



755

HE WANTED HER
— To Beat a Murder Rap!

WAYWARD ANGEL

VERNE CHUTE



A BANTAM BOOK

complete and unabridged

Harry Scheraga

All dames are poison . . . !

. . . and Rocky Nevins had plenty of reason to know it. He was still running from the last one . . . and a murder rap; now he figured on using this one to help him out of a bad spot. But first he had to find a missing heiress who was either hiding or kidnapped . . . or dead.

She could be drinking tea at the Y, or swilling scotch in a roadhouse . . . flat broke, or getting rich on the rackets . . . masquerading . . . or murdered. The only sure thing was, she'd be in the middle of trouble. When she left home she took with her a pretty face, a beautiful body, a stubborn nature . . . and ten thousand bucks that wasn't rightly hers.

Rocky went out hunting trouble, but he didn't begin to know how much he'd find. He ran into one of the nastiest murders on record, and found out fast that somebody . . . with muscle and moola to back it up . . . didn't want the lady located. Then there were two high-tension blondes who kept getting in the way, for very different reasons. But murder and glamour . . . threats or invitations . . . couldn't stop him. He knew all dames are poison . . . and he had to get the girl to beat a murder rap!

About THE COVER

Jerking the ignition and lights off, Rocky shook the screaming girl. "Stop it!" he cried.

She stopped screaming. Her breath caught and then started again. There was the smell of gasoline in the air. Only the girl's heavy breathing filled the gap between the near-at-hand and the night.

He whispered, "Wait!" and slowly opened the door. The only light came from the fourth of a moon sailing placidly overhead.

"It's all right, I guess. Come on," he told her.

WAYWARD ANGEL

V E R N E C H U T E



BANTAM BOOKS
NEW YORK

A BANTAM BOOK *published by arrangement with*
Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Bantam Edition Published
February, 1950

Copyright, 1948, by Verne Chute
Copyright in Canada by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review to be printed in a magazine or newspaper.



Bantam Books are published by Bantam Books, Inc. Its trade mark, consisting of the words "BANTAM BOOKS" and the portrayal of a bantam as here reproduced, is registered in the U. S. Patent Office.

Printed in the United States of America

To
JERRY LUX

CONTENTS

<i>Prologue</i>	1
1 <i>Los Angeles</i>	5
2 <i>Mary Jaine</i>	13
3 <i>Polo Lounge</i>	23
4 <i>Granite Dells</i>	37
5 <i>The Rampart Plaza</i>	51
6 <i>Angels Flight</i>	61
7 <i>At Bay</i>	70
8 <i>Professional Virgin</i>	80
9 <i>Wesley Bell</i>	86
10 <i>San Juan Capistrano</i>	99
11 <i>Casalita Mañana</i>	108
12 <i>The Swallows of Capistrano</i>	122
13 <i>Double-Entendre</i>	134
14 <i>Revenge Is Sweet—Perhaps</i>	142
15 <i>Two Aunts and One Uncle</i>	150
16 <i>Hermosillo</i>	159
17 <i>Avenida Serdán</i>	176
18 <i>Arrival in L.A.</i>	191
19 <i>Tea for Two</i>	198

CAST OF CHARACTERS

HILDEGARDE EDERLEE had more good looks than any girl with that much money was entitled to . . . but neither one did her much good when she got tangled up with the wrong people.

ROCKY NEVINS had looks and a way with women, but no money . . . and not much life left if he didn't clear himself of a murder charge in a hurry.

MARY JAINE, blonde and beautiful, thought she knew her way around . . . but Rocky had a few tricks she hadn't heard of.

HAL HEBER, a good, old-fashioned private eye, never learned that brain power can sometimes beat out the muscle men.

TABITHA TODD, Hildegard's aunt, liked to smoke a pipe and liked people who talked straight.

SALLY CARSTAIRS, an ultra-blonde waitress with a lot of sweaters and a hospitable disposition.

NED and ALICE FOOTE, uncle and aunt to Hildegard, were never seen more than two feet away from each other.

VICTOR DARO, a small-time gambler who got in with high society.

WESLEY BELL, a big-time gambler who picked his own society.

Prologue

SHE WAS young, in her early twenties, lovely—and very frightened. She cringed back against her pillow holding the covers around her slim shoulders. When she tried to scream no sound would come from her constricted throat. Her hand too was frozen to the silken cord of the bed lamp she'd turned on. Half a man wasn't a pretty sight for a girl to awaken to in the dead of night.

He stood there just outside the fringed circle of light. Only the lower part of him was visible—half of a man. Yet he was as terrifying to her as a whole man would have been.

His voice against the night stillness was a whispering, deadly thing that stopped her breathing. He said: "Take it easy, sister. You won't get hurt if you take it easy. Get your things on."

The period during which she might have screamed was past. Fear still held her in its grasp. But she could talk now. "Who are you?" she managed to gasp.

When he didn't answer her brown eyes tried to pierce the space beyond the radius of the lamp's light. She tried to stop the tightening of her fingers against the silken cord, afraid she'd pull it. She couldn't do that. Dear God in heaven, no! To pull the cord would be to shut off the light, and light was her friend, her only friend.

In her new fear, different and apart from the first, she tried too hard to remove her trembling fingers from the cord. She hit the hooded lamp cover, tilting it upright. Light suddenly filled the whole room instead of its previous white circle against the bed.

She saw all of him now. The flat automatic pistol in his hand, his glistening face that looked even more dangerous than the gun. Yet even in her panic she was able to spare one hasty glance past him. The French doors to the window balcony were partly open, showing the means of en-

trance he had used. Halfway across to the windows was a wooden whatnot, the shelves filled with childhood dolls in a graduated scale of solemn sizes. The bottom shelf, which had contained the largest doll, was empty. The doll had fallen on the hardwood floor between the wall and a thick-haired rug. The doll's fall had awakened her; it was almost as though it had tried to warn her of danger. Now it was pitifully broken, an outstretched arm crushed by the man's ruthless foot.

His voice came again. It tried to be soothing. "Come on, sister. You're taking a powder. You're going places. I got a car waiting."

She shuddered. "You—you're not going to kill me?"

In a reassuring gesture he laid the gun on the bed where a pale-green candlewick spread had been folded back. But he kept his other hand behind him. His sly movements were almost hesitant as though he'd had to change his plans when he'd accidentally brushed the doll from the shelf and awakened her.

"Here's the deal, sister," he explained. "All you've got to do is go away for a couple, three weeks—that's all we want. You understand?"

She said yes she did. But she didn't know what she was saying. A scream was coming on again, trying to break its way through. His image, photographed by her eyes, would remain as long as she lived. His other hand was still behind him.

She cried: "Your hand. . . ."

He began moving toward her.

Her delicate nostrils dilated to a sudden, strange odor coming from his concealed hand. She'd never smelled that smell before. Her mouth opened, she screamed—

Her scream was cut off; it died before it was born, unsaid, unscreamed.

A fat, hot hand covered her mouth. She fought like a wildcat. But one strong hand clamped over her mouth while the other gripped her arm. A tobacco-tainted breath

and the fumes of the small sponge he'd had in his hand all fought against her.

He'd dropped the sponge, and this gave her a chance to fight free. She broke away from him, her tragic face as white as the bed sheet upon which she crouched. Nightgown torn from her shoulders, she clutched frantically at the sheet, trying to shield her uncovered breasts from his profane eyes.

"Oh, please," she begged. "Dear God—"

But her moment of freedom slipped away. Already he was beyond the borderland of reason. Her scented hair was in his nostrils again, the warm smell of her driving him on. His groping fingers found the black automatic. In sadistic fury he struck again and again.

She couldn't fight back against that, and her pitiful look of hope toward the door was the last she ever took. . . .

It was moments after she'd stopped fighting, after she'd even stopped moving, that he backed away from her. Ugly red marks on her white throat gave the mute testimony of his fury. Breathing hard, face pasty and sweating, he looked down at her. Her lovely breasts were still uncovered, still warm and smooth and soft, but the vibrant life of the body of which they were a part was gone.

He shuddered and listened into the night. No sound came from the rest of the large house. But little by little the voice of the outside came in through the French doors—unidentifiable, unclassified. He closed the doors and then there was no sound.

When he came back across the room his ruthless heel crunched on the doll's arm again. Cursing, he stooped and picked the doll up. After he'd wiped his fingerprints from it he replaced it on the shelf, taking care that the broken parts did not show. After he retrieved the small sponge and his automatic pistol he stood in the center of the room and listened. Only the sound of his own heavy breathing came to him now.

Minutes later, he eased the hall door open, opened it a

fraction of an inch at a time. The door made no sound. But there was a sudden terrifying noise off in the house—a clock tolling the hour. It went bong, bong, bong. And then the house was quiet again.

When he backed out of the bedroom a moment later his shadow from the night light in the hall was a freakish, sinister thing. It was made even more shapeless by the girl's body and clothes he was carrying. He shut the door noiselessly behind him and went down the stairs.

Somewhere below a door opened and closed, and then stillness fell over the scene. Beverly Hills is very quiet—a well-policed city. Murder seldom, if ever, happens in Beverly Hills.

C H A P T E R 1

Los Angeles

THE AIR was heavy that morning—heavy and smoggy. What little sunlight filtered through the overcast was a sickly yellow by the time it came through the dirty windows of the East-Fifth-Street lunchroom. It gave the strong face of Rockwell Nevins an odd appearance. He sat at the end counter seat, a cup of coffee in one hand, a doughnut in the other.

He was of medium height with sandy, almost yellow hair and calm blue eyes. His white shirt, open at the collar, was clean, and his hard-weave suit was of good material. Despite his twenty-nine years, he looked more like a college student than a dishwasher. At the moment there was an air of detachment about him as though his thoughts were far removed from the sinkful of dishes waiting for him. He glanced at the clock on the wall. A quarter to eleven. A little late for breakfast, too early for lunch. He'd have time for his phone call. By-passing a wino dozing over a coffee cup, he moved on to the phone.

He gave the battered booth a double look as though it were a trap set by the law. Outside it a pair of wornout directories hung from their twisted chains like bodies at a double hanging. Rocky brushed past them. A nickel got him the largest downtown hotel in Los Angeles—the Biltmore.

When the girl at the hotel switchboard answered, he said: "This is East Fifth Street. How's the air over on the right side of the tracks? . . . Well, what do you know! . . . Yes, I would like a room number—like, say, Suite 27-C. . . . Thank you, too."

In a characteristic gesture, he rubbed the side of his jaw while he waited. An old scar was there; it showed when he needed a shave. It showed now.

Somebody opened the New Idea's street door and a pungent wave of stale beer and tobacco came in from the street. He closed the booth door hurriedly, frowned, lit a cigarette, and said:

"Charley? . . . Rocky. What's new on that San Francisco mess? . . . Oh, sure." Squinting at the phone number in front of him, he reported: "It's Trinity 1-7903. . . . Sure, I'll wait."

He hung up. When the phone rang he caught it on the first bounce. Charley was now talking from his own unlisted, private phone.

Rocky said: "Okay, Charley, let's have it. Fast. . . . Hey, not that fast! . . . Hell, talk sense. . . . You mean if the fellow dies I'll get five years to life. . . . What! They swore I used brass knucks and a knife. Me—ye gods!" He listened a moment, then said: "Go back? Sure, when I get money enough to fight a frame-up. I'll get the money, Charley. . . . No, not from you—but, thanks, anyway. Funny thing, I thought I was being followed here but it turned out okay. The L.A. cops were doing a little routine work chasing bums out of doorways and I thought they were after me. I dodged into a lunchroom, took a 'Dish-washer Wanted' sign out of the window, and went back to the kitchen. . . .

"Sure, I'm washing dishes. What did you think I was doing? I had to leave all my things in Frisco in my hurry to get away. I landed here broke—but I'm making good money, be back on my feet in no time at all. Only I need some big money—fast. Got any ideas? . . ."

For the next few moments, Rocky nodded, frowned, and dotted his side of the conversation with "yeahs" and "sures." Then he stiffened. "Sure, I can handle it, dames or not. . . . Yeah, I know, the last one took me for an even

\$3,000! But it's going to be different from now on. Tell me more."

He listened and wrote the name "Hildegarde Ederlee" on an envelope, then put a few dollar signs after the name. He said, after a moment: "I've got it all. She's lovely and wild and unpredictable. She lives with her aunt and uncle but wants to manage her own affairs, has threatened to hire an escort to take her places she can't go alone—and all you want is the job of managing her estate. Is that right? . . .

"Yes, I'm listening. You haven't been able to get in touch with the young lady but you think I can. . . . Okay, if there's any trickery going on I'll find it. It's a deal—I'll talk her into letting you handle her affairs and you'll help me out of that mess in San Francisco."

Rocky looked a little happier when he summed it up. "Charley, this is the kind of job I've always wanted, something that won't strain my sense of refinement. You know, studying criminal law while selling used cars made me a pretty good detective. I've already made a deduction about the dishes I've been washing: you won't believe this, but they're exactly the same ones I washed yesterday and the day before that! But, look—don't worry about me. I'm through letting dames play me! . . . Yes, I'll get the newspaper." He told Charley he'd let him know how he made out, thanked him, and hung up.

The serene, almost sleepy calm had left him. Alert, he glanced at the cup shelf. Enough coffee cups to last a while. He went past the cooks laboring at the kitchen range and out onto the back porch. Hunting through a pile of old newspapers, he found the one Charley had mentioned—the society section of two Sundays back. He took it up front to the counter.

The newspaper, having served its apprenticeship to the waste pile by lining a cup shelf, was yellowed and stained. When Rocky turned a page a cross section of coffee-stained society from Malibu to Pasadena took a brief, stony

glimpse at the other side of the tracks and didn't seem impressed.

But Rocky was. His very blue eyes skipped to the picture of a tall, slender girl. He hoped it was the girl. It was. The caption said: "Miss Hildegarde Ederlee, of Beverly Hills, California." Just looking at the picture made Rocky's knees a little weak.

A lean, hungry-looking customer halted, shifted a toothpick in his mouth and looked over Rocky's shoulder. "Some babe!" he said and gave a knowing leer.

Rocky's slow smile faded, leaving his face lean and hard. His eyes took in all of the man in one brief glance. The man moved on.

Rocky turned back to the picture. There was a story with it. Miss Ederlee, according to the news item, had taken part in a charity festival the younger set had given. There was a lot to the story. It had been a gala affair. . . .

Carefully tearing out the picture, he folded it and put it away into his shirt pocket. Then he pushed past the wino who was swaying toward the door to join a safari to Main Street to see what the daily quotation was on a pint of sherry.

Back at the phone booth, Rocky found the "E" page of the extended-area phone directory still intact. One Ederlee was listed in Beverly Hills: Talbot S. Ederlee, 624 Rexford Drive, B. H., Crestview 8908.

Five cents later Rocky was talking to the "O" telephone operator. She listened politely and then suggested somewhat plaintively that he deposit ten cents for five minutes, please.

"You sure it's ten cents?" Rocky asked. When she said she was and repeated her request he gave the phone his last dime.

While the machinery of the telephone company went to work on the dime Rocky had time to look at the doodling on the booth wall. The main drawing was the work of a frustrated student of art—an anatomical monstrosity that

no gentleman should look at while conversing with a young lady. Rocky looked away through the glass window, whose dirty surface seemed suddenly wholesome in comparison.

Then he was giving all his attention to the phone. Someone had stopped its buzzing at the other end of the line, a good ten miles away.

Rocky said quickly: "This is Rockwell Nevins. I'd like to speak to Miss Ederlee. Miss Hildegarde Ederlee."

Whoever was at the other end hesitated, gave an answering mumble, and Rocky was waiting again. Through the glass door he saw Sally, the tall blond waitress, come in from the kitchen to adjust a green headband before the mirror. Farther back over the swinging doors he could see the cooks at work.

Rocky was patting the phone box on its *derrière* impatiently when a sound came cautiously over the wire—a feminine hello.

"Hello," he answered. "This is Rockwell Nevins, personal escort. I'm at liberty any time you say after one o'clock. Your car or mine." He listened a moment and then said: "I beg your pardon, I don't understand. . . . That's strange. I must have made a mistake. You are Hildegarde Ederlee, aren't you?"

The only answer was a heavy, sinister silence. The phone turned into a dead, mechanical thing in front of him. It was as though he hadn't been talking to a living person. But he held on, not quite sure that someone was listening.

A slight noise came over the wire. Rocky gave a slow knowing smile. Somebody was still listening. Then that somebody was talking and he was answering. "Yes. . . Yes," he said. "My number is Trinity 1-7903. I'll be here for the next few minutes if you want to call back. Thank you. Good-bye."

He hung up and looked at his hand. It was trembling. He shook his head, then was smiling faintly again. Nothing to do now but wait—and keep the line clear so she could call back. He looked around him—only a few customers at

the counter, the boss not in sight. Hastily he wrote an out-of-order sign on a paper napkin and draped it over the mouthpiece of the phone.

Back at the end of the counter he warmed up his cup of coffee from the shining double urn. When he sat down he looked at the news picture of Hildegarde Ederlee again. He shook his head. "That voice wasn't yours, baby. If I had any sense, I'd leave this job alone. If she phones back—"

He didn't say what he'd do. He was looking toward the door when a prim little woman who was probably lost came in from the street to use the phone. About the time she inspected the makeshift sign the phone rang. Rocky went leaping toward it. "Excuse me, please," he said.

He spoke quickly into the mouthpiece: "Yes, this is he." He listened a moment then nodded. "All right, Miss Ederlee. I'll be there at three o'clock. . . . Good-bye." Hanging up, he said to himself: "Here we go—but it's still not Hildegarde Ederlee!"

Turning to sidle from the booth, he saw the woman waiting her turn for the phone. He grimaced at the booth wall. Then because he was Rockwell Nevins and nobody else, he took the paper-napkin sign and smudged the anatomical drawing into the nothingness it deserved. Backing out of the booth, he smiled at the woman and started back to the counter.

A fat man in shirt sleeves came through the swinging doors. "All right, bud. We got a sinkful of dishes."

"They'll be sorry they were ever born," said Rocky. Then he pulled up. "Say, I can only work till one. Better put your banner back in the window." Taking his coffee with him, Rocky went back into the kitchen.

A sinkful was an understatement. Dishes were piled high all over the sink and scrap table. And Sally, the tall blonde, was bringing in as many more as she could carry. She gave him a friendly big-mouthed smile. "Say, good looking, can we have some cups and saucers first?"

"Okay, Princess." Shoving dishes aside, Rocky found the

stopper for the sink and started hot water running through the perforated soap can. He stacked in the dishes—plates together, saucers together, cups on top to come out first.

His short vacation from the smells and the dish clatter of the kitchen made him aware of them more than ever now. His sensitive nose dilated. Behind him on the huge cooking range steamed every type of cooking utensil he'd ever seen, from a gallon tin called a "gunboat" to a fifteen-gallon stock pot. A battery of waffle irons added their smoke from below the level of the order shelf.

Dinner was practically ready. Soon another small blonde girl came downstairs from the dressing-room to help Sally. In a little while they began yelling out dinner orders as though their lives depended on it. Rocky was keeping up with the early dinner rush getting the dishes out when the owner came hurrying through the swinging doors to grin at him. "You got a steady job, fella," he said. "Harvey's gone on a drunk again."

"That was damn white of Harvey," said Rocky. He grinned. "But I'll have to skip it. I meant what I said, I can only work till one."

The boss gave him a double look. "What's the matter with you? Don't you want to work?"

Rocky pulled his hands out of the soapy water and began to wipe them on a towel. The incredible blue of his eyes usually made people stare at them. But the big man's gaze dropped.

"Okay, Jack," he said hurriedly. "I get it." Digging a "Dishwasher Wanted" sign from behind the work table, he took it out front.

The dinner cook came loping over to get a china-cap strainer hanging above the sink. His brown face wrinkled into a genial smile. "New in town, eh, boy?"

Rocky nodded. "Two days. San Diego."

"San Diego? I got cousin in San Diego." With this fast observation the cook took the strainer and loped back to the work table.

Sally rushed in for a few more cups. As she piled them on her nice plump arm she said: "Say, handsome, you're too darned good looking to be a dishwasher—what cooks?"

Rocky closed one eye. "Don't tell the boss—I'm learning the business."

She wrinkled her nose at him. Then she moved closer and whispered: "I'm working a split shift today—off at two. We can go to a show, if you want."

"Can I have a rain check till tonight? I've got a date with an heiress this afternoon—didn't you see the way she held me on that phone?"

Sally made a face at him and hurried out into the dining-room.

Rocky had three dollars in his pocket when he bade good-bye to the New Idea Café. The sun was bright, finally having fought its way through the overcast. A shop on Los Angeles Street charged him forty cents to press his suit; another dime went for a shine. By sitting in the last chair in the barber college, he got a shave for fifteen cents, which included a brushing for his felt hat. At a fruit stand he bought a sack of piñon nuts and went down the street with one between his teeth. He stopped at the Princess Cinema House with its "Open All Night" sign, and shoved a quarter at the wizened little man in the cashier's box. "That's for last night—but I've got a better place to sleep. Thought I'd let you know."

After he'd walked over three blocks to the Hill Street subway station he found he had a few minutes to kill before the two-car Pacific Electric train left for Beverly Hills. Part of the time he spent glowering into the clouded mirror of a gum-vending machine that had beaten him out of a new cent.

Prophetic or not, he'd gotten off to a bad start.

C H A P T E R 2

Mary Jaine

ARIZONA ASH TREES line both sides of Rexford Drive in Beverly Hills. Spaced with mathematical precision, the imported trees give the street a solid, expensive look. As the drive winds away toward the hills it picks up larger, stately residences; and by the time the house numbers reach the six hundreds, they are painted on small white cement markers on spacious lawns. There are a few bordering firs and a few olive trees between the houses. Rose bushes and flower beds are scattered about by the expert hands of landscapers. Where Spanish architecture prevails banana plants and palmettos shelter themselves under the red-tiled roofs like children hanging to their mothers' skirts.

Rocky exhaled the last bit of East Fifth Street, then took a deep breath of Beverly Hills. He smiled slowly. Ten miles from downtown Los Angeles everything basked in unfiltered, undiluted yellow sunshine.

The Ederlee residence was easily the oldest on the street—a two-story frame set back on a wide, rolling lawn. Its sharp-angled roof was steep enough to have shed a Michigan snow storm. The house looked a little old and tired—but it didn't look like a house of murder.

Back of the big house at the end of the driveway was a more modern, newer structure: a three-car garage painted white. One of the pull-up doors was open, the space behind it yawning carless and vacant.

Rocky walked in on the winding sidewalk, checking on himself as he went. His suit was good and had taken its press well; his shoes glistened in the sunlight, his felt hat was passable. He had on a polka-dot bow tie.

That certain composed quality was with him again, as though he were at peace with the world. In a characteristic gesture he touched the knife scar on his face. On his freshly

shaven face it hardly showed. The scar was a San Francisco Heidelberg acquired during his early schooling at Fisher-man's Wharf.

When he moved up on the porch he cracked a final piñon nut between his teeth. After he'd placed the shell carefully into one of the pair of enormous stone vases standing guard on the porch he rang the bell.

A tall, bald man in the livery of a servant opened the door. His sour face never changed expression when he saw Rocky. But his face did change position. He was suddenly and literally straight-armed out of the way. A woman, taller than Charlotte Greenwood and as friendly, grinned past the butler. "Come right in," she invited, "we've been waiting for you."

"Thank you." Rocky gave his hat to the butler and followed the tall woman into an enormous living-room separated from the short hall by an arch. Columns were close enough together to make a person go through the arch whether he wanted to or not. Stairs were at one side and above this an upper balcony that probably served the upstairs rooms. Sleeping-rooms likely. Maybe a private sitting-room or two. The house was that big.

The living-room was hot—much hotter than indicated by the small fire in a white brick fireplace. A furnace was probably going somewhere in the basement. Charlotte ushered him forward, holding on to his arm as though claiming him by right of discovery. Rocky saw the three other persons in the room then. A stiffly starched couple in their sixties stood and sat next to the fireplace. Posed as they were, the small, elderly woman in her chair, her husband standing stiffly beside her, they might have been sitting for an old-fashioned tintype photo.

The woman looked tiny—doll-like when she straightened a lace collar already straightened. A gentle face was set off by a wealth of lustrous platinum hair. Her pale, almost transparent complexion reflected the little light that was allowed to come past red velvet drapes. Her husband

was short, stocky, Napoleonic. Both had the same type bifocal glasses hanging from gold chains as though the glasses had come two to a set. They began fumbling their way into them.

The third person in the room was wide-shouldered, heavy-jowled, a man who sat uncomfortably in a thin-legged chair. His lips were thick and his eyes narrowed. He had a photograph in one of his fat, pudgy hands and a sheaf of papers in the other. A leather case that had at least one characteristic of its owner lay on a dainty table in front of him.

Other fragile pieces of furniture and chairs stood around waiting to be sat in if you wanted to take the chance. It was a room that Thomas Chippendale would have been proud of.

Charlotte said: "May I present Mr. Rockwell Nevins; Mr. and Mrs. Ned Foote, Aunt Alice and Uncle Ned to Hildegarde Ederlee; Mr. Hal Heber." She didn't add "private detective" to the big man's name, probably thinking it was unnecessary. She grinned out her own name then. It wasn't Charlotte; it was Tabitha. Tabitha Todd. She was also an aunt of Hildegarde Ederlee.

Rocky smiled faintly and added another how-do-you-do. He knew now that it was Aunt Tabitha he'd talked to on the phone. He continued his smile. Everybody was here except Hildegarde, the girl he'd come to see.

Ned Foote squinted through his glasses. Breaking up the tintype combination, he stepped forward and asked gruffly: "Just where have you been escorting my niece?"

Somewhere off in the house a clock slowly began tolling the hour—bong, bong, bong.

Everyone except Rocky went rigid and stood motionless until the clock had finished striking. The tension relaxed a little at a time. Tabitha said: "Threè o'clock. You're right on the dot." She turned to Ned Foote. "Uncle Ned, I'm afraid you've got things wrong. Mr. Nevins hasn't started driving for Hildy—yet. It's only tentative—"

"Oh," said Ned Foote. A thin smile tightened his lips. "I'd appreciate it if he'd keep it that way—tentative."

Rocky looked serenely at Aunt Tabitha then at the burly private detective. He was beginning to wonder what it was all about.

Hal Heber, still on his feet from the introduction, lumbered closer; it was a move of only two steps, yet he lumbered. "There's a couple of questions I'd like to ask. Now, look—"

Ned Foote interrupted. "I'll ask the questions, Mr. Heber."

Rocky watched the detective's yellow eyes narrow. But when Heber saw Rocky looking at him he forced himself to grin.

Rocky listened gravely to Ned Foote again.

The little man said: "How did you know Hildegarde wanted an—an escort?" He sneered the word "escort."

Rocky smiled faintly and glanced at Aunt Alice next as though it was her turn to speak. She was smiling very gently, her wrinkled face as delicate and fragile as a wax flower. She didn't look at him or at the others, only at her husband, and no young bride ever put more respect and devotion in one glance.

Rocky turned back to the greater number. "I don't get it. I came out here to see Hildegarde Ederlee. I've seen everybody else."

Uncle Ned's heavy brows lowered like storm clouds. "What do you know about the girl?"

Rocky shrugged his shoulders at Tabitha. "See? It gets more involved by the minute. I'm not used to all this heavy thinking. Tell Miss Ederlee I'll call later—and look, can you get my hat back for me? I can get out by myself."

Aunt Tabitha grinned. "Please don't mind us. I was the one you talked to on the phone—for Hildegarde. It's about Hildegarde we wanted to see you." She looked almost coyly at him and whispered: "If Hildegarde hasn't seen you already she'll want to."

Rocky shrugged and looked at a chair. Deciding to stand it out, he said: "May I?" and reached for a cigarette in his inside coat pocket.

The reaction to this simple gesture was almost comical. Aunt Alice's lacy sleeves went up. She gasped as though already suffocating from smoke. Uncle Ned cried: "Please, please. We'll have no smoking!"

Rocky jerked his hand emptily from his pocket. Aunt Alice straightened the round lace collar that came up to her chin and began breathing easier. But her pose was still that of a martyr. Outside along the street came the laughter of children. Aunt Alice reached for a rope of blue corded silk and pulled it. Almost at once the butler made his appearance.

"Grafton," she said in a suddenly dry voice, "those children again! Chase them away. They're disturbing the whole neighborhood."

The butler hurried away to do her bidding and Aunt Alice looked sweet and gentle again. Tabitha caught Rocky's arm and whispered: "Nice, isn't it?" She said flatly to the others: "I'm taking Mr. Nevins. You can have him later. Do you mind?"

Before they could answer she had Rocky securely by the arm. "Just a minute!" came the heavy voice of Heber behind them, but they kept on. Tabitha stepped ahead at the spiral staircase and led the way up it past an upstairs sitting-room and into another room that had enough frills and flounces in it to be hers.

Inside the room she said: "Go ahead, light up. We'll have a drink before Uncle Ned comes burning up here." She went into a kitchenette and came out again juggling four glasses. Two were water, the other two were whisky.

"Ah! This is more like it." Grinning, Rocky dropped into a comfortable chair, a glass in one hand, a lighted cigarette in the other. The sinister feeling he'd entertained about the whole affair seemed to fall away before the charm of this fifty-year-old woman. He looked at a Vassar

pennant on the wall, at a loving cup marked "Fox Trot 1920."

He didn't look surprised when she said: "Do you mind?" and took a brier pipe from a drawer. Loading it with fragrant tobacco, she soon had it going. She laughingly explained about the pipe. "I go without smoking so much downstairs I've got to make up for it when I get up here."

"I'll bet you can whistle through your fingers too."

"Sure." She put her two middle fingers in her mouth in a short V. Then she laughed and sat down. She sat opposite him, her long nyloned legs sticking out in front of her. It wasn't a graceful gesture but she was comfortable, which was more important to Tabitha. She said: "The girl you're here to see is missing. She's been gone a week."

He inhaled cigarette smoke. "I gathered as much." His eyes hardened a little. "So you had me come all the way out here to see how much I knew?"

She puffed at her pipe like a man. "In a way, yes. But tell me, where did you get this telephone number and why'd you phone?"

He took the newspaper clipping from his pocket and handed it to her. "Maybe I thought I'd like to work for her."

"Oh." She seemed disappointed. But she looked at the yellowed clipping. After she glanced at the picture she folded it and put it away into her pocket. "Thank you," she said.

Rocky started to protest. Then he said: "You can keep it" and finished his drink. "If I had any sense I'd get out of here."

Tabitha grinned at him. Reaching forward, she straightened his bow tie. "Stick around. The Footes downstairs didn't want to go to the police; so they hired a private detective to find Hildegard. You met him. Personally, I don't think anything's happened to Hildy but I'd like to know where she is. I wouldn't want them to know I hired you."

"Who—me?" He sat back in his chair again.

She nodded and said hurriedly: "Here's the story: Hildegard's father and mother are dead. Ned Foote, her father's half brother, is her uncle on her father's side; I'm her aunt on her mother's side. When her father died some five years ago Hildegard felt kind of alone and insisted that I come out here and live. I came out." She puffed at her pipe. "But it's all Ned Foote's show now; don't think it isn't. He's trustee of the trust fund and executor of the will that gives Hildegard practically everything when she's twenty-six. She's twenty-five now."

Rocky looked at the bottom of his empty glass. "All of which makes me an automobile salesman," he said.

She laughed a little too loud and caught up his glass. "You'll like Hildegard. She needs someone who'll see she doesn't get hurt. I think you're the one. I'd do anything for Hildy; she's a good kid, in school or out." She got up and went out to get him another drink.

When she came back Rocky said: "If that's the way you want it I'll start looking for the dame."

"Hildegard," she corrected.

Rocky grinned at her. "Hildegard," he said. "I see that the phone is in Talbot Ederlee's name."

"It's never been changed." Tabitha straightened his tie again. She filled in the details about Hildegard. "She's about five-eight or so—anyway, a lot less than my six feet; brown eyes, brown hair. She's full of hell—will be found in lively places. For what it's worth, there's a card dealer named Victor Daro; she met him when some of the younger set imported him to do the gambling at a charity affair a couple of weeks back. She might have followed him off but I don't think so." She closed one eye. "I haven't told this palooka downstairs anything about Victor Daro. It's yours, exclusive. And as far as I know Heber doesn't know anything about Hildy's girl friend either—a Mary Jaine. I don't know where Mary lives, but if you can find

her she'll be able to tell you a lot. I'll let you know more about this thing tomorrow."

"Mary missing too?"

"Not that I know of. But I'll find out what I can about her for you. All I want is for you to find Hildegarde and tell her to phone me. I'll try to find you a better picture of her."

Rocky nodded and looked innocently toward the ruffled curtains. "I'll have to have some money."

She was ready. "A hundred do?" When he said it would for a start, she took a roll of twenties from her purse, peeled off five, and stuck them into his hand. "See if you can find out what that private detective downstairs knows. He's got an office downtown. I'd better phone you in the morning."

"I'm moving," he said hurriedly. "A new number. I'll phone it to you first thing. Then you can tell me more about this Mary."

She nodded. "If you don't want to talk to that detective downstairs now you can go out the side way. Your hat's in that cloak room at the door."

He ground his cigarette out into a chrome tray and they moved out of the door together. Hal Heber's thick voice came up to them. The acoustics were that good. "Yes, sir," he was saying. "I can get anybody to talk. I can tell whether they're holding back or not. Just let me talk to him."

"I want no interference from anyone," growled Ned Foote.

Rocky whispered to Tabitha: "I've changed my mind about going out the side way. I'll talk to them—a little."

She shrugged her shoulders, winked slowly, and took herself and her pipe back into her room. Rocky moved hurriedly back along the hall. There was another room and another door. He opened it. There was a balcony beyond a French door, cool green curtains, and a bed with the same greenish tone to its candlewick spread. The room had a sweet, delicate smell as though coming from perfumes selected with great care. A clothes closet was well filled and

there was a rack for shoes. The white rug on the floor was as thick-haired as an Angora cat. A number of little dolls sat primly on the shelves of a wooden whatnot.

Rocky looked through several drawers of the dressing table before he found a small photo in a frame. He removed the picture, looked at it, and held his breath.

The snapshot was of a slim girl clad in a white bathing suit that wouldn't have crowded a compact. She would have answered the description Tabitha had given him. Pocketing the picture, he put the frame back where he'd found it and tiptoed out of the room.

At the foot of the stairway he flagged the butler. Fumbling into his pockets, he said: "Can I get my hat without a check?"

"Yes, sir. A check won't be necessary." The swallow-tailed one backed away and Rocky went ahead to join the threesome at the tea table.

He smiled to the Footes who were in the same position he'd left them. "Miss Tabitha told me about your niece," he said. "I'm sorry she is missing." He added: "I'm a driver—a chauffeur—and I had anticipated working for her." He portioned a smile among the three of them. "Naturally if she's gone there's no job."

"Naturally," agreed Ned Foote. He looked almost pleasant.

Hal Heber's thick jowls spread. "Just a minute, young fellow. There's a few questions I want to ask you."

Rocky looked the private detective over slowly. "It seems that you're always asking questions, or about to. Things like that can get to be a habit." He smiled at the elderly couple. Neither smiled back. Uncle Ned stood there as strong and resolute as an oak bastion, Aunt Alice, as fragile and blue-white as a Mandarin teacup. She gave him only the briefest of glances before turning her gaze back to her husband.

Hot lights glowed in Heber's eyes. "First," he said, "if you don't know Miss Ederlee, why did you phone her?"

Rocky grinned. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Heber's angry retort was stopped by Ned Foote's raised hand. He had suddenly found a solution and nearly smiled over it. He said crisply: "Thank you for coming but it won't be necessary for you to come here again. As you see we have adequate help in hunting for my niece. Good day, sir."

Rocky raised his hand, turned, helped himself to his hat from the butler, said good-bye politely, and followed Grafton to the front door.

Grafton let Rocky out and shut the door gently but very closely behind him.

He stood on the porch a moment looking off across the nice lawns. When the big lock of the front door clicked Rocky slipped behind one of the enormous vases on the porch.

Hal Heber came lumbering out pulling a soft hat with a too-narrow brim down over his eyes. Jabbing a cigar into his mouth as though he were mad at it, he hurried out to the street. He looked one way then the other, and his lips moved in what was no blessing. Then he scratched his ear, got into his car, lit his cigar, and drove away.

Rocky walked out to the street on the lawn, keeping close to the property line so the Footes couldn't see him if they were watching from the window. A block away he looked back to be sure Aunt Alice wasn't in sight, then lit a cigarette and breathed smoke placidly.

