thing, I want to talk to him." He hesitated a minute, then continued. "Tell you what I'll do: you hold Powers forty-eight hours, and I'll make you a present of Riorden's killer. Is it a bet?"

"Still want to play detective, eh?" Nicholson pretended to be vastly amused, but he wasn't fooling anybody. He was wondering how far Stern was right and he was wrong in the case.

Stern grinned. "Okay, in forty-eight hours you can rib me all you want. I still say, is it a bet?"

"Sure. I'll hold him for you." He laughed. "Funny thing. I can pinch a servant and hold him as long as I please, but when I go to pinch one of these water-front roustabouts that carries a union card you and the whole community jump down my throat. What's the matter? Hasn't a servant got any civil rights?"

"He might have more if he'd join a union," said Stern. "You got a good reason for holding Powers though. If anybody asks you it's for his own protection."

"You damn liberals give me a pain," Nicholson grunted. "You're always doing something because you think it's for the other fellow's own good."

The doctor from the city medical-examiners' office came down the stairs of the brick house, and Nicholson lowered the car window and called to him, "What did it look like to you, Doc?" he asked when the brisk, efficient-looking young man stood beside the car.

"Carbon monoxide," said the doctor dryly. "Characteristic symptoms."

"Could she have committed suicide?"

"That's your job. If you mean did I find anything indicating murder the answer is no. It could have been murder, accident, or suicide, depending on how the gas got into the room. You think somebody else turned it on?"

Nicholson shook his head, and the doctor was about to turn away when Stern asked: "What was the medicine she was taking, Doc?"

"Ordinary cough mixture, as far as I could tell. We're having a sample analyzed, of course."

"Would it have anything in it to make her sleep?"

"Possibly a small quantity of codeine or some other opiate. Not a lot, unless someone added it."

"But enough so that, once asleep, she would not waken easily."

"Possibly. The analysis will give us the exact quantity." The doctor refused to venture any further opinion on the subject, and in answer to another question dealing with the length of time Miss Cosimo had been exposed to the gas before she died he was equally vague. "That will be difficult to tell even in the autopsy. Some cases go out pretty quick, and I've known others exposed for as long as eight hours to recover. It depends on the individual and the circumstances and a lot of other factors."

"Would you make a guess on this one?"

"I'd say about three hours, if I had to," said the doctor sourly, "but it's just what you said, a guess, and I'd deny it if anyone quoted me." The doctor nodded and moved away. Nicholson grunted. "Well, let's get back to work." He led the way out of the car and up the steps.

Back in Nellie Cosimo's forlorn, tragic little house police routine ground methodically to its conclusion, yielding nothing beyond a few unidentifiable fingerprints subsequently explained by the known events of the night and early morning. Nicholson handed the small flat key to Sergeant Tripp and ordered an investigation of the possibilities it suggested. Then he turned to Stern.

"Nothing more to be done here," he announced. "Come on, I'll drive you downtown."

Stern, staring absent-mindedly at the short chain that dangled from the broken living-room door, seemed not to hear, and Nicholson testily repeated his invitation. Instead of answering, Stern said: "I don't suppose there's any chance that chain was unhooked when Scanlon broke in here."

Nicholson pointed. "You can see for yourself the screws are pulled half out of the catch on the doorpost. That wouldn't happen unless the chain were up."

"Yeah," said Stern. "Uh-huh." But he remained staring at the door.

"You act like you had a bad case of shell shock. Are you coming or not?"

Stern's gaze shifted to the gas radiator. "If you don't mind I'll stay here a while," he murmured. "I want to check the gas meter and look around a little."

"You're wasting your time," said Nicholson tolerantly. "The boys have been over everything with a fine-tooth comb. This is one time you're definitely wet, Hawkshaw."

"Maybe." Stern did not look up.

"Okay, if you want to waste your time go ahead. I'll tell the precinct cop downstairs you're snooping around so's he won't plug you by mistake."

Stern nodded absently. "Thanks."

The police captain gave an irritated grunt and went out. Stern, left alone, began a patient and methodical examination of the apartment. He knew that he was going over ground already covered by experts, but that did not bother him. Experts had been looking for positive facts, while the evidence Stern sought was purely negative. He had to satisfy himself definitely that those things which he was seeking were not there.

He re-examined the door and gave minute attention to the

windows. He squatted on his heels for some time in front of the gas radiator and went over walls and baseboard inch by inch. Having finished with the front room, he repeated the same meticulous operations in the rear room and in the bath and tiny kitchen. At last he had demonstrated two purely negative premises to his complete satisfaction: the first, that no one could have forced an entrance to the apartment during the night; and the second, that there was no outlet other than the radiator from which gas could have escaped into the room. As a corollary to these two major observations were several minor ones: that the gas radiator could not have been extinguished accidentally, that the apartment contained no unexplored hiding place, that Nellie Cosimo had been an addict of sex-story magazines, that someone had burned paper recently in the bathroom.

From the apartment Stern proceeded to the floor below, checking pipes and outlets for clues that he did not expect to find. Finally he reached the basement and stood for a long time gazing fixedly at the gas meter. The meter was ordinary in every respect, and the shutoff valve in the pipe above it needed only a glance to prove that it had not been tampered with for a long time—probably months. Well, that was that.

As he climbed the basement stairs he cursed himself again for a stupid, egocentric idiot. He had underestimated the murderer, and that underestimation had amounted to criminal negligence. He alone had been fully aware of the danger and yet, by his own actions, he had given the murderer an opportunity. And the murderer had acted swiftly, with split-second timing and an accurate estimate of the advantages offered by special conditions over which he had had no control. Did the opportunism of the killer argue for subtlety, cleverness, and daring, or for a growing desperation? Stern thought the latter, for while the plan had worked it had been extremely foolhardy. Nellie Cosimo might have been saved. She would have been saved if a certain young assistant D. A. had used the brains God had given him—and if Nellie had been saved she might have talked and the killer been

trapped. The plan had succeeded only because of Stern's stupidity and the killer's cursed luck.

But the plan had worked, and the killer had successfully removed the greatest obstacle to his continued freedom. For it was plain that Nellie had known who the killer was—had been, perhaps, the only person left alive who did know positively—and now Nellie was dead. And there was little consolation in the fact that the killer had been forced to expose himself in the commission of this latest crime, for the evidence resulting from that exposure was not legal proof and would not be worth a dime in court. The man was free and would remain free until definite proof was available—or until he stubbed his toe or was trapped.

Stern paused on the stairs and laughed mirthlessly. Nellie Cosimo's little brick house had been a trap, and the smart trapper had sat down alongside his snare and watched the bait being stolen from under his very nose. After this tragic fiasco did he dare to bait another trap?

He went slowly out into the street. On the sidewalk he paused, his brow wrinkled in concentration, and stood staring at the pavement between his feet for so long that the precinct cop stationed on the stoop got curious and came over.

"You lose something, Counselor?" he asked.

Stern straightened his shoulders and looked up. His mouth curved in a slow, wry grin. "Nope, I found it," he said. "You're a native of these parts, Officer. Where's the nearest food that's fit to eat? My stomach thinks I'm training to be a bloodhound."

PART FIVE

1. Bait

Stern, brow still wrinkled in thought, dawdled over his belated breakfast to such an extent that the diner began to fill with noon-hour customers before he had finished. Finally he picked up his check and slid off the stool but instead of approaching the cashier's desk, he squeezed into the phone booth and called the Longshoremen's Union Hall. He asked for Jackson and was lucky enough to find him in.

"How come?" he asked when the longshoreman's deep voice came over the phone. "I took a chance but I hardly hoped to catch you. Thought you'd be on the picket line."

Jackson was jubilant. "Picket line was called off an hour ago," he announced. "The boys negotiated a settlement. The strike is won, and everybody's going back to work."

"Congratulations. Look, fellow, I have a sort of hypothetical question I want to ask you. Is there any way for an Eastcoast long-shoreman to work the old racket of collecting two pay checks for one shift? You know, signing on for one job and then working on another?"

Jackson thought a moment. "Some of the boss stevedores used to work a stunt like that. They'd sign a man on and then forget about him, and he'd sneak off the dock and go work somewhere else. Of course the boss got his cut. But the union put its foot down on that stuff, and I doubt if you'd find any of the men willing to take a chance now. If they were caught it'd mean their union cards, and the boss stevie'd get the gate from the company. That graft's not legitimate any more."

"But it still could be done?"

"Yeah, sure. If anybody was dope enough to take the chance."

"How would he get off the dock without being missed or spotted by the front office?"

"The boss stevie could give him a job where he wouldn't be missed, and getting off the dock's easy. There's lots of ways, but the best would be to hook onto a tug or a railroad barge and ride across the river. Over there would be the safest place to shape the second job, anyway, and there's always some kind of a boat around."

Stern thanked him, evaded further discussion of the subject, and asked if Whitey Gordon and the other committee members were at the hall. Sangster, Painter, and Whitey were there, and Stern got Gordon on the phone and held a brief, low-voiced conversation with him, ending by saying, "Get over there and stay put, both of you. I want you out of the picture for a while."

After leaving the diner the young attorney spent a very busy hour during the course of which he interviewed two bartenders, two landladies, and a prostitute and wound up in Mayme Burke's hotel room in the theater district.

Mayme had just arisen and was inclined to be petulant. "I don't know why I should talk to you at all, shyster," she spat. "You put the finger on my brother, and now they're trying to frame him for a murder rap. Show me one good reason why I shouldn't have your fat little can bounced out of here."

A remark about people who live in glass houses was on the tip of Stern's tongue, but he succeeded in stifling it. If he was going to get any information from Mayme he would have to use diplomacy, and disparaging remarks about Miss Burke's pleasing plumpness hardly came under that heading.

