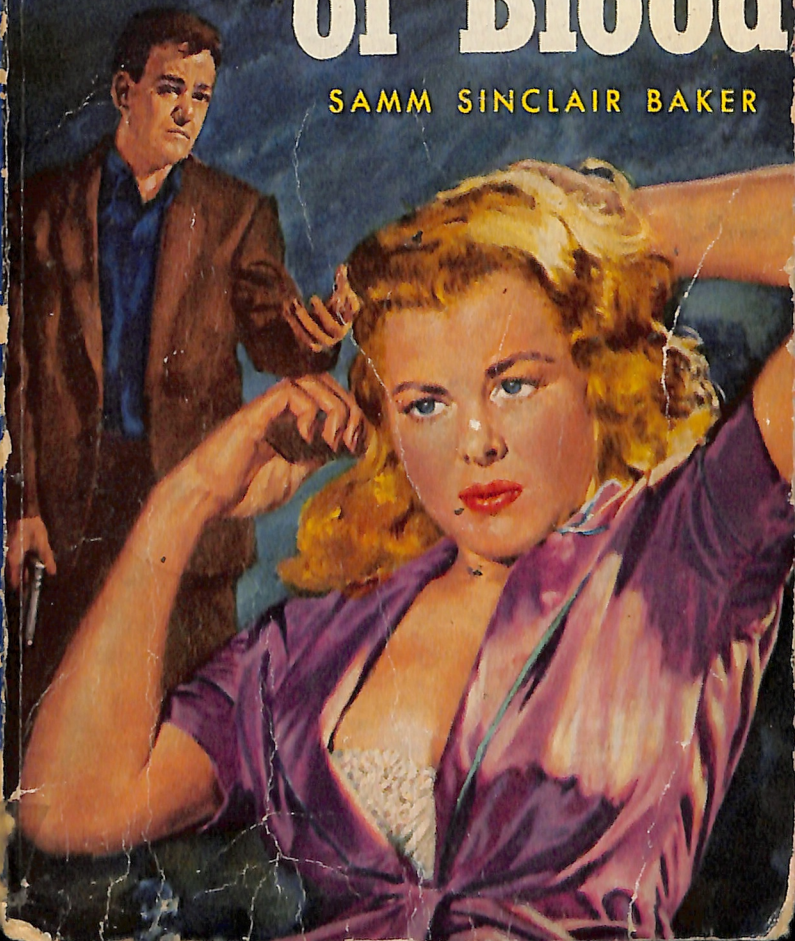


A GRAPHIC
MYSTERY

25¢

One Touch of Blood

SAMM SINCLAIR BAKER



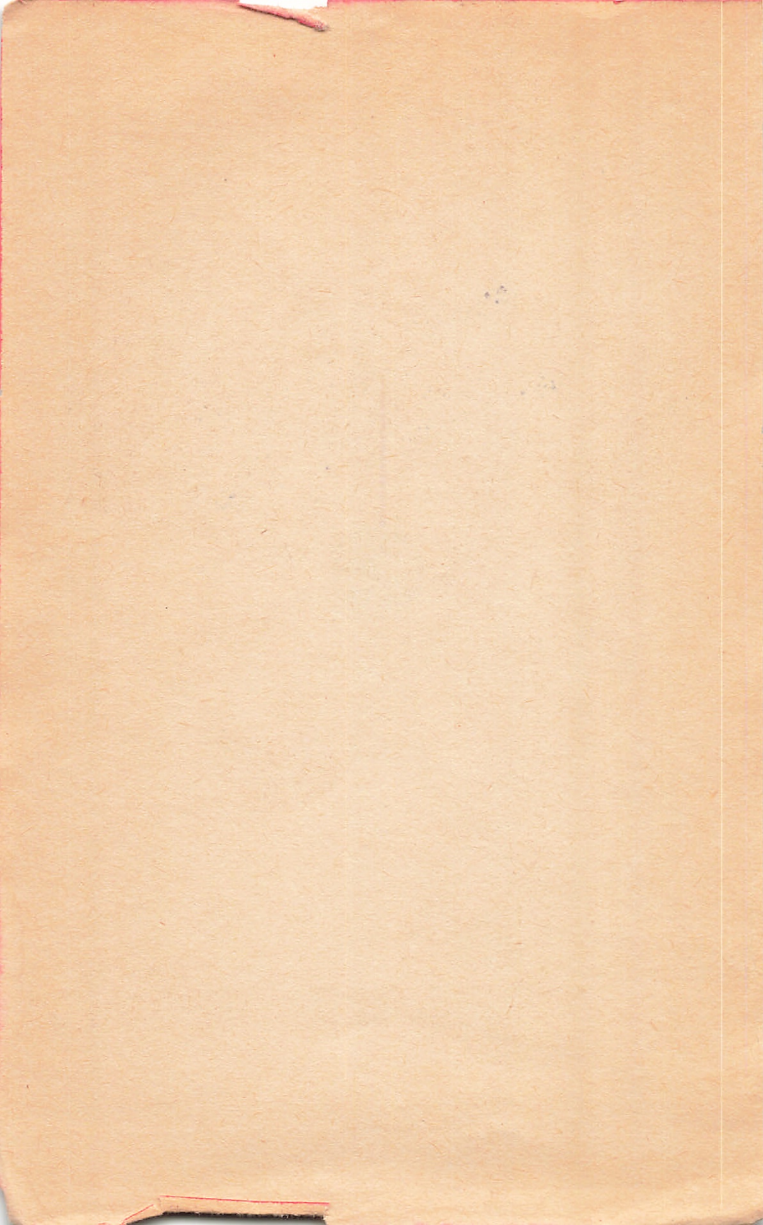
LOGAN BOOK EXCHANGE

75 South Main Street

Logan, Utah

Exchange & Buy Outright $\frac{1}{2}$ Price





ONE TOUCH OF BLOOD



SAMM SINCLAIR BAKER

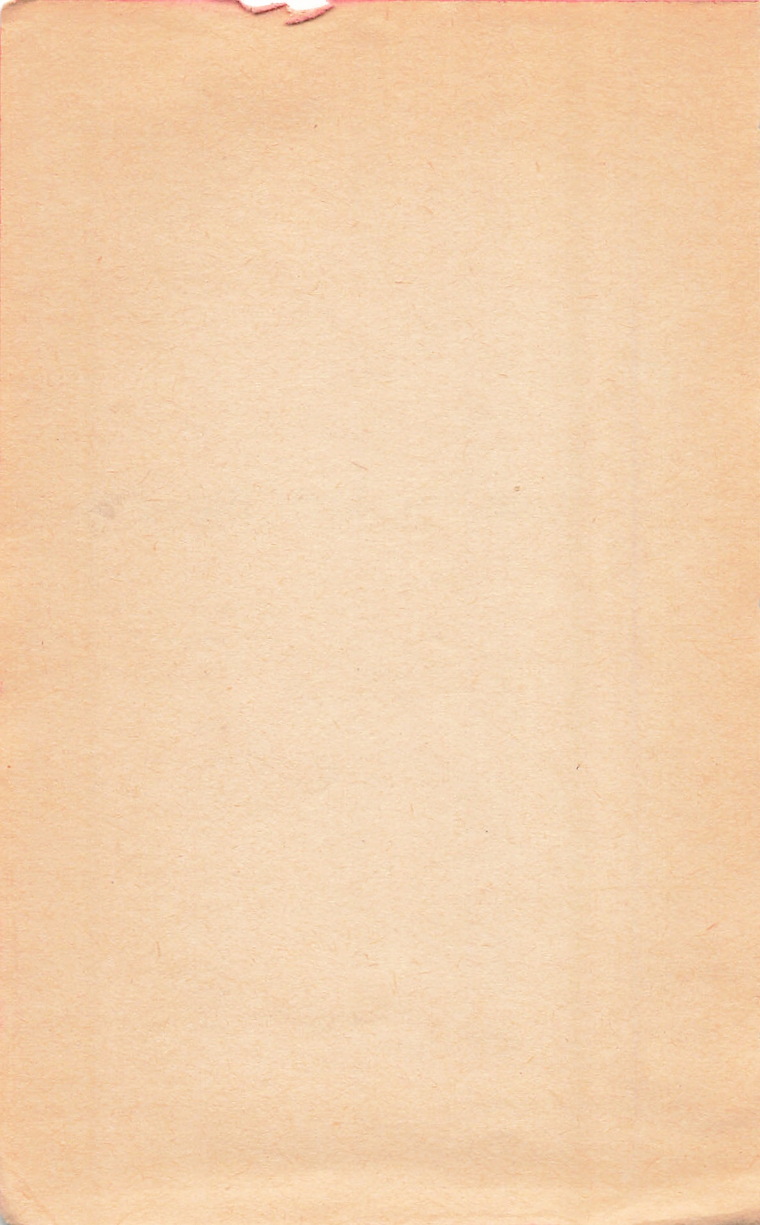
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ALL CHARACTERS IN THIS WORK ARE FICTITIOUS
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One Touch Of Blood



One

THE TELEPHONE rang insistently. I tried to ignore it. Because I hate telephones. I should have been born in the days when they delivered important messages to you by ox-cart. Even that would have been too quick. Because I also hate important messages. Maybe the reason is that I'm in the advertising business. Where every message is "important."

I let the damned thing ring. It stopped. My gorgeous new redheaded secretary erupted efficiently through the door into my office.

"It's J. B. on the telephone for you, Mr. Clark," she announced. Her excitement agitated the front of her pink blouse. She'd only been working for me a week so I hadn't gotten around yet to deciding whether or not they were real.

I answered idly, "Are they real?"

Off guard, she questioned, "Are what real?"

I half-smiled into her round eyes. Hmmm, very light blue.

Her sudden blush was dark red. She repeated, "J. B. himself is on the telephone."

"I guess I'd better speak with himself."

She nodded with relief and as I lifted the phone started walking out. At the door she turned and said blandly, "They are." The door closed behind her.

It was my turn to be stupid. I called out, "What are what?"

A strangled voice from the telephone screamed, "What do you mean—what are what?"

I felt very pleased as revelation hit me. To myself I said, "They *are!*" To the phone, I said, "How are you, J. B.?"

J. B. headed up my most important advertising account, Pluperfect Liquors, Inc., makers of Old Rankler bourbon. Maybe J. B. gave me the account because the amount of Old Rankler I drank was alone enough to cover half the appropriation. His full name was J. B. Plupe. His partners were J. C. Plupe and J. D. Plupe. Jon, John, and Jonathan respectively. Their multimillionaire grandfather's name had been John, which explains why Pop had dubbed his boys so they would all be named after grandpa and share in his liquor fortune.

J. B. was yelling into the phone, "We just had a meeting and everybody has accepted your new murder campaign for Old Rankler!"

"That's great, J. B." I ought to have been enthusiastic. I was not displeased. But I'd been in advertising more than ten years, and everything in advertising is so enthusiastic that I'd lost all genuine enthusiasm years before. How enthusiastic can you get? I repeated more loudly, "Great, J. B. Thanks a lot. I'll get started on the plans right away, as outlined . . ."

"Wait a minute," he enthused, "I've got a terrific new thought to point up your murder idea."

I deflated. I should never have come to the office this morning. I shoulda stood in bed or in a bar. Every time J. B. gets an idea, I get trouble. The kind of trouble that should happen to a competitor.

"An idea?" I moaned.

"Yeah," he gloated. "You'd better sail right over here so I can launch it at you." Since J. B. acquired a 90-foot motor launch, he talks a nauseating nautical lingo that would make even a sailor sea-sick.

"I'll be right over," I managed.

"Hurry!" he yelled . . . Then he couldn't withhold his stupendous idea any longer. He blurted, "We're going to advertise for murderers!"

I figured I hadn't heard right. "We're going to advertise for—what?"

"Murderers!" he answered seriously. He elaborated, "Not just people who have committed murder—that's too commonplace. We'll advertise for people who are *going* to commit murder."

"Oh . . .!" That made it much clearer.

"You don't get it?" he asked.

In this business, you've got to "get" everything instantly, even before it happens. You never admit to a client that anything is unclear. Otherwise he asks you to turn in your typewriter ribbon and he hires another advertising agency. And then maybe you have to get into some dull business—like making money.

"Of course I get it," I insisted. "It's murder!"

"Exactly," he yelled happily. "Now dive over here and I'll fill you in on the details." He hung up.

I opened the bottom drawer of my desk, pulled out a bottle of Old Rankler, poured a gobletful and drank it. I seldom drink anything outside of business hours, unless it's whiskey; the same during business hours. And anyhow I was going to see Old Rankler's murder-crazy skipper and needed a bracer.

And I was going to see him about advertising for murderers. Maybe I'd better explain to you what this whole "murder advertising campaign" was all about. Really very simple . . .

THE ENTIRE "murder campaign", as J. B. called it, started with my needing an idea, a *big* idea, for advertising Old Rankler bourbon. Needing a "big" idea meant that I damned well better present a new campaign gimmick they

would buy or I'd be out of the account while some other smirking punk would be in.

The idea didn't have to be good, it just had to be something they'd okay. Because, don't kid yourself, any advertising is only as effective as the client will permit his agency to produce.

That's how I got around to murder. This way: I started by analyzing what people were reading in magazines and newspapers because, since liquor is restricted from radio and television, the advertising has to be printed.

Today, perhaps the most popular reading is mystery fiction, right? Just about every magazine carries at least one mystery story. The big babies, the *Post* and *Collier's*, usually feature a mystery serial. The *American* has a monthly short mystery novel. Fill out the list yourself and you'll find practically every important magazine included, those catering to women as well as men.

My problem was to get those same people to read the Old Rankler advertisements. Sooo . . . I decided to link up mystery-reading potential with the 100-proof potential of Old Rankler.

Ever been to the movies and watched the young hero, an advertising man, seeking the big idea? Just when you think he's concentrating sensibly on the blouseful of goodies that the heroine is bouncing at him, he jumps up, screams, "I've got it!" Bingo, there's the million-dollar idea all shiny and complete and wrapped up in cellophane.

My friend, it ain't so. You sweat and strain, brain all racked and filled with pain. Then, after days and weeks of what's-the-use, maybe you squeeze out an acceptable campaign idea.

Anyhow, here's how my proposal finally worked out, as I submitted it to J. B. We'd buy a load of short short mystery stories from prominent authors. The stories wouldn't have to be murder stories . . . any puzzle slant

could fit—robbery, comedy crime, mystery-romance. In our magazine-page or newspaper ad we'd use approximately half the space to print the story, under the heading, "This Month's Old Rankler Mystery Story." The other half of the page would be headed, "But there's no mystery about Old Rankler . . ." Then we'd go on to show the bottle, emphasizing the label, with descriptive copy such as: "Every drop 8 years old" . . . "pure, rich, Kentucky-bred flavor" . . . "70 years of distilling skill."

Like it? So did I. But the boys who buy advertising these days are tough babies. It's not enough that an idea *seems* good; you're supposed to show why it's good and why it absolutely must work. So I huddled together my staff and we finally produced a thick black book full of facts and figures showing that people go for mystery stuff and would read our ads more readily than other whiskey ads and then we'd sell more of our poison than others sell of theirs. We filled in with a lot of sketches showing how ads and displays and suchlike would look, then I carted it all down to J. B. He presented it to his Board, and the result was the pleasing and puzzling phone call from him. Where do we go from here?

I buzzed the secretary. She moved in, very curved, very graceful, very curved. I tried to keep my eyes off where they didn't belong.

"I'm going down to Pluperfect Liquors," I explained. "I don't know when I'll be back."

She moved up close to me, so that her pale blues looked into mine own bloodshot eyes, less than a foot away. She said, "Your wife called before, Mr. Clark, while you were on the telephone with Mr. Plupe."

"Thanks. I'll call her back."

"She said she was going out, that she'd call you later." Her words were cool, her eyes hot. I hire the damndest secretaries.

"Tell her she can reach me at Plupe's if it's important." I tried to remain impersonal.

"Yes, Mr. Clark," she practically whispered. She moved a little closer. "Is there anything else, Mr. Clark?"

Another step and she'd go right through me and come out the other side. Her bulging blouse touched my arm.

"Yes," I replied, "you're scorching my suit."

She stepped back, hurt.

I added quickly to reassure her, "No offense, chum. And I don't like formality. I'll call you Gloria after this and, when we're not surrounded, you call me Clark." That's my first name too, Clark C. Clark.

She softened. "Thanks . . . Clark. Incidentally, in case someone asks me, what does the middle C in your name stand for?"

I replied quietly, "Clark." She looked surprised. Everyone always looks surprised. "That's right," I repeated, "my name is Clark Clark Clark." I explained aimlessly, "My father stuttered."

On that punchline, I patted the girl gently on one of her several cheeks and left, muttering to myself, "Here I come, J. B., wondering what devilish scheme you've figured out this time to murder my murder scheme . . ."

"THIS IS the most seaworthy idea I ever hitched anchor to," J. B. told me enthusiastically as soon as I seated myself in one of the upholstered deck-chairs in his office. You heard right—an upholstered deck-chair. In keeping with his nautical ideas, the big handsome man's office was decorated in his idea of yacht-style, sort of an Esquire-Vogue-Town & Country nightmare effect.

"Sounds great," I assented absently.

He looked puzzled. "I haven't told you the idea yet."

"No," I covered up, "but I have a vague notion . . ."

I smiled secretly and wisely and almost-winked.

He grinned back in satisfaction and almost-winked back. "You'll love it, skipper," he gloated. "Just listen to this—"

I listened, but "this" at the moment turned out to be a loud, painful male howl from the next office, followed by the rat-a-tat of an angry female voice that rattled the life preserver on the wall.

J. B. bolted from his chair and flung open the connecting door, letting in the protesting masculine groans full blast.

"What goes on?" I yelled, pushing myself up from the comfortable chair reluctantly.

J. B. ducked his head back into the room. He explained joyously, "A blonde is killing my brother!" He turned away and said persuasively, "Don't hit him again, ma'am. What happened?"

I heard an indignant, determined female voice shout, "The son-of-a-pinch bitched me!"

Half-aloud I moaned, "That's no blonde . . . that's my wife!"

I looked into the next office. J. D. Plupe, normally a natty, fresh-creased and slick-combed little man, was seated awkwardly and painfully in his over-size wastebasket. My beautiful, slim, long-legged blonde wife was half bent over him, holding a brass ashtray stand above his noggin. J. B. was surveying the scene now with unconcealed satisfaction. He turned to me, "Your wife?"

I suddenly knew what they mean by "too dumb for words." I reached for a sentence and "Gllmp" came out. I nodded, gazing at one of my clients sitting wedged in his genuine walnut wastebasket while my account flew out the window.

J. B. asked curiously, "What did she say?"

I untied my tongue and explained, "She means that the son—uh—pinched her!" I caught an angry look from J. D. and knotted up the tongue again.

That little man yelled in strangled tones, "Somebody get me out of this damned receptacle!"

After a few minutes' struggle during which J. B. held down the basket and I pulled up on J. D., the latter emerged bruised in body and spirit from his cramped container.

My smoldering wife lifted the ashstand higher and muttered, "Try that once more and I'll push you right through the window."

I said thoughtfully, "This is the thirty-second floor."

She put down the stand and glared at me, "What kind of lecherous clients do you have?"

That brought a snarl from J. D. "I'm no client of his from now on!"

J. B. interrupted severely, "Shut up!" He asked my wife again, "What happened?"

I was afraid she was going to spit on the rug through her lovely red lips. "Tell the gentleman what happened, dear," I suggested. "By the way," I remembered my etiquette, "This is my wife Helen . . . J. B. Plupe and J. D. Plupe."

A quiet voice, coming from a tall, thin, bald-headed man who had suddenly stepped through the other doorway, added, "I'm J. C. Plupe. How do you do, Mrs. Clark. May we learn what happened?"

My blonde lit a cigarette, seated herself on the arm of a deep leather chair. Her slim, gunmetal-nyloned legs were still, a sign to me that she had calmed down under the courteous treatment. She said, "I phoned my husband, had to see him in a hurry." That meant she needed some quick cash. "His secretary said I'd find him here. I was right near the building so I arrived before him. I was waiting in the reception room when this little bun-of-a—"

"Hrmph!" I interrupted loudly.

"—when this character," she gestured toward J. D., "asked me into his office. He said I'd be more comfortable

here. I was bending over the smoking stand after a few minutes of conversation, and," her voice rose again, "this binking—"

I interjected for J. C.'s benefit, "She sometimes mixes up her words when she gets excited."

"Only my cuss-words," she stated, "because I'm a lady and ladies don't swear. Anyhow, I shoved him. And if he tries it again, I'll push him clear through the wall, the basting stinkard!"

J. B. and J. C. looked disgustedly at J. D.

The little man yelped, "I want him fired from the account."

Big J. B., in the voice of a clipper skipper, roared, "We'll fire him for bad advertising, nothing else, understand? We're sick of your stupid interference! One of these days, I'll throw you out of here on your rear!"

The unpleasant mite snarled, "Try and do it. How about the will?"

Tall, balding J. C. snorted angrily, "Wills have been broken before." He said more calmly, "You'd better apologize to Mrs. Clark."

The injured partner yelled, "She nearly breaks my back and I gotta apologize?" He limped out of his office.

I said, "Thank you, gentlemen, you're very decent." I meant it. Helen nodded her thanks also.

"Suppose you come into my office, Clark, as soon as you straighten out things with Mrs. Clark." J. B. smiled a toothful, intimate smile and said to her, "I've enjoyed meeting you, and may I add that you're one of the trimmest craft it's been my pleasure to encounter in many days' sailing."

Her friendly eyes cooled.

Out of the side of my mouth, I murmured, "That's a compliment, dear."

We were left alone in the somewhat disarranged office. I reached over to kiss my loving partner and wasted it on

five slim, muscled fingers pushing my face back.

She asked accusingly again, "What the hell kind of clients do you have, anyhow?"

I shrugged. "In spite of what you read in the frustrated novels about advertising," I explained, "my clients are just people, not all villains and lechers. Some are good, some bad. Some I'd like even if they weren't clients. If I dislike them really, I won't have them as clients. And they wouldn't have me. In short, they're people."

"Save it for the next meeting of the Advertising Club," she snapped. "I didn't come for a lecture. I came for fifty of the bucks that you snake out of your loving clients. When I want philosophy, I'll tune in Old Uncle Bill's Bunions on the radio." She snared the wilted bills I dragged from my wallet.

She picked up her purse, stuffed it with the tired green lettuce and grimaced at me sourly. Then she grabbed my lapels, pulled me off balance and sank her teeth into my lower lip, gripping it gently for as long as twenty seconds.

She let go and I breathed again. In fact, I panted. I reached for her, but was stiff-armed back firmly. My amorous, unpredictable wife. "Maybe that'll keep you from biting the nearest waitress at lunch," she said, frowning. She never smiles; that might tip off people that she likes something, some little thing, about life. "And tell that under-sized wolf for me again that if he ever makes another pass at me, he'll find himself flying over his window-sill and holding on to thirty-two floors of nothing."

She turned and left swiftly. I walked into J. B.'s office somewhat dazedly and sat down on soothing foam rubber.

He glanced up from some documents. "Looking over the company's papers," he explained grimly. "Want to see what happens to J. D.'s stock if we make him walk the plank out of here." He relaxed. "You either have lipstick on your mouth or you're bleeding."

I wiped my lips. I commented vaguely, "Lipstick is thicker than blood."

"Gorgeous rig, that wife of yours."

"She's something," I agreed. "I'm not sure what, after five years of marriage, but definitely something."

"Seems sort of cold-blooded," he fished.

"That's only to cover the fact that she's so hot-blooded—" I broke off. Look at me, I'm embarrassed. Get tough, kid. I asked pointedly, "What's your idea, J. B.?"

"About your wife?"

If he had a sense of humor, I'd think he was kidding me. Or maybe I had no sense of humor, like so many people who doubt that quality in others. "About our murder campaign," I insisted.

He caught fire instantly. "As I told you," he cried, "we're going to advertise for murderers."

"I know." I knew nothing. "But fill me in a little."

"It's simple," he continued. "You want murder stories, right?"

I shrugged. "Mystery stories. Clean, entertaining stories—not bloody."

He waved my elaboration aside. "So we run a little teaser campaign first, see? We advertise something like this: Wanted—murderers who are about to kill somebody. No name at the end, only a newspaper box number. After a couple of weeks, everybody is talking about it, wondering what it's all about."

I almost said I'm wondering right now. But I didn't. Rule one of the advertising course is—keep your goddam mouth shut when a client is speaking.

"Then we cash in on the curiosity we built up for several weeks. We run an ad about 'Found—murderers,' see? And we tell the public that we've been tracking down murderers in short short mystery stories and that Old Rankler ads soon will bring them a whole series of the best mystery tales

ever written." His eyes glittered. "Like it?"

His eyes said that I damn well better like it.

"I like it," I said. Lay it on, chum, hoist the mainsail, loose the jib. I enthused, "I like it very much. Those teaser ads will be a sensation," and besides, they'd add sweetly to my billing. "Just one thing—" I warned.

He didn't like my tone. It's okay for a client to "just one thing" his agency, but he doesn't like the underling to "just one thing" him. "What one thing?" he growled.

"Suppose somebody answers an ad? Suppose a murderer shows up? We might be in trouble."

He looked disgusted. "What are you," he accused, "an advertising man or a mouse?"

I tried to smirk it away. "Mice don't drink bourbon."

"Then let's stop squeaking about insignificant storm clouds on the horizon," he said, mollified and back at the spoked wheel again. He was finished with me. He waved me a brush-off and muttered, "Work it out. Bye."

The ad-man's lot—"work it out." Everybody dumps the garbage on him and asks him to sort it out and deliver it tempting and tasty to Mr. and Mrs. Consumer—you, sucker. Well, what the hell was I getting paid for?

"I will, J. B.," I clarified loyally. "I'll call you up. And—thanks again for your help with J. D."

He looked up with a grimace from the blue-covered document he was studying again. He said, "That son-of-a-pinch!" Then he added, "On second thought, perhaps you ought to look in on J. D. and sort of smooth the troubled waters." He frowned. "I'm going to heave him out of here sooner or later but meanwhile he still has voting power. Try to soothe him."

"Okay," I agreed reluctantly. That little bastard, I told myself, I'll fix him—I'll put a double jigger of arsenic into one of his Old Rankler old-fashioned . . .

Two

I HESITATED outside J. D.'s door. Should I just walk in or knock first? If I heard the little stinkler's voice inviting me in, I'd probably throw up right in the hall and never accomplish my mission. I'd hate myself in the morning anyhow for even attempting to soothe the worm. But they don't pay you fifteen percent to be nice to yourself. I pushed open the door.

The picture I saw would go big on the front cover of Esquire. J. D. was tangled up with a lusty package of excitement. He was not just pinching a buttock; he had a firm and eager grip on that particular section of satin-covered curve. His other arm was wrapped around a tall, tasty torso that you'd like to see in a Bikini.

She was a head taller than he; black hair, humid black eyes, about a size-40 bosom that would have filled two Hollywood cameras snugly. She had a tender tucked-in tummy, pleasantly outgoing hips, and the kind of thin thin legs that somehow look best upholding a large large chest-section. I'd tell you more but I'm not much for noticing detail.

When they untangled and I could get around to viewing her full face, I recognized her as Rose Witson, J. D.'s very private secretary.

Her eyes, and those of the little man, were spitting angrily in my direction.

I said meekly, "Pardon me, J. D., I didn't know you were busy with your secretary." That tactful observation helped a lot.

The heavy-breathing brunette picked up the ball. "I'm not Mr. Plupe's secretary," she said indignantly. "As I've told you before, Mr. Clark, I'm his assistant."

Chiefly busy assisting him in testing Beautyrests, I didn't say. "I apologize again," I offered grandly.

"What do you want?" J. D. asked bluntly.

Damned if I knew what I wanted, except to get the hell out of this unwholesome den. I was supposed to calm the small tycoon's injured feelings, but the words wouldn't even come out for a trial size.

"I just wanted to warn you," I began.

"About what?" he snarled.

I finished lamely, "To do something about the low sill on that big window. You almost fell through before when you were pushed—and next time it could be serious."

The decorative "assistant" intervened, "Who pushed you, Jeedee?" Jeedee—love-talk for J. D.

"Nobody pushed anybody," he snapped. "Forget it."

"My wife pushed him," I explained helpfully. "She got the impression somehow that she was being pinched, so she pushed." I added thoughtfully, "I'll tell her to wear a girdle next time."

The girl was glaring at the guy. She hurled at him, "Did you pinch her? Did you?"

The red in his face answered yes, but the little mouth mumbled, "It was all a mistake."

If they could photograph her heaving sweater in slow motion and reproduce it as the picture-of-the-week in Life, they'd sell 25 million copies. She whirled, picked up her dictation book and zoomed out faster than jet-propulsion.

"Does she really take dictation too?" I asked.

He explained, "Get out!" He jumped to his feet quivering.

At the door, I called back, "Careful—the window."

The ashtray hit the door as I closed it snugly. You hear

more dirty words in this business!

On my way out through the reception room, J. D.'s still smoldering gland-girl surrounded me. The twin volcanoes did everything but spout smoke. She asked menacingly, "Was that on the level about J. D. making a pass at your wife?"

I didn't want to break up her unhappy home. I said soothingly, "Probably was just a mix-up."

"It better be," she muttered.

I looked at her with curiosity. "Hey," I asked sympathetically, "You got a case on the guy?"

Her face was sullen. "So what?"

"Forget the whole thing," I advised. "No runs, only errors. It never happened, okay?"

She flared up, "Nobody wants your sympathy, you bastard. Stick it!"

I walked out sadly. I'm so sensitive. Nobody understands me.

And now, just when I wanted to hide my head in a gallon or so of Old Rankler, I had to hurry back to the office and write an ad. An ad for murderers, yet . . .

HERE IS the ad my chief copywriter, Bob Ronnel, finally handed me—after the sixteenth revision.

WANTED: MURDERERS

If you are about to commit murder, we need you and will pay well for the full details. No risk involved for you. The public will get the benefit in every way. Write at once to Box XXX.

"For the love of hell," he snapped angrily, "I hope you're satisfied this time."

"You're fired," I murmured, as I read the battered sheet.

I love to fire people without discharging them. Because I can't discharge people. Another one of my defects.

"That's the damndest ad I ever wrote, or read!" he glowered. A very wide glower. Bob is medium height, and medium flat, but one foot extra-wide, all joined up to extra-size muscles, extra-size temper and extra-size writing ability. The last is the reason I'd raised his salary so often that he was now making almost as much as me—a bare living wage.

"An unusual ad," I agreed with Bob, reading the copy through. "But it's what the boss man ordered, and you've got to admit it'll get attention."

I put the sheet flat on the desk, face up. "Sit down while I try it on J. B. over the phone." I lit a cigarette. "But don't sit in the wastebasket. That's reserved for clients."

The young man looked puzzled. He asked, "What's the basket crack mean?"

I briefly related the details of the bottom-pinching, pushing-into-the-basket episode in J. D.'s office. Bob was not amused. "Somebody ought to murder that slimy little wolf," he growled, "inch by inch. I personally would volunteer to start by twisting off his—"

"Please, Bob," I interrupted, "there are ladies present." I indicated the operator's voice on the phone informing me that I could now have J. B.

His rumble came over the wire inquiring, "What ladies are present? What did you say?"

"It's me, J. B.," I clarified, "Clark. I want to read you the ad for murderers—"

The operator's voice screamed, "Ad for murderers?"

"Get off the wire!" J. B. yelled. "Not you, Clark. Shiver my anchors, I have more spies in here than are in our embassy at Moscow. If we have an embassy in Moscow . . ."

"The ad, J. B.," I repeated, "I want to read you the ad—"

"Then read it, and stop wasting my time discussing international politics."

Has anyone a quiet, shady candy-stand for sale? "Here it is," I managed. I read it to him and waited. J. B. always digests words and ideas slowly and carefully before swallowing them or spitting them out, like someone chewing on a forkful of bony fish.

He said explosively, as always when he renders the big decision, "I'll buy it! Don't change a word. Launch it in every morning newspaper in the city tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" I asked, startled.

"Run it two columns wide by about five inches deep, with a heavy black dotted border around it. Time is short, so let the newspapers set it. Buy position at the top of page two."

"Page two?" I gulped.

"This telephone has the damndest echo," he complained.

"But," I protested weakly, "this is an ad for murderers. I sort of thought we'd run it small first, maybe in the Personals column, as a test."

Bob was watching me with his eyebrows gesturing disbelief to hear me arguing with a client to cut down the size of an ad.

"Look, Clark," J. B. said patiently, "if it's worth doing at all, it's worth doing big. Right?"

"Right!" I answered automatically; typical ad-man reflex.

That echo he liked. "Get sailing, boy," he ordered, "full speed ahead. Tomorrow is Friday. I want it in every morning paper in the city. Then repeat every week till we can get the big ads under way, and start it in top newspapers nationwide next Tuesday. Right?"

Dazedly, "Right."

"You like it?"

"I love it."

"We'll get lots of comment and attention."

"And lots of murder." I amended quickly, "I'm kidding." I hope I'm kidding.