Walking along looking at the snapshot he'd pilfered, he didn't notice the sleek convertible at first; it had slowed along the winding street to match his walk. When he looked around he saw the girl. He started. Her face was the same as the one in the newspaper and in the snapshot he had in his hand. Her face was paler now, but her eyes were as large and brown. She pulled the big car into the curb, leaned farther across the wide seat, and said: "I'd like to see you—a minute."

"Sure." Rock shoved the picture into his pocket and

smiled at her. "Say, it didn't take long to find you, did it? You are Hildegard Ederlee, aren't you?"

She gave him a quick, warning look.

"Don't be silly. And for Pete's sake, not so loud." He saw then that the hair around her little hat was silky, golden, not brown. She said, "I'm Mary—Mary Jaine. J-a-i-n-e." She flashed a glance down the street. "Will you meet me at the Polo Lounge—say, in fifteen minutes?"

"Sure, but—" Before he could ask her what it was all about and where to find the Polo Lounge, she'd slid back under the wheel and let out the clutch. The big car zoomed on up the street.

"Well, I'll be—" he said. "Why didn't she give me a lift?"

Nobody answered him, but a gardener, spraying hollyhocks that were taller than he, paused long enough to tell Rocky how he could get to the Polo Lounge. It was in the Beverly Hills Hotel a few blocks away. Rocky had fifteen minutes to get there; he thought he could make it.

C H A P T E R 3

Polo Lounge

THE SEGMENT of Sunset Boulevard that ran in front of the Beverly Hills Hotel had two lanes of traffic and a bridle path. The hotel itself was a white stuccoed affair of indeterminate vintage standing back from the boulevard among its beds of pansies and petunias. The way in from the street was over a circular drive that ran up to the portecochere where a liveried doorman stood waiting to welcome real or prospective guests and raise his brows at sightseers.

Rocky walked in, his hundred dollars in twenties running interference for the forty-odd cents he'd had before he met Tabitha. He went in through the swinging glass

doors as though he lived in the hotel and had his room rent paid up two weeks in advance.

The lobby was warm and friendly. Alcoves led from the desk to the various dining-rooms and the bar. One archway was bordered by two wide-eared pink-and-green caladiums. Electric lights hidden somewhere beneath the foliage made the plants stand out mystically. Comfortable seats and sofas were everywhere. Over a fireplace hung an old map of the early Spanish grants and ranchos that had surrounded Beverly Hills in the early days.

Rocky saw a directional sign and followed it. It led to the Polo Lounge.

The Polo Lounge was cool and inviting. Walking through without seeing Mary, he ended up by sliding into a seat at the bar, where a golden-gin-and-angostura-bitters kept him from getting lonesome. With one eye on the entrance, he looked around.

The spot usually reserved for a back-bar mirror had sold out to the Persians. A large painting of a polo game took the place of the glass. Five Persians, who looked as if they didn't give a damn one way or the other, were playing polo only hard enough to give the lounge its name. Yet it was a nice mural with real sparkling stones embellishing the trappings of the horses and the dress and turbans of the figures.

Rocky cracked a piñon nut and laid the shell carefully beside his crepe napkin before lighting a cigarette. "What year would you say it was?" he asked the big bartender.

The man cocked his eye at Rocky and then at the mural to be sure he knew what Rocky was talking about. Then he offered: "Somebody said thirteenth century." He looked at Rocky as though wondering if he was worth a more complete dissertation on the subject. He decided to dole out a little more of his information. "Earliest records of polo are Persian, but it was the Tibetans who gave it its name."

"I thought it was Marco Polo," said Rocky innocently.

"Marco Polo?" The bartender grunted scornfully. "Cut up some more lemons, Eddie."

Rocky finished his drink and hunted up a phone. He could have had one at a table but he went out into the corridor.

As soon as he'd gotten his number he said: "Well, Charley, I've got an in. Nothing for you yet but I've a retainer for myself. . . . No, I haven't seen the girl yet. She seems to be missing or something. Then there's another girl. . . Hell, no. Business, Charley. All business. I'm playing the dames from now on. I'm not forgetting what that gal Lynda in San Francisco did to me."

Rocky began doing a pantomime. His voice raised like a concert-pitch piano under a piano tuner's hammer.

"'Oh, my, no,' Lynda says to me. 'Of course I don't have a husband. I'm a career girl. Poor little me, no friends, no folks. If I had a car to get to work I wouldn't have to fight the streetcars and buses and I wouldn't have to get up so early. An apartment closer to my work would be nice, wouldn't it, darling, and a radio. Oh, you wonderful man, just put the groceries on the table; I can at least put them away. Well, if you really think we should have a little Scotch on hand we can buy a case. You save money, you know. What shall I get first on my charge account at the White House ladies' shop—a complete wardrobe?"

"'A husband? Oh my, no! It's just a party we girls are giving—for girls. A sorority party.'"

Rocky stopped his pantomime. "That's the party I crashed, Charley. I had a right to see where some of the \$3,000 I spent on the dame was going, didn't I? I found out—a six-foot-and-a-half husband who'd just gotten home from somewhere, maybe out of jail. A surprise coming-out party for him, a surprise period for me. You know those little bloodthirsty fish they have down in the Amazon called caribes; well, I felt like I'd fallen into a river of them. When I stopped swinging I started running and when I stopped running I was here! . . . Yes, you bet I

mean business now, and your man in San Fran will need money to beat that frameup—hey, Charley, I'll have to call you later. The dame I was supposed to meet is just coming into the lobby. 'Bye."

Mary Jaine wore sunglasses now. Tall and slim, she hurried toward the Polo Lounge, her thighs moving rhythmically under her gray gabardine skirt. Rocky followed her in and watched her slide into a seat in a far corner of the room. On his way over he saw a waiter wiping off a table. He said: "A golden-gin-and-bitters and a ginger-ale highball. Bring them to the back table with the change." Relinquishing one of his twenties, he went on to the booth.

She looked up when he sat down. Then she was smiling uncertainly as though she might have made a mistake in meeting him. She pointed with a cigarette she'd already lighted. "Mind sitting over to the side so I can watch the entrance? I can see it in the post mirror. I thought somebody I knew was in here, so had to wait—been here long?"

He shook his head and sat where she had indicated. "I've been having a spirited discussion on early polo with a bartender."

"That was nice," she murmured, but her mind wasn't on polo. She leaned closer. Her little hat didn't hide much of her blond hair. "Look, which one are you?" she asked. "I mean, which detective? Not the police, I hope."

Rocky shook his head and brought out a pack of cigarettes. "I wouldn't know a clue if I met one in the road. I'm a driver, an escort—do you have to wear those sunglasses?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I do." She began talking fast. "I'm Hildy's friend and I saw you go in the Ederlee house. I want to know how you stand. If you really do private driving and escorting and things—well, that's something I'm afraid I'm going to need myself—and bad."

"Any place, any time, your car or mine. With yours the rates are half. I know the city like a book."

"Well, that's fine," she said; then trying to hide her

eagerness, she said more slowly: "Well, I guess it's all right. You see, it's like this. I know where Hildegarde is, but she doesn't—Well, you understand—"

He nodded as though he knew what she was talking about. "If you really want to hire me we'll figure it on the expense-plus plan if you like. A hundred dollars should start things—"

She nodded quickly. When her ringless fingers came out of her purse a crisp, green hundred-dollar bill came with them. Her cheeks pinked a little as she folded the bill and pushed it across the table to him. She looked up in time to catch his admiring glance.

"This is entirely business, isn't it?" she said softly.

"Of course," he agreed and put the hundred away in his wallet. He was doing all right. From forty cents to two hundred dollars. Already he had enough to pay a retainer to Charley's lawyer up north.

"I'll have a ginger-ale highball," she said when she saw the waiter coming toward them.

The waiter came on and stopped at their table. Two drinks were on his tray. One went in front of her on a souvenir coaster. The gin-and-bitters stopped in front of Rocky. He kept lounge-gazing. The Polo Lounge had round tables and square tables with crinkly tinfoil and patterned paper under their glass tops. There were green chairs and padded seats against the lighter green of a carpet. Dark-green shutters were nailed back from opened windows, out of which he could see orange trees with fruit on them. Mirror-covered posts allowed persons in one alcove to see into the next. Off in a back booth a young couple, who were carelessly unaware they were being seen, were making the kind of hot passes at each other that should lead eventually to the altar.

The waiter went away. Rocky looked around—into the girl's face. Something had happened to her smile.

"How did you know what I drank?" she demanded.

He smiled. "Aunt Tabitha told me Hildegarde went in

for ginger-ale highballs; you, being her best friend, would likely have the same tastes. It was just a chance. Did I guess right?"

"Yes." She lifted her glass to hide her confusion. "You'll have to excuse me for being so jittery. I'm all worked up about Hildy."

"It's natural you would be." Rocky rubbed his fingers along his cheeks until he saw her watching him. Then he smiled slowly. "I'm on your side working for you. First of all, you want me to help you find Hildegard although you know where she is—"

"No, no," she cried softly. "I didn't say that. That's not the way it is. You don't understand."

Rocky closed his eyes. Taking a sip of his gin-and-bitters, he brought out the picture he'd brought with him. He studied the photo and tried not to look at her.

"Oh!" she said and pounced on the snapshot. "Where—where did you get it?"

"In Hildegard's room," he told her.

Her face was suddenly strained and incredulous. She gave a small, nervous laugh. "Don't you see? It's I." She sighed with relief. "I'm sure glad you brought it. Hildy's aunt and uncle haven't seen me—and it's better they don't. I'll just keep the picture. You don't mind?"

He shrugged. Tabitha had kept the news clipping; now Mary had the snapshot. "This is all a little puzzling," he said. "But still it certainly is fun being a detective."

Her smile wasn't worth very much. Her eyes began watching the mirrors again. He decided that if he wanted another picture of Hildegard he'd have to get it from a back issue of the newspaper.

She said suddenly: "Say, I'd better go. I won't know just where I'll be; so I'll have to phone you." She took a tiny address book from her purse and looked at him.

"I'm moving, but you can get me in the morning at Trinity 1-7903—between 9 and 9:30."

She laughed softly. "Short office hours, aren't they?"

But she put the number down, pushed back in her seat, and closed her little book. "As long as you have your car I won't need to drive you downtown, will I?"

"Oh, no." He got to his feet. "I'll be waiting in my office to hear from you."

"Your half-hour, you mean." Then she smiled at him. "I'll see you tomorrow, Mr. Nevins."

"Good-bye, Miss Jaine."

He cracked a couple of piñons while going through the lobby. He walked half a block and saw a motor-cop hiding in a blind street waiting to pounce on some luckless motorist. He asked him about a cab. The answer didn't help. He already knew that the doorman at the hotel could get him a cab. Rocky thanked him anyway and walked another half block. When he saw a cab unloading passengers in front of a residence he ran toward it holding up his hand.

The New Idea Café on East Fifth was a six-o'clock madhouse when Rocky arrived. The "Dishwasher Wanted" sign was out of the window but Rocky could see it leaning against the baseboard inside as though it were only catching its breath. Sally and another girl were running up and down the counter, dodging into the kitchen, and calling out orders.

Rocky stood in line behind the counter stools waiting for somebody to fall off or get through eating. He watched Sally with a new interest. She, too, answered to the description of Hildegarde; not too much to be sure—but she was tall and slender, and the way she talked wasn't East Fifth Street. She was a blonde where Hildegarde was a brunette—but a girl could bleach her hair, couldn't she? And weren't all women actresses at heart?

With two hundred dollars of Mary Jaine's and Tabitha's in his pocket, Rocky decided he should go to work on somebody. . . . While he was thinking about it the pay phone came into his line of vision. He smiled faintly at it. It looked as though it were about to ring. Yet there was no

reason why it should ever ring; it was a pay phone and the boss had his own phone up front at his desk. This phone would ring, if at all, on an average of once a month. It had already rung once this month.

Sally motioned that the end stool was nearly through. He moved down and stood behind a man's back while studying a book he'd bought—a copy of *Pearsdale's Guide to Los Angeles and Vicinity*. When the man finished the bread pudding that topped the thirty-five-cent lunch and relinquished his seat, Rocky slid into place before the seat could cool. He asked Sally if she could get him a steak.

She said, "I can try—Say, did you quit?"

"Sure. No future. French fries and coffee."

When she came back with a coleslaw starter he asked about the phone. "Did it ring while I was gone?"

"Not while I've been here."

They got another chance to talk when she brought him his steak. "You sure look nice—all pressed up and everything. Who's the dame—me?"

He whispered, "You. There's a special reason I want to talk to you. When do you get off?"

"Eight o'clock. We can walk around." Her hand went up through her blond hair. "I'd show you my apartment but I know you men."

He took a French fry in his fingers as though it were a fried shrimp. "Is it close in?"

"See?" she said, tossing her head. She tapped her finger at him and was gone again.

When she came back she said: "It's the Etoile Apartments, 289 South Grand. You take the Angels Flight cable car to the top of Bunker Hill and walk over a block. The air's swell up there and you can really sleep."

When next she alighted Rocky said: "I'll give it a look. And about the phone here—if you can answer it without giving the name of the café it might do me a lot of good. My new boss thinks this is my number."

"Of all things." She frowned slowly. "Say, I've got a

phone in the hall where I live—number's Vandike 2-5001. You can use that. And look, I'm going on here nights; so if you want to rent my spare couch you can sleep nights. I can sleep days."

"You mean, you trust me?"

"Of course. I know a gentleman when I see one."

Rocky didn't argue the gentleman point. "Okay," he said and wrote the phone number on a piece of paper. "Look," he said, "I'll be back for you at eight o'clock—do you know anybody by the name of Hildegarde?"

She raised her brows to him. "Should I?"

Rocky shook his head, smiled, got up, paid his bill, and went outside.

On Main Street a number of stores were still open. He was able to buy a pair of socks, underwear, a new shirt, a bow tie, and a new, narrow-rimmed Homburg hat. Packages under his arm, he walked downstairs into a place that said in green neon: "Coon's Baths. Number Two."

He had a fast shower, changed his clothes, left his laundry, and said he'd call for it later.

It was eight o'clock on the dot when Rocky got back to the New Idea. In a few moments Sally came out of the kitchen. Dressed for the street and home, she seemed taller—a little taller than he. She wore a dark skirt, suspenders and a lightweight sweater of shaggy wool, and a knit jacket. She was quite pretty, and she had two good reasons for wearing a sweater.

He whispered, "Hello, Cupcakes."

"Stop it!" she whispered back but a nice color came into her cheeks. She looked down the counter as though the customers she'd been smiling at all day had suddenly become dust under her feet. "Let's get out of here," she said.

"Sure."

The phone rang in the rosewood-colored booth. They both looked at the booth. After the second ring the owner of the lunchroom started back from the front. But Rocky held up a couple of fingers that said he'd get it.

Inside the booth he took down the receiver. "Hello," he said experimentally. Then he smiled at Sally and closed the booth door.

"Yes, this is Rockwell Nevins. . . . Oh yes, Miss Jaine. How are you? . . . No, I don't sleep here. As a matter of fact, I just dropped in to get something—" He looked toward Sally who stood outside, a sudden wooden look on her face.

"All right. . . . Sure. . . . Can I call you back? I'll have to get in touch with the garage and see if the transmission in my car's ready. . . . All right, your car then. . . . Yes, Seventh and Broadway will be fine. . . . Southwest side. Twenty minutes. . . . Okay—'bye." He hung up.

Outside, he caught Sally's arm. "Let's get out of here."

She asked: "A girl?"

Rocky laughed. "My boss. That's the hell with working for someone; they've always got a call on you. Here I'm not even supposed to start on my new job until morning and I've got to go." He grimaced. "I get all fixed up for you and look what happens—just smell me, Cupcakes."

She did, smiled approvingly, then looked forlorn. "Can't you phone him back? Tell him you've broken a leg."

"No dice—but I'll get through as soon as I can." They kept walking west on Fifth Street. "I'll get loose as soon as possible. Say, about renting me that couch—were you kidding?"

She shook her head. "No, I wasn't kidding." She took his arm as they crossed at Spring Street. "I'll go on home. When you're free you can give me a ring. Just ask for apartment seven."

"All right, Cupcakes. I'd better leave you here. Say, what about that cable car you were telling me about? Where do I get it?"

"Third and Hill. It's called Angels Flight. Last car is at 12:20. If you miss that one you'll have to walk up the concrete stairs. Good-bye."

He lifted his hand to her, then ran across the street to

beat the signal. Walking two blocks to Seventh, he crossed again and went up to Broadway. A sleek gray Cadillac convertible was at the corner; it halted briefly, went on a few feet, and halted again. Then its horn peeped. Rocky walked over to the car, opened the door, and got in. "Hello," he said.

"Hello," said Mary. She had the same outfit on she'd had in the afternoon, and her trim little hat still sat jauntily on her head. Her lips were a little redder now—an evening shade. And she didn't have her sunglasses on. In their absence her face had a soft, unreal look—but her quick smile brought the look back to earth. "I circled the block twice waiting for you," she told him.

"Sorry."

"That's all right." She touched the accelerator and the big car purred contentedly and moved toward Eighth Street. She slowed. "Would you mind driving? The first place I want to go is Granite Dells. Hildegard didn't show up at my place; so she'll probably be out there."

He nodded and ran his eye over the car approvingly. It had a deluxe steering wheel. The instrument board was chrome and black. The seat was red leather—a special convertible job.

She smiled at him. "Hildegard's car. You can see how I stand with her."

He nodded. "With an in like that we shouldn't have any trouble finding her or in doing whatever we're supposed to do."

Her smile turned a little cold. Then she was bringing the big car to a stop in a red zone. She inhaled smoke, tapping the ash from her cigarette into the chrome ash receiver. "It's not too easy to find Hildegard when she's not ready to be found. In many respects she's quite a clever girl—although some of the company she keeps is not so hot. Also, I would like to turn this car over to her. I don't want to be responsible for it." She looked through her lashes at him. "Do you know where the Dells is?"

"Of course."

She laughed softly.

He grinned at her and stepped out of the car. "Somehow I wish it was you I was hunting for."

Her laugh rose merrily. "Me—I'm just like water in the tap. All you have to do is to turn the faucet and there I am. I can't take it like Hildegard. Hildegard means 'battle maiden,' you know. I start crying when I get hurt. . . ."

"All right, Boo-hoo. Will you wait a minute?" He brought out some small change from his pocket, looked at it, and hurried toward a cocktail bar that raised its beautiful neon head from between two drab business houses that were closed for the day.

There were a number of customers groping around in the gloomy interior. Rocky called out to anyone who might answer: "Anybody know how to go to Granite Dells?"

"Sure," said a voice and a man moved next to Rocky at the bar. "Out east of here. Wesley Bell's place—say, you going out? I'd like to take a crack at that roulette table again."

"Sorry. Got a girl with me," said Rocky. "Just down from Seattle. What kind of a place is the joint?"

"Pretty swell. Dinners until nine-thirty, then the games open. Got a pencil?" When Rocky gave him one the man squinted and laboriously drew a diagram on a paper napkin. "Turn east on any of these through streets—Florence Boulevard is good. . . ."

"Thanks." Rocky took back the pencil and the napkin. He stopped and fed the cigarette machine. Behind him the man called: "Good luck."

Rocky raised a hand to him and went on his way. Back at the car he tossed Mary a pack of Camels and started peeling the cellophane off another pack. "Will you drive till we get out of town? You go out Florence and turn east. You don't mind, do you?"

"All right," she said cheerfully and slid back under the wheel. "But why didn't you say what you needed?"

"What?"

"Cigarettes. There's a whole carton in the back."

"Like to buy my own," he grinned. "Like other things, Boo-hoo. As soon as a man lets a woman buy him cigarettes—well, he loses that—little something."

"What—little something?" she asked and turned the car lights on.

"Damned if I know. I was reading a book."

The motor began to purr as contentedly as a house cat after a bowl of cream. Turning left at the first through street, they raced east. "I'm nearly starved," she said.

He looked at the clock on the instrument board. "We'll make it before they close. Nine-thirty. Maybe we'll have a chance to talk to Wesley Bell before they start the games."

She raised her eyebrows. When she smiled into the windshield the reflected light from the panel did things to the softness of her throat, to the warm smoothness of her skin.

He watched her face from the corner of his eyes while she told him about Hildegarde. Hildegarde was a graduate of a local university. She had met Victor Daro at a charity party her set was giving to raise money. Daro, it seemed, had been "borrowed" from Wesley Bell's Granite Dells to fleece patrons at the charity bazaar. The affair had been a great success with lovely maidens shilling for the sleek, dark-eyed gambler. That had been some weeks before. Mary Jaine herself had met Hildegarde at Granite Dells six months ago and they were good friends.

Mary told him more about Hildegarde—confidential things. Hildegarde was spirited and had had words with Ned Foote over her estate, the culmination of which was that Hildegarde had taken \$10,000 from the family safe, which, of course, was her own money, and left.

She told him about Aunt Tabitha. Tabitha was an old dear who, besides smoking a pipe in the privacy of her own

rock, scandalized the Footes by swearing over the phone when she got excited. Tabitha was, Mary assured him, still a maiden.

Rocky sat back in the wide seat comfortably. The road was a blaze of lights behind. It seemed as though all Los Angeles were going to Bell's. The Cadillac purred along, idling at sixty.

Presently he asked: "Mind telling me something else?"

"Anything you want to know."

"You said that Aunt Tab was a virgin at, say, fifty; how about Hildegarde at—what did you say, twenty-five?"

She gave him a quick glance. "Why do you ask?"

"In the interest of finding her. There would be several additional channels to figure if—"

"Oh." She ground out her second cigarette since starting. "Well, I don't know—well, yes. I'd say yes, she is."

"Would this Victor Daro know that?"

"Say!"

"Cut it out, we're not children. What she does is her own business. Personally, I don't give a—"

Angry lights flashed in her brown eyes. "Go ahead and say it. You might as well."

He shrugged. "All right. Personally, I don't give a goddam! She can have seven kids born out of wedlock if she wants. All I want to do is find her for you, give her a message from Aunt Tabitha, and get back to L.A. before the last car shoves off tonight."

Her eyes were sultry in the half-light. "All right, you don't give a goddam. All you want to do is find her for me and give her a message from Aunt Tab—what's the message?" When he smiled at her she changed her question. "What last car?"

"Angels Flight. The last car up the hill is at 12:20. It's a block straight up and it would be too bad if I had to walk. I live up there, you know."

"That last car is important, isn't it?" she asked coolly.

The motor purred on. Rocky began to crack piñon nuts

between his teeth. He let the shells slide out past the wind wings. After a mile of silence she said: "I can't say that I care for that smug look on your face."

He looked concerned. "What, Boo-hoo?"

"Go to hell," she said. But she tempered her words with a faint smile at him.

C H A P T E R 4

Granite Dells

MARY DROVE all the way to Granite Dells. The parking lot was nearly filled when she rolled the Cadillac into a vacant, white-lined space. A uniformed attendant appeared from somewhere and said: "Good evening," and gave her a parking ticket.

When they moved into the light Rocky smiled at her. "Hello, Boo-hoo."

Mary brightened. "We shouldn't have words. We won't, will we?"

"We wouldn't think of it."

They both laughed.

A pile of huge granite rocks weighing several tons each and looking as though they'd been taken from the Long Beach breakwater were piled on either side of a drawbridge walk. The piled-up rocks seemed to be the only reason for the name—Granite Dells. Beyond, a well-lighted path ran to the porch of the big building, which was a rambling Southern affair. Its second story was lost in the cypress that crowded it and gave a High Sierra fragrance to the air.

Inside, the reception room was "landscaped" to represent a woodland scene. A small waterfall cascaded into a frog pond filled with pond lilies. The backdrop was painted a forest green with trees, plants, and falling leaves. Pillars and supports were clothed in live ferns, begonias, and semi-

tropical plants. It was a room that would be cool even on the hottest day. Through the glass doors and windows could be seen the big dining-room with its three separate wings. A cashier's desk, a hat check stand, and a battery of green plush seats finished the picture.

In a corridor was a mounted display of rocks common to the countryside. Flashing on them at intervals were differently colored lights. As each light came on, a few of the rocks would glow as though from some inner light.

When a waiter led them toward a table Rocky asked: "Wes in tonight?"

"Wes?" The waiter twisted his mustache and looked puzzled.

"Yes," said Rocky easily, "Wesley Bell."

"Oh." The man's face brightened. "Mr. Bell, you mean. Yes, he is here." He went ahead.

Mary laughed merrily and whispered: "Rocky, my dear, that wasn't so good. I'll introduce you to Mr. Bell." When they reached the table she said: "Will you order me a lobster, please?" She smiled and began moving across the floor through the maze of tables.

Rocky sat down, lighting a cigarette while grinning to himself at the waiter's rebuff. He looked around. The tables were made of hewn planks at least four inches thick, polished until they reflected the starlit effect of the ceiling. Salt-and-pepper shakers and sugar bowls were of hotel silver, napkins of brown linen. The place seated some five hundred and it was nearly full. A satisfied, contented hum filled the air—the kind that is usually found where people are well fed and enjoying themselves. A souvenir folder stood at each place.

The waiter hovered near Rocky.

"Broiled-lobster dinner for the lady," said Rocky, "and what else do you have?"

"Chicken. Fried chicken, sir." The waiter stood there, a polite expression on his thin face, a pencil poised above a pad that had number 213 on it. The same number was

on a place card in the center of the table. When Rocky hesitated the waiter raised his finger at number 227 who was passing. Number 213 explained to number 227: "His first time here."

Number 227 held his tray down so Rocky could see the orders. There were orders of fried chicken and one of broiled lobster. The fried chicken was golden brown—a leg, half a breast, half a back, a side. Shoe-string potatoes, crisp and hot, filled a basket; a chef's salad and hot biscuits were included in each order. But the red lobster took Rocky's eye—large, broiled. In its half shell it lay on a bed of lettuce, garnished with red and white radishes. Lemon and condiments stood ready in a separate dish; a round earthenware bowl was yellow with drawn butter. A tiny wooden-handled brush in cellophane was beside the bowl.

His stomach forgot about the steak it had had earlier in the evening.

"Lobster," said Rocky decisively. "Two orders. And a drink now."

"Thank you," said 213 to 227, and 227 went on his way. Then 213 informed Rocky: "Drinks are at the bar. We're not allowed to serve the tables—but you may bring your drink here if you wish."

"Sure," said Rocky and picked up the folder. There was a picture to the buildings and grounds and Wesley Bell's promise to his customers. The folder said:

Granite Dells, part of the old Bastante Family Spanish Land Grant, is leased on a 99-year basis from the heirs. Much of the food served is produced on our own ranch—chickens, eggs, butter, vegetables. Lobsters, always in season at Granite Dells, are shipped to us from various districts depending upon the season—Mexico, New Orleans, the Eastern Seaboard, the Newfoundland Banks.

The arrangements, plans, and appointments are Mr.

Wesley Bell's. Mr. Bell is owner and operator of Granite Dells. Two dishes only are served, which facilitates the work of the employees and makes for better service to you.

Mothers will find the dining-room a delightful place to come for an evening without their children. In keeping with this policy, no minors are allowed on the premises. This rule, you will find, is the only one we have.

Rocky looked around him, saw no minors, got up, and went to the long, hardwood bar. A white-frocked bartender stood in front of a sign that said. "All drinks 50 cents."

"A ginger-ale highball, a bourbon and water, and two glasses of wine," said Rocky.

"Lobster or chicken?"

"Lobster."

"The Chablis is good, sir. An excellent white burgundy. It is just decanted—and very cold."

Mary was there when he got back to the table. She looked more at ease now, her hat off, her coat back on her shoulders. Smoke from her cigarette-draped finger rose straight into the air and up through vent holes in the ceiling. Comfort for the diner who didn't smoke was another thing that Wesley Bell had thought of.

Rocky placed the ginger-ale highball and one glass of wine in front of her.

"Thank you, Rockwell," she said.

He looked around. "If Hildegard isn't here she's sure missing a bet. In fact, I'm beginning to think—"

"Think what?"

"That you taught her most of her tricks."

"Oh." Mary looked relieved. "Well, I guess I did at that. But remember what I said. Don't tell any of the family about me. They think Hildegard and I were quits long ago."

“Okay.” He raised his glass. “I’d give a toast but I don’t know any decent ones.”

She wrinkled her nose at him and took a sip of her drink. He caught himself staring at her. Her face was soft in the mellow light, her lips were full, her eyes warm and glowing. She looked more seductive than ever. She was the first to look away, giving a last quick glance at him, then dropping her eyes.

The broiled lobsters came, complete with shoestring potatoes, drawn butter, hot biscuits, and salad. Rocky watched Mary gracefully butter the white meat with the small brush provided. The wine stayed chilled until they needed it. . . .

Before they’d finished eating, Mary said: “I’d like some more wine. Would you mind—?”

Rocky nodded and got up. When he started to the bar he saw a tall, dark Valentino in evening clothes making his way toward the table he’d just left Mary at. He went on to the bar. “Two wines,” he said to the bartender.

“Chicken or—?”

“Chablis 1928. Two frosted glasses.”

The bartender smiled politely.

When Rocky got back to the table the tall, dark-eyed man he thought might be Victor Daro was no longer there. He’d changed as though by magic to a short, heavily built man in expensive dark clothes. The diamond on the man’s finger wasn’t quite as large as the original Cullinan but it was still big enough to stun a canary bird. The man was as broad-shouldered as a wrestler but his square-cut face was finely made. About fifty, he looked as though he’d be more than a match for any man in the room.

It was no secret in Wesley Bell’s life that he’d been, in turn, a teamster, waiter, co-owner of a chain of restaurants, and later operator of a gambling ship that had been anchored off the California coast in the thirties.

Rocky didn’t have to be told this man was Wesley Bell. But Mary introduced him.

The heavily built man acknowledged the introduction with a strangely soft voice. He did not smile. It was said he never smiled.

"Please sit down," he requested. "Mary was telling me you approve of the lobster."

"Best I've ever had." Rocky put one of the frosted glasses in front of Mary. "And I should know. I come from a sea-food town—San Francisco. And from Baltimore."

"Ah, Baltimore!" Wesley Bell's gray eyes clouded, then grew bright again. "I miss the soft-shells, the cherrystone clams. Sometimes I'm almost tempted to add them to our dishes here." He sighed, shook hands with Rocky again, and said: "Please pardon me, there's some things I want to go over with Carelton before we open upstairs. Carelton," he said for Rocky's benefit, "is my manager. If you win too heavily for the tables to pay off, you'll meet him." He said, "Mary," then and his voice rounded the name as though enjoying the sound of it. Then he was gone, walking gracefully for a big man.

Rocky turned to Mary. "You know everybody, don't you, Boo-hoo?"

"Uh-huh, don't I?" Her brown eyes were very bright—too bright. She'd stopped smiling. She said: "You didn't tell me about Baltimore."

"You didn't ask me."

"I'm asking you now. Have you ever been in Baltimore?" He shook his head.

"Do you have a car?"

He shook his head again.

"Do you know the city like a book? Have you ever been out here? Did you think you could fool me with that East-Fifth-Street restaurant phone number? Have you been in town over three days? Did you—?"

He began waving at her.

"That's bad manners," she said.

"I was only trying to say no to your questions."

Her eyes flashed. "You told me to phone between 9 and

9:30. Your office! I phoned at 4:30 and got the New Idea Café, 292 East Fifth Street. They said you'd just quit." She let a cramped little smile run up the side of her face. "I let the man who answered think I wanted a job. He asked me some very personal, some very terrible questions—he asked me if I ever put out. When I told him I didn't know what he meant, he wanted to hire me at once for his night shift. 'That's fine,' he said, 'most of the girls I get just take the job for an address. They need an address, so they won't get vagged—see?' " Her eyes searched his. "So that's the kind of a place you worked in? What did you do, wash dishes?"

Rocky finished his wine and his cigarette and looked at her sadly. "Good-bye, Boo-hoo. If you'll let me have the keys to your car I'll get my hat; it's the only one I've got—as you probably also know."

"Oh, no, you don't." Her eyes, dark now, challenged him. "I knew all about you before we came out here. I still came with you, didn't I?" She let that sink in, then added: "Don't think you're running out on me!"

He shrugged. "Out again, in again."

"But," she said, "I do think you should tell me something about yourself."

"Sure," said Rocky. "Hold your hat and don't stand up. I was born of poor but honest parents. I somehow got through school, went four years to U. C.—and then became an automobile salesman. I sold foreign cars: Duesenbergs, Swallows, Austins, Rolls. I was still selling cars until I came down here."

"It must have been interesting," she said without interest.

He nodded. "No romance in handling new cars. But when you play the field—ah! Cars, foreign or domestic, are like women. Lines, bodies, paint—temperament."

She smiled faintly. She was still a little angry. "You didn't say how you got that." She felt her cheek.

His fingers unconsciously moved to the scar on his own face, then upward through his silky hair. His voice lowered.

"I don't really like to talk about it. I don't like heroes." His blue eyes grew dreary as he contemplated his empty lobster shell. "It was at Panama. A native child's scream, a white, churning path through the water as a giant barracuda made another rush at the boy. I dived from the pier—but I didn't realize the fish had hit me until I had the boy safe on the beach."

She said fervently: "You were a hero."

"It was nothing."

The dining-room was thinning now. No one had been admitted after nine-thirty. Outside, sleek black limousines began arriving from Los Angeles, Long Beach, and Hollywood. The gambling-room upstairs was opening.

"Shall we go up?" Mary asked and rose from her seat.

He followed her past the bar into a back hallway. Then they went up oak stairs that were nearly as wide as the hallway. At the top was a large cocktail room where a radio crooned softly in the half-darkness. A chrome-and-black bar ran the length of the room; it was already lined up by bettors getting primed for their sessions at the tables.

Mary said, "Let's go in singly, kind of stay apart. I saw Victor Daro a few minutes in the dining-room and he's going to tell me where Hildegard is—have you money enough?"

"Yes, dear," he said meekly. "I'll wait here, drink a little wine, and dream of sunny France. You go ahead."

She hesitated before saying: "All right. But don't go to sleep dreaming."

"Good luck," he said and cut a swath through the gloom of the cocktail lounge. He found a table. When a tall, very thin waiter who looked like a country grocer stopped in front of him, Rocky said: "Hell, I don't know what I do want."

"Who does?" croaked the man.

"What would you have?"

The waiter took on a little interest. "You mean if I was you and you was me?"

Rocky nodded.

"A lemonade with a shot of good whisky laid on top. Not mixed, you understand, just laid there. Some places call it a whisky float. I'll get you one."

Rocky didn't try to stop him.

When the waiter got back Rocky placed two one-dollar bills on the tray and tried the drink. Full-bodied whisky left its subtle bed to make merry with his taste buds. It was neither sweet nor sour. The suggestion of lemon in the background came as an after-thought to put a tang to the drink. "That was right on," said Rocky.

The lean-faced waiter picked up the tray. "Thanks." But the two bills in his fingers confused him. He hesitated. "That much of a tip means you want to know something. What?"

Rocky lighted a cigarette. "It wouldn't do any good to ask. You wouldn't tell me."

The man wiped off the table that was already wiped; then he straightened a coaster that was tending to its own business.

"All right," said Rocky. "What about this Victor Daro? You know anything about him?"

"What kind of things?"

"Oh, hell! I wouldn't want to know anything good, would I?" Rocky looked off toward the wall where a bare-footed Mexican in a mural was missing the best part of the scenery as he plodded uphill too close behind a burro. "Jeez, you'd think I was a Fed on the prowl or after Stella, queen of the dope ring. Hell, forget it."

"You don't have to get exercised," said the waiter. "Nobody's been unkind to you." He touched his small nickel badge. "Number 17 is an easy number to forget, isn't it?"

"I've already forgotten it."

Number 17 looked convinced. "I don't like guys like Daro," he said. "I don't like the breed. He's got a way with women, sure—plays them for all they're worth. Figured in an attack case in L.A. some years ago. Released. Vagged a

couple of times up north. Worked on a gambling boat for the boss. But Vic Daro is small time, a tinsel fish, if you ask me. I understand that he got into the wrong bed a while back, that he ain't got long to live—see you later.” Number 17 took a last swipe at an imaginary speck on the table and was gone.

Rocky sat there while he finished his cigarette and his drink. Then he got up and strolled into the gambling-room.

By comparison it was as brilliantly lighted as the Diamond Palace on a sunny afternoon. It was already filled with throbbing, eager humanity who knew this night was their big, lucky one. The paraphernalia and furnishings had a solid look as though built to stay. And this was the case, for Granite Dells had its own law, its own police force to preserve order and keep away grips and chisellers.

