

"If you think I killed her, say it like a man. But for God's sake, get moving and find her!"

This was a desperate man pleading with a cop, a desperate man who loved his wife, wanted her back, and had eight million people playing detective to find her.

"You big-shot nine-to-five bankers think cops are like your gardeners or milkmen. Well, you'll find out different . . ."

This was the tough cop talking, a cop who couldn't wait to see the pleading man strapped in the chair for murder.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch

"Sophisticated, tough, full of action."

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"Sustained frenzy."

New York Herald Tribune

[&]quot;Taut with suspense."

DELL MYSTERY

BY HOWARD BROWNE

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Dedication:

To Anna with love

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CHAPTER ONE

THAT LAST STRETCH of forty-odd miles was the worst of the entire trip. Leona and Feewee were sound asleep on the rear seat—had been ever since we left Bridgeport an hour before. Once or twice I had passed a remark over my shoulder into the blackness back there, but the only answer I got was silence and, once, a small snore. Not that I could blame them; the swish of tires on wet pavement and the rhythmic beat of windshield wipers made it a real problem to keep my own eyes open and my head out of my lap.

At two in the morning, our street was as black as an account executive's necktie. I turned into the driveway and pulled up even with our front walk. While I was cutting the motor and the lights, Leona opened

the rear door and slid out quickly.

Her white coat was a dim blur seen through rainstreaked glass. I rubbed my eyes and yawned and said, "It's too late to bother with luggage. Go ahead;

I'll bring Feewee."

She had already turned away. I could hear her high heels click along the walk and on up the four steps to the front door. While she fumbled with her keys, I went on sitting where I was, less than half awake, knowing I would have to get out from behind the wheel eventually and thinking how good a lukewarm shower was going to feel. After that, ten hours' sleep would be just what the doctor ordered. Only I wasn't going to get ten hours' sleep. The Glacier Soap account was up for renewal at eleven o'clock, which meant I would have to be out of bed by seven-thirty

at the latest.

It was a hot, sticky night, along toward the end of August, and we were at the end of a five-hundred-mile drive down from one of the small lakes in northern Maine. Thirteen straight hours at the wheel, less a couple of breaks for food and a few stops at gas-station restrooms.

Leona and Feewee had been up at the cottage since late June, and I had driven up there the first of August to spend my vacation with them. I managed to get in a little fishing with Mike Dempsey, who had the place next to us, and once I swam across the narrow part of the lake to prove I still had my wind and a few muscles. But mainly it was just a matter of lying around in a pair of shorts, soaking up some sun and getting acquainted all over again with my two-piece family. And about time, too. As vice-president of one of New York's more dedicated advertising agencies, I managed to spend about as much time with my wife and daughter as I did with my barber.

After hours of looking into glaring headlights, the darkness was as soothing as a cool breeze. I yawned until my ears popped, and leaned down to set the handbrake. The rain had slacked off until it wasn't much more than a fine mist. I opened the car door and got slowly out into the driveway. Nothing to see, and all there was to hear at that hour were crickets and the low growl of a foghorn from the lowlands bordering Long Island Sound a mile to the south. I lit a cigarette, decided I didn't want it after all, and ground it into the gravel with my heel.

I walked around the car and breathed in some of the humid Westchester County air. No lights visible at the neighbors' on either side of us. Glenn Orcutt's big Buick was parked about four feet from the curb, as usual. The leaves of the elms and cottonwoods lining the parkways whispered in their night voices. All very peaceful and suburban, except that at the

moment I was too used up to appreciate it.

No point in standing around getting rained on. I went back to the car. Feewee was sound asleep, her bonnet down over one ear, a blond braid sticking out. Somewhere along the way the dome light had gone dead, and I snaked my daughter out of there as gently as the darkness and the rain would allow. She stirred and swung an arm and hit me above the ear with a hand like a violet and said something that sounded like "Doggy won't mind me," and didn't wake up.

I closed the car door with my knee and carried her along the winding walk and up the steps and fumbled open the screen. The foyer light was on, as was one of the end-table lamps in the living-room. I went along the hall, on up the stairs to the second floor, and into Feewee's room. Without turning on the light I put her down on the bed and slipped off her coat and shoes. She woke while I was untying her hat, and said, "Do you like me, Daddy?" and I said, "No," and she said, "Why not?" and I said, "Because I love you," and she said, "Hot dog!" and was asleep before the last word was all the way out. The "hot dog" part of it was something she'd picked up from the Dempsey boy at the lake, and we'd have to break her of that; but the rest was a ritual Leona had taught her when she was first starting to talk, and it was a big thing.

The house smelled of heat and dead air from being closed tight the past three weeks. I opened a few windows and peeled off my clothes and stepped under the shower. When I came out, Leona wasn't in the bedroom. I padded out to the head of the stairs and said, "Hey, how's about it down there? Let's get some sleep."

No answer. No sound at all. I said, "Come on, will

you?" and walked back into the bedroom and yanked the spread off the bed and turned down the sheet. I brushed my teeth and opened another window and sat on the edge of the bed and looked at my toes and decided I'd cut the nails first thing in the morning.

The shower head dripped. The tree frogs skirled.

The foghorn went on snarling in the night.

I said a few words under my breath and got off the bed and went back out to the stairhead. Not a sound from below. "Hey, Lee! What's the big idea? It's after two, honey."

Not even an echo. I stood there, listening. No light, hurried steps, no click of light switches, no doors opened or closed. I shivered a little in the night air

and went back for a robe and slippers.

The light still burned in the living-room. Her tan straw handbag was on one of the couch arms, open, a handkerchief and one corner of her ostrich-skin wallet showing. The dining-room, kitchen, and breakfast nook were dark. So was the first-floor powder room. Leona was in none of them. The basement? At this hour?

I opened the inner door and looked down the steps. Not a glimmer of light. Halfway down was the side-door landing. The door was locked, bolted from the inside as it should have been. I snapped on the basement lights and tried the rumpus room and the section with the gas furnace and the laundry units. Everything in order. Lifeless air and a ton of silence and no sign of my wife.

What had started out as mild annoyance began to turn into vague uneasiness. I raced back up the steps to the ground floor and began flipping on lights. Everything looked exactly as Thelma, the maid, had left it the day before I took off for Maine. I tried every room, including the enclosed porch at the rear of the

house, which I had missed the first time around. It was clean and orderly and unoccupied.

I took the steps to the second floor three at a crack. Feewee was snoring a polite little-girl snore, her blue dress hiked up to her waist, one dimpled arm hanging off the bed. I stopped long enough to throw a light cover over her, then tried the guest room and the sun deck. I even looked in the closets.

Nothing. Nothing at all.

The time for being vaguely uneasy was past. I was worried now, and sore because I was worried, and maybe even a little more worried because I was sore. I pounded back to the first floor and gave the rooms

another going over just to make sure.

This time I found something I'd missed earlier. The rear door, the one off the back porch, was unbolted. Not standing open, not even unlocked really. The night latch was on, which meant the door could be opened from the inside but not from the outer steps leading down to the back lawn and the barbecue pit.

That wasn't right. I thought back to be sure. Ten minutes before leaving for Maine I had made certain that the side door and this one were securely bolted. They should still be bolted—both of them. It would have been impossible, short of breaking a window, for anyone to have entered the house while we were away. The maid came in by the day; she had no use for a key. Besides, she had gone back to Lincoln, Nebraska, to visit her folks while we were away, and wasn't due back until after Labor Day. That left only my mother-in-law, over in Scarsdale, who had about as much use for me as I did for her. The only reason she would have for stopping by would be to set the house afire.

The obvious answer was staring me full in the face.

Leona. While I was upstairs putting Feewee to bed, my wife had ducked out the back way. Just like that. In and out and gone.

Gone where? Where does a woman go at two in the morning, when the neighbors are in bed and

the streets dark and empty?

A pressure was beginning to build up in my throat. I tightened the belt of my robe and pulled the rearporch door open and walked slowly down the three steps and stood in the yard, the wet grass curling against my bare ankles, while my eyes got adjusted to the darkness. Not a light showed. The hedge between our place and the Murrows' next door seemed higher and thicker than I last remembered it. The rain had stopped entirely now and a few stars showed. There was the smell of damp foliage and a cool edge to the air. A cricket started up in one of the flower beds and

I jumped as though somebody had shot off a gun.

I fumbled in the robe for a cigarette, didn't find one, and crossed to the driveway, feeling the jagged rock through the thin soles of my slippers. The garage door was down and locked, as it should have been. I moved on up to the car. Leona wasn't in it. I hadn't really expected her to be. I went on, my feet dragging a little, numbness starting to crawl up from my legs to form a knot under my ribs, and looked both ways along the street. It was filled with shadows and dark stretches an Indian couldn't have seen into. A street lamp a block down did no good. Too many trees in the way.

I went on standing there, trying to think my way through a fog of worry that was beginning to border on panic. What, exactly, does a man do when his wife walks out on him at two in the morning? Walks out without saying good-by or go to hell or it has been fun, darling. Without a comb or money or a spare lip-

stick. Bareheaded, a white coat, a summer dress. Amnesia? It happens. You read about it once in a while. The brain blanks out and nothing works except the muscles that move your legs and arms, reflexes that keep you from tripping over curbs and out of the way of traffic.

It happens.

One thing to do. Call in the police. Only you hate to do anything like that. They send a car out and you start telling them all about it, maybe getting a little hysterical in the process, and then the door opens and your wife strolls in. She's surprised and a trifle amused at all the commotion, while you stand there mumbling apologies like seven kinds of a fool. The cops tell you that's all right, happens all the time, think nothing of it, but they're getting sore ribs from trying to keep from laughing in your face.

I walked slowly along the street, looking in the shadows, wanting to call out to her but afraid of waking the neighbors. My slippers made dull, flapping sounds against the cement. Not a soul in sight. Dim shapes under the trees and in front yards turned out to be cars in the driveways, a bicycle, a coiled garden hose. As dim and dreary and deserted as a ghost-town

graveyard.

And no sign of Leona.

I stopped at the corner, then came back again along the opposite side of the street. The light through my own front windows was the only bright spot against the night. I plodded along the driveway and around to the rear of the house, intending to go in the way I had come out.

That was when I saw the lighted window at the Fremonts'.

Sally and Mark Fremont. The previous summer they had bought the place directly behind us and fronting on the next street over. They joined the same country club Leona and I belonged to and ran pretty much with the same crowd. Sally was a dark-haired little thing, quite pretty, who invariably lapsed into a crying jag after her second Martini. Mark was junior partner of a firm of architects in Manhattan—a tall, slender man about my own age, with deep-brown eyes, small, sensitive features, and a caustic tongue. He was a Harvard graduate, given to wearing tweeds and smoking an obscure English mixture in straight-stemmed imported briers. At first we had hit it off well enough, but one night at the Murdochs' semiannual cocktail party he had started in on something he called the parasitic role played by advertising agencies. I got a bellyful quick and said so, publicly and at length. It left us still friendly but a long way from being friends.

I stood there on the back steps, staring at that light. It wasn't impossible that Leona had seen that light and gone over there to let Sally know we were home. The girls were still thick as thieves, in spite of the coolness between Mark and me; in fact, Leona and I had had a few arguments over the way she kept defending him. On top of everything else, we were constantly running into them at week-end parties and the shore club, and I hadn't liked the way he kept hanging over her, whispering in her ear and flashing his smile like a toothpaste commercial.

She was probably there, all right. I thought about going over and getting her, but that would likely mean being polite to Mark Fremont—something I didn't feel up to at two-thirty in the morning. A phone call would do just as well.

I used the extension in the breakfast nook. After the fifth ring, the receiver went up at the other end.

"H'lo?"

A woman's voice, thick with sleep. I wet my lips. "Sallv?"

"Uh-huh. Who's this?"

"Ames. Ames Coryell, Sally, I wake you up?"

"I guess so. Partly, anyway. What time is it?"

"After two. Look, I suppose this is going to sound silly to you, but is Leona over there?"

'Leona? Why, what would she be- Ames, where

are you?"

"At home, Sally. We just got back from Maine half an hour ago. Leona went out, for some reason, and when I saw your light on I thought maybe she dropped in on you."

"At two in the morning?"

"Well, I saw your light on."

"That's Mark. He's in the den, working on some blueprints or something. I've been in bed for hours."

"Okay. Guess that covers it. Sorry as all hell I woke

you. If you-"

My voice trailed off. I was remembering something—something that vaguely puzzled me.

In the silence, Sally's voice came over the wire. It

had a tinny, faraway sound. "If I what?"

"Well- Look, Sally. Don't you have a phone extension in the den?"

"Why, of course we do. Heavens, you've seen it there at least a hun—"

"Then why didn't Mark answer on the first ring?"

"Gosh, I- Wait a minute."

It was closer to five minutes before she came back on the wire. "Ames!"

"Yeah?"

"Mark's not here! He's nowhere in the house!"

Her voice was almost shrill with a mixture of bewilderment and outright alarm. I said, "All right. Relax. He's probably taking a walk around the block." "With Leona?"

"Oh, cut that out!"

"Well, it's mighty funny. The two of them missing at the same time!"

"I said cut it out! You don't know what you're talking about. There's nothing between them and you ought to have sense enough to know it. Listen, call me back the minute Mark shows up."

I slammed down the receiver and stood there staring at nothing. My mouth seemed curiously dry. I went into the kitchen and drank a glass of water and found a cigarette and lit it with the second match. My hands were trembling. Not much, but enough to be noticeable. I walked back into the breakfast room and picked up the phone again.

The desk sergeant said somebody would be right over and to take it easy. He yawned while he was say-

ing it.

CHAPTER TWO

A CAR DRIFTED QUIETLY along the street while I was putting up the coffee. I lit the gas under the pot and had the front door open by the time a tall, spare man in plain clothes came along the walk and up the steps. The brim of a yellowing Panama shielded his face from the porch light. He had a cool, unhurried voice that said, "Mr. Coryell? I'm Lieutenant Box, Bay Point police."

I pushed open the screen. "Come in, Lieutenant.

You sure took your sweet time getting here."

He followed me into the living-room and I pointed to a chair. He took off his hat and laid it casually on a corner of the piano and sat down and tossed a thin leg over his knee. "Sorry for the delay, Mr. Coryell. A woman over on Linden Court thought somebody was after her silver. Turned out to be the cat."

"This one isn't that simple." I walked down the room and back again. "It's about my wife. The ser-

geant tell you?"

"Very little. Just the address and a code number.

We like to keep details off the air."

He was close to forty, maybe even a little past it. He had calm, hooded eyes, a sallow skin, and uneven, not very white teeth which he kept from showing any more than was necessary. His hair was thick and black and beginning to thin out at the temples. He had the hard, careful, competent look most police officers above the rank of patrolman seem to have, and he didn't fidget. Probably he didn't have anything to fidget about.

I said, "Here's how it is. My wife walked out of here an hour and ten minutes ago. While I was upstairs getting ready for bed. Not a word first, you understand; she just up and left. I want her found before something happens to her."

"What makes you think something's going to hap-

pen to her?"

I scowled. "Look, don't start jumping on everything I say. I don't know that anything's going to happen to her. I simply want her found."

Nothing changed in his expression, if you could call

no expression at all an expression. "We'll find her, Mr. Coryell. She's already on the Teletype and we've got two squads working this entire section right now looking for her. But one thing you'll have to understand. If she left of her own accord, we can't force her to return."

"She wouldn't leave that way. Not without telling me first."

"It has happened."

"I don't give a good goddam whether it has or not. I'm telling you this isn't like that."

"You suggesting somebody took her away? By

force?"

"You mean kidnaped? That's ridiculous!"

He spread his hands. "What do you suggest?"

"I don't have any idea. Anyway you look at it, it doesn't make sense. She didn't even say good-by to Feewee. She had no reason— I was up—"

My voice quit on me. My hands began to shake uncontrollably, and I balled them into fists and shoved them deep in the pockets of my robe and walked away from him.

His words came from behind me. "How long have you been married?"

"Six years next June."

"Any children?"

"A girl. Phoebe."

"How old is she? Your daughter."

"Three next month." I turned impatiently. "Why all these silly questions? Let's have a little action, for God's sake!"

His jaw hardened. "Listen, Mr. Coryell. It's understandable your being upset. But get this straight—I'm running this investigation, not you. The sooner that's understood, the better we get along and the quicker we get results."

Anger washed over me. I opened my mouth to yell at him. Then suddenly I wasn't shaking any more. He was right, of course. I had been too keyed up, too close to terror, to be of any use to him or Leona or myself.

"Excuse me a minute." I left him sitting there and went into the kitchen. The coffee was ready. There was part of a fifth of Old Forester on one of the pantry shelves, and I dug it out and poured about two inches into a glass and put it down neat and quick. It hit bottom and bounced twice and began to spread heat through me, and then I was all right again.

I put together a couple of cups and saucers and set them on a tray with the sugar bowl. No cream in the refrigerator, of course, but I never used the stuff anyway, and from the looks of the lieutenant neither did he. I filled the cups and turned off the gas and brought the tray into the living-room.

Box was still sitting the way I had left him. He took one of the cups, passed up the sugar, didn't ask for cream, and leaned back to stare level-eyed at me through the steam.

"Start at the beginning," he said, "and give it to me step by step. All of it."

I sat down across from him and lit a cigarette to go with the coffee. "We've got a summer place in Maine.

Feewee and my wife went up there in June, as is customary, and three weeks ago I drove up to spend my vacation with them. We started back yesterday afternoon and reached the house around two this morning. Leona got out and opened the front door; I came in with Feewee a minute or two later. I put my daughter to bed and took a shower. My wife hadn't come upstairs by the time I finished. I called her and she didn't answer, so I went downstairs to find out what was holding things up. She was gone, Lieutenant. Not in the house or the basement or the yard. Her handbag was on the couch and the back door unbolted. That's the story. All of it, like you said."

One of his eyebrows was away up. "You mean she left her bag?"

"There it is."

He put his cup down and scooped the straw bag off the couch arm and dumped what was in it on the end table next to the lighted lamp.

Nothing that wasn't in half the purses in town. Wallet, house and car keys, bobby pins, handkerchief, lipstick, comb, change purse, fountain pen, cigarettes, the Dunhill lighter I'd given her on her last birthday. Box counted the bills in the wallet, flipped through the identification panels, then tucked everything back where it had come from. He closed the clasp and stood there bouncing the bag lightly on one of his palms, his expression thoughtful, his eyes distant. When the silence began to get noticeable, he put the bag down where he had found it and went back to his chair and his coffee.

He took a slow sip and looked woodenly at me over the edge of the cup. "You and your wife get along all right, Mr. Coryell?"

"One hell of a lot better than most couples."

"Nothing you been up to that might have upset her?"

"I don't know what you mean. A fight? An argument?"

He shrugged. "I don't mean anything in particular. I'm simply trying to find out if you've given her any reason to walk out on you."

"Then the answer is no. Sure, we have our differences. Who doesn't? Once in a while we get into it about my not being home as much as we'd both like. I don't suppose you know it, but I'm in a business that raises hell with normal living. But that's nothing to walk out on me for—at least not without a lot of advance warning."

He nodded, agreeing with me. "Some woman you been fooling around with she might have found out about?"

I smiled without humor. "I told you I hardly had time for one. Let alone two."

"How about her?"

"How do you mean?"

"Sure she wasn't interested in another man?"

The blood banged into my head. "Now just a goddam minute! You happen to be talking about my wife!"

He gave me another of his level, emotionless glances. "Mr. Coryell, I don't know a thing about you or your wife. Not a thing. But I know, and you know, that a lot of women—married women—play around. I'm not saying your wife is one of them, but I'm not overlooking any possibilities, either."

"Well, you can overlook that one, brother!"

He drank some more of his coffee. Then, without looking at me, he said, "How well do you know this Mark Fremont?"

I stared at him blank-faced for a second before I

remembered my call to Sally Fremont. "Oh. That. You mean he's still missing?"

"Far as I know. We got Mrs. Fremont's call right

after yours." -

"Why tell me about it? That's her problem, Lieutenant. My only interest right now is finding Mrs. Coryell."

"I know. Only doesn't it strike you as odd that the two of them should turn up missing at exactly the

same time?"

"No." I could feel heat rising in my cheeks. "The guy went out for a walk or something. He's probably home right now."

"How does your wife get along with him?"

"Like she does with everybody else. Friendly. Gracious. But I'm the man she's in love with."

"How do you get along with him?"

"Fremont? Hell, he's all right, I suppose. I just don't happen to take to him myself. A little too superior and condescending for my taste. Artistic temperament and all that."

"Mrs. Coryell feel the same way about him?"

"Not especially. She's more tolerant about phonies than I am, I guess. But she wasn't having an affair with him and she didn't run off with him. So let's get back to my problem, shall we?"

He stared at me stolidly. "I don't like coincidences,

Mr. Coryell."

I sighed. "I don't, either. But there are such things and this is one of them. Look, Lieutenant, my wife and I just got back from three weeks in Maine. We were together almost every minute of the time. Leona was warm, affectionate, happy all during those three weeks. No moods, no silences, no brooding the way a woman is when there's something on her mind. Nothing happened to change her during the trip home.

She got out of the car the minute I stopped in the driveway, she went up the steps, unlocked the door, and walked into the house—and right on out the back way."

"You see her go in?"

"I didn't have to see her go in. The door was standing open when I reached it, the lights were on, her handbag was on the couch—the same bag she carried all the way back from Maine. What more do you want?"

He took another slow pull at the coffee cup and went on sitting there as though he had arrived for the week-end. "And you can't think of a reason for her walking out?"

"Not really. No. I know people once in a while black out and do crazy things. Amnesia. Something

like that."

His eyes narrowed a little. "It's always possible. She ever have any mental trouble you know about? Fits of depression, talk of suicide, inability to sleep, that sort of thing?"

"Not that I know of. And I'm sure I would."

The phone rang. I was off the couch and in the breakfast room before Box could put down his cup. "Hello?"

A man's voice asked for the lieutenant. I called him in and stood in the doorway while he answered. He said, "Box," listened while the receiver made squawking noises for almost a full minute, then said, "Okay, Riordan," and hung up slowly. If his expression had changed any it was only to grow a little more bleak.

I wet my lips. "Well?"

"Not about your wife, Mr. Coryell," he said absently. "This was something else."

We went back to the living-room and sat down again. Neither of us said anything for a minute or

two. I drank some of my coffee and blew cigarette smoke around and tried to think but got no place with it. The silence grew heavier and heavier. Box went on sitting, not moving, his face empty but a long way from being vacant. I decided I didn't like him much. There was a vaguely hostile air about him, a kind of ingrown suspicion. Maybe all cops were like that, I thought. I hadn't been around enough of them to know.

Presently he nodded briefly for some reason all his own and put his eyes on me again. "Let's go back a ways," he said, a harsh note in his voice for the first time. "After you were sure your wife wasn't in the house, what did you do?"

"Walked around outside looking for her. I told you

that."

"Exactly where outside?"

He had questions to ask and he was going to sit there and ask them, and if I didn't like it I could write to the mayor.

"The yard," I said. "The driveway. The car. The

street."

"How much of the street?"

"Well, both sides as far up as the next, corner."

"Which corner was that?"

"Colfax. The first cross street to the north of us."

"See anybody there?"

"No. This was after two in the morning, Lieutenant."

"Just sort of glance about or were you pretty thor-

ough?"

I rubbed the back of my neck and frowned at him. "I looked around. I didn't paw the bushes or peer behind trees, if that's what you mean."

"Are there bushes along there?"

"Yeah. The Brinkman place on the northwest cor-

ner. He's put in a lot of bushes next to the sidewalk."

"You didn't happen to poke around in them, did you?"

"No. Why?"

"Too bad you didn't."

Something in his tone jarred me. My God, not Leona! "What are you getting at, Box?" "They found Mark Fremont in those bushes. Knocked in the head."

CHAPTER THREE

I SAT THERE with my jaw hanging, understanding what he had said but not what it could mean. "Knocked in the head? You mean he's—dead?"

"Close to it. In critical condition from a possible

fracture, according to the receiving hospital."

"That's terrible! He say how it happened?"

"Fremont? He's unconscious, mister, and he may

stay that way. Permanently."

The thought that came to me then was a natural one under the circumstances. My fingers tightened until they ached. "Jesus, I wonder—"

One of Box's heavy eyebrows lifted. "What were"

you going to say, Mr. Coryell?"

"Well— I—I don't know. You think it could have something to do with Leona—with my wife's disappearance?"

"How do you figure?"

"Well, she left the house. Maybe somebody grabbed her. Fremont, out for a walk, saw what was going

on and tried to help her and got slugged."

Box grunted. "In other words, Fremont just happened to be taking a walk at the exact time your wife just happened to have slipped out the back door, and some kidnaper just happened to be roaming around the neighborhood. Is that the way you see it?"

I bit back the anger boiling up in me at the almost open sarcasm in his voice. "All right. Maybe you've

got a better idea."

"Several, Mr. Coryell. But I think we can let that go for now. I believe you said your only interest was

in finding Mrs. Coryell."

"I want her found, yes."

He reached one of his wide, blunt-fingered hands into a pocket and dug out a small leather notebook and a ballpoint pen. "I'll need a description. And a photograph. The Teletype may turn her up inside a day or two; if not we'll send out some readers. While we're at it, give me names and addresses of relatives, friends, where your wife banks, beauty shops, charge accounts, and so on."

He made it sound cold and impersonal, like some-body compiling statistics on accidental deaths over a holiday week-end. I had a sudden picture of pages peeling off a giant calendar, the way they do it in movies, while stolid men took their time digging into file drawers and lifting telephone receivers and ringing doorbells. Strictly routine. No emotion, no sense of urgency, no overtime. A stolen wallet, a hit-andrun case, a missing woman. Police matters. Sure, some guy's going to have to skip lunches until payday, some hospital gets another customer, some husband goes sleepless until his wife turns up in Milwaukee or the morgue. So what? The old routine works eighty-seven per cent of the time and what better odds do you expect?

Box was waiting, the notebook opened to a fresh page, the pen ready. "She's five-four, a hundred and twelve pounds, honey hair worn the way they're wearing it these days. Blue-gray eyes that look a little green when she's mad, which isn't often. Age twenty-eight, house-broken, answers to the name of Leona. Will that suit you, Lieutenant, or would you like a sample of her skin?"

His head snapped up. "Don't use that tone on me, mister. I don't take it from you or anybody else. Get that straight right now."

That was when I blew up. "And you're supposed to find my wife! Why, you small-town flatfoot, you couldn't find your shoes in a plate of soup. All you know how to do is sit on your fat can and ask a lot of dumb questions. What're you waiting for—a fast fifty bucks under the table?"

For about ten seconds he stared at me out of those cold, hooded eyes. Then very deliberately he went back to his notebook. "Blue-gray eyes," he said, and wrote it down, not hurrying. "Any birthmarks or scars?"

His quiet voice, his calm face, made me feel like a five-year-old who had just thrown a tantrum. I picked my cigarette off the ash tray with unsteady fingers, discovered it had gone out, and lighted another. I got off the couch and pulled my robe around me and walked over to the window and leaned my forehead against the glass. "No. No birthmarks. No scars."

"What was she wearing?"

"White coat. Pale-green dress with short sleeves and a V neck. Linen, I guess. Tan hose, white shoes."

It went down in the book. He wanted to know what jewelry she was wearing and I told him; then it was relatives and our friends. Leona's father was dead and her mother lived in Scarsdale. There was a married sister in Buffalo, but I couldn't remember the street and he didn't ask me to look it up for him. I was in the middle of listing close friends when we heard a small sound on the stairs and Phoebe came into the living-room.

One cheek was red from lying on it and her hair was every which way. She said, "You woke me up," in a small accusing voice and reeled over and bunted me in the leg with her head and stared round-eyed at the lieutenant.

I lifted her up and smoothed down her dress.

"Sorry, Baroness. I expect we'd better get you into some pajamas, hey?"

She went right on looking at Box with that direct intensity only a child can manage. "I expect I don't know you." She was polite about it, but firm.

His smile was awkward and self-conscious, but it was an improvement over what I'd been getting. "I'm John Box. Your father told me about you. You're Phoebe."

"Feewee Co'yell. I'm very pleased to meet you. Can I have some milk, Daddy? Where's Mommy?"

"No milk, Baroness. It would make your stomach growl. And Mommy isn't here right now. Excuse us a moment, Lieutenant. This young lady belongs in bed."

Abruptly Box said, "Phoebe, did your mother come home with you tonight?"

It took a second or two for the implication in that question to get through to me. In the brief silence Feewee's answer was prompt and clear. "No."

"Phoebe!" I shouted, completely floored. "What's the matter with you? You know Mommy came home.

With us. In the car."

It was the wrong approach and ordinarily I would have known better. When they're that age a show of anger or alarm at something they've said or done can drive them into a shell that only time and a lot of patience can crack. Feewee's mouth retreated into a small tight line, her chin set stubbornly, and the big round tears began to form.

I took a deep breath, forcing my voice down. "Now listen to me, darling. It's all right. Mommy was up at the lake with us and we got in the car and took a long ride. After it got dark out you and Mommy and I ate in that nice restaurant and you didn't want your milk.

Now do you remember?"

No sale. All she did was tighten her fingers against my neck and bury her face in my shoulder and begin to sniffle.

Box's quiet voice reached me. "Let it go, Coryell.

You're only confusing her."

There was a change in him. His voice was a shade sharper, his shoulders a shade stiffer, and the glint in his eye hadn't been there earlier. He was on the edge of his chair, leaning forward like a vulture ready to swoop.

I could have socked him one. "You keep out of this. Pulling a question like that on a kid when she's half asleep. Maybe you'd like to get out the rubber

hose and work her over!"

He wasn't listening. From now on anything I said would be just so much noise. I used a finger to wipe away Feewee's tears. "My mistake, Baroness. Up to bed you go. In the morning you'll remember about Mommy."

When I came down again Box was leaning back in the chair, his expression somber. I went over and stood in front of him. "That will be all, officer. You can leave. I'm getting somebody else to handle this. Somebody, I don't mind telling you, with a little common sense."

He didn't bat an eye. "You're a little confused, Mr. Coryell. I'm not the plumber, in to fix a leaky faucet. Your wife is missing and it's my job to find her. Well, I'm going to find her, whether you like it or not." I waited until I could trust my voice. "I've had

I waited until I could trust my voice. "I've had about all of you I can take. Get over the idea you're talking to some crummy panhandler, mister. This is my house and I'm telling you to get out. Now."

Tiny muscles moved along the slope of his jaw. "If

that's the way you want it. Get your clothes on."