"Happy sailing!" he called out. He added, "Don't forget Friday afternoon. You're bringing your secretary and Bob Ronnel to help at the weekend meeting—and bring your beautiful wife, too!"

"Bring my wife?" He had me floundering.

"I like her, Clark," he said cheerfully, "I like her very much. I like a woman with spirit. Reason I never married is I never found a woman with enough spirit."

You never found a woman with enough woman, I wanted to answer. He'd hung up.

I glumly repeated the instructions about the campaign to Ronnel. "Put it in the works," I moaned. "The space department will have to do a lot of explaining to the newspapers before they'll accept the ad. But you can push it through by saying we're advertising for mystery writers as a teaser to a big-space campaign later." I mentioned, "My head hurts."

"Why so grim?" he asked reasonably. "This is a nice hunk of billing. You'll be able to afford mink at home instead of mice."

"I tell the gags around here," I snapped. "I don't quite know, Bob. I just don't like the feeling of this teaser campaign. Advertising for murderers isn't funny, even as a twist. I'm afraid of trouble."

"Look at you," he pointed, "superstitious."

"Some day," I complained, "somebody will let us run a campaign as written and presented, no changes, no fancy gimmicks. Finally we'll prove that advertising pays—just plain advertising—no fifty-word sentences on why I like to cuddle up in my aunt's navel, no—"

"No workee, no adee in tomorrow's papers," Bob reminded me. "Save the weeping for the weekend."

That reminded me. "Hey, what's this weekend deal? J. B. just mentioned it too."

"You're losing your memory along with your hair," he explained gently. "This is the weekend we're all supposed to go to J. B.'s country place to kick around Pluperfect's problems—remember?"

"No," I groaned, feeling my giant-size headache give birth to a litter of twenty more little headaches. "I forgot all about it."

I pressed the buzzer. "What'll I do? I promised my wife a weekend at the Skytop Club."

"Bring her along," Bob suggested, grinning. "The rates at J. B.'s are cheaper. And I don't think he'd mind."

"He likes her," I advised jealously. "He likes her very much." And I love her very much. Nuts.

"Anything for a client," he smirked. The smirk frowned. "J. D. will be along too, of course . . ."

"J. D. Chreest!" I yelled. "I'm not going, I'm not . . ."

My redheaded fugitive from a business-school daisy chain, Gloria, came bouncing in, the motions of her lunging lungs bruising her dictation pad.

"What do you want?"

"You buzzed." She added warmly, "Hello, Bob."

Our hero gulped and put more emotion than a Barrymore could in the simple little answer, "Hi—"

"I just wanted to remind you," I told her, "about this weekend at J. B. Plupe's. You're supposed to come along," I bobbed my eyes over her figure and said firmly, "to take notes."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Clark," she warmed me, "I'm looking forward to it."

"So am I," Ronnel glowed.

"They're still printing newspapers, Romeo," I threw at him. He left in a hurry, only tripping over two chairs trying

to aim for the door and keep the redhead in focus at the same time.

"It ought to be fun," she smiled at me.

"We're not going for fun. We're going to work! Work! Work!"

"Yes, sir," she sparkled, "I love to work, any kind of work. What are we going to work on?"

"Murder—" I began. I stopped and waved my hand wearily in dismissal.

The bewildered girl left, on the run. Doesn't she ever walk, I wondered. My mind's evil eye visualized J. D.'s restless hand reaching out to pinch her quivering young rump.

The weekend certainly ought to be fun, I snarled to myself. I punctuated the observation by pulling open my desk drawer to get something for my headache. But the bottle I pulled out didn't contain aspirin . . .

Three

I SPENT most of the night and next day trying to figure out how to avoid the weekend jollities. Illness wouldn't do; an advertising man has to present nothing less than a death certificate—his own—as an acceptable excuse for missing a conference. I thought of suicide but decided that dying is just about as unpleasant as living. Unable to think up a plausible alternative, I found myself in J. B.'s office late Friday afternoon, sitting alongside my impatient wife. My gay secretary heated another chair happily with her motor running as usual, next to Bob Ronnel who couldn't keep his eyes off said motor. We were all waiting for the big man to stuff us into his limousine and lurch us out to the Plupe country place.

J. B. came in briskly and impressively. He headed directly for my cool but unreluctant blonde, and told her rapidly and enthusiastically how happy he was that she was coming to spend the weekend with him. With *him!* He clung to her hand possessively as he talked.

I said, "That soft, pink hand with the diamond rings is due back in the hock shop in twenty minutes."

His plump fingers dropped her slim ones. "Your husband is a very funny man," he giggled.

"Personally I could never see it," she commented.

Everybody else laughed.

"My wife is a very funny woman," I ad-libbed.

"Certainly a lovely and charming one," J. B. contributed, his gleaming teeth nibbling her.

I changed the subject. "How'd you like the ads in this morning's newspapers?" Obviously I was rattled, asking that question; advertising procedure is to frame the point this way: "Ads looked great this morning, eh, J. B.?"

The answer was favorable anyhow. "Just as I ordered, ha-ha," he ha-ha'd. "And just as I told you," he continued, "no trouble at all. No murderers turned up, no violence of any kind. But at lunch, all the men at the club were talking and wondering about the ads. That's going to pay off, Clark, you'll see."

"Those fellows are the type who drink plenty of Old Rankler," I agreed. Plenty of anything, I might have added.

J. B. liked that. "Looks like we're sailing in a sweet breeze," he said, "no squalls ahead." He popped out his arm suddenly, looked at his watch. "Let's get started."

The communication box on J. B.'s desk buzzed. He pressed a key. His secretary's strangled voice emerged, "There's a gentleman—a man—out here who insists on seeing you and no one but you."

"I'm leaving for the country." He snapped officiously, "Take care of him."

Her voice was frightened, "He said if you don't take care of him, he'll take care of me and you!"

J. B. looked startled, then interested. "What does he want?"

"He wants to see you about the ad in this morning's paper." She gulped and managed to squeeze her hysteria through the plastic box. "He says he's a—a murderer—and that you advertised for him."

I interjected, "It's a gag, J. B. He couldn't know you ran the ad—it had a blind box number."

My objecting was a tactical error. I could see him getting stubborn.

The voice from the gook-box came through again, "Mr. Plupe," it wailed, "I think I'm going to faint."

He replied, "First send the man in. Then faint."

The door opened and "the man" bulked into the room, his head bent down, his shoulders turned sideways so he'd fit through the doorway. His monstrous face was a Hollywood type-cast for "murderer" in capital letters. Heavy black hair and thick, barbed-wire eyebrows, black squinting marbles that functioned as eyes. A long bluish nose trailed crookedly down to a thin mouth that gashed clear across bristled cheeks and bulging chin. He wore a woolen cap.

He asked, "Which one of you is the boss?" The voice was the most startling effect of all, a thin, sinister squeak, like the sound of the haunted-house hinges in a Boris Karloff movie.

What the hell was J. B. looking so gleeful about? He replied, "You say you're a murderer?"

"Oh, you're the boss!" The goliath turned toward him. "How much is in it for me?"

"How much what?"

"Whaddya mean how much what? Money! What's what but money?" The giant scowled. "You ain't trying to give me no run-around, are you?"

J. B. shook his head complacently. "No run-around. But why should we pay you money?"

"Because you advertised that you'd pay good for full details about a murder I'm gonna commit. Right?"

Without thinking, my reflex answered, "Right!"

The brute massaged me with his little eyes, and piped, "Who's this joker?"

My helpful wife explained, "He's the caddy-master."

"Oh." He looked puzzled. "For a caddy-bastard, he don't look so healthy. And anyhow, I don't like bad words." Nobody bothered to straighten out his language, especially not indignant little me. He went on angrily, "I believe in the American system of gov'ment, I believe what I read in the newspapers. How about the cash?"

He took two swift steps, picked a rugged umbrella off the coat rack. Using only thumb and index finger of each hand, he bent the entire umbrella in two. "Nobody better hurt my feelings," he explained. "I'm a law-abiding citizen and I want my pay-off." He reached for the coat rack—to dwindle it into toothpicks, I presume.

J. B. headed him off by asking, "How did you find out we ran the ad?"

Gorilla-boy answered smugly, "I ain't telling, I got connections."

It's supposed to be a secret who runs a blind ad, but plenty of leaks are possible in the newspaper, agency and advertiser's organizations. People yak; try and stop them.

Apparently J. B. came to the same realization. He shrugged resignedly.

The box on the desk buzzed and a voice gargled, "Your car is waiting, Mr. Plupe, in the no-parking zone in front of the building."

"I'll be right there." J. B. continued, "I'll be frank with you, Mister—what did you say your name was?"

The big man replied amiably, "My friends call me Weasel."

"Weasel?" J. B.'s forehead corrugated. "Weasel what?"

"What's the difference? Just call me Weasel."

J. B. explained, "But if we make out a check to you, we'll have to have your full name."

The huge bulk bristled. "I don't like checks. I get paid off in cash."

"Very well, Weasel," J. B. placated him. "I'm afraid there's been a little misunderstanding. Our ad is really seeking writers of murder or mystery stories. Then we pay for the story. We don't want an actual murderer, you see. But Mr. Clark, our advertising man," he pointed at me, "will see that you're compensated for your trouble in coming here, I'm sure."

I nodded hurriedly. I was sure, too. I'd pay off if I wanted to live.

Weasel had his own ideas. "Okay," he assented, "then I'll write the story of the murder. I'll write it down."

I grabbed the suggestion quickly. "Good," I agreed. "Bring the story to my office next week, whenever you're finished—"

"No," he disapproved. "I ain't no regular writer. And I don't spell so good. You're an advertising man—I guess that means you can write. You gotta help me. What're you doing tomorrow?"

I was sinking fast. "I can't do it," I managed.

"You write ads, doncha? That means you're a writer, aincha?"

"You *are* a writer, aren't you?" J. B. asked blandly.

Through her sharp teeth, my helpful wife gritted, "Get out of that one, genius!"

The desk-box buzzed and wailed, "Mr. Plupe, a traffic cop is threatening to give your chauffeur a ticket unless he moves your car."

J. B. responded, "We'll be down in a minute, I said." He turned to us with the air of one solving a situation, and stated, "I have an idea."

"No!" I wailed. His last idea was already practically delivering me into the meat-hooks of a mass-murderer.

He ignored me. "Weasel," he said, "all these fine people are coming to my country place right now for a big week-end conference. You'll find it nice and private—you can write your story up there. How about coming along?"

Weasel considered for a few seconds. He gestured toward me. "Is *he* coming?"

"Yes, of course," J. B. explained. "He's the boss of our advertising agency."

"Him?" the big man asked incredulously. His eyes softened to the consistency of granite chips. "Y'know," he

chirped, "the guy don't look smart or healthy. But I like him." He patted the top of my head.

As they helped me up from the floor, I grunted, "For a week I'll be wearing my skull in a sling."

"Anything would be an improvement," my amiable wife remarked.

The door opened and a merry little J. D. trotted in, followed by his sultry sulky assistant, Rose. She wore a dress cut lower than my mood at the moment.

After all the introductions were made, J. D. said, "I'll take this redheaded one in my car, along with Rose—the three of us will fit very snugly." He grabbed my secretary, Gloria, by the armpit. Two more seconds and he'd be stripping off her bra. If she wore a bra.

Bob Ronnel stepped forward and said angrily, "Hey, she's with me!"

J. D. pushed him away and snarled, "And what agency will you be fired from, any second?"

"Now wait a minute, J. D.," I intervened ineffectually.

Another buzz from the desk-box and a voice moaned, "Oh, Mr. Plupe, the policeman gave your chauffeur a ticket and is threatening to arrest him for resisting an officer, or something."

"I'll be right down!" J. B. yelled.

"Thank you, sir," the receptionist sighed. "May I faint now?" A low thud indicated that she had.

J. B. winked at my stormy blonde. "I never saw the ticket that couldn't be fixed by a case of Old Rankler," he chuckled. "C'mon, everybody. Helen and Bob, you come with me." He lowered his voice, "What's the difference, Bob? Let the girl Gloria go with J. D. After all, Rose will act as their chaperone."

The dark-haired beauty overheard him. "Chaperone!" she sizzled. Her eyes blazed. Her chest expanded ominously as though it would burst with two loud explosions.

J. B. cut off her stormy obscenity by telling me, "You and Weasel can ride up with J. C. and his wife in their car." He raised his voice, "All aboard, everybody—let's lift anchor."

I felt my arm gripped as though by a giant cobra. It was Weasel's tender touch. His face wore a horrifying grimace that I learned later was meant to be an amicable smile. He said raspingly, "As long as you're with me, baby. From now on we're buddies to the end."

"My end," I moaned. I found myself carried along with the ill-tempered group. I should have my two heads examined, I warned myself. I thought of this unhappy, miscellaneous crew bottled up for the weekend at the Plupe country place, Rocky Cove Lodge. I thought of the sharp cliffs surrounding the property, of the huge, ragged black rocks at the ocean edge below.

I groaned aloud, "Murder!"

"That's the general idea, ain't it, chum?" That came from my sidekick, Weasel. He added, "Now you're my what you call it—co—co—collaborator, huh?"

"As long as I'm not an accessory," I mumbled.

He shrugged his mammoth shoulders, and squinted. "What's the difference?"

My curiosity pushed me into asking, "What murder do you figure on writing about?"

He answered indifferently, "I ain't sure yet."

"You mean you have a choice? More than one murder?"

His hold on my limp biceps tightened irritably. "Like I said before, what's the difference?"

If I'd known the difference then, I'd have resigned the account and broken up the party. Instead I went along for the ride, in the grip of the muscled monster. As if I could help myself . . .

Four

WHEN we were picked up by J. C.'s car a few minutes later, I was afraid that the affectionate man-mountain was going to make me sit in his lap. Instead, Weasel was surprisingly self-effacing, squeezing himself quietly into half the rear seat.

J. C.'s wife, Mari, was a sight to delight, as the ads might say. From my rear perch next to Weasel, my eyes spooned up the back of her small, curl-topped, silvery-blond head. She had a Viennese accent with a tiny but gracefully upholstered figure to match. With her along, the weekend was shaping up better.

As we rolled swiftly along the highway, I noticed that J. C. had been studying my seatmate's huge face through the front mirror as he drove. His gentlemanly, modulated voice drifted back the question, "Weasel, haven't we met somewhere before?"

Quickly, too quickly, Weasel snapped out an abrupt, "No!"

"I'm almost sure I've seen you previously," J. C. persisted. How could you forget a face like that, I wondered—like forgetting Grand Canyon once you've seen it.

"Nobody around here ain't seen me before today," the big man growled, "your brothers, neither."

Mari's musical voice took over to ease the situation, trilling, "Why are you being so nosy, darling? Maybe the gentleman prefers to be, how do you say, anonymous."

For the rest of the ride, Weasel kept his blue woolen cap pulled down well over his narrow strip of forehead,

and held a massive hand over the bottom part of his face.

Watching J. C. drive so carefully and surely, I mused over the differences among the three brothers: J. C., quiet, well-mannered, soft-spoken, thin and somewhat bald on top. J. D., small, irritating chaser of anything in panties; married at one time and divorced, I seemed to recall. J. B., the man I dealt with mostly; handsome, well-built, enthusiastic but generally fair-minded bachelor extrovert. All in their thirties, with the same father but different mothers—all the assorted parents dead now, including the old man. Half-brothers actually, held together more by the rich golden stream of Old Rankler bourbon than by any ties of blood or affection.

I shook off the thoughtful mood and made like a genuine advertising man. That is, I let loose a load of yak-yak designed to charm the ears off my client's charming wife. I was still spurting small talk when we arrived at Rocky Cove Lodge.

I'd been there before, but the place still looked to me like a medieval haunted house with modern plumbing. It had a dark-brown English-manor exterior, and an interior with a labyrinth of rooms, twisting all over the landscape. Maybe the general idea was to keep the right bedrooms from knowing what the left bedrooms were doing. The result was that you could get lost in the wings and corridors without even trying.

This whole costly collection of evasive rooms was pushed out on multiple acres of rough-landscaped land, purposely kept that way for good taste and least interference with the natural surroundings. The assorted paths and clumps of bushes and trees ended abruptly in sharp cliffs that fell precipitously to ugly, massive rocks in the cove of a blue-black sullen ocean far below. One flight of strong, winding, rough-wood steps led from cliff-top to ocean shore. Dramatic? Yes. Dangerous? Yes.

We walked up the steps of the house with Weasel carrying all the suitcases in his big mitts as though they were pebbles. When I'd asked him whether he wanted to pick up some extra clothes, he'd looked at me in a puzzled way and explained, "I'm wearing them."

I led him into the house without further questions. He dropped the suitcases and we trudged toward the sound of voices.

You needed binoculars to see from one end of the living room to the other, but I could make out by the attitudes of the others that they'd beaten us by about a half-hour and two rounds of Old Rankler old-fashioned. You could ask for a Martini or Daiquiri in this house but when you got it, you'd find it tasted just like an Old Rankler old-fashioned. Is that bad? Like our ads said, "Solid 100-proof—and the proof of its fine flavor is in the solid satisfaction of Old Rankler users."

We went through a flurry of introductions during which I found myself shaking hands happily with a glass of my favorite and only available brand. One obviously discordant note was the ice-cold shoulder that Mari gave natty J. D. who was dashing gaily from one female to another. Watching Mari, and without thinking, I murmured aloud, "What did *he* ever do to *her*?"

A chilly voice answered quietly, "He married her."

I turned and found that the words had come from J. C., a fierce and different J. C.

My curiosity made me ask, "When was that?"

He relaxed and seemed under control again. "Two years ago. She was granted an annulment a month later. We were married a year ago."

All I could think of to say was, "Congratulations." So I didn't say it.

Breaking the awkward silence, he asked bitterly, "How'd you like a month married to J. D.?"

I tried to introduce a light touch, shook my head emphatically. "I'm not that kind of a girl."

"Neither is she." His lips tightened. I followed the direction of his eyes. Across the room, little J. D., apparently helped by the old-fashioned, was trying some new-fashioned ideas with Mari. He was talking fast and probably dirty, holding on to her arm which she was trying to pull away, while she curdled up her face at him as though about to spit catlike in his eye.

J. C. put down his glass quickly and sliced across in their direction. Before he reached them, the little man let go and hurried away toward the portable bar in the far corner. Husband and wife gripped hands as though to keep each other from strangling their obnoxious relative. They exchanged a few words and left the room together.

Such a lovely refined couple, I remarked to myself, burying their violent emotions before they could erupt. I wondered how it would be for a sensitive little Viennese lady being married a month to a sex-maniac like J. D. I veered over to the vacant bar to wash the bad taste out of my head.

As I finished fixing my drink, I was nudged in the arm by what might have been a Great Dane's nose. I turned and found sultry Rose Witson pressing against me. I raised my eyes to her face, where they would do me the least good, and tried to grin without drooling.

"Fixsh me annother drig," was approximately what she said.

"Sure," I assured her, trying to lean lightly on the Old Rankler and heavy on the water. I handed her the diluted drink blithely.

She sipped, then abruptly dumped the rest of the drink into a bowl on the bar. She handed back the empty glass. The shock of almost drinking water had helped her recover somewhat. "Put in some liquor this time," she ordered.

"What the hell you so stingy about? Every time you tilt that bottle, you add to your advertising take."

"What the hell you getting so loaded about so fast?" I asked in return. "You've got the whole weekend ahead."

Her eyes glittered angrily. "That's what I'm getting so loaded about." She pointed across the room with her glass, spilling some of the liquid down the deep tan center valley. I listened for the sizzle.

I followed her eyes to a sofa over yonder. My tender young secretary, holding glass instead of dictation pad, was scrunched into the corner of the wide couch. Energetic little J. D. was breathing down her neck, so close that in another inch he'd be racing through her flaming red hair in his shorts. I wanted to tell him that he'd left his motive running. Gloria's face had that upset look of should-I-be-nice-to-a-client or let this jerk have my ice cubes in his face?

You could practically hear the call of the bugle and the thundering hoofbeats of cavalry as Bob Ronnel roared over, picked up the little man, threw him five feet across to the other end of the couch, grabbed Gloria's arm and catapulted her out through the wide doors to the terrace. It happened so fast that I found myself choking over a single swallow. I'd have to raise Bob's salary for holding his terrific temper in check so comparatively well.

At that point, the dark beauty decided to put on a make-him-jealous act. She pressed her goodies under my jacket lapels and said loudly, "How about you'n me taking a nice long walk and examining the beauties of nature, Clarkie?"

It worked; Jeedee-boy bounced off the couch and headed toward us. I looked around to see whether all this was being absorbed also by my critical wife.

That aloof blonde was standing near the tremendous fireplace with J. B., her eyes regarding me without expression, as usual. That meant she didn't like what she was seeing. I disengaged my lapels from Rose's quivering fingers,

dodged around J. D., and sauntered over to the fireplace. At least I think I sauntered, but from Helen's sour, disgusted inspection, I felt more as though I were crawling.

J. B. greeted me enthusiastically with, "I'm having a wonderful time. So glad you persuaded your charming wife to come. Most magnetic woman I've met in years—or ever!"

"She is?" I asked. I amended quickly, "She is!"

He rolled on, "Fill that lonely glass of yours and have a good time, Clark. We don't start work until tomorrow morning, I've decided. Tonight, let's raise full sail and have fun!" Fun, like dancing the Charleston in a cemetery.

I said nastily, "J. D. seems to be making every effort to be fun-loving. And I do mean loving!"

My client scowled a most unpleasant scowl. He ripped out, "That slimy snake. Some day I'll break—" He stopped.

"His contract?" I suggested sweetly. I knew damned well that the shares were all in the family, that it was a till-death-do-us-part deal.

J. B. recovered. He said pointedly, "Thought you wanted a drink. The bar is ten paces to your right." I was spanked, neatly and completely.

He turned toward my blonde. "As I was saying, Helen . . ." The brushoff. She dusted me away with a frigid glance, then filtered warmth into her white-blue eyes and murmured, "Yes, Jon?" So two-three drinks and they were on a Helen-Jon basis.

I squirmed away and poured another double drink down my gullet to keep my sunken spirits company. Maybe I ought to wrap myself in an old shawl and leave myself on somebody's doorstep.

Instead I walked out on the terrace to tell the twilight profanely what I thought of women . . . and men. What I had figured was a new clump of bushes on the grass nearby turned out to be Weasel, standing disconsolately

with hands in pockets, staring out in the direction of the ocean, hidden by the high, gloomy shelf of cliffs against the black sky.

"Where's your drink?" I broke in.

The horror-mask he used for a face brightened a little as he saw me. "I only like chocolate malteds," he explained.

I put aside my hatred of the human race for a minute, and asked, "Why the gloom? You got yourself into this. Any way it turns out, you're in for some bucks."

"I don't like it here." His face seemed to be smelling something like skunk in the heavy, darkening air that surrounded us.

"You can call a cab and catch a train back." I pulled out my wallet.

He pushed it away. "Thanks, pal." He didn't have a bad face at that. "I gotta stay. I got things to do." And people to do them to, I thought.

"Want to tell me about it, Weasel?"

He tried to look innocent, like an alligator with a mouthful of struggling native. "What's to tell?" he squeaked. "We're gonna write about a murder, ain't we? All I'm doing is figuring it out. Okay?"

Before I could say nokay, a ship's bell started clamoring violently from the house.

"Dinner," I explained.

We walked toward the house together, a handsome couple, I'm sure. I noticed J. B. guiding my glamorous wife into the dining room. She wasn't resisting.

An involuntary growl from my massive partner checked me as we entered the dining room. I looked up and saw the eyes under the heavy brows shooting poison at somebody. The somebody was busy little J. D., who was working hard trying to warm the bare shoulders of both Helen and Gloria, now seated at either side of him. With a sharp knife and fork, I figured that Weasel could eat the little

man in three-four crunching bites of his huge molars. Without ketchup.

I shouldn't have thought of ketchup. Same color as blood. And the thought of blood always makes me weak. I managed to sneak back to the bar and put down a couple of antidotes against fainting.

My legs headed back to the dining room more cheerfully, if a trifle less steadily. I noticed everyone accounted for. J. C. and Mari had returned, she looking lovelier even than before, in a rich blue dress with a delicate cameo brooch complementing her slim white throat, the diamond frame sparkling exquisitely against the swelling material.

The only empty seat was between Weasel and J. D.'s gorgeous Rose, so I headed for it with pleasure. As soon as I sat down, her leg shuddered against mine. I looked at her amorously and then realized that the contact was caused by anger, not passion. She was glaring again across at her little man who was concentrating completely on sweet Gloria next to him.

I tried to divert her attention. I remarked, "Beautiful wife J. C. has. Pretty pin she's wearing. Nice dress—"

She advised me unkindly what I could do with the lady, the pin and the dress.

I started to reply that I was not ambi-sextrous, then gave up. I asked instead, "Why don't you throw your knife between your boy friend's eyes and have it over with?"

The dark beauty slid over her bowl of hot soup and dumped it into my lap. I stifled a scream, in deference to my client, my host. Nobody noticed while I burned.

Out of the side of her luscious mouth, Rose said, "After this, keep your ugly ideas to yourself."

I tackled my food viciously in bad temper and wet pants. The way I felt, even I could kill somebody.

I glanced around the table, and a grimness in every face,

despite the bright chatter, told me that I was not alone in feeling that way.

With a lapful of hot soup, how come I shuddered from a sudden chill? The night is young, I moaned to myself, and it's all so horrible . . .

DINNER had ended hours before and though the moon was high, my spirits continued low. But I tried everything to appear occupied and amiable, including playing cards and drinking, taking a walk, drinking, conversing with various members of the macabre little gathering, drinking, and yes, drinking.

I'd just finished being trounced at pingpong by my gleeful and brightly flushed secretary.

"It's not good manners, or good judgment, to beat your boss," I said. "You can turn in your typewriter Monday."

She kissed me as solace, her lips soft, active and delicious. She smelled good too. Before I could get greedy, she stepped back, clearing the view so I could see my wife, seated at a card table in the next room, watching us. Her face was impassive as she raised one hand toward me, formed her fingers into an approving circle, then went back to playing cards. My stomach was a cinder; my ulcer said—talk yourself out of that one, chum.

Gloria was cooing, "Maybe that will make you feel better." She meant the kiss, not the look from my wife.

Words dribbled out of me, "You play a good game—especially those smashes. Didn't realize you were so strong."

"Feel my muscle, daddy," she laughed. "Used to be a Girl Scout."

"Don't be too cocky," I insisted. "Don't take any moonlight walks with the little Napoleon, for instance."

She became obstinate and annoyed. "It's after office hours, Clark," she stated. "I can walk with anybody I please."

She looked so tempting I was on the verge of asking her to saunter out with none other than me. Bob Ronnel intervened. "How about a game?" he asked the girl.

She scooped up a paddle, raced around to the other side of the table, red hair tossing, and yelled, "On guard!" They began to whack the defenseless white ball.

Oh, youth, here is thy fling! I carried my broken old body over to the bar, and began another series of Old Rankler taste-tests. Minutes, hours maybe, flowed by. I had no conception of time and less of people and events. I was experiencing the pleasant sensation of getting thoroughly clobbered.

I was still hanging on to the bottle, and the bottle hanging on to me, when people appeared out of the mist, apparently a couple of hours later, and made noises about going to bed.

"An early start in the morning, Clark," J. B. seemed to be saying to me heartily. "Lots of work to do and we'll want to get sailing fast. We're counting on your brain-power, you know." He turned to someone at his side and added, "Your husband is certainly full of ideas."

"That's not all he's full of," a familiar blonde voice commented. Liquor, I guessed the voice meant.

I focused on the beautiful body alongside J. B. and gradually recognized my gorgeous wife. My own slim blonde section of heaven. One idea started to blossom in my wandering mind as my bloodshot eyes roamed her immaculate torso. The mirror over the bar reflected a mild, sloppy leer on the blurred planes of my indistinct face.

"Right, J. B.," my reflexes responded happily. I reached for my wife's arm. I said, "C'mon, dear, our room's down this way."

"You're wrong, panther-boy," she answered, numbing my wrist with a quick downward flick of the hard edge of her palm. "*Your* room is thata way. *My* room is thisa way."

She indicated the opposite direction.

J. B. explained quickly. "Everyone has separate bedrooms tonight. I figured you'd all rest better that way. When you get up early, you won't have to disturb Helen, for instance. And we'll all be fresh in the morning."

I said grouchily, "I'd rather be fresh in the evening."

My disagreeable wife punctuated the conversation. "I prefer it this way. Good night." She turned away.

I called out to J. B. "Which way is your room?"

Helpful Helen called back over her shoulder, "Thisa way."

Next stop was my bedroom, though I fail to remember what route I took. As I undressed haphazardly, I wondered whether the adjoining rooms held redheads, brunettes or whatnettes. The hell with it, I swore to myself, I'm through with women. But I left my door unlocked just in case.

It paid off, I told myself, when I was awakened later by agitated shaking.

I looked up and saw Rose the robust. The light in the room was on but the window showed black night.

I said sleepily, "You're robusting out all over. Is that nightgown supposed to be nylon, or cellophane?"

She ignored the jokes. Her eyes were wild. She said hysterically, "It's two o'clock. I just woke up. I'm worried about Jeedee, he hasn't come to bed yet!"

"You mean he was supposed to sleep with you?"

She calmed enough to retort, "What the hell is that to you?"

"Nothing," I assured her hastily. "It's just that I thought we were having separate rooms tonight, all of us, and—"

She practically screamed, "Stop talking like a damned fool and help me find him."

"Have you looked in the room he was supposed to occupy?" I asked mildly.

"God, no!" she sputtered. "Jeedee would never sleep

alone, he can't stand being alone. He has a phobia."

Next step. "Have you looked in the rooms of any of the other ladies?"

"Are you insinuating . . . no, I haven't tried any other rooms," she shrieked.

"Why not?"

Her voice raised a couple of notches. "Stop gabbing and help me!"

"Shhh!" I shushed. "You'll wake up everybody."

"Isn't that the general idea?" she howled desperately. "Get up!"

The lusty amazon was already sprinting out of the room.

By the time I'd pulled on T-shirt, slacks and moccasins, she bounded back, covered but not concealed by a thin pink robe that did nothing but emphasize her generous curves. Holding my aching head, I led the way down the corridor. The next door was open, Rose's room obviously. I hammered on a door a few feet farther down the hall and walked in. The light from the hall showed me J. C. just starting to sit up in bed. In blue-striped silk pajamas he looked as aristocratic and controlled as at a board meeting. His hair wasn't even mussed, perhaps because he had no hair.

"Sorry, J. C.," I apologized. "We're looking for J. D. Rose here claims he's missing."

The tall man swung out of bed carefully, put on his slippers, picked up and donned the robe that had been lying at the foot of the bed, just like in the movies.

"Let's go," he said.

"Where?" He seemed so sure of where to go.

"To the rocks," he stated simply.

Rose gasped, looked wild-eyed and repeated in high tones, "The rocks? Why to the rocks?"

"Call it a hunch," he said.

"How d'ya jump at a hunch like that?" I was bewildered.

Maybe I should have skipped the last six Old Ranklers. Nothing made sense to me.

J. C. explained patiently, "Last I saw J. D. tonight, he was drunk—as usual. When he gets that way late at night, he often starts prowling around the grounds, says he likes to look at the sea. I've warned him before. He's probably slipped off the cliff and fallen to the rocks below." He continued, "I'll get a battery lantern and we'll go look."

How can he be so calm about his own brother, I wondered. Rose was sitting on the bed, weeping.

"This is nuts!" I exploded. "What's the sense of figuring on the worst before even bothering to see whether J. D. is in one of the other rooms?" I elaborated weakly, "You know his wolfing habits. How about you wake the people in the other wing, and I'll wake them in this wing—then we'll report."

The thin, composed gentleman shrugged and left.

Rose was still sobbing wildly. I patted her heaving shoulder—it was like touching live bait.

"Come on, baby," I soothed. "We'll find J. D. passed out in some room or under a bush." Duty called. When a client is missing, an ad-man looks.

By the time I'd aroused the other roomers in my wing, who turned out to be Gloria and Weasel, and had shuttled them into the living room, we were joined by J. B., Mari and Bob. Also by my unflustered wife, every blonde hair shiny and unruffled.

Everyone was beefing about being awakened, claiming they had all been sound asleep—not an insomniac in the house.

"Anybody seen J. D. lately?" I asked.

The women looked indignant, the men noncommittal.

Warm-hearted Helen suggested, "Did you look in the garbage cans?"

The glare from Rose was sharp enough to scratch your eyes out. "Where's J. C.?" she asked.

Mari answered hurriedly, "He's all right, he just woke us all up." She seemed frightened.

Rose screamed, "He must have gone to the rocks!"

The executive, J. B., took charge. "That's ridiculous," he snapped. "No sense in being alarmed over nothing. Let's all spread out and search the rest of the house, kitchen and all, then we'll cover the grounds. That halfwit might even have gone to a tavern nearby."