Roulette, table craps, blackjack, and chuck-a-luck games were already at work accommodating the customers begging to be relieved of their money. Suave, clear-eyed croupiers and dealers cast an impersonal eye over the players and raked in the cash. Other, bulkier, men in smart evening suits were inconspicuous on the outer fringe of activity, yet were part of the setup.

Rocky risked a quarter at the most honorable-looking of the battery of slot machines lining the wall. The machine whirled derisively, then stopped with a decisive clink. He listened, but there was no metallic roar of coins cascading into the cup. There was only a clanking somewhere down in the bowels of the thing as though it needed that action to set the trap for the next dewy-eyed customer.

He found Mary at a blackjack table. She was winning, but not much. The dealer was tall and suave with a surly, handsome face—the same man Rocky had seen at Mary's table in the dining-room: Victor Daro.

Rocky stopped on the outer fringe of players and watched. He stayed there until Mary turned and saw him; then he moved up to the table. Every gesture of Mary's,

every movement of her hands and her eyes told him to stay away. But he smiled as though he didn't understand. Placing a silver dollar on the table, he asked Daro: "You stand on seventeen?"

"Yes." Daro smiled and shuffled the cards with that sharp, confident swish professionals use. "And I draw to sixteen," he added and glanced at Mary.

Mary looked at her stack of silver dollars and said nothing.

Rocky took his place between Mary and an elderly man who didn't seem to care whether he won or not. Rocky asked for a cut. On the first hand he got a blackjack. Daro's sleek fingers flicked out and covered his dollar with a dollar and a half.

Rocky picked up his winnings, said: "Thank you," and walked away. His gambling was over for the night.

He fooled around for an hour, restraining himself from bucking the games. When he looked wistfully at the crap table a man moved aside. "Want in?" he asked.

"Not me. Those little cubes know my number. I swore off—women and dice."

He was back in the cocktail lounge talking to Number 17 when Mary found him. She smiled at him and sat down. "Bored?" she asked.

"Not now, Boo-hoo. When you're around—"

"Stop it!" She opened her purse, brought out the parking ticket and her car keys, and laid them down on the table. "You mind going home alone? You can leave the car in the garage at the Rampart Plaza. You know where that is, don't you?"

He nodded. "I'll find it." Picking up the keys and the ticket, he asked: "Daro?"

Her eyes met his unflinchingly. "It's a good guess—if it is a guess."

"Logic, my child," he said. "Have a drink?"

She shook her head. Then she held her head steady and leaned forward so he could light the cigarette in her lips.

After a moment she got up. "See you tomorrow. I'm leaving now. I'm finding out—about Hildy."

"Sure," he said.

"Sure what?"

"Just sure." On his feet now, he toyed with his glass down on the table. "As soon as I nurse this drink along a while, I'll shove off too. I wouldn't want to miss the 12:20 train up the hill. I'd hate to have to walk that block." He saw Mary stiffen. Then she dropped back into her seat. His eyes followed hers. Hal Heber, the private detective, was coming in from the gambling-room. A limp cigar jutted from his jaw.

Rocky gave a hard laugh. "There's our manhunter. We're going to have to talk to him sometime; it might as well be now. Better sit tight, Boo-hoo." He stood until Heber saw him; then he beckoned.

The big man came over, his jowls bouncing like a woman's cheeks when she's wearing hard heels on a sidewalk. Halfway over he gave up his cigar as though regretfully, looking first for a place to park it and then consigning it to a marble ash receiver. When he saw Mary surprise widened his small eyes and kept them wide. But he didn't stop lumbering toward them.

Rocky said lightly: "Mr. Heber, won't you sit down?" He turned and smiled. "This is a girl you should know. Mary Jaine, this is Mr. Heber, hired by Hildegard's aunt and uncle to find Hildegard."

Mary smiled that quaint little smile of hers.

"How do you do," said Heber. He looked at the chair at her left and sat down uncomfortably. But his eyes were bright and curious. He looked a little worried.

Rocky motioned the waiter. "What'll you have, Heber?"

"Gin sling." Number 17 took the order and strolled on back to the bar as though he had money invested in the enterprise.

Rocky said: "Mary, here, knows Hildegard quite well. She's looking for her too. And I'm working for Mary."

Mary smiled sweetly.

Heber cleared his throat. His pudgy fingers fumbled at his coat pocket as though to bring out the photo of the missing Hildegarde the Footes had given him. "Miss Jaine," he said and peered through suddenly narrowed eyes, "maybe you can give me some information about Hildegarde Ederlee. All I want is to find her."

"Who doesn't?" she asked brightly. "I do. Mr. Nevins here does. You do. Everybody does. That's why I'm out here tonight. If I find out anything that I think you should know—" She hesitated, looked at her wristwatch, and said: "Oh!" and got up. "I'm sorry but I've got to go." She smiled at them and moved away toward the gambling-room.

Heber took a fresh cigar out of his breast pocket and bit the end off thoughtfully. Sticking the cigar into his mouth, he turned it slowly between his full lips. Yellow, shifty little eyes followed Mary out the door. "So that's the dame, Mary Jaine," he said as though to himself.

"In person," Rocky said grinning. Sitting back, he nursed his drink along. "I don't know much about this business but I do know the best place to hunt for Hildegarde Ederlee."

"Yeah?" Heber showed interest. "Where?"

"Night spots. Like this one. You have an expense account?"

"Yeah. But the old folks won't go for any expense like this. No liquor."

"What do you put it down as—cheese?"

The detective's thick lips warped into a grin. "Corn plasters, mebbe." He added from the corner of his mouth: "You can bet I get it down as something."

The gin sling came—and almost with it, Wesley Bell. He sat down with them, refused a drink, and was introduced to Heber. No, he hadn't seen anybody by the name of Hildegarde Ederlee around for some time. He frowned slightly and looked at Rocky. "Have you seen Mary?"

Rocky said: "Last I saw of her she was going back into the big room. She said she was—" He pulled up. "She said she was seeing somebody."

"Oh, yes. She's probably in my office. She knows I want to see her." Wesley Bell started to rise, then sank back into the chair again. His eyes were almost warm. "You know I've got a place in my heart for the kid. Knew Mary's father well. In fact, he was one of my men on the boat. Got killed in a passenger-plane smashup in the East last year. Left everything to Mary. Not much, but enough for a while. I kind of look out after her when I can; and sometimes I'm able to help her keep on an even keel. I'd do anything for the kid; so—" he hesitated, almost smiled—"if you think anybody's trying to pull a fast one on her I'd like to know about it."

Heber pulled in his thick lips and didn't say anything. Rocky said: "Is anybody trying to pull a fast one on her?"

"I don't know—for sure." Bell got up and nodded briefly to Heber. Flicking his finger toward one of his men in the doorway, he was gone.

Rocky looked sideways at the detective, watching him roll his cigar around in his lips. "I wouldn't want to get in Wesley Bell's way," he said.

"You said something there." Heber looked through his slitted eyes. "I don't know what your business is in this matter, but as long as you stay clear of me—"

"Quit it," said Rocky. "You'll be scaring me."

Heber laughed harshly. His drink was gone. "No percentage in me sticking around here," he said and turned up one side of his mouth. "Thanks for the drink."

Rocky didn't try to detain him. As soon as Heber was out of sight he jerked his head to Number 17 who was hovering close by. "Another float," he said. "But first, you know the bird that was with me—or the dame that was in here a little while ago?"

Number 17 caressed his Adam's apple with the back of a thumb. "Can't make the fellow. But the girl—name of

Mary something or other—been coming out here for a couple of months. Seems to be a nice kid.”

“Two months?” Rocky said softly. “Was she alone or with another girl? The other girl might be as tall, perhaps the same build—”

“I don’t know. Not sure—Maybe I am though.” He scratched his chin as though this would hypo his mental processes. “I think they came in once together—the night the boss was away. Come to think of it, the other girl was a brunette, but they looked a lot alike. That was it—Yeah. Anything wrong?”

Rocky shook his head. “No, nothing wrong.” He fumbled with his cigarette pack until the waiter went after the drink. Staring moodily at his paper napkin, he wrote on it: “Have one on me.” Leaving a dollar bill to pay for the drink, he went out. When he passed the gambling-room he smiled sadly at the crap table as though it were the tombstone of a departed friend.

C H A P T E R 5

The Rampart Plaza

FROM THE wide veranda the auto park looked as lonely under its tall electric lights as Rocky felt. Half of the cars had gone home. He was standing there turning a cigarette into a long gray ash when a girl’s angry heel taps sounded behind him. He turned. The girl was alone. She was small and well built. If he was any judge the peaked little hat she was wearing was to take some of the roundness from her face. She looked past him toward the cab stand.

He said: “Cab?”

Her dark eyes swung back to him and took him in in one swift glance. “What are you giving me? You’re no cab driver.”

“Thanks.” Then he smiled at her. “I’m a dishwasher.

But I do have a car. I can drop you off anywhere between Main Street and Beverly Hills."

She jerked a cigarette from her purse, put the cigarette between her red lips, and looked toward the auto park. Rocky held a match for her. She hesitated, then pushed her cigarette into the tiny flame. That did it. She was smiling by the time they reached the car, and when she saw it was a Cadillac convertible her smile grew twenty degrees warmer. The parking attendant looked at Rocky sharply but he took the parking ticket without argument.

The girl cuddled into the wide seat as though she'd just made a down payment on the car. As they sailed out of the lot she sniffed back toward the porch. "I wish the son-of-a-bitch could see me now."

"Who?"

"The guy that brought me. He went high-hat. Met some fine-feathered friends, then wanted me to go home in a cab; he even gave me five dollars as though I was a pickup he wanted to pay off—mister, this is a car."

Rocky nodded twice. Once in sympathy for the way she'd been treated, once in acknowledgment for the car. "I know how you feel. But I always say the hell with them. A swell-looking dame like you can always get somebody."

"Don't!" she cried. "I'm sick to tired of lines."

He smiled faintly. Turning into the main road, he dimmed his lights at an approaching car, then raised them again.

"I still know how you feel, babe. Same thing happened to me tonight. I brought my girl friend out here and she's going home with one of the dealers. That's the only reason she came out—to see him!"

"Don't cry," said the girl and patted his arm.

"I feel better already."

A mile from Granite Dells a car's lights suddenly shone into Rocky's rear-view mirror. He frowned. No car had turned out of the auto park behind him. The car's lights on the road behind blinked twice and then went out.

Alerted, Rocky had his foot on the brake when it happened. But it was too late to completely dodge the length of iron pipe catapulted across the pavement. "Watch yourself!" he cried, then was fighting the heavy car. Tires wailed in the night as they careened and skidded the width of the road and back again.

Rocky's quick pull in the direction the car was skidding kept it from turning over, but it ended up hopelessly in the ditch, jammed against the bank. When the tires stopped screeching the girl's screams took over.

Jerking the ignition and lights off, Rocky shook the screaming girl. "Stop it!" he cried.

She stopped screaming. All was silent then—outside. Only the girl's heavy breathing filled the gap between the near-at-hand and the night. Her breath caught and then started again. There was the smell of gasoline in the air.

He whispered: "Wait," and slowly opened the door and stuck his head out. The only light came from a fourth of a moon that was sailing placidly through fleecy clouds overhead.

When she whispered something he couldn't understand he said: "It's all right, I guess. Maybe it was just an accident. Come on, you can slip past me."

"I'll try," she murmured.

He helped her, sliding back so she could get past him. Her crumpled hat and shoulders were no sooner clear from the door when a splinter of flame penciled the gloom. Rocky jerked the girl down as flame and noise mingled again. Beside her head the windshield splintered and a spider web of lines leaped out from one corner.

Then the noise was over. No more shots. Silence. Crickets began chirping and the thousand and one other noises of the night started up. Rocky crouched back against the car seat, holding the girl. He thought she was trembling until he saw it was his own shaking hand. The girl was still. Was she dead?

Sweat popped out on his brow as he caught her arm.

She was breathing but they were trapped like rats in a packing box with no chance to defend themselves. A car came roaring in then, no lights on it. Somebody was picking up the gunman but they'd investigate the wrecked car first. Rocky's hand slid past the girl and came in contact with the jammed door handle; he twisted it desperately, and when the door opened an inch he kicked it against the side of the ditch bank.

The other car had come to a full stop and there was a hurried consultation. Voices sounded against the throbbing of the car's motor and the beam of a flashlight began painting the ground toward Rocky's car. Rocky got the door opened against the dirt bank and slid out. His groping hands found a heavy stone and closed over it. He began circling the car toward the voices. . . .

The flashlight showered the inside of the car. Somebody rasped: "Look, we got the girl! But where's the fellow?"

"A car's coming. Let's get out of here!"

"We better make sure about the girl. Give her another slug."

The cold-bloodedness of it was incredible to Rocky. Fury possessed him. He acted as though the man's voice had released a hidden spring. He leaped into the light and hurled the stone.

The stone missed the men but there was the crash of window glass in their car beyond. At that moment the car's headlights, appearing with sudden urgency from the direction of Granite Dells, started the men running for their car. One swung the flashlight back to Rocky, caught him in its beams and blinded him. But no shot was flung his way. Then the car was roaring away into the night.

Rocky cursed after it. Then he hurried back to the Cadillac. The girl was sitting up blinking at him.

"Oh, my God!" she cried.

Rocky asked soothingly: "Are you all right?"

She said she was. By this time the oncoming lights were showering the car and ground with light.

He helped her out. "Babe," he said slowly, "I'm glad you're not hurt—but just how mad did you make that friend of yours?"

"Oh!" she said. "Oh, not Ralph. He wouldn't hurt a flea. He's afraid of his own shadow—Did I faint?"

But Rocky was out in the road waving. The car rolled up and stopped short like a man stubbing a toe. A fat man slid from the driver's seat. "Anybody hurt?"

"Oh, no," said Rocky. He brushed the girl off, and explained: "Hit a piece of pipe somebody dropped in the road—sure wrecked things. Can you give us a lift?"

"Sure, sure. Going right into town." He walked around the car, looked curiously at it; then he looked at the girl who stared back at him sullenly. He grunted: "Lucky not to be killed, by God!"

"I guess that covers it," said Rocky.

The girl kept looking at Rocky, but she followed his lead and did little talking on the way in. Rocky himself said practically nothing, letting the driver furnish the entertainment as well as the passage. "Been out to the Dells," said the fat man. "Did all right by myself, by God!"

By the time they'd got to town the driver had told them of every wreck he'd ever seen—even had been in a few himself, by God! Take a Cad though. Pretty safe in a Cad. Used to have one himself, by God!

He let them off at Eighth between Broadway and Hill. Enjoyed their company, by God! No trouble at all. Any time, any time.

It wasn't quite twelve and a drugstore was still open. While the girl had a cup of coffee Rocky found the telephone number of the Auto Club, phoned and reported the accident and the location of the car. Nearest club garage to the accident he found was Hill's Wayside Super Station. He was informed that that was where the car would go. They'd phone right away. He said all right.

But he dropped another nickel, had long distance get him Hill's Wayside, put in some more coins, and got Mr. Hill out of bed.

"The Auto Club will phone you about a car registered to Hildegard Ederlee. This is her father. When the car comes in can you get on it at once? . . . Tonight, if possible. She'll need it right away. . . . Oh, windshield—smashed fender—headlight—a little paint. . . . Yeah. Phone you tomorrow."

As he went out of the booth he laughed mirthlessly. "That Mary gal has sure got a good man helping her—me!" But he didn't strut when he walked; he limped a little.

The girl was standing at the counter on one foot looking at the heel of the other shoe. She smiled wryly at him. "I ought to sue you."

"Don't do it. That was my girl's car and I just gave the bad news to parties concerned." He took her arm. "Come outside." He had two twenty-dollar bills in her hands by the time they hit the street. "For nylons and shoes, and for getting shot at," he said.

"Gee, thanks." Her eyes were bright now. "Who do you think it was?"

"I'm not even thinking. I just reported the thing to the cops but I kept you out of it. That was best, wasn't it?"

When she said it was, he smiled at her. "Now I'll get you a cab—"

"All right," she said slowly.

He whistled at a cab that was trying to cruise undetected around the corner. While it was making its turn back he saw her studying him.

She took a deep breath and said: "If you'd like to come up—"

"I can't—tonight."

She hesitated, then said candidly: "I'd probably not feel like I do tomorrow."

"You mean you want to do something tonight that would kind of hurt him, is that it?"

"I guess so. Yes, I guess that's it. Well, good-bye," she said. She kissed him impulsively. "If you change your mind tonight, I live at the Cliff Apartments on West Olympic. Apartment 5. Mildred Arnold."

"Okay," he said and smiled. "Good night, Mildred." He helped her into the cab, put two dollars into her hand for the driver, and watched her slide out of his life. Then he went looking for another cab.

The Rampart Plaza was tall and stately, rising high enough in the air to look down at two city parks. A rimless plate-glass door had a discreet "614" on it but no name. At one side of the building was an underpass to the basement garage where he was supposed to leave Mary's car. Rocky smiled wryly at the entrance.

A sudden thought made him inspect the cars parked along the curb. He moved along the sidewalk. The street lights were good and he could see into the cars. The first car was a shiny coupe. The outlines of the face he saw were familiar; the jutting, red-tipped cigar clinched the recognition before the face turned away.

Rocky said: "Don't you ever sleep?"

Heber's entire face came into view, his fat jowls quivering. "What the hell you doing here?"

"Calling on a young lady. And you?"

"She hasn't got back yet," said Heber. "I'm hired to find a certain girl and there was one more question I wanted to ask this one before I went to bed. But, hell, I can't wait all night." He moved over in the seat. "Want me to drop you somewhere?"

"Yeah. Right here! Maybe she got home too early for you. Or maybe you were just checking to see if she arrived at all!" He tossed his cigarette away and half-circled the car, looking at the windows. All were intact. "Just doing a little checking myself," he explained.

Heber didn't like the implication. "You mean—she had an accident? Look, you son-of-a-bitch—"

Rocky stepped closer to the car and then changed his mind as suddenly. Moving to the apartment entrance, he shoved the plate-glass door open and went inside. There was no lobby but he found a help-yourself night elevator in an alcove. As he took himself up to the eighth floor he looked at the Cadillac's car keys. The third key he'd been contemplating all evening looked as though it might work pretty well on a Yale apartment-door lock.

Number 617 was at the end of a carpeted hall that was so thick he could have used snowshoes. The door of the apartment was of natural eucalyptus, a small mother-of-pearl push button at its side. Rocky started to touch the button and then looked at the silver key on the ring. Heber had said the girl wasn't in.

He opened the door quietly then pulled up. There was no sound from within, but a light shone into the small hallway that hid the door from the living-room. The carpet muffled his tread as he moved inside. In the living-room a floor lamp drew a white circle on a chair and part of a smoke stand. Half the couch was in the perimeter of the lamp's light, but nobody was using it or the reading lamp. Rocky shrugged and walked heavier now. Mary might have left the lamp on when she left earlier in the day.

Then he saw a hat—a gray hat with a narrow brim—and a man's kid gloves. Rocky moved to the kitchen. A fifth of Old Taylor stood there beckoning to him. There were two glasses. The whisky level was halfway down to the bottom of the label. A lighted cigarette in a tray was short enough to have lived its life out; its final breath was a wispy Indian signal of smoke spiraling into the ceiling.

There was another small hallway. At the end of it a tiled bathroom was open. A bedroom door was cracked open too. Rocky moved to it, pulled up—and stared.

The tall, effeminate Victor Daro stood over the bed swaying slightly, his coat off, his necktie awry. A lock of

stringy black hair was down in his eyes. He was no longer the suave, polished dealer Rocky had seen earlier in the evening. His leering smile was that of a cat watching a crippled canary swimming in a bowl of thick cream. Daro was looking at Mary.

She was worth looking at. She lay there, her spun-gold hair framing her soft oval face. Her uncovered body was very white and very lovely against the blue of the chenille spread. She was motionless, her eyes closed.

The spell woven over Rocky suddenly broke. He moved slowly into the room. Daro looked up, his whisky-flushed face turning a sudden paper-white. For a moment he didn't say anything. Then he whispered hoarsely: "Get out of here! Get out of here!"

Rocky didn't move, didn't say anything—just looked at him.

Daro shook his head and then ran trembling fingers up through his dark hair. "She drank too much," he blurted. "Just putting her to bed."

"Yeah," said Rocky. He glanced at Mary. She was breathing steadily. He pulled part of the chenille coverlet over her. "Yeah," he said again. He swung to Daro. "How long you been here?"

"Just got here. Well, half an hour ago. We had a few drinks—too many, I guess."

"Then the guy downstairs arrived late—or was lying to me to keep me away. Those drinks—you didn't doctor one of them?"

Daro's dark eyes widened. When he opened his mouth to protest Rocky hit him—an easy backhand slap. When the dealer's head went back Rocky followed with a straight right that had all his 140 pounds behind it. The smack as it hit Daro's jaw and the resultant crash to the floor didn't make the night workers at San Pedro look up from their work, but it did make Mary stir uneasily on the bed.

Face livid with rage, Rocky cried: "You dirty son-of-a-bitch." Pulling Daro to a sitting position by his hair, he

looked into the glassy eyes. Then he closed the glassy eyes with a vicious barrage of fists.

Rocky was trembling when he dropped into a taffeta-covered chair. Pulling out a cigarette, he shoved it into his mouth and lit it. He smoked it down. It was quiet again—no noise in the apartment except Daro's heavy breathing. Daro had fallen with an arm over his face and he wasn't getting much air. He was getting enough to suit Rocky. "When I get through with you you'll be sorry you were ever born," he muttered.

He got up then, looked at his trembling hand, and laughed mirthlessly. Back in the kitchen he smelled both glasses, wrinkled his nose at one, and emptied both in the sink. He filled a clean glass half full of whisky, took it straight, and blinked. When he went back into the bedroom he had a pitcher of water in his hands. Smiling faintly, he pulled the blue chenille spread back and gazed down at Mary's loveliness. His eyes were filled with the same kind of admiration that an artist would have looking at a rare and beautiful painting.

"Well, Boo-hoo," he said gently. "I hope you got your information."

Replacing the spread hurriedly, he took three steps, then poured the pitcher of water over Daro. He lighted another cigarette while he watched Daro sputter and beat out with his hands.

Rocky waited. There was no hurry. When Daro was looking at him again through one good eye and one swollen one, he said: "Got a key to this dump?"

The dealer shook his head. His long black hair got in his eyes and stayed there.

"Show me," said Rocky.

Daro got to his feet unsteadily and winced as he felt of his jaw. He unloaded his pockets, spilling a key ring out with the rest of the stuff. Rocky compared the keys with the one on Mary's car ring. If Daro had a key to the apartment it wasn't on him. Rocky picked up the billfold and

looked inside. "Metropole Hotel," he said. "A Greek joint?"

Daro didn't answer. Rocky said: "Here's the key I used to get in here." He tossed the key ring over to the dressing table. Glancing at Mary, he strode across the room and pulled the table scarf over the keys. "Now we're going home. Both of us."

They made a nice pair going down the elevator, Daro half leaning on Rocky. The cab Rocky had called must have had a station close by for it was on the curb when they got down to the sidewalk. He put Daro inside and told the driver: "Hotel Metropole."

"Where's that?" asked the man.

"How in the hell would I know?" Rocky went on down the street. As he passed Heber's car he said: "Good night, sucker. Go home and throw your mother a bone."

Daro's cab glided past Rocky toward Sixth Street. A moment later Heber's car was sailing down the street after the cab. "Sharp as hell," muttered Rocky. But his last glance on the street was a long, lingering one back toward the Rampart Plaza.

C H A P T E R 6

Angels Flight

HE FOUND a garage open at the corner and a pay phone waiting for him inside on one of the supporting posts. He dialed a number, waited a long time, and finally got a sleepy answer.

"Charley? . . . This is Rocky. . . . Sure, it's your private number. I finally got it this afternoon—don't ask me how." He glanced at the attendant sleeping in the office. "Anything new on that San Francisco business? . . . No? . . . Well, Charley, I'm in, solid. They fell like a ton of bricks for my glad smile and warm personality. Say, in your

public relations 'stuff have you ever come across a private dick named Hal Heber? . . . Can you get a line on him for me? He's got an office in the Randolph Building at Second and Spring. . . . Sure. . . . Sure, tomorrow will be fine. I'll phone you. . . . Sure, I'd like to see you too—but I can't get away now. . . . Yes, I'm on a lead. It's not too hot but it may be the girl. You know they can change looks a lot, or did you? I'll call you tomorrow. . . Okay, 'bye."

He hung up and walked to the corner where he awakened a taxicab driver. At Third and Hill Streets he got out and looked along the empty street.

Across the way was a tunnel into which a west-bound cab was disappearing. The snapping of its exhaust inside sounded like Chinese New Year. On one side of the tunnel was a flight of concrete stairs running up the steep hill to Olive; on the other side a black-and-orange cupola had the legend: "Angels Flight." A sign below and to the side said: "Last car, 12:20."

It was one-thirty—too late to ride the cable cars. The tiny funicular line was closed, its two tiny cars asleep halfway up like two chickens roosting for the night.

Rocky grinned at the driver. "Can you get me upstairs without walking?"

"Sure."

The cab went to Second Street, skirted another tunnel, and roared up the hill. Rocky got off a block from the Etoile Apartments. Waiting around to be sure he wasn't followed, he walked on to 289 South Grand. He stood on the front porch of the Etoile a few moments longer, listening to the noise of the city coming up to him—no individual sounds, only an enormous, hushing sound into which were lost the noises of owl streetcars, automobiles, and the noises that go with night.

Inside the Etoile he looked at a list of names over the mail table. Each name was written in ink on a small oblong

of paper. Number 7 belonged to Sally Carstairs and Lola Evans, but a pencil mark was scratched through Lola.

He went upstairs and knocked on apartment 7. There was no sound from within and the transom remained dark. He tried again. This time he got a response, but from a door twenty feet down the hall.

The head that came into view had curlers on so tightly that it looked as though it were being scalped. A fat hand clutched a pinkish robe. "Hello, babe," Rocky whispered, and the head snapped out of sight like a jack-in-the-box. When he knocked at 7 again the transom yellowed and a lighted line appeared at the bottom of the door. The door wedged open and a voice said sleepily: "What do you want?" Then a hello and Sally, in blue dressing gown and mules with blue pompoms, stepped aside to let him pass.

She sat on the folding bed that was down, rubbed her eyes sleepily, and looked at him. "Hello," she said again.

"Hello, Cupcakes." He took a chair and sat and looked at her. There wasn't much else to look at. Across the room was a couch and a rocker with a red cloth cushion. The latter was jammed against the wall as though fleeing from the bed when it had been let down. The apartment was neat and clean—a bathroom, a kitchenette—nothing fancy.

"Well?" she smiled and curled up like a sleepy kitten.

"You still want to be my landlady?"

"Wait'll I get awake, will you? Huh? What did you say?" She blinked at him with eyes indeterminate as to color. Then she smiled again and pushed her blond hair back from her forehead. "Sure. Yes. My girl friend paid four dollars for the couch. Could you afford that much?"

"I'll pay five dollars."

She raised her eyebrows, smiled, and got up. "I'll buy a drink."

Rocky followed her into the kitchen, nodded approvingly at her taste. It was the second bottle of Old Taylor he'd seen within the hour.

She took two cubes of ice from a battered icebox, placed

one in each glass, and poured whisky slowly over them. The theory was that ice cubes cool the whisky without spoiling it by too much dilution.

They drank to each other and to the apartment. They made ham and egg sandwiches and coffee. Sally's sly smile at him became more pronounced as the drinks took hold. "You're sweet," she said. Her yellow, bobbed hair seemed to have a million lights in it. He "bought" a drink from her bottle. After a while she said: "I'll bet you're trying to get me drunk."

"Why should I do that?" He grinned and lighted her cigarette. Then he kissed her.

That was all right with Sally. "Come on," she said and led the way back into the living-room, the blue gown molding her legs as though the cloth were damp. She sat down and regarded him with glowing eyes. Then she smiled. "Miss Robbins isn't going to like this."

"Who in the— Who's Miss Robbins?"

"The bitchy busybody down the hall. I'm surprised you didn't see her. She's been trying to get an eyeful ever since I moved in. That's why Lola left; this dame was getting on her nerves; Lola said she couldn't do a thing without the old bag sticking her nose into it."

"Doesn't she bother you?"

She looked at him with wide-open eyes. "I don't give her anything to worry about. Decorum is my forte."

"Hey, waitresses don't talk like that."

She blinked at him.

He grinned. "Let it go. Only she did see me come in."

"Oh. Now she'll be talking her head off. If she doesn't hear you go out she'll be worried all night. Maybe she'll have a relapse—maybe even die." Sally looked worried and a little dizzy. "Wouldn't it be awful?" A little-girl smile drove her worried look away. "You know what Lola told the old girl? She told her that what she needed was—well, I'd better not tell you."

"Okay. But I gather that this Lola must have been quite

a girl." He picked up her alarm clock and looked at it. "Hey, two o'clock. Aren't you sleepy?"

"Oh no," she said and stretched languorously like a kitten. "I'm on a different shift tomorrow—four to twelve. Are you sleepy?"

He looked toward the couch. "Well, I am, a little. You have some covers to go with that couch?"

"They're inside the couch whenever you want them."

He got up, finished his drink, and went over to the day bed. Taking the covering off, he folded it and put it on the chair. The top of the couch raised on its hinges, revealing neatly folded blankets, comforters, and a pillow. She watched him through half-closed eyes as he went about making his bed.

He smiled at her. "I've got to get me some things tomorrow; my suitcase got lost coming down from Frisco."

She gave a short laugh. "You seem to be doing pretty well. Yesterday, I know for a fact, you didn't have a five-dollar bill; now look at you— Say, I haven't any pajamas except some lounging ones and they wouldn't fit you."

"That's all right. I don't use them."

"You don't?" She laughed. "Now isn't that something. I don't either. I sleep without anything; it's more healthful—"

"—and exciting," he supplied under his breath and turned back to the couch. A moment later he looked back at her. All he saw was her yellow head on the pillow opposite. Her blue dressing gown lay in a crumpled heap on the chair beside her. He grinned at her and then took a walk around the room. The few things he saw were all in good taste—not the things a working girl would treasure. The things were like her talk when she forgot herself. There was something wrong with her setup. She didn't belong on East Fifth Street. Taking out his wallet, he took a five out and put it on her dressing table.

He picked up his hat and went to her. "Now for some

shenanigans. Listen to old busybody." He put his finger to his lips, winked at her, and opened the hall door.

Faintly another door down the hall opened. He called back into Sally's room: "Well, good night, Miss Carstairs. I'll see you tomorrow." When the door cracked open wider next door he said: "And good night to you, Miss Robbins." Miss Robbins slammed her door shut. Rocky slipped back into Sally's room.

"You're cute," she whispered and sat up in bed. "Oh!" She pulled the covers up over her breasts. "I'm not used to having men around. . . ."

"Gee, Cupcakes, you really don't sleep with anything on, do you?" Then his fingers slid along the wall to click the switch.

He undressed, got in between a pair of sheet blankets on the couch, said good night again, and in a moment was asleep. It was the nearest thing to a bed he'd slept in for days.

It was scintillating daylight when he awoke. The type of yellow sunshine that keeps the Chamber of Commerce happy was streaming in the window. Things were cooking, coffee smelling up the place; there was the light-brownish smell of toast. A radio crooned softly. He could hear somebody in the kitchen.

He sat up in bed—sat higher and stared across the room at the couch. The couch! He wasn't on the couch; he was in the center of the folding bed. "Well!" he cried. "Now isn't that something! I go to sleep on the couch and wake up in a bed!"

He got up. In the bathroom he took a fast shower and dressed. He opened the door and came out.

Sally was just coming back into the apartment. She smiled brightly. "Good morning. Say, did you give anybody this phone number?"

"Sure. Did I get a call?"

She smiled. "I guess you did. The girl was good looking; I'd say tall, with brown, maybe hazel eyes, a temper—yes,

a temper. She doesn't like to be kept waiting. And her name is 'you will know.'"

Rocky grinned. "That the only name she gave?"

"Uh-huh."

"She leave a number?"

"No."

He shrugged and looked toward the kitchen. "Sure smells good—breakfast? And you look like a yellow-haired angel."

"Thanks." She slipped back away from him. Her eyes were deep and puzzling as they'd gotten the night before. "You'd better go," she said softly.

He looked at her with surprise. "Go?"

She smiled. "The telephone—she's waiting and I don't think she likes to wait."

A slow smile came over his face. "Oh! Will I ever get used to dames?"

He found the phone on the landing halfway down the stairs. It was on a table filled with laundry slips, discarded magazines, and the like. The receiver was off its hook.

He said into it cautiously: "Yes. . . . Oh, sure. This is Rocky. . . . Hello, Boo-hoo. . . . No, it was my landlady. . . . Of course she's interested in me. I pay her five dollars a week— What's up? What did you find out about Hildegard?"

He let the phone do the work for a minute while he slyly took a cigarette from his pocket and lighted it with a match he ignited on his thumbnail the first try. He inhaled smoke and said: "Not before two. . . . Sorry, but it'll have to be two. . . . Yes. . . . No, don't worry about me. I'll be there. . . . Rampart Plaza. . . . Yeah, I'll find it." He looked at the phone a full minute after he'd hung up. Then he smiled slowly.

Back upstairs he reported: "She was still there."

"That was nice. Would you like arsenic in your coffee, or strychnine?"

"Make it $C_{12} H_{22} O_{11}$."

"All right then—sugar!"

Breakfast over, she began wishing about again in her crisp gingham house dress. Whether she had anything under it was a matter of conjecture; but it wouldn't have taken a biology professor to have guessed the right answer—her underclothes were laid out on top of the dresser.

She stopped her flight long enough to run her long tapering fingers through his blond hair. "The real thing," she said as though she half envied him. Her fingers slipped down to the scar. She pulled up and didn't ask the question she started. "How—" was as far as she got.

Rocky clasped her around the hips. "Don't worry, I'm not sensitive about it. It was nearly dark. There were three of them, with knives. I never did find out what it was about. But the girl was young and her father old. I didn't know I was hurt until after the old man and his daughter escaped."

"Gee, darling—"

"It was nothing, Cupcakes."

His second cup of coffee finished, he strolled half a block to a drugstore, bought a safety razor, a pack of blades, shaving cream, a carton of cigarettes, and a tiny bottle of *Blue Grass* for his "landlady."

She had on the blue robe again when he got back. She was as pleased as a child with the perfume. "My favorite flavor. Honey, I think you're frightfully nice."

"Thanks," said Rocky, "but I'm really a stinker." He borrowed the bathroom to shave.

Presently she came inside, put the plug in the extra-large bathtub, and started the water running. He could see her in the small mirror in front of him. When she went out again he delayed his shaving until she came back inside with a bath towel. He began shaving his neck around the sides of his jaws again. He watched her turn off the water and nod when she tested it with her hand. She began playing in it like a child. Then she sat on the edge of the tub.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Don't mind me, Cupcakes."

She sat there until he'd finished and put his shaving things away. He smiled at her. "I've got to be running now. I've got an appointment at two. Do I get a key?"

"On the dresser," she said. Then she smiled at him. "I'll likely be here. If I'm asleep wake me."

"Sure," he said and went out closing the bathroom door behind him. He listened but there was no click of the lock. He was dressed and ready to go by the time the small clock said twelve. He had two hours to get to the Rampart Plaza.

His name came through the bathroom door.

He went to it and cracked it open. "Yes, Cupcakes," he said. He looked inside—at her face through the shower curtain she pulled around the big tub.

"Rocky," she asked softly, "what are you doing here—I mean in town? Do you mind telling me?"

"Not at all. I'm hunting for a girl—a girl whose folks want her home." He watched her reaction.

She withdrew her head before he could see the look of consternation that came over her face. He said: "If any calls come for me take the number, will you? Tell them you're my landlady."

Her voice was faint—but it said yes, she would.

At the Flight Rocky looked down from the cement platform that jutted out from Third and Olive Streets. Far below him Third Street continued on its way, running into a row of buildings at Main, staggering a little and jogging on.

Rocky moved slowly to the landing platform of the cable railway. One of the cars was at rest on the upper level. He watched a girl put a small ticket into a slot and go past the operator smiling. Not having a ticket, he put a dime on the counter. The man gave him a nickel in change and a ticket. The ticket said: "Good For One Ride. Angels Flight."

The incline was so steep the car seats were built like stairs so passengers could sit on an even keel. Ten pas-

sengers were already aboard for the ride down hill, several more coming down the ramp. Rocky sat opposite a young girl who was busy lining up her lips in a tiny mirror.