"Why?"

"I'm taking you in."

"You mean you're arresting me?"

"I mean I'm taking you in for questioning."

"Well, I'll be damned! And you'd do it, too, wouldn't you?" I turned and went over and picked up. my cup. The coffee was cold by this time. I put the cup down and looked at Box again. "Have you got the crazy idea that I had something to do with my wife's disappearance?"

He stared at me and said nothing.

"Why? Because of what Feewee said? Is that what's

in back of this 'I'm running you in' routine?"

He shook his head about a quarter of an inch. "We're past the routine stage on this, Mr. Coryell. There's not a lot of ways for people to drop out of sight. Either they go under their own power, or somebody puts the snatch on them, or they get killed and the body hidden."

"Which one you saying applies here?"

"Too early for me to say definitely. The way you tell it, leaving was all your wife's idea. Me, I'm not so sure. Several points don't fit in with that theory at all."

"You still harping on what my daughter said?" "She's your daughter. She make a habit of lying?"

"Oh, stop it! She's not even three years old. She wakes up out of a sound sleep in the middle of the night and a perfect stranger starts in firing questions at her. That could confuse a kid three times her age!"

"Sure, I'll go along with that. Taken by itself I'd hardly give it a second thought. I wouldn't have even asked her the question if some other points hadn't come up beforehand."

"Like what?"

"Like that handbag, for one."

"Handbag? You mean my wife's? The one on the couch?"

"That's exactly the one I mean." He leaned forward and jabbed a stubby forefinger at me, waggling it to lend emphasis to his words. "A cop gets to know human nature, Mr. Coryell. The way people act. Like this business of the bag. A woman might not stop to make up her face before she goes out. She might even be in such a hurry she'd tear out of the house without putting on her clothes. But she's not going to forget to take her bag. I don't care what's going on—fire, flood, or fear—her bag goes with her.

or fear—her bag goes with her.

"Now you might say, 'All right; she took a different bag.' Not in this case, Mr. Coryell. Why would she bother? Even if she did, she'd transfer her keys and money first. She'd have to! But when I find her bag right here in the house, with everything important to her still in it, that's when I start thinking you've

lied to me right along."

"I'm beginning to understand why people don't like cops."

He flushed clear to the hairline. "I grew up in a neighborhood of cop-haters, my friend. Manhattan's lower East Side. Some day maybe I'll tell you about it. Only right now I'm showing you the holes in your story.

"Could your wife have been kidnaped when she walked into the house? Nothing to suggest it. You found no sign of forcible entry, no indication of a struggle, no screams, no cars racing off into the night. So we can throw that one out.

"Now we come to this business of Mark Fremont being found with his skull fractured. Less than a block from where Mrs. Coryell vanishes into thin air, and at almost exactly the same time. Like I said before, I don't like coincidences. Her disappearance could fit in with the attack on Fremont—and I think it does."

"How?"

"Okay. You suggested he might have been slugged while somebody was grabbing your wife. It's possible but a long way from being likely. Too much of a coincidence that Mrs. Coryell should leave her home at the exact minute a kidnaper passes by and Fremont is out for a walk. So let's take a shot in the dark; could she have gone out the back door to meet Fremont?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Box!"

He spread his hands. "I'm not fond of it, either. In the first place they would hardly be running away together without luggage or money. And a rendezvous on the street at two in the morning doesn't make much sense. That leaves us with only one explanation—an explanation that fits in with finding your wife's purse in the house, your daughter's statement, and the attack on Fremont."

He stopped there and looked at his thumb. I said, "Am I supposed to ask you, or is this pause for dramatic effect?"

His eyes came up and hit me. "Maybe Fremont was out for a walk and saw you pull into the driveway. Maybe he stopped to welcome you home. Maybe he saw that your wife wasn't in the car at all and you slugged him to keep his mouth shut, then dumped what you thought was his dead body in the bushes at the corner."

"And why wasn't my wife in the car?"

"Because somewhere between Maine and Bay Point you killed her and hid the body."

I sat there, letting it soak in. Off across the Sound the first light of dawn began to touch the horizon. It was going to be a warm, cloudless day.

When I did move, it was to pick up a cigarette and light it. My fingers were perfectly steady, as they had every right to be. "I don't suppose there's any use in

my telling you you're all wrong?"

"That's up to you."

"I've told you the truth. From the beginning."

"All right," he said with unexpected mildness. "Theory is one thing, proof another. Right now I want the exact route you took from Maine, the places you stopped, the people you spoke to and who spoke to you. Both you and your wife, Mr. Coryell."

I stood up and said, "Hold it a minute," and went out the front door to the car. I fished the three road maps I'd used out of the glove compartment and brought them in and spread them out on the dining-

room table.

I started by indicating a point on the one for Maine. "Here is the town of Eastbrook. Our cottage is on Chimney Lake, a mile and three quarters north of town. About one o'clock this afternoon we left there, taking Route 200 to where it joins Route One. Right here. We followed One, through Belfast and Rockland, on down to Brunswick and on into Portland. I had the tank filled at an Esso station in Portland; all I recall about it is the restroom was clean and the guy on the pump wore glasses. We didn't hurry particularly; it's beautiful country. We had a late dinner at a nice place in Boston. I'll recall the name in a minute. Are you getting all this down?"

He said he was.

"I bought more gas at another Esso station while we were in Boston. On Route One, across the street from a large movie theater. The Van Courtland—something like that. I didn't notice what was playing. The man at this station was a young fellow. I remember he gave my wife a little cleaning fluid to take a small spot off her white coat, explaining he couldn't let her use gas from the pump because it had lead in it and would ruin the coat. He checked the oil and

tires and said everything was fine.

"From there we drove all the way into Providence without stopping, using the state parkways mostly. At Providence we made another gas station stop—one of the Sunoco chain I think it was—then pushed on to New Haven. That's where we started running into a lot of rain. At Milford I took the two-mile cutoff over to the Merritt Parkway to make better time. Around one in the morning we stopped off at a highclass roadhouse and had coffee and sandwiches, milk for Feewee, although she was too full of sleep to drink it. By this time, I don't mind telling you, I was about half dead myself. From there on, what with the rain and the traffic, it was a full-time job just keeping my eyes open and the car on the road. My wife and my daughter were sound asleep on the back seat all the way. I turned off at Weaver Street, came on down through Larchmont on the Post Road and into Bay Point. Two o'clock, a few minutes either way, when we pulled into the driveway."

He kept on writing for a minute or two after I'd run down. "I'll need the name of the place you ate at in Boston, and the name and location of that road-

house you mentioned."

I rubbed the palm of my hand across my forehead, trying to dredge up the information. My mind moved sluggishly, through a quicksand of weariness. From far off down the sky came the buzz of a plane. "Kelly's Oasis, in Boston. And the Endore Inn, just outside of Bridgeport."

They went down in the book. He flipped the cover shut and straightened up, shoving notebook and pen back in his pocket. "Now I'll need a picture of your wife and a look through the house."

He spent a good twenty minutes going over the place. We returned to the living-room then, and he

picked up his hat and tilted the brim down over his eyes the way it's done in pictures. I went with him to the door.

"You'll hear from us, Mr. Coryell."

He pushed open the screen and stepped out onto the porch. I said, "You might as well know one thing, Lieutenant. I'm not leaving this solely in the hands of a bunch of small-town tire chalkers. If my wife hasn't turned up inside a few hours, I'm having some of the professional boys step in. Amateurs have a habit of lousing things up."

It was the first time I'd seen him smile and of course it came out lopsided. "You don't have to worry about the way we handle it, Mr. Coryell. Believe me, this one gets the grade-A treatment."

It was light out by this time. I stood there, watching him go along the walk and climb into the prowl car. He turned it in a tight U and drove off, the buggy-whip aerial quivering at the rear bumper.

The house was like a morgue. I heated the coffee and took the pot into the living-room and sat on the couch. I drank two cups spaced between cigarettes and thought a good many confused thoughts. After a while I fell asleep sitting there.

When I woke, the sun was up and the world was alive again.

CHAPTER FOUR

SEVEN-TEN. Feewee was still asleep, in a tangle of sheets and cotton blanket. I showered, shaved, and dressed mechanically, and put together a fast breakfast. There was no fresh bread for toast, but I found a can of what they call New England brown bread stuck away in one of the cupboards and made it do, with canned orange juice and more coffee.

The morning paper hit the screen door while I was eating, and I leafed through it quickly, hunting for an item about an unidentified woman turning up at a police station or a hospital. Of course if anything like that had happened to Leona it would have been too recent to be in the papers. I knew as much but that didn't keep me from looking. Fear can always throw

logic two falls out of three.

The rest of the news seemed no different from what you get any morning these days. A payroll stickup in Brooklyn that ran into six figures; still another picture and story on Tony Sallazo, Chicago slot-machine czar on the run after indictment for tax evasion and probably halfway to Uruguay or Monaco by this time; and a warehouse fire in Queens. The Yankees had taken both ends of a doubleheader from Washington, and Vic Seixas was favored in the finals at Forest Hills.

I got rid of the dishes and returned to the breakfast room and called the local police station. Box was off duty, but a sergeant told me they had no word on my wife. He sounded hard and suspicious, as though they had already decided down there that I would be up for murder any day now. I gave him my

office number and left instructions to call me there if anything developed during the day, then banged the receiver down. Just wait, I thought bitterly, until the sons of bitches come sucking around for a donation to one of those benefits they're forever cooking up!

I paced the floor a time or two, then telephoned the Fremonts'. The colored maid answered. Even she didn't sound very friendly. She said Mrs. Fremont was at the Hutchinson Park Hospital, in New Rochelle, with her husband. She had no word on his condition, but gave me the number and I put through a call. After some delay Sally Fremont came on the wire sounding a hundred years old.

"This is Ames, Sally. How's Mark?"

Her voice was thick with sudden anger. "What's the matter? Are you afraid he's going to live?"

I almost dropped the receiver. "Wha-at? What are

you talking about?"

"You're not fooling me a minute, Ames Coryell! He's lying in there, fighting to live, and you're the one responsible! You and that high and mighty wife of yours! Don't think I haven't seen her batting those big eyes at him and turning on the charm. He was all right until she came along!"

She was almost screaming by this time. I said, "Sally! Listen to me! There's no truth—"

"So you caught them together and you tried to kill_"

Abruptly there was silence, and then a man's voice said, "This is Doctor Haslip. I'm afraid Mrs. Fremont is much too upset to talk further with you just now." I could hear faintly a wild sobbing in the background. "Hold it a minute, Doctor. Are you the

physician attending Mr. Fremont?"

"Yes."

"How is he?"

"His condition is critical. I'm afraid that is all I can tell you at the moment."

"Is he conscious?"

"No."

"How soon will you know something-definite?"

"Impossible to say."

He was polite but getting impatient. "Look, Doctor Haslip, I won't waste your time with a long explanation. But Mr. Fremont may have information vital to me. If he should say anything—"

"There is a police officer in the room. If Mr. Fremont regains consciousness long enough to make a

statement, it will be taken down. Good-by."

A firm click left me holding a dead instrument. I put it back in the cradle slowly and sat there staring at the wall. Sally Fremont's accusations were nonsense, of course, but that hadn't made them any easier to listen to. But even as I told myself as much, I was remembering the times Leona had defended Mark against some of the remarks I had made. Why had she been in such a sweat to patch things up between Mark Fremont and me? I began to recall how he seemed to be forever trailing around after her at parties the four of us attended. It was always Mark who was getting her a drink, lighting her cigarette, teeing up her golf ball, handing her a towel when she came out of the pool. A guy does things like that when he's nuts about a woman. And I hadn't noticed her fighting him off. Maybe she-

I said aloud, "Stop it, you silly bastard," and went upstairs to take a look at Feewee. She was still sleeping, curled up, the pillow between her legs. Yester-

day's long drive had knocked her out.

At eight I telephoned Leona's mother in Scarsdale. She was a feather-headed old harridan whose husband had walked out on her twenty years before, leaving her two young daughters and too much money. After the maid pried her awake and handed her the phone, I explained what had happened. All it earned me was an earful of her usual hysterical approach to any problem, plus a long-winded complaint about not having seen or heard from Leona since she left for Maine. It was impossible not to believe her. She was all for barging right over and grabbing Feewee away from me on the theory that the child would take up with opium smugglers unless she had proper supervision. I came within an inch of telling her to stick to her hormone creams and Austrian couturier, and broke the connection while she was still talking.

But it did bring up the problem of what to do about Feewee. I thought for a moment, then phoned Grace Murrow next door. She asked no questions, was sympathetic without getting sticky about it, and said she'd love to look after Feewee for as long as I wanted.

I took the luggage out of the car and stacked it in the basement, then drove over to the Larchmont station in time to catch the 8:28 into Manhattan.

CHAPTER FIVE

FREEBOLT & FROME is a long jump from being the biggest advertising agency in New York, but anyone in the business will tell you it's one of the best and growing all the time. It fills the top two floors of the Marine Trust building at Forty-Ninth and Madison, employs one hundred and sixty-three people, has airconditioning throughout and one of the best pension plans in the business. On the forty-third floor are the paneled offices and a reception room right out of a high-budget musical, all decked out in knee-deep dove-gray carpeting, sharp-angled blond furniture especially designed by Abernathy of London, lavish touches of chrome and silver, and a hushed atmosphere laced with good tobacco, he-man cologne, and an occasional whiff of imported perfume.

Miss Reese, the blond receptionist, was touching up her nails with Dulcinea by Neynell, "Glamour at Your Finger Tips," when I got off the elevator. She slid the small vial out of sight and gave me the smile reserved for company executives. "Welcome home, Mr. Coryell! My, what a simply gorgeous tan! I'll bet you had a wonderful vacation!"

"Just peachy. Is Mr. Frome in yet?"

I got the wide-eyed treatment. "Why, no, Mr. Coryell. Mr. Frome left for Mexico over a week ago. Fishing or something."

'I see. When will he be back?"

"I don't really-"

"All right. Miss Dunlap down?"

"She called. She'll be a little late."

"Ask her to check with me as soon as she shows up."

I went past her, through the inner door and down the long, wide corridor. At nine-fifteen most of the offices were empty. There was the light odor of furniture polish hanging in the air. Miss Stewart, Wilton Demrosch's secretary, was at her desk checking a bank statement over coffee and a cigarette. I didn't have to guess at the brand she was smoking. Demrosch was account executive for Royal Cigarettes—"Savor the Flavor!"—and any other make would have gotten her court-martialed for high treason. At least.

Kathy was opening the morning mail at my desk. "Well, hello! Hallelujah, am I glad to see you! This place has been a mad—" Her deep-brown eyes got very round and her mouth fell open a little. "Ames! Is something wrong?"

"It shows, hunh?"

"Well, you do look strange. Sort of drawn around the eyes and mouth."

I was suddenly aware that my throat had a tight ache in it and that my hands were a long way from being steady. I moved past her and dropped into the swivel chair.

Alarm moved in her lovely face. I could see a tiny pulse beating at the base of her throat. "What is it? What's the matter? Can I get—"

"It's all right, Kathy. For Christ's sake, don't go getting motherly on me. I'm fine." I bit down on my teeth, fighting the pressure out of my throat. "Listen, I might as well tell you and get it over with. Leona is gone. Disappeared. And I don't have the slightest idea where or how or why."

For a split second I would have sworn there was an expression close to satisfaction on her face, but it was gone before I could be sure. "You mean she's left you? But I always thought that—"

"No. No, nothing like that. I only wish it was that simple."

"But you said-"

"I know what I said! Look, it goes like this. We got back from Maine early this morning. Leona walked in the front door and straight out the back. And that's the last anybody's seen or heard of her. No fights, no fond farewells, no nothing."

"There has to be a reason, Ames."

"You think of one, let me know."

"Hadn't you ought to notify the police?"

"I notified them. A fat lot of good it did. They got it all figured out I murdered my own wife."

"Ames!"

"You heard me. A bunch of Keystone cops. And I'm supposed to sit around and chew my thumb while they waste time combing every ditch between here and Maine."

"Why should they think you-killed her?"

"How would I know? They've got one way of thinking and that's it."

"What shall we do first?"

I liked that we. "Well, I did some thinking coming in on the train. The FBI sounds like the best bet. Maybe if I talked to them."

She was dialing Information before I finished speaking. I watched her, feeling the warm glow I often got just from looking at her. She was straight and slim and rounded in a dark-blue gabardine suit, a white blouse with a rounded neckline. No jewelry except for a white gold wrist watch. She had a smooth ivory skin, slightly uneven features that made her a lot more attractive than most of these flawlessly beautiful women, and her dark hair fell in loose waves from a ruler-straight part. She was both efficient and femi-

nine—a combination as rare as a sense of humor in a client.

Five years before, Katherine McVey had walked into my new office not thirty minutes after Kenneth Frome appointed me Copy Chief at twelve thousand a year. She was twenty-one, fresh out of some jerkwater college, wore a Phi Beta key where you couldn't miss seeing it, and had a head filled with nonsense about the advertising business.

She wanted a job, she said, and she couldn't have timed it better. The secretary to the man I was replacing had resigned along with her boss, leaving me in the center of a cyclone with nothing to hang on to. That's why Kathy McVey was on the payroll and weeding out the files before I knew the color of her eyes. As it turned out, I couldn't have made a better choice after a month of interviews.

At the time, I was twenty-seven, only two years with the firm and married less than one. I had started in Research, but the breaks came fast and were spectacular enough for the old-timers around the outfit to start calling me the Boy Wonder. I bided my time, kept my head down to size, spoke politely to my elders, and did my job considerably better than was necessary. I knew where I was going. It was only going to be a matter of time before I got there.

Consequently I didn't stay long in Copy. I tried my hand at bringing in new business, did a stretch as account executive for Truarch Shoes, and even took a fling at media supervisor. Then one fine day Kenneth Frome called me in and appointed me executive vice president—a species of trouble-shooter for every department in the firm. By this time I was up to twenty thousand, plus an end-of-the-year bonus; and with Freebolt, the senior partner, somewhere in southern France coughing out his life in a private TB sani-

tarium, an eventual partnership was not impossible or even improbable.

Kathy said, "Just a minute, please," and put her hand over the mouthpiece. "A Mr. Ballard on the wire. He's not in charge of the local office but I think he'll do."

I took the phone. Ballard sounded young and efficient. I told him my name and why I was calling and some of the details. When I finished, he still sounded efficient but cautious. Would I mind holding on a moment? I said all right and listened to a lot of clicking sounds. Maybe they were checking the number I was calling from, maybe they were recording the conversation, maybe Ballard was finishing his morning coffee.

Finally a girl's voice cut in and found out I was still around. She transferred me to another line and a man named Adler had me repeat the whole story. "I'm afraid this isn't for us, Mr. Coryell."

"What do you mean, not for you?"

"Simply that we don't have any jurisdiction in matters of this kind."

"Well look, I don't want to sound trite about this,

but I am a citizen and a taxpayer."

He kept his patience. "Of course you are, Mr. Coryell. But we happen to be a Federal agency and our activities are pretty much defined by law. We can't interfere with the operation of local or state authorities until and unless a Federal statute is directly involved."

"Such as?"

"In your case, there is none. At least as far as we know. There's nothing to indicate, for example, that your wife was taken away by force. And even if she was, we couldn't enter into the picture unless you received a ransom note through the mails, or it was shown that she had been taken over a state line."

"But damn it, I've been trying to tell you, nobody knows what's happened to her. She might just as easy have stepped out in the back yard and been grabbed by somebody who drove off with her. I wouldn't have known; I was upstairs under the shower."

I could almost see him shrug over the wire. "Anything's possible. Naturally. But from what you've told me, it would seem as though she left of her own free

will."

"In other words, you're not interested."
"In other words, we're not permitted to be interested-yet. If your local police find evidence to warrant our help, they'll ask for it. That you can be sure of."

"Meanwhile, I'm supposed to be satisfied with the

way they handle it?"

"That's about the size of it, Mr. Coryell. Chances are your wife's got something on her mind and has gone off to think things out. Probably taken a room at a hotel for a day or two. Happens all the time."

I said, "There's another angle to this I haven't mentioned. At almost the exact time Mrs. Coryell vanished, a man named Mark Fremont-one of our neighbors-was found critically injured by a blow on the head. Less than a block away."

His voice perked up slightly. "How did it happen?"

"That's another mystery. Nobody knows, and Fremont is still unconscious."

"Do you think it has a bearing on your problem?" "It could, but frankly I don't know how."

"Then there's still nothing to bring us into the case, sir."

Arguing with him wouldn't get me anything except sore. I thanked him not very graciously and put back the receiver. I reached for a cigarette, and Kathy snapped on the desk lighter.

"No soap."

"Maybe if you called the Washington bureau?"

"Same difference." I blew out a cloud of smoke and watched it drift toward one of the air-conditioning vents. "They're all tied up in red tape, those boys. Swipe a three-cent stamp out of the post office and you get ten agents with shiny briefcases breathing down your neck. But for something like this, no dice."

"What's this about one of your neighbors being

hurt?"

I told her the story, including Box's theory about Fremont seeing me come home without Leona. She frowned over it for a minute, then shook her head. "It may not be as bad as you think, Ames. She might have just wanted to get away for a while. Some little thing troubling her she didn't want to tell you about until she had a chance to think it over."

"At two in the morning?"

"Well-"

"You're as bad as the briefcase boys. Listen, I know my own wife. She could no more pull a stunt like this than she could put arsenic in the potato salad. Try and get that through your— Hey, what's the name of that police captain Keltner had on the Honeywell Coffee Hour here a month or so back?"

"I'll look it up."

She was back almost immediately. "Captain Mc-Naughton, Twelfth Precinct."

"Considering what they paid him, he owes us a

favor. Get him on the line, Kathy."

The captain remembered us, all right. He was cordial enough until I laid the whole story in his lap. "Well, say, Mr. Coryell, that's too bad. Run out on you, hunh?"

"That's not it at all. Either she blacked out sud-

denly and wandered off, or somebody snatched her for some reason we don't know about. Anyway, I want her found—and quick. That's where you come in, Captain."

"Yeah? How?"

"Look, I know it's outside of your province, or whatever you call it, but those town whittlers in Bay Point don't know their hat from third base. I'd like to get a couple of your best men to go out there and take over. I'll see they don't lose anything by it."

That was when the frost set in. "You ought to know

better than that, Mr. Coryell, Bay Point is Westchester County."

"What of it?"

"Like you yourself said, it's outside our district. Hell, we couldn't operate up there even if we wanted to. Even the state police can't butt in on a case inside corporate limits without being asked."

"Well, I'm asking you."

"It's not up to you. It's for the local law out there to do the asking."

"You're telling me I'm stuck, is that it?"

"How do you mean, stuck?"

"The way you put it, I have to depend completely on these halfwits in Bay Point."

The frost was getting thicker by the second. "You happen to be talking about police officers, mister. Men trained to do a job. What do you think I've got over here?"

"Okay, I'm not saying the Bay Point police aren't trained. They can probably handle drunks and keep traffic moving. But this is a job for specialists, Captain. That's what I want. Men accustomed to handling missing-persons cases. And I damn well know this Lieutenant Box out there's not the man for the job."

His voice sharpened. "Box? Would that be John Box?"

"I guess so. It's an unusual name. You know him?"

"If it's the man I think it is, you bet I know him!

Let me tell you something about John Box, Mr. Coryell. There's not a smarter cop in the East. Only thing the matter with him is his temper, which is why he's out in the sticks instead of here in the city where he belongs. Some East Side politician sounded off on John here a few years back and ended up in the hospital. They busted him for it; and come to think of it, I did hear he was on some small-town force in Westchester. Take a tip from me, Mr. Coryell, and leave him alone. He'll not only find your wife; he'll step on anybody who gets in his way!"

And that's as far as I could get with him. I finally slammed down the receiver and got up to walk the floor. Kathy watched me, not saying anything, her ex-

pression troubled.

The phone rang and I beat her to it.

CHAPTER SIX

It was Gordon Swayne, the agency art director. He had some layouts on the Drexel Pen account that needed a fast okay. "Listen, I'm busy."

"You think I'm on a vacation? This stuff's got to be ready by three-thirty and I haven't even ordered

type."

"What's the matter with Freedman? I thought he was handling Drexel."

"He's the boy who's on vacation-not me."

"Bring 'em in."

He was a stocky little guy with wild hair and the world's worst taste in clothes. But there were only two men in town who could handle commercial artwork better, and they were paid twice his salary. He stacked four roughs in front of me, along with several pages of typewritten copy. I spent five minutes going over both while he sat on the corner of my desk puffing a pipe that had never heard of chlorophyll.

"Who wrote this copy?"

"Hughes. Drexel's been his baby nearly a year."

"We can't use it. The layouts are terrific, as if you didn't know. But this copy stinks. Hughes'll have to do a lot better."

"Time's running short, pal. Three-thirty, like I said."

"Okay, get the art finished. I'll give Hughes a goose."

A phone call brought Hughes up from the next floor in a hurry. He shuffled the yellow sheets nervously and looked at me half-belligerently out of weak eyes behind horn-rimmed glasses. "I thought this had real punch, Mr. Coryell. Mr. Freedman saw the trial run and gave it a clean bill. Said to terse it up a bit and put it through. I spent a great deal of time on it."

"You mean you wasted a great deal of time. This stuff just lays there. Your lead's too long, for one thing."

"I followed the layout."

"Then change the layout. You don't have to follow it out the goddam window. And get some color, some bounce, into your message. This kind of junk, you couldn't sell dollar bills for a dime!"

"Maybe I'm too close to it."

"My God, Hughes, don't give me that old stall! Where else can you be, in this business? When it's Drexel Pens, then there's nothing else but Drexel Pens. You got to live them, breathe them, eat them, sleep with them. You're out with a girl, she fits your clutch like the barrel of a Drexel Pen. Her blond hair has the sparkle and richness of the Drexel Diapoint. Her sixth Martini reminds you how much ink a Drexel holds. When you sign the tab you double your usual tip because it's so easy to write with a Drexel. And when you finally crawl into bed with spots in front of your eyes, those spots have got to look like Drexel Pens!"

"Yessir"

"You've got to meet that ball on the rise, Hughes. To make the consumer want your product you've got to want it yourself. That rule operates every department in this agency: Media, Research, Copy, Art, Merchandising—the works. We can sell dog sleds to Hottentots, parachutes to coal miners, foot warmers to amputees. Within our reach are millions upon millions of people. We catch their eye from the pages of

their newspapers and magazines, we stick up billboards along the highways; we woo them, plead with them, warn them against bad breath, smelly armpits, and decaying teeth; we sing at them on radio and TV. They buy our breakfast food for energy and regular elimination and the valuable boxtop, they use our soap to look like Marilyn Monroe and marry a millionaire, they smoke our cigarettes because a guy in a white coat gives them a confidential chat on the benefits of tars and nicotine.

"Millions of people, Hughes! Millions of consumers. And they buy what we tell them to buy. Why? Because we're a bunch of experts who know how to make them want our brands. Those millions work for us. They do what we want them to. They tell us anything we want to know. Anything at—"

I stopped there, my mouth hanging open, as the full meaning of what I had just said dawned on me.

"Hey, that's it!"

Hughes and Kathy were staring at me blankly. I reached up slowly and closed my mouth with my hand and grinned at them. "Okay, Hughes. You know what I mean. Now give me what I want. Two hours is all you get."

He left. I sat down behind my desk and lit a ciga-

rette and went on grinning at Kathy.

"What's so funny?"

"How'd you like my little pep talk?"

"You do it much better with your tongue out of your cheek."

"Don't say that. You got to talk that way every so often or they think you're losing your touch."

"Like 'meeting the ball on the rise'?"

"Well hell, you heard him. 'Terse it up a bit.'
Agency English, kid. Pure agency English."

"Way you were going you should have been good

for another hour at least. What stopped you?"

"An idea. A brainstorm. I know how I'm going to find my wife!"

"I don't get it."

"You will, honey chile. Call a meet-"

The telephone interrupted me. This time it was Ernie Purcell, account supervisor for Glacier Soap. He sounded like he was holding an angry rattlesnake in his lap. "Ames, they're here!"

"Who's here?"

"Glacier. Granger Guilfoyle and that brown-nosed sales manager of his."

I looked at my strapwatch and from it to Kathy. "I thought that Glacier Soap renewal was up for eleven."

She pointed to a notation on my calendar. "There it is. Eleven o'clock."

Into the phone I said, "What's going on here, Ernie? They're an hour ahead of time."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you! Guilfoyle claims it's the only time he's got open and if we want to discuss contract it's now or not at all. You know what's behind all this, don't you?"

"You tell me."

"I got it from Swanson over at Y & E, strictly soundproof, that Jack Reddick's been making a big pitch for the Glacier account. I'd say this is Guilfoyle's way of showing us where we stand."

"Then the hell with it. Get him out of here."

Purcell let out an anguished wail. "Ames! My God, what're you saying? You can't throw a million and a half billing out the window just like that. At least we got to put up a fight."

"I'm in a fight already-a damn sight more important fight than hanging on to a slippery client who doesn't want to be held on to. Either he waits until the time originally agreed on or you handle him without me."

I slammed the receiver down and looked up to meet Kathy's reproving eyes. "Look, kid, don't you start on me."

"You can't do it, Ames."

"You just watch me not do it. Take this down. I want a meeting of the Plans Board, including top assistants, in the Glue Room in exactly ten minutes. Also Publicity. And I hate to do this but you'd better ask Alex Case to sit in."

She was making a row of pothooks in her book, her head bent slightly forward with the dark hair falling along one cheek. Leona's hair had a way of falling along one cheek, too, but hers was like the sun on a yellow flower.

"Anyone else?"

"Well-get hold of Ted Verrick over at Palmer & Verrick, the market researchers. They're in Rockefeller Center. Ask him to get right over here. If he can't make it personally, I want his best man."

"I'm going to say something, Ames."

"Listen, Kathy. I've never thrown any weight at you and I don't want to start now. I think I know a way to find my wife and I'm in no mood to waste time getting it off the ground."

Her eyes didn't waver. "You know perfectly well Mr. Purcell is too—too light to save that account."

"Guilfoyle wants out! And out he'll go, no matter what I or anybody else does to stop him."

"I'm not saying you're wrong, Ames. I'm simply trying to point out that Mr. Frome will be furious if you don't try to stop him."

"I don't need you to tell me my job." My head was starting to pound. "My wife's missing and the hell with Freebolt & Frome. When it comes right down to it, this is an infantile business at best and I'd be bet-

ter off out of it."