I glanced at Weasel who was standing to one side, wide-awake but sullen. He was fully dressed, even to the little wool cap. I couldn't tell what he was thinking of, but the expression on his mug showed he wasn't pondering anything pleasant. His little eyes blinked with high excitement.

Next to Gloria, Bob was looking grim and determinedly silent. The youngsters were holding hands.

"Let's get moving," J. B. ordered loudly. He started to assign separate areas to each of us, when we were all suddenly shocked by a far-away shout.

We dashed outside in a disorganized wedge, and started running toward a powerful lantern light. The single swinging light in the opaque blackness was weirdly bright and lonely and ominous. There was no sound but our running footsteps, our assorted heavy breathing, and Rose gasping hoarsely, "Jeedee, Jeedee, Jeedee . . ."

In a few seconds we were grouped around the lantern, held by J. C. His face was composed but solemn. A cold, damp wind from the sea swept over us. We could hear the heavy waves below smashing against the rocks, and sending white spray flying wildly into the blackness down there, way down there.

J. C. spoke. His voice was tense, funereal. He said tonelessly, "There's a body down there. I could just about make it out in the lantern's beam."

Nobody asked whose body. He continued, "It's not recognizable from here." Maybe not from down there either, maybe never recognizable again. He said only a little louder than a whisper, "Suppose the men come down with me. The women wait here or in the house."

We started to move toward the wooden steps. J. B. said, "Bob, four of us can handle it. You stay up here with the women." He looked at the dark-haired, shivering girl. He said sympathetically, "Rose, we're not sure yet. Have courage." The other women moved closer to her. Bob shoved his hands into his pockets and stood a little aside, glowering at the ground.

The two brothers, the massive Weasel and myself started to descend the creaking wooden stairway, holding tight to the railing as the wind pushed and sucked at us.

I almost missed my footing trying not to look down toward the rocks. My stomach was a soggy, soaked sponge. My feet finally touched ground, and I followed the others over to the rocks a few yards away.

I had no real sympathy for the detestable little man, yet I found myself thinking sickeningly, what once was a human being might now be a smear . . .

Five

WHAT do you do, what do you say, what do you think, when you see a body splashed into bloody, ungraceful death—a body that a few hours before had personality, desire, vitality, purpose?

So this is what you do. You look at the smashed, formless figure and then you look away at rocks, far sky, turbulent water. You try to put both hands down your throat and hold your stomach from heaving out through the top of your head. And what you say? You say to the farthest, mean, glittering star that violent death is hideous, ungraceful, without sense or reason—that life too is senseless—but sudden, precipitous death is even more so. And you think, mostly, that you want to get away from there, far away; you ache to turn time back to the day before.

The body was definitely J. D., recognizable by the clothes. What once was his face was now a wet splatter on the uncompromising rocks. The rest of the figure was spread sausage-like, as if without muscle or bones.

I lifted my eyes upward toward the high cliff edge, and my mind asked the same question that must have been scurrying around in the heads of all those present. Did he fall or was he pushed?

Above the vicious slap and pounce of the breaking waves, I heard footsteps racing recklessly down the cliffside stairs, then a woman's hurrying feet. Half-scream, half-wail, a broken voice poured out the anguished words, "It is Jeedee!"

I turned to see buxom Rose collapse in a heap of pink frill on the rocks near the body, near most of the body. Weasel bent and picked her up easily and gently in his heavy arms.

J. B. said emptily, "We might as well all go up and call a doctor—or somebody. No use trying to carry it," he corrected himself, "him." You'd need a basket.

We followed Weasel, still carrying the girl's lush, inert body, up the stairs. Her trailing robe was covered on one side with muck; whenever the lantern beam hit it, the mess glinted dark red against the pale pink material. My skin crawled and I kept my eyes on my ascending feet the rest of the way.

The others proceeded to the house, and I went over to the rest of the women and Bob. I answered their eyes, "It's J. D. all right."

Mari's pale eyes looked bitter, unsympathetic. She asked steadily, "Is he dead?"

I nodded.

Gloria was quivering in the wind. She held her negligee so tight around her, she seemed to be popping through. "It's terrible," she moaned. "He wasn't a very nice man, but this shouldn't have happened to him, not this." She began to sob.

My practical wife said flatly, "Don't carry on so, Gloria. He was nothing to you." She hesitated, "Was he?" My sweet woman.

Bob jumped in and pulled the weeping girl to him, his arm around her shoulders. "Lay off her," he snapped. "She's just a kid, she's all upset, for Christ's sake!"

My blonde continued her needling, "And what are you so disturbed about, little man? I never noticed any love between you and J. D. when he was alive . . ."

There was meaning to Helen's prodding, I knew. Her mind always worked click! click! zip! like a razor-blade

cartridge. She was trying to find out things while nerves were still exposed and vibrating.

She ignored Bob's nasty muttering, and queried of the night air what I had asked myself far below, "Now, did he fall . . . or was he pushed?"

"Pushed?" Mari ejaculated. "That's ridiculous!"

"So?" My shrewd sidekick puckered up her shapely lips sardonically. She mused aloud, "Such a little push . . . as when a man reaches for a girl uninvited . . . and she gives him such a little push, not meaning any real harm, not meaning to kill him—or maybe even meaning to—" her eyes swayed from Mari to Gloria, back to J. D.'s ex-wife, J. C.'s present wife. She concluded lightly, "And over he goes. No more trouble. No more interference. Nothing."

The tense Viennese rasped, "Like the push from you that almost threw him out of his office window yesterday? Yes," she nodded jerkily, "my husband told me about that."

Helen hit back sarcastically, "Oh, so you know all about that. Give you any bright ideas?" That was below the hips. Next they'd be trading handfuls of hair. But it was interesting, I was learning things.

Gloria stopped crying long enough to pitch in her contribution. "Don't anybody accuse me," she wailed. "What if I did walk out here with him? When he made a pass at me, I just ran away, back to the house. I didn't touch him, he was still standing there." She looked up at her hero. "Bob can tell you that," she wailed, "he passed me when I was running back to the house."

"Sure," Bob muttered. "He was still standing there."

I asked fast-like-a-snake, "How do you know? Were you going to the little girl's rescue?"

He looked bewildered, then frowned and said, "Why not? I didn't trust him any farther than I could throw a—"

"—a body?" I suggested. I added quickly, "I'm sorry, Bob. Very stupid. I couldn't resist it."

He shrugged.

My frigid blonde kept up the pressure. She asked, "Could be you two young people have made this up together as a nice blanket for you both to get under?" She bore down, "She left him standing there, *she* says. You left him standing there, *you* say. But somebody didn't leave him standing there—"

Mari interrupted shrilly, "This is crazy, crazy! It's so obvee-ous. The man was drunk, and he walked to the edge and he fell over. Or he felt bad about the world and himself, and he jumped over. The man was drunk," she repeated, "he fell by accident."

"Why are you so sure?" Helen insisted.

"Because I'm sure, I'm sure!" She said the words over as though to assure herself.

My blonde kept punching, "Are you so sure because you and J. C. quarreled with him earlier this evening, and now this doesn't look so good for either of you?"

Mari defended herself vigorously. "Everybody quarreled with him, tonight and almost every night. Even J. B. had a fight with him. And Bob did, and Gloria. And you yesterday afternoon," she accused. "And your husband, too, I understand."

I started to say, leave me out of it. But her statement was true, so I shut my mouth. I was relieved there were no cops listening.

My wife summed up quietly, "That's why everybody's so sure he fell and wasn't pushed. Because everybody hated his crummy guts . . . and could have shoved him over so happily."

Mari sounded exhausted. She said, "I don't know. Maybe he was fed up with everything, especially himself, and jumped."

Helen's beautiful face sneered. "The only place that rat would jump," she said, "is into bed!"

End of Round One. I felt chilled right through to my last evaporated drop of Old Rankler. Even the dark silence around us shivered.

A shout hailed us from the house. We all started walking toward it tiredly.

Gloria's voice came shakily, "Was that the body that Weasel was carrying before?"

"No." I began to explain that the body being carried still had central heating. I veered off that and wondered how to tell her that you couldn't carry a jellied torso in your arms. I gave up. I merely added, "No, that was Rose. She passed out. The doctor or somebody will get the other body later."

The girl emitted a loud wail and started weeping all over her sympathetic escort again. I hoped that he was Sanforized.

My understanding wife said impatiently, "The bitchid little stupe!"

Mari simply looked blank and drained and a little worried.

My numb little mind kept asking me over and over again as we trudged on, was he pushed or was he pushed?

BACK at the house, we found the two brothers, with Weasel and a somewhat wilted and red-eyed Rose, sitting dispiritedly in the living room. J. B. explained that he had phoned the local doctor who stated that he'd be along soon and would also notify the police authorities, "if I can get him out of bed."

The perfect gentleman, J. C., settled on one of the sofas with his wife, tenderly massaged her temples. He looked up and said in his usual cultured tones, "I don't understand what the police have to do with this. It couldn't have been anything but an accident. He was drunk, as often

before, and he fell over. All that's required is a death certificate. Why the police?"

"Merely a formality," J. B. said. "Apparently even in an accidental death like this, the police must be notified." He stated with assurance, "It will all be over before we know it. I apologize to all of you," particularly to my luscious blonde, according to his eyes, "for this—inconvenience."

I thought, seems the two boys have it all tabbed, stamped and filed away. J. D. neither fell nor was pushed, he merely tripped over a bottle of Old Rankler. And now his shares of Old Rankler stock would go to his two relieved brothers.

My canny wife apparently was entertaining the same thoughts. "Pardon me for bringing it up," she said, "but the police will probably want to know what happens to J. D.'s share in Pluperfect Liquors."

The two living brothers stared and, it seemed to me, worked hard at looking surprised.

Finally J. B. explained, "It's no secret, I guess. The business is all in the family. His holdings go to J. C. and myself, divided evenly." And no more backtalk from the exasperating J. D., he might have added. The last consideration was probably more important to the brothers than the million or more bucks concerned. Although history reveals that men have been pushed, poisoned and stabbed for smaller amounts.

J. C. said quietly and pointedly, "That line of thought is nonsense." A million dollars' gain was not nonsense to some people, including the tax department. And Rose.

She suddenly sat erect, every lovely and healthy inch of her alert. She asked loudly, "With J. D. dead, where do I come in?"

You don't come in, baby, I could have told her. Here's where you go out.

J. B. came through like a gentleman. He said, "Why, Rose,

of course your position with the firm will continue."

My wife hissed to me, "The only position she knows is horizontal."

"I heard that," the big brunette yelled, "you brassy two-bit illegitimate."

My blonde snapped, "Don't call me two-bit! And you certainly look like a bereaved widow in that outfit of four yards of nothing."

The big babe sputtered a row of epithets and wound up with the statement, "I'm not going to get discarded in this deal. After all, I was Jeedee's—uh—sort of common-law wife."

"Accent on the common, dear," Helen threw in.

The brothers were looking at the brunette with a combined stare that would have turned Hot Springs into a glacier. Careful, honey, I thought—surveying sultry Rose fondly—or you too might be falling from high places.

The gal was cooking more hot words to serve when J. B. prevented further cussing by asking loudly, "Who would like a drink?"

I seconded the motion and hurried over to the bar.

Weasel asked plaintively, "Any chance of getting a double chocolate malted around here? I'm hungry." I glanced at him in surprise; he looked years younger and centuries happier. Here all of a sudden, I told myself, was a really gay monster, and the only thing that's happened is that one of us got himself killed.

I said in a low voice, "What the hell are you so happy about, Weasel?"

"I dunno," he smirked angelically, "maybe I got a weight off my mind."

"Try to keep your happiness to yourself. Remember, there's a dead body practically present."

The big man tried to look too innocent. "You know, I like you," he said. He patted my head.

While I was pasting it back on with a generous application of Old Rankler, a couple of cars arrived, bringing the doctor and assorted colleagues. Among them was a fat politician-looking character introduced as Chief Batrous. He was the police department.

Sitting in the sunshine of the golden Pluperfect millions, Chief Batrous was very polite, considerate and almost servile. I don't know what J. B. had said to him, or slipped to him, on the porch, but for the most part we were treated more like local voters during a tight campaign than like suspects.

"Just a few questions," the fat man said pleasantly, seating himself near the bar. He had been out to see the cliff and the body and to absorb J. B.'s suggestions and opinions, spelled m-o-n-e-y.

"It's obvious," he said, "that this is a most unhappy accident. Thank you, Mr. Plupe." He accepted a second dose of Old Rankler from J. B. "But just for the record, I want to get everybody lined up right." He lined up his throat with the soothing bourbon. "Let's start with you, young man." He looked at a list he'd made up earlier. "You're Clark C. Clark, Pluperfect's advertising agent. Correct?"

"Right," I corrected.

"Just for the record," he repeated assuringly, "I take it you were on good terms with the deceased?"

I glanced at J. B. with a what-do-I-say anxiety. He nodded slightly. I answered, "Sure." Why make trouble?

"Fine." The Chief put a check mark after my name. It looked like I had been graduated.

A woman's sarcastic voice cut down my smugness. "They got along just dandy," Rose sneered. "Why, this twerp was threatening to push Jeedee out of a window on Thursday. Also, Jeedee wanted to take the advertising account away from him!"

The Chief looked unhappy. He leaned on another swallow

of Old Rankler. "Is that correct?" he asked me mildly.

"Not exactly," I fenced. "You see—"

The girl with the exaggerated lungs interrupted again, "That happened after his wife, this bitchy blonde over here, had just missed pushing Jeedee out the window herself." She snarled, "She claimed she was defending her alleged honor!"

The Chief was impressed, and he didn't want to be. He'd intended just a brief walk-through on this incident. Maybe I ought to start phoning the family lawyer.

The fat man regarded me less benevolently. "Just for the record," he said again, "seems like Mr. Plupe must have fallen over the cliff maybe midnight or a little after." He explained to everybody, "He's been dead a couple of hours, more or less, according to the doctor's figuring, and he was last seen in the house about 11:30. Where were you," that meant me, "say between midnight and one o'clock?"

"Me?" I was startled. Where the hell had I been? "I don't exactly know," I stumbled. "I remember taking a little walk, then I went back to the bar, then—dammit, I don't remember." I didn't. All I remembered was dark alcoholic fuzz; I hadn't been counting either minutes or drinks. I finished weakly, "I guess I went to bed around one or so . . ."

My blonde's comment was not uplifting. She said, "Chief, after a couple of dozen drinks, my husband," she tossed the word off her tongue as though it had been dipped in sulphur, "goes to a little world that's neither his own nor anyone else's. In other words, he probably passed out."

I started to protest, but gave it up. The only world in which I could really tolerate myself was that gray limbo of nothing and nobody; why deny it?

"That's a helluva way to abuse good liquor," the Chief snarled. A crime worse than murder obviously. He re-

membered the conspicuous throne he was occupying and added, "Pardon me." He ventured, "Mrs. Clark, what time did your husband get to bed?"

"I don't know," my oversexless beauty explained.

The Chief looked from her svelte figure over to me doubtfully, weighing my manhood.

J. B. took charge. "We all slept in separate rooms, Chief. We had a big conference scheduled for early tomorrow," he looked at the mantel clock, "today. But that's not important." He applied the pressure. "What is important is that we're just wasting time here. We're all horrified and exhausted by this terrible accident and need rest and quiet. Can't we get to bed?" A stiff note in his voice warned: don't make a federal case out of this.

The Chief yielded up to a certain point. "I'll finish as soon as possible, Mr. Plupe. Just have to get things straight for the record." He looked me over disapprovingly, jotted some words after my name and crossed out the previous checkmark. I'd flunked again. I was a bad boy. Just how bad, I wondered.

Could my better self have overcome me and wandered out in a blind daze to abolish J. D. from this earth? Know thyself, they say. Hmmm, I wish I did know . . .

Six

"**M**RS. CLARK," the Chief tagged her next, "can you account for your time between 11:30, let's say, and one?" I was interested in her answer, too. I suspected she might have been playing with J. B., and not mumblety-peg.

She shrugged disdainfully. "I played some cards. Took a walk with J. B." The hell with you, hubby mine, her expression indicated. "I also went to the johnny, if you must know."

All in the night's work to the Chief. He summed up, "Then you were alone part of the time?"

"Just me and the Reader's Digest," she explained indelicately. "I don't usually take a witness."

He ignored it. "And what about this incident in Mr. J. D. Plupe's office?"

I admired her composure. She said, expressionless, "He pinched me suddenly in my—derriere. When that happens, I usually pull, pinch back or push. In this case, I pushed. That's all."

"And almost shoved him through the open window!" Rose inserted shrilly.

"Is that a fact, Mrs. Clark?" the Chief asked.

"When I get pinched, I react fast," Helen stated factually. "I don't stop to make a survey of the premises."

"She'd react just as fast next to an open cliff," the dark girl snarled.

"You binking stitch!" the blonde retorted. Dear Rosy, I thought, from my wife's murderous expression, matched

by the faces of J. C. and J. B., you'd better shut your large luscious mouth or you may not be long for this world, either.

The Chief went on, "One more question, Mrs. Clark. Were you down by the cliff at all with J. D. Plupe at any time tonight?"

She answered angrily, "I wouldn't take a walk to Tiffany's with that little lecher!" She settled back in her chair determinedly. The Chief didn't seem to notice that she hadn't really answered his question. Or did he?

He shifted his attention, suddenly conscious of Weasel's massive frame, staring with a mixture of astonishment, disgust and admiration. "I didn't get your name before," he said to the big man.

The behemoth appeared ill at ease. He muttered, "M'name's Weasel."

The Chief hardened. "What's your real name?"

"Everybody calls me Weasel."

The little fat man started to rise from behind the desk, his jowls flaring. "I want your real name for the records," he snapped, "and I don't want any trouble or I'll make plenty of trouble for you. Now . . . what's your name?"

The silence was full of watchful eyes. Everyone was looking at Weasel's huge reddening, puckered face. After all, what did we know about him?

His heavy lips twisted, tightened, finally opened and released the words, "My name is Wesley Abelard." He added rapidly in one breath, "Everybody calls me Weasel, just Weasel."

J. B. repeated in astonishment, "Abelard?"

The Chief asked him, "You know the name?"

It was clear that J. B. wanted to suck back the sentence and bury it, but it was too late. He said grudgingly, "We had a girl working out here for a while named Doris Abelard."

"You know her?" the Chief asked. No answer. He raised his voice at Weasel, "You know her, I asked."

The big man was staring down at the floor. He mumbled, "She's my sister."

Recognition blossomed on J. C.'s face. He'd probably seen Weasel with his sister Doris somewhere. That explained why the big fellow had tried to hide his face, had in general acted so uneasy driving up in the car.

The Chief revealed his shrewdness—he'd be a whiz at Twenty Questions—scoring on the next try. "Where is your sister?"

My massive collaborator broke suddenly. "She's in the state asylum," he raved, all control gone. "That little no-good rotten squirt made a play for her when she was working here. He got her in trouble and then threw her over when she asked him for help. She had a bad miscarriage and never came out of it right. I didn't have the money to take care of her good," his shrill voice was ripped with emotion. "She went off her nut. I had to let them take her away a couple of weeks ago!"

I had gone over to him and put my hand on his huge trembling shoulders. It was like trying to calm Vesuvius. "Take it easy, pal," was the best I could think of.

"I been trying to get some money together ever since," he went on hysterically. "That's why I answered the ad—but I came here to get close to him, to be where maybe I could get even with him. I'm only sorry I wasn't the one who killed that little rat."

"Nobody killed him," J. B. interjected in a rush. "He fell—it was an accident!"

"Were you out there on the cliff with him tonight, Weasel?" the Chief kept driving.

The big man was recovering gradually. He managed to say, "No."

Rose started pitching again. "I saw him leave the house,"

she informed the Chief. "It was some time around midnight, I'm sure."

"What about it, Weasel?" the fat man asked.

"Sure, I left the house," Weasel retorted. "And I'll admit I was looking for the runt. I looked all over the place. But I couldn't find him." He stopped, then said wonderingly, "He musta been dead already . . ."

J. C. appeared troubled. "Chief Batrous," he began, very sincerely, "I'm afraid we're making a mountain out of a molehill, tragic as this may be. Can this investigation possibly uncover anything useful? There's no evidence of struggle or disturbance of any kind at the cliff's edge where he fell, is there?"

"No," the Chief said candidly. "The grass is packed into hard ground up there. No footprints or anything like that could show. But," his face remained stubborn, "I'm just filling out the record. I ain't looking to uncover anything that ain't there."

Yet he had uncovered a motive for a stranger who had answered an ad: "Wanted—Murderers." A stranger of formidable strength, who admitted that he'd come here to revenge himself on a man now being unsmeared from some rocks out there in the windy darkness.

"Just how do you happen to be here, Abelard?" the Chief pursued. The friendly "mister" or "Weasel" words were gone, so was all sympathy from his tone.

"For God's sake, Chief," J. B. hurled at him, "if you go into every little detail, we'll be up all night. We're all worn out, we've been through an awful shock. Can't you fill in the details another time?"

The fat man seemed about to argue. Then he drew a heavy star alongside Weasel's name on the paper. His reluctant expression indicated that he wouldn't mind filling in details for hours.

THE CHIEF shifted his fat around in the chair, and called out, "Gloria McLane?"

The pretty redhead squealed, "Me?"

Batrous looked her over appreciatively. He seemed to like the way she fitted her striped dressing gown, or vice versa. He asked, "Just fill me in on your activities up to, say, one o'clock."

Inadvertently she looked toward Bob and flushed.

That husky young man yipped gallantly, "She had nothing to do with this, understand?"

The fat man groaned, rubbed his face, rubbed his glass of Old Rankler against his lips and dumped the contents down his throat for good luck. Tirelessly, J. B. filled the glass again. A good host . . . and a subtle conniver: the more Old Rankler, the less rancor.

The Chief consulted his list. He asked, "You're Bob Ronnel?"

Bob repeated, "She had nothing to do with it!"

"Let her speak for herself, boy," Batrous ordered. "She's a grown girl."

The grown girl's chest demonstrated her maturity as she took a deep breath and let it out with the words, "He's right. I had nothing to do with it."

"All I wanna know," the Chief said wearily, "is where you were—where you both were." The liquid sedative was making him more sleepy and less wary, also less patient.

Mari decided to take a hand. "Gloria, why don't you tell him what you told us before?" she suggested dryly. "That you were with J. D. by the cliff. That you ran away from him. That Bob had come out to rescue you but found it wasn't necessary . . . because you were already on your way back."

"Is that the story?" Batrous asked. A story which alibi'd no one.

They nodded.

The Chief shook his head and put question marks opposite both these names. He seemed to wish they'd been curled under some snug bush all night so he could scratch their names off. But no, they had to complicate things for him. "I get more damned suspects," he told his pencil.

He shifted his eyes toward Rose, let them detour through her gauzy drapery, up mountain and down valley. He said mildly, "You've been doing a lot of talking about other people, Miss Witson. Now, what about yourself?"

She pulled the negligee tighter, proving again that she didn't wear gay deceivers. She said carefully, "I was playing cards."

Mari mentioned, "Not all the time, you weren't."

"Thanks for your contribution, sister," the brunette said disdainfully, accenting the "sister".

Batrous looked content to let the two females scratch it out and see what meows he could pick up.

"Why don't you also tell the man that you took a walk—or something—with J. D.?" the Viennese pressed. "I saw you go out together." I wondered whether she was trying to turn suspicion away from herself.

"And we came back together!" the dark wench emphasized.

Nobody affirmed or denied that. The Chief asked, "What happened while you were out with him, Miss Witson?"

"—If it will pass the censors!" That from my sarcastic blonde, naturally.

Rose snappily suggested something highly anatomical that my limber mate could do with herself. Then she relaxed, let a tear slide along her mascara and said softly and dramatically, "Jeedee and I took a walk through the gardens." She paused long enough to let the violins tune up. "We sat on a bench near the magnolia trees." Yuk-yuk, I'm coming, Virginia, smear my old Mammy with corn pone and cover me with Daisy Belle. "We held hands. And then

—" the moisture glistened like a skim of ice on her hard brown eyeballs, "Jeedee asked me to marry him . . ."

The room was so still you could hear an option drop. The first sound was a thick stream of German words from Mari that I couldn't understand but that I was sure you wouldn't find in kindergarten books. For instance, what does "werfluchtef hur" mean?

Rose yelled suddenly, "Look at their faces, all three of them!" She pointed to the little group of Plupes—J. B., J. C. and Mari. It was true, they all emanated disgust and hatred before they quickly exchanged glances and smoothed out their expressions. The volatile brunette raged on, "Any one of them would kill Jeedee to keep me from sharing one-third of the family fortune. They hated him and they hate me. They'd murder anybody rather than lose control of one share in their precious stinking business!"

She opened the waterworks and let the stream overflow. I wondered, was this genuine grief due to losing her lover, or losing a whack at the Plupe millions?

I handed her a shot glass of Old Rankler straight and she tossed it down without missing a single sob. Then she voiced the thought in most of our minds. She accused savagely, "Any one of them could have overheard Jeedee proposing to me out there in the darkness . . . and then grabbed the first chance to get rid of him."

I didn't say, "It would have been just as easy to get rid of you, honey, and would have avoided the expense of a family funeral." I didn't say that brothers seldom push brothers over cliffs, although a half-push from a half-brother or ex-wife would have smashed him more than half-dead. I didn't say anything. I'm an introvert. And furthermore, I know on which side my Old Rankler account is buttered.

The Chief was grim but silent.

He put two exclamation points alongside Rose's name on

his list, making the dots extra-heavy. Old eagle eye.

J. B. said reasonably, "Chief, we sympathize with Miss Witson. She's suffered a loss, no question about it—whether," he measured his words for emphasis, "my brother asked her to marry him or not. But is it really necessary for us to submit to her hysterical babbling?" Or is it necessary to get a new police head in this neck of the woods, he implied.

Batrous nodded that he understood. He glanced next at Mari and said hurriedly, "Mrs. Plupe, just a word or two from you about where you were during that hour or so around midnight?"

The neat little doll looked worried. She clenched her slender, capable hands and drew a long ragged breath. Here it comes, I noted. Were we going to get some enlightenment about her former husband, or just a charming Strauss waltz-me-around?

"I DON'T MIND telling whatever I know," Mrs. Plupe finally said in the grand manner. A little waltz music, maestro, please. "But I don't think I can help you. I was restless last night. I was here, there and everywhere, indoors and out, at one time or another." As incomplete an alibi as I'd ever heard this side of Vienna.

"Happen to see your, uh, ex-husband while you were—outdoors?" he asked respectfully.

Her eyes darted for a minute over toward her husband. She covered quickly and said, "No."

"She's lying!" Rose intervened. "She had an argument with Jeedee before dinner and never finished it because J. C. broke it up. Both of them were fighting with Jeedee! I'll bet both of them saw him later outdoors to carry on the quarrel, whatever it was."

"Miss Witson," the Chief yelled impatiently. "Unless

you have facts to back up what you say, please don't say anything."

"Don't worry," she bit off, "I'll have facts enough to hang them all!" And you'll have a broken neck if you're not careful, toots, I warned silently.

The fat police-politico turned to the brothers and simply said, "Gentlemen?"

J. B. said matter-of-factly, "I can't account for every minute of my time. Of course, I didn't know it would be necessary. One never does." Reasonable enough. "Even now I don't think any of this is necessary."

The suffering Chief waited.

"However," the big executive continued in his board-meeting manner, "I was both indoors and out, after playing cards. When Mrs. Clark came in after our walk, I stayed out for a little while, just enjoying the beauty of the night." After enjoying my blonde beauty?

Not a bad-looking guy, I had to admit. And my practical wife was undoubtedly impressed by the fact that he had money that hadn't even been printed yet. Still, I tried to console myself, the only difference between him and me are a few million lousy dollars. How could that possibly influence her?

"You didn't see Mr. J. D.," the Chief prompted.

Emphatically J. B. asserted, "I did not." Too quick and too sure that reply, I pondered. Watching his air of dominating power, anyone would nominate this tycoon as the toughest cookie in the room, the man most likely perhaps to murder and get away with it. Would he let anyone, even a brother, get by with crossing him up—especially a brother who might put one-third of the family business in the hot hands of an acquisitive floozy? I didn't want to answer that question, even to myself.

Poised, gentlemanly J. C. took the floor, unasked. "I was outdoors also for quite a while, with my wife and without."

Unfortunately for the Chief, the grounds were large enough to pitch a carnival without even having one tent in full sight of another.

Batrous asked, "For the record, did you see your brother—I mean, Mr. J. D.?"

The dignified and oldest brother took time to light a cigarette and consider the glowing end for a few seconds. He said surprisingly, "I may have. I saw two figures out by the cliff edge when I was walking by at one time . . ."

"Recognize them?" The Chief looked alert again. Everyone in the room waited tensely for the answer.

The explanation came very slowly, "It was very dark, not much moon." He hesitated, "I couldn't say. And I walked on quickly, didn't pay much attention." He elaborated, "My mind was occupied with a problem . . ."

The problem of how to get rid of J. D.'s interference with the business? The problem of spending the rest of his life helping his wife to avoid the man who had shocked her into a hushed-up annulment after one month of married hell?

Had he passed the two figures in the darkness, or waited until only one figure remained and then pushed that one over the cliff edge? I shivered involuntarily. I studied J. C.'s expressionless face carefully, trying to find the answer there to a suspicion that kept nagging at me.

Smart Rosie jumped up and jerked me erect suddenly with her. "Who was it?" she yelled at me. "Who wanted to go right out to the cliff when you woke him up? Who didn't waste any time looking around but went right out to the place where—where—" She lost breath, then screamed, pointing a quivering arm at the strained and whitening face of J. C., "He did! He's the one! And his high-toned bitch of a wife helped him—that tart who thought Jeedee wasn't good enough to even share the same world with her!"

I grabbed the stormy Rose as she collapsed, almost blistering my fingers against her feverish flesh as her negligee broke open under my clutching hands. I pulled her wrappings together as she sobbed and shook in a heap, the dried dark stain on her robe quivering like an open wound.

When I straightened up, running a high fever, my wife's look froze me. She asked, "Having fun, Rover?"

The dark weeping girl struggled to her feet and hurried from the room in a mist of flying tears and unshackled negligee.

Chief Batrous cleared his throat, looked everywhere except at the two brothers, picked up his papers and rose up on his stubby legs. He said weakly, "I guess that's all for now."

"You mean we can go to bed?" my blooming secretary asked eagerly.

"Yup," he assented.

Bob said gallantly, "I'll keep an eye on your door, Gloria."

"On the outside of her door, chum," I suggested.

J. B. said authoritatively, "You won't be needing any of us further, will you, Chief? I mean, from now on."

"Well—" the fat man was hesitant.

"Fine!" the tycoon took over. He addressed all of us. "I think you'd all best go back to the city tomorrow—I'll see that you're driven there. Chief," he plowed ahead, "I'll personally be responsible for all these folks, so that you can get hold of any of them any time you want. Okay?"

What could the little job-holder do? He probably had a wife and two stills of his own to support. And besides, there was no evidence whatsoever that I could see of murder. No marks at the cliff edge, no telltale clues on the body smashed and bruised into a shapeless mess by the rocks.

"Okay," the Chief echoed uncertainly.

"Good!" J. B. loved those echos of affirmation, as no

one knew better than I. "One more thing," he instructed us. "We'll be closed up Monday for the funeral. Tuesday will be a busy day making up for Monday. Let's have our meeting right after working hours on Tuesday—at five, say." He asked me, "Can your staff make it, Clark?"

"Does my staff like to eat regular?" I replied. I realized that the questionable humor was out of order, just about as incongruous as J. B.'s detailed attention to business matters before his brother's body was even dry. I covered up fast, "Sure, we can make it. Bob? Gloria?"

They nodded without enthusiasm.

"I hate to bring it up," my wife said, bringing it up, "but we have a dinner date at seven with the Boggsses next Tuesday. They're coming in from Los Angeles."

J. B. told her smoothly, "That'll fit in fine. We'll launch our meeting right on time, sail along on the high spots only and hold it down to an hour." He turned the charm up a few notches. "Perhaps you'll wish to pick up Clark at my office and have a drink with me before dinner?"

She nodded agreeably. Too agreeably. Baby, I wanted to say, remember money isn't everything. It isn't?

The boss-man said, "Good night, all. Thanks for your cooperation." Class dismissed.

We straggled out dispiritedly. I looked at my lovely blonde pleadingly. She said, "I'm going to sleep—in *my* room—alone."

"I only want to talk," I complained.

She said succinctly, "I don't want to talk, either."

I wailed, "Nobody misunderstands me." I trudged off to my lonely twenty-by-twenty cell.

But as I lay there welcoming sleep, I could hear through the open window the rhythmic booming of the sea. Merciful waves were washing away the last stains sprayed on the rocks by J. D.'s battered body—removed by now in a very

unfashionable basket, no better upholstered for rich than for poor.

The waves also kept washing that same question at me: Did he fall or was he pushed?

And incidentally, I thought, where *had* I been from eleven-thirty until one?

Cripes, here I was even suspecting myself . . .

Seven

I WOKE up with an idea. Not about J. D.'s death, but about the Old Rankler advertising campaign. I thought I had hit on a wholesale way of getting the short short mystery stories we needed, provided the program were still on in spite of J. D.'s demise. I'd have to check that with J. B.