A warning horn suddenly sounded and the car broke away from its mooring and started its grind down the hill. Hotel and apartment-house windows rose to meet it, and an alleyway went past. In the middle distance the car jauntily swerved aside to let the upward-bound car pass, then straightened again as though it had a mind of its own, and continued on its way down to the Hill Street level where it stopped decisively with a soft thud. Rocky took a last look at the streetcar advertising above his head, saw that the girl opposite had finished with her full red lips, and then followed the rest of the passengers out of the car.

C H A P T E R 7

At Bay

ROCKY BOUGHT a pack of cigarettes across the street from Angels Flight and took his change in nickels. He restocked with piñon nuts at the Grand Central Market and found a telephone booth and a number he liked. Before he called the number he filled one jaw with piñon nuts, lowered his voice, and practiced: "Ladies, you're giving me good money; so I'll give you good service."

Then he dropped his nickel and tried his voice on the phone—a real call.

"Mr. Heber, please," he asked. "Ah, Mr. Heber? . . . This is Grafton speaking for Mr. Foote at the Ederlee residence. Mr. Foote asked me to have you come out. . . . Right away. May I inform him that you are on your way? . . . Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Rocky hung up and crossed his fingers.

He invested another nickel and got the Randolph Building where Heber had his office. "I'd like the name of the

janitor or head maintenance man. I'd like to address a letter to him. . . . Yes. . . . Yes, Welch. Thomas Welch. Thank you." He hung up again and hurried to the Randolph Building where he took up a position from which he could watch the entrance without being seen. He saw Heber bustle out and hurry down the street to an auto park. After Heber drove away Rocky crossed over to a small key shop in a downstairs cubbyhole.

After a small, sandy-haired man got through staring at Rocky's blue eyes, Rocky asked: "Can you come over to the Randolph Building a minute? Having some trouble getting my door open. Mr. Welch said you could fix it in no time."

The little man replied in a voice that needed some of his own machine oil: "A dollar. Never leave the shop for less than a dollar."

Rocky put down two bills. "You can leave the shop twice." He smiled and cracked a piñon nut between his teeth. "Third floor, back—number 306. I'll be waiting for you."

Rocky went up the rickety elevator and waited outside the single office that had a glass door labeled: "Hal Heber, Private Investigator." A sign said: "Come in." But another clocklike sign countermanded this request and pointed an arrow at two o'clock, the time Heber said he'd be back.

When the key man came into sight from the direction of the elevator Rocky was tugging at the door. "If you can get me in that's all I need. I've just remembered where my key is."

The old man nodded and took a handful of keys out of one pocket of his frayed coat and tools from another. Then he was squinting at the lock and at the keys. "Lucky," he said. "I got a key here that fits most of the locks on this floor. I was telling Tom Welch—" His voice faded away. Tongue out, his face twisted into a knot, he fitted the key into the lock and shook the door. It came open.

This seemed to be a signal for Heber's phone to ring.

Rocky looked at it sitting on Heber's battered oak desk. But his eyes were flitting around the one-room office. In one corner was a dented file cabinet that had cost somebody at least twelve dollars new. There was a battered swivel chair, two customer's chairs, a rug that needed cleaning, and a row of books that would have belched dust if anybody had made the mistake of opening one of them. Rocky tossed his hat on the desk.

"Phone," said the key man.

Rocky looked at him.

"Ain't you going to answer it?"

"I always let it ring a few times to make people think I'm busy." He moved to the phone then, took down the receiver and said "Huh? . . . Yeah. . . . Yeah. . . ." He looked out of the window at the city hall rising up into the sunshine. But he wasn't seeing it. His eyes were wide and incredulous; his mouth seemed to have trouble staying closed. "Yes, yes, Grafton," he said, in a voice that was not his own. "You may tell Mr. Foote that I will be out there as soon as possible. Can you tell me what it's about? . . . Okay, okay, then. Tell Mr. Foote I'm on my way." Rocky hung up and blew out his breath. "Well, I'll be damned!" he said.

Then he smiled at the key man. "Thanks, that'll be all. I'll bring the key down when I find it and you can make a duplicate. I should have an extra."

When the man left, Rocky locked the door from the inside. After casting a double look at the silent phone he shrugged and went to work. Methodically he searched the four drawers in a desk first. Then he looked at the letters in a wire basket. It all took time. Once he raised his eyes to the door, listened, then went back to work. Starting in on the files, he brought the first drawer to the desk top. He had half the stuff out when he heard a key in the lock.

He smiled grimly. He had his choice of bouncing on the alley pavement three stories below or sitting it through. He decided against the jump.

He was grinning when Hal Heber followed the opening door inside. Behind him were two men. One was heavy set and blond and wore a green sport shirt with short sleeves, the other, taller one had on a light suit that needed cleaning and pressing. Neither looked very bright. Heber's cigar rolled across his thick lips as he looked at Rocky. "Any luck?"

"Not yet." Rocky lighted a cigarette and watched the three place themselves to cut off his escape. Hal Heber closed the door and locked it. Rocky added: "Thought I had plenty of time. Your sign said you'd be back at two."

"Forgot some papers," said Heber. "Had to come back. When Jack the elevator man told me he'd taken up the old man to fix my door I got suspicious. I sent for a couple of my boys that don't like guys who come in without knocking. Meet Fred and Simms." The two plug-uglies nodded. Simms shook his own hand like a fighter introduced to the crowd, and said without any show of unfriendliness: "Howdy." Fred merely grunted.

Heber went across the room and closed the window. When he came back he asked "What you looking for?" His little eyes held no expression at all as though he weren't interested in the answer.

"Thought I could save myself some work," said Rocky. "Where in the hell do you keep the Hildegarde Ederlee file?"

Heber sneered. "You sure ask for what you want, don't you? Go ahead, boys. Work him over. Don't break his jaw, Simms. I want him to answer some questions." He moved over to the side, pushed half of his fat buttocks up on the oak table, and sat there, one foot on the floor.

Rocky grabbed a chair and swung it over his head while backing to a corner. His blue eyes were indigo. "All right," he invited, "any time."

The blond Simms smiled slowly and picked up the other chair. He hurled it viciously. Rocky managed to dodge but lost his balance trying to hold onto his own chair. He saw

his mistake too late. Fred was on him. Rocky came up fighting. His hard fists lashed out and connected. But he was through before he started. Outnumbered, outweighed three pounds to one, he was knocked from one man to the other. He felt like a handball must feel during a tournament. Off balance, he never quite caught up with himself; he was kicked, yanked to his feet, slugged, and mauled. It seemed to last forever—then he was down and out.

He swam back to consciousness, water dripping from his face. Some of the fog went away. An empty water glass was before his eyes. A big, slack-jowled face was close to his. A cigar was in a thick-lipped mouth that was enjoying itself.

The face said: "Put him in the good chair." Rocky felt himself lifted into place. Heber held him steady, by the hair. "All right, we'll try again. What you looking for?"

Rocky smiled through his cracked, bloody lips. His exploring hand felt his jaw and his nose. He said between clenched teeth: "I'm still looking for Hildegarde Ederlee—and for the person who wrecked me coming from the Dells last night. I think it was you. Thought I'd find a gun here to check—"

Heber's pudgy hand gave a backhand swish and blood spread on Rocky's face. His hand reached inside his coat and brought a pistol out of a shoulder holster. "Here's a gun to look at."

Rocky was aware of the little black tunnel centered on him. He held his breath, hypnotized. The black bore was steady and unwavering. It was terrifying. He heard Heber's voice as though from a distance: "I can say he got shot robbing the office. There's the elevator man, the key man. . . ."

The clanking elevator sounded as it stopped at the third floor. The iron doors opened noisily as somebody got out. Rocky slumped forward in the chair, his eyes glassy. Then he dived—straight between the advancing men. His fingers found and curled around an ink bottle. He hurled it straight at the glass door, made a bull's-eye on the "H" of the "Heber." The glass shattered, splintering to the edges

of the frame. Half the pane fell out and crashed to the floor.

Heber could think fast when he had to. It was plain he didn't want any interference, let alone police interference. "Get out," he snarled to Rocky. "Goddam it, boys, get him out of here—fast!"

Rocky picked up his hat and limped past them unmolested. Stopping at the door, he turned and, disregarding the people the smashed glass had summoned, studied the three inside. His smile was rigid, chiseled on his face. "Okay," he said, "okay! I'm putting you down in my book."

When somebody said: "What's the matter here?" Rocky jerked his arm away and stumbled on to the elevator. He said to the operator: "Come on, Jack, let's go down."

The eight-floor carpeting of the Rampart Plaza looked green and cool in the daylight. It looked comfortable enough to lie down on and sleep for a week. Rocky stopped in front of an oval hall mirror and looked at himself. He'd washed his face, stopped the blood flowing, and been brushed up in a barbershop, but his lips were swollen and a dark bruise on his jaw was going to get darker before it got well. His eyes were half closed on an odd, sleepy expression. He smiled derisively at himself.

He pressed the ivory button at 817 and waited.

The door came open as though Mary had been standing behind it. She stood back from it, looking neat and fresh in a flowered-silk coolie coat and black pajamas; a spot in each cheek was almost as red as the rose on her coat. But the red spots of anger faded. She stared at his swollen face, eyes widening. "What in the world—?"

He slid in sideways and kept going through the inner hall into the living-room. Smiling faintly at her, he looked around the apartment and then toward the kitchen. "Pretty nice joint," he said. "Got a drink? I need one."

She gave assent by leading the way into the kitchenette. He followed, lighting a cigarette on the way. A stiff drink from the O.T. bottle helped.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

"I was giving a couple of fellows a boxing lesson."

She bit her lip.

He said: "I'll need some more money, Boo-hoo. About two hundred dollars." He poured a water tumbler half full of whisky again.

The money part didn't faze her. But she said: "You can cut out the Boo-hoo business." She led the way back into the living-room. Suddenly she whirled. "Why two hundred? You mean—because of last night?"

"What do you mean, because of last night?"

"Here," she said.

"If you mean blackmail," he said almost hissing through his swollen lips, "that would be something—me a black-mailer! If I am, you're Hildegard Ederlee. You're not Hildegard, are you, Boo-hoo?"

"Would I be asking you to find her!" She stood there facing him, her hands clenched at her sides. "One thing I know, Mr. Rockwell Nevins, you were here last night." It wasn't a question but he answered it.

"I was here all right. Your boy friend tell you?"

She laughed derisively. "No. Piñon shells. A couple of them on the sink. But what happened to Daro?" She looked startled. "What happened to me? When I woke up I was—" she finished faintly "—in bed."

He took her by the shoulders and forced her down on the couch. He sat beside her.

Her eyes blazed. "Keep your hands off me. I could cheerfully—tell me what happened and don't lie."

"Sure. I dropped by last night to bring your keys. It seems kind of silly now, but it seemed logical enough last night. There was a man downstairs, the one you met at the Dells—Hal Heber. He'd followed you home or got here after you'd arrived. I tried to find out something from him but he's a pretty smart operator. Last night he told me there was no use going upstairs, that you hadn't come in yet. But I came up anyway, let myself in with the key you

had on your car keyring. I thought I'd wait around for you."

She plucked nervously at the border of her coolie coat. "We came in the side entrance. Go ahead, please."

"The light was on over here—this one. In the kitchen was a bottle. Ginger ale was getting warm on the sink and a cigarette was smoking up the room. Somebody was here all right. And I hadn't made any noise coming in. I began to look around.

"The bedroom door was open. Your playmate Victor Daro was in there in his shirt sleeves, swaying drunkenly. The leer on his face spelled no good for you."

Mary took a deep breath and held on.

"He was staring at you, Boo-hoo—and who wouldn't! You'd had a little too much to drink or he'd slipped something into your glass; I don't know. You were lying there on your back, your eyes closed, looking very lovely."

"I was—"

"Yes, Boo-hoo—like the day you were born."

"Oh!"

"I left my key—your key—you'll find it under the scarf on your dresser. Then I dragged Daro out onto the street and put him into a cab. Then I went home."

Mary slowly recovered the shreds of her composure. Her brown eyes were not so hard now or so hurt looking. But they were still worried. She got up and went out into the kitchen. When she came back she had a tall glass of ice water for herself.

"I'm trying to believe your story." She said it almost wistfully. "All of it," she added.

Rocky stopped sipping at his drink. "When a girl passes out, if the guy is on the level he goes home. I went home. Look, wouldn't you know if it was true?"

Color flooded into her cheeks and she sat down again. She said faintly: "I guess I would know. Yes, I would." She went on, her voice suddenly stronger. "It must have been something in the drink last night. I remember getting

drowsy all at once. I remember going into the bedroom saying I'd have to lie down for a while."

He watched her while she got up and went into the bedroom. She was gone for a few minutes. When she came out she had the car keys in her hand; she also had two bills. Rocky took the bills, put them into his wallet, said thanks, and went back to his musing.

Her words interrupted his thoughts. "I'm sorry you got hurt defending me—Can I do anything for your face, Rocky?"

He smiled. "No. All in a day's work. I often get beat up like this. What I really wanted to tell you last night, your car keys was all I did get back with." He told her about picking up the girl, his wild trip, and the wrecked car. He also told her about the shot.

Her eyes were wide again. "They might have killed you!" She added as though she thought she should say something: "The car doesn't matter; it was insured. Auto Club—who was the girl?"

Reluctantly he pulled his upper lip from the cool rim of his glass. "The girl was stranded at the Dells. I phoned the Auto Club about the car, told them to fix it up as soon as they brought it in—to charge it to Hildegard Ederlee. Was that okay?"

She nodded. "Only you should have left the keys with it."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded. Then she cried out: "Oh, no! Then you might not have come here." She shuddered and suddenly moved closer to him. Putting her glass on the coffee table, she took his head in her two hands and pressed her mouth to his swollen lips. "Thanks for last night," she said.

He smiled, then a grim light came into his eyes. "Boo-hoo," he said slowly, "somebody is trying to kill you. Somebody knew the car and was waiting for it. They tried to potshot the girl I was bringing to L.A., thinking it was you. They thought they were shooting at you!"

She turned pale.

He got up then, wincing at the effort. "You'd better stay out of sight until I get a line on things." He looked down at her. "Look, I've got a line on Hildegarde. That may help."

She sat up straight. "You have?"

He nodded and felt his jaw again. There was a mirror on the wall but he was afraid to look in it. He settled for another drink and went back to the kitchen to get it.

When she came out to join him he said casually: "If anything happens to Hildegarde who gets the money?"

She caught her breath. "I guess her Uncle Ned. But I know about that part too. Hildegarde talked enough about it. There's a trust fund, and Uncle Ned, having charge of her money, can invest it as he chooses; he can even say how much allowance she can have up until she's twenty-six. After that she gets it all if she's alive." She barely breathed out the last part of the sentence, and looked frightened again.

"What a deal!" he said.

She smiled through her anxiety. "Hildegarde was a little wild. Her father wanted to protect her. But she does get the whole thing when she's twenty-six—about \$600,000. Some of it is in orange groves, apartment houses, things like that. But her uncle has either made bad investments or is crooking her. The last report, Hildy told me, was a payment of \$25,000 for a grove out above high-water level in the foothills. Hildy and I drove out to see it. It was terrible. Worth about \$5,000. Hildy thought her Uncle Ned split the money with the realtor-owner."

"Then why is Uncle Ned paying good money to have her found?"

"It's not for love. I guess he's afraid she's out stirring up trouble. He heard that she went out to that foothill orange ranch and asked questions." She grimaced. "I really think he'd like it if she never was found."

Rocky shook his head and tried to whistle through his

lips; he couldn't. "This is a swell job," he said. "If I knew who shot up the Cad I'd know what it's all about. Do you know what it's all about, Boo-hoo?"

She gave him a twisted smile. Then her eyes softened. "Please don't take any more chances like you did. You won't, will you?"

He told her he wouldn't.

C H A P T E R 8

Professional Virgin

"Do YOU MIND?" asked Rocky as he picked the receiver off the cradle of the telephone. When Mary shook her head he asked the switchboard operator for a Crestview number. When he got it he requested audience with Miss Tabitha Todd. A moment later he caught his breath. "Wait! Did you say she's at the morgue?"

Mary leaped to his side. "Oh, no! Not Tab!"

"Hush!" said Rocky. He listened and his expression began to change. Then he was grinning like a Cheshire. "That's different. . . . Fine. . . . Give her this message. Tell her her friend will meet her at the Circle Café on Sixth Street tonight. Six o'clock. She'll know."

He hung up, his knees a little weak. Mary's eyes were still wide as she stared at him. "What was it?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Tabitha's down at the morgue, all right—but she's there under her own power. Seems that she was checking on a girl—that wasn't Hildegard."

"Oh!" She sighed with relief.

When his smile hurt his puffed lips Rocky stopped. Looking at Mary closely, he asked: "When did you see her last—the last time?"

"Who?"

"Lana Turner. Hell, you know who!"

"Three days ago. I didn't see her last night."

"Did Daro see her? You were going to find out something. . . ."

Mary looked at him disdainfully. Then her face went wooden. "No, it was a false alarm. Daro didn't know a thing. I thought he did but he didn't. If she liked Daro it might have been fascination at first, but—well, you saw for yourself what kind he is." Her face turned as pink as rose petals. It made her look very lovely.

"Okay then, Hildegarde doesn't go in for things like that. You said yourself she was a virgin. But virginity is a fleeting thing: oftentimes the very lack of it gives a girl that 'what-the-hell' outlook on things. Maybe it's that way with her, maybe not. To still be frank, maybe she's the other kind that leads the conversation around until you ask her if she is, point blank. That's what that type wants. She trades on it. Professional virgins should really have certificates like drivers' cards."

"You don't like them, do you?"

He smiled at her.

What color had left her face came back again. She got up, very tall and very graceful. It helped her regain her composure.

He looked intently up at her. "Let's talk about Wesley Bell. This Wesley Bell really likes you, doesn't he? He told Heber and me that your father worked for him on one of the boats."

"Did he?" She smiled faintly. "But we're only looking for Hildegarde," she reminded. "And you can't do detective work if you go around leaving a trail of piñon shells wherever you go. Why do you eat them?"

He held out a few. She tried one, cracking it between her white teeth. The tiny white meat got away but she caught it before it reached the floor. She ate it and looked at him.

"They're good," she decided. "But I'm afraid a person would starve to death eating them."

"Perhaps." But he wasn't to be shaken off. "With the

risk of offending you again, do you know for sure that she isn't living with this Daro?"

Mary's lips curled with scorn. "That— You do have a vile mind, don't you?"

"I've never been told that before. A little depraved, perhaps—never vile." He grinned at her. "But it's worth all the abuse I get, working for a beautiful girl like you."

"Thank you." She put one pajama-clad knee on the couch. "Or did you mean Tab? How much does she pay you?"

"Not much. But I haven't seen as much of Tabitha as I have of you."

Her brown eyes went hard. "What do you mean by that?"

"Let's not fight," he said and got up from the couch. Picking up his hat, he started for the door. "Don't worry, Boo-hoo, I won't be bothering you much longer. You and Tabitha both are going to be happy. The more I think of this line I've got on Hildegard, the better I like it. But first I'm having a few words with Victor Daro. 'Bye." He waved at her and passed beyond her sight into the hallway.

His hand was on the door knob when she called: "Rocky!"

He turned back, raising his eyebrows.

"I've got it," she almost shouted. "Come back here!"

He retraced his steps. She was sitting upright, both knees on the couch. She made a nice picture, her eyes dancing and her face very bright.

"Say!" she cried almost joyously. "You don't have to worry about that clue. I know where she'll be tomorrow. Why didn't I think of it before? Tomorrow Hildegard will be at San Juan Capistrano!"

He stopped at the couch. "Why?"

"The swallows!" Her eyes danced. "Tomorrow's the day they return. You've heard about them, haven't you? They go away in the fall, come back in the spring. Hildy never

misses going down. It's a sort of event, like the Fiesta at Santa Barbara and Rose Parade at Pasadena."

"So?" he prompted.

"We drive down to Capistrano tomorrow. We can go early. Will you phone me after you see Tabitha?"

Rocky nodded slowly as though he wasn't too impressed. "But right now, sister, I'm hunting up this Victor Daro. There's a few things I forgot to ask him last night. Maybe he can put some light on who wrecked the car last night. Another thing, for God sakes don't leave this apartment! If they took a shot last night they can do it again. Don't even answer the bell."

"I won't," she said softly. She came up on the other knee, searching his face. "Please don't get into any more fights— Say, we'll have to have the car."

He clicked his teeth, fumbled into his pocket, and brought out a slip of paper. "Here's the phone number of the garage that's got the Cad. Why not phone them and have them deliver it?" He smiled: "You can tell them you're Hildegarde."

She nodded brightly. But she didn't say anything else as he went on to the door again. He opened it, pressed the little button that took off the night latch, and called back: "'Bye, Boo-hoo." When she answered he closed the door a little harder than necessary.

Outside, he waded through the carpet to the end of the hall and watched Wilshire Boulevard's surge of traffic half a block away. Sixty seconds later he moved back to Mary's door. Turning the knob slowly, he cracked the door open.

Mary already had her number on the telephone.

"Really," she was saying, "I don't care to discuss it. But don't worry, you'll get your money. I'm sending it in an envelope to the Metropole Hotel. You won't have to come up here any more either; and I'd rather you didn't speak to me in public. . . . No, that's final, my dear Victor. By the way, there's a friend of yours on his way over there. . . .

Yes, that's him. . . . You'd better have the desk tell him you've moved, unless you want to talk to him. . . ."

She hung up on that note and Rocky closed the door gently. Running to the stairs, he went down a floor and took the elevator the rest of the way to the street level.

It wasn't Victor Daro who got Rocky's business; he didn't go near the Metropole but into a clothing store on Spring Street. He passed over a deposit check to the man at the counter.

"Yes, it's ready," the clerk told him, staring at his face. "Want to wear it or shall we send it out?"

"I'll wear it." Rocky picked up the suit along with the other packages he'd brought in with him. When the clerk still stared Rocky grinned. "You probably say your prayers every night; I forgot mine. Automobile accident. I ran into a truck—driver."

When he came back from the dressing-room he had on a hard-finish light-blue suit, a new bow tie, tan shoes, and his light-gray Homburg hat. It all looked fine in the mirror—but this didn't take the discoloration from his jaw or open his eyes any wider.

Next door he bought a small, black traveling bag, a comb, clothes brush, and a few incidentals. He put his old suit into it. His extended shopping tour ended in the drug-store across from Angels Flight.

The cable car took him up the hill in fifty seconds. Tossing his extra ticket into the slot, he saw a sign that said: "Fifty Tickets For Fifty Cents." He bought a book of tickets for Sally and had to break a twenty doing it.

At the Etoile Apartments he slipped past the landlady's door that was standing wide open. Then he tripped on upstairs. There was nobody in the upper hall except Miss Robbins. He smiled widely at her. He waited until she'd raised her nose to the proper angle and had gone into her own room. Then he took out his key and unlocked Sally's door as though he owned the place. Tossing his bag on the couch, he called: "Sally! Cupcakes!"

There was no response and no sign of her. The bathroom door was open; the kitchen door was open. Standing there in the middle of the room, he began to notice little things—not actually notice them, rather the absence of them. No cigarettes on the smoke stand, nothing at all on the dresser, and no clothes hanging in the closet. When he looked into the bureau drawers they were empty of everything except the neatly folded newspapers used to line them.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he said.

He sat down, lit a cigarette, and looked around the room thoughtfully. After a while he looked at the folding bed. He took it down slowly as though afraid of what he might find. He didn’t find anything that scared him but he did find a note pinned to the bedclothes—unsigned. It said:

Sure, I ran away from the folks—but why can’t you leave a girl alone? Please go to hell.

He repeated what he’d said about being damned. He found himself looking at the book matches in his fingers. He couldn’t remember whether he’d picked them up off the dresser or whether he’d taken them from his pocket. On the cover was a picture of a pair of huge granite boulders; a sign between them said: “Granite Dells.”

He lit another cigarette off the one he had in his mouth and smoked it half the way down before he moved again.

He didn’t use the hall phone. The one he used was in a cut-rate drugstore at the corner of Fifth and Hill some three blocks down the slope.

He got a cool, placid voice filled with all the assurance in the world. “Hello,” he said to it, “this is Rockwell Nevins of the Seattle Nevins. . . . Look, Boo-hoo, I’ve got what might pass for good news; it’s good news until something better comes along. . . . Sure, sure, I’ll tell you. I’m on her trail. Maybe we won’t have to go to Capistrano. . . . No, I can’t tell you any more. . . . Say, I’ll call you back—I’ve got to run. . . . Okay, then. I’ll call you back, I promise. ‘Bye.” He scrambled the receiver all over its hook

in his hurry to get it hung up. She was still protesting. . . .

He changed a quarter at the cashier's and brought his five nickels back and placed them in a neat pile on the ledge inside the phone booth. One of the shiny nickels got him the New Idea Café and a voice that sounded as though it had already said hello too many times that day. "Sally there?" Rocky asked. "No, no wait! . . . No, I haven't got her. And I don't know where she is. If she didn't show up at four she didn't show up. . . . Yeah, the hell with you, too!"

Rocky hung up. The next nickel got long distance; he had to have a little help on this call. At last he got his party.

"Mr. Bell?" he asked. Then, "This is Rockwell Nevins who was out there with Mary Jaine. Look, there's a few things I'd like to know. . . . Well, for one thing, do you know a girl by the name of Sally? . . . You don't. . . . Another thing, there's something that smells to me—which side are you on in this clambake? . . . What? I am talking English and you can understand it. . . . Hello, hello. . . . Sure, I'll wait. The number is Tucker1-9001. . . . Sure, take your time calling. I'm having my lunch here."

Rockey eased the receiver onto its hook and looked behind him at the counter. His irritation began to ooze away. The waitress was serving a steak, the size no cut-rate drug-store should ever have, across the counter to a customer who didn't look like he was worthy. Rocky sat down. When the girl got around to him he said: "Could you bring me the mate to that steak down the counter? I'll have it medium."

C H A P T E R 9

Wesley Bell

ROCKY FINISHED his steak and considered a piece of French apple pie. The one-eighth in the plastic case in front of

him was the kind he liked—plenty of syrup, plenty of cinnamon. But he forgot the pie when he saw the two men come inside and go to the phone booths.

One of the men was small and wore a chauffeur's black cap; the other was taller, thin and hawk-eyed. This one was well dressed but his hat was pressed down so tightly on his head as to suggest a case of baldness. Neither was over forty.

They stopped at the battery of phone booths. The thin-faced one looked into several before he stopped in the one Rocky had used. When he looked around, his eyes hard and searching, Rocky was innocently looking at the plate that had held a steak.

Presently a phone began to ring. Rocky looked toward the phone booths. The thin man was inside an adjoining stall holding a receiver to his ear. Rocky got up. As he went past the chauffeur he grinned. "Tell your partner he's good. He's damned good!"

"You tell him," said the man.

"Sure." Rocky went into the phone booth, took the receiver down, and stopped the phone's racket. "All right," he said, "it's your nickel. What's on your mind?"

He could hear the voice through the booth wall as much as through the phone. The voice said: "Mr. Bell wants to see you."

"What kept you so long? And, look, maybe I'm busy."

The man's voice was cool, clear, and to the point. "It's not a good idea to be too busy. I'm afraid Mr. Bell might misunderstand."

"I'm scared to death," said Rocky. "But, come on, let's go." He left the booth, put a dollar and twenty-five cents on the lunch counter for his meal. Before he followed the men outside he took a quick look into the mirror. His jaw was discolored but his eyes seemed better. Because both had had the same treatment, it made them less conspicuous than if only one had been battered.

They walked down the street to an auto park. While the

thin man and Rocky waited on the sidewalk the chauffeur wheeled out a Cadillac limousine. Rocky looked across the street. The second floor above the stores had four long windows. On each was the legend: "Saunders Beauty School."

"Just a minute," he said, "I've got to go across the street."

The men looked at each other. The thin, well-dressed one said: "I don't think you'd better."

"You don't?" Something happened to Rocky's self-restraint. He said: "Look, fellow, I don't mind you dragging me out to the Dells as long as you're gentle about it. I'm the sensitive type—How'd Bell get you anyway—phone you? I was only in the drugstore twenty minutes."

The man's nod was supposed to take care of all the questions.

Rocky said: "I'm going across the street. If you want to tag along that's all right." He half-raised his hand in a mocking salute, stepped to the curb, and when there was a break in the traffic, dodged across.

The thin man was beside him when he went up the stairs to the second floor. At the desk Rocky asked a girl if he might see one of the operators—any one.

"I beg your pardon," she said, "maybe I can help."

"All I want is a little information."

The girl, about thirty and redheaded, smiled. "There's really little you can do. They say a little raw beefsteak held against the bruise will help—"

Rocky laughed. "Not that—it's about something else."

"Oh," she said. She motioned into an office.

Rocky said excuse me to the thin man and followed the girl into the office. There was glass in the paneling that ran all the way around it; it cut off the outside noise but not a view of the lobby.

Rocky put a five-dollar bill on the desk beside the girl's hand. "A couple of questions. None of the \$64 ones." He lowered his voice, "What I'd like to know is can a brunette

successfully disguise herself as a blonde? Is there any way you can tell that the pseudo blonde's hair is dyed?"

The girl murmured a small thanks and put the bill into her apron pocket. She smiled. "Nowadays a girl can change everything from her personality to her foot size. There are bleaches, dyes, washes to do the trick. That might answer the first question. Yes, positively a brunette could disguise herself. Hair, eyebrows, lashes—all except the color of the eyes."

She lighted a cigarette from the match Rocky held for her. "Question number two," she smiled. She had a nice mouth, white teeth, and a twinkle in her eye. "It's not easy to tell if hair is dyed, that is if the treatment is kept up. If a girl forgets to take repeated hair washes, she's all washed up in more ways than one. You see, the hair naturally reasserts its true color when it grows out. Next time you're out with a blonde look at the part in her hair, or her eyebrows. The real blonde's hair will be a little darker at the roots, but not much; the color will be graduated, turning lighter as it grows away from her head. The bleached blonde's hair will be different: It will have a definite line of demarcation. Would you care to see what I mean? I think I can find a couple of girls here."

Rocky shook his head. "That does it. If I stay around here much longer I might get to liking the place. Besides, my very important friend over there is getting impatient."

"Who is he?" she whispered.

A faint smile came over Rocky's face. Surprise was a smear across his mouth when he looked at her. "You don't know him? Why, that's Delacey. I'm just taking him up, driving through to San Quentin. By not using handcuffs it salves his pride and makes our work easy. If you look out the window you'll see us leave in that car across the street."

She looked half-frightened. "What—what did he do?"

"Attack," said Rocky shortly. "Can't keep his hands off women. I shouldn't have brought him up here but I wanted to find out about a gun moll he travels with,

whether she really is a blonde or a brunette." He lowered his voice. "Got any children?"

"A girl. Nine." Her eyes were getting larger.

"Tough age," he said. "Yeah, tough. That's the age of the one over in the morgue." He straightened. "Well, I'm much obliged to you. I'll get this bird on his way before he kills any more young girls."

"Wait!" the girl's eyes gleamed now. She pressed a number of buttons. In a few seconds girls popped in from every direction. The readhead spoke to them in a whisper. She picked up a cold cream jar and moved stealthily toward the door of the reception lobby. The others followed.

Rocky got only that part of it. He didn't wait to hear what the redhead said, nor to see what happened. He moved slowly backwards to the inner door, opened it, and ran down the long hall that had a back stairs to it.

A block over, he selected from a cluster of cabs one of the newest models. "Granite Dells," he said. "I'm in a hurry." He took the crease out of a five and laid it in the driver's hand.

Wesley Bell, in shirt sleeves and open shirt front, got up from behind a big mahogany desk and shook hands with Rocky. He dragged a comfortable chair with wide leather arms across the room, leaving white tracks in the rug. The tracks went away immediately. He asked Rocky to sit down. "Riley," he said to a tall, gangling youth, "have Eddie come in—what'll you have to drink, Mr. Nevins?" He politely refrained from looking at Rocky's discolored jaw or his puffed lips.

Rocky said dryly: "I talk best on whisky. Make it a straight bourbon."

The owner of Granite Dells passed the word on to Eddie who came in from the bar. Wesley Bell ordered something for himself. "A little of the Montrachet if it's cold." He explained to Rocky: "We managed to get a little of it. It's a low-voltage, high-quality white wine that fits

in any company. I drink practically nothing but I don't like to have my company drink alone."

When Eddie had come and gone they raised their glasses. Wesley Bell reopened the conversation. "How did you get rid of the boys?"

Rocky told him.

Wesley Bell's eyes twinkled; he almost smiled. He matched Rocky's drink with a sip at his own. "I know, you'll excuse me—but you were getting a little tough on that phone." Bell's patient eyes looked at him steadily. "I thought maybe you were accusing us of something, perhaps to cover your own part in the affair."

Rocky silently clashed with the stocky man. Then he let a smile seep past his tight lips. "It's your say, mister."

Bell nodded. "Now about last night. The boys saw the Cadillac convertible wrecked on the road. Looked pretty bad—windshield and all. But they found nobody in it. Then we discovered that Mary Jaine wasn't in the car at the time. The park attendant said it was some other girl and you." Bell spread his nicely manicured fingers on the polished desk. "When you phoned and asked me to keep my boys out of your hair I didn't quite get it. If you want to you can tell me what for?"

Rocky sipped thoughtfully at his whisky. He said without smiling: "Somebody was giving me trouble. I thought maybe it was you because of the dollar and a half I won here last night and took away with me."

Bell's unsmiling features never changed. "What did happen?" he asked.

Rocky told him about the piece of pipe in the road, the car signaling back at him, and the shot that nearly hit the girl but went through the windshield instead.

Bell waited until Rocky was through. Then he said flatly: "It wasn't my boys."

"That answers that," said Rocky. He got up and took a few steps back and forth. "I got beat up by two men and a

gun this afternoon. As long as I keep moving it doesn't bother me so much."

Wesley Bell scowled.

Rocky smiled faintly. "No, they weren't your men. I'd tell you if they were." He stopped walking and looked at his host. "I thought maybe you'd get excited about the girl's car getting wrecked. I thought you'd be able to tell me more about it. That's why I came out here at your invitation."

The gambler let the implication go past without even looking at it. When he spoke again his voice was soft and earnest.

"You're worrying too much. I told you the other night that I'd do anything for Mary. Because I think you're on the level, I'll tell you why. I know it won't go any further." His eyes softened a little. "I had a daughter once. I was busy and neglected her and she got to running around. She got hurt—bad. It was my fault. She died in my arms. I've never forgiven myself." He got up, his face twisted in pain. "I guess that's the reason I'd help Mary Jaine. She makes me think of my girl the way she was; so bright, gay—so full of life."

Rocky looked down into his glass without seeing it. He listened to workmen pounding somewhere off in the building for a moment, then he said: "Thanks for telling me what you did. Which makes me damned glad I came out here." He tapped his glass lightly with a fingernail. "I'm not saying that whoever fired the shots was trying to kill Mary. It might have been that other kid they were after; it might have been me. But it damned well had to be one of us."

Bell sat down, began sipping his white wine as he might hot coffee. "About the accident—it could have been that private detective I met last night."

"Hal Heber?"

"Yes, that's him."

"I'm playing with the idea," said Rocky. "Only it

doesn't make sense. He's being well paid to hunt for Hildgarde Ederlee. Anyway, it wasn't Daro. Daro's only black-mailing her."

Bell's eyes grew as cold and gray as a honker goose in season. His words were short and clipped. "What about?"

Rocky shook his head. "I don't know that. And I don't know for how much. All I can tell you he is." He smiled. "I'm going to do something about it."

"You're leaving it alone," said the gambler. "I'll have a talk with him; he'll tell me. Yes, he'll tell me. People do."

He must have pressed a buzzer, for the door opened and Riley came back inside. Bell asked: "Have the boys got here?"

Riley said no and shook his head. But two negatives in this case didn't make a positive. The boys still hadn't arrived.

Rocky grinned at Bell. "I did have an appointment at six."

"I'm sorry," said his host. "It's six now—Riley, get my car and take Mr. Nevins to town. Get him in there fast. And I mean fast." He shook hands with Rocky and walked with him to the door. He was a nice man to visit if you didn't get in his way.

Aunt Tabitha wore a lambskin jacket, gray gloves, and a flowered straw hat that had her best man-hunting smile under its brim. There was a suggestion of flutter in her pale-blue eyes. The smile went to Rocky, the flutter to a well-muscled Hercules who sat at her right. She introduced him. "Archie Hunsaker, Rocky Nevins. What in hell happened to you?" She stared at Rocky's face.

"I had to fight my way here. That's why I was late."