"That's the way you feel now. But you're not going to feel that way when Mrs. Coryell comes back. Only by then you'll have managed to jeopardize your whole future."

"Save your breath for those phone calls."

"All right. Just let me say this much: it's going to take a while to get the people you want together. Half the Plans Board aren't even down yet this morning. You want to pace the floor and wring your hands until they show up, or do you want to call the meeting for eleven instead, then go in and save Purcell's neck while you're waiting? It's only an idea and I'm not going to say another word."

Unexpectedly she burst into tears.

I looked at her bowed head and the silly wisp of handkerchief. "Okay, damn it. You're right. But someday, just for the hell of it, be a little wrong, will you? I'm getting an inferiority complex."

Her smile was radiant. I tipped a hand at her and

stalked out of the office.

CHAPTER SEVEN

They were in chairs around the conference table, just sitting there, not talking, when I walked in. The agency crew looked like something out of a tooth-paste ad, all teeth and radiating a forced cheerfulness that fooled nobody.

Ernie Purcell bounded to his feet and came charging over to lead me to an empty chair next to him at the head of the table. "Sit right down, Ames, and we'll get this show on the road. You know Mr. Guilfoyle, of course. And Mr. Stoll. I informed Mr. Guilfoyle you might be delayed a few seconds, and he very kindly agreed to wait."

Granger Guilfoyle's small hard eyes said he had never been kind to anybody in his life and this was no time to start. "Hell of a way to run a business,

Coryell. My time happens to be valuable."

"Then show up when you're supposed to," I said. There was a stunned silence. Ernie Purcell reeled in his chair. You don't talk to clients that way. Not ever and for no reason, including mopery, rape, and bad manners. The advertising industry regards clients as a kind of expensive and fragile glassware, to be handled with sandpapered fingers, washed in the blood of account executives, and polished with the flayed skins of department chiefs.

Guilfoyle stared at me. There was a baffled gleam in his deep-set eyes. "All right," he rumbled. "I'll admit you got a point there. Only I'm due back in Toledo quicker'n I figured and I don't want to leave this business of a new contract hanging." He wasn't exactly a sight for sore eyes. He stood several inches past six feet and was as thin as the top rail on a backwoods fence. He wore a rusty black suit that had been pressed about the time Lindbergh was flying the Atlantic, a three-dollar white shirt with a Hoover collar, and a string cravat that had been tied with a pair of pliers. All this and a long bony face full of blackheads gave him the look of a bankrupt undertaker.

But he was still a Freebolt & Frome client, with a total billing close to a million and a half dollars. He owned the Glacier Soap Company, lock, stock, and animal fat, and served as board of directors, president, treasurer, and probably swept out the offices nights. He knew every nickel that came in and had his thumb print on every penny that went out. What he didn't know about advertising would have filled ten years of the Congressional Record, including supplements. Not that a lack of knowledge kept him from sticking both hands past the elbow into our operation of the Glacier account. Not this boy. He had worn out two account supervisors the first year, and Purcell, the present incumbent, was already complaining of sharp pains in his duodenum.

There was a general pulling up of chairs, of getting memorandum pads at exactly the right angle on the shiny surface of the table, a fiddling with freshly sharpened pencils. Leland Stoll, Glacier's sales manager, a round-faced, balding little cipher, kept a wary eye on his boss, ready to jump in the right direction. Guilfoyle transferred a gnarled stogie from an ash tray to his lipless mouth and blew a cloud of oily smoke at the ceiling. His attitude said it was up to us to haul the freight, to spin the compass and find out which way was north.

Purcell climbed to his feet and picked up the top

folder from a pile in front of him. "To begin with, Mr. Guilfoyle," he said, aiming his remarks directly at the boy who counted, "I'd like you to know that this agency welcomed the challenge you threw in its lap almost exactly one year ago. We knew right away that just reaching into the old bag of tricks wasn't going to be enough. Our cue was to get our best team in there, pick an All-American quarterback to call the signals, and get that ball across the goal line. This was the big leagues and the competition tough as whale droppings, but we made up our minds to finish right up there on top..."

right up there on top . . ."

Blah-blah-blah. Rah-rah-rah. A few years of this and you can't talk any other way. Agency English. Spoken only in Madison Avenue and environs. Check and double-check and let's put wheel's under it, get it rolling, fire those jets, up-periscope and see where we're at. Let's hit that line and sink that basket and cage that puck. Let's find out that score, let's be agency-wise and price-wise and talent-wise and dollar for dollar you can't beat a Pontiac. And meanwhile Leona is missing and God knows in what kind of trouble and I'm sitting here with

"... appears these past twelve months have found "... appears these past twelve months have found Glacier Soap hitting right on target. We like to feel, here at F & F, that Alex Case is the boy I've got to be ready for. Sure as hell's hot he'll do his our part in that picture, thanks in a large measure to many excellent and highly stimulating suggestions from you, sir. Let me chart out for you briefly, some of the data compiled by our various departments."

He glanced across the table almost eagerly, looking for a word of commendation, or at least an interested expression. Granger Guilfoyle was studying his cigar with open boredom; Leland Stoll's moon face held nothing except a vacant smile. Our own group,

made up of Copy Chief, Art Director, Media man, Radio and TV Director, and a man from Merchandising, along with Purcell and myself, was obviously spellbound. Almost too spellbound. Actually, every-body in the room was positive that Glacier would no longer be around come the first of November, that we were merely burning up ammunition in a battle already lost.

"Total billing," Purcell continued doggedly, "amounted to one million, four hundred and twelve I'll lay it right on the line. This is the way it has to be, boys, and no argument. Box is bound to scream at my butting in on his investigation but at the rate he's going Leona can die of old age before hundred and seventeen dollars. Fifty per cent of this sum was expended in newspaper and magazine media. Forty per cent went into TV and radio, seven per cent outdoor advertising, the remaining three per cent for miscellaneous items."

Guilfoyle stirred. "What miscellaneous items?"

"Uh-" Purcell flushed a blotchy pink. "I-uhdon't seem to have a breakdown on that phase, sir. However, I'll have one in the mail to you within twenty-four hours."

It was the best anyone could have done in answer to what was obviously an unjust bit of carping. Guil-foyle put on an expression that said what can you expect from a bunch of dopes, and went back to his cigar.

Purcell went back to the papers in the open folder. "Results," he said, a shade too loudly, "ranged from encouraging to excellent. Midwest sales alone show a six point four one rise following an extensive . . ."

Why don't I just get up and walk out of here? Soap, for Christ's sake! My wife may be stretched out under

a dirty sheet down at the morgue and I'm supposed

to sit around and squeeze my brains into a lather over how to sell a combination of alkali and fat acids and perfume. You press the stuff into bars and you stuff the bars into packages psychologically designed for the correct eye appeal and you hire a slew of high-priced talent to sit around on their fat behinds and dream up ways and means to sucker the public into thinking that it kills all bacteria except millionaires and movie

"... Coast and Rocky Mountain areas responded favorably to a similar campaign, bolstered by the wide use in drugstores and supermarts of our new display and tie-in sales plan. The Eastern Seaboard and Middle Atlan—"

"Just how long," Guilfoyle said flatly, "does this have to go bn?"

The folder shook visibly in Purcell's hand. "It needn't go on at all, sir. Naturally I assumed you would be interested in the results of—"

"I know the results. I knew 'em before you did—and not by looking at a lot of gobbledegook graphs, either." He put up a knobby forefinger and tapped the side of his country-style haircut. "I carry my figures up here, sonny, and I don't mind telling the rest of you boys I don't like the looks of those figures. What I wanta get down to is the kinda selling job you got lined up for next year, only I'm letting you know right here and now I'm not going to go along with anything as weak and wishy-washy as you birds pulled on me the last time."

Purcell flashed me an agonized appeal, which I ignored by lighting a cigarette. He was account supervisor for Glacier; let him handle it or go back to writing copy. Certainly I was in no mood to osculate the pelvis of this soap-kettle king, even if my not doing it cost Freebolt & Frome fifteen per cent of a million

and a half bucks. I was here because there was an unavoidable delay in getting at what I had to do, and because a man on a job often goes through the motions even when his heart's not in it.

"As you wish, Mr. Guilfoyle," Purcell said thickly. "Incidentally, it might interest you to know that we really scraped the bottom of the barrel in pooling our brains, idea-wise, to work out a sales campaign that will really vacuum the consumers' pockets. I know I speak for us all here when I tell you we've burned the midnight oil Frome's bound to be sore for channeling everything...if I can come up with something to get myself covered when he calls me on the carpet. What am I worried about? Maybe he'll bawl hell out of me, maybe he'll fire me. A lot I care! If he thinks for one goddam minute that finding my wife doesn't mean more to me than a future in this crummy con game, then he can stick using last year's operation as a broad base, we have revamped all newspaper and national magazine layouts, carrying out the same dignified approach but blending it with a heart-warming human interest appeal and on a much more eye-arresting plane. We—"

Guilfoyle stirred impatiently. "Let's see what you

got."

Purcell's shrug was resigned. He nodded to Gordon Swayne, the art director, who picked up a large portfolio and came around to the unoccupied side of the table. From the portfolio he brought out several big sheets of Bristol board and placed the top one on a display easel.

It was a pen-and-ink finish, done with the sweep and simplicity which made up the Swayne touch. It showed, very large, a curly-haired four-year-old in her bath. She was bending forward with both arms outstretched, clutching at a cake of Glacier floating just out of reach. Above the drawing, in tall thin sans serif lettering, was the caption: KEEP YOUR YOUTH ALWAYS WITHIN REACH. Underneath was a single block of copy, leaded out and with plenty of air, which read:

Only Glacier holds the true secret of youth, for only Glacier keeps your body as soft and smooth, as fresh and fragrant, as a child's.

That is why millions of smart women insist on Glacier soap for their bath. They know a lovely skin is the hallmark of the young, just as they know that harsh alkaline soaps remove the natural bloom of youth.

Yes... Nature's own formula for beauty is to be found in each pure, gentle cake of Glacier. For your skin's sake—for your sake—won't you tell your dealer

you want Glacier Soap-today?

"Of course you've noticed, Mr. Guilfoyle," Purcell was saying, "that we keep hitting the youth theme right on the nose. Your idea, sir, and at first glance it would seem both the artist and the copywriter have managed to jell that message."

"No good," Granger Guilfoyle said promptly. "That last line kills the whole thing dead: You stuck a goddam question mark out on the end there. That's weak. Wishy-washy. A last line's gotta have impact! You don't ask 'em to buy my soap. You tell 'em! They gotta be halfway home with four bars before they remember razor blades was what they went in for. How about that Stoll?" about that, Stoll?"

Bars is right, you old goat. Prison bars, made of your stinking soap, with a pair of nyloned legs on the other side to represent my wife. No use bringing out the saws and hammers and chisels. Nothing cuts through

Glacier Soap-but nothing! They mix it with Guilfoyle blood-and tempered steel is butter compared with

"... must admit you're absolutely right, G. G. I knew there was something that didn't quite ring the bell. As usual you've put your finger squarely on the real flaw. The way it blimp! You look like a blimp, Stoll, anybody ever tell you? Pump some more hot air into that bloated belly of yours, paint signs on your beam, and they could float you around town as an ad for Glacier last line has to hit 'em right where they live. At least that's the way it looks to me, G. G."
"I see where we stumbled, gentlemen," Purcell

said, "and I want to go on record right here and now as agreeing with you one hundred per cent. I'd say that question mark pulls down the value of the copy almost to the vanishing point. I suggest we pass this on to Mr. Crandall, here, to work the bugs out of the

problem."

Crandall, the agency Copy Chief, was a barrel-chested, slope-shouldered Irishman who had recently joined Freebolt & Frome. Not only could he produce selling copy on anything from air-conditioners to zwieback, he could backtrack and make qualified statements with the best of them. He propped his elbows on the table, now, and made a tent of his fingers and

spent three full minutes studying the copy. He chewed his lips and cocked his head and squinted his eyes, putting on a show of concentration and cerebration that fascinated even Granger Guilfoyle.

"This," he said finally, "is right off the scalp and I wouldn't want anybody to think for a minute that it can't be upgraded. But as long as the ball's in my court—and understand I'm just thinking on my feet here—it might be an idea to take the words 'won't won't out of that last line. That would give us: 'For you' out of that last line. That would give us: 'For

your skin's sake—for YOUR sake—tell your dealer you want Glacier Soap—today!"

Then the silence. A waiting for The Reaction.

Then the silence. A waiting for The Reaction. Granger Guilfoyle gave it plenty of thought, his bony face as blank as a bar of his own soap. Finally he stuck the stogie back in his face and drew in some smoke and let it trickle out. "What else you got?"

Everybody's lungs went back to work. Gordon

Everybody's lungs went back to work. Gordon Swayne, a fine film of perspiration covering his hands despite the air-conditioning, placed the next piece of art on the easel. This one showed a sylvan glade, heavy on the weeping willows and winding stream, with a girl and a boy (accent on youth) talking about Glacier. It breathed good taste and class and distinction, in four colors, and the copy was lyrical but restrained.

Granger Guilfoyle jumped in with both feet. He poked and prodded and found fault with everything from commas to the weeping willows. Faces around the table grew long and taut. A spot of color burned in Purcell's cheeks and he was beginning to stammer.

It went on that way, only increasingly worse, through the balance of the artwork. By the time Purcell finished outlining what the agency expected to do radio and TV-wise for Glacier, nerves were frayed to the snapping point and I was ready to beat Guilfoyle over the head with the stump of one of his own arms.

Purcell finished playing the last of three transcribed commercials. He shut off the machine and came back to the table and slid the disks back into their envelopes with almost exaggerated care. At this point his cue was to launch into a sparkling summation calculated to sweep the client into reaching for his fountain pen and the agency contract. But the droop in his shoulders, the drawn lines around his mouth, said that

he had shot his bolt and the rest was up to Granger Guilfoyle.

The president of Glacier Soaps, Inc. leaned back and dusted tobacco ash off his shirt front. His movements had a kind of deliberate finality that was unmistakable. He turned a chill eye on his sales manager. "What's your opinion, Stoll?"

Leland Stoll had missed none of the signs. He coughed an apologetic little cough and put on that regretful look. "I must confess, G. G., that I'm rather disappointed. It seems to me there are certain—well, weaknesses, shall we say?—in the over-all strategy. The whole tone is—is wishy-washy."

Guilfoyle's open hand hit the table. "There's your answer, boys. If my own sales manager's not satisfied, how d'ya expect me to be? Understand, I got nothing personal against you guys. You mean well and you try hard. But far's I'm concerned you missed the boat by from here to Texas. All I been getting this morning is a bunch of wishy-washy junk I'd fire my office boy for coming up with. I gotta have punch and socko. Hard-hitting copy. This weak-kneed crap might be fine for Cadillacs and ladies' pants. But not, by God, for what I'm selling!"

Purcell was breathing with his mouth open. "We've upped Glacier sales by nearly seven per cent. That's a record any agency in the business would be proud of. And I can assure you it's only the beginning. With the cumulative effects of—"

"Horse manure! Any time I spend a million and a half bucks I want more'n a lousy seven-per-cent increase. That I can get by scribbling on privy walls. Come on, Stoll."

He started to stand up, ignoring Purcell's stricken expression. I got out of my chair and walked over and stood in front of him. "Sit down, Guilfoyle."

He gave me an unblinking glare. "Now, look here, Cor-"

"My turn," I said. "No weak-kneed crap this time. 'Punch and socko'—if I'm quoting you correctly. Okay, it just so happens we've got exactly that kind of campaign tucked away in our files. Under X, for extra. It's just lying there waiting for some big man with vision and guts to come along and give us the goahead. A man like you, Guilfoyle."

Not a sound in the room. The man from Toledo

Not a sound in the room. The man from Toledo stared at me, his face showing nothing but black-heads.

"No weeping willows and young love in Plan X," I said. "No dimpled darlings and dulcet dignity. This time the consumer doesn't get caressed. This time we step on his toes and scream in his ear. It's a circus sideshow, with loud-mouthed pitchmen and Oriental dancing girls.

"Some great gimmicks, Guilfoyle. We'll pay Miss America to take off her clothes and step into a bathtub with your soap. Only she'll do it in Madison Square Garden between rounds of a world's championship fight. We'll string a wire from Radio City to the Empire State building and hire Grandma Moses to walk it a hundred feet in the air, scattering Glacier Soap coupons to the crowds below."

Behind me somebody moved his feet. It sounded

like a load of coal going down the chute.

"Magazine advertising like you've never seen before," I said. "Picture a double-spread in full color. The left-hand page shows an open tool chest. Stocked with saws, screw-drivers, hammers, planes, chisels, drills—the works. Hanging over the edge of the chest are four pairs of nylon hose, sheer as a shadow. On the facing page we run a heading: 'Do You Keep Your Nylons in the Tool Chest?' Then comes your body

copy: 'Of course you don't! Delicate fabrics deserve the finest of care. So stop using ordinary soap flakes that give your lingerie that "tool-chest" look. Switch to Glacier Flakes—today!'

"Now take radio and television. You've never heard singing commercials and spot announcements like the ones in Plan X. Nobody has! Audiences won't stop at writing complaining letters to the networks; they'll grab shotguns and head for Toledo! We wrap beauty-contest winners in cellophane bath towels and shove them in front of the cameras holding a bar of Glacier off to one side at eye level while giving it that adoring look—the kind of look that makes the average viewer reach for the nearest ax. We cut out the soft voices and make them loud and brassy and abrasive to the nerves. In short, we'll make the name Glacier as well known as aspirin—only it'll give headaches, not stop them.

"But the real clincher, Guilfoyle, is the merchandising plan. It provides for a city-to-city campaign that would make advertising history. Coast-to-coast coverage on a simultaneous basis, hitting every hamlet, village, and town from Bangor to Burbank. We'll load every local newspaper, put up window streamers, wall banners, and car cards. We'll plaster a 24-sheet in Day-Glo on every billboard and blank wall in the country. But the real crusher will be a large fleet of dirigibles—blimps—each an exact replica of a cake of Glacier Soap. We'll float them over every city and suburb, with the crews tossing handbills like confetti!"

I paused for breath. "Of course, Plan X isn't for pikers. The dollar-squeezers couldn't touch it. But for a tycoon of your vision and scope it's made to order."

I stopped there and waited. Waited for the big ex-

pensive client to stand up and lay one on my chin. I wanted him to, like I could never remember wanting anything before in my life. He'd get it back, brother, and he could stuff the fifteen per cent.

The president of Glacier Soaps, Inc. dug a chewedlooking pen from deep under his right arm and said, "Now you're talking. Trot out this contract you boys

been yapping about and we'll get her signed."

I don't remember getting out of there. But I knew something I'd never really understood before. In this business anything you wanted was yours, no matter how fantastic. All you needed was a loud voice, a sense of complete conviction, and no fear—and the boys in the Brooks Brothers suits and the Countess Mara ties would give it to you.

Now I knew how I'd handle my meeting with the

Plans Board.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I RAN INTO KATHY in the hall. "Three minutes until eleven, Ames. Nice timing. How did it go?"

"The way they always go. A lot of noise and a new

ulcer or two. Any calls?"

"Ruth Dunlap says you wanted to see her."

"Yeah. She in her office?"

"She was. And this Lieutenant Box—he telephoned to say he has no word yet but that he'd like you to call him back."

"Why the hell should I if he's got nothing?"

"Well, don't hit me, mister." Her smile was a little crooked. "I'm with you."

I put a hand on her arm. "Sorry, kid. Nerves."

I rode up to forty-three and walked to the far end of the corridor and on into the small Spartanlike office next to Kenneth Frome's. Ruth Dunlap, his private secretary, was at the typewriter. She was tall, thin, forty, with the gray beginning to come through her dark, pulled-back hair. Nobody would ever call her beautiful but she had that freshly scrubbed look and her eyes were direct and without guile. "Nice to have you back, Mr. Coryell. How was the vacation?"

"Adequate," I said. Apparently Kathy hadn't mentioned my wife's disappearance. That was fine; I didn't want the news spread around until I was ready to do the spreading myself. "I'm told the man is out

of town. Fishing in Mexico, or something?"

She smiled. "Let's just say he's in Mexico, period."

"Not that oilman's daughter again?"

"And why not? Mr. Frome should get married."

"At fifty-three why would he bother?"

She drew down the corners of her mouth, registering mock disapproval. "That's an awful thing for a happily married man like you to say."

An unwitting jab, but a jab just the same. I said,

"How does he feel about calls from the office?"

"No! Not even life or death. Those were his exact words."

"I really ought to talk to him."

"I wouldn't dare! Of course, if we were about to lose the Royal Cigarette account, or something equally as appalling-"

"Ît's nothing like that. This is more or less a per-

sonal matter."

"Then I'd certainly suggest holding it up, Mr. Coryell. He'll be back tomorrow night anyway."

I glanced at my strapwatch. "Okay. I'm due at a Plans Board meeting right now, so I'll run along. Be

Actually I hadn't wanted to call Kenneth Frome at all. But now I was on record as having made an effort to clear my plan with him beforehand. That could make a mighty big difference later on.

It had been called the Glue Room ever since we made an important contract stick by using it to impress a manufacturer from a small town in Virginia. It was long and fairly wide, windows along two sides, a couple of Chinese red couches, and a big Swedish modern conference table down the middle. Sea-green and silver grasscloth on the walls, dark-green carpeting underfoot, pale-green monk's cloth drapes with a block design in the same red as the couches. A builtin bookcase in one corner became a well-stocked bar when the right button was pushed, and across from that was a pale-ash desk, very modern in the lines, where a secretary could take down whatever nightschool English floated by. Touches of silver and chrome in the right places and exactly the right amounts finished the job.

I came in at 11:06, with Kathy. They were waiting

for me, their backsides planted comfortably in the leather armchairs around the table, pads and pencils within easy reach, cigar and cigarette smoke climbing from individual chrome ash trays into the cool air. Freshly shaved cheeks, shining teeth, orderly hair, un-obtrusive suits, colored shirts with tab collars, quiet ties, dull polish on the shoes. Agency men.

Kathy went over and sat down at the secretary's desk and got out a shorthand notebook. I said, "Good morning, gentlemen," and walked down the room to the far end of the table where two vacant chairs were standing. A young man with the face of a Yale undergraduate stood up from one of the couches. "Mr. Coryell? I'm Otis Uhlman, from Palmer & Verrick. Your secretary suggested I wait in here."

"Verrick couldn't make it?"

"No, sir. He's in Philadelphia and won't be-"

"Make yourself comfortable."

As the one who had called the meeting, I was entitled to the head of the table. I sat down and made a minor production out of lighting a cigarette. The ten faces along the big board wore expressions ranging from obsequious to challenging. Without Kenneth Frome, these clambakes followed pretty much the same pattern: a well-mannered and carefully casual dog-fight between the top brass, with the lesser fry fighting to stay out of the middle. Any minute now I'd be the target for sniping from the three or four

men in the room strong enough to get away with it.

Only this time I was leaving off the velvet glove.

This time it wasn't some easel presentation to bicker over. I had a plan and I wanted to get it on the road,

and anybody who got in my way would think a house fell on him.

I breathed out some smoke and gave them my Sunday smile. "Thanks for coming in, men. I might as well tell you right off, what I've got to say is going to sound like a whodunit script. I can't help that. You see, my wife is missing."

It went past them like a bullet. They stared at me blankly. I hunched my shoulders and leaned into my audience. "My wife disappeared from her home around two o'clock this morning. I don't know why and I don't know where. In fact nobody knows, including the police. She might have been kidnaped or she may simply have suffered a lapse of memory and wandered away."

They had it now. They made the vague sounds peo-ple make when you tell them a business acquaintance has just dropped dead or gone south with company funds. A couple of the faces took on that knowing look—the one that says these things happen all the time and who has your wife been carrying on with, old man?

Malcolm Hewlitt, two chairs down on the left, had something to say. He was the vice-president in charge of Merchandising, a big beefy red-faced number who looked like an unemployed admiral. He was married to Freebolt's sister, which was what got him in in the first place, and what he knew about the agency game would have fitted loosely under a hangnail. "Very sorry to hear this, Ames," he rumbled, mak-

ing it sound like some sort of accusation. "Mighty fine woman, Mrs. Coryell. I-ah-I know I speak for us all in hoping she-ah-turns up quite soon. But surely her-ah-absence, her absence isn't the reason you've

called this meeting of-ah-of minds?"

"That's exactly why I called it."

He reared back as though I'd thrown a knife at him. "I'm sure I-ah-I fail to see just what you hope-"

I said, "We're going to find her!"
They didn't get it. Not one of them. I looked along the table at two lines of blank ovals topped with various shades of hair, and a couple of ovals with no hair at all. "The Bay Point police are a bunch of incompetents and the FBI refuses to come into the picture on the grounds that no Federal law is involved. Private detectives are out; it's too big a job for one or two men to do in a hurry, and if she is in some kind of danger, I don't want any time wasted. That's why I'm suggesting we do the job ourselves."

Gaylord Krantz, account executive for Neynell Cosmetics, our biggest client, stuck up his hand like a traffic cop. "Hold on a minute, Ames. Leaving out all the other objections I can think of, we'd be 'way out

of our depth in an operation like this. It takes an organization specifically trained for that purpose."

"And you think we're not?" I said. "You know what a detective agency or a Missing Persons bureau would do on a deal like this? I'll tell you. They'd send out operators to ask questions, to ring doorbells and hold up a picture and say, 'Have you seen this woman?' Well, by God we can do the same job—and we can do it one hell of a lot better! We've got I don't know how many millions of operators who can hold a pic-

how many millions of operators who can hold a picture up in front of people and ask that question."

The way they were staring at me you'd think I'd gone crazy entirely. Wilton Demrosch, account executive for Royal Cigarettes, put it into words. "You gone nuts, Ames? What 'millions of operators'?"

"Television sets."

"What?"

"You heard me. Television sets. They don't have

to ring doorbells to get an audience, either. They get invited into the living-room! All day long and most of the night they hold up deodorants and floor wax and tea bags for an audience that doesn't pass up a single word or picture. So you tell me why they can't just as easy hold up a picture of my wife."

I had them now. I got up and walked around in a

tight circle and back again to my chair. I put my el-bows on the leather back and pushed my jaw out at them and went on talking, hammering it across. "The way I see it, this will be an out-and-out sales

campaign. The biggest we've ever tackled. The whole agency's going in on it, plus some outside help. Only this is going to be unlike any other campaign you ever heard of. Instead of selling scouring pads or sar-dines, we sell the consumer a job. The job of finding Leona Corvell!"

That was when everybody had something to say at the same time. I listened politely, keeping an uneasy eye on the few in a position to block me. Particularly Jackson Elliott, at the far end of the table. He was a vice president, in charge of Media, and the bird most likely to give me real trouble. A small, scholarly man in his fifties, he never actively opposed any of the other executives, leaving that to Lew Murdoch, his assistant. Like most blocking backs, Murdoch picked up a lot of bruises to keep unfriendly hands off the man who called the signals.

They didn't keep me waiting. I saw Murdoch nod to something Elliott whispered in his ear and I

braced myself as Murdoch rapped for quiet.

"It just doesn't add up, Mr. Coryell, if you'll pardon my saying so. Pictures of wanted criminals, for example, have been flashed on television screens without the public rushing out to join the manhunt."

I shook my head with weary patience. "Honest to

Christ, Lew, I'm surprised at you. Can't you see where the difference lies? For one thing, wanted crooks are a dime a gross, and police bulletins about as stimulating as a shot of Novocain. We use completely different methods. We've got imagination and a sense of the dramatic. Our entire business is based on an ability to dramatize and glamorize products, to create a desire for what we have to sell. We make the public do what we want it to do.

"Another thing: right here we have all the ingredients of a top-grade mystery-suspense script. A woman is missing under dramatic circumstances. Not some thirty-buck-a-week typist from Canarsie, but a beautiful Westchester society woman. She comes home from a summer in Maine, walks in the front door of her home—and right on out the back way without a word to her husband. She leaves a three-year-old child she loves with all her heart. A neighbor who may have a clue to her disappearance is found unconscious and near death from a blow on the head. Where is Leona Coryell? Why did she disappear? Is she a victim of amnesia or was she kidnaped? Is she alive or dead? Like I said, all the elements of a whodunit. But with one big difference: this time the public can get into the act!"

I broke it off long enough to light a cigarette and get rid of the match. They were hooked, all right, but that didn't mean I had them in the boat. Not by from here to Detroit.

"You think for a minute," I went on, "that Joe Consumer is going to let us down if we appeal to him our way? Why, he's the boy who supports us! He buys what we tell him to buy, does what we tell him to do. Call him up any time and ask him what program he's got tuned in or what magazine he's reading or what newspaper he buys. He tells us. Ask him how a Royal

cigarette compares with the brand he usually smokes. He picks ours every time. Ask him to try our toothpaste for thirty days and the graph shoots up through the top of the chart. Scare him, amuse him, excite him, entertain him, and he'll come through for you every time. I tell you we can't miss!"

My favorable reference to Royal Cigarettes had won Wilton Demrosch to my side, which was why I had put it in. He was nodding emphatically even before I finished talking. "You got something, all right, Ames! Make a hell of a stunt!"

That brought in Malcolm Hewlitt again, his wat-

That brought in Malcolm Hewlitt again, his wattles quivering. "I-ah-I oppose it. I'm not unsympathetic, Ames. Only natural that you want to-ah-to locate Mrs. Coryell. But that's what the police are for. We can't—ah—we can't suspend operations simply to put over some—ah—some—ah—some purely personal matter. It's not—ah—it's not in the cards."

I slapped a hand down on the table and they all I slapped a hand down on the table and they all jumped. "One or two days! That's all I want. Forty-eight hours at the most. A two-day campaign on a local basis. If that doesn't get results. we might as well drop it. By that time she could be too far away from here for anything short of a national campaign." I glanced at my watch. "Nine hours ago my wife vanished, either by choice or by force. There's a good chance she's somewhere within fifty miles of us right now. Let's get at it before the distance grows any greater."

Krantz still wasn't sold. "This is the age of speed. In nine hours she could be in Outer Mongolia."

"Then we'll locate the plane that took her there. That's exactly what I'm trying to get across to you people. A woman can't fade out like a chalk mark under an eraser. She has to come in contact with others—a cab driver, a landlady, a waitress. Somebody,

for the love of Pete!"

A throat was cleared and a colorless voice said, "Mr. Coryell?"

It had to come sooner or later, and now was as

good a time as any. "Okay, Alex."

"Mr. Frome is away, as you know. I'm afraid I can't authorize any considerable expenditures in his absence—at least, not for a matter outside of agency business."