My idea had to do with the Mystery Writers of America, an organization you probably know about, with a membership of most of the top mystery writers. It's generally referred to as MWA to save ink and breath. Locally, they usually meet the first Wednesday evening of every month for dinner and discussion in the private dining room (the private eye room?) above a noisy little French restaurant.

That much I knew because—surprise—Helen was a member. You see, she'd written and sold a mystery story a couple of years before to one of the pulps; just for the fun of it, and also the money. She'd been a publicity writer before throwing away her talents by tying on to me. She enjoyed the meetings each month, so she kept up her membership by the simple expedient of paying annual dues. With a new month starting, I knew she'd be attending a meeting the coming Wednesday.

My idea was that she take me along since guests are permitted, and have the chairman give me a few minutes to explain our new campaign and ask the writers to submit stories to our agency. That way I could hit seventy writers at one blow, at least—also get a notice in the MWA monthly

bulletin. Since mystery writers, just like people, are always seeking money, I felt sure they'd welcome this new market for short short stories.

All of which gave me an excuse to put on a robe and toddle down to my wife's room in the other wing. I assured myself that my trip was for consulting, not spying.

I ran into one of the maids who was able to direct me to the right room. The girl was pretty enough for me to offer to help her make up beds, but I desisted. I thought fleetingly about Weasel's sister, Doris, and the taste in my mind was terrible.

I rapped, entered, closed the door behind me. My gorgeous pajama'd wife was sitting up in bed reading a mystery story by the light of the morning sun. I grinned and she almost smiled back. My grin became a leer and she said snappily, "Look, I'm not in the mood."

"Baby," I explained, "sometimes I think of the lesser things in life. I want to discuss a business matter with you."

She didn't believe me but she put her book aside and lit a cigarette, flicking the used match into my approaching face. "A fellow could lose an eye that way," I bleated. "I only wanted to get close enough to tell you I love you and missed you last night."

She said quietly, "I love you too, Clark. I missed you too." She added hurriedly, "Now push your eyes back into their sockets and tell me about the business matter." But she didn't bother to button the unbuttoned top button of her pajamas. Women are so inconsiderate, it's wonderful.

I outlined the plan.

The mind under that golden hair is jet-propelled. She said immediately, "Good slant. You're in. I'll call the MWA office as soon as we get back to town, and fix it."

"Sure they'll go for it?" I asked. "I want to be sure before I throw it at J. B."

"Start pitching, kid," she assured me. "Those MWA

characters love collecting checks almost as much as they hate writing stories." Her eyes squinted. She said, "I have another idea."

I moved quickly. Just as fast, she snuffed out her live cigarette on the back of my hand. I yelled, "Ouch!"

She said calmly, "That's not my idea." She went on without the least concern for my singed skin. "Here's a new twist for the meeting. There's often a speech involving actual crimes, explained by police authorities, medical examiners and such. Suppose I make the speech, this time. I could throw the details about the death of J. D. at the membership—ask them their opinions as to whether it's accident or murder. And if murder, who did it—"

"Done it," I corrected.

She ignored me. "Think those amateur sleuths would get a kick out of it?"

"Sure, I guess they'd enjoy kicking around a live, unsolved problem like this one," I agreed. "But I'm against it—completely."

"Why?"

"Because J. B. wants this whole incident kept as shush-shush as possible. He says it was an accident. So it was an accident, see? A pious obituary in the papers telling the world what a sweet and gentle soul that rat J. D. was. A quiet, well-watered funeral. And finis." I finished emphatically, "That's the program."

My blonde disagreed. She insisted, "Murder will out."

"That went out with Shakespeare," I said. "No publicity. J. B. insists on that, I know."

"Seem to you," she asked, as serious as she ever gets about anything, "that J. B. insists too much on the accident angle?"

I said, "Mine not to reason why."

She amended disparagingly, "Yours but to do or die for dear Old Rankler. You stink!"

That's what I like about modern marriage—it builds up a man's ego. I followed up, "You'll drop the idea of discussing the death at the MWA meeting? Just talking about our ad campaign would be plenty."

"I'll see," was her only agreement, "at the meeting."

She cut off further discussion by suddenly pulling me off balance across her bed and applying her firm red lips to my surprised match-mates. I was getting into the act enthusiastically when I was hurled away as violently as I'd been grabbed.

Her pinpoint pupils started expanding again as she grated huskily, "Somebody at the door."

My eardrums stopped vibrating and I heard the knocking. I jumped to my feet quickly and strapped up my robe as she called out, "Come in." What the hell was I so jittery about, I asked myself impatiently, I'm *married* to this babe. A bad case of hotel-detectivitis.

Big-shouldered J. B. swung jauntily into the room. If he was surprised at my presence, he covered up well. After accepting compliments on the pleasant weather, he said, "We'll all drive back to the city together after lunch. I've decided there's no use any of us remaining here." He added soberly, "The remains are being taken care of by the mortician." And the police, I'd bet. "The funeral will be in the city, of course."

The three of us sat and contemplated nothing for a dignified interval. Then J. B. said in his executive voice, "Don't let this hold up your work on the campaign, Clark. Time is short, you know." I've never heard of time being long in advertising. "Clear the decks for action and full speed ahead, even though our offices will be closed Monday."

I started, "You don't think the circumstances of J. D.'s death might warrant holding off for a while . . . ?"

"It was an accident!" he yelled. "Death is one thing, sales

are another, to put it bluntly. No reason why this should interfere with the campaign."

My smart wife said soothingly, "Clark woke up with a bright idea this morning. Tell him, darling." I don't know which startled me more, her gentle tones or the "darling."

Darling picked up his cue. I told J. B. about attending the MWA meeting to ask the writers to contribute original short shorts to us. He was pleased. He agreed, "Good way to get material, and good promotional angle too. Any way we can tie in the MWA name?"

"Probably," Helen thought aloud, "for a fee." For a fat enough fee, a writer would murder his own typewriter.

"Go ahead," J. B. signaled. "And let's put off our Tuesday night meeting until Thursday, so you can report on what happens with MWA. We'll make an evening of it, have drinks and buffet at the office afterwards. Can you arrange your end of it?"

I could arrange anything—also for a fee. I nodded. I caught Helen's warning glance; neither of us mentioned the idea of discussing the death at the MWA session.

J. B. and I arose, jockeying as to who would leave the humid bedroom first. My flattered wife watched like a smug rabbit in a whippet race. Finally we left together, squeezing through the doorway uncomfortably.

I headed for my own bedroom, all morning before me. What to do with it? Two things beckoned me. I wanted to look at the cliff edge and the rocks again, just out of curiosity, I guess.

And I wanted to have a talk with J. C. I was still puzzled as to why he headed for the cliff so fast as soon as J. D. was reported missing. I warned myself, curiosity killed a cat. I hoped it wouldn't kill a certain advertising man who shall be nameless, but whose initials are C. C. C.

SOME DAY I'll have hot kidneys for breakfast like they do in the British cinema. This day I had fried eggs and bacon alone, and liked it.

While the maid was in the kitchen breaking dishes, I slipped into the living room and splashed some Old Rankler into my black coffee out of courtesy to the house. When I'm writing copy for spaghetti, I eat spaghetti, and love it. When I'm writing liquor copy, I drink my inspiration beforehand—and the words flow.

The fortified coffee inspired me to action. While nobody was looking—I thought—I trudged out of the dining room, through the living room, with a slight pause for another splash of stimulation, and out of the house. I walked softly across the lawn toward the cliff edge, making like Sherlock Holmes. Shucks, I scolded myself vaguely as I reached the spot where J. D. must have stood last before he left this life, I've forgotten my magnifying glass.

Okay, Philo, I asked myself as I looked around the deserted spot, what the hell do I do now that the Chief didn't do last night? Clue, clue, where are you?

Clue answered by sparkling in the tough crabgrass near the cliff edge. I picked it up and recognized it immediately as the cameo brooch that Mari had worn in the V of her dress last night.

As a connoisseur of necklines, I retraced the path of my eyes carefully over the preceding evening. I definitely remembered that Mari had worn the cameo at dinner and during the evening. But she certainly hadn't been wearing it when she appeared in her robe after the body was discovered. After all, she wouldn't wear a brooch to bed—somebody impetuous might get pierced and scarred permanently.

I couldn't remember whether the lively Viennese was wearing the brooch in the late evening hours or not. Full confession—I couldn't be sure of anything in those vital

bourbon-drenched hours. Maybe I needed fewer glasses in front of my eyes.

Yet, if Mari had dropped the brooch here in the grass last night, that meant she had lied, that she had been at this spot. And if she had lied, the purpose was obviously to conceal that she'd been here with J. D.

But why hadn't the Chief found the brooch? He could have missed it in the blackness, but that didn't seem likely; the fat man appeared indecisive but not stupid. And if someone had planted the cameo here after the inquisition last night, how had they sneaked it out of Mari's room?

I examined the costly gadget carefully for the first time. On close inspection it didn't appear as exquisite as I'd thought. The white nude figure was nicely shaped but the color in the background was a bit uneven. I turned it over. The pin had broken off, perhaps in a struggle with J. D. Could be that the brooch was wrenched off as the pin broke and fell in the grass unnoticed, then was soiled by the overnight exposure. The silent nude lady refused to talk. I put the inexplicable brooch in my pocket.

Looking around, I noticed a low, heavy shrub growing only about a yard from the cliff edge. I walked over carefully and pulled at the branches. The bush seemed very sturdy, hard-rooted in the iron earth. If it had withstood the ripping of the constant winds from the sea, I figured it could anchor me, if necessary.

I got down carefully on my hands and knees, then crawled over to the cliff edge on my stomach. I held on tight to a branch of the shrub with one hand and inched out to arm's length until I could look over the rim. Why I was sticking my neck out, I'll never quite know. Probably just the over-developed curiosity of the ad-man; I always had to peer into every possible angle of an advertising problem, and this situation presented the same kind of challenge.

Want to or not, I always find myself looking into things

and people, finding out what makes them tick and kick—especially blondes, brunettes and redheads.

So here I was looking down, straight down into a couple of hundred feet of nothing, my gaze ending up in wet black rocks and raging sea. Whatever the police had left, the waves had licked off. The rocks looked hungry again, edging up toward me like sharp giant teeth. I suddenly felt dizzy, sick and lonesome, and very much against providing a snack for the eager rocks with my shrinking, goose-pimpled carcass.

The view told me nothing, except that it accentuated to me the horror J. D. must have felt as he had crashed toward death in the windy blackness of the night before. I decided to get out of there fast.

Not turning, lest I go off balance, I scrunched myself backwards like a caterpillar, pushed past the helpful shrub, and started to rise slowly to my feet.

With a screech, a huge sea gull flew up close in front of me, suddenly appearing in a flutter past the edge of the cliff. At the same instant, I was knocked off balance by a vicious push against my back and right shoulder. I fell forward toward the edge of the cliff, my terrified eyes filled with nothing but open space and sky. I twisted, reached, grabbed at the tough branches of the one projecting shrub. The rough wood and sharp leaves tore my hands but I held on, turning with the violent motion and falling on my back, my head over the cliff edge but my body clinging to the hard earth.

My eyes took in the figure of a man bending toward me. I pulled up my knees and kicked out desperately at him. It was J. C., his normally calm eyes staring, his face grimacing strangely as he jumped back from my lunging legs. I scrambled up quickly before he could recover, jumped at him and gripped his jacket in both hands by the lapels, almost lifting him from the ground.

I dragged him back from the cliff edge with me. Still holding him tight, I raged at him, "You tried to push me over, like you pushed J. D." I was hurt in more ways than one—I'd always liked this guy and thought he liked me. But apparently murderers made their own rules, and not according to the Boy Scout code.

His face and eyes quieted. He gasped, "Let go of me. Please."

I let go. I figured I was also letting go of the Old Rankler account. The hell with it. I guess my wife would rather have a poor husband than a dead one. Hmmm, I wonder.

"I'm sorry, Clark," J. C. was saying. "I'm terribly sorry. I came out here with the same idea you had, I suppose, to look over the scene in the daylight. When I was near you, that bird appearing suddenly startled me. I jumped aside, bumped into you—" His shaken voice repeated sincerely, "I'm terribly sorry, more than I can say. If anything had happened to you, I could never have forgiven myself."

And I wouldn't be around to forgive you, I might have pointed out. I said, "It was a close thing."

"An accident, Clark." He put his hand on my arm and pressed it convincingly. "You can't think it was anything but an accident."

I wasn't up to playing captain of a debating team at the moment. I said without much voice, "Okay, J. C. No harm done. I'll sign up for a health course and try to win back the ten years of my life I just lost."

He tried to smile at the quip but couldn't quite make it. But he seemed relieved. "I appreciate your understanding attitude," he said. Then he reached a little further; he suggested tentatively, "Let's keep this mishap to ourselves . . . it would only create confusion and alarm among the others . . ."

Okay, client. I said, "Right." Then, taking advantage of his disturbed state, I pulled the cameo brooch from my

pocket and held it up. "Recognize this?" I threw at him.

He reached for it, and I pulled my hand back until he dropped his. "I'll hold it," I advised. "You just look."

"That brooch belongs to Mari," he said uncertainly. "What are you doing with it?"

I let him have it, fast and straight in the ears. "I picked it up here in the grass a few minutes ago, right here where J. D. was standing during his last minutes—right here! Look," I turned the cameo over, "broken pin."

"No," he denied. "The pin was perfect on Mari's brooch. She was wearing it last night—" He broke off the sentence jaggedly.

"And it was broken while she struggled with J. D. out here," I finished for him.

"It wasn't Mari I saw standing out here with J. D.," he said hurriedly.

Sounded like more ought to be forthcoming. I followed up fast, "If it wasn't Mari, who was it?"

He repeated stubbornly, "Not Mari."

"Did you see who it was?"

He refused to answer. He stared down at the ground, remote in his own thoughts.

"Dammit, J. C.," I raged purposely, "if you saw anybody, if you know anything, tell me. Or tell Chief Batrous. Tell somebody. Don't play around with murder. This is serious stuff—rules of sportsmanship don't apply. A murderer makes his own rules." Like pushing his advertising man over the cliff?

He held his ground. "I have to think."

"Are you protecting somebody?" I asked, holding up the jewel again. "Sure you didn't come out here to find the brooch and cover up for Mari?"

He winced. "Somebody put Mari's brooch here in the grass as a decoy, or to try to make her appear guilty. I'm sure it wasn't here last night."

"How sure?"

"Well, it wasn't here when I came searching for my brother," he said uncertainly. "And Batrous would have found it if it was here after that."

"Possibly," I assented. "But he could have missed it. Look, J. C., you'd better talk. This puts Mari on a bad spot, whether she's accountable or not."

He said gloomily, "I always warned Mari that keeping the brooch was bad luck. I wanted her to get rid of it."

"Why?"

"My brother gave it to her while they were married," he explained. "She gave back all the other jewelry but this was so perfect, so exquisite, that she wanted to keep it." He mused, "I could never understand why that coarse little man collected cameos. Inconsistent with his character—" He looked me in the eye. "Clark, somebody dropped the brooch here—but not Mari."

"How did somebody get the brooch?" I kept pushing. "She was wearing it at dinner and afterwards." He didn't seem to realize I was guessing. "She either dropped it when she was here with J. D. or took it off when she went to bed—in her own room."

"She was not out here with J. D.," he said. "I know her. I know my own wife." That could mean anything, or nothing.

I had to say it. "Are you so sure because *you* were out here with him? Was it you?"

He shook his head, rubbed his bony forehead with his sensitive, aristocratic hand. "No, Clark," he said softly. "You just don't understand." He reached out toward me. "May I have the brooch now?"

"Sorry," I said, "No."

"It will only make trouble for Mari," he pleaded. "She had nothing to do with this."

I could be stubborn, too. "I'll keep it. I don't know what I'll do about it, but I'll hold on to it."

He looked at me steadily. "This has nothing to do with our business relationship, Clark, I want you to understand that." Very fair of him. "Man to man, friend to friend, I want you to promise me that you won't tell anyone about this brooch before you check with me. Will you promise me that?"

"If you tell me everything you know," I pressed.

"I can't right now. I have some thinking to do."

"I have some thinking to do also," I retorted. "I can't promise anything except that I'll think before I act."

He tried to smile. "I'll consider that an even break." He winced and clenched his head again. "I need a couple of Anacin in a hurry. Migraine. Going back to the house?"

I nodded and walked back with him, both of us silent with our separate thoughts. Any kind of break for a murderer, I pondered, was more than an even break. I fingered the cameo in my pocket and glanced sidewise at my companion. How far would he go, I wondered, to help his wife? I remembered the way they always looked at each other, how they seemed always *en rapport* wherever they were. They were in love, and that was my answer—he'd go as far as necessary; he'd lie, fight, maybe kill.

The rest of our unhappy bunch was sitting in chairs on the flagstoned terrace, gazing out at the landscape dispiritedly.

Suddenly J. B. walked out of the french doors and joined us. He frowned, "I've had the help look all over the house. He's definitely not here."

Bob Ronnel stood up. "I told you we should have watched that big bull. After he got rid of J. D., he was finished with his job. So he scooted! Anybody could see that would happen."

I stared at them all in confusion. "Who scooted?"

"Weasel is missing," J. B. explained. "I don't like it. I promised the Chief I'd be responsible for all of you."

"He'll show up," I said without conviction. "He's a little peculiar—shy." Shy like a dinosaur. "I think he probably got up early and left because he felt uncomfortable here. He'll show up in the city."

J. B. looked dubious. Bob asked belligerently, "Hell, Clark, why are you defending the big slob? What's between you and that anthropoid all of a sudden?"

"He's my collaborator!" I added seriously, "Look, he and his sister had a dirty deal. I like the guy. And he needs help."

I was thinking hard. What the hell could have happened to my massive friend? Did he run or was he pushed . . . ?

Eight

LUNCH would have been more fun with a group of cadavers in the back room of a dissecting lab in a medical school. Even the Old Rankler manhattans which were a lunchtime ritual at Rocky Cove tasted like embalming fluid.

My blonde wasn't talking to me. Sensuous Rose wasn't talking to my blonde. Bob and Gloria were so busy looking in each other's eyes that they didn't have time to talk to anyone. J. C. was completely preoccupied with counting the strings in the beans on his plate. Mari's face had been dipped in cement and had come out so drawn and rigid that her lips could scarcely part to take in food; I wondered what had happened before lunch between her and J. C. to plaster that tragic mask over her exquisite features.

The silence from Weasel's empty chair was eloquent in what it didn't say. J. B. had that I've-gone-into-conference-with-myself look that banished any attempt at conversation. The only thing that talked back to me was the onion in the egg salad.

By the time we had finished, packed and assembled to go back to the city, I would have welcomed a hug from a cobra. Maybe that's why I didn't protest much when I was assigned to pair off on the return trip with wet-eyed Rose. She wasn't one to remain the silent or remote type for long.

So I found myself driving a dead man's car back to the city, with a dead man's mistress massaging my lonely hip with her own overflowing curves. Out of loneliness, the

kindness of my heart, and a definite yen, I rested my right hand on her thigh. The thin dress did not insulate her heating system noticeably. The thigh responded with vibrating friendliness.

"Honey," I said pleasantly, "you have gorgeous unconditional reflexes."

She moved a little closer which put her practically under the driving wheel. "What are reflexes, daddy?"

I skipped the birds and bees but managed to deliver a somewhat detailed lecture illustrated with appropriate gestures. Using one hand for driving, that wasn't easy. But I've rarely had a more attentive and cooperative student.

After we'd absorbed the fourth or tenth drink at various tavern stops, the sexy-voiced brunette was teaching me verses to a song about "mountaineers with leather britches" which I had missed in nursery school. As I watched the road with one eye, and my companion's cleavage with the other, murder was the furthest thought from my thoughts.

That's why I was rudely surprised in the midst of the blissful heat when Rosie finished a verse and instead of smooching into the raucous chorus with me, said abruptly, "Those bastards killed Jeedee. But I'll be damned if they can get away with doing me out of the share coming to me—Jeedee's share." I took my hand off her simmering skin. She put the hand back. She murmured into my sensitive eardrum, "How about helping me? I'll make it worth your while."

I'm not exactly overburdened with morals and ethics. But I've always been careful about letting my manhood get caught in a vise. I cooled off quicker than a hot tamale in a deep freeze.

This time I put both hands determinedly on the wheel and kept them there. I asked, "Who do you mean by 'those bastards' when you refer to whoever killed J. D.?"

She retorted in surprise, "I mean the Plupes, of course. Any one of them, or all three of them. They're the ones with everything to gain! And besides, all the evidence points to them. Surely you're not that stupid, Ceecee?"

"Don't call me Ceecee," I muttered. But she pretended not to hear me.

"Didn't you see Mari's face at lunch, with guilty conscience spread all over it? What about her missing brooch?"

My suspicious side pounced. "How do you know about the brooch?"

"Why, Ceecee honey," she buttered me, "while we were chatting on the terrace this morning, while you were away with J. C., someone told Mari they'd admired her brooch the night before and asked to examine it more closely. That threw her."

"Threw her where?" I asked in exasperation.

"Into confusion, lambie. She turned white and said she'd lost the brooch or misplaced it or something. When I suggested we all search for it, she screamed that it wasn't valuable and that we should forget all about it. Now, Ceecee," she asked reasonably, "was that a normal way to act?"

I defended the Viennese. "Conditions at the house weren't exactly normal."

"You're making me jealous, the way you carry on about that imported icicle, darling," she drawled. "My theory is that she met Jeedee out by the cliff and they quarreled about the brooch. I happen to know it's an extremely valuable antique. While they were wrestling over it, I imagine that Jeedee grabbed it and was pitched over the edge, brooch and all. That brooch is probably in the ocean right now."

She jerked a handkerchief out of its fleshy cavern and used it to absorb a series of sobs as Jeedee returned vividly to her mind.

When she quieted comparatively, I asked, "What right had J. D. to the cameo anyhow?"

She flashed, "He gave it to her when they were married. And after the annulment she refused to return it, the bitch."

"How do you know?" I asked gently.

She fired up instantly, "How the hell *would* I know? Jeedee told me, that's how I know." The tears started again, half-water and half-bourbon. "He promised that cameo brooch to me if he got it back!" She wailed, "You talk as if I'm guilty, not her."

"Wait a minute, honey," I tried to soothe her. "I'm not accusing you."

The hysterics took over. "My big chance in life," she dripped, "marrying a multi-millionaire. The man I loved. All gone. Everything lost." She howled, "And you accuse me!" She collapsed against me, her whole body shaking, making mine shake too; it was like falling into a hot, wet washing machine.

The rest of the way into town was like driving through a drenching mist, but the wipers should have been on me, not on the windshield.

She managed to direct me to her apartment and showed me where to park the car. When I started to say farewell on the sidewalk, she insisted that she was too weak to go up alone. I was too weak to resist. And who wanted to? Maybe I'd find out something. Maybe I'd get a drink out of it, anyhow. Maybe I was just adventurous. And maybe just maybe, as Dr. Kinsey might put it.

The joint turned out to be a fluffy nest that might be afforded by an "assistant" but never by a private secretary. Well, maybe by a very private secretary. My first impression was that it was furnished solidly with beds, love seats, couches and sofas; no place to sit down—alone.

Still tear-stained, the sniffing beauty pointed out the

bar in the corner of the living room. She said she'd be back as soon as she freshened up.

I poured myself a delectable dream and a double slug of Old Rankler. While waiting for the return of nature girl, I relaxed on a nubby green couch. Then an exaggerated female off a lush canvas by Petty came into the room. She wore a chartreuse robe molded by her personal abundant contours into a lustrous hourglass shape, divided by a long long zipper a-winding from deep-cut neckline to floor. She had brushed up her rich dark hair and wiped away all trace of tears with delicate make-up. A photo of this would win me any lingerie account in the country.

My glazing eyes gulped my admiration. Before I could get up to greet her, she had pushed me back and swarmed onto the couch next to me. She said meekly, "I apologize, darling."

Brightly I asked, "Glmmmp?" Translation: "Apologize for what?"

Her eyes were breathing in short pants. The situation was getting out of control.

I stabbed conversationally, "You have gorgeous eyes. Are they near-sighted or far-sighted?"

"Just plain excited," she explained. She went on, "I'm sorry I broke down in the car. At least I owe you this. . . ."

"This" was the throwing of her smooth bare arms around my neck, the shifting of her luscious torso over on mine, the pulling down of my head to hers, the firm pressure drawing and holding my mouth to her full, active lips. Testing . . . testing . . . Roger . . . one . . . two . . . over . . .

I was holding on, like trying to keep my balance on a roller coaster, zooming upward and . . .

Suddenly a female voice screamed, "Ouch!" and I felt myself hurled away. I sat up, shook clarity into my buzzing head. The voluptuous female was standing above me, rubbing her lip. She was staring at something in her hand. I

was staring too, but not at the something in her hand. My strained voice was saying, "Your zipper . . ."

She interrupted, unhearing. "Where did you get this?"

My hand scrambled into my pocket. I said, "The brooch!"

"Something jabbed me in the hip," she hissed. "I reached into your pocket and found this."

I said lightly, "My mother told me that a gentleman always removes his jacket; my mistake. I apologize. Please give me that, Rose."

She closed her fist over the cameo. She yelled, "Where did you get this? It's the one Jeedee gave to that Mari."

"I'm sorry," I repeated. "I can't tell you. I promised I'd keep it to myself for a while. Let me have it, please."

She said angrily, "Get the hell out of here, you double-crossing sex maniac." Who, me? "I'll hold on to this brooch, at least until you're ready to tell me where you got it. And if you won't tell me, maybe you'll tell the police." She pushed me toward the door.

I pushed back. She sensed my next action by my speculative look. She tensed and shrilled quickly, "If you try to get this thing away from me—if you don't get out right now—I'll scream the whole house down on your ears!"

My intolerant blonde wife wouldn't like it if I were booked for rape, I supposed. I slouched in defeat, then opened the door and stood hesitantly, my eyes bouncing at her hither, thither, yon and yon.

I said considerably, "One thing you ought to do—"

"What?" she spouted.

I suggested, "You ought to put a lock on that zipper."

She twisted her head down quickly. The long, long trail of the zipper had come unwound during the preliminary festivities. She snatched the robe together.

"Creamy," I stated truthfully, "all over."

She slammed the door against my eyeballs.

I straightened my face and wardrobe as I buzzed for the elevator. I felt dispirited and rejected—I'd have to see a psychiatrist in the morning. I'd had the last word—and the last look—but the panting brunette had the vital cameo brooch.

How was I going to be able to explain the loss of the brooch to J. C.? And, if the violent Rose carried out her threat, how could I explain it all to the police?

The elevator man asked, "Going down?"

"Brother," I gasped wearily, "I sure am—for the third time."

JUST because I felt more aged than Ol' Man River didn't keep the evening from still being young. And I had to keep rollin' along. Where to roll?

Doctor, I feel unwanted.

Tell me all about it, dear boy.

My father dropped me on a slogan when I was three, and I've been seeing television spots in front of my eyes ever since. Can you explain that, doctor?

Yes, my man, you simply have an inferiority complex. Why is that, doctor?

Because you *are* inferior, sir.

Foo! That was no doctor, that was my wife. And my intuition about women told me that now was not the right time to go home. Especially with the brunette's hot breath still hot on my hot breath.

I decided to go to the office. Maybe I'd work for a couple of hours. Nice and quiet, nobody there but me, my inferiority complex and my old friend, Old Rankler. Maybe the three of us could dredge up a mess of new slogans or something. As they say, an ad-man's work is never done. As ad-men say, of course.

The small reception room was deeply quiet as I unlocked the door and entered. Even the framed advertisements on

the walls seemed relaxed from their usual hectic function of shouting, "Hey, lookit here and buy this product r-r-right now!" I almost rushed out to "your corner drugstore" until I remembered that I was supposed to write ads only, not believe them. The ad-man is usually the easiest mark for a sales-pitch; perhaps the fact that he believes so readily makes it possible for him to persuade others to believe.

Without thinking about it, I matched the silence by practically tiptoeing down the corridor, opening the first door on my right. I entered my own office, dim and inviting in the little light that slivered in from the street through the slats on the blinds over the windows.

Relaxation flowed through my body and brain; after hours, with telephones silenced and people removed, this was home. I might even love the business if it would let me simply create instead of connive. I was going to enjoy the next couple of hours here, just sitting at the desk, slowly emptying the Urgent file on the top pile (Urgent for a week or more), nobody to disturb me because nobody knew I was here. Peace, it's wonderful. And unattainable.

I snapped on the light. A massive figure was stretched out unmoving on my leather couch.

The huge shape stirred suddenly, then arose uncertainly from the couch, waving its heavy arms as though groping for balance, swaying ominously toward me. Little eyes blinked out from the shadow of the thick woolen cap, and the little mouth in the creased mass of face whined at me shakily, "Hey, what goes on here?"

I took a step back. "Calm down, Weasel," I said patiently. "It's only me."

He stopped, dug his knoblike knuckles into his eye sockets, straightened his body. If an elephant could look sheepish, he did. He said in explanation, explaining nothing, "I musta fell asleep."

"Yeah," I accepted. "In my office. How the hell did you get in here?"

"Easy. I looked it up in a phone book. Then I came up."

"The door was locked." Sure. I'd just unlocked it to get in.

"Oh, that's nothing." His modesty was refreshing, if not soothing. "I got a friend that taught me how to open a lock like that easy." He suggested gravely, "You ought to get a better lock."

I shrugged. "There's nothing to steal here but my burglary insurance policies." Another thought. "How'd you know this particular room was my office?"

"Just dumb luck," he admitted. "First door I tried. I saw the couch. I was tired. So I laid down and fell asleep." Just like the bear and three Goldilocks. "It's a comfortable couch," he complimented me.

"You haven't told me why you came here. Just to sleep?"

"Sure," he said simply. "I figured you'd have something to sleep on. So I'd just settle down till you came in—then we could start collaboratin'."

"But I wasn't due in here until Monday morning."

"I know it," he stated. "So I'd sleep until Monday. Don't you ever sleep two days at a time when you got nothing else to do?"

How naive can you get? Or how clever? Was this mild-mannered mastodon a meekling or a murderer?

I gave up. "Sit down, Weasel. Lots of things to be cleared up between us." He sat. I asked, "Don't you ever take off that cap?"

He seemed hurt. "Don't you like it? What don't you like about it?" He raised his paw to his head and fingered the coarse material affectionately. He didn't remove the cap.

Who was I to change his habits? "Don't you know that you're in a mess? Looks mighty suspicious, you running out of Rocky Cove during the night."

He grimaced sourly. "I didn't like it there. Besides, once that louse J. D. Plupe was dead, there was no point in me staying."

"Huh?"

He said reasonably, "I went out there to beat the hell out of him. He was killed, so there was nothing more I could do."

I must have looked shocked. I *was* shocked. Do all murderers speak so candidly and openly? Or only when they know the confession will go no further? My spine tried on a few giant chills for size; they fitted.

I asked delicately, "Are you telling me that you killed J. D.?"

"I didn't say I killed him," he returned regretfully. "I only said I was gonna teach him to lay off girls like my sister Doris." His face clouded. I looked at his huge clenched fists. One uncontrolled blow from either of those massive hams could have squashed the small man's head as effectively as wet black rock under the cliff. And after the fall, who could have told the difference?

"Dammit, Weasel," I ripped out, "did you kill J. D. or not?"

The big-lipped mouth curled incongruously into a pout. "Geez," he moaned in high hurt tones, "I thought you was on my side. Maybe I got you wrong. Maybe just 'cause those guys pay you money to do their advertising, you go all the way with them, huh?"

That reminded me of another point that had been bothering me. "I'm not on anybody's side, Weasel. I'm on the side of truth and justice." Listen to that! Next I'd be erecting a monument to myself. "You never explained how you happened to know that Pluperfect Liquors ran that ad, and how you happened to answer it. Talk."

He uncurled the oversize knockwursts that were his

fingers. "Nothing to that," he said. "I been looking for a long time for a chance to get near those Plupes. And I been needing money—to take care of Doris. So when the ad caught my eye in the papers, I figured it might be a way to make some extra money. The ad looked like a screwy gag, you gotta admit."

I admitted it glumly.

He went on, "Then when I found out that the Plupes ran the ad, I figured I could kill two birds with one stone." He added quickly, "I got nothing against birds, though."

Evasion again? I insisted, "How did you find out that the Plupes ran the ad? There was only a box number."

"Oh," he brushed my confusion aside. "I got a friend that works on the newspaper. He told me."

I said despairingly, "You have friends everywhere, haven't you?"

"Sure," he stated seriously. "Most people are friends, if you only give them a chance. Don't you find that?"

I sighed and tried to rub the wary, sophisticated look out of my tired eyes. "I'm afraid not." Maybe it's my own fault; somebody once said, to have a friend, be a friend. But there never seems to be enough time—

What the hell. "Sure, Weasel," I said lightly. "I'm a friend to all mankind."