"I used to do a little wrestling," said Archie. He stretched himself. "Howdy," he grinned.

Archie Hunsaker was a real man if physique counted. He had a wide face, opaque eyes, an open countenance, and an almost stupid stare. His big hands were hairy and

his arms bulged beneath the checkered suit he wore. "Howdy," he said again and reached out a hamlike paw to Rocky. "Glad to meet any friends of Tab's."

Rocky grinned, shook hands, and looked at Aunt Tab.

"Isn't he cute?" she asked. Her blue eyes were as bright and starry-eyed as a schoolgirl's. "Archie's my bodyguard."

"Responsible for the body." Archie smiled smugly at his charge. When the waiter came they ordered drinks, which Archie insisted on paying for. While the waiter was fumbling with his tray Archie said "Ow!" then grinned at Tabitha and took the five-dollar bill she laid on the table. When the change came back Archie pocketed all of it.

Tabitha looked fondly at him.

"Swell dame," said Archie. "Knows how to drink, how to treat a man. I was kind of scared at first when she picked me up."

"Archie!" said Tabitha. She smiled. "He was hanging around the morgue—that's where I met him."

"I was wondering if she was alive," said Archie and guffawed loudly. Archie was having a good time.

Tabitha made a face at him and stretched out her long legs. Where other women had the curves she had the angles. She turned to Rocky. "Strange going-ons out at the house. Looks as though the old folks aren't worrying as much about Hildy as they should. But I am. And I want to see Mary. She'll know where Hildy is if anybody does. Get Mary to phone me." She took a small card out of her purse. "I had a private phone put into my apartment. Here's the number."

Rocky took the card. "Things are picking up. Maybe I can give Hildegard your message personally."

"You mean—you've found her?"

Archie blinked. "I knew a detective once. But he couldn't find an olive in a Manhattan."

"Martini," Tabitha said and patted Archie's cheek.

Rocky sipped at his drink. "I'll have her located by tomorrow night."

"Oh." Tabitha suddenly pushed back her chair. "Will you gentlemen excuse me?" she asked.

Rocky got up. Archie sighed, got to his feet. They sat down again as soon as Tabitha was on her way.

Rocky said: "You shouldn't take her money like that."

Archie looked at him and blinked. "No?"

"No."

"Look, bud," said Archie, "Tab said I was to like you. I'm trying to. But I'm working this corner. The dames fall for me because I'm kind and gentle." He showed his teeth. They were nice, strong teeth. None of them had been knocked out. "I like the work—it's better work than I used to get. I used to take people apart for a living."

"Don't hit me," Rocky said, grinning.

Archie grinned back. "I'm kinda falling for the old gal; she sure is a goofy-goof but I like 'em that way."

"She's coming back. Let me talk to her, will you?"

Archie was suspicious. "What about?"

"I want to give her my report. Just her, see? Professional etiquette. I report to her and then she tells you what she wants you to know."

"Yeah."

Archie did the polite thing this time and got up when Tabitha reached the table. He and Rocky were both on their feet but Archie lumbered off in the direction of the rest rooms.

"Where's he—?" Aunt Tabitha pulled up, smiled faintly, and sat down. She tapped a cigarette with awkward grace on her solid silver bracelet and brought a couple of kitchen matches from her pocket. She scratched a match on the underside of the table and lit her cigarette.

Rocky played with his cocktail. "I had a talk with Mary Jaine," he said.

"You did?" Tabitha pushed her hat back. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You mean before you phoned? Just now?" He shrugged when she looked surprised. He said: "Nice kid. Tall, good

build. Blonde and lively. A yen to be hard-boiled, but not knowing just how to accomplish it. She knows this bunch at the Dells, and she knows practically all about the Ederlee girl."

"That's her all right—have her phone me." Tabitha blew smoke toward the ceiling like a man. She looked at him through half-closed eyes for a moment. "Look, Rocky," she said naïvely. "You saw me first but I wonder if you'd mind if I had my own private eye."

"Your what?"

"That's a detective. Archie's really a detective—didn't you know? He works for a big agency. I haven't told him anything yet, but—"

Rocky smiled slowly. "I can still work for you. On the q.t. I'll tell you what: don't tell him anything; just keep him for a bodyguard and let me do the work. I've got a line on things—only I'll need some more money."

Tabitha clicked her teeth. "All right. How much?"

He did a little mental arithmetic and came up with even figures. "Two—three hundred ought to do it."

Tabitha blinked.

"Two hundred," said Rocky.

Tabitha's face twisted a little but she gave him ten twenties. She looked at him with slow blue eyes. A worried look came into them. But her question wasn't what he'd expected. "What do you really think about him?" she asked.

"A man among men." His voice trembled with all the packed emotion worthy of a lead in summer stock. "A good, staunch timber for a frail woman to lean on."

"Thank you, Rocky." She said it with girlish simplicity. She smiled at him and then began looking for Archie. "We're not eating. We're going out to Granite Dells. Want to go with us?"

"I can't right now. If I make it at all it'll probably be late."

Archie joined them, towing the waiter who carried fresh

drinks. A cigar was in Archie's mouth. Tabitha's look was a little wistful, for either Archie or the cigar. It was hard to tell which.

The waiter who had been bringing drinks to Archie since six o'clock had lost his expectant look. After paying for the drinks Archie laid down a dime and nodded his head to the waiter. The waiter said: "Please, sir, I'm an old man. Don't fool me. Is this dime all mine?"

Archie's look was big and generous. "Sure. Go ahead and take it."

At the New Idea Café Rocky stopped and looked through the window and saw a new waitress prancing around inside as though she were on springs. He had a cup of coffee. When the boss came in from the kitchen Rocky asked: "You hear from Sally yet?"

The man squinted at Rocky. "Oh, it's you." Then he shook his head. "Not a word. She didn't even show up to get her things. I phoned her rooming house and the landlady said she wasn't in, that she said she was going away for a few days."

"Too bad," Rocky said. "Nice girl."

"Sure was. No monkey business with Sally. She done her work." He lowered his voice. "I'm watching this girl. Think she's a hustler working here to keep from getting vagged."

"You never know about women." Rocky finished his coffee, paid for it, and went on his way.

He found a telephone in the Rosslyn Hotel and dialed Charley's number. He counted the rings: twelve. Twelve was enough. He hung up, then continued distributing piñon nut shells around town and looking into the various restaurants he came to. He didn't see anybody that looked like Sally.

At nine o'clock he tried Charley's number with better success. "This is Rocky, Charley. . . . Did you get that two hundred dollars I left for you? . . . Fine. Anything

new? . . . He's still alive—that's fine. . . . You bet we're going to fight the case. I'll get some more money. . . . How? From dames, Charley. Dames owe me a lot. Now I'm on the receiving end."

Rocky lit a cigarette and listened to Charley. He put in a few sure, sures. Then: "Look, Charley, how do you go about finding a missing person? . . . No, not Hildegarte—this is another one. Two missing now, or it might be the same one. . . . Of course I'm nuts. Who wouldn't be? . . . No, the Missing Persons Bureau is out. Hell, quit yawning, will you? . . .

"Sure I'd like to hear what you have on Heber, the son-of-a-bitch. Let me have it. . . . Okay, that's what I thought. If he lost his private license once he'll lose it again. I'm seeing to that." He grinned weirdly. "Somehow I can't get reconciled to the way the bird parts his hair.

"There's another angle. This babe I'm trying to find, this Hildegarte Ederlee, has got me on the run. The dame I'm going around with is a Mary Jaine, a girl friend of Hildegarte's. . . . Yeah, that's her real name as far as I know. I thought she might be Hildegarte at first, but I've changed my mind. Here's the funny part, Charley: she wants to find Hildegarte; an Aunt Tabitha wants to find her; and her uncle and aunt, the Footes, want to find her. . . . Sure, that part of it's all right. But what gets me is that none of them really seem to give a damn whether they find her or not. . . . Sure they hired a detective but they tell him where to look.

"Well, I've got to go, Charley. . . . Don't worry about that estate business. I'll get it for you before I'm through. Just keep on that Frisco case. . . . No, I can't come up tonight. Some other time—so long."

Rocky walked around town until eleven o'clock and then started home. On Broadway he didn't like the reflection he saw of a small man in a plate-glass window. He took a streetcar going north, walked all the way through, and got off the front end. Crossing over to the other side of the

street, he got into a cab and rode two blocks. Half a block's walk got him to Angels Flight just as the warning horn sounded. He stepped aboard as the car began its way up the hill.

The girl he'd seen that morning was sitting opposite him again. She was still minding her own business.

At the Etoile he let himself into the upstairs apartment. For a moment he looked around half eagerly. A cigarette later, he sighed and went to bed. It made him lonesome lying there in her bed looking at the ceiling.

C H A P T E R 10

San Juan Capistrano

THE DOORBELL up above the wall molding clattered a few times and then was silent. It rang again, weakly, as though easily discouraged.

Rocky didn't move. Only his eye moved, circling the room that had been Sally's. The room didn't seem the same with her gone. He looked toward the window that was being touched with what the Persians call a false dawn. The neon outside, which Sally said was turned off at three, was off now.

Suddenly Rocky tossed the covers and leaped into his clothes. He didn't stick strictly to the do-one-thing-at-a-time method; he had his things into his black bag at about the same time he was half dressed.

Loud, authoritative knocking began shaking the door. A thick voice came through it. "Open up—in the name of the law."

Trapped—or was he?

His mind racing for a way out, he leaped to the kitchen window and jerked it open. A square dusty screen framed the opening. He hit the clasp that held it, pulled the screen

off the top hinge, and let it dangle. Then he ran back to the bathroom as the hall door began to bulge.

Tossing his black bag into the oversize bathtub, he pulled the curtains back so the tub could be seen from the open bathroom door. He lay down inside the big tub. It wasn't much of a place to hide but it would do if they didn't come too close.

A key rattled in the lock. The door burst open and the light clicked on. A woman's voice came to Rocky. "You can't come up here and break in. I'm running a decent house. Only the girl lives here—and she's away." A gruff voice answered: "I'm a police detective, lady! There's a guy been murdered." Footsteps came on to the bathroom door.

"Hey!" shouted a voice from the kitchen—and the footsteps at the bathroom door receded. "Get around to the back. The bird went out the window." After a retreat of footsteps the light switch clicked and the place went dark. The apartment door shut with a bang.

Rocky slowly pulled himself out of the tub, blessing the manufacturer for making it oversized. He listened cautiously while he finished his dressing in the semidarkness of the bedroom. A worried frown showed in the pale light of the window. "It's beginning to look like somebody doesn't like me. But who was it that was murdered?"

A half-hour later he went down the back stairs and through the alley. Downhill from Bunker Hill he found a sleeping cab outside the Subway Terminal Building.

"Where to?" asked the drowsy driver.

Rocky thought it over while he tossed his bag into the back seat. "Let's go over on the east side first," he said. "You know a hotel called the Metropole?"

"No," said the driver.

But they found the place. It was a big, white-porched, twenty-room, early Los Angeles residence, and it was set back behind a picket fence as though it were still living in the nineties. It didn't look very happy in the early morning gloom.

Inside a fat-faced clerk looked unhappily up from a Greek newspaper. He looked as though his name might have an "apopolis" in it. "Another detective fellow!" he said, and dry-wrung his hands.

Rocky played along. "Is he upstairs?"

The man shook his head. "They took him away. All gone away. W'at you want?"

Rocky lit a cigarette. "You know his real name?"

"I don't know—Daro, he say. He not speak Greek."

"Oh," said Rocky. "Badly hurt?"

The man shook his head. "Only dead. Only one knife wounds. But they get who done it quick. They find note in his pock, it say: 'Come,' cross or I get you plenty—by no name.' You bet they get him though."

Rocky took a deep breath and waited for his spine to stop tingling. Then he said: "You bet they get him—thanks."

He blew another breath of relief when he got outside. "Sixth and Main if you don't mind."

"You're paying for it," said the cabbie.

At Sixth and Main Rocky changed cabs and went to Pico. A few blocks of Pico Boulevard and he said he had enough. "Here's where I left my car," he told the driver, indicating somebody's parked sedan at the curb. He paid the driver more than he had to, waited until the red tail light danced away in the early morning gloom. Then with his black bag banging against his legs, he went on until he came to a hotel.

On the brass name plate it said: "Hotel El Cabrillo." Registering as Mr. Walter James, he drew room number 420 with a bath, on a quiet back hall of the fourth floor. Leaving a call for six, he undressed and went to bed for the second time since midnight.

Answering the phone this time was different. He didn't have the premonition he'd had on Bunker Hill. Stepping

sleepily out of bed, he went to the wall and said: "Yes. . . . Six o'clock. . . . Thanks for the call."

Buying himself a drink from the bottle he'd brought in his bag, he lighted a cigarette and sat on the bed. After sitting there a few minutes he felt like doing some phoning.

He chuckled with delight at getting Beverly Hills at this time in the morning. When Tabitha's voice came on it was sleepily irritable. "Such language," protested Rocky. "Sure. Rocky. Who did you think it was? . . . Did you find anything at the Dells? . . . Well, I guess she's lying low until things quiet down. I don't understand her being so sore at her aunt and uncle that she'd not get in touch with you. . . . Oh, you heard about the Cad getting wrecked. . . . No, nobody hurt. Mary's getting the car fixed."

He had to do the listening then. When he could get a word in, he said: "Look, Tab. I was just bringing the car back for Mary Jaine the other night. . . . Not Mary Jaine, another girl I picked up. Somebody tried to wreck the car and when this girl, who they thought was Mary Jaine, tried to crawl to safety, they tried to potshot her. Can you tell me why? . . . No, I don't think you could."

Rocky had a couple more questions. "Was Victor Daro out there in his usual place? . . . He wasn't? . . . Okay, you can go back to your beauty sleep. I'll let you know if anything comes up— 'Bye, Tabitha."

He had his breakfast sent up and after drinking two cups of coffee and eating a plate of scrambled eggs, phoned the Rampart Plaza.

"Hello, Boo-hoo," he said. "Sorry to get you up. . . . Oh, you have, since five-thirty? . . . How about the car? . . . They're delivering it this morning—swell. . . . Fine. If you really think Hildegard will be at Capistrano, we can go. I need a day off. I've been working too hard. . . .

"Okay, don't bite me! I said we'd go. I'm working for you and if you want to go that's the way it is. . . . All right, all right, it's St. Joseph's Day and Hildegard and the swallows always return to the old mission on that day.

. . . No, I'm not being funny. Will noon be all right? I've moved and I've got a lot to do. . . . Yes, darling, yourself."

He had a fast cigarette, ground it out, and then because he was feeling that way, called up Charley and told him he had two hours to sleep.

The sixty-mile trip to San Juan Capistrano was something to put in his memoirs. It was a dazzling spring morning and a third of the distance was through Valencia orange groves already bright with their spring and summer fruit. Mary had Hildegarde's car again, undented, polished, and full of gas. The fenders had been straightened, a new windshield installed, and a little paint added. It *had* been a fast job. He sat back in the red leather cushions, half-closed his eyes, and looked at Mary's reflection in the windshield. After a while he said: "I want a girl you should know." When she didn't say anything he said: "Her name was Sally. Like that name?"

She was frank. "No, I don't. A girl with a name like that— Well, I don't like it."

He looked at her. If she knew Sally she was keeping the information to herself. He decided she didn't know Sally, and if she didn't know Sally, Sally was out.

When they neared Santa Ana he said: "It's warming up—how about a bottle of beer? Some Carta Blanca."

She nodded. "I'd like that." As though to orient their position, she glanced at the brightly loaded orange trees on one side and the English walnuts on the other. "The Castle Café is right ahead—one of the nicest bars on the road."

"Sure," he said. But on the outskirts of town was a huge, gaudy red sign: "Beer." He looked at it when Mary made the boulevard stop. "Here's our place," he said.

She shot him a quick glance. "But it's not the Castle."

"I'll buy this one."

She pulled in doubtfully and parked between a small runabout truck that had a flat tire and a cutdown, hot-rod

car. The place was dumpy and screened in like a porch. Khaki canvas was rolled up to make windows. Juke-box music kept down the sizzling noise of frying hamburgers and the laughter and talk in two different languages.

Rocky found places at the counter and grinned at Mary. Mary smiled faintly.

A very polite, very bright-faced Mexican came forward. His two-bit yellow tie had huge polka dots on it. "¿Amigos, qué quiere?" he asked and wiped the counter carefully in front of them.

"Cerveza. Dos. Carta Blanca, mucho frío," said Rocky.

The Mexican beamed, brought two frosty beers from the icebox, and put two shell glasses on the counter. His liquid black eyes were filled with admiration as he stared at Mary and her spun-gold hair. He filled her glass first and ran it over—then he filled Rocky's.

"You sure handle the lingo," she whispered after the Mexican youth had taken the dollar bill and gone back to blink at the maze of cash-register keys.

A small, very pretty girl with carmine-red lips came in from the kitchen and made change for the youth. She followed him back to the new customers, smiled, and said in faultless English: "I hope you're being served satisfactorily. My brother is new here. A National from Mexico. He's not supposed to be doing this at all but he desires to help."

Rocky told her gallantly in Spanish that the service couldn't possibly equal the looks of its hostess. She made a gesture of belittlement, looking sideways at Mary. She said in a low voice, in colloquial Spanish: "You're doing all right by yourself." Then she hurried away.

Rocky said to Mary: "I'm sorry. I couldn't resist trying out my Spanish."

"You mean, you couldn't resist, period."

"Yes, dear," he said meekly.

Back in the car it didn't take them long to reach San Juan Capistrano. It was four o'clock when they arrived, with the sun giving a sample of what it would do later on in

the season. Mary went a block past the mission and pulled into the curb.

San Juan Capistrano was known as the halfway place—halfway between San Diego and Los Angeles on the old Camino Real, the ancient highway of the missions. There was one main street: the paved thoroughfare that went through the town. Early-California houses with wooden porches and balconies did what they could to hold back the progress symbolized by the cars and huge trucks thundering through. Some of the buildings were almost as old as the adobe mission, which had somehow kept alive under the flags of three different nations: Spain, Mexico, and the United States. Today should have been a gala day for San Juan Capistrano.

But something was wrong. There was no festive atmosphere, no feverish running about, no excitement. Rocky looked at Mary who met his gaze boldly and with a shrug of her slim shoulders.

"Shall we check the hotels?" she asked.

"What for, the swallows?"

"No, silly. Hildegarde."

"Wait a minute," he said and got out of the car. Although the inhabitants of this ancient Spanish town were mostly Americans, Rocky stopped a Mexican laborer. A cigarette took care of the amenities long enough for Rocky to sort out his Spanish and ask about the swallows. The Spanish word for tomorrow, *mañana*, was predominant in the talk. "*Las golondrinas mañana, señor,*" clinched it.

When Rocky rejoined Mary he gave her a funny look.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"We're a day ahead of ourselves. Tomorrow's the day. Tomorrow's St. Joseph Day."

"Well!" she said. "Well! How in the world did we make that mistake?"

"I wouldn't know. But—can't we check all the hotels anyway? She'll probably come down tonight to be here in

time for tomorrow's show. If we don't have any luck we can go back to Santa Ana and check the hotels there."

She smiled. "What's the difference? Anyway, we'll be right on the scene when the swallows do arrive."

"What time do they come?"

She gave that little smile of hers again and laid her hand on his arm. "Gee, Rocky, I wouldn't know. I don't go in for that kind of swallows."

"You make me thirsty."

"Let's see the mission first. I've always wanted—"

They paid thirty-five cents to a descendant of the original Indians to get into the mission yard. Mary led the way. Inside the gate and to the right a part of the old wall rose straight up from the ground. Last year's mud nests of the swallows were still there in the eaves but they were occupied by sparrows and swifts.

Mary shrugged her shoulders and held out her hands palms up. "No swallows."

He grinned. "I wouldn't know a swallow if I met it on the road."

"Bees," she said and pointed up into the adobe wall. "I'll bet there's hundreds of pounds of honey up there."

"Yes, honey."

She winced. "Don't, Rocky."

He said: "Why not? This is my day off—come on, let's take a quick look-see and get out of here—it gives me the creeps."

"That's because you're not esthetic. Come on, let's look at the old tannery—wait, isn't that a swallow?" She looked askance at a Mexican woman who was straightening an ancient black lace shawl on her head.

"¿Las golondrinas?" asked Rocky.

"Sí. Theese wons ees onlee a scouts. A few today. Mañana, many you will see. Tomorrow; yes."

Rocky looked at the small sparrow-sized birds practically wallowing in a pool of mud and water in the courtyard. The swallows were cinnamon-colored with a marked white

forehead, a blue sheen on their backs, and whitish underparts. "Las golondrinas," Mary said and the Mexican woman smiled again. "Sí, señorita."

They went on, saw the tannery, the school, the church, museum, and flower-filled grounds; then they went out into the world again.

In a barroom they planned their attack. Mary suggested they start by checking the hotels.

"Hotel or hotels?"

"Whatever it is."

"Okay," he said, "whatever it is." He went to the window and looked into the sky. He called back: "No swallows, no Hildegarde."

The bartender grinned. Mary wrinkled her nose at him and said: "Two bourbons and plain water."

Rocky came back, sank into the leather-backed seat and half closed his eyes. His fingers began feeling the scar on his face. She watched him, her own thoughts playing across her face like reflections on cloudy water. At last she said through a cloud of cigarette smoke: "If you didn't play with that scar nobody would ever notice it."

He smiled at her. "Yes, I know. Do me a favor?"

"Yes, of course."

"Take an inch off your heels. You're too tall for me."

She gave a small hump and buried her nose in her glass. Somebody put a nickel in the juke box. *Rumors Are Flying* broke out behind them.

Rocky absent-mindedly finished his drink, lighted a cigarette, and stared at the picture of the mission above the bar. He pursed his lips. "You're safe down here. Nobody followed us as far as I know. We can relax. Nobody will bother us—not even Hildegarde."

Her eyes turned sultry. "Why, you—"

"Let's not fight, dear."

"Then don't make such remarks."

"Yes, dear."

They checked on the hotels, motels, and auto courts

without results. Rocky did the checking, asking at each place for Hildegarde Ederlee and giving a description of her. It was almost eight o'clock when he gave it up and sat in the hotel lobby looking at Mary.

He didn't find looking at her very difficult. She looked as fresh as when they'd left Los Angeles. Her blue dress-maker suit was short enough to be exciting; her nyloned legs and slim flanks modeling it helped out admirably. Every male eye in the lobby was on her.

"You're a sweet kid," Rocky said. "I like working for you."

"I think you're nice too." She laughed softly and wrinkled her nose at him. "Just think of us being down here together."

"Uh-huh." He smiled at her. "What shall we do to pass the time, get drunk?"

She crinkled her eyes.

"I'll be back," he said and went next door. He bought a fifth of sloe gin that was as red as the setting sun had been, and put it into the car. Then he went back into the bar, put a nickel into the juke box, the rest of his change into a cigarette machine, and another bourbon into himself. He came back and looked at Mary and smiled. She smiled back. All indications pointed to a wonderful evening if Hildegarde would just stay away. He would have bet half his money she would.

C H A P T E R 11

Casalita Mañana

THEY DROVE along the San Diego road toward the ocean, Rocky doing the driving, Mary sitting back, eyes half-closed. Cloud-filtered moonlight did things to the old-California houses, turning the plaster ones a ghostly white and drenching the flats with murky light. Ripe oranges

took on an individuality of their own against the dark green foliage of their parent trees. The warm breath of early spring had something added: the pleasant tang of the ocean, which was only two or three miles distant.

Off in a field a big red barn had a sign on its slanting roof. When the Cadillac made a turn its headlights lighted the sign that said: "Dr. Pierce's Nerve Medicine." They went on and rolled up to an underpass at the junction of the Coast and Inland routes to San Diego. To the left was San Clemente, Oceanside, San Diego; to the right, Dana Point, Laguna, Los Angeles. Rocky mentally flipped a coin before he took the road to the right, which ran past a huge Richfield gasoline sign rising vertically into the warm evening. To the left on the beach was a trailer camp of automobile gypsies, their camp fires making red will-o'-the-wisp smudges in the night.

Farther along the highway they found a small wayside café sitting out on a cliff over the ocean. They pulled into a parking lot behind the building. "A private drink," said Rocky and held the bottle of sloe gin up to the light filtering from the back door of the café. The liquid had a gay red color to it.

Mary asked: "What—what is it?"

"A lover's drink."

She laughed softly. "Does it really—work?"

"If you take it slowly; if you don't, it'll make you sick."

She took it slowly out of the bottle after first wiping the mouth off. He watched her. "You're a true bottle baby," he said, lighting two cigarettes, giving her one, and sitting back in the seat under the wheel. He flipped on the radio, picking up Clyde Hellmann's Band as though the dial had been set for it. Then he took a drink.

"Care to dance?" he asked.

She looked askance toward the café. "Do you really want to or is it just because you want to be nice?"

"Keep pushing me around," he said. "Just keep pushing me around."

She laughed that soft laugh of hers and her slender fingers touched his arm. Her hand was warm and friendly. Her face in the reflected light had a starry-eyed look.

"Mr. Detective, please tell me something about yourself."

"Sure. I went to school, learned to sell automobiles. But I quit to come to L.A. and be—a detective."

"What was your greatest case?"

"You, my pet."

"But," she said with mock interest, "there must have been others—other cases."

"There was one," he admitted. "Like out of the book of *Unsolved Crimes* by Barry Courtland. A girl was found in her bed. She was murdered, her money gone—not a fingerprint in the room, not even her own. The killer had systematically wiped the wallpaper, furniture, pictures, kitchenware, even the floor. . . . Yet we apprehended the culprit by merely using the old Rocky Nevins's system of deduction."

"Yes?"

"You see—"

A rear door opened at the back of the café to splash light all over the yard. A lean man in an apron came outside and walked toward them. He was apologetic. "Sorry, folks, but the boss says—well, you're not supposed to be parking here unless you come inside."

Rocky nodded. "That's all right, mister." He brought out two one-dollar bills and handed them to the waiter. "All we wanted was a drink. We just had it."

The tall waiter looked past his bushy eyebrows and frowned. "I mean you'll have to come inside. We don't serve out here."

Mary said sweetly; "We don't want to come inside. It's so nice here."

Rocky said: "We'll have another drink out of our bottle in about five minutes. Can you come back then?"

"I don't know," said the man. "Maybe I'd better see the

boss. I don't know how to figure it out." He started backing away. Then he turned and went back to the building. The door opened in a shower of light and closed again.

Mary whispered: "Shall we sneak a drink on him?"

"Yes," he said and gave her the bottle. He waited an instant and then asked: "Why did you want to get me out of L.A.?"

She nearly choked. Only by thrusting herself forward did she keep from spilling the red liquor over herself. "What do you mean?"

Rocky could feel her body stiffen. "You know what I mean. I'll admit it was bad timing on my part, asking you now. But, tell me, why did you want me away from Los Angeles?"

She studied his face almost savagely in the half-light. "So you think I hired you to find Hildegarde, even helped you, then got you out of town when you had a chance to find her?"

"Yes." He kept his face out of the light. "Sure, that's what I think, Boo-hoo. I think more than that. I think you know where Hildegarde is and that you're working hand in glove with her. Everything points to it. Her car—I'll bet you two to one she doesn't show up in Capistrano tonight or tomorrow."

"I'll take that bet," she said airily.

"It's a bet." He looked closely at her. "We'll name the stakes later—here comes our friend back."

They watched the waiter stop at the side of the car.

"Why," asked Mary, "did you think I'd want you out of town tonight?"

"Maybe Hildegarde didn't want to be found tonight. I thought she might have taken the name of Sally but I don't think so now."

"I'm sorry," said the waiter, his brow puckered sympathetically, "the boss says—"

Mary shook her head. "No, Mr. Smarty-pants, her name wouldn't be Sally—not that name."

"Then she's pulling a fast one— Yeah, all right, what did the boss say?"

"The boss says he can't serve you out here. Not even from your own bottle." The waiter leaned forward and whispered: "Thinks you're a spotter. Afraid somebody's trying to get his license. Personally, I don't give a damn. For a lead nickel I'd—"

Mary said: "Ever since I've known you, you've been making wise cracks about Hildegarde. I'm getting tired of it."

"The boss says you'll either have to go or come inside."

"We can't come inside," said Rocky. "The young lady—"

"Why can't we go inside?" cried Mary.

"Well, you know your condition better than I do. But just the same, I won't take the responsibility."

"You won't what!" Her eyes were suddenly wide and shocked.

"Not so loud; they'll hear you down to Anaheim Landing," Rocky said in a soothing voice. He turned to the waiter. "Tell your boss we'll rest a moment longer, then move away. Motherhood is entitled to that much."

"Motherhood, hell!" cried Mary. "You crazy loon!" She raised the bottle defiantly, took a deep drink at it. The bartender stared at her. She said between wheezes: "Bartender, is there anybody in there that isn't a stuffed shirt? I want to dance. I want some hot music. I want to have fun."

"But, lady, you've got to take care of yourself." Shaking his head, he began backing away.

"And damn you, too! I'm not even married."

"That makes it worse, lady." The waiter looked at Rocky, shook his head, and fled.

Rocky smirked and started the motor. The waiter was still standing at the back door when the car rolled past and back toward Capistrano Beach.

Mary stopped boiling and simmered for a few miles. Then she sat back on the red leather and mumbled to

herself while Rocky maneuvered the car into a sandy road that ran down to the beach.

She started to protest; then she sat back and stared at the windshield grimly. But her sense of humor broke its way through her indignation. She came as close to giggling as he'd ever heard her.

A little promontory was at the end of the road with several cars parked. Nobody was in them. When Rocky shut off the motor the background music of the sea became louder. It had a friendly, soothing sound. In the moonlight the breakers were small and regular and gave little drum-like roars and hisses when they broke. That was all the sound there was—that and the occasional shouts and laughter that came from farther down the beach.

Firelight from a driftwood fire splashed the Cadillac and the other cars with its light. Odd, leaping shadows were flung against the night. The tantalizing aroma of roasting weiners and coffee came riding in on the smoke blowing their way. Rocky sniffed and smiled at Mary. "I won't ask you any more questions," he said. .

A little half-smile came back on her face. "It's all right. Only you shouldn't have said what you did to the waiter."

"I know it. I often say the wrong thing."

She took the cigarette he had ready for her and sniffed the smoke coming their way. "Those hot dogs sure smell good."

"Want one?"

"Oh, yes. But—"

Rocky slid out of the car and went across the sand.

Several elderly folks with Christian Endeavor pins on their lapels sat around the fire. A number of boys and girls were chasing each other on the beach having a hilarious if not noisy time. A coffee pot boiled on a rock; weiners were bursting open on a wire rack. A young couple ran in and were helped to hot dogs and a paper cup of coffee.

Rocky waited until the young couple had taken four hot

dogs on buns away with them; then he stepped up to the fire.

"Two, please," he said.

One of the women speared off two sizzling hot dogs, wrapped them in buns, and handed them to him. Strange, puzzled expressions were on the faces of the elders as Rocky thanked them and backed away. A shout brought them back to earth as a girl and boy came to the fire kicking up sand. "Mother," the girl cried, "the water's actually warm. You really should come in." Rocky went on his way.

Mary laughed softly when Rocky arrived with a hot dog in each hand. "You can do anything," she said.

After she'd inspected the sandwich as though it were something wonderful the sea had washed in, she bit into it and went mm-mm. Her mouth slightly full, she said: "You were telling me about the girl."

"What girl?"

"The one with the red hair who was dead on her bed. The killer had wiped away all the fingerprints—remember?"

"Oh, yes, that case. The cops came, of course. But they were disgusted with the lack of evidence. They said uncomplimentary things about the beautiful cadaver, blaming it for the way they'd been treated. By now it should be sorry it was ever born. As it was no longer a case for a respectable law officer, they called me in. Within two hours the culprit, who worked at a cotton compress at San Pedro Harbor, was in jail with a signed confession on the chief's desk."

"How in the world?"

"Very simple, really."

"You're too modest." She nibbled at the sandwich and waited. He took a drink of red gin.

"It was as easy as telling her fortune."

"Her fortune?"

"Yes—by the lint. I was able to read the whole story from the cotton lint in the girl's umbilicus."

"In her—her navel?"

"Yes. A good lint man can tell a person's occupation, associates—even where they came from—by the umbilicus lint. Now this girl was obviously going with a man in the cotton industry. If you wish I can give you a short history. . . ."

"Oh, no, that's enough." She wailed, "I don't want to know any more about it."

"Okay," he said, "but I was just warming to my subject. I can tell anything by the lint in a person's navel. I could even tell when the swallows will return. Now the ordinary umbilicus—"

"Oh, please!" Her hand caught his arm.

Rocky said: "All right, we'll forget it. By the way, we now belong to the Christian Endeavor division of Capistrano Beach, Sun, Surf, and Sand Club, with all the privileges of the club—swimming, sanding, sunning, and moonlighting."

She laughed softly. "I could go for that swimming part. It's a wonderful evening for it." She finished her sandwich, had a tiny sip of sloe gin, and wiped her hands on a piece of tissue she took from the glove compartment. She wiped his fingers also and tossed the tissue out the window.

She sat back then, her eyes half closed, her hair shaken out. "This is the nicest time I've had in years. You know, Rocky, there's something about being with you I like. You don't take advantage of situations, don't make passes—you're the perfect type a girl needs so desperately these days. I even think I'm beginning to love you a little." She smiled up at him.

"What you need is a drink."

"I've already had too many. I talk too much."

"That's why we started out to get drunk."

"Was it? Well, I don't think it was a good idea; let's just get mellow."

"Mellow."

They sat there together facing the sea. They couldn't see

much of it. The faint scream of a girl came to them, but it was an I-really-don't-mean-it scream—and then the splash and hiss of the sea again. Rocky could feel Mary's slim body against his; he could feel the muscles of her thigh moving under her skirt as she leaned forward to peer out through the windshield.

She turned her face to his, wrinkling her nose. She whispered: "I'm mellow, I guess. Kiss me, please."

He kissed her and looked off toward the moon-drenched beach. After a while he asked: "You are a nice girl, aren't you, Mary?"

"Oh, yes," she answered readily. "I only drink and smoke and say goddam. But I'm not averse to a little loving once in a while. Only that and nothing more." Her lips parted irresistibly; then they were hard against his. Her body was as soft and yielding as a drowsy kitten's. She lay back in his arms with a little sigh. . . .

The campfire blazed steadily for a while and then died to a red glow on the beach. Buckets of water turned it into a smelly cloud of steaming wood and wet seaweed. Baskets were loaded and soon a safari began streaming up the path leaving the ocean behind. A car started up along the parking space, shot its twin beams at the ocean wall, backed, and then drove away. The other cars went through the same procedure until at last only the Cadillac remained to hold the vigil against the sea.

Rocky said: "Wake up, darling."

"I'm not asleep." She sat up, eyes bright, her face toward the sea. "It's all ours now, isn't it? Isn't it wonderful?" She looked up at him. "Say, wouldn't it be something if I fell for you?"

He said it would be something.

"You think it's dark enough?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

She sat up and laughed softly. "You know what I mean. You're thinking of the same thing I am."

"Maybe I am. Maybe I'm not."

"Uh-huh. I'll go first, take my dip. I'll take the robe, lay it on the sand, and undress out there. Then I'll come back and you can go. Nobody'll know and it'll be fun."

Rocky said: "All right. But have one more drink before you go—a deep guzzle; it'll keep you warm. And for Christakes, don't go out over your waist and don't stay in too long. I don't want anything to happen to you."

"You don't?"

"I don't want to lose my meal ticket," he told her. She made a face at him. But she took the drink. Then she was laughing again, thrilled at the prospect of a moonlit swim. She took off her shoes and stockings and put them back of the seat, then took off her jacket. Taking the folded wool automobile robe he handed her, she said: "Toodle-oo. Don't run away."

"Wait a minute," he said and handed her her purse. "Here's your mad money if I don't wait."

She thought that was funny and laughed a little off key. But she took the purse and hung it over her arm.

He said: "You sure you're all right?"

"Of course."

"It'll sober her up," he muttered as he watched her go. The bottle he held toward the moon showed it less than a third full. He blinked and lowered the liquid level a little. "Hell, I shouldn't have let her go," he said already contrite. "I'm a hell of a bodyguard."

After another drink he became more self-condemning. "I'm a fine one," he muttered. He looked around him and down the sandy road that led to the highway a quarter of a mile away. Then he locked the car, dropped the keys into his pocket, pocketed the bottle, and started across the sand toward the rolling surf.