Alex Case, the company comptroller. A small, prissy man who used lifts in his pointed black shoes and wore blue serge summer and winter. He had the high rounded forehead of a bank examiner, no chin to speak of, and a pair of colorless eyes as cold and full of glitter as two ice cubes in mineral water. Like most men who spend too much time with figures, he was as precise and inflexible as an adding machine—and with about the same amount of warmth.

"You've got a point there," I conceded. "One I've given some thought to. Like most of us here, I make good money and I spend it. But I've got a mother-in-law who's filthy with the stuff, and if necessary I can

get it from her."

I didn't add that nothing conceivable could make it necessary. Leona's mother was worth half a million, maybe more, but prying her loose from a dollar of it would have taken the Third Army, complete with tanks. Not that I would have asked her, or taken it if offered. It all would have to rest with Kenneth Frome. If he figured I was out of line on this, then I would be minus a job and an eventual partnership. Actually, until Alex Case brought the subject up, I hadn't given it a thought. I wanted my wife back and the hell with details.

Anyway, while my answer may not have satisfied Case, it at least shut him up for the moment. And that

was when Malcolm Hewlitt came back for the third time. "I'm sorry, Ames. But I—ah—I must oppose it. The—ah—the welfare of Freebolt & Frome must—ah—must come ahead—"

"Shut up!" I slammed my fist down on the table and glared at him. "You damned old windbag, I've had about enough of you. Keep out of my hair!"

"Now see here, you-ah-you-"

"I'm warning you, Hewlitt. I've taken all the-"

"-can't talk to me like-"

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!"

The whole room was buzzing. Hewlitt was on his feet, his face the color of a Nevada sunset. Those not mixing in were enjoying the fireworks and trying not to show it. Management hadn't come to an open break like this before in the history of the firm.

The phone rang at the desk where Kathy was sitting, cutting off the babble of voices as though somebody had thrown the switch on a noisy radio.

"For you, Mr. Coryell."

I took the receiver. I was so angry my hands were shaking. Kathy, straight-faced, closed one eye in a slow, deliberate wink, and it was like a shot of bonded bourbon. "Coryell speaking."

"Bay Point police, Mr. Coryell."

Box. I would have recognized that voice over a filter mike. "All right. Have you found her?"

"Did you get my message?"

"I was told you called, if that's what you mean, and that you had nothing to report. As for calling

you back, I've been busy.''

His voice was dry as a mirage. "So have we, Mr. Coryell. Nobody we can find saw her last night. She didn't take any of the local cabs or trains, and no woman answering her description checked into any of the near-by hotels."

"Where does that leave us?"

"Still trying. One of the waiters and the cashier at the Endore Inn, near Bridgeport, remember you being in there last night. They identified your wife from her picture."

"Kind of kicks your theory in the head, doesn't it?"

"There's forty miles of fairly open country between

Bridgeport and Bay Point, friend."

I fought to keep my voice down. "In other words, Lieutenant, plenty of room to hide her body. Is that what you're getting at?"

"We try not to overlook any possibilities."

"Even if you waste a lot of time not overlooking the silly ones. Like I told you, Box, I'm not waiting while you guys scratch around out there. I'm putting some experts on the job."

"Anything else you want to tell me?"

"Something I want to ask you. What's the word on Mark Fremont?"

"Still in a coma. His wife insists you're responsible."
"Fits right in with your thinking, doesn't it?"

"We'll wait and see how he makes out, Mr. Coryell.

You'll hear from us."

I hung up and turned back to the table. Hewlitt, still smarting was waiting to jump me. I said "Mal-

still smarting, was waiting to jump me. I said, "Malcolm, I owe you an apology. I had no business blowing my top that way, and I hope you'll make allowances for the strain I'm under and forgive me."

It threw him completely off stride, as it was meant to. "We must—ah—we must keep our—"

I went right on. "As you probably guessed, gentlemen, that phone call was from the Bay Point police. They admit being no closer to finding my wife than they were nine hours ago. That means it's up to us to take over, and I'm asking you—all of you—as friends and co-workers to do this my way. As you know, Mr.

Frome is in Mexico and not expected back before tomorrow night. Ordinarily I'd wait to clear this through him, but there's no way to get in touch with him before then, and delaying matters until his return could be ruinous. So I want to get it into the record right now that I'm assuming full responsibility for my own actions and your co-operation. If Mr. Frome fails to approve of the steps I'm taking, then it'll be my head and nobody else's."

There was some fidgeting, not nearly as much as I'd expected, but nobody came up with any more vocal objections. Hewlitt was still dazed at getting clipped and drawing an apology within seconds of each other,

so there was no more trouble from that quarter.

"Okay," I said briskly. "I'll zero you in, one by one, on how I want this handled. First, the artwork. Gordon, I'll give you a photograph of my wife. Silhouette it with Chinese white and get me a couple hundred strong high-key glossy prints. If that takes too long, we'll have to use Photostats; I'll leave it up to you. Also, do me a fast, simple layout for a broadside, centering a three-by-five cut of her picture, with 'Have you seen this woman?', large size, across the top. Give me room for three or four lines of copy underneath the photograph. Simple and direct, like a police reader. Another fifty in poster form, to go up in and around railway stations and cab stands between here and Bay Point. If you do decide to use Photostats, okay; but I will still need some damn good glossies for the newspapers. Got all that?"

Swayne, scribbling furiously on a pad, nodded once.

"Next, Publicity. Eddie, I want a news release and picture in the hands of the city editor of every daily within a fifty-mile radius. Get your facts from me the minute this meeting breaks. Shoot the stuff out by messenger, then get on the phone and sandbag them,

if you have to, into sticking the story and picture up front where the subway riders can't miss it. The Westchester papers will undoubtedly give you anything you want, since the story concerns a prominent local taxpayer, but let's have the same kind of treatment in the Bronx, Manhattan, Long Island, and the right sections of Jersey. If we move fast and are lucky we catch a lot of tonight's late editions."

Zale's shoebutton eyes gleamed in his thin, shrewd

face. "You leave it to me, Ames."

Jackson Elliott was whispering behind his palm again, while Murdoch nodded rhythmically. I broke in on them with deliberate bluntness. "Lew, I'm going to need a lot of service out of Media and I don't want any argument about it. It's up to you to see that every TV and radio station in this area starts carrying the story this afternoon, and continues to carry it until I blow the whistle. The newscasters are going to be a cinch, but that's not enough. Women don't tune in newscasts during the day. Get in there on station breaks. See if you can snag a few cowcatchers and hitchhikes. Handled right, our clients will be glad to get into the act—particularly if the human-interest angle is exploited. But regardless of the methods you use, I want that picture on the screens!"

Murdoch hesitated, glancing uneasily at his boss. But Elliott wasn't taking a stand while my eyes were

boring into him. "Yes, sir."

"Another thing, Lew," I said. "Hire three or four helicopters to scatter handbills throughout the areas I've mentioned. I'm having half a million printed up for that purpose, with another fifty thousand to be stuffed into mailboxes."

Krantz said, "You want to watch that helicopter stunt, Ames. I've got a hunch you'll be running into a lot of city ordinances on a thing like—"

"So they'll fine us a hundred bucks. I've got more important things to worry about. Now we come to Research." I nodded to Jeff Nolan, whose heavy horn-rimmed glasses glinted at me from halfway down the table. "Jeff, you've got a lot of telephones in your department. I want a man on every one of them. Split up a list of all hotels and rooming houses between Bay Point and New York City, plus the ones in New York itself. Find out if a woman answering my wife's description checked into any of them sometime after two-thirty this morning. Don't miss a one!"

"Brother! You got any idea at all how many-"

"I don't care how many! Phone all of them. You'll get a flock of phony leads unless your boys are smart enough to ask the right questions. Try narrowing them down, but don't overlook anything promising."

"What do we do with the ones that look good?"

"I'll get to that in a minute."

I walked around in another tight circle and stopped in front of the young man from Palmer & Verrick. "That brings me around to you, Mr.—"

"Uhlman. Otis Uhlman."

"You've heard enough to know what's going on here?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, I want thirty researchers. They've got to be intelligent and thorough. They're going to be the legmen on this project. Stick around until you are given a stack of Photostats of my wife's picture, plus mimeographed sheets with the information you'll need. These you'll distribute to your men. Some of these men are to locate the conductors on every train to enter Grand Central Station from Westchester County between two-thirty and six this morning. Also, every porter and newsstand attendant on duty at Grand Central during those hours. Check cab dis-

patchers. Get in touch with cab companies and get a look at their trip sheets to locate all drivers who picked up fares at Grand Central between two-thirty and six. Show all these people the picture and description of Mrs. Coryell. Jog their memories. At that hour of night there won't be many women arriving at Grand Central, even fewer of them blond and wearing white coats. Do the same kind of job at all stations between Bay Point and Manhattan. All this clear to you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hold a number of your men at your office. Any leads that come in here will be passed on to them to run down—including those received by Mr. Nolan of our own Research. They're to call me here immediately on anything that looks halfway promising. I expect a lot of overtime to be put into this, but keep them the hell out of bars and the movies. Any questions?"

"No, sir."

"That's it, then. And pass the word along that the man who comes up with the pay-off lead picks himself up a five-hundred-dollar bonus."

I turned to the others. "I guess that about covers everything I can think of at the moment. Naturally I'll welcome any suggestions, and I don't have to tell you how much I appreciate your co-operation. Any questions, I'll be in my office."

"Now I know what a steam-roller is! Surprised me they didn't give you more of a fight."
"Thanks for that wink. It came in handy."

"Poor Mr. Hewlitt. He never knew what hit him."

"Kenneth Frome's the baby I'm worried about."

"I wouldn't, Ames. He likes you."

"Yeah. But how much?"

CHAPTER NINE

IT WAS NEARLY NOON before I got back to my desk. Kathy had lunch sent in for us both, and between mouthfuls of ham-and-cheese on toast, washed down with black coffee, I dictated copy for the news releases. While this was going on, Gordon Swayne came in with comprehensives on the broadsides and posters. A broadside, in case you didn't know, is one of those flimsy throwaways you find shoved in your mailbox or under your door every too often. Zincs would be made and to the printer by two o'clock, with deliveries of the finished product beginning to come in by three-thirty, a minor miracle considering the amount of work involved. I made arrangements for a handbill outfit to hold a crew ready to pick them up for distribution in key spots in and around Bay Point. They agreed to handle the placing of posters, as well, at cab stands and railway stations along the New Haven line.

Ira Crandall came in with rough copy for thirtysecond and one-minute spot announcements for TV and radio. It was good stuff—in fact the best—and I told him so. Kathy typed them out for mimeographing and phoned for a messenger.

After that there was nothing to do. Nothing except to wait for all the planning to start paying off. I called home. No answer. I tried the Murrows' and Grace said Feewee was fine, no trouble at all, and they had plenty of room for her while Leona was "away." However, it turned out that a Bay Point officer had stopped by, asking where my car was, but of course Grace

hadn't known. They probably wanted to look it over for bloodstains or some other nice incriminating evidence, only I didn't tell her that.

So far, what with all the activity, I hadn't had a chance to feel much of anything except a kind of numb panic. But now, just sitting there, I began to understand what all this really added up to. It was Leona who was missing. My wife. The woman I loved. Not just another woman with a face and a shape and a strange name, like the ones you see in the tabloids shot up in a love nest, or attacked in the subway, or raped behind a billboard, with an arrow put in to show where it had taken place, and a camera shot of a body covered by a blanket, with a policeman's legs in the foreground.

I got up to walk the floor. I thought of Leona up at the lake in Maine, slim and lovely in that yellow bathing-suit—if you could call about six inches of cloth anything except a handkerchief. I remembered how tough it was for her to acquire a tan, how her nose kept peeling, how she threw her head back to laugh, the way the color of her eyes seemed to deepen whenever I kissed her, how she always wanted the lights left on when we made love—

"Send out for the papers, Kathy. All of them."

"Yes, sir."

I dropped into the swivel chair and stared blindly out the window, feeling terror and a vast loneliness starting to swell inside me. Any minute now my phone might ring and there would be one of those flat official voices at the other end saying the body of a woman answering my wife's description had been fished out of the Sound or taken from some gas-filled room, and I was to come down and make the identification. Or it could just as easy be a—

The phone rang.

I damn near fell off the chair getting to it. "Coryell speaking."

Jeff Nolan, in Research. "Hey, I think maybe we

got something."

"Well?"

"Over at the Hotel Glenmore, on West Fifty-Fifth. Seems a blonde checked in there about three-thirty this ayem. Name on the register is Mrs. L. B. Ryerson. Gave a Rego Park address. Clerk says she was wearing a white coat, no hat. I described your wife; he says it could be her."

I had it written down while he was still talking. "Sounds good, Jeff. But keep them phones going, just in case."

"Check."

I hung up. "Kathy, is Uhlman still here?"

"He left twenty minutes ago."

She called Palmer & Verrick and got him on the wire and I gave him the Hotel Glenmore lead. "I'll shoot a man right over there, Mr. Coryell. It's practically around the corner."

"You'll need a picture."

"Some of those Photostats came through. I'll ring

you back the minute I get a report."

The phone rang again as I hung up. This time it was Lew Murdoch, in Media. He sounded downright human, which could only mean he was out of range of Jackson Elliott. "Channel Three, Ames, at two o'clock. Gleason Reports the News. I gave him the pitch personally and he's only too glad to help out."
"What about a picture?"

"He's got a picture. Swayne gave me a dozen of the sharpest stats you ever saw, and quick, too. That guy's a whiz."

"So I'm finding out. Anything else?"

"Have a heart, pal. Gleason was my first contact."

"You're doing fine. Try hitting one of those acrossthe-board shows. Right offhand I don't know—Hey! Try Royal Cigarettes. They have that quiz show at three. Don't bother checking with Demrosch; Joey Prather over there can fix it if anybody can."

"On my way!"

One of the mailroom boys brought in the late editions and I leafed through them quickly. The Brooklyn payroll bandit was still at large and presumably counting the take; another picture of Tony Sallazo, still among the missing despite a face like a battle-ground; and more about the Queens warehouse fire, with three bodies found and a shot of a victim's bereaved widow not looking at all bereaved. But nothing at all about the disappearance of my wife or the battered skull of Mark Fremont.

Shortly after one o'clock, however, the newspapers started calling. I laid it all out for them, holding back nothing except the business about Fremont. I still was sure that the attack on him had nothing at all to do with Leona's walking out on me. They listened to me politely enough, but you could tell they were a little disappointed, and some of their questions were almost brutal. It would have meant more space if I could have hinted a few sex orgies were involved, or even a touch of the old eternal triangle. A couple of legmen came in with photographers and I gave them what they asked for. While that was going on, a call full of ice cubes came from Alex Case, the comptroller, wanting definite word about how the bills I was running up would be paid. I managed to put him off again with a fast line of double talk. The real trouble on that point would come to a head ten minutes after Kenneth Frome returned from Mexico.

By two-thirty the switchboard was jammed tight with incoming calls. Three TV commentators had

carried the story on their two-o'clock programs, as had a couple of radio stations. Joe Consumer was seeing my wife on every street corner, and we finally had to put four girls on telephones in the bull pen to take down the flood of information. Kathy and Miss Stewart, Wilton Demrosch's secretary, were handling it from there, straining out the crank stuff and the patently worthless and passing the rest on to Otis Uhlman for a more thorough check.

Uhlman telephoned me a little after three. "Afraid that Hotel Glenmore lead kind of petered out, Mr. Coryell. Her name was Ryerson, all right; she'd been to a late party and decided to stay in town overnight."

"Okay."

"Have some other reports here. Our men interviewed six New Haven conductors who were on duty during the hours you specified. Not many trains at that time of night, as you know. Three women wearing white coats were incoming passengers. The trainmen said none of the three resembled in the slightest the picture of Mrs. Coryell. No cab driver at Larchmont, Mamaroneck, New Rochelle, Pelham, or the two Mount Vernon stations picked up a fare in a white coat from a southbound train. Incidentally, the police along there are following pretty much the same procedure as my men are, at the request of the Bay Point authorities."

"Going through the motions, hey?"

"I beg pardon?"

"What else you got?"

"Porters and newsstands no help at all. We're still checking trip sheets on all New York cabs, but it's a big job and too early for results. I'm-afraid that's about it, at least up to now, Mr. Coryell."

I tried to think of some angle I'd overlooked. "How

about the New York Central trains?"

"Well-no. Both branches are quite a way from Bay Point. The Harlem line might be worth trying, but the Hudson is clear over by-"

"I know where it is. Try, anyway. Both branches. It's not impossible somebody gave her a lift across the county and she took a train in from somewhere along there."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Coryell."

Kathy came in while I was putting back the re-ceiver. Her hair had lost some of its neatness and there was a pencil smudge on one cheek. "Small cloud on the horizon. Ames."

"Well?"

"Alex Case, Boy Comptroller. Ruth Dunlap just told me he's insisting she get a message through to Mr. Frome."

Anger, sudden and sharp, ballooned in me. I almost welcomed it as a counterirritant to the terror gnawing steadily at my stomach. "Goddamn him for a penny-pinching bastard! What's Ruth going to do about it?"

"She thinks she can stall for an hour or two. After that-well, Case is an official of the firm. You know she wants to do it your way, but it could snap back on her."

I chewed a lip, thinking furiously. "Look, kid, this place is like all the rest of them in one way at least—one big happy family. And every family has a closet full of skeletons."

She blinked at me, puzzled.

I said bluntly, "Any powder-room gossip about Case?"

A slow smile flickered at her lips. "You wouldn't!" "The hell I wouldn't. Come on, Kathy, I can see you've got something. Spill it."

"Gossip is always nine-tenths imagination, Ames."

"This time I'll settle for the other tenth."

"Well. Well, there's a girl—Pat Rudell—who was in Accounting for a few months before being transferred to a better job in Media. A friend of mine in Merchandising saw her coming out of a not very nice hotel about four o'clock one morning—with him."

"Alex Case?"

"Yes."

"Anything else?"

She flushed to the roots of her hair. "One of the cleaning women is supposed to have seen the two of them on the couch in his office."

"Uh-hunh. Can't say I blame him. You ever see his wife, Kathy?"

Her face was still red. "No."

"Big bossy dame built like a Notre Dame tackle. He's scared to death of her. Which suits me just fine right now. Hand me that phone."

Her hand moved reluctantly to the receiver. "What

if there's nothing to it?"

"We'll soon find out."

"I_"

"I don't like it either, kid. But this is one time I'll

fight dirty. Do I have to tell you why?"

She gave me the phone and in a moment Case came on the wire. I said, "Ames Coryell, Alex. Something's come up that I think you can help me on."

"Yes?" His tone said this was where I crawled and

he was going to love every minute of it.

I slammed it right into his teeth. "Remember a

girl named Pat Rudell?"

If there's such a thing as a stunned silence, this was it. It took a full seven or eight seconds for Case to get his voice up off the canvas. Even then I could barely hear him. "Uh-Patricia Rudell?"

"That's the one," I said briskly. "Started in Ac-

counting, now in Media. I've heard some pretty serious things about her which may or may not be true. Unless you or Elliott can vouch for her, I think the matter should be brought to Mr. Frome's attention."

I had him cold. He knew it, and he knew that I knew it. What he couldn't know was how far I was

prepared to go, and he was afraid to find out.

"Ames."

"Yeah?"

"Perhaps you'd better—uh—hold off until I have a chance to look into this. I'm sure Miss Rudell is a fine young woman. She came strongly recommended by an old friend of mine and I'd—uh—well, hate to—"

"Whatever you say, Alex."

Kathy watched me replace the receiver. "A lot of

people would call that blackmail."

"And they'd be right. Now why don't you sort of go back and find out if Miss Dunlap gets another call from my old pal Alex Case?"

I sent down for a Thermos of coffee and was finishing the second cup over the afternoon mail when

Kathy came back. "You win."

"Canceled the call to Frome, hey?"
"He'll never forgive you, Ames."

"Pardon my complete indifference. What else is

going on?"

She sat down and bit a knuckle on her thumb and looked at the tooth marks. "Both switchboard girls are about ready to walk out forever. Looks like half of Greater New York knows where Mrs. Coryell is."

"They can't all be wrong."

"That's the trouble. You need a small army just to investigate the ones that do look kosher. We're taking the information on those and having Uhlman's men work on them in the order received."

"I can't suggest a better method."

She poured coffee into my cup and drank some of it. She looked a little haggard. "You any idea how we turn this off once she is found?"

"Who cares?" I picked up the phone and called Re-

search. "Jeff? Your boys turned up anything?"
"Nope. Nothing hot, anyway. Would you believe it, there's over twenty-three hundred hotels in—"

"Keep at it." I hung up and paced the rug. Kathy watched me, sipping from the cup and not saying anything. I took out a cigarette, crumbled it, threw the shreds on the floor, kicked the wastebasket, and sat down again. "I wish to God I could do something besides sit here on my apodosis."

"Your what?"

CHAPTER TEN

FOUR O'CLOCK came and went. Uhlman's boys were hard at work on the more promising leads, but so far everything had canceled out. The switchboard was still running at capacity as additional TV and radio programs picked up the story, plus the first evening papers reaching the stands with Leona smiling up at the reader together with hyped-up accounts of what had happened. Most of the copy mentioned Freebolt & Frome by name, making quite a thing out of the novelty of turning an advertising agency into a detective bureau.

The mystery slugging of Mark Fremont, prominent architect and a friend and neighbor of the missing woman, came in for considerable speculation, most of it cautious. Sally wasn't seeing reporters and the doctor was vague about the extent of Fremont's injuries.

Anger—the kind of anger that comes with worry, helplessness, fear, and too much imagination—went on building steadily inside me. I couldn't shake a vision of Leona being hauled out of the river, cold and wet and dead. There was no actual reason to think the river had claimed her, any more than a speeding truck or a sex maniac, but the picture stuck with me just the same.

Lieutenant Box called at four-twenty to report no progress.

"What's the word on Mark Fremont?"

"Still in a coma and getting weaker."

"Can't they get a statement of some kind out of him?"

"Right now it's a matter of keeping him alive."

I was honestly shocked. Even the doctor's somber statement to me earlier, and Sally Fremont's hysterical outburst, hadn't really prepared me for the possibility that Mark Fremont might die.

"They're talking about operating," Box was saying. "If he lives through the knife we might get some an-

swers."

"You haven't found anything to show who might have slugged him?"

"If you're talking about clues-no. His wife says you

did it."

"That's what you said last time you called. And I

still say she's out of her mind!"

"I don't know. According to her, your wife kind of played up to Fremont and you made some pretty strong threats."

"She told you that?"

"Uh-hunh. I gather she's got a lot more to tell us if

her husband doesn't pull through."

"This is ridiculous, Lieutenant. I'll admit Mark Fremont and I weren't fond of each other. But this business of my wife making a play for him is sheer fantasy and Sally Fremont knows it."

"What reason would she have for making it up?"

"She's crazy, that's all! This thing has driven her nuts!"

"Maybe so. But if I were you I'd be pulling for

Fremont to stay alive."

It ended up with me losing my temper. He didn't like it and I told him what he could do about not liking it and got myself hung up on.

By a quarter to five my hopes were down to ragged edges. Over fourteen hours since Leona had walked off into the night, and the answer as far away as ever. I sat at my desk and burned tobacco and made meaningless marks on a scratchpad. Kathy was around telling the help I wanted everyone involved to stick with it until further notice. It would mean one hell of a bill for overtime but I was in past my hatband already, so there was no use worrying about that now. Uhlman had called in for further instructions; I told him to keep his men on the job until ten o'clock, then to get them back on the ball early on the following morning unless he got word from me to the contrary.

The sun was behind the building on the Hudson River side of town and the office was full of shadows. I had turned on the desk lamp and was thinking of calling Grace Murrow to find out how Feewee was

getting along, when the phone rang.

A man's voice. Crisp and young, with a touch of the Philadelphia Main Line threaded through it. "Mr. Coryell?"

"Speaking."

"My name is Thorpe, sir—with Palmer & Verrick. I've just finished speaking with our Mr. Uhlman, and he suggested that I call you direct."

I took a deep breath, my pulse starting to race. This

was no routine call. "Okay. Let's have it."

"Well, at three-ten this afternoon the office sent me out to interview an Anthony Vorota at his home in the Bronx. He's a conductor on the Hudson branch of the New York Central, and was on duty from last

midnight until eight this morning.

"Mr. Vorota was most co-operative. I showed him a picture of Mrs. Coryell and gave him a complete briefing. He examined the photograph carefully and finally vouchsafed the information that a woman wearing a white coat had boarded his train at 4:02 this morning, but that he was fairly certain she wasn't the one we are looking for."

"What made him so sure?"

"That's exactly what I wanted to know, Mr. Coryell. Since he had called in when he saw the picture on television, he must have had some idea it was your wife he saw on the train. He admitted he hadn't really looked too closely at her, but his impression was that she was younger than Mrs. Coryell, and as he put it, not so much a lady. Then, too, she boarded the train at Dobbs Ferry. That's not only clear across the county from Bay Point; it's quite a way farther north. It hardly seems likely that she would travel away from New York before taking a train to Grand Central."

He was right, of course, although I hated to admit

it. "In other words, the interview was a dud?"

"Well, not entirely, sir. He did mention one thing that struck me as being rather strange. It seems this woman wasn't carrying a handbag."

I clamped down on the receiver until my fingers

ached. "No bag? He was sure of that? The conductor?"

"Quite sure; yes sir. The woman paid for her ticket on the train, and Vorota is positive she took the money from her coat pocket. Since Mr. Uhlman mentioned to us that you had made quite a point of your wife not having a bag, I thought it a rather strong coincidence that two blond women wearing white coats would be traveling about in the same general vicinity at that hour of the morning without handbags."

I was thinking the same thing and getting excited about it. "What else did he tell you?"
"Well, he was very definite in saying the woman left the train at the 125th Street station. I went directly there and checked trip sheets at the nearest cab companies. I was fortunate in locating a driver who had picked up a fare at the station around that time. Not the young woman we're interested in; but he claimed to have seen her. He explained that she did

something rather odd, which is why he happened to remember her."

"Odd?"

"Yes, sir. It seems he was waiting in front of the exit with his flag up when she came out. He called out, asking her if she wished to engage a cab, but she walked past him, toward Madison Avenue. Immediately after that he did get a fare, and as he passed Madison, he saw her hail a taxi at the corner."

"Odd is right. If she wanted a cab, why pass up one that was handy? Either she changed her mind, or she wanted to make sure nobody would trace her move-

ments."

The words came out all right, but they weren't the words churning in my mind. Why darling? Why are you running away? What's wrong? You could have told me. I'm your husband. I love you, darling!

"-fortunaté. He knows the-"

"What? I'm sorry, Thorpe; I missed that."

"I was saying, sir, that the driver I spoke with knows the one who picked up this woman."

"You find out where he took her?"

"Not as yet. I'm waiting to obtain that information now. The driver we want is named Reznik; a resident of Brooklyn. I telephoned him, but his wife informed me that he had already left. He checks in at the garage at six o'clock."

"What about his trip sheet?"

"Precisely why I want to talk with him. It shows he took a fare from 125th and Madison to the corner of Columbus Avenue at Sixty-First Street. There's always the possibility that he noticed where she went after leaving his cab."

"Where you at now?"

"In a drugstore on Broadway, corner of Sixty-Third. They're sending Reznik over here the moment he shows up."

"Okay. Wait for me in front. If the driver gets there before I do, hold him. That clear?"

"Yes, sir."

The pencil smudge was gone and her hair was neat again. She ate a tired-looking salmon-salad sandwich and drank a Coke while I told her about Thorpe's call. "How does it sound to you?"

"The best yet."

"Keep the board open and things moving. In case it does turn out to be a bum tip."

"That's wise. I'm thinking of what that conductor

said."

"I know what you mean and it bothered me, too, until I worked it out. After all, his job is punching tickets, not memorizing the passengers. Sure; he thought she looked younger and less like high society. And he's right. In the picture she was all decked out in an evening dress and her hair up, and it made her seem older. You know. But in a summer dress, her hair down and her nose peeling, she looked about sixteen and a long way from regal."

"Sounds reasonable to me."

"I think this one's going to pay off, Kathy."

"Say, you'd better hurry. It's ten to six."

"I'll call you. Any word from Frome?"

"Will you please stop worrying?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I had been out of an air-conditioned office since nine-fifteen that morning, and the humid heat hit me like the steam room of a Turkish bath. The evening rush hour was still going strong, which meant no cruising cabs, so I walked up to Fiftieth and beat out a couple of women to one unloading in front of the Weston.

We went up Park Avenue to Fifty-Seventh, across town to Broadway, then north again. New York in August. Stone and glass and metal buried between layers of exhaust fumes. Limp collars and wet hand-kerchiefs. Light dresses and white sandals. Buildings going up, buildings coming down. Too much noise and not enough manners.

A great place to visit, but only eight million peo-

ple would want to live there.

The drugstore turned out to be one of the redfronted Whelan chain, next to an electrical appliance shop. A Skyview cab stood at the curb, with the driver leaning against a fender talking to a slender young man in a brown Palm Beach suit and no hat. I walked over to them. "Your name Thorpe?"

"Yes, sir. This is Abe Reznik, Mr. Coryell. He re-

members the woman this morning."

He was short, squat, middle-aged, and needed a haircut. The usual collection of celluloid buttons pinned to the usual uniform cap. Small hard eyes, with fine wrinkles around them from squinting into the sun. A loose-lipped mouth, with a cigarette living in one corner. "Would you say she resembled my wife?"

"Jeez, Mac, you got me."

"Have you seen a picture of Mrs. Coryell?"

"Yeah, sure. How could I miss? It's on the television when I get up this afternoon. I always turn on this Royal Revue; that Murphy, he absolutely kills me! Lousy cigarettes, but that Murphy—a real clown! They flash this picture a time or two—a real doll. Name, what happened to her; you know. Don't mean a thing to me. And your friend here, he's got a picture he shows me to look at to see do I remember her."

"Would you say she was the woman you picked up on East 125th Street early this morning?"

"Like I told your friend here, mister, who looks at fares? I see, sure, she's got a white coat and blondtype hair. That's all. She flags me, she pays me, she goes."

"You notice where she went?"

"Mister, I got my own troub-"

"Think about it for a minute."

"Le'see. This I ain't so sure. She starts off down Sixty-First. I fill in the sheet, I make a U on Columbus— Hey, she stops to talk to some guy with a broom! Absolutely! I seen her! Front of one of them brownstones, couple doors down from the corner a ways."