Pleased, he lowered his carcass and spread it out on my couch, his legs projecting beyond the end, his feet resting on a pile of magazines on a low adjoining table. He mumbled, "My brains is tired from all that talking. I'm gonna sleep now."

The huge head rolled, the hands relaxed on the barrel chest. Damned if he wasn't asleep. I'd have to try that stunt at a client conference some day. Or wouldn't they understand?

Snores typhooned out of the guy's mouth. Yet I didn't have the heart, or nerve, to waken the sleeping behemoth.

A quiet, undisturbed Saturday night at the office! I picked up the Urgent file from my desk and left. I'd try working in Bob's office, far from the maddening sound waves.

I PUSHED open the door to Bob Ronnel's room, and wished I hadn't. The half-light from the street revealed two shapes entwined as less than one in the large leather "relaxing" chair in the corner.

The peculiar relaxing stopped as I took a startled backward step. An excited female shape propelled itself out of a man's arms and off the man's lap, and landed nimbly if somewhat erratically on its lovely legs.

I said, "Lights, sorry," and turned on the desk lamp.

Bob acknowledged my presence by sputtering, "What the hell are you doing here?"

I'd have to take that up with the Labor Relations Board. "Don't you remember?" I asked. "I work here. Also, I'm the fellow who signs the payroll checks . . . and the dismissal slips."

He ignored the innuendo. "You spying on us?"

I'd be upset in his situation too, so I bothered to explain, "Weasel is sleeping, with full sound accompaniment, in my office. So I thought I'd look for peace and quiet in yours."

They both looked surprised. "Weasel in your office?" the girl squeaked. "We didn't see him. He might have murdered us both!"

Bob grabbed the telephone. "I'm calling the police," he yelled. "They want that big ape—"

I jumped toward him and pulled at the instrument. He dropped it, filled his strong hands with my neck, and started squeezing. I gripped his wrists instinctively and pushed away. The girl screamed and yanked the back of my jacket collar, pulling me in the opposite direction.

The tug-of-war must have looked ludicrous, but to me it was somewhat less than funny. I was rapidly losing my

wind. My throat strained and ached, my eyes were filming over fast. My befuddled brain wondered how come the walls of the room were in motion, tipping, tilting—

Suddenly everything let go, and I fell across the flat desk. I practiced breathing for a while.

When finally I was able to stand erect, I focused and saw the giant Weasel, wool cap and all, holding the cursing, struggling figures of Gloria and Bob aloft, one under each mammoth arm.

I croaked, "Will you folks have one lump or two with your beating?" No response.

I rubbed my throat. I thought I spoke with controlled dignity, but the words came out like pebbles sliding down a stone-crusher. "Let 'em down, Weasel," I said. "They'll behave." If not, the big man would serve them to me like two rare hamburgers on buns.

Bob stepped up to me fast and gripped my hand. His eyes were hurt and desperate. He choked out the words, "Clark, I'm sorry, Clark. I didn't mean to hurt you, Clark. It's my damn temper." He kept shaking my fist in his and pleading. "Say it's okay, Clark. I'm so damned sorry, I could kill myself, Clark."

Clark; he must mean me.

I murmured, "Better you than me." His kicked-cur expression sickened me. "Okay," I said, "forget it. You weren't choking me; it was your father strangling your pet garter snake when you were three. Tell it to your psychiatrist in the morning." To my large friend I said gratefully, "Thanks, Weasel. Maybe you saved my worthless life. You've preserved some great unwritten radio jingles for posterity."

He wagged his watermelon head. "So much noise coming from in here," he complained, "it woke me up. Does this go on all the time in an advertising agency? How do you get work done?"

I said, "I'll show you. Everybody sit down. Conference!"

We sat. Weasel hopped into the act eagerly. He might never become the best man in advertising, but he certainly would be the biggest.

"Some explanations due me, Bob," I began. "First, what are you and Gloria doing here on a Saturday night?"

He dredged up an explanation. "J. B. dropped us nearby in his car. So we thought we'd come up here and do some work."

"That kind of work my agency can do without," I said disagreeably. "You've been seeing too many movies about advertising. I'm running a workshop, not a joint."

Bob said, "It's legitimate, Clark. We're in love. It hit us when we got in here and started talking. We were just sitting and telling each other about it." His voice faded pathetically, "It's not what you think."

"Let's drop the whole thing," I said. "I'm not in the mood for love. But I want this understood, Bob—no phone calls from you to the police about Weasel. If they want him, let them find him themselves."

Weasel glared at the young man. "You calling the cops about *me*? After what I seen your girl do down at Rocky Cove?"

I followed up fast. "What's this? What did you see her do?"

Bob yelled at Weasel, "Shut your rotten trap, or I don't care how big you are, I'll get you—" One more second and I'd have an office full of soft-scrambled copywriter.

The girl screamed, "You don't have to get in trouble defending me, Bobsy." Bobsy! "I've got nothing to hide really. Suppose I did push that little rat out there last night? It was only a little push. I *know* he didn't go over the edge!" She wailed to try to convince herself. "I know he got up again!"

She made noises like a leaky faucet as she toppled into

Bob's arms. Maybe they really were in love. Or, more realistically, maybe they were just cooperating for mutual protection.

I spoke to Weasel. "If her push killed J. D., then it was an accident and we can clear up the whole mess or just agree to forget it among the four of us. But we'll know for sure that nobody committed murder!" The hell with the ethics of the situation; right now I wanted information. And a gallon of Bromo Seltzer. I said, "So just what did you see, Weasel?"

He answered reluctantly, "I don't like to talk about this. But if you say so, okay. You're my friend."

The two youngsters stared at him rigidly, still wrapped in each other's arms.

"Sure, I saw Gloria out there by the cliff," the big man went on slowly. "Like I told everybody, I was waiting for a crack at the little louse myself. Excuse the bad language," he apologized. "And," he deliberated, "I saw her push him. He fell down. And she run away—"

Now for the 64,000 dollar question. "Weasel," I pressed, "you know how important this is. Did you see J. D. get up?"

"Well," he rubbed his face uncertainly, "I was watching her running away. Then I heard somebody else coming—"

"That was me," Bob threw in. "I came out there to look after Gloria. I'd warned her not to go walking with that slimy lecher."

"Weasel," I repeated, "did you see J. D. get up after Gloria pushed him?"

"Like I started to say, when I heard somebody else coming—guess it was this guy—I just got outa there. When I came back later, there was nobody around, like I told the cop at the house."

"Then you did not see J. D. get up?"

"No," Weasel admitted reluctantly. "But I didn't see him

not get up. I just went away. That don't prove nothin'."

Nothin' don't seem to prove nothin' in this complicated mess, I thought. I aimed at Bob. "How about you? Did you see J. D. get up, after Gloria left?"

He said quickly, "Sure." He rushed on, "I had a talk with him and told him to lay off Gloria."

"Okay," I continued, "I don't believe you. But then what happened? He wouldn't take that advice from you without a scrap. If you threw him over in a fight, accidentally or otherwise, then say so. Say so!"

"He's lying!" Gloria screamed. "I won't let you lie for me, Bob. You'll only get into terrible trouble. Listen, Mr. Clark. Bob heard me running away. He came after me. He couldn't know whether J. D. got up or not, because I'm sure he didn't even reach J. D."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because I'm sure!" she yelled. A great reason.

"You know, I suppose," I said to them, irritably, "that this proves nothing except that all three of you had the opportunity to kill J. D."

No answer from any of the fevered three.

Exasperated, I yelled, "Don't tell me that all three of you pushed him at once!"

I felt besmirched, befuddled and bewildered. I couldn't believe anyone about the happenings of the night before. Not even myself. I'd been passed out. Now this night after the night before was wearing on and I was wearing down. What to do? I decided to walk out on them, leave them in the office to sleep, smooch or stew in their own curdled juices. But where to go? I decided to head for my fate worse than death. You guessed it, home . . .

Nine

HOME is where the blonde is. When the blonde is home. Maybe she and J. B. were seeking clues in his penthouse apartment. Or maybe J. B. was just seeking. Half of me hoped my apartment would be deserted. The other half wanted my other half there. As I inserted the key in the door, my hand shook nervously.

She was sitting in bed reading a mystery book, looking sexier and more glamorous than the babes in the mattress ads. I braced myself to receive the daggers from her eyes, but a smile sunrayed toward me instead. Not too hot, not too cold, not just right—but a smile anyhow.

"Good trip in?" I tried.

"Mmmm," she hummed noncommittally. "Seems you and that fat wench took the long way home."

Being a husband, I never know when to keep my mouth shut. I commented, "Meow."

She threw the book. Perry Mason connected with my head painfully.

Pleased by her accuracy, she went on, "It doesn't matter. I don't even care if she kissed you a few times. Or tried to."

I leaped forward to defend, or prove, my manhood. She picked up another book and threw it—definitely a circulating library. It stopped me. I sat on her bed gently. I said, "This is a happy surprise. I thought you were sore at me."

She was pleased with herself. "That was an act. I merely wanted to create a situation making it look natural for me to drive back with J. B."

I winced. "Not what you think," she said, "although he's an attractive hunk of man—" She thought about that for a few seconds, then shrugged and continued, "Actually I wanted to find out whether he had anything to do with the death of J. D."

That didn't sit right. "Are you making like Shirley Holmes?"

"Figured maybe I'd write another murder novel. Why not? It's less boring than just breathing."

"I'll tell you why not," I raised my voice righteously. "Because if you stick your lovely neck out, you might get it cut off."

She softened a trifle but not enough to encourage intimate activity. She said, "He might have."

"Who?"

"J. B., you dope. He might have had something to do with his brother's sudden death. I found that out."

I'd have to get a new hearing aid for my brain. "I'm out at first," I said. "You'll have to explain."

She obliged willingly. "I fixed a trap for J. B. I told him while we were driving down that I'd seen him leave the house around midnight last night. Even though I hadn't."

"Oh, you hadn't?" Clear as a cracked crystal.

"I was bluffing," she said, "but it worked. I pretended I was jealous, that I thought he'd been with another woman. Gradually he let it leak out that he'd been talking with J. D. Also, it seems that J. D. wanted him to scrap your entire mystery campaign, because he didn't like you. They quarreled about that—"

"Damned nice of J. B.," I said, pleased and relieved.

"Back to your normal head size, balloon-top," she deflated. "J. B. also made it clear that he wasn't so upset about J. D.'s dislike of you or the campaign—but about his interference with the running of the company."

I dwindled. "Oh."

The blonde smirked. "Under my skillful needling, your proud, talkative pal bragged that he alone is the brains and the boss of Pluperfect and that nobody, but nobody, was ever going to get in his way." She spread her smooth white hands, and finished, "Exit J. D."

"You're kidding." I was astonished. No jumper at conclusions she, as Time Magazine might state.

"I'm not accusing, I'm theorizing. But if I were Chief Batrous, I'd draw one giant star in front of J. B.'s name on my list."

"That stars just about everybody but me."

"You?" She laughed. "You can't even alibi yourself. You were passed out, you claim. You might have staggered out in the dark, had a run-in with J. D., and pushed him over the cliff without even knowing it yourself. Or— without admitting it even to yourself—"

"Hey," I ejaculated in alarm, "you don't really think that could have happened? Anyway, a wife can't testify against her husband."

"I could find a way to testify against a murderer."

I said in an equally affectionate tone, "How about yourself? Did J. D. make a pass at you that night?"

"I'm a woman," she shrugged. "Of course he did."

"And?" I asked. "Did you take it? Or did you, say, sort of push him away?"

She was furious suddenly. "What right have you to ask questions of me after spending half the night with that feverish brunette?"

I figured it was her wifely privilege to know as much as I wanted her to know. I told her about the ride in, and about Rose tossing me out of her apartment—leaving out the frenzied preliminaries. Then I covered all the details about the events at the office.

By the time I finished my complicated saga, I was heavy-eyed and yawning, and flattened under the covers in my

own twin bed. She was bright-eyed and busy filing all the odds and ends of information in her capable brain.

"I'm beginning to see the light," she said. "Good night, darling. I love you." Her bed lamp clicked off.

It took a minute to penetrate. I sat up. "Did you say you love me?"

No answer.

I tried again. "What did you do when J. D. made a pass at you?"

No answer.

"You can trust me, baby," I insisted. "Was it you who pushed? In self-defense, I mean. Was it you?"

Still no answer.

THE FUNERAL, scheduled for Wednesday morning, was not something I expected to enjoy. My dreary expectations came true.

The funeral parlor was loaded with enough flowers to scent the state of New York. Yet, as I stood near the uncomfortable benches, I seemed to keep smelling the damp sea that smashed against the black rocks at Rocky Cove—the damp sea, and death. I kept gulping down my nausea and wondering how long I could last in this dim churning auditorium packed with fixed, studiously mournful faces. My exquisitely groomed spouse, at my side, was as poised and expressionless as at a dull cocktail party. I wondered what she was thinking. I often wondered whether she ever let even herself know what she was thinking.

Why this great commotion and ceremony over a particularly undesirable scrap of humanity, I asked myself.

J. B., handsome and assured in mourning clothes, approached us as we looked about for two seats on the aisle; my deep green feeling made me realize I'd better be in position for sudden exit if necessary. He greeted us courteously with a hearty, "Ahoy." We shook hands all around. I looked

around inside myself for appropriate words of sympathy, but didn't find any. Helen didn't even try. It was too apparent to us that this man had lost a half-brother, but no one he loved.

I finally said weakly, "A good many people here."

"Yes," J. B. agreed pleasantly, "a nice turnout." He glanced at his watch, seemed to count the gate as he looked about the place and measured the progress of all preparations.

My impervious wife asked blandly, "Anything new in the investigations at Rocky Cove?"

"What investigations?" he replied flatly. "There's nothing to investigate. An unfortunate accident." He turned to me. "You handled the press well, Clark."

I accepted the compliment with a nod. I'd worked hard to get out press releases to all the papers about J. D.'s "unfortunate accident." Apparently Chief Batrous had backed up our story fully, because there was no hint printed anywhere referring to murder, suicide or even slight inebriation.

J. B. was asking, "Are you going out to the cemetery? Not at all necessary, you know."

That was my welcome cue. "We hadn't figured on it."

"Fine," he said. "You still plan to go to the Mystery Writers' meeting tonight?"

Just like that, the quick executive switch from corpse business to corporative business. I stuttered, "Sure."

"Excellent," he approved. "You'll let me know at our conference tomorrow evening how you made out, right?"

My trained echo, "Right."

He walked away smoothly, body turning smugly to accept condolences from those who spoke to him. His face had assumed the conventional mourner's mask. I said to Helen, "Cripes, how sophisticated can you get?"

We found a couple of aisle seats. The services started.

I concentrated on a woman's hat in front of me and tried to occupy myself making up slogans about it. I had come up with plenty of nothing by the time the eulogy began. Even my shriveled conscience was cringing as the flattering phrases failed to cloak the mean little body in the casket. Oppression was closing in on me unbearably when a sudden shriek made me jump a foot off the cushioned bench and almost burst my kidneys.

The shocking sound came from one of the benches up front. The high note crescendoed into a series of rending feminine wails. A lush black figure that I recognized as an hysterical Rose Witson wrenched upward from the seat and then collapsed, arms outspread, veil floating down with her sinking body.

In an instant, four men carried her limp figure up the aisle past us and out of the hall.

"She looked dead!" I whispered harshly to Helen. "What d'you think happened?"

For once my blonde looked nonplussed. She said, "They wouldn't dare, not in here."

One of the men who had carried the body was hurrying down the aisle again. As he passed us, the murmur arose, "One of Mr. Pluë's closest friends. She was overcome and fainted."

We relaxed. A woman behind me told her neighbor, "She's the only one here who really cared for that depraved character . . ."

The solemn words from up front floated through the air, "A man of exceptional character . . ."

I couldn't take any more. I touched Helen's arm to signal my departure, arose quickly and hurried up the aisle, through the outer hall and into the open air. I stopped on the sidewalk, bolted to the curb and leaned against the back of a parked automobile, rubbing circulation back into my limp and fallen face with a handkerchief.

In a couple of minutes, footsteps announced two more people leaving the oppressive building. Glancing around the side of the parked car, I recognized a distressed J. C. chasing his agitated bride, Mari.

He stopped her by reaching for her arm, catching it on the back swing and holding on. They came to a dragging halt, far too occupied with their own emotions to notice me.

J. C. was trying to keep his voice down but his words penetrated like whips. "You can't run out of there like this, Mari," he said hoarsely. "It doesn't look right. He was my brother. He was your ex-husband."

She defended herself shrilly. "If I stayed another moment, I'd scream my hatred out loud. I hated the man, hated him, hated him! I'm glad he's in there in that coffin. That's why I couldn't stay another second—I'd scream out my joy to everybody!"

The tall man held her firmly by both arms, facing her squarely and making her look at him. "Take hold of yourself, Mari," he warned. "You're acting like a mad woman. What's happened to you? You were always so gentle, gracious—"

Yes, I wondered, what had happened to the warmth and understanding I'd seen between them before the death at Rocky Cove. Now they were glaring sickeningly at each other, their eyes shuttered and remote. Then I recognized the difference: they didn't trust each other any more . . .

As if to confirm my impression, J. C. said with careful deliberation. "You don't trust me any more, do you, Mari? Is that it? You're afraid of me."

She looked away. "Afraid? Only because you don't trust me."

"If you trusted me," he insisted, "you'd tell me about the brooch. Mari, how did it get there in the grass, right on the spot where he fell?"

She flared up, "I've told you dozens of times. I don't

know! I put it in my jewel box when I went to bed." She blurted, "And how about you? You quarreled with that horrible little wretch. What happened? Why don't you tell me?"

He pleaded, "Mari, I only want you to trust me. Tell me when you were out there with him, and why."

"You're jealous!" Her eyes widened with horror and hurt. "Don't touch me. Let me go, or—" Her words were rising to a scream.

He released her. She ran down the street, stopped a taxi and rolled away.

J. C. stood on the sidewalk thoroughly shaken, his deadened eyes following her cab. In their course, his eyes passed over me, only half concealed by the parked car, then his gaze came back, cleared slightly and recognized me. I wanted to dig a hole in the ground and dive into it, but my quaking embarrassment was a poor shovel. Don't just stand there, I told me.

"Couldn't help overhearing," I apologized, walking over to him. "That's what you want to know, isn't it?"

He drooped in despair. He asked, "Now will you please give me the brooch? Perhaps if I return it to her, it will help patch up things between us." I felt as though he were talking to himself, not me. "I'd do anything in the world for her."

I didn't know how to cover up. So I told him straight. "Rose Witson has the brooch."

His face seemed to split open with astonishment. I explained briefly how she'd obtained the cameo from me.

For the first time, I heard him curse somebody—me. In a few blistering seconds, I learned how many different kinds of a fool I could be. The fact that I deserved the raking helped to insulate me.

When the venomous outpouring finally stopped, I said meekly, "I know it doesn't help, but I'm sorry, very sorry."

His face became composed gradually; you could almost hear each distinguished feature click back into its accustomed place. He looked again like J. C., the perfect gentleman. His voice too was under control as he said, "I'm sorry too, Clark. I apologize for the outburst. It's not all your fault." He rubbed his forehead again with his sensitive fingers in his characteristic migraine gesture.

He looked past me, far past me, at something, at nothing. He said aloud but tonelessly, "Now I'll have to straighten this thing out. Now I know what I have to do."

I asked softly, "What is it you're going to do, J. C.?"

"J. D. was rotten. I'm sure he deserved his fate. I wasn't going to do anything, Clark. But now, I've got to make certain, and then—" He broke off, looking like a man in a trance.

"I don't get it. Can you break that down?"

But I'd lost him. He said, only half-aloud, "There's no other way. I'll have to do it."

Before I could dig any further, we were surrounded by people-noises as the throng emerged slowly and respectfully from the solemn stone building. J. C. turned away without another word and walked, stiff and erect, back to his duty as a mourning member of the family.

My blonde found me and asked, "What's happened to you? Even your old face would be an improvement."

I looked at her drearily. I explained, "I've just been talking to a man about a murder."

"Our tired old murder?" she asked shrewdly. "Or a brand-new fresh one?"

"I don't know," I said. I didn't know. I never know. "But from the way I feel," I pinched my numb flesh, "I'd say that all the dead bodies are not in caskets."

"Stop making noises like a creaking door in a radio mystery. Maybe the big brains at the Mystery Writers' meeting will know the answers. I'll ask them."

"Phooey," I discounted. "According to their stories, all those characters know is that crime doesn't pay."

"Not so," she denied. "They know more than that, according to their slogan."

I bit. "What's that?"

"Crime doesn't pay—enough!"

She wheeled away, bearing her cute rotundities behind her. Leering leech that I am, I followed . . .

Ten

IT WAS Wednesday evening. I was still following my wife's delightful derriere, as they say in the gay girdle ads. This time I followed it—still out of pinching range—into the Mystery Writers' meeting.

The room was a long, smoke-grayed, low-ceilinged private parlor above a garlic-scented French restaurant. The meeting was already started when we entered. The bar was at one end, the mystery writers at the other.

A wide, blond, red-faced character at a long table up front was talking to attentive men and women seated on folding chairs before him. His gags were being enthusiastically appreciated even though they were mild and feeble, since no writer will ever spill usable cracks before another author. The chairman sipped from a tall red drink which was either blood or a sloe gin fizz. I decided it was blood since I can't stay in a room with a sloe gin fizz—the sizzle keeps me awake.

He motioned energetically to my blonde to drag me up to the head table, introducing me immediately as "Mrs. Clark's husband" and "a fellow who wants to buy mystery stories." Instantly, a tray of fresh wet highballs was placed in my lap. Bribery, I thought agreeably. Little did they know that you can't bribe an advertising man.

After I'd placed the emptied glasses on the table swaying before me, I was introduced by name to those sitting nearest me. I affirmed that we wanted to buy short short mystery stories.

"What kind of mystery stories?" a neurotic personality in the third row, named Gene, wanted to know. As at every meeting of every organization, everybody wants to get into the act.

"Good ones," I silenced him. "Stories that are attention-getting, attention-holding. Preferably stories with a lot of twist and little or no blood. Puzzle stories, amusing, romance slant okay, crime stuff with clever variations. Clean entertainment—so that the liquor authority can have no more objection to this device than to paintings of gadgety bookends next to a whiskey bottle or tired men being propped up by a dog, a mantelpiece and a glass. Do I make myself clear?"

"Not yet," said a dry-voiced gag-writer tagged Bill. "How much? And I don't mean cases of Old Rankler."

I told them what we'd pay per story, including rights to reprint in a periodic booklet for mystery readers, as we probably would do—sort of a combination reading and cocktail recipe book.

After a few dozen unnecessary questions, I gave the details on submitting the manuscripts and sat down to considerable applause.

The chairman stood up and regarded me and my offer with a pleased expression. He said charmingly, "We appreciate the golden words of Mr. Clark and the glittering opportunity to sell more stories. However, his is not the only gold that glitters. Note the shining presence of his lovely wife and our co-member, Helen Clark. She has another problem to place before us. She asks us to help her find the solution to a real-life mystery."

My blonde stood up and faced the assemblage confidently, to an accompaniment of welcoming werewolf-whistles. She spoke directly to her point. "Now, here's what I want—your help in solving a murder. Not a storybook murder but a real murder, fresh with hot blood. A murder

being bypassed by the authorities as suicide. Does that interest you?"

There was a general murmur of enthusiastic assent. Some of the members even straightened their slouches slightly. Oddly enough, mystery writers love a mystery.

"One other important thing," Helen continued. "I want your assurance that everything said here tonight will be off the record."

They nodded agreement. Didn't mean a thing, I realized, to count on the discretion of fifty or more people. But I knew that nothing would stop my determined spouse. If this leaked out, it might anger and lose my client. But if I tried to stop her, I'd win a broken head from the membership and maybe lose my wife.

She launched into a narration of the events, starting with the moment she very nearly tossed J. D. out of his own office window. I moaned aloud, "If any of this leaks out, my name will be dud."

Finishing the recitation, she stated, "Now Clark will fill you in on anything I left out, and add whatever he saw, heard or thought of that I haven't told you."

Her cold blue eyes stabbed me. She ordered, "Front and center!"

I stepped up resignedly to the center of attention, next to her.

"In addition to telling old jokes," I began, "the blonde and I also dance and sing duets." Her grimace withered me. I continued hastily, "Here's what happened as I saw it . . ."

As I spoke, a few flashes of illumination sparked inside my musty head, but these ideas I kept to myself. I decided to let the folks make their own interpretations and conclusions according to the facts, not by my own analyses and opinions.

"That's it," I concluded. I sat down right there at the front table.

There was no applause. There was very little noise of any kind, except for an occasional discreet alcoholic burp. But that was no reflection on my story. They were all thinking, a unique preoccupation at any MWA meeting.

"Any questions?" the chairman asked.

There were many questions, some only confusing, some cogent and pointed. We answered them quickly, as best we could. This game was dramatic and exciting, with the goal the ultimate unmasking of a murderer.

Finally a short man rose to his feet with determination. Helen hailed him, "Thanks for starting it, Fred. I know we all want to hear your solution, but please—with a minimum of ifs, ands and prefaces."

Fred frowned, wiping his glasses. "The outline given brings to my mind strongly the case of the strange death of Marie Lachaise Baudelaire in Paris, France in March of 1896, on the 17th day of that month, I believe; and the most peculiar demise of Lord Chauncey Inchwinch the Third, or was it the Fourth, in Upper Worcestershire in 1904. Yes, it was the Fourth, not the Third. Incidentally many of you will recall, I'm sure, that as one of the world's most notorious biblioklepts, Lord Inchwinch was known to have—"

"Fred!" interrupted my impatient wife, "get out of the library and into this problem. Who killed J. D.?"

Fred looked startled, then surprised, then calmly patient. He said blandly, "Why, Weasel did, of course. It's obvious. In fact, here's one of these cases where the very obviousness of the solution has obscured it from you. It recalls to my mind the strange happenings in the noted recordings of the assassin, Abernathy—"

"Why, Fred?" Helen loudly demanded. "Why Weasel?"

"Because seeming stupidity is the perfect cloak for exceptional cunning. The main clue is in his character as an opportunist. Admittedly, Weasel wanted to annihilate his

sister's seducer. If he were actually the abysmal brute he pretends to be, he would have plunged straight for his target like an enraged bull. Instead, he waited. When the opportunity arose, through the newspaper ad, to visit his victim's office, he grasped it at once. Then, when he learned about the weekend plans, he instantly made the opportunity to go along to Rocky Cove."

I interrupted. "Weasel was asked along by J. B. He didn't create the invitation."

"Aren't those just weasel words?" the frowning man asked.

His cohorts laughed more than I thought necessary.

He washed me away with his mild eyes and continued, "Finally, as the supreme opportunist, noting that the man he had marked for annihilation was heading outdoors, Weasel adhered to his accustomed pattern. In the dark, he followed that unsuspecting figure to the cliff's edge. I can see him—you can see him too, can you not?—unhesitatingly seizing the opportunity. The quick push into the black abyss of destruction below. The casual return to the house. The re-assumption of the guise of ignorance and unintelligence."

The small man summed up convincingly, "A beautiful, simple execution—no plan, all action. No clues, except the repeated pattern of action. Weasel is unquestionably the murderer."

I asked, "But why draw suspicion on himself by leaving the scene during the night?"

"His supreme confidence," the savant replied. "So sure was he that he had covered all tracks that he saw no reason to stay."

"Then why go to my office instead of divorcing himself completely from all those involved, including me?"

"Elementary, my dear sir," he sherlocked. "He likes you. Until he stops liking you, he goes where you go—or where

you will be. If and when he stops liking you, he can and possibly will pulverize you into nothing also, like his last victim."

"I don't believe it. There's no solid proof against Weasel."

"Character is all the clue and all the proof required here."

Fred sat down and rested his small hands in his lap. His relaxed attitude reflected absolute confidence. A brainy man, I thought, more often right than wrong; I shuddered for my large buddy.

A round-faced writer named Ed, a grinning-at-nothing individual, arose from among the stirring members.

"Weasel, my eye," he said. "Three people go out into the night. Two return, together. I ask you—which two?"

The replies popped. Gloria, of course. And Bob, my copywriter.

"Absolutely correct!" Ed grinned. "Those two collaborated, I'm certain, in killing the dirty little man. Furthermore, I don't doubt that they would call it a clear case of sex-defense."

The groans pleased him but didn't stop him. After grinning a while, he went on, "Consider Bob's make-up, given to sudden bursts of uncontrollable emotion and resultant trigger-action. For instance, Mr. Clark," he turned toward me, "he attacked you at one point, you said, because of a remark about the girl."

"That's right."

"Well, consider what he would do if this J. D. character made a pass, instead of a mere remark! Probably he shoved the victim over the cliff in a wild rage—and grateful Gloria, naturally, now is keeping her mouth shut about it."

During the burst of discussion which followed, the tall fellow called Gene started swaying to his feet again. He

finally pulled himself erect by the cord on his horn-rimmed spectacles, and said, "I've been thinking."

After the mocking applause had sputtered out, he kept on, "I can put my finger on the real murderer, or shall I say murderess, right away." He leered, "And brother, how I'd like to do it."

"In other words—" Helen prompted.

"In other words," he clarified, "the lady known as Rose. By the way," he frowned at me, "I don't believe you gave us her telephone number."

I changed the subject fast. "She was the only one who lost out in a big way through J. D.'s death. Why should she kill him?"

"He was her man," Gene sang out discordantly, "and he done her wrong."

"Let me clear up one thing," I stated crisply. "J. D. had reached puberty a long time ago. There was nothing new about his chasing other females. If Rose were the jealous type, she'd have erased him long before. So your theory is way off base."

"Stop playing defense attorney to that overheated sex-pot," my caustic wife told me, "and let's hear what some adults have to say. Any more on the subject from you, Gene?"

"Only ten thousand more words at five cents a word." He added hastily, "Which I shall boil down to a few dozen tidy sentences. For instance. This intense female lines up with the unattractive little wolf because she thinks she can shake him loose from a few of his millions. After a while she realizes she's not getting any richer, or any younger, while her eager playmate is picking posies and denuding her garden, so to speak." He asked me, "True?"

"I suppose so."

"Tell me," he inquired shrewdly, "did you or anyone else ever hear J. D. say a word about marrying her?"

"Well, not that I know of," I admitted, "but she claims he did."

"Now I ask you, Mr. Clark," he interrupted, "why was Rose so excited when she awakened you late that night at Rocky Cove?"

"Just my effect on women in general, I suppose," I suggested modestly. "After all, my manly charms have been known to—"

"Your manly charms would get lost in a Cracker Jack box," my admiring wife interrupted. "Go ahead, Gene."

"Here this woman practically breaks down your door to scream that her boy-friend is missing. Why her consternation? This fellow was known for his late-hour wanderlust—especially his lust. So why should she suddenly split a gut because he hadn't come to her room?"

I opened my mouth to reply, but I was too late—

"I'll tell you why," he shouted, his glasses flying off the bridge of his thin nose. "Because she had tossed the guy over the cliff. And she figured that the best cover-up was to express her own concern about his disappearance before his body was discovered. So she woke up you and the entire household, thinking to establish by her appearance of worry and frenzy that she was actually unaware of lover-boy's whereabouts, and therefore couldn't be held accountable for his death later."

"But why?" I asked. "Why should she bite the man who fed her—and clothed and sheltered her?"

"Jealousy," he repeated. "An act of simple, stark, raving-mad jealousy because of his attentions to other women at the party. And afterward, probably no one was more sorry for the action than she. In fact, she was the only one who was sorry."

I said, "Her grief was real enough after we found J. D.'s body."

Gene pounded, "Of course her grief was real. I just

finished saying it was realer and deeper than anybody's grief—including and perhaps especially that of his half-brothers." His eyes gleamed behind the spectacles. "Let me throw a question at you. During the interrogation that night by Chief Batrous, who kept accusing all the others?"

Helen leaped in, "It was Rose, of course. She kept screaming accusations at everybody."

"And why?" Gene followed up.

I said heatedly, "Because she was enraged about the murder of J. D.—"

"How did she know it was murder?" Gene's voice brimmed with triumphant cunning. "Everyone else was accepting it as accident. Was she so sure it was murder because she was the murderer?"

A scream arose from the back of the long room. A voice shrilled, "That spineless stinker can't call me a murderer!" A heaving body came zooming down the aisle toward us, flaming red skirt flaring up to reveal flashes of flesh above her long, slim, stockinged legs as she ran.

I stepped forward to head her off, trying to wedge myself between her and the fascinated Gene as she leaped at him.

I was mangled by sharp fingernails. Then the muscular female lifted the spindly writer, flung him crashing back into his seat and snaked out with her long, maroon-tipped talons to investigate whether there was really blood under the pale skin of his cheeks. I grabbed her from behind, reaching around her throbbing body with my arms. She tried to butt me with her lush bottom, but I moved in close and held her tight to prevent any part of her body from swinging at me.

How long I held on I don't know. But it gradually penetrated that she had stopped struggling. The interested eyes watching me indicated that my hands were clutching parts of the lusty babe's anatomy that will never be featured in full color on the front cover of *Woman's Home Companion*.