"I know your brother didn't kill anyone," he said, "and please

believe me when I say I'm going to prove it. You can help me by answering one or two questions."

After all, it was stretching a point to say that he knew Tommy Burke wasn't a murderer. He didn't actually know that Burke hadn't killed Murdock—or Riorden, either, for that matter. All he could swear to was that Tommy had had nothing to do with Nellie Cosimo's death, because Tommy was in jail when it happened. However, he was a convincing liar, and Mayme half believed him, in spite of herself.

She lit a cigarette without offering one to her guest and threw herself down in a half-sitting, half-reclining position on the bed. The blue silk robe gaped open, revealing a generous portion of white thigh, and she made no effort to close it although she was obviously aware of the display. Stern recognized the gesture for what it was—not a come-on, but an insult—and felt a sudden desire to slap her contemptuous, too red mouth. He tried to ignore the exposed leg and look at the girl's face, and Mayme caught his eye and smirked a bit at his discomfiture.

"All right," she conceded. "Ask your damn questions, and I'll tell you whether I'll answer them. But make it snappy; I've got a rehearsal in an hour."

Stern said bluntly, "Did Murdock ever tell you he had a stool pigeon planted in the union?"

Mayme shook her head. "John Murdock didn't talk to me about his business."

Several other questions along this line elicited the same response, and Stern tried another approach.

"Where did you keep the letters that were stolen?"

"Here—at the hotel."

"When were they stolen?"

"A week ago. I went away for the week end, and Tommy, the little bastard, got the hotel clerk to give him my key."

"When did you find out about it?"

"Tuesday. John called and told me that Tommy was trying to

blackmail him. He asked me what to do about it. I told him I'd talk to Tommy."

"Did you?"

"No. Tommy kept away from me. I didn't see him until—afterward."

"Do you think Murdock intended to pay the ten thousand dollars?"

"He had to. We were both afraid Tommy would do something foolish, like trying to sell the letters to a scandal sheet." Mayme dropped her head. "It's funny how important it seemed then," she said, speaking half to herself.

She sounded sincere, and Stern's owl eyes widened. He said quietly: "I'm sorry. Just one more question, and I'll get out and stop bothering you. Was there anything wrong with your car when Jackson borrowed it?"

"That no good son of a bitch! That was a brand-new buggy," said Mayme. "If I can figure any way to collect I'll sue him for the repair bill."

"But wasn't there anything wrong before he took it?"

"Not a God damn thing. What are you trying to do? Save the louse some dough?"

"I was thinking about the clock," said Stern.

"Oh, the clock—that," said Mayme. "There was nothing wrong with it, only it was a half-hour fast. I was going to take it into the company next day and have it regulated."

From Mayme Burke's hotel Stern took a cab to the D. A.'s office and held a short consultation with his chief. He emerged with a cat-and-mouse smile behind his glasses, and the look was still there when he entered Nicholson's office.

"Well," said the police captain ungraciously. "What do you want now?"

Stern sat down and pushed his hat to the back of his head. "It looks like we both got worked over," he said cheerfully.

Nicholson glowered. "You don't have to be so damned gay. The commissioner is raising hell. The opposition newspapers keep

calling up and hinting that there's a tie-up between these other murders and the Cosimo woman's suicide, and they've got him blamed near crazy."

"You told him it was suicide and not to worry, I suppose."

"I'm not that dumb. It looks like suicide, and damned if I don't think it is suicide but I'm not committing myself. I told him I had every available man working on it and that I'd give him something definite on both that and the Riorden kill by Monday morning. I'd better make good on that, too, if I don't want to lose my commission. The old man's not fooling." He paused and looked at Stern almost plaintively. "I've got Powers downstairs if you want to talk to him."

"Later." Stern flicked an imaginary speck of dust from the desk top. "Did you get the background reports on our trade-union friends yet?"

"All their history from a to z. You can read 'em if you want to but you won't find much. There's not one lead in the bunch. Three of 'em—Gordon, Burke, and Sangster—were born on this water front and lived here all their lives. They sort of grew up to be longshoremen. Painter's been here about six years—used to be a ship's doctor when the regulations weren't as strict as they are now. Jackson was a college professor, of all things, before he went proletarian, and Colletti came over from Italy in 1930 and has worked on the water front ever since. Mellus is a labor faker of twenty years' standing, but he's always been out in the open and what you might call legitimate."

Stern waved the reports away. "I'll take your word for it. What about alibis for last night?"

"What time?"

"Around ten-thirty."

Nicholson looked puzzled. "Sangster and Colletti and Painter were at the Union Hall all evening—that is, they were in and out between there and the docks. Seems they had an idea there might be some trouble and volunteered along with about a dozen others to sleep in the hall and keep watch. Any one of 'em could

have gotten over to Cosimo's place, although how they would have gotten in and turned on that gas I still can't see."

"Skip it." Stern was leaning back in his chair with his eyes half closed. "What about the others?"

"Well, Gordon and Jackson were with you," said Nicholson with a hint of malice. "They couldn't have turned on the gas with you watching, could they?"

Stern said: "Ouch, don't rub it in."

"Mellus was home packing around that time. His landlady---"

"I know," Stern interrupted. "I saw her. And two of her roomers say the same thing. I never knew a fellow with so many alibis."

"And Burke was in jail," continued Nicholson dryly. "Maybe he did it by remote control."

Stern rose and stretched. "Thanks. I think I'll have a little talk with Powers." He grinned. "Don't worry, my friend, I have a hunch we'll smoke this killer out between now and Monday."

"Hunch," growled Nicholson. "I'm sick of your damned hunches." But the eyes that followed Stern out the door were as near to being wistful as the eyes of a tough cop could ever be.

It was late afternoon when Stern emerged from the tiny white-washed visitors' room where he had talked to Powers. He called Nicholson's office on the desk phone in the corridor.

"I want you to do me another favor," he told the captain. "Release Powers but put a tail on him and, for Godsake, don't lose him. And keep a check on every person in the case for the next twenty-four hours."

"How many dicks do you think this department has?" complained Nicholson. "It takes at least two good men to tail anybody successfully, and I can't spare 'em. Besides, they stand out like sore thumbs down there on the water front. I'm surprised somebody hasn't put a slug on one or two of them just for fun. Some people don't like cops."

"I know," agreed Stern. "I'm one of them. But do the best you can with the others and concentrate on Powers if you don't want another murder."

"Why the hell don't you leave him where he is if you think it's that bad? He can't kill anybody in jail."

"As far as releasing him is concerned, Mrs. and Miss Murdock are arriving in town late this afternoon, and he wants to meet them. Says if he don't he'll lose his job. Let's not argue that last point."

Nicholson spluttered at the other end of the line. "I don't like it. What in hell screwy scheme are you cooking up?"

"None. But I think our murdering pal is going to do one of two things in the next twenty-four hours. Either try to blow or attempt another murder."

"I think you're crazy. As a matter of fact, I know you are. But I'll bite. Who's he going to kill?"

Stern smiled into the mouthpiece. "I don't know. It depends on how his mind works. The one thing I do know is that he's panicky."

Nicholson continued his protests, but he finally weakened and agreed to do what Stern asked. The assistant D. A. hung up and walked slowly down the long corridor to the street. He rode a bus uptown, got his car out of the garage, and started on the drive to keep his dinner appointment at Dr. Stevenson's.

He was looking forward to the dinner in the doctor's quiet, comfortable house. It would be a chance to relax the growing tension that was mounting and mounting until it was close to the breaking point—to discuss the case dispassionately and objectively. Perhaps such a discussion would bring to light some bit of evidence that had been overlooked—some proof that the murderer was the murderer. Since the events of the afternoon Stern was morally certain that he was right, and yet he could not make a move because he had not one bit of evidence that would stand up in court. True, he could build up a fairly strong circumstantial case against his suspect, perhaps even get a confession with a little of Nicholson's persuasive help, but the chances against convincing a jury were too great, and this was one murderer for whom Stern did not want to leave the slightest

loophole. Better to wait, hard as waiting was, for the murderer to make the first move and pray that this time the rat's luck would not hold and there would be a slip—just one little, fatal slip that would spring the trap. Stern sighed, remembering that he had used the same reasoning in relation to Nellie Cosimo. Was the chance he was taking too desperate? No—this time things were different. The murderer was watched, and the potential victims were closely guarded—unless he was wrong and a fit subject for the psychiatric ward.

The first snow of the year was falling when Stern drove up to the curb before the terraced lawn of the Stevenson home. It was only a flurry and not persistent enough to stick to the black, wet pavement and sidewalks, but the lawn was white with it, and bushes and trees were sprinkled with a thin, confetti coating. In the early dusk the cheery lighted windows of the big house made a pretty picture, as full of friendly warmth and cheer as an old-fashioned greeting card. The fear and uncertainties engendered by ruthless murder seemed remote and unreal in this safe and comfortable world.

Mrs. Cox, the Stevenson's buxom "housekeeper, cook, and conscience," as the doctor called her, answered Stern's discreet ring and ushered him into the spacious front hall. Her brown face beamed with pleasure as she shook his extended hand.

"You're quite a stranger, Mr. Stern," she said in her meticulous, slightly British West Indian speech. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

"I'll say the same"—Stern grinned—"if you promise not to accuse me of having one of your dinners as an ulterior motive."

The Negro woman thanked him with a quiet dignity that did not quite hide the twinkle in her eye. As she turned to hang up his coat and hat Stern asked: "Where is everybody?"