"Think you could point out which brownstone?"

"Could be, Mac."

"Let's go."

It took some digging but I found the man with the broom—a janitor employed at one of the rooming houses along there. It turned out that she hadn't actually stopped to talk to him; he was sweeping the walk, didn't see her in time and banged the broom against one of her ankles. The picture I showed him drew a blank, but he remembered that she walked away while he was trying to apologize, crossed the street, and went into a hotel farther down the block.

I paid off Reznik, told Thorpe to check back in at Palmer & Verrick and walked on down Sixty-First to the hotel the janitor had pointed out.

Nobody would ever confuse it with the Waldorf. It had been a brownstone once, three floors and an English basement, but they had ripped off the outer steps, slapped on a flat gray limestone front and a two-bit green canopy, and allowed somebody with a sense of humor to name it the Fairbrook Arms.

The lobby was about a foot across, with black and white rubber tiles underfoot, a pair of high-backed chairs upholstered in dusty red armor-plate, an imitation marble counter, and behind the counter a thin number cleaning his nails.

I leaned on the marble and we stared at each other. He had a skin that didn't get outdoors much, a mustache hardly worth mentioning, and beady black eyes that flickered like a match in a high wind.

He also had a reedy voice, full of adenoids. "Was there something?"

Right then I could have told him no, that there was nothing. Leona would no more walk into a dive like this than she would shoot a game of snooker in a Bowery pool hall. But I resisted the impulse to turn around and leave. Maybe she had come here. Maybe she'd been coming here for months. Maybe right now there was a man with her in one of the rooms upstairs. What did I know? A woman who could walk out on her husband and child without a word—

If my voice was cold, it was because there was a coldness inside me. "Who was on the desk here around six this morning?"

His hands were motionless, his eyes guarded. "As a matter of fact, I was. Why?"

"A woman came in here around that time. Maybe

she took a room then; maybe she already had it. Blond, wearing a white coat, not carrying luggage or a handbag. Who was she?"

"You a cop?"

"No."

He shrugged faintly and went back to his nails. "I asked you a question?"

"We don't give out information about our guests."

I hated being there, I hated him, I hated what I was thinking. I reached across the ledge and yanked the file out of his hand and threw it on the floor. "I haven't hit anybody since I was thirteen. Do I start with you?"

"Listen, I can call the cops!"

"Go right ahead."

"I don't know what woman you're talking about."
"Too late to tell me that."

"We don't want any trouble here, mister."

"Then don't invite any."

"Well, maybe you mean Miss Quill. She came in around then."

"She in now?"

He made a half-turn away from me and put a hand in one of the slots of the key-and-mail rack behind him. The number above it was 304. "Her key's not here." I nodded and moved past the desk and saw the open

I nodded and moved past the desk and saw the open door of a self-service elevator. It was only slightly wider than my shoulders.

The third floor had a single narrow corridor, very high in the walls and painted in a neutral shade of brown that had started to develop blotches. Six doors along it, tall and narrow, the same color as the walls. 304 was at the front of the building.

I stood there looking at the neat brass numerals. I was trembling. All I had to do was knock. Go ahead, Coryell. Pick up your hand. You don't have to kick

the door down. Just a small discreet knock should do it. Then there will be quick, light steps from the other side and the door will open. And then you will know. You'll know why the woman you love, the woman you've been married to for six years (and would you like to try for fifty?), walked out on you like somebody getting off a streetcar.

I knocked.

It was quiet in the hall. A radio played dinner music, very faint, strained through walls. In the air, the light, dry odor of dust and what might have been an insecticide. A chain rattled and I stiffened and the door opened.

It wasn't Leona.

It was a woman, though, and she was staring at me with her mouth open. If she had been expecting somebody, it certainly wasn't me. Her arm tensed as if she was about to slam the door.

"Miss Quill?"

"I'm Janice Quill."

It was her radio I had heard. A string ensemble was doing something commendable with a Waldteufeu waltz—the one you can never quite remember the name of. "My name's Coryell, Miss Quill. Ames Coryell. May I come in?"

"Why?"

"Well. Matter of fact, I was expecting to find my wife here."

"With me?"

"Instead of you. It's a little involved."

"Come on in. You'll have to make it brief; I'm ex-

pecting a friend."

She stepped aside and I went past her into a small living-room. The usual hotel apartment furnishings. Clothing scattered around. Crumpled Kleenex dotted the carpet. In one wall a half-open door let me see

the foot of an unmade bed.

She pointed to what would pass as a lounge chair in some circles, and sat down across from me on the couch. She shook her head to a cigarette and watched

me light one.

I stared at her over the match flame. She seemed nervous. She was blond, all right; under twenty-five and evidently just out of bed. She wore a peach-colored nightgown, very sheer, under a thin yellow robe with a deep V neckline. Her figure was excellent, her skin flawless, her deep-blue eyes a little hard. After a shower and a comb and the right amount of makeup, she would be beautiful in a rather overpowering way.

"How do I look?"

"What? Oh. I guess I was overdoing it."

"I feel like I've been memorized." She lifted an arm with negligent grace and pushed at her hair. "What's this about your wife? Am I supposed to know her?"

"Probably not. But somewhere along the line last night I hope your paths crossed."

Her puzzled frown was charming. "What's that

supposed to mean?"

"My wife is missing, Miss Quill. From our home in Bay Point. It happened about two o'clock this morning. A conductor says he saw her on a New York Central train an hour or two afterward, and that she got off at 125th Street. A cab driver tells me you flagged his cab at 125th and Madison at about the same time. Now what I have to find out is whether your paths crossed at that point and in tracing you we lost her."

"I'd say it was pretty evident."

"And you'd be right—if it was my wife the conductor saw."

"But I thought you said-"

"He could have seen another woman on that train. Not my wife at all. You, for instance."

Something was bothering her. She stared at me, frozen-faced, and said nothing. "Were you on that train, Miss Quill?"

"I don't owe you any answers, mister."

I blinked at her in astonishment. "Of course, you don't. I'm only try-"

"You're not fooling me even a little bit."
"Fooling you? I'm not trying to fool anybody. I told you-

"Sure, you told me, A nice smooth story, all worked out before you walked in here. Don't think for a minute I don't know the real reason you came here."

"Listen, I don't-"

"You're working for her, aren't you? All you have to do is get me to admit I was out there this morning and she's got him right where she wants him. And that means every dime he's got! Well, you can just—"
"Hey, wait a minute! I don't have the slightest idea

what you're-"

"Get out of here! Go back and tell her she can whistle Dixie before I fall for a cheap trick like that. Who does she think I am-some little innocent fresh out of finishing school?"

"All through, Miss Quill?"

"You bet I'm all through! You made a nice try, mister whatever your name is, but I'm not having any. There's the door; use it!"

"All right, now you listen to me. Far as I'm concerned, what you've said is pure Greek. Your private life is none of my business and let's keep it that way." I fished out my wallet and gave her one of my business cards. "Go ahead. Pick up your phone and call that number. My secretary's name is Katherine Mc-Vey. She'll vouch for me and for what I've told you."

Her expression was still made up of anger and suspicion. "I need your help, Miss Quill. If it's a matter of money, I-"

"You're wasting your time, mister."

What little patience I had managed to hold on to was starting to crumble. "Listen, I've had—"

The radio finished a station break, and a masculine voice, brisk and no nonsense, took over. "And now the news. Police of thirteen states today were requested to be on the lookout for a Mrs. Leona Coryell, wife of a prominent New York advertising executive, who disappeared from her Bay Point home early this morning under unexplained circumstances. She is five feet four inches, one hundred and twelve pounds, blue eyes, blond hair, age twenty-eight. When last seen she was wearing a white coat and a green linen dress. If you have information concerning this woman, call Murray Hill 8-7070 in New York, or notify your local police. . . . In a blistering speech before the United Nations general assembly, this afternoon-"

I reached over to turn off the set. In the sudden silence a car horn swore in the street. "There's your proof, Miss Quill. The phone number you just heard is the same one that's on the card you're holding. What more do you want?"

She sat there, snapping the card lightly with the nail of a forefinger and looking at me level-eyed for what seemed a long time. "Okay, mister. I was on a train this morning.

"What train?"

"The 4:02 out of Dobbs Ferry."

That tore it. That tore it right down the middle. There went the only decent lead to come out of hours of radio and TV broadcasts, hundreds of phone calls and personal interviews, reams of newspaper print.

Now it turned out this was the woman the conductor had spotted; not my wife at all. Yet when I thought of all the coincidences involved—

"Let me get this straight, Miss Quill. You were wearing a white coat and a green dress?"

"A white coat, but my dress was a flowered print."

I thought back. Actually neither the conductor nor the cab driver had described the woman's dress. Probably the coat had prevented them from observing the color. "How is it you weren't carrying a handbag?"

If there was any hesitation, it was so brief I couldn't be sure. "I suppose you might as well know the rest of it. It so happens a boy friend of mine lives in Dobbs Ferry—and I'm not going to tell you what his name is. He's married and hates every minute of it. I was out there last night while his wife was out of town—only she tried pulling a fast one by sneaking in on him around three this morning. She might have caught us, only we heard her car in the driveway. I just did manage to get my clothes on and out of there in time. Without my bag."

It was her life and she was living it. I ground out my cigarette and stood up and retrieved my hat. My hand weighed a ton and so did my heart. "I guess that does it, Miss Quill. Thanks for your time."

She walked to the door ahead of me. "Too bad about your wife, mister. I sure hope you find her."

There was nothing I could say to that. All I wanted was to get away from there. I opened the door and started through—and nearly collided with a slender young man in a hound's-tooth sport coat and darkgray slacks. He was standing in the doorway, a hand half raised as though on the point of knocking.

We eyed each other, blank-faced. You could find

We eyed each other, blank-faced. You could find too many like him any night around the midtown hotspots. Thick black hair parted along the side and curling a little around the edges. A too-handsome face that wasn't handsome at all. Careful eyes, a mouth with a built-in leer, an unstable chin. Padded shoulders and a nonchalant slouch and three manicures a week.

He made no move to get out of my way. The lifted hand drifted down and settled in one of the patch pockets of his coat, leaving the thumb outside. His eyes flicked past me to the girl, and even with all the nice white teeth, his smile was as empty as a Balkan treasury. "Hi, Janice. Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?"

The deliberate insolence in his voice was all I needed. I put a palm where the lapels of that beautiful coat came together, and shoved. I liked doing it. I would have liked to do it again.

He bounced off the opposite corridor wall, took a couple of quick shuffling steps toward me, then stopped short. The corners of his mouth lifted in what wasn't a smile. He said nothing.

I went on down the hall to the elevator.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I CALLED KATHY from a corner tavern. "False alarm."

"Oh, no!"

"What's promising at that end?"

"Nothing right now."-

"Looks like it's going to stay that way."

"You sound awfully tired."

"How would you expect me to sound?"

"And angry."

"I've been meeting the wrong kind of people."

"It'll work out, Ames. You'll see."

"Sure."

"Lieutenant Box called. Wants you to stop in on your way home."

"I'll stop in, all right. The son of a bitch."

"Are you coming back to the office now?"

"I think I'll take a run home. At least for a while. You might as well knock off, though."

"I will not! The switchboard girls are leaving at

eight and I'll take any calls after that."

"Okay. Look, anything comes up, good or bad, you call me, you hear? None of this business of sparing me."

"Of course. Try to get some rest, Ames."

"Any word from Frome?"

"Ruth had a wire from him. He's due at La Guardia early tomorrow morning."

"Hell! Why couldn't he have stayed that extra day?"

"I keep telling you, it'll be all right!"

"Yeah? Wait'll he sees the kind of money I've been spending! Not that it makes much difference, I sup-

pose. If Leona's not found by morning I might as well give up entirely."
"Now I know you're tired."

"Call me if anything breaks. Either way."

A cab got me to Grand Central in time to catch the 6:55 for Larchmont. I found a seat at the rear of the end coach and lit a cigarette and tore a ticket out of end coach and lit a cigarette and tore a ticket out of the commutation book I had bought that morning. Directly in front of me a young matron who had spent a tough afternoon shopping at Bonwit Teller was reading an account of Leona's disappearance in an evening paper. I could see her picture smiling up from the page—the same picture that had stood on my desk for nearly a year. I wanted to lean across the back of the seat and tap her on the shoulder and ex-plain that it was my wife she was looking at and would she mind keeping an eye out for her. But of course I did nothing of the kind.

Kathy had been right. I was tired-tired and angry. There probably was even a little self-pity mixed in. The weariness could be by-passed, the self-pity ignored, but the helpless rage in me went on building up the pressure like an overheated boiler with a stuck safety valve. The worst anger is the kind that has nothing to spend itself on, and the way things were I didn't even have shadows to swing at.

Trying to think gave me nothing except a jumbled montage made up of Leona and Feewee and a beaumontage made up of Leona and Feewee and a beautiful hard-eyed blonde with a sulky mouth and a boy friend whose wife certainly understood him. I gave up finally and opened my own paper. Leona was on page three next to an account of a vice raid on a midtown hotel. The picture of Tony Sallazo had slid back to page six; he was still missing and showed every indication of staying that way. The White Sox were fighting Cleveland for second place in the American League and cool air from Canada would break the

heat wave by tomorrow night.

The train pulled into Larchmont at 7:35. I avoided a couple of members of the golf club I belonged to and entered the station parking lot. My car was exactly as I had left it that morning. Either the police hadn't found it or were satisfied to give it a going-over later. I rolled down the windows to let out the lifeless, sun-baked air, started the motor, and drove along the tree-lined streets into Bay Point.

I parked in one of the diagonal slots in front of the long, low structure of face brick housing the Bay Point Fire and Police Departments. It sat well back from the street in the center of handsomely kept flower beds and a lawn like a billiard table. In the driveway three men in dun-colored coveralls were sponging down an already gleaming hook-and-ladder truck. A small white wooden sign staked into the lawn showed the words *Police Department* and an arrow pointing toward a screen door at one end of the building.

It was my first visit. A wide room, not very deep, windows on two sides, walls a light beige. Neat and clean and cheerful. Sturdy golden-oak desks and chairs, a bank of dark-green filing cabinets, a wooden bench with a slatted back in case you wanted to wait.

Near the far wall a tall, thin man in plain clothes sat puffing on a straight-stemmed pipe and looking out a window while he spoke into a telephone. His voice was too quiet to reach where I was standing.

The desk nearest the door had a uniformed officer behind it filling out a form on what, clearly, was a brand-new typewriter. He was finding it tough going. I stood there, waiting while he finished a sentence using the first finger of each hand. He glanced up at me finally, frowning slightly in a holdover of concentration. "Yessir?"

"Lieutenant Box around?"

"Afraid the lieutenant's kind of busy right now."
He had sharp, direct eyes but the rest of him looked almost too young to be a cop, although he had the right build for the job. "Will somebody else do?"
"My name is Coryell. Box left word he wanted me

to stop in."

There was a subtle change in his expression. My name might have done that. He stood up almost hastily and tilted his head at the entrance to a corridor in the rear wall. "Second door on your right, Mr. Coryell. Go right in."

The tall, thin man hung up the receiver and watched me cross the room. I could feel his eyes boring into my back. I walked along the tan linoleum, freshly scrubbed and waxed, and found the right door and knocked lightly on the frosted glass before walk-

ing in.

It was a small square office, with one window facing the side street and a Venetian blind halfway down to keep out what was left of the day's hot sun. A golden-oak desk, its glass top littered with papers, stood at an angle across one corner, with Box behind it in an armchair with a low back. His black hair was rumpled and his hooded eyes a little bloodshot. "I tried reaching you at five-thirty. Sit down."

I dropped into a straight-backed chair across the desk from him and placed my hat on a corner of the glass top. "I was out trying to run down a lead."

"On your wife?"

"That's all I'm interested in right now."
"How'd you make out?"

"I drew a blank, if you're interested. It seems there were two women running around without handbags this morning."

His heavy brows lifted in mild interest. "You found the other one?"

"Yeah. Complete with white coat and blond hair.

And, like I said, no handbag."

I went on to tell him the rest of it. He listened intently enough, but I couldn't help feeling that his interest was largely academic. When I finished, he leaned back in the chair and picked up a pencil and made a meaningless mark on a scratchpad. "Quite a coincidence."

"I thought so, too. What did you want to see me about?"

"Like to have a look at your car, Mr. Coryell."

"Why?"

"Just routine."

"Like looking for bloodstains or a stray femur?"

"What are you so sore about, Mr. Coryell? You asked for police assistance."

"You call what I've been getting from you assistance? All you've done so far is accuse me of murdering my wife and assaulting a neighbor."

"As far as the neighbor is concerned, his wife is

the one who accused you."

"And you fell for it."

"If he dies without making a statement she's going to bring charges, Mr. Coryell. Against you."

"What does that mean?"

"You'll be arrested and booked."

"What's the matter with right now?"

"She's not ready, she says. Maybe you'd better try talking to her."

"My interest right now is in finding my wife, Lieutenant—not trying to reason with a hysterical woman."

The phone on his desk rang. Judging from his end of the conversation which followed, somebody had

stolen a bicycle from in front of the post office. He hung up finally and lit a cigarette with a kitchen match from the desk's center drawer. "About taking a look at your car, Mr. Coryell. Do we have your permission or do we have to impound it?"

I said, "If you want to waste the time, send your men over to my place after I leave here. All I can say is it's a good thing I decided to do something about

finding Mrs. Coryell myself."

He nodded. "I'll say one thing; you certainly stirred up a real commotion. Radio, television, newspapers, handbills, and posters. Not to mention that this en-tire section has been knee-deep in young men ringing doorbells and stopping people on the street. Worse than the day they took the census. The sergeant out front had a total of twenty-seven hot tips come in by phone since two o'clock this afternoon. We ran every one of them down, too."

"Well, that's something you've done."

"You can't think of anything we haven't done, Mr. Corvell."

"Including trying to find her buried along the road?"

He flushed slightly but his eyes were steady, watching me. "We're not overlooking any angles."
"You still think I killed her?"

"When something happens to a married woman, nine times out of ten the husband has the answer."

This time I made no effort to hold back my anger. "More of your goddam statistics! I put an entire advertising agency to work hunting for her, I coax eight million citizens into playing detective, I jeopardize my job. And you've got the colossal gall to sit there and hand me this 'nine-times-out-of-ten' routine! You think for a minute I'd go through all that if I had murdered her?"

"It wouldn't be the first smoke screen I've run into, Mr. Coryell."

I could feel the muscles swell in my neck. "Listen, you hick constable, are you deliberately trying to needle me into taking a swing at you? You'd like that fine, wouldn't you? Give you a chance to try beating a confession out of me. Was that the kind of stunt that got you booted off the New York force?"

He stood up swiftly, banging his chair against the wall, and bent down across the desk until his face was inches from mine. Words came through his teeth, not loud but hard as bullets. "That will be all, mister. I'm sick and tired of you and your big-shot attitude. This whole stinking neck of the woods is full of you nineto-five bankers who think cops are in the same class as your gardeners and milkmen. Well, by God, you're going to find out different. Now get the hell out of here before I lose my temper altogether!"

"I'm going to have your job for this, Box."
His smile was a snarl. "Not before I find your wife, friend. Not before I see you strapped in the chair for killing her!"

I got to my feet without hurrying and walked over to the door and out.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WHAT WITH DAYLIGHT-SAVING TIME, it was still light out when I pulled into our driveway just before eight. Glenn Orcutt, his shirt off, bald and looking a little fatter than he had a month earlier, was mowing his front lawn. He came over, his round face solemn, while I was getting out of the car. "Nice having you back home, Ames. Say, Helen and I are real sorry to hear this about Leona."

"Thanks, Glenn."

"What do you think the answer is?"

"That's what a lot of people are busy trying to find out."

"You haven't heard anything at all?"

"Not yet."

"Well, you know me and Helen. Anything at all we can do, just say the word."

"Nothing, thanks. It'll work out."

"You bet it will, Ames." His rimless glasses were slightly misted from his struggle with the mower and I could smell the perspiration rising off him. "Funny thing is, Helen's so upset I'm almost afraid she's going to have a nervous breakdown or something. Wants me to sell the house and move out of Westchester altogether."

"What for?"

"Well, you know women. She's got some silly notion about a gang of kidnapers working this neighborhood. Claims she's seen strangers hanging around here the last few days. Then there's Mark Fremont getting beaten up and maybe going to die. Most of the families in this district are pretty well off financially, and Helen's got the idea Leona and Mark are the first victims of this gang."

"Can she describe any of these strangers?"

He brought his voice down almost to a whisper. "Hell, she hasn't seen anybody! Imagination, that's all. Always jumping at shadows. I'd hate to count up the number of times she's poked me out of a sound sleep claiming there were burglars in the house."

"Some women are like that, all right."

"I ought to know! Good thing you've got a nice sensible girl like Leona."

I came close to reminding him that at the moment I didn't have her. But that would have made him apologetic for a thoughtless remark, and then I would have had to apologize for making him apologize, leaving us both confused and a little uncomfortable. So, instead, I said something about getting outside of a little nourishment and a drink or two, and he said I must be worn out, and I admitted he was right about that, and he said to be sure and let him know if there was anything he could do, and I thanked him again, and that ended it.

I went into the house through the side door and found Grace Murrow sitting on the couch reading the Larchmont *Times*. "Oh, now look, Grace. I don't expect you to be a baby-sitter."

she was a small soft-spoken woman in her early fifties, with beautiful hands and the clear youthful eyes of a school girl. "Nothing of the kind, Ames Coryell. Feewee wanted to sleep in her own bed, and I'm certainly every bit as comfortable on your couch as I would be on mine."

"I may have to go out again later this evening,"
"Then call me and I'll come in. Any word about

"Then call me and I'll come in. Any word about Leona?"

"Not a thing. Feewee all right?"

"She's fine. She had a big dinner and I just this minute put her to bed."

"Is she upset about-her mother being away?"

"Well, she asked a lot of questions, Ames. That's only natural. And I had a bad moment myself while we were watching television before dinner. They put a picture of Leona on the screen and started talking about her being missing."

"Ouch! Feewee saw that?"

"I changed the station before it was on more than a second or two and before they could give her name. A cowboy movie saved the day."

"You've been wonderful, Grace."

"Oh, stop that. You know you'd do—"
A car stopped in front of the house. White letters on the side read BAY POINT POLICE DEPART-MENT. A uniformed officer got out and came up the walk. I went over to the front door.

"Mr. Coryell?" "That's right."

"Lieutenant Box sent us over to take a look at your car."

"In the driveway. It's not locked."

He was a young man, nice-looking, and a little ill at ease. He said, "Thanks," briskly and went back down the outer steps and beckoned to a plain-clothes man in the back seat of the car. The latter got out, carrying a squat-looking black bag, and the two of them entered the driveway.

I returned to the living-room. Grace looked calmly at me over the top of her paper. "You look about ready to drop. Had your dinner?"
"Come to think of it, no."

"I'll whip up something."

"There's nothing in the house."

"I meant to tell you, I had Gristede's send over an order."

"Like I said before, you're wonderful!"

"Why don't you make yourself a drink and read the paper while I fix up some cold cuts and a salad? Too hot for anything else."

"I'll look in on Feewee first."

She was in flowered pajamas and her braids had been combed out. The light blanket was already half on the floor and the big flop-eared stuffed rabbit I had got her the previous Easter was wrapped in her arms. I snapped on the dresser light. Her blue eyes were wide open, looking up at me from the pillow. I had always been glad that she looked so much like her mother. Now, for some vague reason, I was doubly glad.

"I'm not a bit sleepy."

"That's what they all say."

"You came home late. I heard our car. Where's Mommy?"

"Oh, she's around somewhere. What did you do today, Baroness?"

"I just played. Are there really, truly Indians, Daddy?"

"Indians? Where?"

"Anywhere. Like on tel'vision. They were shooting guns!"

"You'd better get to sleep, young woman."
"Can—may I please have a glass of water?"

I brought her one in the bathroom tumbler. She sat up and swallowed about half a spoonful and gravely handed me back the glass. The soft curling wealth of her yellow hair made a lovely frame for her bright, alert face. "Are there any, Daddy?"

"Any- Oh-Indians? Sure there are. Only they're

far away and they don't shoot guns any more. Not at

people."

"Î had dinner with Mrs. M'row. We had ice cream and I ate ever' bit, and we had ma'coni, and maybe tomorrow we can go to the park, Mrs. M'row said so, Daddy, and see the *little* ducks. Why didn't Mommy come home with us, Daddy?"

Her question reminded me for the first time of what she had told Box. I put the bathroom glass on her dresser and sat down on the edge of the bed. "I'm afraid you must have had a bad dream last night, Feewee. Mommy did come home with us."

"I didn't either dream, Daddy. I can remember just

as plain."
"Remember what, darling?" "She said she liked me."

"What?"

"You know, Daddy." She sat there with her legs drawn up and her face as serious as a Supreme Court justice's. "I said do you like me and she said yes. Only she wasn't s-posed to say yes. She must say no, and then I say why not, and then she must say 'cause I love you."

"Maybe she was too tired, Feewee."

"But Mommy always does it that way. It's a game!"

"Now hold on a minute, young lady. Mommy and you and I rode home in the car all the way from the lake. You know perfectly well Mommy was with us. You saw her."

"But, Daddy, I can't see in the dark. I'm not a hitty!" Unexpectedly she giggled.

At the back of my mind a thought stirred sluggishly.

"The dark? When was this, Baroness?"

"It was night-time and you woke me up and all the lights were on and you and Mommy were hungry and I didn't want any milk."

That would make it the Endore Inn, the swank roadhouse just outside Bridgeport. We had stopped there well after midnight for a snack. "Well, your mother was there. You saw her at the table."

She gave me that exasperated glance they're born with and never lose where men are concerned. "I know, Daddy. Only Mommy went to the bathroom and I didn't have to, and then you took me to the car and it was raining and it was all dark in there. And I said do you like me and the lady said yes, only she whispered. And I knew it wasn't Mommy at all, only I went to sleep."

I sat there on the bed, hearing the childish treble, hearing the words, remembering one by one all those small incidents I had forgotten because they hadn't seemed important at the time. But now they were important, terribly important, and the sluggish thought was no longer at the back of my mind and no longer sluggish. I was suddenly cold and suddenly shaking.

I stood up. I kissed her and straightened out the light blanket, being extra careful to cover the rabbit. "Good night, Baroness." My voice was as steady as Gibraltar in a light breeze.

"Good night, Daddy. . . . Daddy?"

"Yes?"

"Do you like me?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I love you."

"'Night, Daddy."

"Good night, Baroness."

I picked up the water glass and turned off the lamp on the dresser and walked across the hall to the bathroom. I emptied the glass into the sink and put it back in its holder under the medicine cabinet. I saw my face in the mirror. It looked about the same as usual. A little drawn around the eyes, maybe, and my hair could stand a touch of the comb. But nothing at all to show what was going on underneath.

I went stiffly down the stairs to the dining-room and opened the liquor cabinet and made myself a very tall, very cold gin and tonic. From the living-room, Grace Murrow's voice reached me. "I set a place in the breakfast nook, Ames. The salad looks good."

"Thanks, Grace." I carried the drink back up the stairs and walked into our bedroom and stood at the window. It was nearly dark out now, a bluish haze deeper than dusk, almost black under the trees. Lights were coming on in the houses along the street. A screen door slammed, somebody whistled shrilly, a dog barked. A blue Ford convertible turned the corner too fast and stopped with a screech of tires in front of the Benbrooks' and a bareheaded young man vaulted out and ran up the steps. That would be the Kellogg boy, Phyllis Benbrook's steady date.

Those are the things you see, those are the sounds you hear. Yet all the time there is a numbness in you like the numbness of an embalmed leg, and a feeling of helplessness that is like pain except that it is far worse than pain. How long this lasts you have no way of knowing; because they don't make clocks to measure that kind of time. Then finally the fog lifts very slowly and after a while it has lifted far enough for you to start thinking in something like a straight line. You tell yourself that you're supposed to have a mind trained to handle emergencies, and in a way this is just one more emergency. And so you put your mind to work.

At first it's rough going. You're still afraid, and fear is like sand in the gears. Then memory begins to dig

up the facts and the facts drop into line and are sorted into neat columns and you add up the columns. And there is the answer. Not the complete answer. There are still a lot of facts you don't have. But at least it can be the basis for finding the complete answer.

The Endore Inn. A low rambling white frame building, well back from the highway, with a putting-green lawn and a broad semicircular sweep of drive-way to the front door. One story, ivy on the walls to kill the too-new look, square pillars flanking the entrance. The bright-green neon sign has a chaste look. Half the building seems all windows—the dining-room. The other half appears to have no windows at all. That probably meant gambling; I had heard of such places in that part of the state.

The parking lot is almost filled, with the rain slanting down and no attendant in sight. I let Leona and Feewee out and park far back where the flood lights

fail to reach.

Most of the tables are filled at this hour. There's air-conditioning to lick the humidity. A heavy sprinkling of bare shoulders and dress suits. A waiter shows us to a table near the windows. A middle-aged man at the next table is trying to pin an orchid on the low-cut dress of a young woman with a doughy face. He appears to be slightly drunk, and his hands are hitting all the wrong places.

Feewee can hardly keep her eyes open, and I'm not much better. We have sandwiches and iced coffee, milk for Feewee. A travel-weary family group, set down among a great deal of opulence and hardly aware of it.

Leona finishes eating and I light her cigarette, using a match from a glossy white folder bearing a phony coat of arms and three words: The Endore Inn. She asks the way to the powder room and I watch her

move gracefully between the tables, her blond head a lodestone under the soft light. Even with a sunstruck nose and that white summer coat and an everyday dress, she makes the rest of the women in the room a dime a dozen, for all their strapless creations and fancy hairdos. A lot of eyes besides mine are on her all the way.

Some time passes. Voices make a sound like distant surf, and the clink of dishes and flatware is a cheerful counterpoint to dance music played softly by a small orchestra without too many brasses. I sit there and pick at my sandwich and fight to keep my chin off my chest. Feewee dozes openly, her cheek propped on a dimpled and slightly soiled fist.

It finally dawns on me that Leona is taking an unconscionable length of time to powder her nose, even if it is peeling. While I'm fuzzily deciding what to do about it, a waiter comes over. He is a small man, with a patient face and a crumpled shirt front. "Mr. Coryell?"

"Yeah?"

"Madame has gone directly to the car. She has asked us to inform you that she is very tired and would you please hurry."