As he approached he heard a softly suppressed scream and surged ahead through the loose sand. Then he heard her laugh and slowed down. She liked the water and had the situation well in hand. The sand under his feet was

damp and firmer now. He saw the moonlighted whitecaps and the breaking rollers, and then he saw Mary. She was all white and exciting—a water sprite splashing in a hidden pool.

Near at hand was the wool robe, a red mottled floor over white sand. Her dark skirt was a blot on the robe, her underthings wispy like the sea foam that danced in the moonlight. Her purse was a black rectangle. He knelt on his heels and watched her frolic in the surf. She started out farther, ducking under a roller that leaped toward her.

He waited another moment and then called to her. She heard him and sank into the water. She was on her knees when a big comber came sweeping shorewards. Upended, she came up splashing. She cried out: "Why didn't you stay in the car?"

"You've had enough. Come on out."

"No," she called. "This is fun."

"You're getting out too far," he shouted again. "If you don't come out I'll come in for you."

"Come ahead," she taunted.

He started toward her, went as far as the water, and then retreated hastily. Her back to him, she laughed scornfully. She splashed farther out. She would come out when she was damned good and ready.

"Okay, baby," he said softly. "You asked for it. I'll be damned if I'm going to take a chance on your getting drowned." He ran back to the robe and pulled off his coat, his necktie, and shirt.

A big wave fell on the beach with a reverberating boom. A quick glance in her direction and his eyes widened. There was no white sylphlike creature in sight. Mary Jaine had disappeared.

Stifling a cry, he jerked off the rest of his clothes, and leaped toward the hissing sea. A long, spreading wave caught him when he was up to his knees. Splashing on, he was ready to dive the minute the water was deep enough. But he didn't get to dive—he didn't need to. There she

was, sputtering and sobbing in another big wave that broke over him.

Catching her arm, he pulled her to him. Anger strangely had followed his quick relief. "You nearly scared me to death," he cried. "Hey, look out!"

Another big wave broke—a seventh wave in size. They went down together, legs and arms churning. Eight or more feet of water poured over them. Rocky didn't let loose of her. He had her tight when the water spread out and then went rushing back into the sea. Sputtering, she clung to him.

Slipping a hand under her knees, he lifted her and began carrying her toward the robe.

He was halfway there when she suddenly caught her breath. "Say! Put me down this instant! Don't you see I'm—Put me down!"

"Sure." He grinned at her and moved on to the robe. He sank to it, pushing aside his clothes and hers. "Now, Aphrodite—or is it Venus who rose from the sea—you're saved."

"Thanks," she said. "I owe you a nickel. Please—"

"Sure. Take a big drink out of the bottle; then you can use my shirt to dry on. God, you might have drowned!" Taking his own clothes, he moved down the beach, turned his back to her, and put his clothes on. He was shivering slightly when he turned back. "All right now?"

"Just a minute, please," she said in a small voice; then, after another minute, "all right."

She was trembling and trying to smile through it. She picked up the bottle, handed it to him, and said nervously: "You'd better take one."

"I will. Got a heater in the car?"

"Yes."

"Then let's go."

Twenty minutes later she said: "I'm warm as toast but God, I feel sticky."

"It'll take a shower. But that's easy. You can have one at the hotel. When I stop to think what might have happened. . . ."

"I just lost my footing was all—but thanks anyway." She laughed for no apparent reason. The immersion hadn't driven all of her mellowness away.

They finished the bottle and tossed it away. Then she said: "Darling, please don't let me go swimming any more."

He grinned at her. "I'd be a sap to stop you—but I will." He pressed the starter and listened to the big motor. He kissed her. Then he turned the car around in the parking space, guiding it into the sandy road that wound up to the highway.

She put her head against his shoulder. Before the car reached the pavement she was asleep.

Rocky rolled on south, made the turn to Capistrano, and looked at the clock on the instrument board. It said two o'clock. He stepped a little deeper on the gas. Capistrano loomed up in front of him before he was quite ready for it. But he got the big car stopped, and swerved into a black-top driveway.

On the side street was the *Casalita Mañana*. Of Spanish architecture, it had a tile patio and a Spanish garden. Banana plants grew around its doors. Earlier in the day he'd checked the hotel for Hildegarde. But this time he didn't walk in from the sidewalk; he drove up to the front, cut off the motor, and waited. A sleepy clerk came to the archway and looked out. Rocky crooked his finger at him.

The man, dressed in a *charro* costume that needed pressing, moved forward cautiously as though afraid someone would steal the hotel out from under him. "Yes?" he said, raising his eyebrows politely. He thawed considerably when he saw the car.

"A room," said Rocky precisely. "A room with a private bed."

"A bath, you mean, señor?" The clerk's teeth showed in

a warm smile. "Very sorry." He smiled as though this too was part of his duty. "All we have is a cottage." He pointed. "The last one over there. It is—"

"We'll take it," said Rocky in a studied, precise tone. "Bring the register and the key." He raised his brows and looked down at Mary. "I don't want to awaken her. She came down to see the swallows, and she has to be up early—get it?"

"Get it," said the clerk. Taking the bill Rocky shuffled from his pocket, he said: "Drive over, please. Behind is a place for the car. I will bring the key. A pitcher of ice water too?"

Rocky sneered at him. Why would he need ice water? He got the Cadillac started again, drove on, found the place to put the car, put it there, and let the motor die. He didn't move until the clerk arrived to open the door, turn on the lights, pull the drapes, and see that everything was all right.

"It is ready," said the clerk and brought the card over for him to register. Rocky solemnly registered as Mr. and Mrs. James Dahlrimple. After the clerk had retraced his steps to the hotel Rocky got out of the car unsteadily. His hands under Mary, he carried her over the threshold.

After putting her on the bed he went back to the car. Searching in the space behind the seat, he found a pint of bourbon, brought it in and smiled at it. He said: "We got to get some sleep. The swallows will be here soon." Thinking of swallows made him thirsty. He opened the bottle.

He looked at Mary. She smiled lazily up at him. "I'm mellow. Are you mellow?"

"Yes. But I've got to help you. Have you got a nightie in your purse?"

"Of course not, silly," she said and went back to sleep.

He undressed her and put her lovely body in between the sheets. She was breathing peacefully, like a happy little girl. He chuckled as though he had a joke on the world; he did. "Mr. and Mrs. James Dahlrimple," he murmured.

After he'd found a couple of extra wool blankets and moved over to the couch with them he made up his own bed and undressed. He looked at the couch as though it were suddenly questioning his manhood. He cursed it until he went to sleep.

C H A P T E R 12

The Swallows of Capistrano

ROCKY AWAKENED a little after eight in the morning and sat up in bed. Some commotion or other outside had awakened him. Yet as he listened now there were no identifiable noises—nothing but a great morning stillness. He got up and saw that Mary was still asleep, her yellow head half-buried in the pillow. "Hello, Boo-hoo," he whispered.

When she didn't answer, he went into the kitchenette. Sneering at the bottle on the sink, he poured a big glass of ice water from the pitcher the clerk had brought, and stood there with it in his hands.

He showered, dressed, and slipped out into pale sunshine that filtered through the few streamers of fog that rolled in from the ocean. Blinking, he assured himself he felt fine. "I feel fine," he said, and wandered away toward the main street to find a barbershop. He whistled a little off key as he went. The tune was: *When the Swallows Come Back to Capistrano, I'll Come Back to You.*

On the main street he found that the great "stillness" was made by the stir of many people—a feeling of expectancy was in the air. Practically all of San Juan Capistrano was up; they had been up at daylight. Today was the big day—St. Joseph's Day. Visitors from all over the country had arrived and were still arriving—all to see the swallows return. Men, women, and children strolled the streets or flocked into the mission grounds. It looked as though the swallows would have a nice home-coming.

A tiny, barefoot Mexican girl came down the sidewalk. Rocky stood back so the little girl could touch each post of the white picket fence as she went past; he didn't want her to break her mother's back.

Moving on, he found the barbershop in a building that looked two hundred years old. The barber, whose name on the windows was Harvey Nelson, stood in the doorway anxiously looking toward the sea. Reluctantly, he went inside with Rocky, giving a last glance at the sky with his deep-set eyes.

But if he couldn't see the swallows he could talk about them. He became voluble about the swallows. Having recently come from the East, he knew more about the situation than any native. Yes sir, this was the day. St. Joseph's Day. Yes, sir. Yes, sir, they wouldn't fail. They left on the same day each year, came back on the same day—like clockwork. He seemed very proud. He acted as though the swallows belonged to him.

Rocky looked into the mirror and smiled. His eyes looked all right now and there was only a slightly yellow bruise on his jaw. His lips were no longer puffed.

When the barber got his cloth under Rocky's chin he really spouted off. Rocky could do no better than an occasional yeah, yeah, and then only when the brush or razor wasn't being waved at him. He was fed-up with swallows by the time he got out of the chair. Hurriedly paying his bill, he went next door for a cup of coffee.

Here a retired schoolteacher had taken over. She had come from Phoenix, Arizona, to see the swallows return. She too was a perennial. Her arrival each year was as certain as that of the swallows. She'd left with the swallows each year on St. John's Day and returned when they did on St. Joseph's Day.

"Just think of it!" she cried, her voice fairly quivering with emotion. "A hundred and fifty years!"

Rocky blinked at her. "You have? That's a long time, lady."

"Not me, young man. Certainly not! The swallows!" She nearly smiled. "*Petrochelidon albifrons*."

"Oh," said Rocky.

The schoolteacher's eyelids fluttered like butterflies. Her words were for all mankind. "The legend is that the mission got its swallows in an odd sort of way." She looked sideways through her glasses at Rocky. "In the early days a tavernkeeper was said to have become angry at the swallows nesting under the eaves of his establishment and destroyed their mud nests. The swallows took refuge at the mission, where they have been ever since." She smiled as though she liked the sound of her own voice. "*Petrochelidon albifrons*," she cried. "The dear little *Petrochelidon albifrons*."

Rocky received a cup of coffee from the genial fat-faced proprietor, paid a dime for it, and turned back to the woman. "Where do they go?"

The schoolteacher held out a hand palm up as though to disclaim any inside knowledge or to prove she had no swallows concealed on her person. "No one knows." Then she half smiled as though the swallows had perhaps after all confided their secret to her. "Efforts have been made to follow them, even by airplane, but all efforts thus far have been doomed to failure. There are between three and six thousand swallows here. But the big question is how do they recognize the day when it is time for them to fly away? Or the day which they return?" She smiled around the coffee shop as though the tourists were all fourth-graders.

When she moved to a table to give private instruction to a couple there, the fat-faced owner stopped looking toward the kitchen and waddled to Rocky. "This lady only come here twice a year," he said in Spanish accents. "A cups of coffee. Twenty cents a year. Ten cents on March 19, ten cents on October 23rd. . . ."

A phone began ringing in the kitchen. The man's eyes rolled eloquently. He lurched for the kitchen, crying: "Es Capistrano Beach. I told them to call me—"

Stillness gripped the coffee shop. A spoon rattled in a cup; somebody coughed nervously. Then a barefoot Mexican boy came tearing out of the kitchen.

"¡Las golondrinas!" he shouted wildly. "¡Aquí vienen las golondrinas!"

There was a rush for the door. Rocky leaned forward against the counter to let the occupants past.

The owner hurried by, stopping long enough to wave with mock disapproval toward the street where his son Paul Revere Manuel Gonzales was making his ride. "I tell him each year to say in English: 'Thee swallows are coming,' Manuel always forget. '¡Aquí vienen las golondrinas!' he say."

Rocky grinned at him. "¡Viva las golondrinas!" he said, finished his coffee, and went out into the street.

Traffic was jammed. People in the street shouted at each other and watched the sky. A louder shout came and Rocky's squinting eyes saw a dark cloud off toward the ocean. Everybody was yelling now. "The swallows! ¡Las golondrinas!" The swallows were coming down the homestretch; they were nearly here. Everybody was patting everybody else on the back—a gala day. "¡Aquí vienen las golondrinas!"

Rocky tried to get through the crowd to get to Mary. But it was already too late. The flock of swallows swooped into sight with a drumming of wings. The air was full of them. The mission's allotment detached itself from the cloud, swooped, circled, and dipped down into the courtyard, landing on the old mission as they had done for many scores of years. They were home—safe at home.

Hypnotically Rocky followed the people inside the mission grounds. By now thousands of swallows were there, resting on the roof or already in noisy battle, driving the sparrows and swifts from the nests under the adobe eaves. A few swallows were already on the hunt for soft mud to repair their nests. All were chirping noisily; some scolding

like cross women during a spring housecleaning, some happy as swallows to be back at home.

The old padre stood in the doorway of the church and smiled. The devout crossed themselves. To them the returning of the swallows on St. Joseph's Day was an omen. It meant that God was still in His Heaven, that luck and prosperity would be with them throughout another year.

Rocky found himself grinning like a fool. He slid a dollar bill into the hand of an old Mexican woman, saying only: "Adiós," which really means "Go with God," and started off toward the hotel.

In a Mexican gift shop run by a man named Patrick O'Connor, Rocky looked at a silk-print negligee that had huge red poinsettias splashed over it. The colors were rich and bright without being gaudy. It was the prettiest he'd ever seen.

When he left the shop his purse was lighter by twenty-five dollars but he had a wrapped negligee under his arm.

At the desk of the *Casalita Mañana* he found a clerk he'd seen before but not the one of last night. The man said: "You are the one asking about a girl. Shall I check for you—what was the name again?"

"Never mind. I've found her. I'm with you, in cottage eight." Rocky gravely selected two Corona-Coronas from the cigar case and put down the exact change, a dollar and thirty cents. Then he said: "I want room service."

"I can take your order, sir."

"Fine." Rocky pocketed the cellophane-covered cigars. "One triple-strength bourbon, one plain, both poured over ice cubes—Old Taylor, if you have it. Two orders of ham and eggs, eggs basted, hash-brown potatoes, hot biscuits and honey, and a pot of coffee. Cottage eight."

As he went outside he smiled at the cigars jutting from his breast pocket and took a cigarette. "Big shot," he said.

Rocky shook her shoulders for half a minute before he got any response. "Boo-hoo, wake up!" he cried.

"Yes," she said opening her eyes sleepily and blinking at him. Her face had the clean, fresh look of a child awakening. But her eyes closed again sleepily.

"The swallows came," he told her.

"Who did, darling?"

"The swallows."

"Thanks, darling." She turned her head and went back to sleep.

One of those faint, discreet raps one is always hearing around hotels interrupted Rocky's laugh. Opening the door, he found a waiter who carried a tray with one large and very strong drink and one small one on it. Both were heavy with ice cubes. Rocky stopped the man's whisper with a finger to his own lips. He took the tray and came back inside. He put one of the drinks down on a doily centering a stand at the bed. He gave the waiter a five-dollar bill. "Bring the breakfast when it's ready," he whispered.

When he shook Mary's shoulder again she stirred and looked up at him. "Good morning," he said and put the glass into her hand.

"Good morning. Say, what's this—ugh!" She wrinkled her nose at the whisky.

"Down with it. It'll make you feel better. We've got places to go, things to do. Here." He tucked the light blanket around her shoulders and raised her head.

"All of it?" she asked childlike, her lips parted.

"Like this—see." He downed half his drink and said: "See, I feel better already." He smiled savagely.

She drank half of hers. Another grimaced attempt and she made the rest. "Oo-oo," she said. "Now I don't feel better."

"Breakfast is on the way. You can have it in bed."

She looked around her then, as though for the first time. "I've got to take a shower and—is there a shower?" She started to pull the covers aside, then pulled up sharply. Color flooded into her cheeks like rose petals on snow. "Why, I'm—"

"You didn't have a nightie and—wait!" He made a dive for the package he'd bought, tore it open. Bringing forth the colorful negligee of silk, he draped it over his arm. It slid off his arm like a thing alive, transferring its wave of color to a little mound on the bed in front of her.

A sudden, pleased smile came out from the corners of her mouth. "It's lovely," she murmured.

"Now you can have your shower," he told her. "But hurry. Breakfast will be here any minute." Whistling softly about the swallows coming back to Capistrano, he started outside. As he went past the writing desk he picked up a piece of stationery and an envelope. When he glanced around her back was to him; she was already shrugging into the negligee.

Outside, he wrote a short note on the stationery, using his left hand to do so. Then he stood against the door and smoked a cigarette through. He said to himself: "I've got to start finding out things!"

By this time the waiter was coming down the path carrying a covered tray. Rocky met him, took the tray, and went inside. Mary stood tall and lovely in the bathroom door, her yellow hair tied up with a towel, the flowered robe part of her. Her brown eyes were very bright.

"Mm-mm," she said.

"Me," he said, "I'm starved."

After they'd eaten, Mary said: "Aren't we the ones!" and got up to take her clothes into the bathroom to dress.

As soon as she was out of sight Rocky, smoking a cigarette, went to the door and gave a discreet little knock on it. Opening the door to the empty path, he said a little loudly: "Mrs. Dahlrimple—yes." Then he said thanks. An envelope with the note he'd written himself was in his hands when he closed the door and turned back into the room.

The unsigned note said: "Hildegarde: They're closing in."

Mary appeared in the bathroom door. "Judas priest!"

she cried, "did he say Mrs. Dollywinkle? Say!" Her eyes got big. "Did you register me in here?"

"I must have," he said. "Only it's Dahlrimple."

"Well, of all things—"

"It seemed kind of funny at the time. I didn't want to give my name—or yours. I really didn't want to give any name but the clerk was nice following me around with the register. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind?" She leaped toward him. "Give me that note. If it's what I think it is—" She snatched the envelope from his hand and tore it open. She read it and went limp. The note nearly fell from her hands.

Rocky took the note from her fingers. Before she could protest he said: "Listen," and went to the bathroom door. She was close enough for him to grip her arm when he looked out of the window. "The cops," he whispered. It was his turn to go limp.

From the window they watched the two uniformed officers kick down the racks of their motorcycles and park beside the Cadillac. One of them looked at the number he had on a card and nodded to the other.

"Get your things on," Rocky whispered. "We've got to move fast. While I keep them busy, ditch out of here the back way and lose yourself in the crowd going into the mission. I'll meet you in the mission church before noon; if I don't, beat it back to L.A. Remember, nobody saw you here. You weren't here!" He dived through the kitchen door before she could object.

Outside, he folded the note and shoved it into the loose leather at the instep of his shoe. Then he joined the cops, smiling brightly. "Howdy, fellows," he said. "Nice day."

A big sour-looking officer in a blue uniform was just turning his way. The other had prominent, almost opaque eyes with hot lights in them. He was the spokesman. "Your car?"

Rocky took the keys from his pocket and tossed them to him.

The man's face flushed. But the other moved closer and unlocked the car as though that was part of his job. The men seemed more interested at the moment in seeing whose name was in the driver's compartment than anything else. The cop who had opened the door, read it off: "Hildegarde Ederlee, 624 Rexford Drive, Beverly Hills, California." They looked at each other and smiled as though it was going to be a nice day after all.

The cop with the opaque eyes turned to Rocky. "You're not Hildegarde Ederlee, are you?" he asked.

"No," said Rocky. He smiled faintly at them. "I'm her driver. What's the trouble?"

"We ask the questions; you answer them," said the big cop. The other tapped his cheek. This effort seemed to shake out a thought. "Clemson, better get inside and get the girl. We'll coax her to go in with us. Gladstone can have it from there—but, first, look him over."

Rocky grinned as the cop frisked him without finding a gun.

They both looked at him. "This," the big one objected, "isn't funny. This is a hot car. You can't laugh that off."

Rocky's body went tense but he caught himself and looked toward the hotel. "You've made a mistake. But I'll have to tell her. She's at the coffee shop in the hotel; she's paying our bill. She likes to settle that part herself, always afraid somebody's—"

"Stay here," the sad-faced officer said as he started for the hotel building. He looked at his card. "Mary Jaine," he said aloud.

The other officer sat sideways on his motor seat and regarded Rocky closely. He started his questions. "You drove the car down here from Los Angeles last night?"

"You mean did I drive the car last night?"

"From L.A.?"

"Sure. But it's all right. We have permission to use the car. When we arrived this cottage was all they had left—number eight. I registered for it with the name she said."

He stared back at the cop. "But there's a couch in there. Don't forget it. I'd tell you more but I'm not in the habit of telling an employer's business." He took a cigarette from a limp package and tapped the loose tobacco from it. "Now what in the hell is this all about, and who reported the car stolen?"

The cop sneered at him. "How would I know. But take it easy. You'll find out soon enough. We've been to a lot of trouble finding you." He laughed with ill humor. "Wait till you run up against this Gladstone."

Clemson came running. "Adams—something's damn funny. The waiter said the dame hasn't been inside yet. Said he brought two breakfasts out here." He lurched on around the side of the bungalow and then into it. In a moment his head stuck out the bathroom window. "She's flew!"

Rocky felt almost sorry for him. He said: "If you give me a chance, I'll tell you all about it." He waited until the cop came back, red-faced and puffing. It's as bad asking a motorcycle cop to run as it is to ask a cavalry to fight in a trench. He said then: "You probably scared the wits out of her. Let's go see the chief."

"You bet we'll see the chief," said Adams. The two cops grinned at each other. Clemson said: "The chief's gloves don't leave a mark; yeah, bud, you can talk all you want."

Adams said: "Shut up, Clemson—all right, fellow, back that Cad up and turn it around. Follow me and don't try anything. Clemson will be right behind you. Straight ahead to Del Rio, mister!"

Rocky followed instructions. But he didn't see Clemson in his mirror. It looked as though Clemson had stayed behind to hunt Mary.

At the station in Del Rio the arresting officer said: "I feel sorry for you," and took him inside. A tall, gray-haired man sat back in a swivel chair behind the desk and glared fiercely at them. The man was lean, wiry, and tough. He looked as though it were his car that had been stolen.

"Chief Gladstone," said Adams, "this is him. We got the car outside."

"Clemson phoned in," said the chief without apparently moving his lips. "Sit down," he said the same way.

Rocky sat down. Behind him the door closed and he was alone with Ivan the Terrible. Ivan looked over his papers on the desk, scowling at them. He didn't appear to like them any better than he did his subordinates or his prisoner. Rocky said: "Mind if I ask one question? Then I'll answer them for you all night."

Gladstone looked up in surprise. Then he shrugged. "Go ahead."

"Just who reported the car stolen? And who told you to be on the lookout for me in Capistrano? And isn't Capistrano a little off your beat, your jurisdiction?"

"That was three questions."

"Oh, hell!" said Rocky. He fumbled with his tie, and his fingers touched the cigars. He took the nicely wrapped cigars out and laid them on the chief's desk.

The chief raised his eyebrows. He looked at the cigars and then smugly at the papers on his desk. The long, tapering fingers of one hand spread and he suddenly pushed his hand over his face. He cursed profanely but listlessly. The other freckled hand slipped out as though not to let the first hand know what it was doing and picked up the cigars. After that it was easy. He picked up a small penknife and removed the wrappings from one of the cigars. Firm white teeth bit into the end, a kitchen match did the honors, and Gladstone drew in his breath, breathed smoke, and sighed. He waved at the other cigar.

Rocky shook his head. "I was just trying to be a big shot carrying them around. I don't smoke cigars."

"I see. Well, I don't smoke this kind either—often." His hand crawled out slowly, picked up the other cigar, admired the embellished "Corona-Corona" on the band, and put the cigar away into the recesses of his desk drawer. "Go ahead, smoke a cigarette. Then say something else."

Rocky lit up and said something else. He said quite a lot.

"The car's not hot. I had permission to use it. Look, I brought my girl down last night to be here when the swallows came in. We took the last cottage they had at the Casalita Mañana, and everything looked like it was going to be a fine day until your boys showed up. The girl ran out—but fast—probably half scared to death. Hell, you know how it is. . . ."

Gladstone mumbled a little obscenely that he knew how it was. He disappeared behind the smoke cloud of the sixty-five-cent cigar. He stopped swearing to mutter: "Hell, and I could have had a little place in Carlsbad, a few chickens, an avocado orchard! But no, I had to be a cop!" He put both elbows on the desk, staring off into space as though he were looking at the loaded avocado trees he didn't own. Cigar smoke punctuated his breathing. He said: "I've been in the racket too long. They think I'm tough. I've got a name for it. Hard-boiled Gladstone, that's me. Wait'll you come up before Gladstone; you're supposed to start trembling, and start talking." He grunted. "I've got my belly full of it. A nice guy wants to take his girl down to see the swallows and—oh, hell!"

He looked at the papers on his desk again. "It's a phony," he said. "Somebody bought it—somebody who knew we worked to the edge of Capistrano and might cross over when nobody was looking. I don't know the gent who called up, but here's the fellow's name who signed the complaint in Los Angeles—a Ned Foote, signing for Hildegarde Ederlee. That mean anything to you?"

Rocky nodded. "He's a phony too. But he's executor for the girl's estate."

The gray-haired man smiled sadly as though lost in his own world. "Old hard-boiled Gladstone," he said, that's me. For two bits Mexican money I'd go along with you when you go out the back door, past the privy, and down the alley. If you don't mind too much we'll hold the car for Los Angeles." He looked up unsmiling. "Now I'm

going to be busy as hell. I've got an important report to make—a dog fight that happened a week ago last Friday in front of the Women's Club."

Rocky got up and started for the back door.

At the door he turned and looked back. Gladstone was still looking at his avocado trees.

Rocky went on out through the door and past an open doorway that gave off an acrid smell. Then he walked through the alley to the main street half a block away. Nobody tried to stop him.

A sight-seeing bus was about to start for San Juan Capistrano. "See the swallows at Capistrano," shouted the driver. "Ticket, mister?"

"Why not?" asked Rocky.

C H A P T E R 13

Double-Entendre

HE FOUND HER in the gloomy interior of the church in the mission grounds. She sat in a back pew, a huge book she'd got from somewhere up in front of her. Rocky moved inside and sat down beside her.

She gave him a warning glance. "I—I think somebody's following me." She held the folio-size book up to cover his face as well as hers.

He looked at the book. It was volume one of a two-volume set, *Our Islands and Their People*. He was more impressed by its size and remoteness than by the topic.

The introduction said:

While it is not the purpose of this book to treat especially of the late war with Spain, a brief résumé of the leading events of that memorable contest will not be out of place. . . .

That was as far as he got before he put his hand over

hers. "Take it easy, sister—Mary. We're practically out of the woods."

"What—what happened?"

"A hit-and-run. Some fellow out on the highway got run over last night and they're blaming us. I got away but they're holding the car."

She looked at him, face white, eyes wide. "You didn't—last night?"

"No, I don't think so. When I told them somebody was trying to frame us they laughed. They made a slurring remark about you and well, I lost my head—"

"You didn't! You mean—you had another fight?"

Fingers mentally crossed, he said: "There was no other way out. But they were so surprised I was able to click off the light and walk out. Of course I had to do some tall dodging to get here—"

"But the light? Where—?"

"They had me down in the basement—third degree." He looked toward the golden altar that had been brought over from Spain, and at the original canvases on the dingy walls. He uncrossed his fingers and looked at her. "I didn't show them the note—what about it?"

She wailed: "How could I be Hildegarde like it said?"

"Look, sweetheart, who knew you were coming to Capistrano?"

"I don't know."

He caught her shoulders and shook her savagely. "Come on," he said irritably, "let's have it. We're in this thing together—and manslaughter can be as tough as murder."

"You're hurting me." She pulled away from him. "People are looking at us."

"Let them. Who knew you were coming here? Tabitha? The old folks? Wesley Bell? Victor Daro? Heber?"

She took a deep breath. "Only you knew—maybe Tabitha did. But she wouldn't—"

"Aunt Tabitha. She wouldn't tell Uncle Ned. Is that it?" At her silence he exclaimed: "I'll be god-damned!"

She gave a soft cry. "In church!"

He looked around him startled. He felt sorry, and mentally earmarked a dollar for the poor box. His eyes narrowed then. "Maybe it's me somebody wants to get out of the way."

Her eyes brightened with fear again. "You mean so they can get at me?"

"Something like that," he said. But he was willing to let her think that they were both wanted on a framed hit-and-run charge.

"Look," he said after a minute. "We've got to get back to L.A., and fast. We've got to find out what this thing is all about. I've thrown the cops off our trail by doubling back—but I don't know for how long. But we'll take a chance. You wait at the mission gate. I'll find a rent car and see if I can get somebody to drive us to Laguna where we can catch a bus."

Rocky didn't forget the poor box when he followed Mary out the door.

The Mexican driver was curious to know why his passengers were so interested in going to Laguna, but he managed to confine his interest to the ten-dollar bill Rocky promised him.

They pulled into the busy main street of Laguna during the noon hour. The driver gave a last approving glance at Mary, took his money, showed his teeth in a gracious smile, and drove off. As soon as he'd turned the corner Rocky and Mary walked to the bus station, and while waiting for the next bus to Los Angeles, had a sandwich and cup of coffee.

When finally they were seated in an overcrowded bus Mary lost some of her nervousness and smiled wanly to Rocky. "I'd be in a mess without you," she whispered. "I'm so mixed up I can't even think."

"That makes two of us," he whispered back. Then he nodded to the package she'd been carrying since she fled the Casalita Mañana in Capistrano.

"You ought to know what it is," she said, and broke an edge of the paper. There was a red poinsettia on the silk cloth underneath.

He smiled faintly and turned back to the window.

They were going through Long Beach along American Avenue when she spoke next. "What will they do about us? The car?"

"They'll impound the car. They've got a good description of me and you'll probably be Hildegarde Ederlee to them. That means the cops will be hunting for her now."

A fair amount of light came back into her brown eyes. "Do you think—"

He waited. She tried again.

"Do you think somebody framed this thing on us to get the police hunting for Hildegarde?"

He rubbed a hand on his scar. "You've started to think again, haven't you?"

"Have I?"

"Oh Christ!" Then he pulled up. "Maybe somebody did arrange all this to get the cops hunting for Hildegarde. Who could it be? It wouldn't be you, would it?"

Her face jerked away from the window. Her eyes were full of fear but she let him see them.

He looked at her closely. "If it's not that way it's like this: somebody wants us both out of the way. If they can't do it the neat way jail would be the next best thing."

"But," said Mary, "what about the man we were supposed to have run over?"

"We can't worry about him. We never hit anybody."

Mary sighed. She spent the next few minutes looking at scenery which was partly hidden by ugly wooden oil derricks busily turning their owners into millionaires.

When they reached East Washington Boulevard in Los Angeles, Rocky remembered to be cautious. "There's just a bare chance somebody might be watching the station," he said. They got off, found a cab, and left it a block from the El Cabrillo, where Rocky was registered as Walter James.

"Do you still want me to run things?" he asked.

She nodded, "Oh, yes."

"All right, the Cabrillo is a block up the street. Grand and Pico. My room is 420, and I'm registered as Walter James. I'll go first and you come up in about five or ten minutes. The elevators are straight back as you enter the door. Come up to four and I'll have the door open—"

She smiled wryly. "Just like that?"

"Just like that! We'll be off the streets, and we'll have a phone. If we can't figure something out then, we ought to go back to Capistrano."

She smiled noncommittally, and let him go ahead without her.

"I'm having a friend up for a drink," Rocky told the ancient bellboy as he parted with another ten-dollar bill. "I want a fifth of good whisky, a bottle of ginger ale, a sack of piñon nuts, and Camels; if you can get any change out of that, it's yours. When the "boy" grinned he added: "Don't try to save too much money on the whisky."

A few moments later Mary came in through the door he'd left open. She gave him a funny little upturned smile, said hello, and sank stiffly into a comfortable chair.

She inhaled almost greedily at the cigarette he lighted for her. She sat there watching him unsmilingly until a knock came on the door. Then she got up as quickly as he did. She slipped into the bathroom.

At Rocky's invitation the bellboy came in. He had a fifth of whisky, a frosty bottle of ginger ale, a bowl of cracked ice, the piñon nuts, and a carton of cigarettes. "I brought you up a late paper too," he said—"and a menu from the joint next door, just in case."

"Next time I have a horse running I'll let you in on it," promised Rocky. The bellboy, whose son might have been a jockey, went away happy.

Rocky had a ginger-ale highball ready when Mary joined him.

"Thanks," she said but made no other comment.

He took a quick swallow of his drink and looked at her. "Kee-rist, you women! Now what's the matter?"

Her brown eyes were a little hurt. "Well, what did you think I'd do—like it? I suppose you added 'and wife' to your name downstairs."

He tossed up his hands, got up and walked around the room. When he came back he stopped in front of her.

"A lot of thanks I get keeping you out of the hoosegow! All I had to do was to throw you to the wolves. Hell, if that's what you want, why don't you go down to the detective bureau at Central Station and give yourself up! They'd love to have you. They'd have Tabitha down there too. They'd have your friend Wesley Bell, Aunt Alice, Uncle Ned. But, sister, they wouldn't have me! I'd still be too easy to frame for that business out at Capistrano!" He shook his head savagely, his very blue eyes hard and angry. "But they wouldn't give a damn about me if they had you. You'd be the nicest thing they've had in the police courts for some time. Your picture would be in all papers. Some of the papers would make you look like a blonde, some would make you look like a brunette. They'd have you down as Hildegard Ederlee, as Mary Jaine—as the Wayward Angel! They'd have a field day with you. But this doesn't worry you—all you're worried about is that you're in a room with a man and the door is locked!"

He went on to the window and looked down into the street. Then he felt her hand on his arm. "Rocky, please don't mind me. I'm all mixed up."

When he turned she put one hand on his cheek. Then she kissed him lightly on the lips.

"I know what you're doing is for the best," she said. "I'll be all right now. I'm willing to listen to you."

"All right," he said. "All right." After a minute he patted her arm. They had another drink. He said: "I've got to get out and see just how big a jam we are in. You've got to stay out of sight." He smiled at her.

At the desk downstairs he paid up his room for a week. Then he walked along the counter to the switchboard where the operator was busy chewing her gum. Stalling, he asked idly: "How do you take a long distance call? Do you charge it to the room?"

"Oh, yes." Her smile was very sisterly. "All you have to do is to give your room number and we'll charge it. If it's over fifty cents we might send the bellboy up to collect." She smiled again and turned to the switchboard. "Excuse me, please—Room 420, yes. Main 5-1089. Thank you. Just a moment, please."

Rocky went out the door cracking a piñon nut. Looking into the small notebook he had in his inside coat pocket, he found the number beside Victor Daro's name. It was Main 5-1089.

With a surprised shrug he went on to the corner and bought another paper. He gave a couple of nickels a workout on the telephone—but he didn't have any luck with either Charley's or Heber's number. Neither was in.

When he returned to the room he had a few packages, several magazines, and a clean shirt for himself. Mary didn't answer his soft knock on the door; so he let himself in with his key.

She wasn't in sight but the water was running in the shower. She was singing. It sounded good. He opened the bathroom door, called in that he was back, heard her say that was fine, and went back and sat on the bed.

When she came out of the bathroom she had on the colorful Capistrano negligee. It clung to her soft curves as though it or she were wet. She looked as if she didn't have a care in the world. "Did you bring my toothbrush?" she asked.

"Sure. And some toothpaste and powder, a bottle of perfume, and some cleansing tissue—man, do I know about women!"

She whirled around and gave a small curtsy. She looked like a painting, her face having that soft, clean-scrubbed

look, her eyes lovely, her silky, golden hair hanging over her shoulders. Her trim legs were discreetly covered by the flame-colored wrapper.

He asked: "How was he?"

"Who?" Her face suddenly flushed. "Oh, you are a stinker! Everytime you start being nice to me—Who? Who?"

"How should I know? Can I help it if I stop at the desk to pay my rent, and hear the girl repeat my room number and then ask for Main 5-1089?"

She watched him closely, saying nothing.

Rocky ran his fingers through his sandy hair. "When I came back you were singing in the shower. It wouldn't take a detective to point out you were happy about something."

She pulled up and stopped at the bed. Her eyes were no longer mild. "Yes, I called him."

"I'm not surprised. Did you find out if he pulled that deal at Capistrano? And is he still blackmailing you?"

Her eyes blazed a little. When they softened again and she said: "Oh, Rocky," he knew she hadn't been reading the papers lately.

She said: "They told me he wasn't there any more—that he'd left permanently."

"You didn't give our number out?"

"No, I didn't! I thought you wouldn't like it."

"If you'll swear to that we won't have to move."

Her eyes grew sultry again. Then that quaint little smile of hers broke through. "Oh, Rocky! I'll swear." Her smile widened. "Goddam!" she said.

Rocky grinned at her. Then he whooped and held on to the table and practically yelled. She whooped with him.

When he was able to talk again he said: "Look, Boo-hoo, I hate to boss you around like this. But I've started this job of finding Hildegard—and I always finish what I start. I'll find her all right—for either you or Tabitha. Now I've got to see Tabitha."

"Oh!"