"Miss O'Callighan is downstairs in the game room. A gentleman by the name of Jackson is with her. Mr. Gordon, another visitor, is out on the back porch with Dr. Stevenson, helping the doctor look for his overshoes. Miss O'Callighan introduced the two young men as murder suspects."

"That's exactly what they are," said Stern solemnly.

"Really." Mrs. Cox made a small grimace. "I thought it was just one of Maeve's unladylike jests."

Stern's face showed only polite interest, but he chuckled inwardly at this remark. It was one of Mrs. Cox's oft repeated complaints that, having come to the Stevenson household only ten years before, she had arrived too late to make a lady out of Maeve. This attitude was entirely sincere and without the slightest presumption, being the result of a bit of British priggishness that not even ten years' association with Dr. Stevenson had been able to shake, coupled with deep affection for both the doctor and his niece. In the give-and-take of this unorthodox household the attitude had long since been accepted as a norm, and even Blackie had learned to take it in stride, though she was still susceptible to a little ribbing from that direction. Stern filed the remark away for reference as he followed Mrs. Cox down the hall.

The thick carpet of the stairway leading down to the game room made Stern's descent practically noiseless, and he paused on the bottom step and listened shamelessly to the conversation that came from an old sofa drawn up before the fireplace at the end of the room. From where he stood he could see Jackson's head and broad shoulders and the sleek black of Maeve's page-boy bob over the back of the sofa.

"I wish I'd never seen you," Jackson was saying ungallantly. "What good does that do?" objected Maeve. "You have, and I have, and here we are."

Jackson turned and looked down at her, and although Stern could not see the arm it was evident even from where he stood that it was paradoxically tightening about her waist. "But it's impossible," he said. "I'm a trade-union organizer and I've got to go on being one but I can't ask you——"

"Wait a minute." Maeve put up a hand and touched his face.

"If you're going to tell me you can't ask me to marry you, you better think again. You can't love me and leave me, mister."

"Holy mackerel," breathed Jackson. "All I did was kiss you."

"All! I like that. Anyway, you didn't kiss me; I kissed you. Like this." The hand that she had raised to his face slid around his neck and drew him down to her. Maeve demonstrated convincingly. At last she drew away and leaned forward, staring into the fire. She began whistling "The Boys of Wexford."

"Stop that," said Jackson. "If there's one thing I hate it's a whistling woman."

Maeve interrupted her whistling long enough to say, "You'll get used to it, darling. Now shut up. I'm trying to think."

Jackson made a move to rise from the sofa, but she caught him and pulled him down. "All right, dear, I won't whistle if you don't like it. I won't even try to think. After all, what is there to think about? We might as well admit we're stuck with each other."

"Do you know how much my job pays?"

"I don't and I don't care. I've been educated to look after myself. I don't want you to support me—only love me. And I know what I'm letting myself in for too. You'll be beaten up and put in jail, and we'll probably be run out of town now and then. So what? If it's okay for you it's okay for me, too, my sweet."

Jackson persisted halfheartedly. "What will your uncle say?" "Good riddance. And he'll mean it too. He'll probably feel sorry for you and try to warn you before it's too late. Promise me you won't listen to him, love."

Stern had seen and heard more than enough, and he turned and tiptoed quietly up the stairs. He might have stamped his way up for all the two on the sofa would have heard—or cared, probably. It was funny—how long had these two known each other—self-sufficient, unsentimental Maeve and Jackson, the leader of tough realistic longshoremen? This was Saturday. They had met Thursday morning in an abandoned basement in the shadow of two brutal murders. Two days. Not once until today had they been

alone together and yet here they were in another basement (strange, how basements and cellars had kept popping up these last two days) "stuck with each other," as Maeve had expressed it, and planning to make the best of it. And he, Stern, had known Maeve ever since . . .

The assistant D. A. with the brilliant future shook himself somewhat as a dog does upon emerging from water. Then, his face blank and his eyes expressionless behind their glasses, he stepped out of the little alcove in which the stairs were set and strolled toward the living room at the front of the house.

Dr. Stevenson's amazingly vibrant tones were coming from the living room, and Stern found the doctor delivering a lecture on liberalism with Whitey Gordon, an interested audience of one. The doctor's goatee wagged violently, punctuating his remarks.

"Most leadership uses liberalism only when it's expedient, and most constituents, whether they're the citizens generally or the rank and file, as you call them, understand neither the functions of intelligent leadership nor those of the rank and file. There's too much talk of public servants and that sort of rot. A leader's function is to lead, to take responsibility and make decisions, and the citizens' task is to gauge the leader's actions in the light of an intelligent awareness of the problems to be faced. There's more discipline required in a democracy than there is in a dictatorship because there's more freedom in a democracy. And that's not a paradox, young man."

The speaker glanced up and saw Stern standing in the doorway. He hopped to his feet spryly and came forward with outstretched hand. "Come in, my boy, come in. I didn't know you had gotten here yet. You'll be interested in this discussion. Whitey, here, has been telling me some of the problems of his union."

"It sounded as though you were telling him," said Stern slyly. "Well, perhaps, I was." The doctor's cheerful admission was accompanied by a twinkle that belied his humble tone. "Blackie keeps telling me that I'm like all reformers—I lecture instead of

listen. Tell me, son"—he turned to Whitey—"have I been lecturing you?"

"And how," said Whitey. "But don't get me wrong; I liked it." They all laughed. Stern poured rye from a decanter on the table, without waiting to be asked. He felt as much at home in the doctor's house as he did in his own apartment.

"What a lawyer you would have made," he said. "I wish I could hypnotize a juror like that."

"Listen and learn, I always say." Whitey lifted his glass and drank unconcernedly. "What's the news from the front, general?"

"Of course!" exclaimed the doctor. "I had quite forgotten those murders. What are the latest developments? Have you caught the scoundrel yet? You know, my boy, I've been following the case very closely in the papers, and it seems to me that the police are being even more stupid than usual. Now I have a theory——"

"Whoa!" laughed Stern. "What about your trade-union discussion, Doctor? I'm sure that would be more interesting. I'm a little fed up on murder myself."

"You should know better than to think you can put me off that way," said Dr. Stevenson severely. "I've been waiting patiently to discuss the case with you, and you're not going to get out of it. First, suppose you tell us what you have discovered and whom you suspect, if anyone, and what you are doing about it."

Stern sat down and gave the doctor a wry grin. "That's a pretty big order, isn't it?" he temporized. "Especially with one of the prime suspects right here in the room."

"Who? Me?" Whitey turned wide, innocent eyes on the assistant D. A.

Dr. Stevenson said: "Humph. Pay no attention to him, young man. He's probably laboring under that asinine delusion fostered by amateur-fiction detectives that everyone from the detective himself to the parlormaid has to be viewed as possible murderers. He might as well have called *me* a suspect."

"You'd make a honey if I could figure out a motive for you," said Stern. "Let's see now. How about this? We could say you

killed Riorden under the mistaken impression that he was the stool pigeon; then you killed the dishonest employer and his equally dishonest secretary. The method used to dispose of your victims may have been a little messy, considering your age and fastidiousness, but the motive's on the up-and-up. You took the law in your own hands in the interests of democracy and clean government, suffering, of course, under a temporary aberration brought on by too many gall-bladder operations. The worst you could get would be confinement in one of your own sanatoria."

The doctor smiled. "Hitler's Gestapo never thought up a worse punishment," he said ruefully. "I wish, my boy, that you'd be serious though. I really want to know what progress you're making."

"I tried to be serious about Mr. Gordon here," retorted Stern, "and see what it got me." He sighed, took a sip of his drink, and leaned back in his chair. "But I'll try again," he said. "I might as well. I know I won't get any peace until I give you a demonstration of my well-known powers of deduction. Incidentally, you must remember that my methods bear not the slightest resemblance to that of the famous Le Doc. They have in them nothing of the scientific assurance of the Police Judiciare or even of Scotland Yard and its bulldog meticulousness. They have been bred, if you will pardon the implied indelicacy, by Perry Mason out of Hildegarde Withers."

Dr. Stevenson could stand just so much and no more. "Out of Alice in Wonderland, you mean, you young idiot. I warn you, if you continue this sort of drooling there'll be no dinner—"

"Ha!" said Stern. "You overstep yourself, Doctor. I have friends and allies in this house. Mrs. Cox welcomed me with open arms."

"Would you care to put that alliance to the test?" asked the doctor, ominously advancing toward the hall door.

Stern held up a hand as though to ward off a blow. "Please, if you insist on taking me seriously I'll be serious. I promise."

The doctor's expression was both amused and suspicious. "You," he said, turning back from the door, "had better."

Whitey Gordon had listened to this exchange in silent but openmouthed astonishment. Stern looked at him and laughed. "Brother Gordon thinks we're nuts," he said.

"I don't blame him." The doctor sat down and continued to eye Stern severely. "Will you get down to cases?"

"Not cases," said Stern. "It's really all one case, you know. The Case of the Longshoreman's Hook, we call it in the department. The other murders—you have deduced, of course, my dear doctor, that Cosimo was murdered, despite the reticence of the newspapers—are merely outgrowths of the Riorden killing. The motive for all the murders remains the same, and the same person committed all three."

"How do you arrive at that?" asked the doctor.

"By the simple necessity of having to arrive somewhere if we're going to have any progress at all." Stern warmed to his subject. "The trouble with these murders has been that there is no evidence in the ordinary sense and no clues that mean what they pretend to. All the clues in the first murder pointed to Jackson. But, by a simple process of logic, or perhaps I should say dialectics, those clues could be made to point in the opposite direction: away from Jackson toward Jackson's opposition. Now Jackson's opposition was the Weller-Murdock combine, but Murdock himself has been killed, and the methods of the murderer are psychologically incompatible with Weller—if methods can be incompatible. Anyway, you see what I mean."