My cold-eyed wife said to me, over the babble, "You might let go now, if you can break the suction."

At the same instant, someone tapped my arm. It was Gene, who had managed to struggle up from his chair. He grinned with both sets of teeth and giggled, "May I have the next dance?"

I released Rose. She collapsed into the just-vacated chair, let her head fall back and sobbed toward the ceiling, uninhibited and unembarrassed.

Feeling ineffectual, I handed her the handkerchief that had been sloppily trying to decorate my coat pocket.

She looked up at me from under a thick film of tears and took the handkerchief. "I'm sorry," she murmured, her breath coming in short gasps, her contours heaving. "I was sitting back there and tried to control myself. But when this loud-mouthed wise guy," her eyes flashed at Gene, "kept yelling that I killed Jeedee, I lost my head and didn't quite know what I was doing—I just wanted to rip his tongue out—"

"Rose," Gene was saying, "if I'd known you in person I'd have known better than to accuse you. I apologize." His eyes roamed over her, up, down and sideways, without apology.

She softened, then flared up. "This may be fun and games to you characters here, but it's dead serious to me." She winced at her own choice of the word. She sighed, "I'll go quietly."

I asked, "How'd you get here in the first place?"

"J. C. mentioned to me in the office yesterday that you were coming to the Mystery Writers' meeting tonight to ask for story material. So I had dinner in the restaurant downstairs, then just walked up and sat down. Nobody stopped me."

Nobody would, I realized. No identification or tickets of admission were required. And you could look like a mystery

writer as long as you walked on two legs. Or even on your hands and knees.

I suddenly thought a horrible thought. I began, "You're not going to tell anybody at the office—"

"That you're picking apart Jeedee's death in front of this crowd?" she asked calculatingly.

"Ymmmph," I answered.

She eyed me speculatively with one of those what's-in-it-for-me looks. Finally she said, "I'll think about it." She licked her lips delicately, as though tasting her bribe-to-be. "I think I go now."

Gene picked up his eyes from where they had slid under the top of her low-cut dress and stuffed them back behind his glasses. He yipped eagerly, "The least I owe you, Miss Witson, is a drink—or three—or nine—and a lift home?"

She didn't say yes. And she didn't say no. She elevated the body beautiful and left the meeting, wagging her thin, panting escort behind her.

THE NEXT theorist, a well-known writer named William Bernard, nominated J. B. as the murderer, stating with assurance, "This crime could only have been committed by a capable, reasoning, executive mind. The mind of J. B., of course." He emphasized wordily that J. B. had wanted to get rid of his brother because of interference in running the business, not to mention the money involved . . . that J. B. had "set up the murder scene, the weekend at Rocky Cove . . . that he had suppressed any thorough police investigation."

My unimpressed wife argued, "To coin one of your favorite words, William, I say—Balderdash! Whatever that may mean. You haven't even placed J. B. at the spot where the killing occurred."

"No, my dear," the little writer's face remained flaccid,

as expressionless as last year's corpse. "You're going to place him at that spot, aren't you?"

"Me?"

"Yes. Wasn't J. B. talking to you, along about murder time?"

"Well . . ." Her tone was thoughtful.

"And then," he continued, "after a bit, J. B. was not talking to you? In fact, he had vanished into the broad outdoors? That adds opportunity to motive and ability."

I jumped up involuntarily. I snapped, "To all that, I say—bal"—I caught myself—"balderdash! I know J. B. didn't kill his brother!"

Quickly he asked, "How do you know? You profess to have been out of this world at the time. Were you really?"

I retorted weakly, "Ballsderdash!"

He sighed "No . . . I guess there's no point in suspecting you. This crime, as I mentioned before, required in its planning and execution a bright mind, an executive mind—at any rate—a mind."

I didn't like the nasty laughter of those ganged-up mystery writers. But I decided to ignore them and concentrate on the question, to paraphrase Mr. Shakespeare—J. B. or not J. B.?

A surprisingly deep voice boomed out. It came from a gangling, pasty writer who looked as though he might have been stretched out in a taffy machine. He asked, "How come you've all missed the most likely candidate—the blonde witch known as Mari? She hated the sex-pervert she had taken as a husband—or been taken by. He was making passes at her again. Further, even her husband said that her hatred transformed her into a 'madwoman'—his word, not mine!"

"She had nothing to gain," I protested.

"A wife would have some interest," he retorted, "in her husband's share of the dead man's share of the Pluperfect

millions. But, more important, she's the one we actually can pin down to the spot. Remember the brooch! I'm sure it happened this way: Falling off balance, the victim hit the brooch with his clutching hand, pulling it off and breaking the pin so the damning piece of jewelry fell from the lady's heaving—uh—breast, and was left unobserved on the grass." He breathed sharply. "In short, the dead man reached back from the other world to pin the crime on his ex-wife—with the very pin that he gave her himself!"

In the thoughtful silence, another member said quietly, "You're close, but you must see that the most likely murderer is a man who would kill not for his own gain, but for the mental health and freedom of his beloved wife."

My cynical mate interrupted acidly, "Show me where it says in the marriage vows, 'I promise to love, honor, cherish—and murder.'"

"Why the passionate outburst?" the quiet author probed. "Say, you're not fond of this guy, or something, are you?"

She ignored the question, saying, "I just can't see him killing the little rat—or killing anybody. J. C. is too much of a gentleman."

"He wasn't too much of a gentleman to attack your husband. Even the cover-up wasn't subtle!" He mimicked, "I beg your pardon, Clarkie, old boy, I saw a bird and stumbled against you." He flung at her, "Does that sound reasonable?"

My stubborn blonde refused to accept his line of reasoning. "I still don't think that motive is strong enough. I get worked up to the boiling point myself at people," she glanced my way to indicate the specific "people" she meant. "But I don't kill them—often."

Not often, I thought moodily, only every minute, every hour—we kill the one we love the most, with casual unkindness, with indifference, with blunt thoughtlessness. Each day we die a little until death do us part from ourselves.

I tried to shake off the mood. I needed a drink, a kind word, a soul. I needed a world I'd want to live in. Don't we all?

The quiet, and persistent, writer was saying, "Let's go back to the hours past midnight after the household had been awakened by the bewildered girl, Rose. Did J. C. react like the others, with understandable alarm and confusion? No. He very simply and methodically secured a lantern and when asked where he was going, stated in effect with complete assurance, 'I'm going to the cliff.' Why? Because he knew the body was there . . ."

"No!" Helen said. "He was smarter than the rest of us, that's all. So he headed for the cliff—"

She stopped abruptly, realizing her statement was not sensible. There was no reason for J. C. to assume his brother had gone to the cliff rather than to a village saloon, or the front lawn, or a dozen other possible places.

The writer—I never did find out his name—pushed his advantage. "While explaining that he'd been out in the night, at just about the hour when his brother was killed, J. C. later produces a custom-tailored story. Remember? He tells about two shadowy figures wrestling at the cliff side. But does he identify those figures? No!"

I said weakly, "It was dark. Maybe he couldn't tell in the blackness out there."

"Couldn't distinguish one type of figure from another?" the writer asked incredulously. "Look at the assortment he had to choose from. The monstrous body of Weasel. The slim loveliness of Mari. The billowing voluptuousness of Rose. Catalog them all . . . all distinctive . . . all different." He took a deep breath, "I'll tell you why he couldn't, or wouldn't, name whose figure he saw struggling with J. D. It was because the 'other person' was himself, and he couldn't very well put the descriptive finger on himself as the murderer!"

Helen cannonballed to her feet. "I don't know why I'm defending any man," she pitched. "They're all nothing but bummy crastards. But I tell you that I'm sorry I brought the whole matter up tonight. J. C. is no more guilty than I am."

A dark, plump member arose slowly. He unpursed his smooth, baby lips and asked gently, "Who said you are not guilty, Helen? It was you who almost threw the little man out of his office window. And I certainly don't put it beyond you to push him into the ocean wastes as promptly as into a wastebasket if his advances displeased you . . ."

"Speaking of waste," I interrupted wearily, "we're wasting our time here."

Before anybody could heckle her any further, I jumped up, grabbed the momentarily passive spouse, yanked her to me and headed for the exit. At the top of the stairway going out, I called back, "This is all off the record, don't forget."

A glance at their stony faces assured me that if I expected this to be off the record, I was off my nut. I said loudly, "Anyhow, don't forget your short, short murders."

Someone yelled, "Don't forget yours!"

Eleven

WE RETREATED from the meeting without dignity. On the sidewalk, we hesitated. I said to my delicious mate, "I hope those big-brain pals of yours supplied the answer for you."

She eyed me coldly. "Who needed an answer?" she asked. "I have a pretty good idea of who the murderer might be. All I wanted was confirmation."

I was baffled. "Did you get it?"

"Don't be stupid!"

That explained everything. "I can't help it," I apologized, "I seem to be dizzy since I was hit on the head by a marriage license." I continued, "If you know who did it, then tell me. Or the police."

"I haven't figured out any proof. Neither did my friends, the mystery writers, and I don't trust my own suspicions. They're too much like hopes." She looked me over disgustedly, then explained further, "So shut up!"

I whined, "What did I do now?"

"You didn't buy me a drink," she snarled.

I followed her into a plush saloon down the street where everything but the waitresses had a cover charge.

One of the redheaded cuties jiggled her breastworks over to our table and asked for our order.

My surly blonde reminded me, "The menu is on the table, not on the waitress's chest." She added, "I'll have anything but Old Rankler. If I get one more reminder of those Plupes, I'll toss my cookies."

I mumbled to the girl, "Two anything else that's eight years old and wet, with soda." She left with my eyes tattooed on her rump.

Helen was squinting speculatively at a barfly on the far wall. The barfly winked at her, then gently collapsed to the floor from the effort. "All we have to do is pin the murderer down . . ." Helen seemed to be talking to herself.

Just then the waitress bobbed her goodies over to us prettily and set two bubbling golden glasses on the table, permitting my eyes to roll down into the front of her dress as she bent over. I seemed to hear bells and I guess red lights flared in my eyes.

"Tilt!" my discerning blonde called out.

My eyeballs fortunately were bloodshot or they'd have blushed.

Helen looked at the glasses suspiciously and asked the girl, "What's in these?"

Puzzled, the rotund waitress replied, "It's eight-year-old Old Rankler. Isn't that what you asked for?"

In reply, my combative blonde picked up both glasses and tossed their contents into my face. I didn't even have time to open my mouth first.

"I hate Old Rankler," she explained grimly, "but my husband loves it. Don't you, lovey?" She added, "Now let's get out of this subsidized sewer."

Waiting for my change, I asked her damply and glumly, "Going with me to the meeting at Pluperfect tomorrow night?"

For answer, she wanted to know, "Everyone who was at Rocky Cove going to be there?"

"Yes," I said. "What's that got to do with it?"

"I wouldn't miss it," she stated grimly.

I asked timidly, "Going to clear up the murder?"

"Either that," she replied, "or commit one." She arose. "Let's go," she ordered, "tall, dark and hands."

To restore my manhood, I picked up the silver from the change plate and dropped it down the waitress's gaping bozooom as I passed her. There was a clinking sound, like a small cash register ringing.

My blonde raised one eyebrow and explained, "Metal falsies!"

I shook my weary head and heard a clinking inside there too. I needed rest and fortitude to face the meeting tomorrow night. I didn't look forward to the get-together: it smelled too much of murder, any way you sniffed it.

As I fell asleep later, I dreamed of a shadowy black figure approaching me, pushing me into hollow dark nothing, and screaming at me as I fell, "This will kill you!"

I refused to open my eyes. I might wake up to find I was dead. And it would be too great a disappointment if I weren't.

THE EVENTS of the next day made me consider changing the name of my business from Clark's Advertising Agency to Madhouse, Inc.

First thing, when I entered the office the only evidence I could find that Weasel had spent the night there was a large, permanent dent in the seat cushions. Anybody trying to sit on either end would now automatically go tobogganing down into the center trough. I'd either have to change Weasel's nocturnal sleeping habits or replace the couch with a cement park bench that wouldn't bend.

When I buzzed for my secretary, the door swung open and I suddenly saw dots in front of my eyes. Gorgeous Gloria was wearing one of those wild polka-dot dresses as skin-tight as if it had been welded on.

She gurgled, "Like it? Such a gay dress. I wore it for the meeting at Pluperfect tonight, but mostly to cheer you up." She swayed over to my desk. "You look so unhappy lately."

"What's to be happy?" I asked morosely. "Too much work and too little reward. A loving wife. Clients getting murdered right and left—"

She corrected me sharply, "It was an accident. You said so yourself. The police say so too, don't they?"

I said speculatively, "About the only time you get serious is when I refer to J. D.'s death as murder rather than accident. How come?"

"No special reason," she insisted. "It depresses me, and I don't like to be depressed. Besides, being depressed makes me feel sexy, and when I feel sexy, I get all out of control—"

Her polka dots started heaving. She moved close enough to give me a rubdown.

I backed away. Look at me backing away, I remarked to my astonished self.

"That won't work," I advised the palpitating girl. "Relax. You can't get my mind off murder, off you and yours in connection with murder, no matter how much you turn on the sex." I explained. "I'm still not sure about you. Did you get sexy too, just a little bit sexy maybe, with J. D., and then have to give him the heave-ho to keep him from climbing all over your polka dots?"

She said calmly, "You're mean, inconsiderate and not very understanding. Just because I like you a lot—and show it—doesn't mean that I encourage every man I meet. And besides, I'm just a weak little girl—I wouldn't hurt anybody, especially a client."

"I saw your fragile muscles," I reminded her, "when you were slamming Bob and me around at pingpong—"

"Leave Bob out of this," she said angrily. She started playing with her zipper, jerking it down an inch or two, then up to the top of her dress again. My head was bobbing like a yoyo.

"What gives with Bob?" I asked "Why this big interest

in me if you're nuts about him? Or are you just trying to keep my mind off Bob and his part in this thing?"

"I'm crazy about Bob! But that doesn't mean I have to suppress my feelings toward other men, does it? Do I have to put myself on ice just because I'm engaged?"

"Engaged? You mean you and Bob are going to get married?"

"Well, sort of—"

"Because a wife can't testify against her husband and vice versa?"

"Honey," she moved in on me, "why can't you get your mind off J. D.'s body? He's dead. I'm not."

I flung at her, "Is this the way you operated on J. D. that night?"

She jerked the zipper down with an angry gesture. "You men make me sick," she exploded. "You just can't understand that a girl may not mean anything when she flirts a little." She ripped the zipper down a little further, apparently unaware of her action. "You're all alike. Why, just because I took a little walk with that squirt that night, he tried to—"

I reached for the dangerously low zipper, grabbed it and pulled up, warning, "Better close up this damned dress before somebody—ouch!" My fingernail and some flesh were caught between the teeth and catch of the zipper—

The door opened and Bob walked in. His eyes popped wide. I jerked my hand away, leaving a wedge of torn skin behind.

Bob asked, "What the hell?"

The girl glared and gritted her teeth. "All you men stink!"

I was recovering. I asked, "What were you saying about what J. D. tried to do . . .?"

She whirled out of the room, slammed the door on us. Bob and I stared at each other. He asked ominously, "What happened?"

I explained by snarling the one word, "Women!"

That explained nothing and everything. His eyes were full of suspicion.

"Let's sit down and get some work done," I said. "We're falling way behind on this Old Rankler campaign."

He spread some layouts from our art staff on the desk before me.

I liked them all except one. When I told Bob to discard it, he began arguing violently, finally ripped the page into small bits and threw them at me like a shower of confetti. I called the angry young man several sizzling names that Mr. Roget had omitted from his Thesaurus.

Bob collapsed into the dented couch. "I'm sorry, Clark," he apologized. "That damned temper of mine again. I simply can't control it."

"You did all right before when you found me latched on to your soulmate by accident," I reminded him. "Ordinarily, you'd have thrown the walls at me. You're learning."

"I'm not learning fast enough," he groaned. He stood up, his face strained and determined. He said loudly, "Clark, I want to quit."

"This job, you mean?" I was startled. Jezazz, another problem. Every employer a psychoanalyst. Now I'd have to calm him down, let him tell me how frightened he was because he dreamed that every night his mother was raped by a boa constrictor—then give him a raise and wait anxiously for the next emotional disturbance.

He was continuing determinedly, "Yes, I want to get out of here. Right now."

"This minute?"

"Yeah, grab my hat and go. I know it sounds like a dirty deal to quit so suddenly, but I've got to—or I can't be accountable for what might happen."

"I don't get it," I said. "One minute we're planning an exciting campaign together, and the next minute you're

making with the grab-my-hat trick and away we go." I tried to lighten it up. "What's your problem, Mr. Ronnel?"

"I'm my problem," he answered bitterly. "I can't control myself, so I've got to get the hell out before there's another explosion."

"Another explosion?" I asked. My glands began perking rapidly. "Are you referring to the explosion at Rocky Cove?"

He sagged. "What's the difference what I'm referring to? Okay if I go—now?"

I burned, "Of course it's not okay. There's that big meeting tonight. It'll look like hell if I show up without you after building you up to J. B. as a copy genius, and after he asked specifically that you come along." I raged, "You going completely crazy, losing all sense of responsibility? Or did you forget about the meeting?"

"No, I haven't forgotten about the meeting," he retorted. "That's the main reason I want to quit now. I don't want to go to that session."

"Why not? I'll do the talking. You just bring your manly charms and keep your diarrhetic mouth shut. Nobody will get into trouble, as long as you don't let your teeth or anything else slip out."

"No good," he repeated stubbornly. "That murder will come up again and—" He stopped abruptly.

"—And you'll lose your head again? Maybe this time permanently?" Another thought, "Or are you worried that you'll let slip some damaging information about Gloria?" I yelled, "Speak up, Bob. What happened that night? What do you expect to happen tonight? Maybe I can help you."

His eyes dulled and shifted downward toward the floor. The muscles of his face loosened. He mumbled, "Forget what I said. Nothing happened. Nothing's going to happen. I'll be at the meeting."

He started to leave. I felt a big chance to learn something

slipping away. I tried to haul him back with my question, "What's on your mind, Bob? Tell me, it'll relieve you."

He turned and yelled back, his face livid with rage—in short, normal again—"I told you I'd be there tonight. You're buying my brains—what the hell do you want, my blood too?"

Bursting out through the door, he collided with the huge figure of Weasel, who was coming in. He cursed the big man in approved locker-room style, then stamped away.

Weasel continued in, closing the door behind him. He said mildly, "That boy is too nervous." He considered the problem seriously. "I don't think he gets enough vitamins, that's his big trouble. The way I figure it, them healthy little round vitamin pills lay around in your veins and keep the blood from running along too fast and getting your nerves all hot and bubbly and excited. Don't that sound logical?"

I found myself rowing a slow boat down a heavy, sluggish stream of blood laden with massive, drifting vitamin capsules. I shook my head but unfortunately it wouldn't come off. I said sarcastically, "Weasel, why don't you drop a postcard to the American Medical Association, explaining your theory?"

He responded eagerly, "Hey, maybe we could sell that idea to a vitamin pill manufacturer for a big advertising campaign. Hey?"

"Not this season," I answered weakly.

"Maybe next year," he agreed. "See, looka me," he admired his grotesque self, "getting to be a real advertising man already. You know what, it ain't hard at all."

I sighed, "I'm sorry, pal, I'm busy. Come back some other century, next leap year, for instance."

The little eyes regarded me questioningly. "Leap year? But I been working on our story . . ."

"What story?" I felt myself sinking down, drowning in my own anemic bloodstream for the third time.

"Our murder story for the advertising," he reminded me. "Don't you ever pay no attention to business?"

I replied dazedly, "Gulbbbdg." My new language.

He understood and proceeded very sensibly, "This is an idea I got from something I heard somebody say to somebody else once someplace where I was. Get it?"

"I hear voices but there's no one there," I quoted.

He ignored me. "It works like this—"

"Go away, chum," I ordered sharply. "Go do some more homework. And don't come back until you've finished writing a twenty-volume encyclopedia."

"Huh?" he asked.

"I'm busy," I broke it down for him. "Get lost."

"Oh," he acknowledged my instructions cheerfully. "Okay, I'll give you the idea some other time. Maybe when I see you tonight."

"See me? Where?"

"At that there Pluperfect meeting." He looked worried, "Don't tell me you forgot that too? You ought to write these things down."

"I didn't forget," I snapped. "But I didn't expect you to be there."

"Been invited," he insisted. "Mr. J. C. called up and said be sure and come, and see him alone some time after I got there."

That threw me. "What for?"

"He wouldn't say." The big man stared at me, his eyes suddenly sick and frightened. Then they blinked and were blank and unrevealing again. "You think Mr. J. C. wants to make trouble for me?"

"I don't know. But don't worry about it."

"If you'll worry about it, then I won't have to. Will you?"

I looked at this trusting, rugged countenance. I agreed wearily, "I'll worry about it, Weasel. And I'll only charge you the usual fifteen per cent commission."

He said, "I like you." I ducked the skull-cracking pat on the head. He left, waving at me his huge, hairy mitt, big enough to blot out the sun—or to obliterate a man. I murmured to the closed door, "I'm glad you like me, it would kill me if you didn't."

I picked up a sheet of copy about Rengo corsets and started to read it. The first line read, "Would you like to Rengo-vate your figure?" The second line seemed to say, "Why does J. C. want to see Weasel alone?" The third line continued, "Why does J. C. want to see Weasel alone?"

At the fourth try, I decided to try to walk a straight line out of the office and down to the nearest bar. It was only eleven a.m. and I'd promised myself once that I'd never drink before noon. So I turned my watch ahead an hour. Moonshine-saving time.

I started drinking a long and lonely lunch of Old Rankler. But I must admit that I didn't enjoy it. Somehow the stuff seemed to be flavored with blood . . .

Twelve

I WAS trying to read my fortune in the damp bottom of my fourth glass of Old Rankler. I was counting the tea leaves that weren't there, and looking for the face of a murderer, a face which refused to take shape no matter how hard I stared.

A voice seemed to speak up from the bottom of the glass in deep, provocative tones. The voice said, "If you'll move over, we can both look."

I complained, "Now they've even got the glasses in this joint wired for sound."

I felt a delectable, firm and warm shape pressed against my back. I sniffed a delirious whiff of perfume.

I raised my head to the bartender and ordered, "Two more Old Rankler old-fashioneds. Without fruit, ice or water."

"Double," the voice suggested.

The bartender asked grimly, "Shall I put them in glasses or just hand you the bottles?" He placed two bottles and two old-fashioned glasses in front of me. "Will you drink them here," he queried, "or take them along with you to the morgue?" A character.

I filled the glasses and made room for the warm brunette next to me at the bar. She managed to cram herself into a space just large enough for a skeleton key. On me, she fit. When she swallowed I could feel the liquor passing through her body, all the way.

"Cozy," I told her. "How did you know I was here?"

"I thought you might like to take me to lunch. I called your office, and your private secretary suggested that you might be here. Very smart, we private secretaries."

"I'm glad to see you," I stated gracefully. "But I'll fire that babe if she doesn't keep her mouth shut. What did you want to see me about?"

Her voice became serious and sad. "I've been lonely. I felt I had to talk to somebody human. Those three Plupes have been giving me six very cold shoulders."

I felt sorry for the girl. She might be loose in her morals and manners. But I was convinced that she'd loved the little dead toad just as much in her own impetuous way as, for instance, Mari loved, or claimed she loved, J. C. And I was sure too that they were giving Rose a very rough time. They couldn't kick her out without causing a lot of trouble, at least until their family corpse was a lot deader than now. So they tolerated her—intolerantly.

"I like talking with you," I assured her, "and drinking with you."

We sipped. She brightened, and pointed to her deep-cut neckline. She asked, "How do you like it?"

I answered with a question, "It—or them?"

Her nudge sent my temperature scooting up through the top of my head. "It, stupid," she chided me. "The brooch."

I knew what she meant, but I wasn't pleased by the sight. She was wearing Mari's cameo brooch. It looked a lot brighter than the last time I'd seen it. The carved, white, naked lady shone against the deep, lustrous, flawless pink background. The diamonds on the rim sparkled with more colored lights than are on a soda-parlor juke box.

"It looks entirely different," I said. "So bright and sparkling!"

"I had it cleaned by a jeweler," she explained, touching it with her hand. "I also had the pin and clasp fixed."

"A good job." I touched it with my finger. "It seemed dull and scratched before—"

She pushed my hand away. She chided, "Mustn't touch—"

A clear, familiar and uncompromising voice added, "—or you'll get your fingers burned!"

"It couldn't be," I moaned aloud. I looked. It was—my lovely and glacial wife. I asked tremulously, "How did you find me?"

"Where else would you be but at the nearest bar, and with the nearest birty ditch?" she asked irritably. "Ask me a hard one."

"Too easy," I said. "You went to the office and—"

"Your sweet secretary told me you probably were here."

"I'm glad to see you," I managed. Where had I heard those words before? "But I needed a drink and privacy. Nobody was supposed to be told I was here. Not Rose. Not you. Not nobody, not even me—I was trying to keep my whereabouts from myself." I shook my head despairingly. "Next time, I'm going to hire a male secretary . . ."

Helen asked coldly, "Want to bet?"

"She's wearing Mari's brooch," I blurted. "I merely was examining it."

"I saw that," Helen said. "You were so close that in a minute they'd have arrested you for trespassing." She changed her direction and asked Rose, "Why don't you give that brooch back to Mari? It's hers."

"It's mine just as much," the sultry girl replied obstinately. "It came from J. D. That Viennese tart killed him and left the cameo on the spot. That's the least I should get out of this." Her eyes flashed, "But it's not all I'll get. That family can't get away with murder. J. D. was going to marry me, and I'm going to collect, dead or alive!"

Helen shrugged. "It's not my fight. Let's see the brooch?"

But the front of Rose's dress was now as bare as the skin above.

"Where is it?" I gasped.

The girl's face was impassive. "Sleight-of-hand," she said. "It's now in my purse, where I keep all my jewelry. I don't trust anybody." She went on, "Anyhow, I only wore the brooch to show you, Ceecee. I wouldn't be stupid enough to wear it in front of the Plupes, or certain other people." Her words were pointing obviously at my irate blonde.

"Don't try to be too smart," Helen warned her savagely. "There's more trouble brewing and you may find yourself right in the middle of it."

"Meaning what?" the brunette asked, her black eyes squinting stonily.

The blonde turned away from her. "I'm wasting my time here. I only stopped by for one reason anyhow."

I already had my wallet out. I handed her some of the still-warm green strips. "You're going shopping," I guessed.

"Some day," she commented, her hand swallowing the money daintily, "people will recognize what a great defective you are." She turned away abruptly, mission accomplished.

I called after her, "See you at J. B.'s office at six." The revolving door swung her away.

Rose checked the heavy clasp on her purse. "I have to rush," she said. "See you there at six also. And thanks for the drinks." She went.

The bartender said to me, "Ain't you going to thank the lady for the massage? Even Sloan's Liniment couldn't've got any closer to you."

"You're a riot," I remarked sourly, placing a dollar tip on the bar. "That's for you," I explained. "Put the drinks on my account."

"Thanks," he said. "Wait a minute." He leaned toward me in man-to-man fashion. "If I was you," he advised, "I'd keep my women separate if I was you. Too many women can kill a guy."

I considered the admonition. "How true," I agreed. "I know one guy it killed already."

THERE was something funereal about the meeting that evening, even though J. D. started off things in his breeziest nautical manner. We met in the seafaring atmosphere of his private office. "More cozy and shipshape in here," he explained. "After the meeting we'll all go and sip some grog in the conference room. I've also arranged to have mess set up there so we don't have to go out to eat. That suit everyone?"

Everyone agreed, without much enthusiasm. The shadow of the late J. D. obviously deadened the spirits of this oddly assorted "crew." Of course the female membership contributed plenty of beauty and color, in the persons of the platinum Mari, dusky Rose, redheaded Gloria and my alert blonde. And the male contingent was bolstered by the handsome brothers and the good-looking though scowling Bob. But Weasel and my dejected self lowered the standard badly. I was wishing I could lower some Old Rankler into my weary frame but, as J. B. had announced, he wanted to pick our brains before flushing our throats.

Discarding any social pretense, J. B. plunged us all into the business of the meeting; the examination of proposed ads and discussion of advertising ideas and approaches, and decisions about lining up the campaign. Layouts and copy were analyzed, criticized and approved in general. Schedules were torn apart and put together again.

I was so busy I almost forgot to admire Gloria's dimpled knees as her pencil raced over the pad on her lap, jotting notes on the proceedings. The other women were silent, somewhat sullen. Rose appeared especially depressed; could be because of the loss of her gold-plated boy friend. But after a while she became animated and tossed in a lot of comments, with a definite member-of-the-firm attitude. J. C.

carefully ignored her and her suggestions, but J. B. accepted her contributions in fair-minded if not exactly cordial fashion.

Mari looked as delicately decorative as ever, except that her face was distorted occasionally by a fleeting frown. Every once in a while she would absent-mindedly touch the place on her dress that might have been occupied by the missing brooch. Then her brow would cloud up like a storm over the beautiful Blue Danube.

My wife, during a lull in the discussion, suddenly said, "I've got an idea. Since a mystery writer deals in dead bodies, would you call him a man of extinction?"

"Please," I admonished her. "I'm the one who makes the bad puns in the family, remember?"

"I wasn't trying to be funny. I was just leading up to a testimonial angle."

"Then deal it fast. We've got work to do."

J. B. silenced me with a look that could have done duty as an icicle. "We would be glad to listen to any suggestion of yours, Helen."

"Well," she said, "some of the liquor outfits go for actors, socialites, prominent executives and the like to testify that they drink Goober's Glue, so why don't you?" She paused. "But our slant is different. It goes like this: There's no mystery about Old Rankler because of its specific age and so forth. And who's better qualified to say there's no mystery about something than the nation's top mystery writers? Catch on?"

We thought about it. She had a point.

J. B. said, "Nice sailing! That's certainly worth thinking about as a future angle in the campaign." He turned to me, "You pick them smart as well as beautiful."

I acknowledged, "I taught her what every advertising man's girl should know."

"The first thing she should know," my cynical blonde

retorted, "is not to marry an advertising man."

After laboring a couple of hours and pouring out buckets of sweat and tears—our sweat, J. B.'s tears—the head man said he was ready to end the business part of the session.

"Anything you want to add before we break up?" he asked his brother.

J. C. had been deeply quiet most of the evening. He came halfway out of his coma to shake his head negatively. Something was on his mind but it wasn't the Old Rankler advertising campaign. I was sure that his preoccupation was tied to the death at Rocky Cove, to the worrisome brooch and to the newly arisen barriers between himself and his remote and brooding wife. She hadn't even glanced at him all evening.

I wondered how I could help smooth things between them. I tried to send an understanding smile in the direction of J. C. But I must have looked like Bela Lugosi in a fright mask, because the slim man's sensitive, hurt eyes shuddered over and past me.

"Let's lower sail for tonight," J. B. was announcing cheerily. "I want to thank you all for your fine work and help. Suppose we wash up and meet in the conference room to stow away some food and drink. Right?"

"Right."

"Right."

"Right."

Right. Those echoes were from the three trained advertising agency people and our unfailing conditioned reflexes.

Big Weasel, who previously had not spoken—nor understood—a word, looked puzzled. He asked, "Do all advertising people talk like that?"

"Only to clients," I said.

"Why?" he wanted to know.

Before I could explain the facts of advertising life, J. C. approached us.

His face was moody and badly worn as he said to Weasel, "Would you stop by at my office for a few minutes?" He strode on, opening the door to the hall and his office down at the other end.

Weasel looked disturbed, meaning there were wrinkles on top of the normal wrinkles in his massive features. "Wonder what he wants. I ain't done nothing to him."

"One way to find out what he wants." I gave the huge figure a shove which nearly knocked me over. "Go ahead and see him."

"I hope he don't make no trouble for me." He went out the door and into the hallway.

I looked around the office. Everyone else had slipped out while we'd been talking, bound for the big conference room and refreshment, no doubt. I headed for the same place, worry nagging at me. What to do? As usual, I decided to wash away my worries. Soap? No. Water? No. Old Rankler? Right, right, right . . .

Thirteen

YOU COULD hardly hear the voices in the conference room through the lapping of the eager tongues against liquid. Apparently, like me, they'd all decided that drinking was the better part of eating because they'd elected to get a pick-up first, a wash-up later and then an eat-up still later, if and when.

I couldn't blame them. The tension had been building in this ill-assorted group since the weekend at Rocky Cove had literally gone on the rocks. The best thing would have been to break up the gathering in a hurry before there were any further explosions. But nobody cared to make the first move without a nod from J. B.

I glanced over at Rose and decided it would be smartest to detour around those dangerous curves at the moment. I circled the room and noticed Mari, off at one side, looking alone and haunted. So I figured I'd haunt her further and edged over. She was still picking at the top of her dress nervously.

I asked considerately, "Still worrying about that brooch?"

She jumped halfway out of her shoes and back into them again, pulling her aloofness closely around her in a hurry.