"It'll be dark soon. I'll take you out to dinner—providing you've got some more money. The dame I'm traveling with is a costly hussy."

She laughed softly. "You'd think it was just my money you liked—fifty dollars all right?" She gave him fifty. "I'll have to get to the bank soon—you're expensive." She caught his arm. "Some nice place?"

"Hell, why not!" he said carelessly.

"Oh," she said, "I forgot to tell you."

He looked suspiciously at her. "What did you forget to tell me?"

"I got you a room," she said. Smiling, she pointed at the connecting door. "It's right next door."

He grimaced. "That means the honeymoon is over."

She laughed softly, wrinkling her nose at him. "By a strange coincidence, and the exchange of a little of what you call folding money, the room next door went vacant. To save your pride, I told the bellboy the room was for your brother—that he was coming for a visit."

"Thank you, Boo-hoo. That was certainly decent of you."

But she had the last word. "You big lunk, do you want to know why I was happy, singing in the bathtub? It's because I won't be seeing Daro again."

Rocky didn't say anything. But she wouldn't be seeing Daro again. The way she said it made him sure now that she hadn't killed Daro even if she did have the reason to do so.

C H A P T E R 14

Revenge Is Sweet—Perhaps

THE MORNING sunshine was free enough of smog to have the All-year Club print a new set of pamphlets for Eastern distribution. The sunlight filtered through the stained-

glass windows of the old Sullivan Saloon on Spring Street, giving a cathedral effect to the speckled mahogany. Rocky bought a beer. While drinking it he let his eyes take in the full length of the bar. Then he asked the bartender: "Simms been in?"

"Who?"

"Simms—or Fred. You know, the big guys."

"You got me." The bartender rubbed what little hair he had on his head. It was a tender gesture as though he didn't expect to have the hair very long. He called into the back room: "Eph, you know a Simms, or a Fred? Big guys." The answer must have been in the negative for he turned back to Rocky and held out his hands palms up. Then he asked: "Have another beer?"

Rocky shook his head. He'd have to buy at least one beer in each bar he searched. He didn't like beer. But luck favored him. Two beers later he was on the point of asking about Simms when he saw the big man in the bar mirror. Simms had come out of a back room and was swaggering toward the front door. Rocky ducked his head and looked at his breastbone until the man passed. Then he got off his four-legged stool, lit a cigarette, and went out into the street.

Simms crossed over. Rocky followed him. A block away Simms went upstairs under a hotel sign that said: "The Enright." Rocky waited on the sidewalk ten minutes but his man didn't come out. At the corner drugstore he phoned Wesley Bell.

"Look, Mr. Bell," he said. "You told me the other day that if anybody was making it bad for Mary Jaine to let you know. I'm letting you know now. Two fellows. Their names are Simms and Fred. I don't know what they're doing—but maybe they could be stopped from doing it. . . . Sure. . . . I can get them to come any place you say. Just give me the address. . . . Sure, I'll wait."

Rocky got out the stub of a pencil. Then he was writing down an address on the inside of a match cover. "Okay,

I'll have them out there within a half-hour—an hour at the most. Thanks. . . . Wait a minute. You know about Daro, don't you? . . . Not your boys again—fine! Well, good-bye."

He dropped another nickel and called the Enright Hotel. "I want to talk to Simms," he said. "Yeah, Simms. S—i—m—m—s."

He waited a long time on this one. Then he was talking again, his voice down half an octave. "Yeah, Simms—Heber. . . . Sure. Now get this. You and Fred come to this address—got a pencil? . . . 1125 Grady Place. Around to the back, upstairs. It's a loft, corner Alameda and Grady. Right away, in the next half-hour. . . . Hell, get a cab. It'll be on the expense account. I'm on my way down there now, so you can't call me back. Make it snappy." He hung up.

He found a cruising cab and took it to Alameda and Grady Streets. After locating the back door he had the cab move on. "Park here," he said and then sat back in the cab and lit a cigarette.

Twenty minutes and three cigarettes later he saw another cab drive up and stop at the corner. Two big men, Simms and Fred, got out looking around in puzzlement. Then Simms perked his head toward the rear of the building and they lumbered around in back and up the outside stairs.

Rocky waited a couple of minutes. Then he got out, told the driver to wait, and strolled back to the rear of the building. At the stairs he stopped and looked up. He couldn't see anything but there was a lot of noise. A screaming curse broke off from upstairs. A broken chair leg came hurtling through a paneless window to drop at Rocky's feet.

He slipped back and then walked slowly to the cab. Five minutes later he saw three men he'd never seen before come down the stairs. They were grinning at each other. Rocky shook his head. "Thought I'd feel better," he

muttered. "But—oh, hell!" Shoving his hat over one eye, he said: "Any place on West Pico. I'll tell you when."

Mary was sitting on the bed staring at the wall when he let himself in with his key. She looked worried behind her smile. "I need a drink," he told her.

"I'll have a smally, myself." She watched him silently as he took the bottle out of a dresser drawer. "You'll need another drink when I tell you what happened."

She looked like a bride sitting up in bed. She had on her own flowered coolie coat and the black embroidered pajamas, all of which meant she'd been over to the Rampart Plaza. Her hair was down over her shoulders. Her eyes were mocking him. He poured out a couple of drinks and brought one to her. He looked down at the part in her hair and smiled faintly. Either Mary had had a hair rinse or she really was a blonde.

He said: "All right, Boo-hoo. What happened?"

She shook her head. "You tell me yours first. Why you needed a drink?"

Rocky walked toward a chair, swung it around, and sat in it backwards. "Now we play again."

"'N'ya, n'ya,' said the little red fox." She smiled at him.

"All right. Hildegard wasn't down at Capistrano, swallows or not. But I'll guarantee to have her into camp in two days. I know where she is now."

She shook her head. "Oh, no, you don't. But I do!"

A little liquor splashed over the edge of his glass. "You do?" When she nodded he said: "Then you tell me."

"Of course I will. I've stopped playing. I feel good hearing from her even if she is in a jam." She fumbled into her purse and brought out an envelope and a bluish-white piece of stationery. "A letter. See, Smarty-pants?"

"From her?"

"Who else? Go ahead and read it."

He looked at the envelope first: a Hermosillo, Mexico postmark; envelope of the Casa de las Rosas, Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico; addressed to Miss Mary Jaine.

The typed letter read:

Dear Horse-Face:

I wouldn't be writing you for help—but I am in serious trouble. I didn't stay in Las Vegas, where I'd been for a week. Please come at once and bring some money. You can get it, and I know you won't let me down. If you as much as mention a word of this to ANYBODY—but I know you won't. At least, please—

Love, H.

Casa de las Rosas, Hermosillo, Mexico.

Rocky again inspected the envelope and the Mexican stamp and cancellation. Then he looked at Mary. "Where'd you get it?"

"My room at the Rampart Plaza. I took a chance and slipped over to get some things." She caught his arm. "But the letter is authentic. I know it is. You've got to go, Rocky."

"Oh!" He tossed the letter onto the bed, picked up his glass, and took it and his cigarettes into the bathroom. Downing his drink, he put the glass on the shelf; then he stared at himself in the mirror. His smile was a little savage. "Now I'm supposed to get out of town," he muttered. "I must be getting close!"

When he rejoined her he said: "I don't like this angle. But I'm not stopping. I can't stop. Just like I told you, I see things through when once I start. I'll find her."

She raised her eyebrows.

But Rocky's was the sudden look of a man who didn't give a damn. The carefree recklessness had come back into his eyes.

She told him her plans then. She had it all fixed up. She'd already phoned and made a reservation for him. The Southern Pacific pulled out of Los Angeles the next evening at eight, made a connection at Tucson for Nogales, and then on the Sud-Pacífico for Hermosillo. "I've got

some money for you," she said. "Five hundred dollars should be enough for expenses."

He looked at the hundred-dollar bills she kept spreading out. He put them all in his pocket as though they were gum wrappers. "Now I've got to do some phoning from a pay phone," he told her. "There's no use letting the hotel know too much about our business."

"Will you be long?"

"Back as soon as I can. I've got to crowd a lot of stuff into the time I've got left. I've got to see Tabitha too."

"Why?"

He suddenly grinned at her. "She's a client."

"But you're not telling her about this—this letter?"

"No, that's between you and me."

Downstairs, he was about to step into a phone booth in the lobby when a Grand Avenue car came to a stop at the corner. Idly he watched the people get off. A slender girl got off last.

He was on the sidewalk before the streetcar clanked on across Pico. The girl walked down the street with a smooth, vibrant swing. Her walk was short, ending at a café into which she went, walking all the way back to the rear.

Inside was a phone booth he could use. He played around inside while getting a complete view of the restaurant. He did his phoning and waited until the girl came from the rear dressed in a white uniform. She poured a cup of coffee from a glass coffee maker, selected a piece of lemon meringue pie from a rack, and sat down at the end of the counter.

He joined her. "Coffee for me too," he said. When she turned slowly to him he said: "Hello, Cupcakes."

She stared at him, the color draining from her cheeks. "You! How—how did you find me?"

He smiled at her. "Take it easy. It's not you I'm hunting for—unless your name is Hildegard Ederlee. It isn't, is it?"

"No. No, it isn't." A little relief came into her face, but not much. "You know what it is—Sally Carstairs. It's my

real name. I've never changed it. Do you really want some coffee?"

"A little, in a cup."

She motioned to one of the girls. "Gertie, will you give my friend a cup of coffee?"

The girl would and did, with a big knowing smile at the two of them.

Rocky smiled at Sally. "You shouldn't have run away. We were going fine."

She shot him a quick glance but she seemed a little more at ease. "I was scared—frantic was more the word for it. You were so mysterious, and when I found you were a detective I beat it fast."

"Me, a detective?"

"Yes, you said you were hunting for a girl." She took a sip of her coffee and looked at him past the rim of the cup.

He laughed, joining her with the coffee and lighting a cigarette to go with it. "I'm not a detective. I'm only looking for a girl for a friend of mine."

Her eyes got wary again. "Who?"

"A local girl. Hildegard Ederlee—ever hear of her?"

"No, sir. I mean no. Gee, what am I so jittery about?" She looked at him imploringly.

"It's all right. When you ran out I thought you might be the dame. Then when I got to checking up, I knew you weren't. Hell, Cupcakes, you shouldn't have run away."

"But I was scared they'd found me here. I might have to go home. You see it's like this: back home there's an estate worth a few hundred dollars that's being held up because the folks can't find me. If they do find me they can serve me and have me taken back. You see I took my share, five hundred dollars, without waiting for the executors to release it. Now I've got to make that five hundred up first; then I can pop in on them, give them back the five hundred, receive five hundred along with the others, and—well you get the idea, don't you?"

"Sure, I get it. If they find you now they can make a criminal out of you even though the money was yours."

She nodded soberly. "That's the way I understand it." Then she smiled at him. She felt well enough about it now to start in on her pie. "Gee, I'm sorry I didn't take you into my confidence. Is there any reason why I can't go back on the hill? I feel more at home riding that dinky little car up the hill than I have any place I've been."

"No reason at all you can't—only I won't be there. The cops are after me for questioning. It's something I don't know anything about and I'm not ready to answer questions either. It's like your business—I'm not quite ready yet. If the cops show up just tell them you loaned me your room while you were away." He broke off a piece of her pie crust and nibbled at it. "Why don't you phone the landlady now? Tell her you just got back, and is there any mail?"

"Gee, I will." She got up and hurried to the phone.

When she got back she was laughing. "It's all right." Then she dropped her eyes almost demurely. "You will come back when you can?"

"Sure!" he said and squeezed her hand under the counter. "And you don't need to be afraid again. You're not the girl I've been hunting for!" He tossed her the "Flight" tickets he had bought.

She laughed softly, her mind entirely free. "Well, don't make yourself too scarce. You know where I'm working now."

"Sure!" Tapping her arm, he got a friendly smile for his effort. He got up, dropping a nickel for his coffee at the cashier's on the way out. He smiled back at her, but when he went through the door it was out of Sally's life.

C H A P T E R 15

Two Aunts and One Uncle

ROCKY LEANED against the telephone. "It's like this, Charley. All my life the dames have played me for a sucker. Now it's my turn. . . . No, I can't come up now. I'm going out of town for a few days. Maybe I'll come up when I get back. . . ."

He cracked a piñon nut while listening to Charley sputter. Then he said: "Don't worry, I'm getting Hildegard's business for you the minute I see her—if it's not too late. . . . What do I mean? Just that! I'm taking this Mary Jaine out of town with me, only she doesn't know it yet. . . . And here's another thing. There are two girls—and one of them really is missing. Charley, I think she's been murdered. . . . Yeah. . . . See you later. . . . No, tonight I've got a date with an idea that's been bothering me." Rocky hung up on that note. He found his hands sweating a little.

Ten o'clock that night Rocky reached the Beverly Hills Hotel. From there he called Tabitha's private number. Having no luck with it, he tried the Ederlee residence and was told that Miss Tabitha wasn't at home. It wasn't known when she would be home or where she had gone.

When Rocky sauntered away from the hotel's portecochere, he went in the direction of Rexford Drive. He walked slowly, taking his time.

He soon found himself under the Arizona ash trees of the winding street. Walking along the sidewalk was an almost eerie experience. Light from the street lamps didn't reach into the branches far enough. The shadows looked like wraiths waiting to drop on some luckless pedestrian.

When Rocky came to the Ederlee place he walked in on the driveway, past the porch with the enormous vases on

it and past the too-large drawing-room that was now dark and forbidding. An upstairs light was the only one showing in the house. In the backyard behind a small, yellow, bug-repelling light was the three-car garage. Two of the doors stood open as though waiting for cars to come home; the other door was locked. There were rooms above the garages which were unoccupied—Grafton, the butler, and the housekeeper were the only two servants in the household and they left the premises at eight at night.

There was a lighted space to cross, and a narrow cement walk circled to the basement door. Rocky walked across the path of light as though he owned the place. In the shadows he hesitated—and waited. Then he tried the basement door; it was locked. He looked at the lock in the light of the small flashlight he'd brought with him. The lock was big and sturdy and seemed as strong as the iron bar that was across the door. It looked as though it would withstand a battering ram. Shielding his light in his hand, he took a look at a window. There was no neat silver strip of metal border around the glass—and no burglar alarm.

Grimly, Rocky went to work on the lock. This one was good and it was new. He'd brought a small pair of wire pliers and a few pieces of wire; yet it took nearly half an hour for him to click the heavy lock open. Opening the door took another five minutes for he had to be certain that it wasn't hooked to an alarm system. One jingle of an alarm bell and he was through; Beverly Hills was known as one of the best-policed cities in the country.

Inside the basement he pulled the door shut behind him. In the darkness a tiny flickering flame threw an unsteady aura of light on the floor to show the location of the furnace. From the faint light he noticed with satisfaction that the blinds on the windows were down. He turned his flashlight on.

In southern California a furnace room can add up to almost anything: a place for old junk, for a hotwater heater, for a central heating system with an automatic gas

control. Or, if the house is an old one and built by an Eastern contractor, there would likely be a regular coal furnace that could later be adapted to the use of gas. Usually the same chimney used for the furnace flue would be used by the several fireplaces to be found throughout such a house. .

Talbot Ederlee must have been an Easterner. He had played it safe. The furnace was adapted for either coal, wood, or gas. At the present time, as shown by the tiny pilot flame, the furnace was burning gas as its fuel. There was a bin for coal but Rocky's light showed the walls dust-gray as though no coal had been in the bin for some time. Gas pipes ran down from the ceiling and into the mechanism of an automatic burner built into the furnace. The tiny pilot light would burn thus until someone upstairs decided to have a little heat. Then the iron firebox would blossom into flame.

Rocky moved slowly toward the furnace. His footsteps were heavy, reluctant, seemingly hesitant to take his eyes within range of what they dreaded they might see.

The lower door of the furnace whined in faint protest when he opened it. He squinted inside and saw nothing unusual. Around the pilot, within the scope of its tiny flame, was an iron burner. Directly above was the grate of the furnace proper. He squinted through the bars of the grate, which was lighted by the small flame, and could see nothing. He felt better.

Then he opened the top door, swinging it back on its hinges. It too whined a faint but mournful protest. He shot the beams of his flashlight inside, looked—and got sick.

Stuck high in the fire box was a charred body. It was hung there by wire. By a diabolically clever scheme, the corpse had slowly dried under the heat instead of burning all at once. The combustion was slow—would be slow; there'd be no odor and no muss. In time the body would be gone altogether, leaving a small residue of ashes to be disposed of in any way the murderer chose.

While Rocky stared at the gruesome sight a sudden clanking noise came from above his head. The gas burner burst into a circle of blue fire. Red-tipped flames crept up through the grate and licked at, but never touched, the body. The light inside was better now—too good. He hurriedly closed the iron door.

For a moment Rocky's face became a puzzled mask in the light of the furnace's glow. Then his twisted face raised to the ceiling, his voice broke with emotion. "You murderers!" he cried. "She's—she's been in there the weeks she's been missing. Poor kid, if it is her, she didn't even leave the house. You didn't let her, you murdering son-of-a-bitches!"

Dropping weakly on an empty box in the darkness, he sat there until he'd smoked a cigarette through. He shook his head every few puffs as though rejecting a thought. "God, it could be any of them!" he said. Once the box trembled as he beat his fist against it. Then, deliberately, woodenly, he ground out his cigarette on the sole of his shoe and put the butt into his pocket, and wiped off the handles to the two iron doors and all other places he'd touched. Then he went outside, locking the basement door behind him. His hands shook while he was doing the job.

He got past the lighted spot in the back yard again and slipped out the driveway to the street. He cursed the house and its living inmates. It was half an hour before he could look rationally at the lights still burning in an upper room of the house. Then he went in on the walk to the porch.

The third time he tried the bell he kept his finger on it until a light came on in the downstairs living-room. Ned Foote, in a gray smoking robe, opened the door and peered at Rocky from under his bushy brows. His eyes were stormy. "Didn't I tell you to stay away from here! What do you want?"

"Miss Tabitha." Rocky fought to control his voice.

"I told you she wasn't in once this evening."

"Sure you did—on the phone. But if she's not in you'll

do as well. That is, if you really want to find Hildegarde." Rocky looked at his hand; it had stopped shaking. "I think I've got something for you."

The little man stared at him for the space of a long breath. Then he inclined his head and stepped aside. Rocky found himself ushered into the big drawing-room he'd first glimpsed. As he went across it he lifted his eyes as though expecting to see somebody watching him from the balcony. There was no one there. There was no one in the big room either.

"I'm listening," snapped Ned Foote.

Suddenly there was the scent of heavy sachet and Alice Foote joined her husband. She had a robe over a lace-necked nightgown. She didn't look at Rocky; she looked only at her husband. "What is it, Ned, dear?"

Ned Foote smiled at her, brought her favorite chair, and sat her in it. Then he said: "Our friend brings news."

Rocky nodded. "I really should wait until Miss Tabitha comes in." But he sat down in the chair that Ned Foote indicated.

Aunt Alice squinted and shook her hand. Then she asked in her bird-like voice: "Ned, dear—please tell him to move closer so I can see his face."

Rocky moved closer. "My news is about Hildegarde Ederlee. I've—I think I've found her."

"What!" said Ned Foote. Then he said: "Yes?"

Rocky's eyes narrowed. He told him something about—Sally. "When I mentioned that I was looking for a girl she started running. Then I found she'd run away from her folks."

The couple exchanged glances but said nothing.

Rocky went on. "I trailed her, found where she worked. But she was smart. When she found I was after her she bought a flock of railroad tickets."

"A flock of tickets?" repeated Alice Foote. She looked at her husband.

"A transcontinental ticket, my dear."

Rocky nodded. "A stopover ticket east. But the girl didn't ride through; she got off somewhere. It would take time and money to check each station. Maybe I'll have to be gone months." He felt for his cigarettes and hurriedly put them away again. "Then there's another clue I'm chasing right here in town. It's almost as good a chance as the other. One of them will produce Hildegarde."

Ned Foote thumped his chin with a stubby forefinger. A lot of coolness dropped away. He was suddenly almost pleasant. "If your girl answers the description and she ran away from her folks, it must be our Hildy. You see, Mr. Nevins, we don't want to leave a stone unturned."

"That's what I wanted to see Miss Tabitha about. I wanted to be on my way tonight. You can't lose time on a deal like this."

Ned Foote nodded. "I can see that." He smiled down at Alice. "Perhaps, dear, it is our Hildy." Alice Foote smiled lovingly back at him.

"A thousand dollars should run things a month," said Rocky. "It shouldn't take longer than that. But it's a tossup whether I should work that angle or this one here. What do you think?"

Ned Foote looked concerned. "We want to do what we can. I don't know when Tabitha will return, and I can see the reason for haste—a moment, please."

Alice Foote and Rocky didn't speak while Ned Foote was out of the room. Once he reached for a piñon nut, but when she coughed he brought his hand out empty again. When Mr. Foote got back he carried a roll of greenbacks in his hand. "I'm advancing you the one thousand dollars. There's paper on the desk. You can give me your receipt."

Rocky smiled. "I'm sorry. I never give a receipt. I figure my services in advance before I ask for a retainer. Now, if Miss Tabitha was here—"

Mr. Foote waved his hands. "It's perfectly all right. And

there's no need to mention this visit to Miss Tabitha. I'll take care of everything."

Rocky nodded and pocketed the money. "I'll let myself out," he said. Two very relieved smiles followed him to the door.

Outside, he crammed his hat on his head savagely. His hands were shaking again but he had a cigarette glowing in the night before he'd gone fifty feet. "God," he said, "do they want to get me out of town, or do they!"

He turned left and strode on to the corner—toward Los Angeles. At the corner was an Auto Club boulevard stop. He looked at it a moment; then he moved over to a low rock wall and sat down to finish his cigarette and think. Within five minutes a police car swept around the corner and came over to his side, a spotlight showering him in its light. Rocky had pushed away from the wall by the time one of the officers got out of the car. The officer demanded. "What's the big idea?"

Rocky said: "If you mean my waiting here, it's a dame."
"Funny place to wait for her."

Rocky nodded. Then he smiled into the spotlight. "I'm waiting here because of the boulevard stop. She comes this way, from L.A. Being a very law-abiding lady, she'll make this stop. I'll step out in front of her car, she'll see me, call my name, and I'll get to see her without explaining my life history to her folks."

"Well," said the cop grinning, "that was a mouthful. Mind if we stick around? I'd like to see how it works."

"Not at all. I wouldn't mind a bit."

"Thanks," said the officer. He grinned again. "Now what name would the lady be calling you?"

"Rocky—Rocky Nevins."

The other cop in the car thumbed through a list of names he had on a sheaf of papers. Then he shook his head. Rocky smiled in the darkness. No reader was out for him. But this wasn't Los Angeles.

It took fifteen minutes for a car to turn into a long

tunnel of ash trees. The lights came on steadily. The cop stood on the sidewalk while Rocky squinted at the lines of the car when it made the stop. Then he stepped out into the full glare of the headlights and looked into them.

A feminine voice cried: "Rocky!"

The cop said: "Nice going," and moved back to his patrol car. The car rolled off into the night.

Tabitha pulled her own car into the curb and looked at Rocky. "What's the matter—in trouble?"

"No. The police force just asked me not to do too much wandering around in the moonlight by myself."

She laughed and held the door open. "You've been waiting for me, haven't you?"

"Sure. I phoned the house and they said you hadn't gotten back yet." He smiled at her. "I'm working nights now. I never give up. Even if you stopped paying me I'd have to go on until I found Hildegard!"

"You would?" She lighted a cigarette. "Say, cops have been swarming over the place like June bugs. Uncle Ned reported Hildy's car stolen."

"Is that so?" asked Rocky.

She said: "You know it is. Were you there—with Mary?"

He nodded. "I'm sticking close to her."

"That's good. Have her phone me, Rocky. Did—did you find anything? I mean any trace of Hildy?"

He told her the same story he'd told Mr. and Mrs. Foote. "If you think it's worth following I'll leave at once. But I'll have to have money. Five hundred would take care of it."

"Whew!" she said. "This business is getting expensive." Then she studied him. "How long will it take?"

"A month to check the towns between here and Chicago."

"All right," she said. "Shall we go to the house?"

"Not unless you want the Footes to know about it."

"Oh, no," she said quickly. "I did a little winning to-

night." She went through her purse and into her nylon stockings and came up with a little over the five hundred dollars he'd asked for. She gave it all to him.

Then she was grinning at him. "I'd like to know one thing if you're not too sensitive to tell me—"

He stiffened.

"That scar on your face. I've been wondering—"

"Oh," he said. His eyes half closed. "She was tall like you. With raven-black hair. I told her I was leaving, that I had to go—back home. It was just a scratch, but it's made me wary of women ever since—"

She laughed not too softly. She quoted: "'She knifed me one night when I wished she was white, and I learned about women from her.' Okay, Romeo. But be sure you keep in touch with one woman—this one."

Rocky assured her that when he had something to report he'd surely do so. He started to slip out of the car; then he asked: "Can you drop me at a cab station? I'd hate to get picked up with all this money on me."

She grinned at him again. "Hold your hat and don't stand up."

On his way downtown in the cab they'd found, he mumbled: "Another dame that wants me out of town."

Before going upstairs to his room he went into a phone booth of the El Cabrillo. It was some time before he got an answer. Then he said: "Charley? . . . This is Rocky. . . . Sure I know how late it is. Sorry. . . . No, I can't come up. I'll be dropping in on you soon. I ran into another jam. I'm at a dial phone so it's all right. We can talk.

"Well, Charley, I went out to the Ederlee house tonight and got into the basement. I found a body in the furnace. . . . Yeah, half burnt. Must have been in there a week or so. Pretty well dried up. . . . I've got an all-gone feeling. If I call cops, they'll rush in and make arrests and probably overlook the real murderer or murderers. . . . Hell, how would I know who it is? No. . . . Hell, no! . . . I've

worked the suspects down to one of three, maybe four. . . . I don't know whose body it is, but from the looks, etc., it could be the girl. . . . Look, what I want to know, is, what do you do in a case like this?"

He listened, then said: "That's what I think—no cops. At least not for a while." Then he smiled wryly and closed his eyes. "It's sure one way of disposing of a body. No greasy smoke, no odor—a slow, drying-up, then a complete destruction. . . . That's what I think, too—nobody will try to remove the body—it's too safe where it is. If it's lasted a week or ten days it'll last a few more days. . . . Just a few days. . . . Sure I'll call you when I get back. And I'll come up when I get the chance. And, yes, I'm still remembering about our deal.

"Wait a minute. My business sounds like small potatoes after this—but keep the thing rolling. I'm putting fifteen hundred dollars into the mail for you tonight. See if you can pay that bird up north not to die!"

C H A P T E R. 16

Hermosillo

HE STIRRED when Mary came into his bedroom, shook him, and asked him what he wanted to eat. Fighting himself awake, he smiled faintly at her. She was already dressed in a light summer outfit that she'd probably brought over in a suitcase from her apartment. She wrinkled her nose at him, smiling.

"You're a lazy so-and-so. This is the last time I'm asking you. What do you want to eat? They're waiting on the phone."

"Orange juice, ham and eggs over, hotcakes, butter and syrup, and a pot of coffee." He came fully awake then and with his awakening remembered the night before. "Make it a cup of coffee—I'm not too hungry."

She looked at him closely. "You must have had a bad time last night." She brought a hand from behind her and pushed a glass of straight whisky into his hands. "It's nearly noon," she said as an afterthought.

He sniffed at the drink, drank it, and watched her speculatively as she went back into her own room. Her voice came to him as she talked on the phone ordering his breakfast. He got up, showered, shaved, and dressed. By this time the waiter had brought up a pot of coffee and some orange juice.

Later over a cigarette Rocky sat perfectly motionless, smoke rolling up alongside his face. He studied her brown eyes that looked so clean and honest. He said: "Boo-hoo, I guess this is it."

"What—" Her eyes widened a little. "What do you mean?" Lips parted, she watched him take out the five bills she'd given him and lay them on the table. He said: "I'm quitting."

"Quitting? You mean, you're not going to Hermosillo?"

"That's it. I'm fed up. It's Hermosillo now. When I get there Hildegard'll probably be in Florida. Then next, it might be New York, London, Italy in the spring. No, I'm going to hunt for her here, on my own. I'll find her; then I'm going back to San Francisco and sell automobiles."

She didn't touch the money. She didn't even look at it. "You mean, simply, you don't want to go down to Hermosillo by yourself. Isn't that it?"

"Maybe," he admitted, shrugging his shoulders. "But it doesn't make any difference. What I'd really like to do is buy a car and drive up to San Francisco where I've got some business waiting for me. There's a town for you. Cable cars on all the hills, four lines of streetcar tracks on Market Street, two bay bridges, buildings that stick into the sky. The greatest city in the world."

"Will you hush?" She looked at him closely. "Is there any other reason you don't want to go?"

"I'm a little afraid of what we'll find down there."

"What do you mean?"

"If Hildegard's really in trouble it's probably too late to save her. She might even be in a house."

"Oh!" she said softly. Her eyes were hurt and reproachful. "Oh, Rocky, why do you say such things?"

"All right, I've got a filthy mind." Dousing his cigarette in his coffee cup, he looked at her closely. "I'm kind of mixed up. I can't get that San Juan Capistrano thing, either, Boo-hoo. And listen, bright eyes, that Heber is one cool baby. He knows which way is up and don't forget it."

"Is he the one who left the note saying I was Hildy?"

"How should I know?" he asked petulantly. "Maybe it was Wesley Bell. He's a good friend of yours and maybe the note was just a warning."

Her eyes burned a little. "Maybe. You won't believe this, but Mr. Bell's interest is entirely a fatherly one. He had a young daughter—he sees her in me. But you wouldn't understand."

He said slowly: "I'll understand if you want me to."

She gave him an odd look. After a moment she picked up the banknotes and pushed them back toward him.

He stuffed them into his wallet. "All right, if that's the way you want it. Why should I worry? I'm doing all right. I'm getting paid for all this."

She shot him a scornful look. "That's all it means to you—money."

He waved his hand, said angrily: "That's right. I'm money mad. But I've given you goddam good service for the money! Nursemaid, bodyguard, taking you places, saving you, putting you to bed—"

"Yes," she cried, her eyes blazing, "for what you can get out of it!"

"All in the line of duty. But you've got money paid up on the credit side of the ledger. You've got service coming. You can give me the can now or you can let me help you. I don't give a damn! Make it easy on yourself. The only thing is, I'm finding Hildegard before I stop." He stamped

out of the room, went down the elevator, and into the back room off the lobby. He had a double gin-and-bitters.

When he went on out the barroom door he found a cab cruising along the street and had it take him down town.

In the Spring Street bar he saw Fred and Simms leaning against the end of the mahogany bar; he leered into their bruised faces and said: "Hello, boys, how you feel?" and went on. He made a few more calls around town, his mind lost in his own problem. He had a sandwich and a beer at Dinty Moore's just off Main Street and got back to the El Cabrillo at shortly after three.

Mary Jaine wasn't in her room or his. There was no singing from the bathroom, no tall, lovely creature lounging on the bed. There was only a note on the pillow.

He looked at the note placidly and then with growing excitement. It said:

Smarty-pants,

All right, I'll do the going to Hermosillo.

Boo-hoo.

Note in hand, he hurriedly inspected the two rooms. Her things were gone. He took the stairs down to the lobby and did a little fast phoning.

Mary didn't answer the phone from her room at the Rampart Plaza; Tabitha said she hadn't seen her; he phoned Wesley Bell without results. Then he phoned the airport. A plane had left for Hermosillo and way points to Mexico City at three o'clock. A tall, blond girl giving the name of Mary Anders had been aboard.

Another department told him they were now booked for two days ahead. Rocky cursed a little until he remembered that he still had reservations on the Southern Pacific leaving that night for Tucson. The difference in time gave him a chance to buy a small, flat automatic pistol from the backroom of a downtown pawnshop.

The train left Los Angeles at eight, taking Rocky with it. He'd arrived at the station an hour early, watching the gate to the train. Nobody had entered that he knew. The cars were air conditioned and comfortable. At Yuma, which he reached before daylight, Rocky got a telegram off to the Footes and an air-mail letter to Tabitha. Each missive gave the information that he was on his way; each was a sort of receipt for the money he'd received.

At Tucson he changed to a Nogales train waiting on a spur track. The complete train consisted of one baggage and one coach. At Nogales a cargador helped him get a tourist card, carried his small bag across the border to another town named Nogales, and arranged for Pullman transportation on a train called the *El Mixto*.

The fat-faced, genial cargador gave Rocky a liquid smile and a shrug of his shoulders. "Señor, et es indeed unfortunate that today es today. Today et es *El Mixto*; mañana, et es *El Rápido*, thee fast tren."

But Rocky didn't do any groaning until he found that he had arrived in Nogales on an off day. Every other day the mixed train was on schedule instead of the fast one. *El Mixto* composed of one ancient Pullman, two first-class coaches, two second-class coaches and all the freight box-cars the engineers wanted to haul—which in this case was four.

The mixed train of the Sud-Pacífico was nearly five hours late starting south from the border. Yet there was a festive air about its going. Everyone was eagerly looking out of the dark windows, smiling to each other now that the train was in motion. Rocky went up front. In the second-class coaches, whole families were sprawled out on the wooden seats and were already digging into their picnic baskets. There were small bunches of Mexican bananas hanging from some of the luggage racks. Some passengers were carrying live chickens in their arms or holding them head down.

At the near end of the coach, Rocky found a news

butcher's stand, which already was the most popular spot on the train. He grinned at the young Mexican agente. "Cerveza," he said.

"Sí." A brown hand lifted the lid of an icebox and brought an icy bottle of Carta Blanca from the water. When Rocky saw two children hurrying over to peer into the box, he said: "Two sodas." The agente brought out two strawberry pops and everybody was happy.

They swept through the state of Sonora, through 280 kilometers of desert and sleepy little towns, a few fertile valleys and then raw, dry arroyos. It was down grade nearly all the way from Nogales with few curves on the single track. The train, which had lost still more time during the night, arrived at Carbo with the morning sunshine streaming in through the windows. Two hours later the train was hurtling into Hermosillo at a good twenty miles per hour.

The arrival was another festive occasion. The first-class passengers detrained with a certain restraint, but the less sedate second-class ones were yelling excitedly and piling their belongings out the windows. Peddlers were already running alongside the open windows dispensing their foods, ice-cold wares, dates, bananas, and other tropical and subtropical fruits.

Rocky leaped for a taxi and said to the driver: "Hotel Casa de las Rosas, y pronto."

"You said it," grinned the chauffeur.

It was too early in the year to be hot and too early in the day for the two-hour siesta; so Benito Juárez, the main street, was fairly well filled with traffic. A friendly breeze was finding its way up from Guaymas on the Gulf of California, some eighty miles away. Before Rocky could enjoy much of it the car was pulling to a stop in front of the Casa de las Rosas.

Rocky got out, paid the driver what he asked in American money, and told him to keep the change. Then he went inside and up a couple of stone steps to the cool patio

porch. There were large palms in pots, a few banana plants, and quite a few comfortable seats.

A tall, bright-eyed girl dressed in a white suit was sitting in one of the chairs. She smiled at him and said: "How do you do?"

Rocky said: "Hello, Boo-hoo," dropped into a seat next to her, and lit a cigarette. After a minute he added a question: "Any luck?"

She whispered back: "No. Hildy's not registered here—but she might be anywhere around. Isn't it a beautiful place?"

"I just got in," Rocky said dryly. He looked inside toward the desk.

She said quickly: "You'd better get a room some place else. Hildy might be scared off if she saw you with me. I can wait right here, and—"

He leaned forward in his chair. "Look, Boo-hoo, did you see anybody you know down here? Like Heber, say?"

She shook her head. Her eyes stopped laughing. "You don't think—that he'd come here?"

"He's one of them," he said flatly. "Maybe he's the one. That's why I came down here—to keep an eye on you. Somebody wants to kill you, sweetheart, and they'll keep trying. You shouldn't have come here, but you did; so keep your eyes open, and if you see him or anybody you don't like the looks of, duck out of sight and get in touch with me."

She looked contrite, upset, and afraid. "I certainly will," she cried.

"I'll get a place a couple of blocks away, but close enough so I can keep an eye on you. Okay?"

"Oh, yes, if it's all right with you." Mary's eyes were shining like stars again. She seemed to easily forget her danger, almost her troubles, even Hildegard. She saw only the beauty of her surroundings—the plaza across the street that was filled with subtropical trees. Palms were everywhere, and fountains and a smattering of friendly citizenry.

And the circling walk was a promenade that would really come alive with the evening.