"I don't at all," interrupted the doctor. "The theory of which I spoke to you a while ago accounts for that seeming incompatibility. I believe Murdock and Weller together planned Riorden's murder. Obviously they used the longshoreman's hook as a weapon to frame Jackson. Then, for some reason, they quarreled, and Weller or one of his henchmen killed Murdock. The woman Cosimo was killed because she had some knowledge of Weller's guilt. I don't see anything illogical about that theory."

"Very logical," said Stern, "and I'd be inclined to agree with you if Murdock and Cosimo had been shot to death or beaten

with a club or some other forthright method but I can't see Weller or one of his morons strangling Murdock with his own curtain cord and devising the subtle method of Miss Cosimo's demise. Their minds simply don't work that way. If you'll let me go on, Doctor—"

The doctor nodded. "You haven't disproved my theory," he insisted, "but you know a lot more about the case than I do. You talk, and I'll listen."

"Thanks." Stern finished his drink and lit a cigarette. "The elimination of Murdock and Weller as suspects left only one enemy of Jackson in the union—the mysterious stool pigeon—and the stool pigeon was, in all probability, one of the remaining six men on the Negotiating Committee. Here again you may demur because there was no proof that the stool pigeon was on the committee, but as Captain Nicholson would say, 'You have to begin somewhere.' So we began with those six men."

"Just a minute," said the doctor. "I hate to keep interrupting, but there's another possibility. Not that I think it merits much consideration, but how about the butler—Powers is his name, isn't it?"

"You're right again," said Stern. "Powers has to be taken into consideration, but it's difficult to see where he had either motive or opportunity. The motive would have to be pretty farfetched unless there's something we haven't uncovered at all, and Powers had an alibi for the first murder."

"You mean Weller," said the doctor, pulling at his goatee, "but isn't it conceivable that Weller would protect Powers? There may be some link between them beyond the fact that Powers was Murdock's butler."

"It's possible," said Stern. "I never eliminated Powers and I can't now, especially after what happened last night. I'll say this much: either Powers lied to me last night, or the man he saw was the murderer. If Powers did lie, then he's probably the murderer himself, and I'm the world's prize sap. And I have to admit that everything depends on whether Powers lied or told the truth."

"But how could Powers have got into Cosimo's house to turn off the gas?" asked Whitey. "Or how could anyone else for that matter? We were there all the time the dicks were off guard."

"You figured the gas was turned off, did you?" asked Stern. "That's pretty smart, Whitey."

"Hell," said Whitey. He looked at Dr. Stevenson and said, "I'm sorry; I forgot."

The doctor waved a thin white hand. "Don't give it a thought, my boy."

"What I was going to say," Whitey continued; "I noticed the meter was going when we were down in the basement. That meant the gas was on, so all somebody had to do was turn it off and then turn it on again after the flame was put out."

"Smart," said Stern again, "very smart. But I'm not going to tell you how the murderer got into the house. You'll have to figure that out for yourself." He paused and then turned back to Dr. Stevenson.

"Admitting that Powers is a possible suspect," he said, "doesn't eliminate the others—the men on the committee. Any one of them could be the stool pigeon and therefore any one of them could have a motive. They all had alibis, which in itself was a little suspicious. But there wasn't any more evidence against one of them than there was against another, so the problem was to find out whose alibi was phony and whose was real.

"Burke, however, seemed to be the only one placed at the scene of the second murder, so I started to find him. I was disappointed when I heard his story because I had hoped that he would have some more positive evidence as to who had killed Murdock. All Burke could do was to explain his presence at the Murdock house. His story sounded logical, and it could have been true, but I wasn't sure until last night. Burke was in jail when Cosimo was killed, and that's the best alibi I've heard yet. Even that's not infallible if you want to indulge in mental gymnastics, but I'll say right now that Burke's the most unlikely suspect I've got."

"Who's the most likely?" asked the old doctor shrewdly.

Stern grinned. "Suppose I put it this way," he said. "Up to last night there were five on my preferred list. Two of them were sort of second-class suspects—primarily, because I don't believe Murdock would have picked a Negro or a little Italian who speaks broken English as a stool pigeon."

Whitey Gordon opened his mouth to speak, but Stern stopped him. "Don't interrupt, Whitey," he said. "I'm getting tired of talking and I want to finish up."

"I couldn't discard the Negro or the Italian, however, because they were members of the union committee. I kept them in mind and concentrated on the other three."

"Three?" said Whitey.

"I told you not to interrupt," said Stern. "I said three and I mean three. I'll explain in a minute."

Stern's cigarette was still smoldering in the ash tray before him, and he leaned forward and tapped it out carefully with his thumb.

"Let's take Painter first," he said. "Painter is shrewd, selfish, unscrupulous, and self-centered, just the type for a stool pigeon—so much the type that this sort of reasoning almost began to operate with an inverse ratio. Would Murdock have chosen a man who seems unscrupulous as a stool pigeon? The answer to that is that the union membership did not look upon Painter as such a man. They considered him honest and trusted him, and his record in the union bears out that trust. So Painter's personality sort of cancels out.

"Also, Painter has the best alibi—an actual witness who swears that he was at home when the first murder was committed. He has an alibi for the Murdock murder, too, but I found out a way to break that this afternoon. But there's not a speck of evidence against Painter that would stand up in court.

"There's no such evidence against Mellus, either, although Mellus is perhaps an even more obvious suspect than Painter. Mellus, especially in the last day or two, has proved that he isn't much better from the union's point of view than Weller was. He wasn't above calling thugs to try to control the union, with the obvious

intention of turning it into a racket for his personal profit. When I heard about that strike it puzzled me. If Mellus was the murderer and, therefore, the stool pigeon would he take the chance of demonstrating that he's crooked? I still haven't found a complete answer to that one.

"And, up to last night, Mellus and Painter and Whitey, here, were running neck and neck in the Suspect Derby with Powers sort of bringing up the rear."

"Nonsense," said the doctor suddenly, "you can't really mean you suspect this young man. I can't believe you'd actually invite a guest to my house if you . . ." The doctor's kindly face took on a disturbed expression as his words trailed off.

"Actually," said Stern, "I can build up a very reasonable case against Whitey. It's conceivable that he might have had a motive, and, as far as opportunity goes, his alibis, like those of several of the other suspects, are more apparent than real. The crap-game alibi never did amount to much. When men are shooting dice they are more interested in the dice than they are in each other and they wouldn't pay much attention to a man leaving the circle for a while and coming back. That was demonstrated this afternoon when Captain Nicholson was questioning the players. Whitey or Sangster or Colletti or any of the others, for that matter, could have left the game for long enough to murder Riorden and returned without notice. I don't say they did, but they could have. Whitey's other alibi was a little tougher until I discovered today that the clock in the smashed car had been a half-hour fast. That means there was an extra half-hour between the time the car crashed and the time the state patrolman came along-plenty of time for Whitey to have gone to Murdock's library and back. However, I'll tell you this much. Since last night I know who the murderer is."

"You know?" said both Whitey and the doctor together.

Stern nodded. "I'm mortally certain since last night. I suspected before, but a little question of timing threw me off. As I said earlier, practically all the suspects had alibis, and an alibi depends on timing. A man can't be in two places at the same time, but if, either through accident or intention, the time is wrong, then the alibi goes out the window. The case of the dashboard clock is an instance."

"You're being very obvious," said the doctor disgustedly. "Let's get down to facts. If you know who the murderer is why haven't you arrested him?"

"No proof," said Stern. "At least no proof that's conclusive."

"But you could break him down."

"Possibly," said Stern, "but I think there's a better way. If the plan I've got now doesn't work we'll probably have to bluff the murderer into confessing, the way they do in the mystery books."

"How did you spot the murderer from what happened last night?" asked Whitey. His voice sounded a little worried, and there were unaccustomed lines of concern between his eyes. Stern looked at him, and they studied each other for a moment. Then Stern spoke:

"I know how the gas was turned off—and on," he said.

"Of course," said the doctor. "I solved that this morning when I read the papers. The meter in the basement."

Stern was saved the necessity of replying by the entrance into the room of Maeve and Jackson.

"That will do," said Maeve firmly. "There'll be no more discussion of murder or anything else right now. Mrs. Cox says dinner is almost ready, and you men will have to go up and wash your dirty hands and faces before I'll eat with you."

She had been shaking Stern's hand and she now turned it over and examined it critically. She made a disapproving face at him and dropped the hand to cross the room and pat her uncle on the cheek. "That goes for you, too, Nunky."

Maeve headed her guests toward the stairs, chattering incessantly, and Stern, watching her, saw that her eyes were sparkling and her cheeks flaming with color and that she was talking simply to cover the joyous emotion with which she was almost bursting. He looked covertly from the girl to Jackson and grinned at the

big longshoreman's self-satisfied, hangdog expression. His own face took on a fondly sentimental look that he would have dubbed idiotic had he seen it in a mirror. It looked as though he were saying to himself, "Bless you, my children, bless you."

"Show the boys to their rooms, Nunky," said Maeve brightly when she had gotten them arranged on the stairs somewhat like a file of wooden Indians or a set of clothing dummies in a shop-window. "I can't come up. I have to help Mrs. Cox set the table. Joey can use the room at the end of the hall that he used to have week ends, and Mr. Gordon and Mr. Jackson (she faltered on Jackson's name and giggled slightly) are in the room at the head of the stairs across from yours. Hurry now, all of you. Dinner's nearly ready."