Taking a deep breath, she said tensely, "I wish I'd never seen that brooch. I wish I'd never met my first husband. I wish I were dead!" Her eyes stared at me moodily. "After what happened at Rocky Cove, I can never be happy again—"

"Why not?" Sure, why not, I asked me—she's better off with him dead. Except that her conscience is still alive.

"Why not?" she echoed. "A thousand reasons." Or one big reason. She looked toward the door, waiting rigidly for J. C. to appear.

I said softly, "That'll all smooth out, Mari. It happens in every marriage—a misunderstanding, sooner or later. You'll find each other again."

"No. My husband thinks I murdered his brother. Without trust, there cannot be love again."

"But doesn't that cut two ways?" I asked. "He feels you suspect him of killing the guy." I smiled feebly. "It isn't likely that you both did it, so one of you at least must be wrong in your suspicions." But why couldn't they both have been involved in the murder? This quarrel might be between partners in crime falling out, each with ugly knowledge of the other.

Before she could answer, the door opened. She stiffened. But the latecomer in the doorway turned out to be Weasel. Mari sighed, relaxed. She handed me her empty glass and said tremulously, "Make me a refill. I'm going to wash up."

Weasel's massive carcass was blocking the bar. He had splashed some soda into a tall glass and was gulping it nervously.

His big face looked pale and glistened with perspiration. It was warm enough in the room for the windows to be open, but not for raising a sweat.

"What's the trouble, Weasel?" I asked.

He looked more dense than even he could possibly be. "Trouble? Who said anything about trouble?"

"Don't ask questions of my questions. What did J. C. want?"

King Kong wiped the moisture from his face with his hand, then took a huge swallow of soda. He blurted, "I can't tell you, Mr. Clark. I know you're my friend, and I'm your

friend, and friends ought to tell each other everything but"—he expelled breath quickly—"I can't tell you."

He walked away a few steps and sank onto a heavy couch. I wasn't sure whether the groan came from him or the burdened furniture.

Somebody who looked like a Venus de Milo with arms came up and offered me an empty glass. Buxom Rose cooed, "Fill 'er up, Clarkie. The glass, I mean."

She was carting a large leather shoulder purse, held close to her side.

I asked, "Still carrying the family jewels?"

She nodded blithely. "That way I never lose any jewelry in the tall grass, or anywhere."

I ignored the opening. Instead, I tried, "Aren't you afraid, toting around your valuables?"

She answered flippantly, "I'm not afraid of man or beast—"

"Or murderer?" I finished.

"I can take care of myself." She changed the subject. "What's the matter with nature boy?" She indicated the huddled man-mountain on the couch. "I thought J. C. wanted to see him."

"J. C. did see him. Guess it wasn't a very merry session." I shrugged it off, added without thinking, "Drink up, for tomorrow we may die."

"Don't you mean, tomorrow we may try?" That was the voice of my inquisitive wife. Just bait my trap with a brunette and it's sure to catch my blonde.

The dark girl said frigidly, "I suddenly find that I have some work to finish in my own office. I'll be back, Ceecee. Then maybe we can continue our pleasant little chat." She made "pleasant little chat" sound like a long weekend romp on a houseful of foam latex mattresses. She hitched her saddle bag over her shoulder and swished out.

Helen asked, "You two going unsteady together now?"

I decided to get off the subject. "Seen J. C.?"

"No. He probably has the good 120-year-old stuff hidden away in his office. Anyhow," she mused, "he sure was pre-occupied during the meeting. Probably wanted to go and brood alone."

"He had a session with Weasel," I mentioned. "The poor guy came out drenched with emotion or something. Looked ready to crawl into a sewer and hide."

J. B. called out to us from across the room where he was talking with Gloria and Bob. "Got to finish up a bit of work on my desk," he advised, "then I'll sail back here for the vittles."

He left us with the amorous young couple, who gripped, then dropped their hands in embarrassment. The girl tittered, "I gotta go. I mean, when you gotta go—" she stopped as her boy friend looked displeased. She finished weakly, "I gotta go." She fled.

Bob looked at his empty glass. Looked at his hands. Looked up, said, "Me, too." And away he went.

I leered at my non-cringing blonde. I hissed, "That leaves us . . . alone . . ."

She raised a delicate eyebrow indelicately. "When *you* gotta go . . . I gotta go." Her lovely frame vacated the immediate premises.

The dent in the cringing couch revealed that even my human St. Bernard had forsaken me.

I looked in anguish at a bottle of Old Rankler on the bar.

I said in pleading tones, "Speak to me! Speak to me!"

The bottle tilted and answered, "Glug-glug-glug-glug" half-way up my glass.

I said to the man in the mirror behind the bar, who turned out to be me, "I never drink alone."

The man answered, "Unless you're alone."

"I know somebody else who's all, all alone," I explained. "Maybe I ought to go drink with him."

"Whozat?"

"Poor alone J. C. Some people might think he's a murderer. But I say he's a gentleman. A gentleman murderer?"

The wavering mirror image reminded me, "But he's alone and lonesome and blue and sorry and sad."

"Tell you what," I decided. "I'll go ask him if he's a murderer. And if he says he is, I won't drink with him."

Smart fellow in the mirror there; he agreed with me.

I started carefully on my way to ask a man whether he was a murderer.

WHILE I was trying to shake hands with the reluctant door knob that would enable me to escape from the conference room, the heavy wooden panel slammed inward and just missed cracking my sensitive skull.

Graceful Mari scooted past and rushed a drink at the bar. I followed her. The slim hand holding the glass was shaking.

"It's none of my business, of course," I began, "but I hate to see you so upset. Been quarreling with J. C. again?"

She retorted emotionally, "I haven't even seen him. I wanted to, and went to his door—but I heard him speaking with someone, so I left." She put down the glass and squeezed both hands together while I watched, fascinated, to see whether the skin would break. She almost screamed, "I can't stand much more of this. I'm going to pieces!"

The door opened on her last words and J. B. came hurrying over, his face concerned. "What's the trouble, Mari, darling?" he asked intensely.

He noticed me, stiffened, and reached for the bottle. He splashed some whiskey over the edge of his glass.

"Nervous whiskey," I remarked.

His fake laugh would have frightened Boris Karloff. Why all the tension in everybody, I wondered.

As if to answer, J. B. snorted, "I've been concentrating too hard, nose too close to the mainsail. Now that the campaign

is about set, I'll get away." He looked at Mari tensely. "We'll all get away together. Long cruise on my boat. Do J. C. a lot of good, straighten him out—he'll love it."

It penetrated to me that the room was full of words now. Everybody had come back. I counted all but one distinguished nose.

I asked loudly, "Where's J. C.?"

Everyone quieted. No one answered.

It was so still that my next words bounced loudly from wall to wall and finally out the open windows. "Anybody seen J. C.?"

Nobody replied. The silence seemed to roar disquietingly. I said tentatively, "Must still be in his office. I'll go get him."

Nobody said yes or no. They all stood transfixed like a bunch of clothed exhibition dummies in a carnival wax-works.

I took one step, and the door lurched open again. Relax, here comes J. C.

Instead it was a small wrinkled man, one of the elevator men, named Joe. His loose skin was fluctuating between muddy cream and gray-green; his eyes were fluttering wildly, his face was twitching. He tried to talk, gulped, pushed at the words again. Finally he croaked, his hand gesturing queerly toward the window, "It's Mr. Plupe . . ."

Mari screamed. J. B. stalked over to the agitated gnome with strange stiff steps, like a Frankenstein monster. He blurted, "What do you mean, Joe?"

Wizened Joe faltered, "He's down there. On the sidewalk." He gargled the words off key, "He's all over the sidewalk. He fell outa the window." His voice faded, "I'm gonna be sick—" He tottered out of the room.

"No-o-o-o!" The long, agonized sound was expelled by a staring Mari, the word starting in a shrill, high scream and ending in a racking, throaty sob. She sank weakly to a

chair, and crumpled forward, covering her dead-white face with shaking hands.

Everyone else stood tautly in position, unmoving. J. B. broke the spell by setting down his glass on a table and making his way slowly to an open window. I followed him.

We peered fearfully through the soupy darkness of the city night. Far below on the pavement a large, shifting black blotch became recognizable as a mass of people converging on something of exceptional interest. Tiny, moving figures were illuminated by the street lights. The straight white beams of autos pointed irregularly at the huddle that spilled over from the sidewalk onto the roadway. The distant noises of slamming car doors, a thin siren's wail, the rumble of crowd excitation, all reached up to us, pulling us down to the scene below.

J. B. moved back and straightened. The pupils of his eyes looked thick and faded. He said tonelessly, "I'd better go down . . ."

I followed him. I said, "I'll go with you." The words started normally inside me, but somehow they came out hollow, as from an echo chamber.

The strained, handsome man stopped by the sobbing, small blonde.

He touched her shoulder and dredged up the words slowly from far inside. "Don't, Mari—" he began. Don't what? He tried again, "You must not—" Must not what? He cleared his throat, trying to clear his numbed mind. He said again, "I'll go see—"

Suddenly she looked up. Her eyes seemed shrunken far back into her delicately formed skull. She rasped, "Why did he do it?" She sobbed, "My fault for not showing him more understanding—" She wrenched more breath for the cry, "Why did he jump?"

"Jump?" The sharp outcry was from Helen. She said shrilly, "Oh, no! Maybe once, with J. D. But not again.

When death comes twice this way, it's got to be murder!"

"Why?" That was from Bob. "Why couldn't it be murder first, and suicide second?"

Mari screamed at him, "What are you trying to say?"

The stubborn young man flushed. He went on determinedly, "Why couldn't it be that J. C. killed his brother out there at Rocky Cove? Then it preyed on his mind until he couldn't stand it any more—and took this way out?" He paused, then blurted, "You all saw how he acted during the meeting, what a strain he was under. He wasn't normal. He was probably thinking all the time about jumping out of—"

"Shut up!" I found myself yelling at the callous young nitwit. I twisted my head nervously, rubbed my unfeeling face. My skin felt like a damp roller towel in a public men's room. I smelled that way also to my own nostrils.

Gloria said quietly, in defense, "Bob could be right. J. C. certainly was not himself. He seemed . . ." she groped, "far away already, sort of out of this world if you know what I mean . . ." She gave it up.

"I don't believe he killed J. D., and I don't see him killing himself," Helen said positively. "I still think he saw somebody out by the cliff at Rocky Cove that night, somebody in the act of pushing his brother off the edge—"

"Then why didn't he speak up and name that somebody, if there was anybody?" Bob threw the logical question.

I rapped out, "Because J. C. was too much of a gentleman—"

"Nuts!" That pithy contribution was from Rose, who'd been leaning silently against the wall.

I was almost shouting, "He was one of the most decent men who ever lived! And one of the most sensitive. He'd have to be sure in his mind before putting the finger on somebody, and sending them to the electric chair."

"I don't get it," Rose said.

"I mean he'd have to convince himself first that the person

was morally more wrong for committing the murder than J. D. had been for provoking the act." I blundered on, "Dammit, I know what I mean but—well—" I tried once more, "J. C. told me the other day that he had to figure something out about what happened at Rocky Cove. He said he had to be *sure*."

More stunning almost than the new death was my wife's vocal agreement with me. She spoke up, "Clark's right." She glanced at me grudgingly, then looked back at J. B. "I'm sure that J. C. thought he knew who the murderer was."

Her cold blue eyes circled the room, judging each silent person that she viewed. She went on clearly, "I believe that J. C. decided to give that person a chance to speak up, asked the murderer to come to his office after the meeting."

Helen stopped, squinted out of the open window. She said abruptly, "That murderer is in this room right now!"

We looked around at each other shiftily, eyes meeting, then fading away toward another object or person. Then we were all looking in one direction, at one person, at the huge figure of Weasel huddled against the wall. The big man stared back at all of us, his tiny eyes rolling agitatedly.

Bob spoke what was in all our minds, "J. C. said at the meeting that he wanted to see you in his office . . ."

For the first time in many minutes, J. B. spoke up. He was the head man truly now, I thought, the only man left of the three to run this tremendously wealthy enterprise. He addressed Weasel authoritatively, "Did you go to his office?"

The big lips worked in the massive face but no words came out. Finally the behemoth nodded.

"What happened?" J. B. pounded.

The big man wailed, "Nothing! I mean, he was all right when I left him—" He squeaked despairingly again, "He told me he expected somebody else—" He appealed to me desperately, "Honest, Mr. Clark, I wouldn't hurt him—not him!"

The question was in all our minds; was it the unmistakable figure of Weasel that J. C. had seen committing murder at the cliff's edge? Did J. C. have to resolve in his own mind whether the crime was outweighed by his brother's tragic damage to Weasel's sister?

It was Bob who voiced our thoughts again. "J. C. wanted to give you an out, Weasel, if he could find one for you. But he had to decide finally, as any decent person would, that murder and murderers cannot be covered up." He asked, "Is that the way it was? Did you have to throw him out before he could identify you to the police as the killer he saw at the cliff?"

"I didn't touch him," Weasel shrieked. "Let me alone—" He waved his heavy arms, as if to fling aside anyone in his way. He moved forward toward us—

The door opened and action was suspended again. Two policemen walked into the room, looked us over. They sensed something violent and sour.

One asked, "What goes on here?"

No one answered.

The blue-suited man asked, "Who's the boss here?" He was not officious, simply inquiring.

J. B. took a step forward. "I'm J. B. Plupe. The man down below is my brother—"

The cop said quietly, "We'd like you to come down and identify him." He looked toward the little weeping blonde.

I spoke up, "His wife."

"Oh." The cop said to J. B., "You'll be enough."

I asked, "Can I go along?"

He looked at J. B. who nodded his okay. "Come on." The cop added warningly, "If you want to look—"

I didn't want to. I wanted to turn back the days to a week ago, before the weekend at Rocky Cove, before all the excitement and tragedy started. The hell with the campaign, the hell with everything else. I wanted J. C. alive again. I'd

liked the guy. I couldn't imagine him a suicide. I couldn't think of him murdered.

Weasel started to follow us out. Gloria shrieked without volition, "Don't let that man get away!"

The cops stopped. The vocal one asked, "What goes on here?"

Nobody wanted to answer. Bob spoke grudgingly, "He was in the room with the man before he jumped—or fell—"

Or was pushed. Nobody said it. Nobody had to. The unspoken words gleamed like neon in the heavy air of the room.

The taller cop said to his companion, "You stay here. Nobody leaves this room."

He led us out. As I closed the door, the last thing I saw as I looked back was the massive, disheveled face of Weasel, his eyes staring after me in pleading and in terror . . .

Big man, I wondered, what now?

Fourteen

THE BODY under the covering was wet clothes and smashed flesh, as J. D.'s had been. The face was J. C., curiously whole, unmarred and unchanged. The features were calm, composed, revealing no longer the strain and worry and tortured emotions they had reflected only an hour or so before.

Whatever had happened to him, I meant to find out how it had happened. In return for the kindness and consideration he had always shown me, I meant to find out.

Then something inside my consciousness reminded me, this is the man who stumbled against you and almost threw you off the cliff.

J. B. said loudly, "It was an accident."

A police officer was standing beside me. He had just been introduced to us as Lieutenant Connor. He turned his sharp, hatchet face and I saw his reddish brows pinched together in the middle of his creased forehead. Whatever was on his mind, he decided to let it go for the moment. He gestured toward the body and advised the white-coated man from the ambulance, "We're through. Wrap it up." He explained to my reactive shudder, "Just a manner of speaking." His narrowed eyes challenged me to make something of it.

"I'm going back upstairs," I said.

Connor replied, including J. B. in the range of his eyes, "C'mon over here by the car first." We followed, stood by the unmarked police sedan.

Without preliminaries, he threw his cigarette end swiftly into the gutter and told J. B., "I understand this is the second one of your brothers got himself killed within a week." His words had a sting, but his manner was straightforward and inoffensive. The man's attitude was, I'm doing a job, want to line things up, finish off fast—if possible.

J. B. answered grimly, "That's right." He'd recovered his color and poise during the activities of the past few minutes. These were the first words he'd spoken since his first quick glance at the scrambled body and the low statement, "That's my brother." He'd turned away fast and concentrated on smoking cigarettes.

Now the recovered executive spoke further. "If we can sit down somewhere, Lieutenant, I'll fill you in on what's been happening—what my brother was doing, who was with him—all that. My brother has been under a severe mental strain. It was more obvious than ever tonight during a meeting we had, earlier. But I didn't realize he was going to jump—" He paused. "I mean, if any of us had even suspected—"

The unimpressed official commented, "Yeah." He agreed, "Okay. Let's sit here in the car for a couple minutes. You tell me about it. Then we'll go up."

J. B. nodded, "I just want everything to be clear. There were plenty of witnesses to my brother's upset condition tonight—"

Lieutenant Connor interrupted, "You tell me what you've got to say alone." His attitude indicated that he didn't want me coached as to how to "yes" J. B.'s statements.

How did he know I was an advertising man? He hadn't seen me shine my client's shoes or anything in the past few minutes. He suggested, "Let's get into the car, Mr. Plupe." He addressed me, "Mind waiting on the sidewalk?"

He indicated a spot not close enough for me to overhear them, not far enough for me to be out of sight.

The sidewalk was kept clear by the cops. All pedestrians

were diverted to the other side of the street. I stood alone and looked far, far up to the thirty-second floor. It was a long way to look up. It was even longer to fall down.

THE CAR doors opened and the two men approached me. Their faces didn't tell me much. J. B. looked less tense, relieved. The detective just looked. I expected him to snarl, "You still here?" Instead, he said, "Thanks for waiting. Let's go up now." Maybe under that ruthless exterior there didn't beat a badge of stone.

I told myself on the way up in the elevator that I had my metaphors mixed. I wished that I had a drink mixed instead, preferably Old Rankler mixed with more Old Rankler. Maybe I could get to the bar for a fast bracer once we reached the conference room.

"It's your floor." The voice came from the same elevator man who had shocked us earlier with his information about J. C. He said, "Terrible fall, huh?"

I almost remarked that a thing like that could kill somebody, but I refrained. Instead, I hurried after the others and caught up with them just as they reached the door to the conference room.

The cop stationed outside the door in the hallway greeted us. Connor asked him, "Everybody who was in there still in there?"

"Yeah," the policeman answered, "Nobody came out. Unless they went out the window—"

Connor's bleak eyes slapped the man's mouth shut.

We walked in. I counted the listless, silent group. All there, murderer not yet accounted for. J. B. introduced them all to the lieutenant. The impersonal eyes photographed each one, then the man spoke, "I'm going to look around the place."

Rose swayed forward a step, "Can I help show you around?"

The detective's mind seemed to lick her over. He answered pleasantly, "No, thanks. Mr. Plupe gave me a good idea of the layout." He went on, "I'll be back in a few minutes. Appreciate it if you'd all wait."

He turned to go, then asked, "Anybody been in the dead man's office since you found out about this?"

All their unspoken replies were negative. Mari failed to look up; she still sat bent over, her hands clenched before her, face to the floor. She raised her stricken face and mumbled, "I killed him."

The handsome figure of J. B. darted over to her. He said, "Take it easy, Mari."

Lieutenant Connor made the leap to her side almost as fast. He challenged, "What did you say?"

She repeated in hardly discernible words, "I killed my husband."

J. B. spluttered, "Don't misunderstand her, Lieutenant. She's terribly upset. She and my brother were estranged the last few days. She feels that contributed to his strain, led to kill himself."

The frowning detective asked her point blank, "Is that what you mean, Mrs. Plupe?"

She didn't look at him. Her head drooped. Her words dribbled out, "Yes . . . yes . . . yes . . ."

The baffled official looked around at us sourly. "I'll be back."

He left. I had the impression he was leaving us together purposely—put the pot on a low flame, add combustible ingredients and let them stew—in their own juice, in J. C.'s blood. Such tasty thoughts we have, Dracula and me.

The door had hardly closed on him before his plan started to work.

Rose pitched a spark at the dormant fireworks. "I'm sick of waiting here, for one," she spoke hoarsely. "Why don't

we tell the cops who did it, let them cart him away, and get out of here."

J. B. looked over toward Weasel, then took his eyes away. He said to the heavy-breathing brunette, "Let the police do things their own way."

He hesitated, then said, "Furthermore, none of us knows exactly what happened. We're all just tacking in an uncertain wind." Our captain was back at the helm again.

The sultry babe snorted, "Who doesn't know?"

That was a signal for Bob to burst out and throw his temper on the fire. "For God's sake," he stormed, "if anybody knows, speak up." He grabbed Gloria's tender hand in his. "We'll all go crazy cooped up in here, staring at the closed door and the open windows!"

Rose pursed her ripe lips, opened her mouth, paused. She looked calculatingly at J. B., then said, "Maybe I'll say what I know . . . and maybe I won't." She implied as clearly as if she had spoken it, "I'll see what pay-off is extended to me."

J. B. looked back at her with a frightening lack of expression on his normally mobile face. If he'd had a loose anchor in his hands, I'm sure he would have hurled it. We were all in arrested motion again.

The door opened once more.

Lieutenant Connor came back into the room, this time leaving the door open behind him. His face was set and serious. He looked around at us dramatically, letting the strain and tension build.

Then he held up a white sheet of paper. He said into the quivering silence, "Maybe this settles everything—"

He looked back into the open doorway. Two policemen had appeared and were blocking the gap.

I looked over at Weasel. He seemed desperate and lost, in every line of his heavy bulk.

J. B. cracked the quiet, his voice pitched a shrill octave

above normal, "What's on that sheet, Lieutenant?"

I waited with the others. I looked at the open door, the open windows, the walls.

I swear it . . . even the walls had ears . . .

THE SHARP profile of the police detective looked dissatisfied. He tasted his thin lips with his tongue, then said, "This paper was lying on top of the desk in the dead man's office."

"Stop saying 'dead man'," Mari shrilled. "I can't stand it. I made him dead!" If she clenched her small white fists any tighter the blood would spurt through at the thin-skinned knuckles.

Connor nodded grimly at her outburst. "Maybe you did kill your husband at that," he said reluctantly.

"This is insane!" The words spurted from J. B. His face was inflamed. "What's on that paper, Lieutenant?"

The agitated tycoon reached down and held one of Mari's hands in both of his own. Maybe the gesture was not exactly a brotherly-sisterly one, even leaving out the in-law angle. The fragile blonde looked up at him. Her stunned eyes warmed a little. She placed her other hand on his. What goes on, I wondered. I noticed Helen also watching them carefully.

Connor coughed and asked, "Sure nobody went into the—uh—deceased's office after you learned he was—gone?"

Helen found her voice first. "That's one thing I'm sure about," she said. "J. B. and my husband went out with the policeman and came back with you. The rest of us haven't left the room." She erupted, "But if we don't break it up soon, I'm going to!"

"We'll excuse you for a few minutes," the detective agreed mildly.

She took a firmer stance. "I'm not leaving until I hear what's on that paper."

"Yup, what's it say?" The nervous squeal was from Weasel.

Connor regarded the big man with special curiosity. He asked, "What're you so nervous about?"

Bob spat out, "Because he was the last one in there with J. C.! Anyhow, will you read that damned thing, Lieutenant, or shall we send for someone who can read?"

Connor replied calmly, "Let's see. You must be the fellow who threatened to break J. D. Plupe's head if he didn't lay off your girl—out there at Rocky Cove, huh?"

Bob didn't answer, although the world's most evil cuss words were reflected in his eyes. Instead, Gloria squeaked shrilly, "He didn't do anything!"

"How do you know?" Connor barked quickly. "I've been told that tonight, for instance, for a period between the end of the meeting and the discovery of the body, you were all more or less separated."

Apparently J. B. had done a good job of filling him in. The truth of his statement struck me. I remembered being left alone in the conference room, just me, the bar and Old Rankler. That was quite a while after Weasel had returned from J. C.'s office. Anyone, including Weasel, could have gone back long enough for the fatal, conclusive push.

Another question fazed me, how did I know that J. C. was still among the living when Weasel left the office?

There was one relief for me. I'd been out-of-mind due to excessive inhalation, let's say, when J. D. was killed at Rocky Cove. But this time I was sober. Well, not exactly sober. Yeah, but not tight. Well, not exactly not tight. Hmmmm. I'd have to look in at the next meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. Or maybe they had a branch—Murderers Anonymous.

I brought myself back to the present meeting of Suspects Unanimous.

"So you see," Connor was winding up, "Not one of you has an alibi for tonight's death—"

J. B. growled, "Who said anything about needing an alibi?" His tone put on the big-business pressure. "Lieutenant, I insist you read us that paper."

The detective regarded the steaming executive speculatively. He said, "Certainly, Mr. Plupe. You're the boss now." Was there a sinister emphasis on the word "now"? Jezazz, next thing I'd be suspecting my own shadow.

I switched my attention back to Connor. He said, "Well, not much to read. Just a few words." He concentrated on the sheet. He read slowly, glancing around at all of us with a pause after every few words. "Darling Mari," he spoke with careful lack of intonation. "Perhaps it will be easier to put this in writing. Every time I try to say it to you, something blocks us off. I'm sorry, darling, I'm sorry that—" He stopped.

Mari screeched, "What? Read it, Lieutenant, please!"

The man shook his angular head. He said quietly, "That's all there is." He held up the sheet toward us. We could see the inked writing, the words ending in mid-sentence, the balance of the paper blank.

J. B. sighed, whether in sorrow or relief, "Then it was suicide . . ."

No one contributed anything further, but some of the tension seemed to evaporate from the premises.

Connor asked, "What makes you so sure it's suicide?"

"The note," J. B. reiterated, "the suicide note. Addressed to his wife. He says he's sorry—" He spoke in exasperation, "What more could it mean?"

"Could be," the detective admitted. "I'm not arguing. I just want to be sure."

I said tentatively, "J. C. was a very introspective and quiet man. Maybe he wanted to apologize to his wife and figured he could do it better in writing. Then he was interrupted by—" I felt the antagonism building from some

of the others, but I kept going doggedly, "—by the murderer. That made a simple note of apology look like a suicide letter."

"Ridiculous!" J. B. said. Not a friendly word from client to advertising agent. I could feel my competitors breathing down my neck, with my neck stuck way out. He went on more quietly, "Much as I hate to admit suicide, that letter makes it clear. The sooner we accept that, the quicker we can get away from this tragic place—"

His voice was solemn as he finished, "Mrs. Plupe and I have had a terrible shock, Lieutenant. Can't you let us go home?" He added, "I'll take you home, Mari." There was music under his tender words.

The Lieutenant shrugged, "I guess we can break up soon." He still seemed dissatisfied.

"It's so clear, Lieutenant," Bob said harshly. "Let's face it. My theory ties up all the facts. Mari Plupe had been married to J. D. Something terrible happened during that marriage. J. D. was pestering her again down at Rocky Cove. J. C. was burned up—we all saw that. The two brothers quarreled, and, whether by accident or intent, J. D. was killed. Now J. C. atones for it by suicide. He couldn't bring himself to put all that down on paper, so he suddenly put down his pen and jumped."

My agitated copywriter paused for more breath. Connor gave him plenty of time and rope. He urged, "Keep talking."

"Sure," Bob continued rapidly. "J. C. was that kind of man. He couldn't live with himself after the murder. That must be the truth," he finished. "All the facts fit."

"An interesting summary," Connor admitted dryly. "And it leaves you and your girl out of it completely."

J. B. seemed dazed. He muttered, "Murder—and suicide?" This couldn't be happening to the respectable and universally respected Plupes.

"I'm sorry, J. B.," Bob gushed emotionally. "It must have happened that way. But there's no proof. The police will have to call it accident and suicide."

Connor interrupted. "One thing I've got to get straight," he stated. He pointed his thumb with irritation at Weasel. "You," he grated, "you were the last one with J. C. Plupe—so far as we know. What did he have to say to you?"

"Nothin'." The bewildered little eyes asked me for help.

"Tell him, Weasel," I directed soothingly. "All that Lieutenant Connor wants is the truth. We all want the truth." My words didn't even convince myself. Diogenes was no advertising man.

"I can't say nothin'," the big man groaned in misery. "I promised Mr. J. C. that I wouldn't say nothin' about it." He dug his hand into his pocket, kept it there balled in an anguished fist.

"About what?" the detective yelled.

"About nothin'," Weasel whined.

"That does it!" Connor flamed with anger. "I'm taking this big guy down to headquarters and I'm keeping the case wide open as long as he hides evidence."

I yelled, "Weasel, speak up. What the hell are you hiding?"

The quivering mastodon shook in torment. Then he pulled his hand from his pocket and thrust something into my paw. He screamed, "This is all I was hiding. That's what we was talking about. He gave me that!"

I looked at the thing in my hand. It was a long strip of paper. Green. A check. I read it. I turned greener than the check with a rush of overwhelming emotion. In a second I'd bawl.

Connor was repeating one word sharply, "Give. Give."

I put the slip in his hands. I gulped down my hovering heart and said to the others, "It's a check for five thousand dollars. Made out to Weasel. Signed by J. C."

Bob blurted dramatically, "Hush money! He was paying Weasel dirty hush money!"

The big man moved fast, picked up the bewildered writer with one hand, lifted him and hurled him across the room. Fortunately the smaller man landed on the couch and staggered to his feet, bruised but with no vital bones broken. He gurgled dazedly, "Do something, Lieutenant!"

The detective waved back the cops who had barged into the room in a hurry. He wanted the scene to play on.

Weasel's eyes were streaming, his voice cracking as he spoke. "Don't nobody say nothing against Mr. J. C. any more," he yelled. "He was the best man ever lived. He called me in his office to tell me he was sorry about everything his lousy brother did to my sister. Then he give me that check, he said he wanted me to use the money to get my sister the best doctors money could buy—"

It was agonizing to watch the grief-stricken giant weeping. He kept on, "Five thousand dollars. Imagine, five thousand dollars, when nobody never asked him for a cent."

Connor filled in the embarrassed silence. He looked at the check and handed it back to Weasel. He said to J. B., "I suppose the check is still good?"

J. B. nodded. "I'll see that it's good."

The police detective was reading J. C.'s letter again. He folded it and put it in his pocket. He addressed us reluctantly, "That's all for tonight." He seemed to close the case as he enclosed the white folded sheet in his pocket. "Don't anybody leave the city for a few days. If you want to go, call me first." He glanced at the head man, and added, "Please."

The exit of the detective and his uniformed aides left a large and silent gap in the room.

There was a general shuffling of feet and a movement toward the door.

J. B. said to no one in particular, "I suggest that we

break up. Perhaps we can get together tomorrow. We can decide about things—tomorrow." He would decide, we would abide, the words meant.

There was a vague murmur of assent.

With the exception of one clear, obtrusive voice. My stubborn, impertinent blonde picked the moment to speak up. "This was no suicide!" she snapped.

Somebody ejaculated, "What the hell?"

"What the hell yes," Helen repeated flatly. "J. C. didn't commit suicide. Mari says she killed him, but it was me more than her—"

"I'm hearing things," I groaned.

Her usually icy eyes were disturbed and stricken. "You heard right," she said. "I killed him by not warning him who J. D.'s murderer was. I knew all the time."

"You're nuts! If J. C. was killed, it was by somebody he called into his office in order to talk the whole thing over. That wasn't you, was it, baby?"

"No," she admitted. "But I could have prevented it. I could have named the murderer."

I snarled in exasperation, "If you know so damned well, tell us now. Who is it?"

She shook her head.

"Tell us!" I commanded.

"No."

"Why not?" I raged.

"No more loopholes," she explained. "I'm going to nail the murderer cold this time."

"If you're not killed first! J. C. knew and wouldn't tell, it seems. Unless you speak up, you're next on the murderer's push parade."

J. B. decided to referee the argument. "You're wrought up," he said tiredly. "It's all over. It's all clear. No murder or murderer to worry about." He lifted his voice, trying to steam the old go-getter vigor back into it. "Soon as this

whole thing is over, in a day or two, we'll all get away somewhere for a change, for a rest."

He took Mari's arm and tried to speak cheerfully. "How does that sound, Mari?" he asked. "We'll get away on our, I mean, my yacht for a while." He was getting twosy already. "We'll invite a few friends. Maybe Helen and Clark will join us—"

A discordant voice came from the audience. "Where do I fit in?" The question was from Rose, her beautiful dark face now bitter and angry. "Giving me the old heave-ho, now that Jeedee's gone? Tossing me into the ash can?"

J. B. said coolly, "You can get away too, of course, Rose. Make any arrangements you want. I'll okay them."

"But you wouldn't recommend that I buy any yachting clothes, is that it?"

"Do whatever you wish."

The sultry female snarled, "But leave you and that underfed refugee to split the money and the business between yourselves. That's what you wanted all along, isn't it—that wilted blonde and full command of Pluperfect?"

"You're out of your head, Rose. Stop being hysterical!"

"You don't know what hysterics are," she ranted. "Wait until I really get started and bring the police in on this. You killed J. D. so I couldn't get any of your precious fortune by marrying him—anybody can see that!"

I tried to intervene, reaching for her arm in order to lead her out of the room. She whacked my hand away. Palsy wasn't walsy with me any more.

She raved, "All of you trying to protect these big shots because you love the smell and taste of their money." She pointed a shaking finger at Mari and screamed, "She killed her husband tonight, and I can prove it!"