He takes the amount of the check and a sizable tip and I scoop Feewee up and carry her out and through the darkness and the rain to the car. I open the rear door and put my daughter on the seat next to my wife in the blackness back there. I get behind the wheel and the motor turns over quietly and thirty seconds later we are on the last lap to Bay Point.

I took a deep pull at my drink and nodded to myself. There it was. All of it. Complete and unabridged, as they say in the book-club ads. A brief episode near the end of a tiring trip. Nothing out of line far enough to make a lasting impression, even in light of what had happened an hour or so afterward. If there was nothing I'd overlooked, if those were all the facts, then this became just one more blank in a long series of blanks.

Unless Feewee had been right all along. Unless the woman in the back seat hadn't been Leona at all!

I turned away from the window. The room was dark now, and I switched on the nightstand lamp. It made a small pool of light, throwing my shadow big against the wall. I put my glass down and lit a cigarette from a carved wooden box next to the telephone. I walked the floor.

All right. Let's say it wasn't Leona. Let's say some-body wants to get a woman away from the Endore Inn without her being seen. For obvious reasons she can't leave in the car that brought her. While they're trying to find a way to bring it off, an unescorted woman—my wife—walks into the parking lot, finds the car she's hunting for, and unlocks it. She is grabbed, knocked out or gagged and hidden away somewhere. The other woman puts on Leona's coat, takes her bag, and slips into the rear seat. Her partner puts the dome light out of commission (it hadn't worked when I was taking Feewee out of the car later) to make stronger the chances of my not discovering the substitution. Sure, it's a long shot. But these people are pushed for time, they're desperate, they have to improvise as they go along.

these people are pushed for time, they're desperate, they have to improvise as they go along.

Everything goes smoothly because everything goes naturally. I reach the car, shove Feewee in back next to the dim blur of a white coat that indicates my wife is where she was supposed to be, get behind the wheel, and drive away. Not a word comes from back there all the way home. That's natural; both of them are sound asleep. I pull into the driveway and Miss X

hops out while I'm reaching for the handbrake. She can't very well go fleeing into the night while I'm sitting six feet away, so she runs up the front steps, unlocks the door, drops the keys back into my wife's bag, tosses the bag on the couch, and high-tails it out the back way.

It all sounded like Ellery Queen with a hang-over, but in a loose sort of way it covered everything. Everything, that is, except the identity of Miss X and her

partner and what they had done with my wife.

It would be up to the partner to dispose of Leona. If he had simply tied and gagged her and dumped her somewhere, she would have been found before this. Since she was still missing, it followed that he had taken her with him.

Why would he do that?

I couldn't even guess. Actually the why wasn't too important. It was the who that mattered, for until I could locate Miss X and her partner, there was no

way for me to go about finding Leona.

On what I knew, finding them was next to impossible. I could return to the Endore Inn and ask questions until I was lavender in the face and likely end up with a double handful of nothing. I thought of going to Lieutenant Box with what I had, but the memory of our last meeting closed that idea off sharply.

And right there is where I remembered a coincidence. The coincidence of a woman in a white coat, with blond hair and no purse, wandering around Westchester between two and four o'clock in the

morning.

Janice Quill. Was she the woman in the back seat?

It happens like that. You keep digging around for a lead, not knowing exactly what it is you're looking

for but trying anyway because you'd go nuts just sitting on your hands. And then when you're right on the edge of giving up entirely, your fingers close on that lead and all doubt is gone, this is what you were after all along, and, brother, it's pure gold!

Janice Quill.

It would have been easy enough to come up with any number of reasons strong enough to have ruled her out. Not one of them would have meant a thing. Not to me it wouldn't. I had her picked solid—just as I had that smooth number in the hound's-tooth sport jacket figured as her partner in the deal. The thought that I could be wrong simply never occurred to me at all.

I finished my drink and ground out my cigarette and called Information from the bedside extension. She looked up the number of Palmer & Verrick and I put through a call to them.

put through a call to them.

Evidently the board was closed, but Otis Uhlman answered the night line. He recognized my voice. "Afraid I don't have anything promising, Mr. Cory-

ell."

"Well, I have. Any of your men there in the office right now?"

"Three."

"Take this down. There's a girl named Janice Quill living at the Fairbrook Arms, a fleabag on Sixty-First, half a block west of Columbus Avenue. Apartment 304. She's blond, blue-eyed, an inch taller than my wife, and a good ten pounds heavier. Good-looking, good curves and a stick-out pair of breasts. Got all that down?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get two of your men over there to keep an eye on her. She's not to know they're around, but if she should leave I want her tailed. I realize that your boys aren't trained as detectives, but I haven't enough real evidence on this girl to call in the police. Think they can handle it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fine. Tell them to look for me inside of an hour."

I hung up and was halfway down the stairs before I thought of something else. I turned around and raced back up to the bedroom.

It was at the bottom of a hat box on the top shelf of one of the closets. A blued-steel Colt .32 revolver, the model with the two-and-a-half-inch barrel and weighing no more than a pound. I had picked it up two years before to leave with Leona while I was away on a business trip. Since she couldn't be coaxed to get within a city block of the thing, I had hid it away with the intention of eventually getting rid of it.

The smell of oil and the feel of repressed destruction. I turned out the cylinder and gave it a spin, like they do on *The Plainclothesman* program. A cartridge in every chamber.

It took me a couple of minutes to figure out the best way to carry it. They were always shoving them under trouser waistbands in the second feature at the Bijou, but that struck me as inviting a hole in the leg. Or worse. I finally let it slide into one of the pockets of my coat.

Not that I intended to shoot anybody.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BAY POINT had been hot enough, but it was an ice floe compared with the city. The cliff dwellers were outdoors, baking under the big lights along Broadway, window-shopping, queueing up in front of the movie palaces, hunting a breath of air and not finding it. Thin dresses and rolled sleeves and open collars.

And the noise. Always the noise.

The side streets were quieter but no cooler, and the curbs were lined with cars bumper to bumper. I drove west on Sixty-First, looking for a parking space and finally finding one when a big Buick pulled out near Amsterdam Avenue.

I got out into the heat and locked up and walked slowly back along the dimly lighted street, the gun in my coat pocket rubbing lightly against my thigh with each step.

Women sat spread-legged on the high stoops of brownstone fronts, waving folded newspapers to create the illusion of a breeze. Those with no steps to sit on had brought out the kitchen chairs and placed them on the walk close to the buildings. There were the murmur of voices and the clink of bottles and a good deal of laughter with beery overtones. A baby cried and a man yelled and a window slammed. A radio brought in the ball game, with two men on and Mantle coming to bat.

I was turning in at the entrance to the Fairbrook Arms when a man's figure stepped out of the shadows. "Mr. Coryell?"

The light was bad, but he appeared to be reason-

ably young, neatly dressed, and sober. "Who are you?"
"The name's Kinsella, sir. With Palmer & Verrick."

"Okay. I'm Ames Coryell."

His voice dropped to a cautious murmur. "Afraid there's been a hitch, Mr. Coryell."

"Now what?"

"She's not in."

"How do you know?"

"Well, in line with your instructions, we were careful not to make any direct inquiries. But I managed to get a look at the key rack while the clerk was telling me no Mr. Applebaum was registered—and there was a key in 304. As a double check I had my partner call and ask for her apartment. No answer."

One lousy break after another. I could wait for her to return, which could mean hours where even minutes were important, or I could try finding out from the clerk where she spent her evenings. Asking questions could be risky. If she called in, for instance, and was told somebody had been around checking up on her, it might panic her into skipping out entirely.

I looked past Kinsella, through the open lobby door, at the man in a pool of light behind the counter. He wasn't the one I had spoken to earlier. This one had graying hair and bent shoulders and a face that had given up the battle long ago. "I want to get into that

apartment, Kinsella."

His teeth flashed in the dim light. He seemed to be enjoying the role of detective. "You'll need that key."

"That's what I was thinking."

"If we could get him away from behind that desk—"
"How?"

"Say! He came on duty about half an hour ago. I saw him park a Ford coupé a few doors down. Not a late model, but still in good shape. Now if he was to get the idea somebody had just banged into it—"

"There's your answer!"

His teeth flashed a second time. He turned and walked over to the curb, squeezed between two parked cars, and cut diagonally across Sixty-First toward the dim lights of a basement delicatessen—and a telephone.

The seconds crawled by. I stood in the shadows, waiting, the air as thick and heavy in my lungs as a woolen blanket. I fumbled for a cigarette and rolled it around in my fingers and went on waiting.

Feet pounded sharply against tile and the hatless figure of the hotel clerk burst through the hotel door, bolted past me and on down the street. He must have been very fond of that Ford. I put the cigarette carefully back in my pocket and stepped over to the entrance of the Fairbrook Arms, through it, and into the lobby.

The same tired air, the same armor-plated chairs, the same imitation-marble counter. Only there was no-body around now, and the only sound was a futile buzzing from the small unattended switchboard. I crossed over quickly and snaked the key out of the cubbyhole marked 304.

The elevator was down, waiting. It smelled of dime cigars. I rode it up to the third floor and walked rapidly along the empty hall. Not even a fly buzzed along its length. No sounds of other people living their lives behind the other doors. On a night like this they would be at the pictures or in some air-conditioned bar watching the ball game and hearing Mel Allen tell about the flavor that chill can't kill.

The same tall, narrow, neutral-brown door. The same neat numerals where they belonged. And the same radio blatting away. Only this time the radio should have been silent.

I hung there, listening. Would she have gone off leaving the radio playing? You do that once in a while.

Especially when you're alone a lot and accustomed to letting the thing run on most of the time, not actually listening, just using the sound to kid yourself that you're not really alone.

It could be the reason, but I had to be sure. I palmed the key and knocked. No answer. I knocked again, harder. Still no answer. Only the mumble of the radio and my heart sounding like a drunken African at the

drums.

I wiped my hand against my coat and used the key. The bolt snicked back and I turned the knob and gave the door a small push.

The bridge lamp next to the lumpy lounge chair was turned on. In the yellow glare the same crumpled pieces of Kleenex stood out sharply along the faded carpet. Nothing to see that I hadn't seen before, nothing to hear except the radio talking intimately about soap flakes.

I brushed the door all the way open with my shoul-

der on the way in. "Anybody ho-"

The words died in my throat. There was somebody home, all right. Janice Quill. Face up on the couch, a narrow strip of yellow cloth twisted tightly about her neck. Dead. Dead as yesterday's ten thousand years.

It was no way to die. Her face was bloated and the wrong color, her mouth wide and strained far back, her tongue enormous. Her eyes had bulged out until they were no longer eyes but something out of the psychiatric ward at Bellevue.

I closed the door with my back and leaned against it, dazed and shaken. Seeing a face in that condition would have shaken Genghis Khan. A few hours earlier it had been a reasonably beautiful face in front of a mind sharp enough to come up with a nice, smooth, quick lie aimed at getting rid of me. It was no fault of hers that the lie hadn't stood up, that I had come back for the truth.

Well, I could forget all that now. I could turn around and walk out and leave her there for a hotel maid to scream over. She was beyond the reach of a tough voice and a hard manner and the carefully casual display of a gun. Somebody had found out about my previous visit and was afraid I would come back, somebody who knew what had happened to my wife and was willing to use murder to keep me from learning the answer.

It was a solid theory, backed up with solid evidence. But doubt kept trying to get its foot in the door. Maybe it hadn't been that way at all. Janice Quill could have been telling me the truth right down the line. I had no real proof to the contrary. There could be a straying husband in Dobbs Ferry. Maybe a spot of blackmail was involved, and he had come here and used the yellow belt from her robe to solve his problem.

Too many maybes. I had to know. Somewhere in this network of coincidence and contradiction must be a link—a link that could tie Janice Quill to my wife's disappearance—or clear her entirely. I had to find it before I could go any further.

The radio tore off a jingle about what the right soap flakes could do for your lingerie. I went over and turned it off. That brought me near the body on the couch. The yellow robe hung open, letting me see a white slip hiked up to show far too much fish-white skin. The tortured face seemed to fill the room. I turned away and walked into the bedroom to find a blanket.

Nothing on the bed except a pair of tangled sheets and two pillows stained with lip rouge. Underthings, too sheer and too frothy, scattered about. Face powder on the rug. The limp air had a slept-in smell.

One closet, loaded with clothing. On an upper shelf were a couple of wool blankets that appeared to have gone through a lot of washing machines in their day. I dragged one of them down, knocking a pale-blue formal gown off its hanger in the process.

It was while I was putting the dress back on the rod that I saw the coats. Four of them, in various weights

and styles. And one of the four was white.

I came very close to passing it up entirely, even though I had spent most of the past twenty hours talking and thinking about a white summer coat. Yet with one practically under my hand, I had turned away and was picking the blanket off the floor before my mind caught up with my eyes.

I licked my lips and let loose of the blanket again and reached in with almost exaggerated care and

brought the coat out into the light.

It had the right feel and the roll collar seemed familiar, but I couldn't be sure about those pearl buttons and the cuffs. No belt; that checked. The label said Altman's. Leona had an account there. So did a lot of other women, and those who didn't could always pay cash.

I dug into the pockets. All I found was a crumpled strip of paper, but it helped—a conductor's receipt for a one-way fare on the New York Central, between Dobbs Ferry and Grand Central Station. Today's date. This was the coat the conductor had seen, all right.

But whose coat?

You've helped her on and off with it, you've hung it up for her, you've brought it to her when the party's breaking up and it's time to go home. There's got to be something about it you remember—a worn spot, a tear in the lining—anything at all to tell you it's her coat.

I ground my teeth together and went over it again.

Slowly, carefully, inch by inch. And after a while I found what I was looking for.

It was a small bleached area, not much bigger than a quarter and so faint it came close to not being there at all. One of the small details I had given Lieutenant Box while listing the places where we had stopped during the drive down from Maine. A service station in Boston. A small smudge of grease on the lapel of Leona's coat. The polite young man in white coveralls. "Can't use gas on it, lady; that anti-knock stuff'd eat a hole right through." He had hunted up a can of cleaning fluid and taken the spot out for her and refused a tip. His expression indicated that just seeing her had

made this a fine large day for him.

I stood there holding my wife's coat, feeling the black despair rise inside me. I had come this far, only to run into the stone wall of Janice Quill's murder. Nothing left for me to do now except call in the police. They would find a guy, a gun, and on the couch a dead woman. Of course, the gun would have nothing to do with the way she had died, but from what I'd seen of police thinking lately that wouldn't slow them down any. They would give me the hard eye and tell me any. They would give me the hard eye and tell me about the Sullivan Act and ask a lot of questions. The same questions, over and over again. And finally they would get out their tape measures and their glassine envelopes and their fingerprint kits and put the old routine into operation. And maybe—just maybe—they would find my wife before whoever was behind all this got around to tying a weight to her ankles and sinking her in the handiest river.

If she wasn't there already.

The telephone was in the other room, near the couch. I put the coat on the bed and picked up the blanket for the third time and walked slowly back in there.

She looked far worse than I remembered. I draped the blanket carefully over her, covering the face first. Even that didn't help much. Perspiration stood out along the backs of my hands. I lit a cigarette and took off my hat and dried my forehead with my coat sleeve.

The telephone was where I remembered it. Squatting there on an end table, looking streamlined and efficient, ready to summon a carload or two of New York's finest. I put a hand down on its chill black length, knowing I would have to pick it up but not wanting to. Not wanting to at all.

Maybe it would speed things up if I called Box instead. I shook my head at the thought. Box would love hearing I was in a hotel room with a freshly murdered woman. A grand jury would have my name on a true bill before I had a chance to brush my teeth.

What they used to call the horns of a dilemma. I couldn't afford to call the police—and I couldn't afford not to.

I turned away and walked over to the room's one window and stared down into Sixty-First Street. Dim lights, a pedestrian or two, a dark sedan cruising slowly west along the shrouded pavement.

Another idea fought its way to the surface. What about that New York police captain I had talked to earlier in the day? The one who knew Box. Certainly he knew enough of the story to act without delay. Neely? McNeely?

Kathy could look it up for me. I glanced at my strapwatch. Nine-fifty. If I knew Kathy at all, she would still be at the office. I left the window and came back to the phone and scooped up the receiver. Presently a tired voice, male, said, "Desk."

"Get me Murray Hill 8-7070."

[&]quot;Okay."

No suspicion in his tone. There was no reason for suspicion. Desk clerks don't make a habit of remembering which keys they take in or which keys they hand out. Not even in small hotels.

A buzz, and click, and Kathy was on the wire sounding a little tense. "Freebolt & Frome. Miss McVey speaking."

"Ames, kid. Listen, what was the name of that—"
Her voice broke in, sounding cool and casual now.
"I'm dreadfully sorry, Mr. Blaine, but Miss Conway left over an hour ago."

"Hey! What kind of-"

"No, she didn't say . . . You're quite welcome.

Good night."

Another click, and I was left holding a windy silence. I brought down the receiver slowly and replaced it very gently in its cradle.

Short of crossed wires, there was only one logical explanation: somebody was there with her. Somebody I had to be kept away from. Kenneth Frome, back from Mexico and demanding to see me? I couldn't believe that. The police? They wouldn't have any reason to—

Unless Leona had been found dead and an order was out to pick me up on suspicion of her murder!

Nothing was ever steadier than my hand picking up the phone and my voice asking Information for the number of the Bay Point police department. And then a Sergeant Loomis was at the other end, very polite, not asking for my name before putting me through to Lieutenant Box.

"This is Ames Coryell, Lieutenant."

Nothing in his voice that hadn't always been there. "Where are you?"

"In town. Have you found her?"

"No."

Relief battled suspicion. "Don't lie to me, Box."

"That'll be the day."

"Then why are the police at my office?"

"I asked them to pick you up."

"What for?"

"Mark Fremont died an hour ago."

"Without making some kind of statement?"

"I didn't say that."

"Well, what are you saying?"

"Give yourself up, Coryell."

"Why? I didn't kill Fremont."

"His widow says different."

"I'm not coming in, Box."

"Then start running."

"That's what you want me to do, isn't it?"

"I'm warning you-give yourself up."

"Not till I find my wife."

"Where did you hide her body?"

"You son of a bitch!"

"You're going to burn, mister."

I slammed down the receiver and leaned against the wall, shaking violently, shaking because I was afraid and angry and without hope. There was no way out, no way to turn. My only lead to Leona had died with Janice Quill, and with an order out for my arrest I was no longer free to dig up a new one. A small, tired voice inside me said, Let it go, brother. You can't fight what you can't reach. She'll come back when she's able to, or she won't come back at all. Maybe the police can do something about it, but not you. Not any more.

I was empty and alone, knowing I was finished, and in a dazed way almost relieved that I was finished. A man can take just so much.

And that was when the phone rang.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

IT WAS LIKE A BOMB going off. I yanked the receiver up and stood there with it close to my ear, not saying anything, hardly breathing, waiting. My face felt stiff and hot.

A thin, brittle voice said, "Hello? Janice? That you?"

The voice had a vaguely familiar sound, like the voice of someone you had known a long time ago and even then not very well. I moistened my lips and took a deep breath and said, "Who is this?"

"Marty. Where's-" He stopped abruptly, leaving

a silence loaded with suspicion.

Too late. I was suddenly positive I knew who was behind that voice. The bird in the snappy hound'stooth sport jacket. The smooth number I had decided earlier was Janice Quill's partner in the kidnaping of my wife.

It would have been a nice time for finesse, for the slick approach that would get me something to go on. But I was too tense to play it smart. "Listen, Marty," I said hoarsely. "This is Ames Coryell. I want to see you. Right away. Where you at?"

More silence, only now it was the silence of a dead wire. I rattled the cutoff bar frantically. "Marty! Listen to me, damn you! I'll pay you! Anything! You've

got to tell-"

"Desk," a bored voice said.

"I don't want the desk!" I shouted. "Where's my party?"

"Nobody on the line, mister."

I fought my voice down to normal. "Look, I was talking to a man named Marty. You know him? Miss Ouill's friend."

"I don't know any Marty, mister. You wanta give

me his number, I'll call him back."

I sighed, said, "Let it go," and hung up.

But things were different now. They say you have to hit bottom before you can bounce. Just before that phone call I had been ready to give up entirely, to leave the job of finding Leona to the boys who were slow at it. But not now. Now my black mood was

gone and I was thinking again.

This Marty had been a friend of Janice Quill's—probably a very close friend considering that he had come into the picture at least twice within the past four hours. When a girl's that close to a guy it would seem only reasonable that she'd have his phone number or his address, or both, written down somewhere. Maybe in a little black book along with other names and addresses. Girls who live alone in cheap hotels along shoddy back streets always have books like that. And why not? At best this was a lonely world.

It was a small apartment and I worked fast. Twenty minutes was all it took to take the place apart. By the time that was over with I knew considerable about the late Janice Quill, including her tastes in clothing, costume jewelry, underwear, make-up, and personal hygiene. According to the medicine chest she was blond by choice, suffered from corns, headaches, unsightly hair, and had trouble sleeping. She occasionally drank too much, had a two-hundred-and-sevendollar balance in a Chase National savings account, and kept two pairs of men's pajamas in the bottom drawer of her dresser.

No address book, no letters from the old folks at home, no diary filled with girlish confidences. Either

everything along those lines had been removed by the killer, or Janice Quill had been a woman without roots and without purpose—and likely without mourners.

I came back into the living-room carrying the only item I could find that held any promise at all. It was a small snapshot from a pocket of one of her coats—a 3 x 5 black-and-white showing Marty in teeshirt and house slippers, his hair uncombed. He was standing in the driveway of an apartment house and grinning confidently into the camera from beside a light-colored Ford convertible with its top down. Nothing else except some grass, a couple of anemic-looking trees, and barely jutting into the picture on the left a section of store front, with the letters E R Y visible on the glass and what could have been a couple of numbers half-hidden in the folds of a drawn-up awning.

Little enough, but all I had. I tucked the print away in my wallet and went to the door, turning to take a last look around. The blanket-covered mound on the couch dominated the room. Janice Quill. No longer hard, no longer beautiful. No longer anything except dead, with a strip of cloth around her neck

and her tongue hanging out.

I closed the door softly on my way out.

A shadow detached itself from other shadows as I reached the street. Kinsella. "Everything under control, Mr. Coryell?"

"No. I want to see Uhlman."

"He said he'd wait to hear from you."

"Where's the man you came here with?"

"Parked across the street."

"Tell him to meet us at Palmer & Verrick. You ride with me."

"Yes, sir."

He crossed over to where a dark sedan stood at the far curb and put his head in at the driver's window. After a moment an engine throbbed, headlights flicked on, and the sedan pulled out and away.

Kinsella returned, his step jaunty, and we walked on down Sixty-First to where I had left my car. I picked up an eastbound street, followed it into Central Park and drove too fast along the tree-banked

curves and out through the Sixth Avenue exit.

Traffic was heavy and the sidewalks were still jammed with sweating citizens. Kinsella sat with his eyes straight ahead, dragging on a cigarette and saying nothing. I turned off at Fiftieth, into the dimness and relative quiet of Rockefeller Center and parked in a restricted area, with the cluster of skyscrapers towering over me, lean and brooding against the remote stars.

We crossed the Plaza and entered the right building. The lobby looked big enough to lose Switzerland in. Kinsella signed the night register and we were whisked silently up to the twenty-eighth floor. An antiseptic corridor echoed under our feet, some corners were turned, then lights glowed from behind the frosted glass of double doors marked Palmer & Verrick, Market Researchers.

A small subdued waiting-room, and beyond that soft gray carpeting, figured drapes, ivory Venetian blinds, walls of a pastel gray. Rows of desks, an incredible number of telephones, a bank of dark-green filing cabinets that seemed to go on forever. Beyond all that an inner hall lined with private offices, and in one of them Otis Uhlman behind a wide mahogany desk, his coat off, a window open at his back.

He was not alone. A round-faced man in a gabardine suit with patch pockets sat tilted back in a chair reading a paper. Another, and younger, man appeared to be dozing on a leather couch in one corner, a cigar not much larger than a cigarette sending up a thin unsteady line of smoke from between the fingers of his left hand.

The three of them stood up as I came into the room with Kinsella. Uhlman had changed his shirt since that morning, with a neat maroon bow tie nesting high on the soft white collar. The room's indirect lighting glistened along the pale slopes of his cheeks. "Good evening, Mr. Coryell. Mancuso just got here with word you were coming in."
I said, "Pull up some chairs, gentlemen. I need

your help in putting together a jigsaw puzzle."

I brought out the snapshot I had taken from Janice Quill's apartment and tossed it in front of them. Light from the desk lamp winked along its shiny surface. "I want the man you see there found and I want him found quick. All I know about him is that he calls himself Marty, although judging from the picture I'd say he lives in that apartment house."

It passed from hand to hand until it reached Otis Uhlman. He took an enlarging glass from the center drawer of his desk and examined the print for a full

two minutes before lifting his head.

I said, "Well?"

Uhlman rubbed a forefinger thoughtfully across the point of his jaw. "What makes you think he lives in this particular building?"

"The way he's dressed."

"The way he's dressed?"

"Teeshirt and house slippers. Even his hair's not combed. You don't go far from home like that. This picture belonged to his girl friend. Maybe she dropped by early one morning and got him out of bed and downstairs to take his picture."

They nodded in silent tribute to my perspicacity, or something. Uhlman said, "Then the job is to find

the apartment house. Excuse me."

He pushed back his chair, stood up, and walked briskly out of the office. Lights went on in the big room outside and I heard file drawers opening and closing. Five minutes later he was back, half a dozen Manila folders under one arm. These he placed on the desk, sat down, and dug a freshly sharpened pencil from a drawer. Rapidly he leafed through the typewritten sheets in each folder, using the pencil to check an occasional entry, until he had gone over them all. Next he took a fresh sheet of paper and copied onto it the information opposite the check marks. The entire operation required no more than ten minutes.

"What," I said, when he looked up at me again, "was all that for?"

He drummed the pencil point lightly against one of the folders. "You probably noticed, Mr. Coryell, that in the picture there's a thin section of shop window visible immediately to the left of the driveway."

"Certainly I noticed it. But there's not enough of it to give us anything to go on. I made sure of that."

"I'm not so sure. While it's impossible to make out what's on display, there are three letters visible on the glass itself, and the numbers 773 in the creases of the awning."

I sighed heavily. "You're forgetting I'm pressed for time. There must be thousands of addresses in Greater New York ending in 773 and hundreds of businesses that end in the letters E R Y. Maybe in a week or two you could run them all down. But I don't have a week, believe me."

Uhlman permitted himself a small smile. "Like most advertising men, you know as much about a market research organization as you need to—and no more. Our job is the compilation of statistics—statistics on everything including statistics. Not only do we compile them, we index and cross-index them into nearly every conceivable pattern. Take toothpaste. It's not enough that we can tell you the number of tubes bought and presumably squeezed last week, last month, or last year. We can produce figures to show how many contained ammonia, chlorophyll, or antienzymes, what colors and designs were most effective in the packaging, and the relation of price to quantity. Automobile tires? We know the number produced, sold, junked, and recapped, their makes, sizes, and treads, how many white-, pastel-, or black-walled. Or, if you're interested, I can supply figures to show the effects of rainfall on the sale of laxatives, layettes, lard, and lactoscopes."

"Make your point," I said.

He tapped a competent-looking forefinger on the list of notations taken from the contents of the folders. "There are something like twenty fairly common types of business that end in the letters E R Y. The most common is grocery, followed by stationery, millinery, bakery, and confectionery, in that order. Much less common would be machinery, battery, delivery, nursery, and so on.

"Now, based on probability alone that store should be a grocery. My suggestion is that we take copies of the Red Book telephone directory, starting with the one for Manhattan, and run through the columns of grocers, looking for those with an address ending in 773. Chances are there'll be no more than one, and if there is one it'll be the store in the picture."

"What if there's none?" I asked.

"Then we try the stationers, still sticking to Manhattan. If that doesn't pay off, we switch to bakers, then milliners. When we finish with those, we change over to the Bronx and Brooklyn books and follow the same system."

"Hours!" I groaned.

"Not at all. There are five of us, Mr. Coryell. Even with bad luck it shouldn't take more than an hour or so."

"Whatever you say."

At a word from Uhlman, the bird in the gabardine suit hunted up five copies of the Manhattan classified directory and handed them around. They looked as thick as a castle wall. We split the alphabet into five sections and started in. Uhlman and his crew went at it with the speed and economy of motion that goes with experience, scanning three columns of the fine print to my one.

Mancuso, the young man with the cigar, connected first. "Bingo! 1773 Seventh Avenue. Jordon's Gro-

cerv."

I shook my head. "I don't believe it. That's right in the heart of Harlem. The guy I'm after wouldn't be likely to live in a colored section."

Uhlman copied it down anyway, just in case, and we went on. Column after column, page after page. I had to stop more than once to keep my eyes in focus. From that night on I was going to hate anything yellow.

We drew a blank. Jordon's Grocery was the only one in the book ending in 773. We tried the other categories, then classified books of the other boroughs were brought in and pored over.

At the end of the hour Uhlman had promised we stopped and leaned back and blinked hazily at each other. Three more possibilities had come out of the thousands of listings: Jewel Stationery, 1773 Amsterdam Avenue, Manhattan; the Park Bakery, 3773 Park Avenue, the Bronx; and Rose-Jean Millinery, 23773 154th Avenue, Queens.

I looked at my watch. Twelve-ten. In the morning. I said, "What do we do now? Send a man to each address to find out which is the one in the snapshot?"

Uhlman was tugging thoughtfully at his lower lip, his eyes squinting at the list. "You've got to understand, of course, that all four of these addresses may be useless, that the one we're after could turn out to be a pottery shop on Staten Island. Up to now we've gone along entirely on probability. I suggest we keep it that way."

"You're the expert," I said.

"Well, you mentioned that this man wouldn't likely be living in Harlem. So let's drop that one to the bottom of the list. Now, take this address in Queens. That's the Rosedale section, clear out near the Nassau-County line and mostly private homes, all of them fairly new. I doubt you'd find an apartment building around there, certainly any as old as the one in the picture.

"So, strictly on probability, we're able to cut our list in half. The two we have left look about equally as good. But since the Amsterdam address is quicker to get to, I suggest you try that one yourself, Mr. Coryell, while the boys are checking the other three. If you should draw a blank at the Amsterdam address, call me."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IT was right out of the snapshot I had found in Janice Quill's coat pocket. On the east side of the avenue, just above 148th. The same shabby brick apartment house, the same driveway, and at the corner a darkened store front with Jewel Stationery in a rainbow curve across the glass. Otis Uhlman had earned himself a bonus.