2. Shots

Stern was reknotting his the before the mirror in the little room at the end of the hall when he heard the shots. There were two close together, then a third, sounding distant and muffled, so that he could not tell the direction from which they came and stood quite still for a moment, gazing at the picture of arrested motion in the mirror before him. It was a backfire. It couldn't be shots. Nothing could happen—not here—not so soon. He didn't have the guts. He wouldn't dare.

Then there was confusion in the hall, and Stern dived for the door and flung it open on a tableau that included Dr. Stevenson, in his shirt sleeves, standing in the open door of his room, looking alert and disturbed as a startled goat, and Whitey Gordon poised momentarily in the hall, a pistol in his hand.

"The dirty son of a bitch," gasped Gordon, his excited words tumbling out all in one breath without punctuation. "He shot him—through the open window. I think I winged him—I'm going down to see. Take care of Jack, somebody, will ya?"

Ridiculously, it occurred to Stern that nobody had an open window through which to be shot.

"Wait," he shouted, but Gordon was already halfway down the stairs, and the front door banged before Stern had taken more than a few steps.

Jackson lay on his face and very still, with one arm doubled under him and the other reaching out toward the open window from which the lace curtain drifted back lazily. Dr. Stevenson was kneeling beside him when Stern entered the room.

"Is he dead, Doc?"

"Get my bag," snapped the little man. "In the closet in my room." And, when Stern had found the bag and returned it, "Here, help me with this coat. The wound's high under the shoulder bladenasty, but not necessarily serious. Take his legs. We'll get him on the bed."

There was a flurry of feet on the stairs, and Stern turned and attempted to catch Blackie, but she eluded him and flung herself on the floor cradling Jackson's head in her arms. "O God," she moaned. "Not yet. Not so soon."

The little doctor was magnificent. He caught Maeve under the chin and snapped up her head so that she was forced to look at him. The gesture had all the effects of a blow. "Blackie," he snapped. "Hot water and towels. Boil up a scalpel and probe. Scissors, sutures, bandage—we're going after that bullet. Do you want him to lie here and bleed to death?"

Maeve blinked to clear her vision and gave him a long, questioning look. Then she said, "I'm sorry," and struggled to her feet and out of the room. By the time they had Jackson on the bed she was back with water and towels, her face pale and vacuous, but her movements steady, quick, and competent. Stern, backing out of the room, had a final vision of her small white hands wielding scissors to cut away the blood-soaked shirt.

Once in the hall, he turned and went rapidly down the stairs and out the front door, pausing only long enough to speak a reassuring word to Mrs. Cox, already busy at the sterilizer in the little office off the entrance foyer. The sidewalk leading around the house was free of snow, but directly beneath the open window two trails marred the whiteness of the lawn. They converged to an ordinary wooden ladder set against an oak tree about ten feet out from the walk, then led off in parallel lines cutting diagonally across the lawn to the street. Stern hesitated only a moment, then plunged out across the lawn, slipping and sliding in the wet snow but managing to keep his trail well apart and distinct from the other two.

He found Gordon at the corner half a block from the house, the gun still clutched in his hand, peering this way and that down the two streets and cursing aloud in a steady flow that did not once repeat itself. The two streets were deserted except for a distant car and an old lady with a market basket who stood on the curb, her terror of this bareheaded apparition that had dashed at her, gun in hand, beginning to be overcome by outrage at its vocabulary.

"He's gone," Gordon shouted into Stern's face. "He got away." He lapsed into another flurry of profanity.

"Shut up and listen to me. Did you see him? Do you know who it was?"

Gordon shook his head hopelessly. "I saw him on the ladder after he fired. He wore a black slicker but he jumped before I saw his face. He stumbled, and I thought I winged him, but when I got out of the house there was nothing but his footprints in the snow. I guess I'm not very good with one of these things." He held up the gun and surveyed it disgustedly.

"All right," said Stern. It was growing colder, and he chattered a little as he spoke. "Come on, we have to get back to the house and call the police. I should have done it sooner, but maybe there's still time for a prowl car to pick him up."

The old lady finally found her voice. "Police!" she screamed vehemently. "Well! Well, I should think so."

Stern called both the township police and the sheriff's office. He gave Gordon's description of the raincoat but warned that it was

almost certain to be discarded. The best that could be done was to post men at the ferries and vehicular tunnels and send out a general alarm to highway patrols and radio cars to pick up all suspicious persons. The township officials would be over immediately, and Sheriff Christy was also on his way, although the Stevenson residence was outside his jurisdiction.

The complications of a new set of officials in the case did not serve to brighten Stern's outlook. He sighed and was about to put in a call to Nicholson when he received an imperative summons from the head of the stairs. Dr. Stevenson called down to say that Jackson had recovered consciousness and was demanding to speak to him immediately.

The alarm would go across the river automatically, and the call to Nicholson could wait. He left the phone and bounded up the stairs to seize the doctor's arm.

"How is he?"

The old man smiled. "If he doesn't break a blood vessel from indignation he'll live. I never saw anyone so fighting mad in all my life."

The flood of relief that Stern felt at the doctor's answer left him weak. At least he would not have another death on his conscience.

"The wound isn't serious then?"

"Not too serious. Fortunately, the bullet angled up along the bone and lodged in the fleshy part of the shoulder. Barring complications, he should be as fit as ever in three or four weeks."

Jackson lay on his side while Maeve, her lips clamped tight but her tear-stained face no longer blank, applied the finishing touches to the bandaged shoulder and Gordon watched from the foot of the bed. The wounded man was quiet, but his eyes were hot and his outthrust jaw rigid.

When Stern came within his line of vision he said, "I gotta talk to you—right away—alone."

Gordon protested. "He hadn't ought to talk now, had he, Miss O'Callighan? He oughtta rest."

Jackson did not look at him. "It's all right, baby," he told Maeve. "I have to talk to Stern. Now! Right away!"

Maeve rose from beside the bed. "I suppose you won't be quiet otherwise," she said with some of her old spirit. "I never saw such a stubborn man. Just for a minute, though, and don't you dare move."

When the door was closed and they were alone Jackson said, "What happened?"

Stern grinned. "You tell me."

"I mean afterward. After I passed out."

Stern told him. When he had finished Jackson nodded.

"I thought it was something like that. He's too clever to live, the dirty, double-crossing rat. But this time his goose is cooked."

"Did you see him? Do you know who it was?"

"Sure I saw him." Jackson ground his teeth. "I knew before but I wouldn't believe it. I couldn't see how. I'd like to break his neck myself but now that I'm laid up I'll have to turn him over to the cops before he kills somebody else."

"Yho?"

Jackson shook his head slowly. "Not you. The cops and plenty of 'em."

"Why won't you tell me?"

"Too dangerous. He's still got a gun. He thinks he fooled us. He'll wait."

"Listen," said Stern. "I know what you're thinking, you crazy fool. You mean you're going to tell the cops—"

"That's just what I mean."

"But you're wrong—dead wrong."

"The hell I am. I don't know all the angles but I know what I see."

Stern wasted no more time in argument. He saw that Jackson was stubborn, and that left only one thing to be done. Much as he disliked it, his hand was called, and there would have to be an immediate showdown.

"Okay," he told the man on the bed. "Do me just one favor, will you?"

"What?"

"Hold your fire until we get everybody in the case rounded up. Then you can accuse whomever you want."

The dying wail of a siren sounded in the street outside, and both men paused to listen.

"That's the cops," said Jackson. "Boy, that's the first time I was ever glad to hear that noise." He looked up at Stern. "How soon?"

"A couple of hours."

"All right. I guess the son of a bitch will keep that long."

Maeve was waiting outside the door, as impatient and maternal as a cat with one kitten. Her brittle exterior had crumbled to an appalling extent in a few brief hours, but she was more radiant than Stern had ever seen her.

"My condolences to both of you," he said gently. "I think he'll live to beat you."

Maeve put her hand on his arm and looked up into his face. "How did you know?"

"Even a bum detective like me couldn't miss. Besides, I eavesdropped."

Her eyes met his, and her hand tightened on his sleeve. A message of sympathy and understanding passed silently between them. Then she dropped his arm and went quietly into the room and closed the door.

Stern went down the stairs to find a pompous chief of police talking to Dr. Stevenson and Whitey Gordon. He joined the group, introduced himself, and added his story to those of the others, then drew the doctor aside.

"You wouldn't want your patient to suffer a relapse, would you, Doc?"

"If he does I'm sunk," chuckled the old man. "My niece just tells me she has special designs on the young man." Stern nodded. "Well, then, your patient is very sick. He can't be disturbed and under no circumstances can he be moved."

The doctor digested this diagnosis for a moment. Then his white goatee bobbed up and down as gravely as though it were a medical opinion advanced by a high-priced consultant. "I understand," he said.

"Good. Then wouldn't it be advisable for you to be in close attendance for the next couple of hours?"

Dr. Stevenson sensed developments he was loath to miss. "Won't I be needed down here?" he demurred. "The police . . ." His eagerness was so transparent that Stern grinned.

"I'll take care of the police, Doctor. You get up and look after your patient."

When the little old man had gone somewhat reluctantly up the stairs Stern turned his attention to the township officer whose name was Holcomb.

"Chief," he said when he succeeded in gaining the official ear, "if you have a man you can spare I'd post him outside the wounded man's door."

"What for?" snapped the other. "You don't think there's any chance of another attack, do you?"

"Not exactly." Stern's tone was suggestively vague. "If you'll step outside with me, Chief, I'll show you—"

The township man was an old-time conspirator. He followed Stern out onto the porch and closed the door carefully behind him. "What's up, Counselor?"

"The man upstairs is a vital witness in two murder cases. That's why he was shot. And he just told me confidentially that he knows who shot him. Now if we cooperate I think we've got a chance of cleaning up this case and a couple of others as well. And one of the others is the Murdock killing."