Sudden, stricken silence.

The outright accusation had stunned us all.

All except Helen, who spoke up, "Prove it? How?"

"I saw her," Rose raged. "I saw her go into J. C.'s office."

"When was this?" Helen asked tensely.

"After we'd all been drinking a while," the dark girl retorted. "I went back to my office. When I started to come out into the hall again, I saw Mari going into her husband's office at the end of the hall. She didn't see me, I'm sure. But I saw her!" Her voice was triumphant.

My factual blonde said bluntly, "That doesn't prove anything. Suppose she did go into his office—"

Rose's eyes glittered. "The look on her face proved everything," she said violently. "Her staring eyes were the eyes of a murderer. But that's not all. She was holding something in front of her. I saw it. Something that looked like a silver cigarette lighter. Something I never saw before, and that she hasn't been showing around tonight. See if she's got it now—that'll be all the proof you need that I actually saw her then, as I say I did. And once the police know that, they'll break her down!"

A gasp came from Mari. She clutched her handbag suddenly in both hands.

Gloria screamed, "She's got something in that handbag!"

Mari whitened. She opened the handbag, took out a gleaming silver cigarette lighter, the kind you keep on desks. The light from a lamp sparkled the initials "J. C." on the rich, smooth surface.

"I was going to give this lighter to J. C.," she said wretchedly, "as a—a conciliatory gift. I wanted to make up with him. That's why I went to his office—"

"I told you!" Rose pitched in triumphantly.

The distracted Viennese said, "But I didn't go in. I started to open the door—only a few inches at most—then I heard him speaking to someone, and I closed the door carefully and went away. I didn't have a chance to go back." She looked at us, begging for understanding. "That's the way it was. I swear that's how it was. I couldn't kill him, I loved

him so." She wept silently, not bothering to hide the glistening tears sliding down her colorless cheeks. Suddenly she reached out and sank her nails into my hand as she gripped it convulsively. "You remember, Clark," she appealed to me, "I told you I went to my husband's office but didn't go in because I heard him talking to someone. Isn't that right?"

I used my good hand to pull her nails out of my other one. I said, "That's right." I didn't mention that she had omitted the fact that she'd gotten as far as opening the office door. If I had a conscience, it would have twinged at that moment.

J. B. said softly, "Rose, I don't want you going to the police about this—about Mari."

"What's to stop me?"

"I'll make it worth your while not to. Because I know Mari is innocent. Things may look suspicious, but they mean nothing."

Rose's face assumed a cunning expression. "I guess I can spend a night thinking it over . . ."

J. B. asked, "Are we all in agreement about that? Nothing said to the police or anyone else until we get together tomorrow?"

No one dissented.

We straggled away. Tomorrow would be another day. Another day, another murder . . .?

Fifteen

THERE WAS little conversation or anything else between my gorgeous blonde and myself when we got home. I didn't make any passes, verbal or otherwise, even when she donned her transparent pajamas with the rosebuds.

Trouble was that we had company in the room with us—the corpse of J. C.

Next morning, I was still groggy after I'd finished my shower and shave. Could it be I was drinking too much, I wondered. Impossible. Who can drink too much? More likely I wasn't drinking enough, I told myself, as my bleary eyes saw two completely obnoxious me's in the mirror while I knotted my tie. I hated myself double. I thought of J. C. and hated everybody.

As I struggled into my coat, a cool voice said, "You look like a factory reject."

I said to my luscious wife, "I'm worried about your rosebuds."

"They're not blooming this morning, dear," she advised.

I warned her, "That material can only withstand so much pressure." I added, "Me, too. I've got half a mind to gather me rosebuds while you nay."

She groaned. "You've got half a mind! Go make money," she ordered. "Baby needs a new pair of minks."

"I hate to leave you," I said seriously. "I mean it. I've got to but I hate to."

She said without rancor, "Never end a proposition with a preposition."

"No clowning," I insisted. "You really know who the murderer is?"

She pulled venetian blinds over her candid eyes. She affirmed, "Uh-huh. I mean, I've a pretty good idea."

"Tell me—now."

Her reply was negative.

"Don't be a wise guy, Helen. The last person who covered up for a murderer was J. C. Now he's dead. I don't want that to happen to you." I explained, "I prefer my wives alive. I love my wives."

She was adamant. "I've got to do it my way. I've got no proof. I've got to wait for the killer to make a mistake and let the cat out of the bag." She softened slightly. "Thanks for the concern. I can take care of myself."

So, reluctantly, I went away from there.

Fortunately for my bewildered mind, I found a high pile of work on my desk which I had to unpile in a hurry. In the movies, advertising men spend their time with feet up on half-acre desks or on cocktail tables at the nearest plush saloon. In real life, all advertising men work—hard. Except those who don't.

I had a hasty and not tasty lunch of coffee and cardboard at my desk. I kept my nose so close to the grindstone that I didn't even look up to watch Gloria jounce in and out of the office as she brought me new work as fast as I could get rid of the old.

Even belligerent Bob joined the game, pointedly avoiding any mention of J. C.'s violent death. We concentrated on other clients; after all, just because they were alive didn't mean we should be prejudiced against them.

Apparently the police had decided to accept J. C.'s plunge as suicide, at least for the time being. The newspapers headlined it that way. Except for supplying photos of the late millionaire to those papers that requested it, we simply told the press, "No comment." This was one of the times

when we figured that the least publicity was the best publicity. I'd checked that early with J. B.'s male assistant; the big brain hadn't come to his offices yet.

We didn't work on the Old Rankler mystery campaign because we didn't know whether or not it would be carried through under the circumstances. It wouldn't be the first time that a good advertising idea perished before it was really born. For all I knew, the campaign might already be deader than—well, the late two Plupes.

Just the same, by late afternoon, I couldn't keep the murders off my desk. All the bodies and characters were lying there. I gave up running and faced the questions that were plunging into the reds of my eyes:

How far would J. B. go, how far had he gone, to maneuver his present one-man position atop the Pluperfect millions?

What had really happened after Mari had opened that office door . . . had she quarreled with her husband, lost her head, pushed?

How much would Rose want as her pay-off, and how far could she be trusted?

Where had all the others been at the murderous instant . . . Bob . . . Gloria . . . Weasel . . . even my elusive Helen?

The telephone came alive and scattered the question marks all over my desk blotter. The voice was J. B.'s assistant asking me to trot over to the Pluperfect office. "Better bring Bob Ronnel and your secretary along," he suggested. "J. B. says he wants to make a decision on the campaign."

"How does the captain appear?" I asked cautiously.

The friendly but careful voice advised, "The storm warnings are up."

Already seasick, I called home as I had promised, to tell my impatient wife that I was headed for the meeting. The phone rang six times, each ring jangling my nerves and fears. I was getting ready to race back to the apartment. Finally she answered in mid-ring.

"I was about to send the riot squad and a shovel over for you," I scolded.

She answered calmly, "I was in the shower, I'm still naked and damp."

My voice leered, "I'll be right home."

"I'll be dry and armored by the time you get here," she warned.

"So I'll go over to J. B.'s." I tried to force a command into my voice. "You're not to come. Lock all the doors—and windows—and don't open until I knock three times."

"I'll see you at Pluperfect in a few minutes," she agreed. The slam of the receiver cut another crevice in my cracked eardrum. The trouble with wives is that they're women.

I gathered up Bob and Gloria and we headed for the death premises gloomily—all set to have our budget cut. I hoped that our campaign would be the only thing that would be murdered . . .

WE WERE told to go right into J. B.'s office. When we entered, the atmosphere crackled. J. B. greeted us with a staccato gesture from behind his big sea-going desk. Two of the pseudo deck-chairs were occupied by silvery Mari and dark Rose who revealed one thing in common at the moment—livid, barely repressed anger. Their hot eyes acknowledged our presence silently.

As the ambassador of advertising, I felt I had to say something. So I told Mari, "I'm glad to see you." I'd expected that she might be home in a condition of collapse.

J. B. complied with the conventions enough to say, "We just arrived a short time ago. Important business decisions to be made, so Mari felt she should be here—"

The seething Rose exploded. "You can see how it's going to be from now on! With Jeedee and J. C. gone, this gruesome twosome takes over. They've cleared the way to run this business just as they damned well please and collect all

the profits in one cozy bundle . . .”

“You’re out of order,” J. B. interrupted stonily. “I told you before—business first. You and I will discuss other matters later.”

The angry girl stormed, “You’re not getting away with it. Either I get what Jeedee wanted for me or I’ll bust this thing wide open. That anemic refugee will be sitting in the electric chair instead of on a diamond-studded cushion!” She pulled a pack of cigarettes out of her roomy shoulder bag. The slash of her match against the surface of the match book was like a stiletto slicing across Mari’s white throat.

That little lady touched her neck and took away her hand unbloodied. She spoke with an effort. “I’m terribly exhausted in every way. I can’t stay long.” The severe black of her dress accented the pallor of her cheeks. There were inch-deep hollows under her eyes.

Before Rose could pitch any more venom, my crisp-looking wife slipped into the room and into a chair. J. B. appeared somewhat surprised but not displeased. She explained simply, “I’m interested, of course. All right if I stay?”

He nodded assent. “Let’s get on with the main decision. Do we set full sail on this campaign now, or scuttle it in view of the circumstances?” His nautical phrasing couldn’t even be stifled by the weight of two dead bodies. He asked me, “What’s your view on it, Clark?”

I played it on the level.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “The original structure and reasons for the campaign are still clear and right and sound. The ads will get top interest and high readership. We’ve proved that with past studies of the great pulling power of mysteries. Our proof-of-superiority story is convincing. So a good percentage of readers should become customers. There’s no question in my mind about all that.”

The attentive executive said bluntly, “So far you haven’t

said anything new. We've been all over that. How about the public relations aspect now?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I'd like to say that the public wouldn't care, but I can't guarantee that. Maybe people will consider it bad taste to tie mysteries to Old Rankler in view of the unfortunate occurrences here. Maybe people will ignore the whole thing. We can play it safe, drop the campaign—and lose a good thing."

Rose shifted in her chair impatiently as though her girdle was on fire. Maybe it was.

The head man turned to his new and only partner. He plodded ahead, "You have a big stake in this now, Mari. What do you think?"

She looked back at him with a gaze compounded of trust, cahoots and affection. "I leave it up to you," she said. "Whatever you decide will be exactly right with me."

"It figures," Rose interjected, "just as they planned." She mimicked cruelly, "Whatever you decide, darling—" Her voice hardened, "How about asking my opinion?"

J. B. glared at her. If looks could kill, this lusty babe would not be long for this world.

The box on his desk buzzed and announced, "That man Weasel is here. He insists on seeing Mr. Clark."

With relief for the interruption, J. B. said, "Send him right in."

Weasel tramped through the door enthusiastically, and thrust a brown envelope in my lap. He said eagerly, "The first one came in, boss. I brought it right over. I didn't show it to nobody."

"Anybody," I corrected automatically.

"That's what I said," he stated confusedly, "I didn't show it to nobody."

J. B. asked with interest, "Didn't show what?"

The big man squeaked, "The first story come in from the mystery writers for the Old Rankler campaign. Mr. Clark

told me to watch for 'em." His eyes sparkled excitedly. "I read it. It's a triple dilly, see? It's called 'Death Of A Twin'—all about a twin that decides he wants to kill another twin so he can inherit his money, see? So—"

"Not now, Weasel," I interrupted. "We're having an important meeting. Thanks for bringing this over, but—"

It was my turn to be chopped down. J. B. said perfunctorily, "I'm interested. Go on with the story, Weasel."

"Sure," the robust raconteur continued eagerly. "This first twin is in the living room of their big house waiting for the second twin. He looks in the big mirror over the fireplace, the first twin I mean, and points the gun at himself in the mirror, telling himself that's how he's gonna aim it at his twin who looks like him, see?"

I tried again, "That's fine, Weasel. Now—"

He raced on, dribbling over his words, "—but while he's aiming the gun at himself in the mirror, he hears the front door slam all of a sudden. He's so surprised that he pulls the trigger by accident. The bullet smashes into the glass and one of the big sharp chunks of glass flies out and cuts the juggler vein in his throat and kills him. So the second twin who's coming in with his girl friend finds the first twin dead and everybody says what a terrible accident and the second twin gets all the money. Good, huh?" he finished.

We digested his recital for a few seconds.

"It's terrible," I groaned. "Why twins? Once the writer makes a point of twins, then the mystery and solution should have something to do with the fact that they are twins. For instance, if two twins were looking in a mirror, one with a gun might aim at the wrong reflection, and . . ."

"Just a minute, Clark." This from J. B., who wasn't even listening to me. "Who wrote that story?"

I took the brief manuscript out of the envelope and read from the title sheet. "It's written by some jerk named Samm Sinclair Baker."

J. B. was leaning forward intently, in his big-decision crouch. "You say you enjoyed the story, Weasel?"

"Geez, yeah," the big man chortled. "I didn't figure on reading it right away. But the first words got me and I read the whole thing right through." He apologized, "I don't read so good but it only took me a couple of minutes. Geez, I can't wait to read more of them." He asked me, "Can I read all of them as they come in, boss?"

I started to explain that the whole deal might be off, but held back as J. B. raised his omnipotent hand.

"Clark," he boomed, pointing at the stimulated giant, "that's our public. If he has that reaction, millions of others will have the same interest and enthusiasm."

I pointed out weakly, "But he only drinks sodas."

"As long as he drinks," the energetic tycoon brushed my comment aside.

"Sure," Weasel affirmed, "I can't hardly wait for the next story."

J. B. walloped his desk. That meant a final pronouncement was coming. I bated my breath which tasted like old worms.

"I've decided," he clarified. I could hear an entire fleet's cannons booming in the background. "Clear decks for action. Full speed ahead. It was a good idea to start with," he continued positively, "and so it's still a good idea. The public may not associate the tragic events of the last few days with Old Rankler. And even if they do, they'll forget in a hurry." He wound up, "We give them good whiskey and entertaining ads—and they'll give us business. You agree, Clark?"

"You show great foresight and courage as usual, J. B." I heard the cash register ringing.

"Then that's the last word," he affirmed. "Those are your orders, Clark."

I encompassed my cohorts in my reply. "We'll put everything in the works first thing tomorrow," I said. J. B. looked unimpressed. "Tonight!" I amended. Bob and Gloria looked

depressed. I finished in a low voice, "Tomorrow."

Rose decided to force the issue. "I haven't given my vote yet," she snarled. "Or don't I have a vote?"

J. B. surveyed her sternly. "I've decided that, also," he spoke firmly. "No, you have no vote. You have a good position here as long as you do your job well. But any more trouble from you, and you're through. No bribes, no blackmail. You behave or you get out." He smacked the desk again. "That's my irrevocable decision."

Rose stood up, her curves quivering without control. "I gave you your chance," she shouted. "Now I'll show you and your precious sister-in-law that you can't get away with murder!"

Mari gasped, then pressed her hand to her mouth as if to clamp down any further involuntary sounds. But she couldn't cover the fear in her eyes.

The dark girl declared loudly, pointing at the frail, shrinking blonde, "I saw her going into J. C.'s office, holding that lighter in front of her—the lighter that she admitted she had bought for her husband and never shown to anyone." She rasped, "Just tie that up with the brooch that she left on the spot where she pushed poor Jeedee over the cliff! I'm calling the police—"

She grabbed up the phone on J. B.'s desk. He started getting up fast from his chair to pull the instrument from her hands. Mari shrank back into her chair in terror. She screamed, "Stop her! Don't let her do it!"

A clear voice cut into the excitement. "That's enough of these hysterics!" Everyone stopped and looked at my determined blonde as she said, "Everybody sit down. I'll tell you who committed the murders . . . both murders . . ."

She pushed a final phrase into the dead silence, ". . . and I'll prove it!"

MY BLONDE didn't have to be magnetic to draw all eyes to her at that moment. She spoke directly to Rose, "Put down that telephone. Listen to me."

Helen went on, "Mari, let me have that lighter if you have it with you. Please."

The silent Viennese dug in her purse for the silver lighter and handed it to Helen.

My calm wife addressed Rose. "You say that you saw Mari holding the lighter in front of her." She placed her hand against her bosom and asked, "About like this?"

Rose nodded vaguely. "I don't remember exactly."

"Oh—you don't remember?" Helen laughed.

"Of course I remember," Rose retorted, stung. "Yes, it was just about like that. She was holding it as though she'd never let go."

"And you noticed especially her expression? You said she looked like a murderer."

"Sure. There was hate written all over her shriveled face."

"No!" Mari protested hysterically. "I was upset. I was afraid. But I loved my husband—I couldn't show hate for him."

The bigger girl stated emphatically, "Every line of your face was visible to me. Murder was written all over it."

"Wait, Mari," my blonde said. She continued quietly, speaking to Rose. "You say you were just leaving your office . . . you looked down the hall . . . you saw Mari opening the door to J. C.'s office?"

Rose hesitated.

"That's what you said last night," J. B. reminded her.

The dark girl said tentatively, "Sure."

Helen spoke with careful deliberation. "Standing outside your own door, looking down toward J. C.'s office, you could only see Mari's back, not her face or anything she was holding in front of her."

My insides jerked in recollection as I reconstructed the

scene. Of course! J. C.'s door ended the hallway; anyone opening that door would have his back to the rest of the hall. Why hadn't I thought of that? Just another instance of my too little and too late brain.

My keen wife went on, "What's more, you stated yourself, as I remember your words last night—'she didn't see me, I'm sure, but I saw her!'"

Rose reddened, looked agitated for an instant, then blurted, "That's a lot of garbage. I tell you that I saw her. That's enough!"

"There was only one way you could see her face," Helen continued implacably. "Only one way you could see what she was holding in front of her. *You had to be in J. C.'s office when Mari opened the door to come in!*" Helen pointed an accusing finger. "You had to be standing inside that office. Probably you stepped back of the door or just out of range as it started to open, when Mari heard J. C. talking to someone—talking to you. You probably saw her face and the front of her body, the gleam of the silver lighter, reflected in the mirror on the wall. Or you peeked from behind the door." My blonde finished loudly, "That's how you saw her—not from down the hall. So you were the last person in the office before J. C. was killed."

I asked myself again, why hadn't I thought of that? It should have been clear to me, to all of us, last night. Certainly if Rose saw Mari's face in such vivid detail, and saw the lighter well enough to recognize it as such, she had to be seeing her—or her reflection in a mirror—from full front, close up.

Another revelation hit me. I burst out excitedly, "It must have been you, Rose, that J. C. saw out on the cliff that night arguing with his brother. He kept it to himself, maybe because he wasn't entirely sure—maybe because he thought you might have had strong justification. He called you to his office last night to give you a chance to explain. And the

only explanation you could give was to catch him off guard, get close to him, back him up to the open window without his realizing it—and then push him out—the same way that you pushed J. D. off the cliff!" I yelled at her, "Isn't that the way it happened?"

The dark girl's face was fixed in rigid lines. Her eyes turned dead black and hard. Her mammoth mammillae bulged and retreated regularly with her heavy breathing. Her full red mouth was clamped shut in a hard painted exaggeration of a cupid bow.

J. B., his eyes wide with astonishment and new understanding, was on his feet behind the desk. He leaned forward and bit off angry words. "Admit it, Rose," he shot at her. "Admit that's how it was. You're caught anyhow. Your own words prove you were inside that office. From that start, the police will get all the details out of you."

The accused girl snarled, "You haven't got a thing on me. And what about Jeedee? Clark found his ex-wife's brooch at the cliff, didn't he? Why don't you go after that little dried-up blonde witch, not me!"

"Brooch? What brooch?" snarled Bob.

No answer.

I said softly, "Rose, how did you know where I found the brooch?"

We were all so intent on watching Rose that we had taken our eyes away from my smart wife. She had moved over quietly behind the dark girl. Now she made a leap at her.

The struggle between the two women was over before any of us could interfere or help. Out of the blur of flailing arms and flashing legs, Helen emerged gripping the big leather shoulder bag Rose habitually carted around.

Rose was screaming and trying to get up from her seat to get the handbag back. But Bob grabbed her at strategic points and held on to same until she finally stopped squirming.

My smooth blonde reached into the big handbag. Something clinked in its depths. She smiled triumphantly and started to withdraw her hand from the bag.

"Now," she said snappily to the sullen brunette, "I'm going to pin J. D.'s death on you too—pin it where it hurts. I've got the cameo right here that was found in the grass at the edge of the cliff."

Helen held out her clenched hand, opened it. There lay the exquisite miniature.

I popped without thinking, "Rose got that from me—she snatched it out of my pocket!"

"You're telling me," my wife said patiently. "But before we talk about the brooch, let's trace Rose's actions the night J. D. was killed." She turned to the smoldering girl and asked sarcastically, "Do you mind?"

The volcanic brunette suggested spiritedly that my wife go exercise herself in a most unladylike manner.

Weasel spoke up for the first time since the fracas started, "Ladies oughtn't to talk like that."

She invited him briefly and vividly to apply similar exertions to his own large person.

My wife, ignoring them both, addressed me. "I'd like you to think back to when Rose awoke you, that night J. D. was found dead. Didn't she seem terribly excited—for someone who couldn't really know anything was drastically wrong with J. D.?"

I thought it over. "Yes—I asked her what she was so excited about. She said she knew there was trouble, she felt it in her bones. In the confusion of the night, I figured it was just that her great love was driving her nuts. Now it seems clear that she knew the guy was dead because she had killed him." I concluded, "And she was raising a fuss to cover up her guilt."

Gloria piped up, "It seemed so suspicious to me, though, that J. C. headed for the rocks right away. How did he

know? Oh, I get it—because he'd seen Rose struggling with J. D. out by the rocks earlier that night!"

Bob snatched the girl's hand lovingly in his. I thought he'd lick it in admiration for her sudden brightness. "He knew, ducky, because he had seen Rose there—seen her struggling with J. D. out by the rocks, earlier that night."

Rose yelled violently, "I didn't kill Jeedee. He was missing. I was worried about him. That's why I raised a riot!" She gazed at me hotly, "You know that I'm very excitable, Ceecee."

Her sizzling glance melted me on the spot. The icy look my wife threw at me promptly froze me back to normal.

She said, "Clark, did you volunteer information about finding the brooch at the cliff? Or did she ask you?"

The old mist inside my head had fully cleared. Now I was fully aware of the discrepancy which had been bothering me. "She told me," I said. "I volunteered nothing. She did claim vaguely she'd heard the brooch was missing—but she couldn't possibly have known where I found it unless she put it there herself."

Rose spat out, "Your mind is so confused, you wouldn't know which side is up." She made a few other comments about my mentality. I resented her comparing part of my anatomy to a hole in the ground.

Helen was asking of Mari, "Just when did you wear your brooch at Rocky Cove that weekend? Do you recall?"

The pale Viennese struggled to straighten her thoughts. "I remember wearing it during dinner," she said. "Then, I think, I wore it until bedtime when I probably took it off and put it in the jewel box on my bureau. She finished uneasily, "I'm sorry, I wish I could help more."

Helen held out the cameo. "Here," she said, "take it back."

Mari shrank from it. "I don't want it," she exclaimed. "I

don't want anything that belonged to that little beast. I should have got rid of it long ago."

My wife showed no delicacy. She thrust the brooch into Mari's hand, then retreated to her seat. I couldn't understand her callous behavior.

Mari was looking at the brooch with an expression of deep repulsion. Suddenly her eyes widened. She blurted out, "This isn't my brooch!"

"What makes you say that?" Helen pounced quickly.

Mari wrinkled her alabaster forehead. She said, "It looks like my brooch—but it's actually just a cheap imitation. The pin is broken—but of course that could happen to any jewelry. But the background behind the figure is discolored; mine was of flawless tone." She raised her voice with conviction. "And these are rhinestones around the outside, not diamonds." She repeated, "This is definitely not my brooch, although it looks like it until you examine it."

Helen was pulling her hand from the big shoulder bag again. She held out a cameo to Mari. "Is this your brooch?" she asked.

The smaller blonde examined it. "Yes, this is mine." Puzzled, she held up the other one. "But whose is this?"

My shrewd blonde said smugly, "It's just a matter of police work now. When the officials start checking back, they'll find that the brooch with the broken pin was given to Rose by J. D. That's my guess."

She turned to the stricken Rose, now crouched in her chair. She said, not unkindly, "You stole the valuable cameo from Mari's room while the rest of us were looking for J. D." Helen applied the clincher, "You were the only person who could have taken it!"

The brunette retorted, "You're crazy, you and your empty-headed guesswork."

My bright blonde explained. "Once we were awakened and Mari had left the room, leaving the brooch there, we

were all in groups except at one point: Rose left the living room in hysterics a few minutes ahead of the rest of us—after the questioning by Chief Batrous. That's when she took the brooch. Nobody else could have taken it between bedtime when Mari put the brooch away and morning when it was found at the cliff edge. Only Rose could have taken it in the few minutes before Mari returned to her room. Then she sneaked out to place it in the grass after we'd all gone back to bed!"

Not a sound from anyone. We were all gaping at Helen. Except those of us who were gaping at Rose.

"You wanted to throw suspicion on Mari," Helen said to the staring brunette. "But you should have at least left Mari's own costly jewel at the cliff edge. Instead, you figured you could get away with leaving your own copy there, broken pin and all." She summed up, "You helped to pin that murder on yourself with your greed for a pin."

At this, with a wild cry, Rose sprang up from her chair, snatched the costly brooch out of Mari's hand. She moved swiftly away from us, retreating to the far wall by the open window. J. B. raced after her.

When he was three steps away from her, the brunette screamed at him, "Stop! If you come one step nearer, I swear I'll jump out of this window."

He stopped and stood swaying near her uncertainly.

Rose lowered her curvesome figure until she was sitting precariously on the sill of the open window. We all remained motionless, watching her.

She held up the jewel before her, looked at it, her eyes shining with deep emotion. "J. D. gave me a brooch months ago. I loved it, because it looked beautiful to me, and because I loved him. When I saw Mari wearing a brooch just like it—only more stunning—at dinner at Rocky Cove, I decided fast to get an explanation from Jeedee."

She didn't seem to be crying, but her face softened and her

eyes turned wet. She was speaking softly, "I met Jeedee out by the cliff later. When I asked him about the two brooches, he admitted that he'd given the valuable one to Mari as an engagement present—then had given me a cheap copy he'd picked up at the same time."

"A dirty trick," Bob mumbled.

Rose glared into space. "The lousy little sonovabitch," she raged, "he told me that Mari knew good things so he gave her a valuable jewel—but that I was a cheap tramp and deserved only cheap things." She started weeping unashamedly. "It wasn't the brooch that bothered me so much, it's what he said afterwards—"

She sobbed, "I called him names and he slapped me. He said he never had loved me, never intended to marry me." Her voice went up uncontrollably, "That's when I pushed him. I was so angry, I didn't know what I was doing. Then it was too late. He was gone."

The dark girl was wailing violently. "I loved him, and I killed him," she cried. "The dirty bastard!"

My persistent blonde refused to let up. She asked, "When did you place the brooch out there at the cliff edge?"

The weeping brunette shrilled, "None of your damned business!" She balanced herself more firmly on the sill. We waited.

Her shoulders sagged and she suddenly said, "I might as well tell you. I threw that fit of fake hysterics so I could get out of the room. It was easy to find the brooch in the jewel box in Mari's room."

She paused, then went on listlessly, "After the sheriff left that night, I decided I'd point suspicion at Jeedee's crummy ex-wife. Everybody knew she hated him, and I figured she'd gotten a lot more out of that marriage than she deserved. So I went out in the night and left the brooch there—but I kept the good one, I couldn't give it up. And later I was lucky enough to get my hands on both of them."

I started to feel sorry for her, then stopped as another thought pierced me sharply. "So J. D. did you dirt," I threw at her. "But what about J. C.? He never hurt you—"

She interrupted simply, "He saw me out there fighting with Jeedee. He told me straight to my face that he'd thought it over and figured it only fair to warn me that he'd decided to tell the police." She frowned and looked around for understanding. "I had to do something," she stated, "and the window was open, he was standing in front of it—"

Now the sobbing was coming from Mari. She had crumpled up and her body shook as grief took possession of her completely.

J. B. looked at her, his face twisting in anguish. "Let's get her out of here," he said to all of us. "The police can take over now." He took a step toward the beautiful staring girl silhouetted on the sill against the open window. "Give me Mari's brooch," he hurled at her, "and get in here. You're all finished anyhow."

"I warn you not to come any closer," the flushed, handsome girl said to him hoarsely. "I'll jump—and I'll take this with me." The valuable jewel sparkled in her hand.

"You're nothing but a bluff," the liquor executive told her. "You always have been that, trying to pretend you're something that you're not. You're just an exhibitionist."

"Get away from me," Rose screamed at the advancing figure. J. B. reached out to pull her back off the sill. She kicked out at him. A shriek sirened from her mouth as she lost her balance. J. B. grabbed but missed . . .

My eyes seemed to burst from my head as I saw her body lurch over the sill and outward; my last glimpse was of her flailing hand holding the glittering brooch, and her beautiful, slim nyloned legs disappearing.

All that was left of Rose in the room was the echo of a long thin fading scream . . .

Sixteen

WE WANTED to get out of that desolate room in a hurry, but it was hours before we could leave the premises. There were a lot of police questions to answer. I felt that I'd have red-tapeworm the rest of my life by the time all the proper procedures were completed.

Finally our dwindled little coterie was left alone by the police. We looked each other over with a kind of newfound friendship. At last the mutual suspicion poisoning our feelings toward each other was completely evaporated.

J. B. was the first to speak. "We've simply got to get away from these surroundings for a while, Mari. I insist you come for a cruise on my boat."

She looked especially frail, particularly lovely. "I'd like to get away," she admitted. "But it wouldn't look right—"

"Nonsense," J. B. spoke fiercely. "I'd like you and Helen to come too, Clark."

I looked at my blonde. I'd love to see that face for a few weeks framed by clouds and sky and blue water. But I figured we weren't chummy enough, at the moment, for her to care for close quarters on a boat.

I said and meant it, "Thanks tremendously, J. B., I appreciate it. But," I stumbled, "I can't get away. Too much work getting the campaign started—"

Bob interrupted with a frown, "Campaign, hell. Everything's ready to roll. I can handle things better with you away." His face softened. "Can't we, Gloria?"

But no comment yet from my frigid wife. I tried on

another thank-you. "Damned nice of you, Bob," I said, and meant that too. "But I'm afraid Helen has other plans . . . I mean she can't manage . . ."

A fierce blonde whisper in my sensitive ear hissed, "I mean I love you, you bun-of-a-stitch. Think of the fun we'll have, fishing."

J. B. was laughing. "Hey, mates, look at Clark," he roared. "He's blushing!"

I stammered, "Just sudden high blood pressure. My blush glands have been clogged since my nursemaid started telling me unexpurgated Mother Goose stories at age three—"

"Of course we'll go," Helen interrupted. "Might as well be seasick as just plain sick of this dismal character I'm married to." She said to Mari, "It won't be too merry, honey, not for a while, but it'll be peaceful. And it'll be a comfort, being together."

My mouth was open.

"That's wonderful," J. B. was saying. "We'll make all the arrangements."

He left with the frail Viennese. Avast and ahoy, you scrub my decks and I'll scrub yours.

Bob and Gloria also exited in a pink haze. I called after them to get to work before noon the next day but they didn't hear me; they were too busy listening to the twittering of birds . . . and bees.

Weasel shared the elevator going down with us. On the sidewalk, the big man said goodbye, looking ludicrous in his ever-present little woolen cap.

I couldn't hold back. I asked, "Weasel, don't you ever take off that cap?"

He reddened. "No . . . on account of my head sort of comes to a point on top. Don't tell anybody."

He turned, blotting out the rising moon as he moved bulkily away.

A cab pulled up, and I followed my wife's sleek legs into

the dark interior. I mentioned our home address to the driver and collapsed against the worn upholstery. I admitted warily to my waiting blonde, "You were very smart tonight, baby. Going to write a mystery novel about it all?"

No answer. She was eyeing me peculiarly. Almost with affection.

I said "Honey, you're the biggest mystery of all. Sometimes I believe you actually like me. Other times, I figure the one thing you're thinking of is divorce."

She shook her head negatively. "Divorce you? Never. Murder you? Well . . ."

I changed the subject. "I'm gone. All I want is to get home in a hurry, take a bath in a couple of cases of Old Rankler, and sleep for twelve hours without dreaming."

My unpredictable blonde grabbed me by my ruptured lapels and whispered, "Come over here, you bexy sastard!"

She pulled me to her and fastened luscious lips solidly on mine. I struggled vigorously, I swear it. "How come tonight, of all nights? I mean, every other night for weeks, I—"

"Every other night for weeks you've been reeking of Old Rankler."

"And here I was thinking it was my big eyes for other girls," I groaned. "But I reek just as much now."

"Sure," she said illogically. "I didn't marry you to reform you."

"Thank heaven." I started to tell her that I was too tired, that I couldn't go for any of this fool-de-rol at the moment, that romance could not ride tonight.

But before I could tell her that I was not in the mood, I was . . .

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