I filled a cavity in the row of parked cars a few doors down, switched off the motor and headlamps, got out, and came back up the walk. The street was silent and dim and empty and hot, with no strollers and only an occasional car rolling by. At the corner a traffic signal purred and clicked from green to red, then green again.

I stood there, feeling vaguely depressed, staring up at the four floors of the apartment building. Most of the windows were dark at this hour, but behind a few of them soft lights glowed against the night. A woman's full-throated laugh reached out to me, throbbing with invitation, and a radio whispered of love in three-quarter time.

Small amber globes burned at the entrance, with a cloud of insects hovering over them. I pushed the finger-smeared door open and came into a narrow foyer with walls painted a sickly green and a gray stone floor that may have heard about mops but certainly never met one. A row of tarnished brass mailboxes in one wall below a line of bell buttons, and on the fourth box from the end the name *Martin Dry* and the number 309.

It was the only name in sight that could have been

shortened to Marty. Marty Dry. My lips moved, tasting the name. It fitted him, all right. It fitted him like the roped shoulders of his hound's-tooth sport jacket.

No need to push any of the buttons. The inner door had been propped open and left that way, with a flight of stairs rising steeply beyond it. I went through and climbed to the third floor and walked along a narrow corridor filled with last year's air and the smell of ancient vegetable dinners.

The door to 309 was closed but I could make out a thin line of light under it. I rapped briskly on one of

the blotched panels.

A paper rustled, feet danced quickly across the floor, a throat was cleared. "Who is it?"

I wanted that door to open and I could think of only one sure way. "Police," I said loudly. "Come on; open up."

I thought I heard a sharply indrawn breath, but I might have imagined it. A bolt turned and the door

opened about a foot.

He wasn't wearing the hound's-tooth item this time. Now it was a natty gray number in a tropical weave, too wide in the shoulders and a deep notch in each lapel. A yellow display handkerchief overflowed the breast pocket, picking up the design in a flaring bow tie riding high between the collar points of a darkblue sport shirt.

Recognition was mutual and immediate. He didn't like my being there. I was trouble. His neck stiffened and his careful eyes probed my face. "You're no cop,

brother. What's all the noise?"

"Want to talk to you."

"What about?"

"Janice Quill."

"Yeah?" His scowl was as hard as he could make it. "Well, spill it."

I shook my head. "Not out here, Marty. Inside. And don't feel too big about my not being a cop. I can al-

ways bring one in if I have to."

He would have loved to tell me to go to hell and bang the door in my face. But just as strong was the urge to know what I was up to. I sensed he was afraid of something. I liked that fine. Fear could mean he had something to hide.

He put a blankly tough expression on his smooth too-white face and stepped back and gave me a cool nod. "It'll have to be quick. I was just leaving."

It was a small room, not orderly and not at all clean. The standard living-room furnishings, dingy and mismatched. A pair of narrow windows opened onto an airshaft. A bridge lamp burned next to a brown club chair with a tufted back, and heaped on a leather hassock in front of the chair were the crumpled pages of an evening newspaper. Layers of blue smoke hung motionless in the lifeless air.

He closed the door and moved gracefully past me to take a lighted cigarette from the groove of an ash tray. He drew in smoke and blew it out in a long streamer, tilting his head back for that casual effect. "Okay, mister. What's this about Janice Quill?"
"When did you see her last?"

His thin brows drew sharply together. "Look, I don't know you and I don't know why you're so interested in Janice Quill. Why come to me about it at all?"

"Why not? You're a friend of hers."

"Sure, I'm a friend of hers. I've got a lot of friends.

But I don't discuss them with strangers."

"That," I said, "makes you admirable." I took a deep breath, trying to hold back my anger. "I don't have a lot of time, Marty. Am I going to have to knock the answers out of you?"

He shoved the point of his jaw at me. It wasn't much of a jaw, even then. "Get out of here, you!" His voice was shrill as a woman's. "Go on; take the air!"

"Not until I get what I came after," I said. "Unless you'd like to try throwing me out."

Indecision cracked the thin veneer of toughness he had worked so hard to build. He licked his lips and stared at me. "I haven't seen Janice since this afternoon. That satisfy you?"

"Where is she now?"

"How would I know? I don't keep track of her."

"You called her around ten tonight. What about?" His courage was beginning to seep back. "Maybe I was going to invite her out. Any law against it?"

"You hung up mighty fast, Marty."

He gave me a sour sneer. "You, hunh? Okay, so I hung up. I figured she was busy."

"She wasn't doing a thing," I said. I walked up close to him and stared into his eyes. "She was dead, Marty. Dead, with a cord around her neck and her tongue hanging out."

He jerked sharply away from me, his hip striking hard against an arm of the chair. His voice grated. "You're a liar. What're you trying to pull?"

"No lie, Marty. Run on over and take a look if you think so. She won't mind. Not any more she won't."

"I-can't believe it. Who did it, then? Who killed her?"

"I think you did. You had reason enough."

He looked at me with a kind of stunned wonder, not saying anything. The hand holding the cigarette hung in the air halfway to his mouth. After a measurable moment he made a quarter-turn away from me and ground the cigarette savagely into the ash tray. He took out his display handkerchief and mopped his face and wrists. By the time all that was over with and the handkerchief tucked away again, he was ready to outsmart me. "Try making a little sense, mister. Janice was a friend of mine. Why should I want to kill her?"

"To keep her quiet."
"Quiet about what?"

"About what the two of you did with my wife."

"You must be nuts! I don't even know your wife."

"I say you do. I say you were at the Endore Inn early yesterday morning with Janice Quill. You grabbed my wife and hid her away somewhere after taking her coat and handbag. Janice Quill put on the coat and took the bag and got into the back seat of my car. You cut off the dome light so I wouldn't see that a switch had been made, and I drove away with her in the car."

"You going to prove all this?"

"I think so. There were some mistakes made. One was when Miss Quill walked out of my house without taking my wife's bag with her. As the police pointed out, women don't run around without their purses. That put me on your girl friend's trail and yesterday I found her."

He flashed his teeth at me in what was more snarl than smile. "I heard about that. She told me at the time. I happen to know she was in Dobbs Ferry that night."

"How do you know it?"

"Her word's good enough for me."

"It wasn't good enough for me. Which is why I went back there."

He went on showing his teeth. Cool and confident now. "And when she wouldn't tell it your way, you tried choking it out of her. Only you overdid it. Is that how it happened?"

A cold rage, sharp and bitter, moved in me. "No,

that's not it. She was dead when I got there. But I didn't need her to tell it my way. I found the proof I had come to get."

His smile faded. Light from the lamp glistened along the pale surface of his eyes. He looked at me

woodenly and said nothing.

"It was the big mistake," I said. "She neglected to get rid of my wife's coat. It was in her apartment,

hanging in the closet."

There was a loud silence while we stared into each other's eyes. Abruptly he shrugged. "Okay. You found your wife's coat. Let's say Janice lied to us both. I wasn't with her that night, so kindly leave me the hell out of it."

I went on staring at him. It made him uncomfortable enough to need a prop for his casual air, so he got out a cigarette and lit it with a match from a glossy white folder bearing a coat of arms, in gold, and three words under that. He waved out the match and dropped it on the rug and pushed his coat sleeve back and was a little too obvious about consulting the dial of a flashy wrist watch. "My date won't wait much longer, friend, so I'll have to be running along. Sorry I can't be of more help, but to me she was just another dame. You know how it is."

I said, "Sure, I know how it is," and hit him full in the mouth.

He reeled back and fell over the hassock. Sparks from his cigarette showered the rug. He scrambled to his knees and reached frantically under the left lapel of his gray jacket and jerked out a small flat black gun. One stride got me to him. I bent and took hold of his wrist and yanked. The gun flew out of his hand and slid under the couch. I let go of him and stepped back and took my own gun out of my coat and pointed it at him. Every bit of hatred and frustration and anger

in me was fighting to pull the trigger. I saw-him dimly, through a red haze. The gun shook crazily in my hand.

"Where is she?" I yelled. "God damn you, where is she? Tell me or I'll blow your head off!"

The too-handsome face writhed in pure animal terror. White showed all around the muddy-brown iris of his eyes. A wick of black hair hung down over his forehead. Still kneeling, he held out his hands in an abject gesture of supplication, words spilling from between his jittering teeth. "No! Don't—don't shoot! Please, mister, b-b-be careful! I'll tell you! I'll tell vou!"

The high keening sound of his voice made my scalp crawl. I lowered the gun slowly and took a deep shuddering breath as my sanity came reluctantly back. "Stand up."

His legs would barely support him. I told him to turn around, then jammed the gun against his back and ran my hands over him. He was swaying like a reed in a high wind. I found no more guns and stepped away from him. "Empty your pockets on the table."

His hands were stiff and clumsy, trying to hurry the job. Not much came out. A black leather wallet, a keycase, the cigarettes and matches, a pocket comb with a film of oil on the teeth, some coins, and another handkerchief. I picked up the wallet and flipped it open. The usual clutter of identification panels. Fifty-eight dollars in the money compartment. A couple of pari-mutuel stubs from one of the local tracks. A small picture of a nice-looking white-haired elderly woman smiling at the camera from in front of the porch steps of a white bungalow. It couldn't have been his mother. His mother would have been a jackal.

I tossed the wallet back on the table and closed the fingers of my free hand around the folder of matches and looked thoughtfully at the slender back of the man who had lied to me. His breathing was ragged and a little noisy and he was still shaking, although nothing like before.

"Pick up your stuff, Marty, and sit down."

He turned around with slow care and fumbled his property back into his pockets, not noticing that the matches were missing. I stood there, letting the gun hang along my leg, and waited until he had finished and was sitting stiffly on the edge of the club chair.

"My wife, Marty. Where is she?"

His eyes rolled from my face to the gun and back to my face again. His lips quivered. "Mister, you know you came awful damn close to pulling that trigger on me. You were like crazy there, you know it? Christ, I had to say something!"

"Where is she, Marty?"

"I keep trying to tell you—I don't know anything about it. I swear to you I don't! You gotta listen to me! Honest, I don't blame you for getting sore, but why get sore at me? Just because a dumb dame I happen to know gets herself mix—"
"Okay," I said. "Maybe you're right. Relax. Have

yourself a smoke."

He blinked up at me, openmouthed, confused by the abrupt change in my manner and tone. He leaned back in the chair and obediently fished out a cigarette. He was anxious to do anything I wanted—except tell the truth. He put the cigarette in his mouth and began to feel in his pockets for a match. I waited until it dawned on him that his matches were missing, then I said, "Looking for these?" and pitched the folder into his lap.

He started to turn back the flap, then froze, his

eyes on the cover. He glanced sharply up, trying to read my expression. I nodded gravely. "That's right, Marty. The Endore Inn. They came out of your pockét."

"Listen, I can ex-"

"I'll bet you can. You found them in the street, or your girl friend gave them to you. Just a coincidence. Well, I'm sick and tired of coincidence." With a hard, quick motion I brought up the gun. "This is the last time I'm asking. What have you done with my wife?"

Beads of perspiration stood out on the waxen skin of his face. "You can't kill me. They'd burn you!"

"That's right. I can't kill you. You'll get it in the leg. In the knee—the left one, I think. You have any idea at all what a bullet can do to a kneecap, Marty? Maybe you've bumped your knee a few times. Hurts like hell, you know? Well, a bullet hurts more—a lot more. And it goes right on hurting. For weeks. Months. In a year or two you walk again, if you're lucky. Only you don't walk very well. Of course if you're not lucky, they take the leg off, which means they have to fix you up with a—"

He shrank back in the chair and the unlighted cigarette fell out of his mouth. "Stop it! You're crazy!"

I pointed the gun at his leg with deliberate care.

"Where is she, Marty?"

Abruptly he collapsed, burying his face in his hands. Words came out of him with a thin wail. "He'll kill me!"

I breathed in and out. "Who'll kill you?" Dry sobs came from behind the hands.

"Look at me, Marty."

Slowly the hands fell away, showing a face crumpled with terror. I lowered the gun, almost embarrassed by the evidence of what fear could do to a human being. My voice was almost gentle. "Who'll kill you, Marty?"

He rubbed his fingers viciously across his mouth and looked away from me. His voice was sullen. "Fred Endorf."

"Uh-hunh. Fred Endorf. Tell me about him."

"Owns the Inn."

"The Endore Inn?"

"Yeah."

"Where does he fit into this?"

"He grabbed her."

"What's that mean-'grabbed' her?"

"What it sounds like. She got in the way."

"Come on, tell me about it."

He shrugged hugely. "Your wife got a little careless. She went down the hall to the women's john, all right, but coming out she turned the wrong way and opened the wrong door. Instead of the diningroom it was Fred's private office."

"Well?"

"Well, she picked a bad time. She saw somebody she had no business seeing."

"Who?"

"Tony Sallazo."

At first the name meant nothing to me. I was on the point of demanding details, when I remembered the scowling, scarred face that had appeared daily in the press during the past week or so. Sure, I knew who Tony Sallazo was. The Chicago racketeer who had gotten a little careless financially with Uncle Sam and had taken off for parts unknown to avoid prosecution.

"Tony Sallazo," I said slowly. "What was he doing at the Inn?"

"Hiding out until Endorf could get him out of the country. Give him a few months where the Feds can't reach him and he figures to square the rumble. So he

looks up his old friend Fred Endorf. Fred runs a nice tight little organization, with a very tough monkey named Clee Moran furnishing the muscle to keep things smooth. Besides the place in Bridgeport, Fred has three other spots where you can put away a good dinner before going down the hall for a hand of stud or shoot a little crap or bet on the wheels. Not to mention a harness track in Jersey and a string of New England taverns. But the big thing for Tony Sallazo is Fred's connection into some of these Spick banana republics by boat. Which is how he happens to be in Endorf's private office the night your wife walks in."

I had a sudden and much too vivid picture of Leona being bound and gagged and dumped on the cold cement floor behind somebody's furnace. I tightened my grip on the checkered butt of the gun. "So they-detained her."

"What else is open? They let her walk out of there, she sure as hell's gonna blow the whistle on Sallazo. Not that hanging onto her will be much better; you're in the next room and due any minute to start yelling where is she. Either way it's trouble, unless they come

up with something in a hurry."

I walked away from him, down the room to one of the windows. The soiled drapes hung limp and discouraged in the humid air. Across the airshaft a bosomy blonde in a ruffled nightgown sat at a dressing table combing out the frizzled ends of a short hairdo. Behind her was a corner of an unmade bed, with a man's naked feet showing.

I came back again. Marty Dry had leaned back and crossed his legs and was reaching for a cigarette. His hands shook a little lighting it. He blew out some smoke and looked furtively at me through it.
"Let's hear the rest of it," I said.

He moistened his lips, the tip of his tongue darting

in and out like a small pale-red snake. "Well, the way Janice tells it, she was at the Inn that night. About a month ago she met this Clee Moran I told you about and they went for each other hook, line, and anchor, with a Park Avenue apartment coming up any day, plus a couple of mink coats and a checking account. Anyway, Endorf calls her in and asks her to take the dame's place in the car. His idea is that with a little luck you'll drive off without catching on that there's been a switcheroo. That way, when you do find out your wife is missing, you'll be positive it happened after she left the Inn."

"He took a hell of a chance," I said.

He grinned without humor. "Sure, it was a long shot. You take the long shot when it's all you got. Clee Moran was against it right away, but there was no time to argue, so Janice, being blond and about the right size, puts on your wife's coat and gets in the back seat. If you tumble to the switch before pulling out of the lot, the boys are to grab you and the kid, and Fred will try to work it out from there. If you do leave, a car is to tail you to make sure nothing goes sour before Janice can give you the slip. Otherwise, she eases out of the picture the first chance she gets, the boys in the car will pick her up, and everything is jake."

"But in the meantime, what about my wife?"

"They got her hid out some place, I guess. Janice didn't say." He snicked ash from his cigarette with a hard movement of a neatly manicured finger. "She did say Fred intended waiting to make sure the cops would write this off as just another case of a wife walking out on her husband. That would give him time to ship Tony Sallazo out of the country before contacting you and agreeing to let your wife go if both of you would forget the whole thing."

While he talked, I stood there bouncing the gun lightly on my palm, thinking, putting the pieces to-gether, beginning to see dimly the pattern that was slowly taking shape. "I can't believe it's that simple, Marty."

His thin, dark eyebrows lifted in protest. "What do

you want? You've got it all."

"Too many loose ends," I said. "You couldn't know that much about Endorf without being tied in with him, and those matches say you've been at the Inn recently. I say you were there when all this took place, that you had a hand in kidnaping my wife. Then when you showed up at Janice Quill's apartment and found me there, you figured I was too close to the truth. You called Endorf and told him-and he told you what to do about it."

The picture was beginning to clear. "You murdered Janice Quill. Why? Because she knew Endorf was holding my wife? That wasn't worth a killing. He could have let her go, hidden Sallazo somewhere else, and denied everything if we went to the police with the story. Then why kill Janice?"

In that moment the answer came to me like a soundless burst of light and something in me stumbled and fell and whimpered and died. I reached out and grabbed Dry's shirt front and yanked him out of the chair. "I'll tell you why, you son of a bitch! It was to cover up another murder, wasn't it? The murder of my wife!"

He clawed feebly at my hand, panic etching sharp lines in his gray cheeks. "You're wrong!" he whined. "I didn't kill anybody. All right, so I've done a few jobs for Endorf. But not murder. I didn't even tell him I saw you there. Believe me, I didn't!"

I threw him violently back into the chair. One of his feet hit the bassely conding the anymodel.

his feet hit the hassock, sending the crumpled news-

paper to the floor. From one of the pages Leona's lovely face looked up at me and I turned away, fighting for control. She couldn't be dead. She was still alive, still unharmed, locked away somewhere, waiting for me to come and get her. Not to believe that was impossible. I bent down and picked up the paper and placed it carefully on an end table, letting my fingers rest lightly on the picture of my wife before turning away. I walked over and fished Dry's small flat gun from under the edge of the couch and slipped it into my pocket. There was no point in flashing my own gun around any longer and I put it away.

Marty Dry was watching me nervously from the

chair. When I reached for the telephone on the other end table he jumped a little. "Wait a minute, mister."

"Well?"

"Who you calling?"

"The police."

"You don't want to do that."

"You don't think I'm going to tackle Endorf by myself?"

"What about me?"

I eyed him narrowly. "What about you?"
"We're fine, hunh?" He gave me a tight, worried
grin. "You and me. No hard feelings? Nobody has to know about me, I mean. Okay?"

"You're my evidence, Marty. You're going to tell the police all about it. Exactly the way you told it to me.

The cigarette danced at a corner of his lips. "That means it gets back to Fred and I end up in a ditch."

"You expect that to bother me?"

"You need my help, mister."

"Not any more, I don't. Not as long as the police know who has her."

"They won't know where he has her. Before they're

through falling over their own feet, Endorf can have it fixed so she's never found. You can't take a chance on scaring him into getting rid of her-permanently."

"If he's responsible for Janice Quill's death, he

may have done that already."

"Maybe not. My way she's got a chance."

"What's on your mind, Marty?"

"Forget the cops, forget you ever heard of me, and I'll show you how to get her away from Endorfalive."

"You know where he's holding her?"

"Let's say I'm pretty sure."

"I'll need more than that, Marty."

"Do we make a deal?"

I stared at him. Sweat stood out along his forehead and beaded the upper lip of his almost feminine mouth. It was a hot night but it wasn't that hot. There was fear in him, so much fear it was coming out of his pores. I knew it wasn't because of me. Not any more. He was thinking of a man named Fred Endorf.

"All right," I said.

It was as though I had taken an anvil off his back. A touch of color crawled back into his cheeks and the cigarette stopped jittering along the thin, bloodless line of his lips. He said, "It's a cinch she's no longer at the Inn, and he wouldn't take a chance moving her any great distance. That leaves only one place for her—a house of his not many people know about up in the hills north of Bridgeport. The way I see it, we drive up there and I telephone to make sure that's where she is, then you round up some local law and go in and get her before Fred catches on to what's happening. It's that simple."

'And if she's not there?"

His eyes gave me the answer. "My car," I said, "is downstairs."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE STREET STRETCHED AWAY like a black stagnant river between the tall dark buildings. A young breeze, eager and unsure of itself, had risen during the past few minutes. It swirled bits of paper along the gutters and ruffled the soft waves of Martin Dry's hair.

We moved along the walk to where I had left the car. I was getting out my keys, when a green-and-white Mercury drew up alongside us and jolted to a stop, bouncing a little on its springs.

Dry stiffened. "Cops!" His voice reached me in a

thin faraway whisper.

I was able to make out the dim figures of two men on the front seat. Before I could say anything a spotlight winked on, nailing both of us with its white hot beam. I put up a hand to shield my eyes and said, "Turn that goddam thing off."

It stayed on, steady and biting. I could almost feel the impact of hard, suspicious eyes. Abruptly the light clicked off, leaving a luminous image for me to blink away, gears growled, and the Mercury left us standing there.

I watched it turn right at the next corner. "Now

what was that for?"

"Cops!" Dry said bitterly and spat. "For nothing. Because they felt like it. Since when do they need a reason for anything? Lucky they didn't shake us down just for laughs. You with a couple of guns in your pocket!"

I unlocked the car and we got in. He drove. He was very good at it. I sat next to him, the Colt .32 in my

coat pocket and my hand in with it. The brave young breeze had died in its infancy, leaving the night hot and still again, with heat lightning flickering along the Jersey Palisades and the smell of the river in the air

By the time we were out of Manhattan and following the curves through Riverdale, its apartment houses huge and black on the hills, I was up to my hatband in doubt. This, I told myself, could very easily turn out to be nothing more than an elaborate trap, put together by a ratty minor-league hoodlum anxious to save his own skin. I had no real reason to trust him, every reason to expect he would do his damnedest to drop me into this Fred Endorf's hands.

Yet I couldn't see handling it any other way. My

last talk with Lieutenant Box was proof enough that the New York police were definitely not on my side; and without Marty Dry's help, locating the place where Leona was being held would have to be a hitor-miss matter. I couldn't risk that. The penalty for

failure was too high. As long as I was the one with the gun, Dry was going to think six times before attempting even an oblique double-cross.

The miles rolled by. Neither of us spoke. The parkways were lined with bushes and trees standing quiet and lonely under the yellow moon. I leaned back against the seat, breathing the night air, feeling the numbness of exhaustion creeping up along my legs. I knew I couldn't last much longer. I was a hundred years old and going downhill fast

years old and going downhill fast.

We crossed the Connecticut line at Greenwich, traveling east on the Merritt Parkway. The dashboard clock read 1:50. Hardly any traffic now. Several times Dry eased up on the gas pedal to allow highway patrol cars to pass us, their red warning flashers brilliant against the night.

Dry shifted his position to light a cigarette, steadying the wheel with an elbow. In the glow of the match his face stood out briefly, stagily handsome, his dark hair ruffling in the air through the open window. His voice was quiet, vibrant. Endorf's got a lodge a few miles northwest of Bridgeport, near the Easton Reservoir. About fifty acres of trees and brush and small ravines between two state parkways. No neighbors within miles, but there's a service station close by with an outside phone booth. I'll call from there and make sure everything's right; then you ring in the cops while I kind of fade away. Check?"

I didn't say anything. It was all unreal, a fantasy, the second feature at the Bijou. I was in the grip of something that happened only on paper, events fashioned by writers who thought in terms of gimmicks and narrative hooks, who knew just where to stick the cliff-hanger.

The tires whispered against the concrete. The darkness closed in. The speedometer held at fifty-five. The gun in my pocket had the cold slimy feel of a snake. It was as unreal as everything else.

More miles, more curving roadway, more minutes dragging their feet. Then Dry was letting up on the accelerator, his neck thrust forward as he peered through the windshield. And finally the car slowed to a crawl and began to angle off toward the shoulder at the right side of the road.

Directly ahead the highway forked, with one ribbon disappearing beyond a gradual rise to the north, the other continuing east past the base of a low raw clay bank topped by a heavy line of trees. Opposite the clay bank, set back from the main highway, stood a small squat structure behind the shadowy outlines of three gasoline pumps in the center of a cement apron. The floodlights were off and the building dark

except for a small bulb burning feebly behind a window.

The car suddenly put on a fresh burst of speed and shot past the station. In the light from the dash Dry's face had a strained look.

"I thought you were stopping, Marty."

He glanced into the rearview mirror, then reached down and cut the lights before swinging off the road and applying the brakes. Tree branches formed a pool of blackness around the car. We were perhaps a hundred yards beyond the station.

I took out my gun and held it loosely between my legs. Marty Dry continued to stare into the mirror. In

the silence the motor throbbed quietly.

"A car's parked up the side road back there." His voice was harsh. "I don't like that."

"Why not? Maybe a little courting's being done."

He jerked a thumb toward the clay bank across the road. "That happens to be the lower end of Endorf's piece of land, friend, A car there could mean a lookout. Maybe he's expecting trouble."

"I hope he gets it. How far up is this lodge?"

"Three quarters of a mile, about."

"Let's make that phone call."

A full minute passed before he moved. A car hissed by, going too fast, its taillights bobbing circles of red that dwindled swiftly into nothing at all. Finally Dry took his eyes off the mirror, muttered something I didn't catch, and leaned down to switch off the motor. He pushed open the car door and stepped out onto the grass. I followed, holding the gun but not pointing it anywhere.

We walked back toward the service station, keeping well within the tree shadows. Cicadas skirled in the branches like bagpipes in the hands of madmen. Not a leaf moved. Dry stumbled over a dead branch

and swore nervously in a hoarse whisper.

Finally the crunch of gravel underfoot and the edge of a small building loomed up sharp and clear in the moonlight. The tubing of a turned-off neon sign spelled out GAS, with *Tires-Tubes-Batteries* under that. The three pumps were covered with metal shields padlocked into place in case some motorist got the idea the stuff was free after closing hours.

Close up against the near side of the building was a single glassed-in phone booth with a fold-back door. It was in deep shadow, hidden from the road. Dry fished through his change for the correct coin and was on the point of entering the booth when I caught his arm. "I want to hear both ends of this conversation,

Marty."

He nodded and slipped in, leaving the door open. I stood very close to him, half in the booth, smelling the sour-sweet odor of perspiration rising from him as he dialed a number with quick stabbing motions of his finger.

A single buzz and a receiver went up. A sour voice

grunted something unintelligible.

Dry moistened his lips. "Swede around?"

"Who wants him?"

"This is Marty. Marty Dry. I'm-"
"Hey, Marty!" The voice was clear now and loud enough to vibrate the receiver. "Where you at? The Inn?"

Dry rolled his eyes at me questioningly, the whites gleaming dully in the faint light. It had to be yes or no and he was leaving it up to me. I nodded, not knowing what else to do.

"Yeah," he said into the mouthpiece.

"Then get over here! You're needed!"

"Something wrong?"

"And then some. A-a friend of the old man's hasn't

been well. She got out of her room and is wandering around the grounds somewhere. He's fit to be tied. The roads are covered but that may not be enough. Snap it up, you hear?"

A sharp click meant the connection was broken. Dry took the receiver away from his ear, stared at it, then at me, and placed it carefully back on the hook.

I grabbed his arm. "He meant my wife." It wasn't

a question.

He nodded heavily. "She must've gone out a window. You don't expect dames to do a thing like that. Look, you heard what the man said. They'll go over every foot of those fifty acres if they have to, and I don't need to tell you what'll happen when they find her. You better get the law here fast, mister!"

My mind was a blank. I turned and ran toward the road. Behind me Dry yelled something. I never found out what it was.

I plunged across the empty highway and clawed my way up the steep bank, across its top and on into the wall of trees. The fact that I was still clutching the gun never occurred to me until the thick stem of a bush knocked it from my hand. I fell to my knees in the soft loam and scrambled frantically about in the darkness, hunting for it. Thorns tore at my hands. I was breathing heavily in labored gasps that were almost sobs. My fingers finally closed on it and I was up instantly and running again.

I ran about ten steps and went headlong into a shallow gully. The breath went out of me with a whoosh, pinwheels of light exploded in front of my eyes, and for the second time I dropped the gun. I lay there fighting for air, seeing nothing, unable to move. By the time my lungs were back on the job I was beginning to think in something like a straight

line.

Slowly I drew my knees under me, my palms pressed against the damp earth. I hung there, breathing with my mouth open, waiting for strength enough to do more than breathe. A dull pounding like a witch doctor loose on the drums was my heart.

Presently I began to crawl in a wavering circle, like a fly with a damaged wing. I was searching for the gun. Dead leaves crackled under me. It was a slow job. It seemed that I had covered at least one of the fifty acres before my knuckles brushed against the chill length of the Colt .32.

It was like shaking hands with God. I staggered to my feet and stood there listening, straining my ears. Nothing except the chirp of crickets and the long drawn out screech of tree frogs. No clumping feet, no raised voices, no bark of guns.

I crawled out of the gully and picked my way gingerly over the uneven ground. It was impossible to move quietly. My eyes were almost useless. I went on doggedly, not knowing where, just moving ahead and maybe walking in a circle for all I could tell.

Áfter a while, not very long, I skirted a narrow ravine and came out into a small natural clearing. There were more trees beyond it, and among the trees

the unsteady beam of a flashlight.

I froze, watching the pencil of light dance through the undergrowth until the shadowy figure behind it stepped into the open. A man, bareheaded and alone, not more than fifty feet away, looking as big as a battleship. I melted back into the trees and went on watching him. He came steadily ahead, spraying the ground with light. There was an indistinct object in his other hand. A gun, I decided. I brought up the .32, holding my wrist tight against my side and the muzzle pointed where it could do the most good if it had to be that way, and waited.

He stopped suddenly not more than fifteen feet from me and a little to one side. There was a tree partly between us. The flash winked off. Silence. I could make out the vague outline of his body in the starlight. He appeared to be listening, and after a long moment he turned aside, the flash snicked on again and he moved slowly away.

I waited until the swish of his feet through the brush was no longer audible before I went on. I kept out of the clearing, circling it instead. After that it was like walking through an ocean of velvet with the pins left in. I was making enough racket to alert half the county. This was what came from preferring football and girls to a membership in the Boy Scouts.

Finally exhaustion caught up with me and I leaned against a tree to catch my breath. From almost under my feet a cricket nobody was going to discourage let loose loud enough to make me jump a foot.

I was going at this all wrong. Even if I managed to keep clear of Endorf's men, I could blunder around in this jungle the rest of the night, passing within inches of Leona a dozen times, and still not find her. She certainly wouldn't try to attract my attention. To her I would be just one more trigger-happy hoodlum looking for a blond target. The wise move for me was to get back to that telephone right away and start yelling for the police.