"The Murdock killing? Hell, they got the guy who did that. McArthur was in my office just this afternoon, and he says——"

"How would you like to prove McArthur's wrong?"

The official's eyes gleamed. "That'd be something," he admitted.

"You mean you think the fellow who did this shooting---?"

Stern interrupted hurriedly. "I don't think; I know. And if you'll help I'll prove it. All we have to do is get all the suspects in those other cases out here—"

"Wait a minute. What the hell do we have to do that for? Why not just nail the guy this guy says shot him and go to work on him."

Stern couldn't help it. "The guy this guy says shot him," he repeated, "has committed three murders and failed in a fourth by the width of a thin whisker, all in the last three days. Do you think you could beat that out of him? He's afraid but he's more afraid of several other things than he is of you and your rubber hose."

"Oh, tough, is he?" asked the chief. "Then how---"

A car was drawing up before the house. "That would be Sheriff Christy." Stern cut off Holcomb's question.

"Not tough," he said. "Desperate. There's a tremendous difference. Get him out here along with the rest of the people I name, and I'll crack this thing for you. He'll be your prisoner, and you can have the credit. Is it a deal?"

The man still hesitated. "What do you want me to do?" he asked suspiciously.

"Follow my lead and back me up." Stern moved down the steps to greet the sheriff. "Glad you could come," he said, shaking hands. "Will McArthur be over?"

"McArthur? What do you need him for?"

"I don't." Stern grinned. "But I think he might want to be here. This is the pay-off on the Murdock business. Chief Holcomb, here, is requesting a roundup of suspects for questioning."

"What?"

"Yeah. He just decided to ask you to bring your prisoner over. Burke's still in your custody, isn't he?"

The sheriff's blue eyes twinkled. "Who's going to do the questioning?"

"The chief insists that I do it," Stern told him unblinkingly. "He

agrees that both this shooting and the Murdock murder are part of a pattern that started with the killing of the longshoreman, Riorden, and that since I have been connected with the case from the beginning——"

"I get it. I get it." The sheriff held up his hand. "I don't need a blueprint. And if you want Burke over here you'll get him. Of course, you'll have to remember that he's still my prisoner."

"Sure. Sure." Stern hurried the two officials into the house. The highest hurdle was still ahead—getting Nicholson to agree to the plan.

Once on the phone, Nicholson fussed and fumed as Stern had known he would. "Of all the harebrained screwball ideas," he raved, "this takes the prize. Even if it's legal—and I'm not sure it is—I'm taking an awful chance transporting witnesses out of the state for questioning. How do I know it'll work? How do I know I'm not letting the city in for a mess of damage suits that'll knock our case from hell to breakfast?"

"The same answer to both questions," said Stern. "You'll have to take my word for it. Either this works, or we'll never find the answer, and this fellow'll go on killing people. Besides, Chief Holcomb requests it. You wouldn't hold out on a brother officer?"

The answer that came sputtering out of the phone was slightly incoherent, but Stern gathered the gist of it which was that all smart-aleck young shysters who meddled in police business should be in hell and would be, if the speaker had his way. He held the receiver some inches away from his ear and waited patiently for the storm to blow itself out. When Nicholson paused for breath he said one word:

"So?"

"So to hell with you," said Nicholson in a weary, defeated tone. "I don't give a damn for a carload of Chief Holcombs, but you know I'll do anything short of committing a murder myself to get this case cleaned up."

"Okay," said Stern. "Get 'em out here as soon as you can, will you? And don't forget Powers and Mayme Burke."

"Suppose they don't want to come? What am I supposed to do—shanghai 'em? And what in the name of common sense do you want with Mayme Burke?"

"Persuade 'em," laughed Stern. "The last guy out here is a sissy. For crying out loud, do I have to tell you how to round up suspects? And Mayme's important; she's a character witness."

"Whose character?"

"What do you care? You're a married man."

Stern stood by while the sheriff called the jail and ordered one of his deputies to bring Burke to Dr. Stevenson's immediately, then called several restaurants until he located McArthur and informed the loudly protesting county attorney of impending developments. This business finished, Stern and the two officials went outside again.

Two prowl-car men, very natty in blue uniforms with shiny black leather putties and Sam Browne belts, were guarding the foot of the terrace steps against a little group of curious citizens and a couple of yapping reporters. Holcomb called one of the cops and sent him up to guard the door of Jackson's room. He quieted the reporters, giving them the bare facts of what had happened and hinting that he would have a very important statement to make in the near future. While the chief was thus occupied Stern led Sheriff Christy around the side of the house to where a middle-aged detective with the lugubrious features of a Newfoundland dog stood disconsolately by the tree, guarding the ladder and the footprints in the snow.

It had stopped snowing, and the night was clear and crisp. Light from the windows of the house made orange rectangles on the lawn and glistened on the branches of the tall tree. Stern was reminded of the Christmas-card impression he had gotten when he first drove up to the house an hour or so ago. Things had certainly happened fast in that hour to dispel the feeling of peace and security that first impression had given him.

Chief Holcomb joined them, and Stern again related what had

happened. Sheriff Christy looked up at the branch of the tree against which the ladder leaned and nodded.

"The way that branch curves, a man on the ladder would have to stand below the level of the window to get a clean shot into the room. That's probably why the path of the bullet ranged upward. Don't look like the fellow had much time to plan what he wanted to do. Where'd he get the ladder?"

"Dr. Stevenson told me that it was lying alongside the house," said Chief Holcomb. "He had been using it earlier in the day." He turned to the sad-looking detective. "You boys find anything, Hurd?"

"Not much," said Hurd. "Sam and Peanuts followed the footsteps out to the edge of the walk. They're out there now, trying to dig up something. Them footprints are our best bet. They're so clear you can see the trade-mark on the heel a couple of places."

"That oughtta help," the chief nodded. He turned back to the others. "Well, boys, it don't look like there's much for us to do out here. Let's get back into the house where it's warm."

As they rounded the front of the house another of Holcomb's men came hurrying up the steps from the street. He had a black rubber slicker over his arm and carried in one hand a heavy pair of old-fashioned overshoes with metal fasteners.

"Look what we found in the bushes down by the corner," he called out to the chief.

Holcomb took the garments and examined them. "Fairly new and in good condition," he said. "Looks like they might have been worn by our man."

"It's a cinch they were," said the detective. "They were thrown over the bushes from the sidewalk. You could see where they had hit the top branches and knocked off the snow as they rolled down. And there was snow under them, so they must have been thrown there recently."

The chief turned to Stern. "This is going to make it easy," he announced gleefully. "When our guests arrive we'll find out who these belong to in a hurry and then we'll have our man."

Stern shrugged, and his face reflected none of the chief's enthusiasm.

"Maybe we can find out whom they belong to right now," he said.

He took the garments and led the way into the front door of the house and through to the kitchen. Mrs. Cox and Whitey were sitting at the kitchen table eating roast duck and dressing. Whitey had the good grace to look guilty.

"Won't you have some dinner, Mr. Stern?" urged Mrs. Cox. "I took a tray upstairs for the doctor and Maeve and the poor young man who was shot and I almost had to fight to get it past that policeman at the door. Whatever happens, there's no sense letting good food go to waste." She noticed the articles Stern was carrying. "Where did you find the doctor's raincoat and overshoes? I told him someone would steal them if he kept leaving them on the back porch."

Stern turned to Holcomb with a rueful grin. "There's the answer to your footprints, chief," he said.

3. Pay-Off

LATER THAT EVENING an imposing array of officialdom gathered before the red brick fireplace at one end of Dr. Stevenson's spacious living room. Stern and Chief Holcomb were there, of course, seated side by side in large armchairs like royalty granting an audience, with a slightly fidgety Nicholson on one side of them and a scowling McArthur on the other. Sheriff Christy, after escorting his prisoner, Tommy Burke, to the couch on one side of the room, had removed the handcuffs from Tommy and retired to a vantage point on the deep sill of the front window.

Between the sheriff on the window ledge and the husky trooper in the doorway, it was going to be difficult for anyone to get out of the room in a hurry. Mayme Burke was on the couch beside Tommy, defiantly redhaired and attractive, her long-lashed, heavy-lidded eyes flicking from face to face with a hint of sheathed claws in every glance. In the corner of the room beyond the couch Powers sat stiff and uncomfortable on a straight-backed chair, his eyes straight ahead and an expression of bored snobbery on his heavy-jowled face. Across the room four of the five longshoremen who completed the gathering had arranged themselves in a row like a union delegation, while the fifth, Mellus, sat stolidly apart, his hands clasped across his fat stomach and his hat on the floor beside him. Painter and Gordon looked calm and at ease, but Sangster was obviously apprehensive, and Colletti was downright scared.

From where he sat Stern could see the outer hall and a portion of the stairway curving up to the second floor of the house. His eyes, moving slowly about the circle of faces, met the gaze of the murderer for a brief moment and passed on. Neither his expression nor that of the other changed, yet, in the instant their glance had met, both knew. There was a desperation and mocking challenge in the other's eyes, and Stern shifted slightly in his chair, no longer in doubt as to what would happen once this man had been dragged into the open.

The assistant D. A. leaned back deep in his chair and began speaking in a quiet voice.

"The first thing to be done tonight is to demonstrate a logical connection between the shooting of Jackson and the murders of Nellie Cosimo, Murdock, and the longshoreman, Riorden."

At the mention of Nellie Cosimo's name Nicholson had blurted a startled, "What?" but Stern completed his sentence before he paused and looked at him.

"This business is a mess," he said, "and we'll never get it cleared up if the rest of you start interrupting. Give me a chance, and I'll hand it to you double-wrapped in cellophane."

His gaze shifted to McArthur briefly, then he blinked once or twice and continued:

"This case is a mess for a lot of reasons. First, the psychology of

the killer—hot and cold by turns, reckless one minute and overcautious the next, scared stiff all the time and yet committing his crimes under the very noses of the police and getting away scot free. Second, the separate police jurisdictions under which the crimes were committed, each interested only in cleaning up the mess in his own district and jealous as hell of any interference from outside. Third, the red herrings dragged across the scene by two or three opportunists who thought they saw a chance to profit by the events surrounding the murders.

"Still, in spite of all this, there should have been no trouble linking up these crimes and spotting the killer, because the crimes all had one obvious common denominator: Motive. Motive made them a simple succession of cause and effect from Riorden's murder right down to the shooting of Jackson.

"I'm not going to be long-winded about this. There was plenty of evidence in the Riorden murder pointing to a stool pigeon in the Eastcoast union, planted there by Murdock in an effort to discredit the union leaders and pave the way for the return of the labor racketeers who had formerly dominated the water front. There were indications that Riorden's murder was part of this scheme, yet there was only one possible reason for resort to so drastic an act as murder, and that was the threat of exposure. Of course, exposure would have been fatal to the stool pigeon's plans—if not to the stool pigeon himself." Stern paused and grinned at his audience. "I don't have to tell you what happens to stool pigeons on the water front.

"So this fellow killed Riorden, and while he was about it he planted a frame on the union leader who was likely to be most troublesome in the threatened strike.

"This theory of a spy in the union not only determined the motive for the murder, but it automatically limited the number of suspects, since in order to operate effectively the stool pigeon had to be high in the councils of the union and probably was a member of the committee negotiating for a new contract. Seven men remained on that committee, and it was a hundred-to-one shot that

one of those seven had killed Riorden. However, every one of the men on that committee, excepting Jackson, had an alibi.

"The preliminary investigation of the Riorden slaying was interrupted by the murder of Murdock. Here, on the face of it, was an entirely separate killing with an acceptable motive in the robbery of the safe. The presence of Jackson and Gordon in the neighborhood seemed to be purely coincidental, and there were three logical suspects placed at the scene of the crime. But when it was discovered that the description of one of these suspects fitted a member of the union committee—Burke—it looked as though a connection between the two killings was established and we had our man. Burke was arrested." Here Stern paused and bowed politely to Nicholson, who grunted and scowled in response.

"But the city police failed to break his alibi for the first murder. However, he admitted being on the scene of the second killing and was charged with that crime. As a matter of fact, Burke could have killed both Riorden and Murdock. Riorden was killed sometime between twelve and twelve forty-five. Burke could have slipped out of the back door of the saloon shortly before twelve o'clock, committed the murder, and been back in ten or fifteen minutes. The bartender broke down when I questioned him this afternoon and admitted he couldn't swear that Burke had been in the booth during that time. And Burke could certainly have killed Murdock. He had motive and opportunity for both murders—"

"Why you"—Mayme Burke started out of her seat—"you crumby little runt."

"Please, Miss Burke. Save your vocabulary until I've finished. I told you once and I'll tell you again—I don't believe your brother killed either of these men. Why? Because he was in jail when Nellie Cosimo died, and Nellie Cosimo was killed by the same person who killed the other two. Motive, the common denominator in all these crimes——"

"Common denominator, poppycock," burst out McArthur. "This

is the biggest damn nonsense I ever heard. I came here to get facts, not common denominators."

Stern's bland face and owlish eyes turned slowly in the direction of the county attorney. "Mr. McArthur," he said in a voice that fairly dripped honey, "will you please be patient for a few more minutes? When I have finished you may have the floor."

McArthur spluttered and subsided, and Stern went on in his quiet, droning tone.

"I was about to say that Nellie Cosimo was murdered by the same person who killed both Murdock and Riorden and for the same reason—fear of exposure. If you'll all just be patient I'll demonstrate that in a few minutes.

"These were smart murders. They were crudely planned and hastily committed under the compulsion of terror that amounted almost to hysteria. Yet the killer left surprisingly few clues, and, as Mr. McArthur and Captain Nicholson know so well, it is facts not theories that stand up in court. As long as the killer stuck to direct action dictated practically on the spur of the moment by a cowardly brutal nature he was lucky and amazingly successful but as soon as he tried cleverness he was sunk. His first mistake of this nature was his planting the spy report on the body of Riorden. That identified him as one of the seven men on the committee, since no one else knew that Riorden had that report. His second mistake was his carefully planned alibis that, in themselves, would have drawn attention to him immediately, had there not been so many suspects with alibis. But his third and fatal mistake was the manner in which he killed Nellie Cosimo. Killing Nellie was dangerous enough in itself, since it clinched the theory that these crimes were not unrelated but grew one out of the other, but the time and manner of that killing did much more than that—it eliminated the only other suspect that could be seriously considered and pointed directly to the guilty man. The moment I heard the news of Nellie's death I knew who the murderer was.

"Powers!"

The former butler started as Stern suddenly snapped his name. Then he rallied and said, "Yes sir," in his usual wooden tone.

"Why did you go to Cosimo's house last night?"

"Well, sir, I fancied I'd do a little amateur detecting of my own." Powers' voice was calm and admirably controlled. "Miss Cosimo had taken the money from Mr. Murdock's safe---"

"How did you know she had taken the money?"

"Why, the keys, sir. They weren't on the desk when I first came into the room. I reasoned that only Miss Cosimo would think to look in—in Mr. Murdock's pocket"—Powers shuddered slightly—"for them."

Nicholson said heavily, "We found the money—in a safe-deposit box registered under the name of Nellie——"

"Yes, yes, I know," Stern interrupted hurriedly. "All right, Powers, what were you after—your cut?"

Powers mustered all the dignity of which he was capable. "I should think not. Certainly not. I wanted to recover the money for Mrs. Murdock. I had reason to believe that Miss Cosimo was in danger and that she was very frightened and I thought—"

"Why did you think she was in danger or frightened?"

"Because it seemed probable that she and I were the only two persons left who knew the murderer, sir."

Under the tempest of surprised exclamations that followed Powers' statement Stern heard a softly expelled sigh like a small wind in the room. He did not look in the direction of the sound but he shifted slightly in his chair, and his right hand disappeared in the cushions at his side. When the commotion had quieted Stern asked:

"So you know who the murderer is, Powers?"

"Perhaps I should not have said murderer, sir. But I did know that Mr. Murdock had employed an—er—confidential agent, shall we say, to keep him informed of what took place in the union."

"How did you know that?"

"Mr. Murdock mentioned it to Miss Cosimo once in my pres-

ence—and on one occasion I saw the man talking to Mr. Murdock in the library."

"Did you know the man's name?"

Powers shook his head.

"Would you recognize him if you saw him again?"

"Only in a very general way, sir. If you will remember, sir, I have already stated that I did not see his face."

McArthur snapped, "Why didn't you tell us this before?"

"I did tell you part of it," said Powers simply. "At that time I did not understand the nature or extent of this man's activities and felt that I was acting in my employer's best interests in not mentioning them."

Sheriff Christy, from his seat on the window ledge, said, "Holy cats," and gave Powers a look of astonishment mingled with respect.

Stern continued his questioning: "Have you seen this man since?"

"I believe so, sir. I believe he was the man I saw looking in the basement window of Miss Cosimo's house last night."

"Wait a minute." Captain Nicholson sat up tensely. "You said you saw this man squatting down on the sidewalk in front of the house?"

"That's right, sir," said Powers. "He was bending over with his back to me, and I naturally assumed that he was trying to see into the lighted basement windows."

"How long was he there?" The questioner was still Nicholson.

"About five minutes, to the best of my judgment. Then he rose and walked away in the opposite direction from where I was standing."

Nicholson frowned and passed his hand over his face. Then he nodded slowly. "Well I'll be damned," he muttered, half to himself. "I'm a hell of a cop."

Stern's eyes twinkled. "Exactly," he said, "and I'm a hell of a detective. I gave the murderer his opportunity and practically watched him taking advantage of it. But for all his cleverness, the fact that Powers saw him squatting there on the sidewalk and was able to describe him later gave him dead away. Powers said he was tall and—"

A sudden commotion caused Stern to pause and look up. Loud shouts and bangings came from the floor above, and an apparition came rushing down the stairs and into the room, neatly eluded the astonished trooper at the door, and shook a hairy fist six inches from Stern's nose. "You dirty, double-crossing rat," it shouted. "Try to put one over on me, will you?"

"Jackson," said Stern. "How the hell did you get out?"

Jackson, a terrifying figure in pants and a bathrobe that gaped open to reveal his hairy chest and an array of bandages, threw back his head and laughed. "I locked the flatfoot in. What the hell are you trying to do, sidetrack me so you can find an out for this murdering stool?"

He swung around toward the seated longshoremen. Whitey Gordon and Sangster started forward, but Stern snapped sharply, "Sit still, all of you. Trooper, get this damn fool out of here and take him back to bed before he murders somebody."

"Keep your hands off me, copper," warned Jackson as the trooper advanced.

"Jack, you idiot," began Stern and then cried, too late, "Look out behind you. He's got your gun."

The trooper clapped his hand to the leather holster at his side and whirled, but the tall man was already standing in the doorway, the heavy automatic in his hand.