Whoever it was must have been standing there all the time. There was no warning, no advance whisper of sound. Only the world blowing up in a sudden sea of white fire laced with agony, and I was falling through it in slow motion toward the edge of blackness. Blackness far, far deeper than the blackness of

any night.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

IT WAS A ROOM and I was in it, on something soft, lying on it, stretched out at full length, on my back, looking up at the bright reflection of warm lamplight forming a circle where a paneled wall met a soft gray ceiling. It was a rich walnut paneling with a glow all its own, cut into large squares and finished off with a strip of beveled molding, very neat, very costly. A man who valued the way things looked, who liked that last little touch of elegance à outrance, would want it done exactly that way.

I couldn't have cared less.

I moved my head experimentally and the soft gray ceiling tilted and spun, taking my stomach along with it. Pain dug into my skull and the groan came out full and strong before I even knew it was there.

Somebody said, "Swede," mildly. A chair creaked and feet came my way in no hurry and I was being looked down at from frostbitten blue eyes set deep in a face as thin and cold as an ax blade on a winter morning. Below the face was a white shirt and an opened collar and the loosened knot of a figured blue necktie.

A narrow hand swam lazily into range and speared the front of my jacket. Teeth flashed in a meaningless three-cornered grin, and a flat voice said, "Upsadaisy," and around went the room again.

I was still on the couch, but sitting up now, blinking at a plump middle-aged man in a brown leather swivel-chair behind a streamlined walnut desk. Behind him were curtained French windows tightly closed. Soft light from a desk fixture and a pair of tailored table lamps with dark-green drum shades brought out the sheen of leather-bound volumes lining one wall and pointed up the thick-piled luxury of maroon carpeting reaching to the baseboards. From what seemed a long way off came the faint hum of an air-conditioning unit.

The middle-aged man was leafing through the identification panels of a wallet lying on the desk in front of him. He held a fat golden cigar between the stubby fingers of his left hand, a ribbon of oily blue smoke climbing from it. I saw with a stirring of not very robust anger that it was my wallet he was digging into.

Presently he tucked everything back where it belonged and put the wallet aside. He removed his rimless reading glasses and placed them gently on the desk pad and rubbed the bridge of his nose between a thumb and forefinger. Light moved along the paleness of his almost hairless scalp. He looked slightly less dangerous than the Bobbsey Twins.

He raised his head and our eyes met. His expression was one of stern composure, like the chairman of the board getting set to bawl hell out of a vice-president. "Well, sir, how do you feel?"

"I've got a lump on my head and an ache under

that. You want to know how it got there?"

He turned a hand over. "If you insist on prowling around private property carrying a gun, you must expect a violent reception. Would you like a brandy?"

"No. Where's my wife?"

He stared at me impassively. "Why do you ask me that?"

"Your name Endorf?"

"I am Fred Endorf, yes."

"What have you done with her?"

"I don't have your wife, Mr. Coryell. I know she's missing of course; the newspapers, radio, and television seem to have talked about little else since yesterday. No, I don't have her, but I am curious to learn why you think I do."

I stood up. The room lurched and I had to take hold of the couch until it stopped. I straightened slowly and walked unsteadily over to the desk and leaned down across from him, putting my palms on the glass to keep from falling into his lap. Our faces

were inches apart.

"You're lying," I said. "You fat son of a bitch, you're lying. I know all about it. I know how you took her and I know why. I know about the switch you made, putting Janice Quill in her place until I'd left the Inn." I slapped a hand hard against the desk. "Answer me, damn you! What have you done with my wife?"

"Please sit down, Mr. Coryell. You're shaking like

a leaf."

My laugh was a short bitter bark of near hysteria. "No kidding! What would you expect? I've been lied to by half the cheap crooks in town, I've been prodded and pushed and insulted by a bunch of stupid cops, I've been hit on the head. I've found a woman dead with her tongue hanging out. And you sit there on your fat rump and tell me I'm shaking like a leaf!"

He looked past my shoulder and nodded slightly. A hand closed on one of my arms, a hand that would not be shaken off. I turned and saw the knife-blade face of Swede and I swung a fist at it. He avoided the blow easily, grinning, and I was yanked back and slammed roughly into a leather armchair. The lights flickered and dimmed and another groan was torn out of me.

"Get Mr. Coryell a drink, Swede."

A glass was pushed into one of my hands and I

smelled the sharp tang of brandy. I gulped it down, gagging a little, grateful for a slow warmth that be-

gan to spread through me.

Endorf sat behind his cigar, a line in his forehead to show me he was concerned about my health. "Perhaps you had better lie down for a while, sir. A blow on the head is no trivial matter."

I said, "Maybe you don't hear well. This is no social call and I didn't just happen to run into a door. You've got my wife and I want her. If I don't get her you're going to be up to your tie clasp in policemen." "Mr. Coryell." He took a deep breath and let it

"Mr. Coryell." He took a deep breath and let it out, indicating that he was annoyed. "I'm trying to be patient. But for you to sit there and hurl unsupported charges at me is a waste of your time and mine. Naturally I cannot refute evidence against me unless I know what it is."

"I've got a bellyful of wasted time," I said. "Why waste more by going over what you know and I know

you know?"

He settled himself deeper into the chair. "Humor me, sir. Please. We can sit here and glower at each other and accomplish nothing. I don't doubt that you are sincere in your suspicions. But that does not make them valid."

"All right. Do you know a woman named Janice Quill?"

"Yes, sir. Slightly."

"You know a man named Tony Sallazo?"

"I know of him, of course."

"But not personally?"

"No, Mr. Coryell."

"You know a Martin Dry?"

"Yes, sir. I do. He has been useful to me on occasion."

"Okay," I said. "Now I'll put it together for you.

About one o'clock yesterday morning my wife came out of the washroom at the Endore Inn. She got her directions mixed and opened the door to your private office by mistake. In there was a man she recognized as Tony Sallazo. This meant you couldn't let her go—at least until Sallazo was safely out of the country. But I was in the next room waiting for her. You fixed that up by having Janice Quill take my wife's place in the car, wearing her coat and carrying her handbag. Once I was far enough away from the Inn, the Quill girl was to slip off, and I would assume my wife had left me under her own power.

"That's the why and the how of it, Endorf. Not that any of it's news to you, of course. But you asked

to be humored."

The man behind the desk put a half inch of ash from his cigar into a circular tray of hammered silver. His hand was as steady as a hand can be. "Amazing, sir. As ingenious as anything I've ever heard. May I ask the source of your information? Get Mr. Coryell another drink, Swede."

I waved the man with the hatchet face away as he came over to take my glass. "I found my wife's coat in Janice Quill's apartment, which proves the switch in women was made. The rest of the details were furnished by one of your hoodlums."

"One of my hoodlums," he said tonelessly. "That would be Martin Dry?"

"Exactly."

"Why didn't you go to the police with your information?"

"Some of it they have," I said, stretching the truth. "The rest happened so fast they're probably a few steps behind me."

I hoped he would get the impression that the boys in blue would be pouring in any minute now, that

unless my wife and I walked out of there quick the roof would fall in.

Endorf took some smoke from his cigar and let it roll out, off his tongue. He moved his hands, touching the telephone, the lamp base, the pen in its green onyx holder. He touched them as though the feel of smooth surfaces gave him pleasure. His eyes avoided mine. I decided he was thinking.

Not looking directly at me, he said, "Holding someone prisoner is always awkward, Mr. Coryell. As well as dangerous. What disposition was I expected to make of your wife?"

"Originally," I said, "you meant to hold her until Sallazo was in the clear, then contact me and arrange to release her if we both agreed to forget the whole thing. Only that's all been changed."

He looked at me sharply, his eyebrows up. "It would seem to be a reasonable and happy solution.

Why would I change it?"

"Because I was able to do a quick job of finding out what had happened. When I located Janice Quill you were afraid I might get the truth out of her, so you had her murdered. That meant no deal on my wife's release, since either of us could pin a murder charge on you."

"Then it follows that I have also murdered your

wife?"

"Tell me I'm wrong, Endorf."

"And now I assume that I am to whip out a gun and shoot you through the heart."

I didn't say anything.

"Do you take me for a fool, sir? Three murders in less than twenty-four hours, simply to protect a hunted criminal. You may know men capable of such senseless violence but I am not one of them." He leaned back and opened a drawer and took out the

two guns I had brought along and put them down on the edge of the desk. His voice was cold, his eyes far colder. "That will be all, my friend. Take your property and go."

For the first time I felt the stirring of doubt. "You're letting me walk out of here? Just like that?

With the proof I have?"

"Proof? You have no proof that involves me in the slightest. Let me make a suggestion, Mr. Coryell. Go to the police and tell them what you have learned. An investigation by men qualified to get at the truth will more than likely show that Martin Dry and Janice Quill kidnaped your wife for reasons of their own. Or so it would seem to me. Good night, sir."

My mind seemed to have gone numb. I stood up

and went over to the desk and dropped the two guns into my coat pockets, not once taking my eyes off

Fred Endorf. "My wallet?"

He handed it over without a word. I was on the point of turning away when I remembered something—something that would blow his story apart like five sticks of dynamite. Words came out before I could check them. "Wait a minute! What about that woman you were looking for?"

His eyes seemed to veil over. "Woman?"

"Martin Dry checked here with a phone call. Your boy Swede said a woman had escaped from her room and was wandering around the grounds. I say that woman was my wife!"

He looked about as flustered as the side of a wall. "Nonsense. Swede."

The sharp-faced man drifted over. "Yeah, Mr. Endorf?"

"I wasn't told that Dry had called here."
"That's right, boss." He shifted his feet uncomfortably. "I figured, you know, just one of the boys

calling in like. Course if I'd a known he—"
Endorf moved a hand. "Take Mr. Coryell up to

see our guest."

It was all handled smoothly and without hesitation. No panic, no guilty shifting of eyes, no stammered explanations. The fuse was gone from my load of dynamite, leaving me with my hands empty and my mouth open. Swede jerked his chin at me and I followed him across the room, through a door into a large center hall and up a wide, bending staircase to the second floor. A wall of glass brick on one side and doors along the other. We went through one of the doors, into a small neat room with a double bed taking up most of it and a small man with dark hair and horn-rimmed glasses standing by an open French window and smoking a cork-tipped cigarette.

There was a woman in the bed, wearing a man's pajamas. A sheet covered her to the waist. She had a weak rather pretty face framed in a cloud of red hair that needed a comb. Absence of make-up gave the face a washed-out look except for two angry spots of color high up on rather prominent cheekbones. She seemed to be sleeping, the pajama coat rising and falling under somewhat labored breathing.

Swede said, "How is she, Dave?"

"A real bottle baby, this one." There was open admiration in his thin voice. "Woke up there a while back and wanted a drink. Just a small one, she said.

back and wanted a drink. Just a small one, she said. Like to chewed my arm off."

"Every seventeen days," Swede said. "Like clockwork and don't ask me why. Rest of the time as sweet a doll as you'd want around. A nice dry Martini or two before dinner and maybe a little Delamain for a nightcap. And that's it. But every seventeen days down goes two fifths of bourbon like it was water on top of an aspirin and we spend the rest of the night

prying her off the chandeliers."

The girl on the bed muttered something and turned on her side, her firm, unbound breasts moving under the green-and-white pajama coat. Light from the nightstand lamp bathed her face and the man at the window reached out and carefully tilted the shade. "Yes, sir," he said fondly to nobody in particular. "Bourbon was invented for this little lady."

I said, "Why bother showing her to me?"

Both men stared at me with a kind of detached hostility. "It's like this," Swede said. "The boss said you should see her. Okay, so you seen her. Let's go."

We went out of there and back down the staircase and into the room where Endorf was waiting. Evidently he hadn't moved. He said, "You saw Miss Santini, Mr. Coryell?"

"If you mean the redheaded lush, I saw her. I'm

still waiting to find out why."

The hand holding the cigar gestured gracefully. "Miss Santini is a protégée of mine, sir. Occasionally she drinks to excess and does some—well, unpredictable things. Tonight she wandered away on the grounds somewhere, and the boys had to hunt for her. It was this situation Swede was referring to on the telephone."

I was out of ammunition. Nothing left for me except to go back to Box with my hat in my hand and my toe in the dirt and tell him he was right, that finding Leona was no job for the impatient amateurs and would he please do it the official way. The ponderous routine would grind and clank ahead, the days would pass, employees of the Endore Inn would be questioned and their boss given a polite but not-at-all arduous grilling, Teletypes would clatter and bulletins go up in police stations across the land. And, if Endorf's guess was right, one day Martin Dry would

be picked up and the truth come out. Only by then Leona would be a long time dead, leaving Phoebe and me with the long empty years to live without her.

I said, "It's beginning to stink in here. Do I just

give you a snappy salute and walk out?"

A touch of color came into Endorf's cheeks. "I assume you came by car. Swede will take you to it. I trust you're satisfied that I am not involved in your wife's disappearance, Mr. Coryell?"

"Nothing satisfies me," I said. "But I have to admit I can't see you killing two women simply to cover up for a crook. If I ever find out different I'll look you up."

He inclined his head a full inch. "Of course. Good

luck in your search. Swede."

I trailed the thin-faced man to the door. I paused there to look back at Endorf. He sat like a statue in soapstone, his eyes closed, the light glinting on his scalp, a stubby finger tracing an invisible pattern with sensuous slowness along the smooth surface of the cradle phone.

No wonder that redhead upstairs was full of bour-

bon.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

IT WAS A LITTLE COOLER out now, with an erratic breeze moving the leaves of the big trees in front of the lodge. Steps led down from the big porch and the darkness closed in around us as we walked along a curving driveway of crushed white stone to where a long, low black sedan was parked.

No one around but the two of us. Swede slid in behind the wheel and I took the seat next to him. The motor turned over so quietly I had to strain my ears to hear it. The headlights came on then, and we rolled smoothly along the crushed rock and pulled out into the side road leading down to the highway where I had left my car.

Swede drove with one hand resting lightly on the wheel, an elbow on the window ledge. He kept his eyes straight ahead, ignoring me. I lit a cigarette with a dashboard lighter and stared at his razor-edge profile. I said, "Price is no object, Swede. Tell me where she is."

He never even turned his head. "Save your wind, neighbor. I wouldn't have any idea what you're talking about."

The trees and bushes flowed silently past us. I thought of that rainy night outside the Endore Inn. I thought of driving away from there, my daughter in the back seat and next to her a woman who had no business being there. I thought of the wet pavement and the bright headlights and turning down our street, with all the houses dark and the nice people in them sleeping. And the darkness of our driveway

(like an account executive's necktie!) and my wife hurrying out of the car and fumbling with the keys before finding the one that unlocked the front door. Only she hadn't been my wife at all. It was another woman, a stranger who had gotten in too deep and was now dead and beyond reach. I thought of her slipping away, out the back door and edging between the houses until she came out at the corner where a car waited to pick her up-

And the missing piece fell into place!

I took a slow, deep drag from my cigarette and dropped it through the window. I put my hand casually into my side coat pocket and took out the Colt revolver, holding it so that my body kept the man at the wheel from seeing it.

"He was right, Swede," I said. "He wouldn't do murder just to shield a criminal. Not Fred Endorf. He likes his fat cigars and leather bindings and redheaded women much too much for that."

From far off a plane buzzed down the sky. I could hear the crickets and the tree frogs plainly. The sedan's motor was that quiet.

"Only sometimes," I continued, "things go wrong. Things even very smart, very careful operators can't anticipate. A neighbor of mine named Fremont was taking a walk that night. He saw what he thought was my wife running down the street toward a parked car. He ran after her and got sapped before he found out his mistake. But the sap came down a little too hard and he died—and Fred Endorf was involved in a murder."

The side road ended, and Swede made a right turn into the Merritt Parkway. The service station had a small huddled look in the darkness.

"Before Fremont died," I said, "I managed to locate Janice Quill. She lied out of it then, but the next time it might not stick. Endorf knew this, and within an hour after Fremont died the Quill girl was strangled with her own belt."

The sedan swung off the concrete and stopped on the shoulder a few feet behind my own car. Swede rested both hands on the wheel and turned his head

toward me. "Your stop, neighbor."

"You knew where I was parked all along. You boys work fast, I'll say that for you. Now it's a matter of getting to Marty Dry first and putting him deep in the river. No witnesses, no loose ends. I'll know the answers and so will the police. But there'll be no proof, and it takes proof, doesn't it, Swede?"

"Go home," he said suddenly. "Go home and take a pill and get some sleep. It'll all look different with

a new sun."

"One question," I said. My throat was so dry the words hardly came out. "I've got to know. Is my wife still alive?"

"Mister, for the last time-"

"We're going back."

"Look, I don't want any-"

"You heard me. I'm going back up there." I closed my hand tight on the gun. "Come on, I mean it."

"I told you to ge-"

I brought my hand up and slammed the butt of the Colt against the side of his head. Everything I had was behind it. It sounded like somebody had dropped a watermelon. He slumped down across the wheel and the horn cut loose with a sustained blast that lifted every hair on my head. I grabbed one of his arms and yanked him over almost on top of me. That stopped the horn, but the sudden silence wasn't much better.

Nothing in sight along the road in either direction. I put the gun back in my pocket and opened the

door and stepped out onto the grass. This time the darkness was welcome. Swede was breathing harshly, his mouth open. I remembered hearing that skull fracture cases often breathed that way. Maybe he had a skull fracture. That would be terrible. I almost laughed, thinking how terrible it would be.

I reached in and took hold of him under the arms and hauled him out. He was as limp as a spaghetti dinner. His heels hit the ground hard. I dragged him over to the nearest tree and took off his necktie and tied his hands behind him. Not that it made much difference. It would be a long time before he could make trouble for anyone.

By the time I was behind the wheel of the black sedan my nerves had stopped jumping. I turned the car in a sharp U and drove back to where the road to Endorf's lodge forked off.

The engine turned over quietly. It was a good car, a great engine. I reached out and patted the dashboard. They didn't make cars like this any more. Only this was a new car. They didn't use to make cars like this. Not any more they didn't.

I was as high as a heroin addict. My adrenals must have been pouring the stuff out like the pumps in a sinking ship.

The road tilted up, curving a little. The driveway entrance couldn't be much farther. I put more pressure on the gas pedal—and headlights threw a beam across the road not more than a hundred yards ahead.

I hit the brake, hard. It was a power brake and I came damned near taking the steering post through the windshield. While I was getting my breath back, a car pulled out of the driveway, made a fast left turn, and rolled away from me in the night.

It could have meant anything. Or nothing. Only it did seem a little late in the day for joy-riding along

a lonely road leading nowhere.

I thought of Fred Endorf sitting behind his fancy desk, waiting patiently until I was safely out of the picture. He would stand up finally and put out his cigar and walk out into the warm night air and get into a waiting car and drive off to tie up a loose end or two. Ends that would have been tied up before this, only I had shown up at the wrong time.

My foot caressed the accelerator. The black sedan was up to thirty within three seconds. Ahead of me the rear lamps of the other car were hardly more than

pin points.

Passing the driveway, I cut my lights. It was like driving through a stovepipe with my eyes shut. Let the road bend and a tree would more than likely put that nice quiet motor in my lap. My only chance was to keep those twin taillights continuously in sight.

Two miles of this, no more and possibly a little less, before warning lights flashed not far ahead and the car rolled to a stop. I coasted up behind it and jumped out, holding the gun and willing to use it. The headlights were off and a door hung open. Nobody around. I found a narrow path leading into the woods and went along it, fast. It was a path laid out to avoid things, and the final turn took me into a clearing, with the indistinct figure of a man hurrying across it toward a long, low building with a flat roof and a sprawling porch and lights burning behind drawn shades.

He was almost to the door when I caught up with him. He turned quickly as my feet hit the porch. But he didn't turn quickly enough. I buried half the gun barrel in his belly so hard he nearly fell down.

It was Endorf, all right. His eyes popped and his round face seemed to hang in folds. "Go ahead," I said thickly. "Go ahead and open it."

Before he could say anything, the door jerked back and a man stood swaying in the opening, light from the room outlining his small body. The smell of high-priced Scotch came out of him strong enough to stagger five sailors. He said, "What the hell?" in a cold, hard voice, then closed his mouth slowly, his eyes riveted on the gun in my hand.

"Inside," I said. "Inside, or your boss gets a bullet

where it'll do the most for him."

"Clee—" Endorf began, but I dug the Colt in deeper and the word ended in a gasp. Both men backed away slowly, and then we were under a beamed ceiling in a large, cheerful room, the door shut and the air crackling with tension.

I moved my eyes carefully, looking at the room. No one in it except the three of us. This would be the hunting lodge and money no object. Maple furniture in bright plaids outdoor prints on the redwood walls.

in bright plaids, outdoor prints on the redwood walls, a giant moosehead over a wide fireplace with a gleaming copper hood, a gun rack in one corner stacked with rifles and shotguns. Two doors flanked the fireplace, one open to show a modern kitchen, the other tightly closed.

The small man was swaying slightly, his mouth loose-lipped, his velvety brown eyes a little glazed. An empty bottle of Old Smuggler on the sideboard told me why. He was wearing gray slacks and a gray sport shirt with a script monogram in dubonnet on the left pocket. CM. Clee Moran, the hatchet man Marty Dry

had mentioned.

I said, "Okay. No more lies. Where is she?"

Endorf had turned to stone. Moran held his hands slightly away from his body, like the sheriff of Dodge City getting set to draw. His mouth curled with crooked insolence. "You talking to me, mister?"

"To both of you," I said. "It's been a hard day

and I've talked too much and got too little for it. I want my wife, and if I have to pull this trigger to get

her, I'll pull it. Believe me."

Endorf cleared his throat and my eyes jumped to him. The smile on his fat face had no business being there. He said, "Take him, Clee. That gun's not loaded."

Chill fingers flicked my spine. I hadn't checked the gun after getting it back from him. I hadn't thought to check it.

Moran said, "Well, well!" in a small, bright voice. "Now that does change things, doesn't it? How can you be so sure, Fred?"

"I make it a point," Endorf said smugly, "never to hand a man back his gun with the bullets left in."

If it was a bluff, it was a two-edged one. For all he could know I might decide to call it by pointing the gun at him and pulling the trigger. But if he wasn't bluffing-

I said, "He's right, Moran. He took them out. Only it just so happens I keep a few extra rounds in my glove compartment."

Endorf stiffened. "You're lying!"

"I know how you can make me prove it."

Nobody moved. Endorf's pale eyes slid from me to Clee Moran in mute appeal. The small man chuckled. "Getting kind of short-haired around here, Fred. If your friend's bluffing and gets away with it, you're in trouble. If he's not bluffing, you're still in trouble."
"Clee, I tell you he's lying! That gun's empty!"

The grin on Moran's face appeared to be a mile wide. "I'll tell you what, Fred. You're that positive, you take it away from him. I'll back you up.'

The fat man's bloodless lips quivered. He stared hard at the Colt in my hand as though trying to see into the chambers. He moistened his lips and rocked

slightly on his heels, clenching and unclenching his hands, over and over.

I said, "Where is she, Endorf?"

"In the other room." He could barely get the words out.

"She's all right?"

"Tied up. That's all."

"Let's go in and get her."

He started toward the closed door—and that was when Clee Moran laughed—a thin, high, drunken laugh that grated my nerves. "Honest to God, Fred, you kill me! You mean you're actually going to let him get away with it?"

Endorf turned back, his round face flushed with impotent anger. "I notice you backed down quick enough. I'm not accustomed to violence. If you were

afraid to risk it, why expect me to?"

The small man laughed again. "I always figured you had no guts. You want to learn to read faces, Fred. The first time you said that gun wasn't loaded your friend came damned near having a stroke! Man, you were a hundred per cent right. That gun's got nothing in it but a little dust!"

I said, "Visiting hours are over. Turn around, both

of you, and put your hands up."

Moran chuckled. "School's out, Coryell. You made one hell of a nice try. Now give me the pretty gun." He started toward me with his hand out, in no hurry, a small unwavering smile pasted on his flushed face.

I pointed the gun at his chest. "Don't make me do

it, Moran."

He kept on coming, his hand as steady as a continent, his smile unchanging. It was the kind of bravery that deserved a better cause.

I said, "That's it, you bastard," and yanked the trigger.

No ringing report, no gout of flame. Just a small click as dry as desert air and then the Colt was twisted out of my hand, almost taking a finger with it, and I was through.

There was a fine film of perspiration on Moran's face that hadn't been there before. "Sit down," he purred. "Sit down and rest the feet. You look tired."
There was a gun in his hand. Not my gun. This one

was bigger and shinier. I never did find out where he

had been keeping it.

I backed away from him until my knees hit the edge of a chair. I let myself down into it, slowly, seeing death in those velvet eyes and not knowing what to do about it.

Endorf came over with a length of thick cord and a roll of surgical tape. He said, "Shoot him if he resists, Clee," in the same tone he'd use to order a drink, and put the cord down and began to tear off

strips of the tape.

It was time for the organ music and please omit flowers. They would truss me up and plaster my mouth shut, then bring around a car and put me and my wife in back and take us out somewhere and mix up a little concrete and sink us in a lake or a river. Or maybe that would be too much trouble. Maybe they would just put us good and deep in the ground and stick a few bushes on top, nothing elaborate, just enough so that no one would ever know what had happened to the Coryells. No one, that is, except Box. Box would know all the answers. He would claim that I had murdered my wife and Mark Fremont, and he would spend the rest of his active days trying to find me. Only he wasn't going to find me, not ever, and the "wanted" posters with my picture on them would turn brown in post offices and police stations, and after a while I would be forgotten and so would

Leona. Forgotten by everyone except Feewee, who would grow up and get married and maybe think of her folks as someone kind of misty and unreal, a couple of people no one wanted to talk about.

couple of people no one wanted to talk about.

The tape was ready. Endorf bent gingerly and started to put the first strip across my mouth. I wondered hazily why he was in such a hurry to gag me. Out here I could yell my lungs out and get nothing but echoes. The sensible way would have been to tie me first so I couldn't fight the taping job.

And then I knew why!

"Moran," I yelled, jerking my head away. "Ask him

about Janice Quill! Ask him-"

A palm slapped down across my teeth so hard I saw stars. I sunk my teeth into it, and Endorf yelled and jumped back and swung a fist at my head. I grabbed his wrist and twisted and he fell down.

Moran was crouching slightly, his eyes jumping from me to Endorf and back to me again. "Hold it, Fred. What's he talking about? What's this with Janice?"

The fat man struggled clumsily to his feet, panting. "I don't know! He's lying! Give me that gun,

Clee! I'll shut him up!"

"Sure," I said. "He'll shut me up. Just like he shut Janice Quill up. Only with her it was a noose around the neck. She's dead, Moran! Your girl is dead! No penthouse on Park Avenue for her. Just a piece of Potter's Field and worms for roommates!"

The small man rocked on his heels, his ferret face suddenly blank. His eyes scorched me. "Who says she's dead? How do you know?"

I said, "Take a look at your boss if you don't be-

lieve me."

Endorf opened his mouth but no words came out. His face was gray and a hundred years old.

"I saw her dead," I went on relentlessly. "With the belt of her yellow robe around her neck. When I found out she was the one who took my wife's place in my car that night, Endorf was afraid she'd tell the whole story. That would pin Fremont's death on him, so he had her killed."

Moran's velvet eyes were velvet no more. Now they were like the sheen of paving blocks on a gray and wind-swept day. Looking into them was like looking at the falling blade of a guillotine. And they were looking at Fred Endorf.

The fat man fell back a step. "I had to, Clee! She could have ruined us all! There are plenty of women—better women than some cheap little blond chippy

like-"

Moran shot him twice, the two reports so close together they sounded like one. Endorf screamed and coughed and screamed again. He clapped both hands to his chest and took a long step going nowhere and fell sideways. He said, "Get a doctor, please. Get a d-d-" and blood poured out of his mouth, his eyes rolled up and set and he was dead.

The killer's eyes swung from the man on the floor to me. In them was the madness of drink and rage and grief. "Your turn," he said tonelessly. "You started all this, you lousy stuffed shirt. Now you get it!"

all this, you lousy stuffed shirt. Now you get it!"

A voice from the door said, "Drop it, little man."

It was a familiar voice, a wonderful voice. I turned my head and there was Box a few steps into the room, a heavy police gun in his hand, two uniformed men crowding in behind him.

"Of course, officer," Moran said politely and jerked

up his gun and fired.

He was already falling as the gun went off. A tiny wisp of smoke curled up from the revolver in Box's hand. The left side of Moran's slick black hairline

was gone, replaced by blood and bone and a gray something that wrenched at my stomach.

Box's hard face floated in front of me. I said, "Jesus

Christ, am I glad to see you!"

And then I fainted.

I gagged on a mouthful of Scotch and turned my head away and spit the stuff out. A woman gasped and I blinked and there was Leona up above me. Her face was dirty and her hair needed a week in the right hands and her green linen dress would do to polish the car. But no woman in the world ever looked a tenth as beautiful as she did at that moment.

I said, "The next time you open a door, be care-

ful."

Two big tears came down and hit me in the face. Her smile was like the rising sun. "Darling," she

said. "Darling."

I sat up and rubbed a hand over my face. I needed a shave. Box saw me and stopped talking to a slender young man in the uniform of a Connecticut State Trooper. He came over and gave me a sober nod. "You all right, Mr. Corvell?"

"I'm fine."

"Looks like I owe you an apology."
Nothing had ever been harder for him to say. But that hadn't kept him from saying it. I said, "Skip it. About half the time you should have been belting me in the teeth for the way I talked."

I put out my hand and he shook it for me. I said, "You made it just in time to squeeze in that last

commercial. How did you find us?"

"Routine, Mr. Coryell," he said gravely. "Palmer & Verrick told us about this Marty you were looking for at the Amsterdam Avenue address. We ran it down and found out he was one of Endorf's boys. When it turned out Endorf owned the Inn where you stopped that night, we had what we needed."

Leona said, "Could we please go home?"

One of the State Troopers drove us to where I had left my own car. I put my wife in the front seat and went around and got in behind the wheel. "Nice to have you back, Mrs. Coryell."

She smiled at me and put a hand on my arm and I kissed her. She drew back a little and rubbed her fingers lightly along my cheek.

"Ames." I could barely hear her.

"Uh-huh?"

"I want to go to bed with you."

"Hey-hey!"

"And I don't mean sex! Just to hold me."
"What's all of a sudden wrong with sex?"

She was asleep before we'd gone a mile. That was all right with me. I didn't feel much like talking, anyway.

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