Jackson said in a bewildered voice. "What the hell--"

"Stay still, all of you," the tall man snarled, "or there'll be a mess on the carpet. I've taken all I can stand. I'm going out of here and I'll keep going, and you won't catch me, you dumb coppers, but there's one little item I gotta attend to first." His beady eyes centered on Stern, and his lips drew back in a grin of pure hate. "You've played your last cat-and-mouse game, you dirty little kike," he said, raising the gun.

Stern pulled the trigger of the gun he had been nursing in the

cushions of the big chair next his hip. The bullet caught the murderer just above the belt buckle, and the gun in his hand exploded with a terrific crash, the heavy slug knocking plaster off the ceiling. His face contorted into a mask of agony, and he slumped slowly forward to writhe on the living-room rug, shot through the stomach. In the moment of comparative silence that followed the thunder of the shots Stern said, "All through this case I've been waiting for somebody to call me that."

"Good God!" said Jackson. "You shot the wrong man."

4. Postscript

BACK IN BED, under Maeve's reproachful eye, Jackson was mournfully contrite. "I'm sorry," he said for the tenth time, "but I just had to find out what this little shyster had up his sleeve."

"You're lucky you didn't get shot again," said Maeve. Her tone was unrelenting, but her fingers brushed his shoulder momentarily, and he reached up and caught them in his good hand.

Stern, leaning over the foot of the bed, said dryly, "I hope you're satisfied. You damn near spoiled the show."

"You won't ever tell Whitey, will you?" begged Jackson. "He'd never get over my suspecting him of being a stool."

"I won't tell him," assured Stern.

"Won't he guess?" asked Maeve.

Stern grinned. "He'll never guess this big lug is that dumb."

"But look," said Jackson desperately. "That clock in Mayme's car—I thought he set it ahead, and even if he didn't he knew it was fast and didn't say anything. I'd been suspicious ever since I saw him in Murdock's office the morning of the accident, and it looked like he needed an alibi. I couldn't believe it, but there it was. And when that slug banged into my shoulder tonight and I turned around and saw him with a smoking gun in his hand it

never occurred to me that he had shot out the window instead of at me. I had just one thought—to get my hands on his throat. Man, it was lucky I passed out when I did. One thing I still can't understand is where Whitey got his hands on a gun."

"I can tell you that—I got it for him. I didn't think you'd be in any real danger out here, but if you were Whitey was the best bodyguard I could think of." Stern left the foot of the bed and sat down in a chair by the window. He was very tired, and somewhere in the back of his mind was the numbing thought that he had probably killed a man. He wondered if he would see the man before him next time he shot at the target in the range at head-quarters.

Dr. Stevenson came briskly into the room, followed by Whitey Gordon. "Well, everything's cleaned up, and everybody's gone," said the doctor. He sounded a little regretful, as though he had enjoyed the excitement.

"How's the patient?"

"What patient?" said Jackson. "I've had worse knocks than this on the docks and worked the day out."

"Will you stop bragging?" said Maeve.

Stern looked up. "Is he dead, Doctor?" he asked softly. He already knew the answer.

The doctor nodded. "Internal hemorrhage. If it hadn't been for that we might have saved him for the state."

"Did he recover consciousness at all?"

"Just for a minute or two. Captain Nicholson was there and got a confession, but there wasn't time to get it signed."

The doctor sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at Stern speculatively. "I followed the case in the papers," he said after a moment of silence, "and I had sense enough to know the murders were linked together but I don't see how you singled him out from the other suspects. I think you owe us a résumé."

Whitey said: "I had a hunch it was him all the time. It didn't surprise me none. But how the hell did he turn on that gas?"

"Won't it wait till morning, Nunky?" said Maeve. "Joey's tired."

Stern gave her a grateful smile. "I am tired," he said, "but I'd rather get the post-mortems over with." He turned to Dr. Stevenson.

"We may as well take it from the beginning," he said. "Murdock had a labor spy planted in the union whose job was to get Jackson out and Weller and his crowd back in. The spy stole Jackson's longshore hook, filed it, and planned to use it to frame Jackson as soon as the strike broke. Something happened to change his plans the night of the union meeting—either Riorden saw him plant that spy report and tried to blackmail him, or he was afraid Riorden had seen him and couldn't take a chance. Anyway, he got Riorden in that dark street behind the parked truck and killed him and planted the hook and clothes in garbage cans where he was sure the police would find them there. Then he went home and framed his alibi by reaching in through his landlady's window and turning her clock back. Then he rang the bell and established the time by knocking on his landlady's door. Later he came back downstairs, went outside again, and reset the clock. It was a simple alibi but it was a tough one to break because the landlady didn't suspect anything and was absolutely honest in her conviction that he was in the house at ten minutes past twelve.

"The next day the spy went to work as usual, but he managed to slip off the dock and get across the river to Murdock's. He had probably done this before when he wanted to report to Murdock without being suspected. Again, I doubt that murder was planned; what probably happened was that there was a quarrel and the spy became frightened that Murdock would turn him in—so he eliminated Murdock.

"That left him in the clear, except for Nellie Cosimo. Nellie knew who the spy was—was pretty friendly with him evidently, since he used her basement as a workshop. For a day or two he trusted Nellie not to give him away—and then the fear maggots in his brain became too strong, and he planned one more murder that would eliminate the last danger and really put him in the clear.

"This time his victim was suspicious and on her guard, and the police were watching, so he had to plan something really good and he did. He evolved a method of murder that was all but perfect."

Whitey interrupted. "I may be dumb," he said, "but I still don't see how that gas was turned off and on again while we were in the house."

"I'm surprised at you, young man," said Dr. Stevenson. "You really should develop your powers of observation."

"Don't tell me you know how it was done, Nunky," exclaimed Maeve.

"Certainly, I do. I knew how it was done the moment I heard the butler's story."

"You mean about his seeing someone looking in the basement window?"

Dr. Stevenson nodded. "It was obvious what that man was doing. He was tampering with the gas connection." He looked at Stern. "I'm right, Joey, am I not?"

"You are, Doctor," said Stern, "and I must admit there's nothing wrong with your powers of observation. The average person walks over those little squares in the sidewalk a dozen times a day without noticing them or connecting them with anything in particular. I had to step on the one in front of Nellie Cosimo's house and realize it was loose before I tumbled to the significance of that kneeling figure Powers told us about."

"You mean those little square plates with a G on them?" said Whitey, his eyes wide with sudden realization. "Gee, I never thought of the gas being turned off from there. I thought you had to have a special kind of wrench—"

Stern smiled. "You do, Whitey. Remember the metal tubing we saw in Cosimo's basement—that was what it was used for, and I, for one, was an idiot not to tumble sooner than I did. You see, those sidewalk gas outlets are about three feet deep with a square iron nut at the bottom. You have to have something that will fit over that nut with a handle long enough to reach. Our clever

stool pigeon made himself such a tool out of that metal piping. He carried it under his coat that night and after he had turned the gas off with it and then back on again he probably threw it in the river."

"But how did he know the gas would be on?" asked Maeve.

"He knew a lot about Nellie and her habits. He knew she had a cold and a deathly fear of drafts. He knew the cough mixture she was taking was a mild opiate. He could see the flicker of the gas radiator against her curtains after her light was out. All he had to do was wait until he was fairly sure she was asleep and then manipulate the flow of gas as he did. He had a much greater difficulty to overcome, but that was solved very nicely for him when I sent away the detective who was guarding the front of the house. That's why I feel partially responsible for that woman's death."

Maeve leaned over and patted his knee. "You mustn't feel like that, Joey dear," she consoled. "You couldn't know."

Jackson, who had been listening quietly, asked, "But why did he try to shoot me? And how did he know I was out here to begin with?"

"You stuck your neck out by telling everyone who would listen that you knew who the murderer was." Stern grinned ruefully. "As for his knowing where you were, I spread the word on that myself."

"You mean—you——" gasped Maeve.

Stern nodded shamefacedly. "I used Jackson as a decoy. I had to get the murderer out in the open. But I didn't think he would strike so soon and I had one of Nicholson's men as a special guard on him."

"So he gave the cop the slip," said Jackson.

"Going and coming," said Stern. "He had sense enough to figure the ferries would be guarded on the way back, so he hopped a truck and rode in with a load of potatoes. He got rid of his gun on the way."

"All of this still doesn't explain how you spotted the right

man," said Dr. Stevenson testily. "Or were you just bluffing downstairs?"

"I wasn't bluffing," said Stern. "I knew there was only one person it could be, because only one possible person fitted Powers' description."

"Nonsense," blustered the doctor, "there were several tall suspects, and anyway Powers' description was too vague."

"Powers described a tall, active man," said Stern patiently. "Of course Powers was himself a suspect and might have told his story of the Peeping Tom just to throw us off the track but Powers didn't fit into the stool-pigeon theory, and there was no other motive connecting him with the murders, so I believed he was telling the truth and that he had actually seen the murderer at work.

"His story eliminated Jackson and Whitey, who were with me at the time, and Burke, who was in jail. Colletti was too small and Mellus too fat and slow-moving. Powers described the man's face as a white blur, so it couldn't have been the Negro, Sangster. That left only one person—Painter—but then I had settled on Painter some time before through a similar process of elimination. Only the fellow was too clever, and I didn't have any real proof."

"Doc Painter." Jackson spoke the name almost sadly. "I actually accused him of being a stool pigeon once but I didn't really suspect him." He looked at Whitey out of the corner of his eye. "Boy, what an idiot I was," he said.

"You're just naturally too trusting," said Whitey. "If you was a mug like me you just wouldn't trust anybody. Why I even suspected you for a while, Jack."

"Oh, Whitey," said Maeve. "You ought to be ashamed of your-self!"

"Not me," said Whitey stolidly. "A stool pigeon's like the guy who steals your dame—he's usually the last one you'd suspect."