In front of the Casa de las Rosas Hotel, a tiny barefoot girl in voluminous dress and black shawl, which had likely belonged to her grandmother, hesitated and looked in. In her arms was a bouquet of red roses. Rocky beckoned her, gave her a half dollar, and she put the flowers into Mary's arms and ran away laughing.

Mary, he saw, was a center for all eyes in and out of the patio lobby. She made a lovely picture: blond hair, a smart little blue-and-white hat, and her white suit. Rocky left her posing thus and went off to find a room at the Ramos, the Laval, or the Esteban; he finally settled on the Esteban because of its location and its cool brick patio and subtropical garden.

Later he phoned her and found that Hildegarde hadn't as yet put in an appearance, and suggested that they meet that evening at the El Charro, a smart café a block from the Parque Madero.

The café on Avenida Serdán had red gingham tablecloths that looked like silk, a couple of talkative white parrots, and the aroma of good and plentiful food.

Mary, starry-eyed and excited, gave Rocky a report of her first day at the Casa de las Rosas. "I sat in plain sight all the time, and today they paged me when you called. No Hildegarde." She looked around. "This is nice. Could we have some of that Carta Blanca?"

"I've already ordered it," he said. "But about Hildegarde—let's look for her in Mexico City next." He smiled. "In the spring it'll be the Mediterranean countries, summer in Alaska, winter in the tropics. This Hildegarde dame can sure get around!"

"Hush," she said.

The beer came—tall, frosty bottles. After they'd imbibed, Rocky said: "I'll take back every unkind thing I've said about Hildegarde. I'm getting to think she is really worth while."

"I'm glad to hear you say that." She put his hand on her arm. "If you only knew—well, you'll see her. And then you'll know what I mean. Somehow, now I'm not worrying so much."

"I had a chance to check around this afternoon myself," he said. "But with no results."

Mary's eyes were dreamy. "We'll find her. Rocky, you've been certainly grand. I really appreciate all this. Where was it that you checked, as you call it?"

He moved his glass into a different red square of tablecloth. "Oh, around," he evaded. Then he smiled at her. "Would you just as soon talk about something to eat? Here comes our *enchiladas* and our *chiles relesños*."

As they strolled along the promenade Mary said: "Oh, please, sir, may I talk about where you looked for Hildy? And could we walk past some of the saloons and things?"

"Well," said Rocky, "they're no different from American ones in L.A. And you don't have to get all steamed up. Hermosillo's one of the cleanest towns in Mexico."

"Oh!" She decided not to light a cigarette on the street; so they took a tiny table just off the sidewalk where they were served another beer. After he'd lighted her cigarette she said: "Rocky?"

"Yes, Boo-hoo?"

"You won't have anything to do with these Mexican girls, will you?"

He looked at her in surprise. "Why?"

"Oh, I don't know." She flushed and said quickly: "Maybe we'd better go back to the hotel. She might show up."

He left her at her hotel and went to his. He found time-tables of the *Sud-Pacífico* and of the Pan American Airways at the desk and took them to his room and studied them. He went for another walk. Later, when he passed the Casa de las Rosas, he saw Mary in the lobby sitting in plain sight of anyone coming past on the street or walking through the lobby. He smiled grimly, dropped in at a liquor store, made a purchase, and went back to his hotel.

An hour later he phoned the Casa de las Rosas. "The Señorita Mary Jaine," he told the clerk. "I believe she is in the lobby. Sí, I shall wait."

Then he was talking to Mary. "This is Rocky. Can you come over? I've run into some of the strangest drinking-liquor you've ever seen. It's green, but it's not crème de menthe, and it's not absinthe or wormwood. It's got a rap like a mescal-and-tequila half-and-half. The proprietor of the place I bought it called it 'Liqueur de Verdad.' He said it would make the most stubborn female in the world tell the truth. . . . Sure, I'll wait. I'll be in the lobby."

A faint spot of red was in each cheek when she arrived but her smile was still working. Apprehension came into her brown eyes when she asked: "What happened now? And what did you mean by 'telling the truth'?"

"Shush, Boo-hoo. Can't you see the natives looking at us? Look at the two caballeros over there. They're remarking what a lovely couple we make—'Buenas noches, señores,'" he said and nodded, and then he took her arm and they strolled on through the lobby.

He promenaded her through a stuccoed archway. There was a corridor and a secondary flight of tiled stairs. They went up to the third floor—to room 345. Rocky opened the door, clicked on the lights, and bowed her in.

"Stop it," she said. But she went inside. "What's this all about?" When he didn't answer she looked curiously about her.

The room was large and had a four-posted bed of some kind of heavy wood with an imported spread that looked like Portugal linen but wasn't. There was a woven Indian rug and heavy furniture throughout. A bath and a dressing-room adjoined. The wide front windows had drapes.

He lighted the floor lamp and turned off the main lights. It gave the room a sort of cocktail-lounge effect. Seating her in the most comfortable chair, he brought out a tall green bottle and two glasses. "Like to try it?" he challenged.

When she didn't say anything he poured about two

inches into each glass and handed her one. She took it, sniffed, and tasted. She said in a low voice: "Like sloe gin. Like the kind at Capistrano."

Rocky smiled. "Only this stuff is dangerous."

She looked up at him, her eyes curious again. "Dangerous?"

"Sure," he said. "The natives say it makes people tell the truth."

"That's what you said before." She took a fast drink and drank it all. She whirled to him. "All right, what do you want to know?"

"Wait a minute. Maybe it takes time to take effect." He took her glass and filled it again. He said: "I'm warning you about this stuff."

"I'm not afraid of it."

"Well, neither am I." He filled his glass and moved to the couch. "It's probably just a superstition."

"Yes?" She got up from the chair and walked around the room. She looked trim and neat and graceful. When she came back she leaned against the head of the couch. "Rocky, I can't stay sore at you. But, why in the world?—if you didn't believe me just why did you come down here?"

His jaw tightened. "Look, does somebody have to hit you over the head to prove you're in danger? Can't you get it through that thick skull of yours?"

"Oh, Rocky!"

He lit a cigarette and blew his words out in smoke. "Hildegard didn't show up. You know why. I know why. For my part I'll be glad to get this mess all over with."

"Me too," she said simply.

"I'm tired of playing."

"Me too." She sank deeper into the couch and smiled sadly as though she'd just lost a dream. She'd given up all at once.

"Let's quit right now," he suggested.

"Let's."

He looked at her closely. "Let's take a big drink of that stuff, then start talking." When they did and had stopped grimacing, he said: "You want to get this out of your system, don't you—Hildegarde?"

She smiled gently. "Hildegarde?" she asked.

"Yes, Boo-hoo. From now on if anybody's going to be coy, it'll be me. You've had your share. To save useless conversation I'll tell you what I know. I've known, have had you figured out for some time."

She ran a tiny smile up the edge of her mouth. "You have?"

"Don't get me wrong. If there had been a Hildegarde down here besides you it would have been swell. I would have loved it."

"Rocky, that was nice." She met his gaze steadily. "What else? How else did you know?"

"You're sure you want to hear, Hildy?"

She nodded. "I imagine I'll hear it whether I want to or not. Go ahead."

"All right," he said. "You made me a detective. So I became a detective. When you said you got a letter from Hermosillo, I went through your stuff at the Rampart Plaza, found the real letter you got from the management here telling you they would always be glad to serve you if you decided on a trip. They even thanked you for the return envelope which they used. Air mail both ways. That was good—"

"I thought I was rather clever."

"You were—plenty."

"Go on."

"You won't call me a heel?"

"No."

"I found out you weren't really a blonde—"

She blushed.

He went on. "But you were good. You were damned good! If you'd have told me you were Joe Bush from one of the fourteen cities of Decatur in the United States, I

still would have believed you. But there were other things. The way you came to Hildy's defense when I said anything derogatory about her. And the way you worked this little trip."

"Okay," she said. "I had written down here to find out about the hotels just in case I really wanted to drop out of sight. The letter was at the Rampart Plaza when I went to get a few things. I merely typed the letter purportedly from Hildy. You see, when you said you were getting close, I had to try and get you out of town. I was afraid you were getting close to me."

He sat up straight. "Then you are Hildegarde?"

"Yes, of course. I thought we had that straight. I thought—why you!" Her eyes widened. "You weren't sure, were you?"

He smiled. "Yes, I guess I was. You had Tabitha sworn to secrecy too, didn't you? She wanted me out of town when I got close to you."

She nodded and spread her hands out on her lap. "I had to get out of the clutches of my aunt and uncle some way. I was getting fleeced out of the estate my father left me. I had to get out and do my own investigating and work alone. There was nobody I could trust." Her voice was a little wild. "Don't you understand? I had to do it myself. Well, I'd already met this Mary Jaine, a blond girl about the same size as myself; we'd, in fact, become very good friends. She didn't have much money and I had a lot of it; she liked to put on the dog, go places, do things. You can see how easy it was for me to cook up this impersonation idea to let me get away from under Uncle Ned's eye.

"It was easy for Mary to play her part, Mary being an entertainer and knowing make-up like she did. She had dyed her hair brown and bleached mine to complete the deception; then she went home that night in my place. Uncle Ned's and Aunt Alice's eyes being somewhat near-sighted removed any risk of being found out. Only Mary didn't like the way she was to stay in my room.

"I took an apartment at the Rampart Plaza and registered as Mary Jaine. It was really very simple."

"How did Tabitha like it?"

"I couldn't take a chance on Tabitha; I had to let her in on it; I had to find out just how badly Uncle Ned was fleecing the estate. Then next day I heard from Tabitha that Mary had gone." She smiled faintly. "Mary just stayed the one night, then ran out on me."

Rocky didn't say anything.

She went on: "I wanted to use the Cadillac and still had it. Nobody seemed to have missed it although I had Mary prompted to tell the Footes that she'd loaned it to a friend. The Footes seemed terribly put out at Mary's disappearance, even hired a detective. Then you came out and Tab talked to you, and I met you outside the house. I'd been to Beverly Hills that day looking for Mary. Of course Tab and I had to pretend to you that we were looking for me, Hildegard, when we really wanted you to help us find Mary." Her fingers gripped his arm again. "Rocky, do you think something might have happened to Mary?"

Rocky got up, walked to the window, and looked out. He could see her slim reflection as she got up. "Do you want to tell me anything more?" he asked slowly. When she didn't answer he turned and looked at her. He gazed at her through cigarette smoke. "You don't have to answer if you don't want to. It's the same question I asked before. Why did you really want to get me out of L.A.? Was it to get me away from the Ederlee house? Or was it so you could be with Daro?"

She laughed scornfully and looked into her glass. The two glasses were empty. She filled them to within an inch of their tops.

"It's still the same answer. I told you—you were getting too close to me. But it wasn't Daro. Daro was through when he pulled that stunt in the Rampart Plaza. But I couldn't get rid of him completely. He'd overheard Mary and me talking. He knew that I was Hildegard."

"I knew he was blackmailing you."

She didn't deny it. "He thought he'd make some easy money by threatening to tell my aunt and uncle that I was masquerading as Mary, and Mary as me. I couldn't have him giving me away."

"But Wesley Bell knew you were Hildegarde too. He gave quite a biography of you that night at the Dells—for Heber's benefit mostly."

She nodded. "Yes, he did that because I asked him to. He—well, I told you about his own girl that he'd lost—just because I remind him of her, he'd do anything I asked. He's that kind, Rocky."

He was silent for a moment; then he laughed almost bitterly. "Everybody was supposed to know you were Hildegarde except me."

"Yes," she admitted. "Except you and Aunt Alice and Uncle Ned." Her brown eyes were a bit hurt. "I had to lie to you—a little."

"We're forgetting Heber."

"Gee, Rocky, I don't know whether he knew or not. What do you think? He gives me the creeps."

"Yes," he said slowly. "I'd say he knows you're Hildegarde by now. The only thing you can say to Heber's credit is that he's a private detective who knows his business. He'd have found out by now. He'd have found out a lot of things."

Her face suddenly went a little pale. "While I'm telling you the truth you might as well have all of it." A forced little smile set on her lips. "The real reason I wanted to get you out of L.A. was I wanted to see if I could stand being away from you."

Impulsively he kissed her lightly on the lips; then he said: "We'll leave in the morning, huh, Boo-hoo? By plane."

She nodded, her eyes suddenly starry. Picking up her glass of green stuff, she said: "It worked, didn't it?"

He smiled at her. It was a short smile. It faded by the

time he'd taken a deep breath, stretched out his legs, and looked at them. "Boo-hoo?"

"Yes?"

"I've got to tell you something about Mary."

Something in his manner or his tone made her stiffen and catch his hand. She became as motionless as though she'd stopped breathing.

He said slowly, softly: "She didn't run out on you."

She backed away from him, her hand over her mouth. "She didn't?" Eyes deep with anxiety, she stared at him. She shook her head as though that would hold back the bad news she was afraid of. "You didn't even know her."

"It was Mary, all right."

"What was?" Then she took a deep breath. "All right, tell me."

"She's dead." He held her shoulders tightly. "It's tough but that's the way it is. She's been dead for two weeks."

She didn't say anything. Sinking slowly to the couch, she gripped an arm of it until her knuckles were white. Pale in the subdued light, she stared at Rocky with wide eyes, lips trembling.

He told her everything; of the suspicions he'd had that made him search the basement of the Ederlee house and of finding the corpse in the furnace. He told her about the Footes' wanting to get him out of town, of Tab's wanting to get him out of town too, and of her—herself—wanting him away.

She tugged him down beside her. In his arms she sobbed as though her heart was breaking. After a long time the convulsive sobs tapered off and became farther apart. "Poor Mary!" she whispered. "It was all my fault. If I hadn't coaxed her to sleep in my bed. . . . I knew they wanted the estate but I didn't think they wanted it that bad. Uncle Ned was capable of it, but not—not Aunt Alice!"

Rocky studied the tile top of a coffee table.

Then she was raising hurt, wet eyes to him. She pushed

him away. "Rocky! You left her—in there! You knew she was there—and you left her!"

He patted her arm. "It had to be that way. She couldn't be hurt any more than she was. Whoever did it killed her in her bed and took her downstairs at night. If I'd called the police they'd have rushed in and arrested everybody in sight. There would be too many suspects, a long, nasty trial—maybe they'd never find out who did it. I had to find out who *didn't* do it first. It's a little slower this way but it's sure."

"Oh, Rocky! But you left her!—"

He dabbed at her cheeks with a handkerchief he took from his breast pocket. "That was another reason I knew you were Hildegarde. Whoever killed Mary found out too late that it was Mary, and then they started hunting for you."

Rocky got up, mixed two stiff drinks, and brought them back to the couch with two lighted cigarettes. "This might help," he said and handed her her glass. When she opened her mouth to remonstrate he put a lighted cigarette between her lips.

"We're going to fly back like avenging eagles," he told her. "If there are any confessions we're getting them before we go to the police!"

Her voice was a little wild and a little hysterical. "I know you're right. I know that's the way to do it, but—Oh, Rocky!"

It was an hour later when she lay back on the couch and smiled faintly at him. The "truth" liqueur had become an anesthetic. "Things are certainly in a mess, aren't they?" she asked in a small voice.

He said: "Boo-hoo, you know what my grandmother used to say when things got in a mess?"

"No. What did she say?"

"She said people should go to bed and forget it all."

"Your grandmother," she said, "was a very smart person."

"That's what I always thought." He took off one of her toeless shoes, then the other. . . .

A few moments later she whispered: "Rocky, please don't get even an inch away from me tonight."

He said he wouldn't. During the long night her hot tears were wet and sticky on his cheeks.

C H A P T E R 17

Avenida Serdán

THE SUN had but shortly come up over the Mexican hills when Rocky started up Calle de Benito Juárez in a four-block walk to the railroad station. But it wasn't too early for Hermosillo. Mexico starts early so it can take off its two hours for siesta in the middle of the day.

The *El Rápido* was due in from Nogales. It was late. When it arrived only two Americans got off. They came out of a dusty Pullman car and surveyed the town with misgivings. The man was fat and sweaty and carried his own suitcases despite the protestations of the *cargadores*. His wife, a frail little thing of a hundred pounds, ran at his side trying to keep up.

Rocky wasn't interested in them. Standing in the shadow of the station, he watched the other passengers unload—without seeing the man he was looking for. He waited until the *El Mixto* train came in from the south. No Americans got off. He went aboard at the Pullman. Some of the berths were down, some up. All were open. He didn't miss anything or anybody as he walked through the train. Pullman, first class, second class—he inspected them all. There were the usual hard wooden seats and a news butcher's stand with a large icebox filled with *cerveza*, Coca-Cola, and other drinks. There was a small stove, and a coffee pot, which looked as though it had come from Kress's, filled the car with the aroma of coffee.

There was steaming corn in its own shucks, and a few breakfast orders were sizzling on the stove. A small Mexican in a brown suit was selling tickets to the national lottery.

Rocky crowded through the aisle. On one side a man, in sombrero and blue denims that had been washed until they were white, held a baby in one arm and a couple of chickens head down from the other. His wife watched him as though afraid he'd forget which hand he had apportioned to the baby. There were many through passengers, some leaning from the open windows shouting to peddlers outside, but none interested Rocky. He pushed his way through the remaining cars without seeing anybody he knew.

But he didn't completely relax until he'd checked the air line. Then the fear he'd had that Heber might have followed them to Mexico was in part dispelled. The Pan American was already in from Los Angeles; but the Aeromave from Guaymas wouldn't be in until 12:50—it was the one he and Hildegard would take to Nogales on the first lap of the trip back to Los Angeles.

There would be no other train from the north until tomorrow. Yet when Rocky started down the street of Benito Juárez again, his eyes were still wary and the small automatic still felt heavy in his side pocket.

Rocky was still looking when he saw the blue taxicab. Heber got out of it, a blunt cigar sticking from his jaw.

Rocky dodged into a doorway without being seen. He saw the private detective pay the driver and then go into the Laval Restaurant. Rocky bought a cerveza in a cantina diagonally across the street.

While he waited the city's life bustled around him. Through the side door he watched a pair of moth-eaten burros dragging a wagon loaded with wood. A two-wheeled milk cart drawn by a six-hundred-pound pony clattered to a stop at the house down the street. A barefoot woman in a black dress and mantilla came from the direction of

Avenida Japala with a large basket on her head. Looking neither to right nor left, she continued on toward the market several blocks away. The ever-present shoe-shine boys clustered around Rocky. He kept one eye on the restaurant door and another on a cab he'd told to stand by.

Hal Heber finished his breakfast and came outside, picking his teeth and squinting into the sunshine.

When Heber got into a cab again Rocky was ready. His blue eyes were hard and bright when he motioned to the driver down the side street. The driver was the same pleasant English-speaking Mexican who had brought him from the railroad station the day before.

It was an easy-tailing job. Heber's cab moved over a block and skirted the Parque Madero, with its rows of palms. It stopped at a small cantina and the driver went inside. Rocky's cab pulled in at the curb half a block behind. When the driver of Heber's cab came outside, he shook his head, got into the cab, and drove on. The cab stopped at cantinas adjacent to the Parque Juárez, the Plaza Zaragoza, and the Principal without success. The kioscos, which are in the center of most plazas in Mexico, already had a smattering of loungers. The sight-seeing took in the governor's palace. But it was evident that Heber wasn't spending his time sight-seeing. At a cantina on Avenida Serdán his driver came out with a giant of a man who got into Heber's cab before Rocky could get a good look at him.

Heber's taxi started on again straight out Avenida Serdán. Then Mexico the unpredictable ran true to form. As though helping the fleeing cab, which as yet seemed unaware of being followed, everything happened at once. A string of burros loaded with wood took that moment to cross Avenida Serdán. This made a two-wheeled huckster delivering meat swerve aside and run into a milk wagon, which promptly deposited its five-gallon cans of milk on the street. While the drivers frantically tried to retrieve their goods a crowd gathered. Street peddlers came

running and set up their stands. A man began selling lottery tickets. By the time Rocky's cab got through, the other cab was out of sight. Rocky let the driver take him out the avenue until they ran out of houses. Then he said:

"Let's go back to the Casa de las Rosas."

"Okay." As the driver turned around he said: "They could have gone down any of these side streets."

Rocky nodded and looked at his watch. It was now ten o'clock—less than three hours before he and Hildegard could catch the plane north.

He muttered to himself: "That's all I want. Just to get her safely out of here."

When they pulled to a stop in front of the hotel Rocky said: "Want to wait a minute?" and went inside.

Hildegard wasn't in her room. Rocky tried the desk.

"Oh," said the man, "she has gone. Only a few minutes ago she went."

"Where? ¿Dónde?"

The clerk shrugged his shoulders and smiled evasively. Rocky didn't spend any time with him. He shoved a ten-dollar bill under the slim Mexican's face.

A ten-dollar bill added up to fifty pesos in Mexican money. The clerk said quickly: "I took thee telephone call. The message say: 'Have Maria Jaine meet me at the Nueva Japala Cantina y Café at once. Any chófer knows where es. Sign—Rocky.'" The "Rocky" he pronounced was like Roak—ey.

But it was good enough. Rocky went out the door in six-foot strides, leaped into the cab, and told the chófer to break any existing speed record to the New Japala.

"Wait a minute," said the driver. "Now, let's see. . . ."

"Wait, hell!" cried Rocky. "Let's get going!"

But the driver, like most Mexicans, had a contempt for haste. "It'll be there when we get there," he smiled. "Must be that little joint out at the end of the washed-out street. We'll try it." He was on his way, his tires making a smooth turn back into the avenue.

Before Avenida Serdán ran out they swerved off into a side street. The street went a dozen blocks and ended at a gully washed there by the last storm. A few single-story, plastered houses clustered together. All were residences with windows covered by iron bars, which allowed the occupants to sleep in the fresh air without being molested or robbed. The few women and children in the doorways watched the cab impersonally and without interest.

The driver pulled up and pointed ahead. "That's it across the arroyo. We should have gone around. It's the little adobe building with the plastered wall."

Rocky was already out of the cab. "Wait here!" he cried. Moving past a two-wheeled cart where a milkman was ladling out a quart of milk to a small barefoot girl, he began running toward the washout. The small building was half a block away.

The gun he'd brought with him jolted in his pocket when he started running. As he approached, the one structure resolved itself into three: three separate buildings and a patio. There was no car or taxi in front of it. Rocky slowed.

Music, from rambling fingers strumming at a guitar, came from the first building. A tired-looking sign admitted the establishment was, or had been, "*La Cantina de Nueva Japala*." He couldn't see anything through the dirty screen door, but the interior had the smell of stale beer and tobacco smoke of male occupancy. Iron bars were over the windows of the other buildings, indicating that they were sleeping-rooms.

Rocky took a deep breath and pulled the screen door open. The room had a dirt floor, tables and chairs, and a sort of bar. Sitting on the end of the bar was a very pretty bare-legged Mexican girl with a guitar on her lap. She had very high-heeled red shoes and no stockings. She looked about eighteen but was probably sixteen. Her fingers stopped moving over the strings of the guitar when she saw Rocky.

She smiled at him and her fingers began moving again.

Rocky smiled back. He moved on to the bar. She was the only one there. He asked: "The *señorita*—you see her? *¿Dónde está la señorita?*"

She brightened. "You want girl?"

"No," he told her. "I—"

A door at the side shook noisily. The door wasn't very strong: half screen, half wood. The screen part was covered by a square of dirty canvas that could be rolled up and fastened to allow a free current of air. It wasn't rolled up now. A heavy voice called out: "Consuela, open up."

Rocky's blue eyes got hard. He had heard Heber's voice before. He still didn't like it.

The Mexican girl got down from the bar. Rocky shook his head at her. He rolled up the canvas on the screen and said: "What's the trouble?"

Heber's fat face didn't look any better through a screen. His eyes widened. "Hey! I thought—" He didn't finish. His eyes narrowed almost out of sight when he said: "So, it's you!"

"Yeah, it's me!" Rocky made no motion to unlatch the door. He was sparring for time. "What'll you have?"

A leer came to Heber's fat face. "We'll have the girl. Eh, Rick." The "Eh, Rick" was directed a little louder and at a point behind Rocky.

Rocky whirled around. The big man who had gotten into Heber's cab stood there. Big and broad, he'd discarded his jacket; now he wore a sleeveless undershirt, a pair of dingy denims, and no shoes. One brown, bare foot had a big toe snubbed and tied with a rag. Standing there, he looked like an overgrown, backward schoolboy.

Rocky started at him, and past him. As yet he'd seen no indication that Hildegarde had arrived. He felt a little better about the situation.

The big man pointed toward the side door.

Heber said: "Rick wants you to open it. Better do as he says."

"Sure," said Rocky, and unlatched the door.

Heber lumbered inside, his small eyes leaping around the room. "Hey," he cried, "where's the girl?"

"What girl?" asked Rocky. "Nobody came with me."

"Take him inside, Rick. Rick—inside. Pronto." Heber stalked over to the girl. "You watch here. Watch for American girl."

The girl smiled and stopped strumming the guitar long enough to say: "Sí, señor." Then she gathered up her guitar and slipped behind the bar away from him.

Heber turned back to Rocky. "All right, you son-of-a-bitch, we'll do some talking."

Rocky smiled faintly. Then he stopped smiling. The big half-breed's voice had changed. "Go through door," he growled. Then Rocky saw the long-barreled gun—a .41 pistol that looked battered enough to have been through all the revolutions of Mexico.

"Sure," said Rocky, and went through the side door into an enclosed patio.

The patio was of ancient flagstones and had a dried-up fountain with several tiles missing. A wooden table and wooden benches looked as though they had frequent use. An overgrown, scrubby guava was trying its best to be a tree. Off the patio were several doors, all cracked open as though to let in the air. No one was in sight. When Heber came lumbering out into the court the guitar started up again inside the cantina.

Heber growled: "In that room." He waved a pudgy hand across the patio.

Rocky said: "Why not?" and went in. It was plain that Hildegarde hadn't arrived. By the time she did maybe he could have the situation under control. He wasn't afraid of the big man's gun yet. He still had his own small automatic. . . .

But he waited too long. He was suddenly flung headlong into the room. He ended up against the far wall, dazed and blinking his eyes. Heber was pointing a big,

flat automatic at him now. But it was the big man who had hurtled Rocky against the wall by one sweep of his huge hand.

Rick came on again, his long arms swinging from his side. But he shoved the battered pistol into his belt.

Dazed, Rocky watched Heber's automatic while Rick's deft fingers ran over him. The fingers found the small pistol and flung it onto an iron bed. Then the big half-breed lifted Rocky by an arm, dragged him away from the wall, and set him into a rawhide-bottomed chair.

Rocky cursed his helplessness. He fumbled a Belmont cigarette from a pack and stuck the trembling white cylinder into his mouth. He lit up, then looked slowly and bleary-eyed around him. A dirty bed, a table, two rawhide chairs, a worn-out serape being used for a rug on the dirt floor—that was all there was. Tobacco smoke wafted into the sunshine that slanted in from the windows; it rose and lost its identity in the hot rafters. The heat was beating in now. It gave a sickening edge to the helplessness of his situation.

Heber pulled his cigar from his thick lips and said: "You asked for it. You couldn't keep your nose out of my business. I wish to hell the boys were here now; they'd like to have a go at you again—hey, who beat up on them for you?"

"I've got friends," said Rocky. He began to feel a little better. Wiping his face with his handkerchief, he looked at the big man leaning against the door. He asked: "You Mex?"

The big man shook his head. "Me Rick."

Heber said: "I'll take care of you in a minute." He led the big man aside, whispered to him, and gave him some money. Rick put away his gun and backed out of the door.

Heber leered back at Rocky. "The Mex girl is taking a five spot over to your cab driver, telling him to go home."

Rocky smiled faintly. "Have it your own way." He

studied the cruel, fat face. "But our talk doesn't need guns."

Heber ignored him and wiped the sweat from his jaw. "Damn the heat! Say, how'd you wiggle yourself out of that stolen-car rap in Capistrano?"

Rocky took off his hat and fanned himself with it. "That's a job you should have taken care of yourself, Heber. It smelled—a frame-up!"

Heber cursed with the rage of a man who had been cheated. When his curses subsided Rocky said: "All right, Heber, I'll admit you outguessed me here. But I didn't think you'd risk using a gun in Mexico. You know what that means down here?"

"Yeah, I know what it means. But I know my business. I'd have found you even if Ned Foote hadn't told me you were leaving town. When I found you'd bought a ticket for Hermosillo I knew what was up. Then I found that the girl came by plane. I took a private plane to Guaymas and a taxi here. I arrived last night, so had plenty of time arranging things. You didn't know it but you were playing right into my hands. This is my stamping grounds. I know this town like a book." Heber was a little out of breath when he got through his speech.

Rocky inhaled at his cigarette. "Do you have to have the girl? Can't we work it out some other way?"

Heber laid a piece of paper and a fountain pen on the table. "Yeah, we can work it out. You came out here instead of the girl. Now you're sending for her."

Rocky's blue eyes began turning icy.

The big half-breed came in, said a few words to Heber, and then sat down. Heber turned back to Rocky. "You'll send for her. Only we'll meet her at the Cantina Ciudad de Zaragoza."

"Where's that?"

"Never mind. Just write that note!"

"I'll think about it," said Rocky. He wiped his brow again. "My God, it's hot! Can't we have some beer?"

Heber shrugged. "It's an idea. *Hombre*, if the girl's back tell her to bring us in some beer."

The big man cracked the door open and looked out. Then he shouted in a thick, guttural voice, "Consuela, cerveza. Carta Blanca!"

In a few moments the door opened and the girl came inside. She was small and graceful and her lips were freshly made up. Her smile quickened when she looked at Rocky. Her soft, warm eyes stared as though he were some fair-haired god.

She carried in three tall bottles of beer and an opener. After she'd put the bottles on the table and opened them she stood back looking at Rocky again. Her buttoned waist was of a material that had been washed so much that little of its filler was left. Wide-meshed, it did a poor job hiding her small, jutting breasts.

The man called Rick put his hand across her neck, fondling her. But she kept smiling at Rocky and letting the big man have his way.

Heber lunged forward and picked up two of the bottles. Then he snapped: "Get the little chippie out of here! Beat it, sister!"

She fled like a frightened deer. The big man shrugged, stuck his hand out to the table and captured the other bottle of beer.

Heber sneered at Rocky. "All right, mister, you asked for it coming out here in place of the girl. Now you're sending for her. You can have a beer after you write that note. Better do it before the big boy over there gets mean."

Rocky sneered back at him, playing for time. He had to get something settled before Hildegarde drove up in a cab. He was already listening for a car's motor.

"Look, Heber, I took a chance coming out here. But there's some things I'd like to know. Where does Mary Jaine fit into the picture? Say, you don't think she's Hildegarde Ederlee, do you?"

Heber pulled his thick lips from the bottle and grinned.

"She's Hildegard Ederlee. Wesley Bell fooled me a while by saying she was Mary Jaine; you fooled me some too. But when I found out there was two girls—" He pulled up and said quickly: "She's Hildegard Ederlee all right."

Rocky ground his cigarette out on the dirt floor.

Heber sneered at him. "Quit stalling," he said. "Get on that note. Tell her everything's okay, for her to come with the driver. She's nuts enough about you to come on the run. Tell her you've got a present for her—a surprise."

As Rocky looked at Heber's cruel face a cold sweat suddenly mingled with the hot on his brow. He glanced at Rick who was sucking the mouth of a beer bottle and looking dreamily off in the direction of the guitar's haunting voice. Sweat glistened on the man's brutal, stupid face. Rocky didn't have to be a mind reader to know it was planned that he himself wasn't to leave the adobe alive.

He tried to keep cool but he was getting a little desperate thinking of Hildegard's impending arrival. Time was running out.

He smiled grimly at Heber. "I guess I'm just getting to appreciate your talents." Getting up, he moved to the table and spread out the paper. The half-breed straightened, watching him like a vigilant cat.

Heber said: "Keep it simple and sign your name."

Rocky said: "I'll have to give her a reason." He wrote rapidly: "Hildegard: Everything is okay. I have a surprise for you. If you want to join Mary, come with the bearer—Rocky Nevins."

Heber read the note, his brow a little puzzled. Then he chuckled mirthlessly: "Cut out the 'If you want to join Mary.' She'll likely know that Mary wasn't in any shape to navigate down here." He waited until Rocky made the change in the note; then he took it back, checked it, and shoved it into his pocket. His warped grin stayed on his face. He picked Rocky's bottle from the floor, took a deep gulp, and said: "Ah!"

Rocky cursed softly. "That was mine! So you'd double-cross a guy for a twenty-cent bottle of beer!"

"Sure," said Heber. "Never give a sucker an even break." His eyes had turned deadly. "You're through giving me trouble! I've got too big a stake in this pie to fool with you!" He was nearly shouting when he pulled up.

Rocky said: "Go easy."

"Go easy, hell! I've waited too long for this chance! I've got a stake from this Ned Foote—\$5,000. And I've got him from now on; he'll be paying me the rest of his life. I've got it planned out for you too—and the dame! The big boy will take you out to the hills tonight in a wood cart. By then I'll be back in L.A. and I can prove I was never down here." Heber swung his hot face to the big gunman. His eyes were unstable with passion. "All right," he gritted. "You can go ahead. *Kill the bastard!*"

The big half-breed's eyes glittered. Standing there, his bandaged toe sticking out from one bare foot, he looked like a character out of a comic opera. But any theatrical resemblance ended there; this was no act, but a deadly, real-life drama. His battered .41 raised its ugly snout. Then he looked sideways at Heber. "Five hundred pesos," he reminded.

Heber took his dead cigar from his lips. "Right."

Rocky went tense. "Hey! You don't really mean it!" In the same breath he cried: "One thousand pesos."

Rick hesitated and looked at Heber.

"He hasn't got it. Not on him."

"Yes!" said Rocky quickly—too quickly. "Right here in my pocket!" But he knew that was a mistake even before he saw Heber's leer.

Heber followed up his advantage. "Rick! You get my five hundred pesos and you get everything he's got on him: money, watches, rings—see, Rick!"

"Wait!" cried Rocky, judging the distance to the gunman. "We're still in Mexico and you can't get away with

murder here. When that gun goes off they'll hear you in the cantina."

"That's right," said Heber. "Only there's nobody in there except the girl. Her folks we sent downtown."

"They'll hear it across the gully."

The big man took a silencer from his pocket and slowly began adjusting it onto the barrel of the gun. . . .

Rocky tensed. It was now or never. For a split second the half-breed would have to look at the silencer. He did, and Rocky leaped, feet first—straight for the gunman's sore toe.

There was a sickening crunch and Rick howled with pain. Dropping his gun, he lunged sideways into Heber. Rocky had a brief glimpse of the bandage falling away, of the toe—a black, crushed bloody agony.

Rocky didn't wait. He leaped at Heber before the detective could get his balance. He pounded in with both fists. Hard rights and lefts beat the cursing Heber to his knees. Then Rocky made a dive to the dirt floor. When he came up he had Rick's .41 in one hand, Heber's gun in the other.

He was just in time. Heber's lunge at him stopped in mid-air. His thick body rocked to a complete halt, feet scraping on the dirt floor. He began backing up, his eyes wild and his jaw hanging down. Under his feet the bottle of beer, which should have been Rocky's, made weird sounds as it gurgled its life away. The big half-breed lay on the floor sobbing with pain.

With his gun pointing at Heber's stomach, Rocky said quietly: "Turn around."

Heber turned slowly. His face now was the color of diseased liver. The bottle of beer had gurgled its final, dying breath when Rocky picked it up.

"For Chrisakes," wheezed Heber, "I didn't mean—"

The descending bottle put a period to his sentence. Heber dropped like a wet bar towel and lay just as still.

Sweating, Rocky stood there some minutes looking

curiously at the men lying sprawled on the dirt floor. Heber was very quiet but the big man rolled back and forth on his face. Rocky turned him over and raised his head. His fist crashed down into the long jaw mercifully—the world's oldest anesthetic.

Rocky tore strips from a blanket and tied up the men, letting them lie where they had fallen. Opening the door to the patio, he peered out—nobody in sight, no sound other than the slow strumming of the guitar. He called: "Consuela, cerveza," and the music stopped.

She came in as before, three icy bottles against her bosom. She nearly dropped the beer when she saw the men on the floor but she got the bottles unscrambled and onto the table. Her brown fingers moved rapidly. As soon as she had the bottles opened she snatched the five-peso bill Rocky handed her and ran to the door.

"¡Alto!" said Rocky. Smiling at her, he picked up a bottle, wiped the mouth, and took a long swig. Any beer manufacturer in the United States would have paid thousands of dollars for a painting of his expression. He put words to the expression with an enraptured "Ah!" Pulling up a chair, he sat down, lit a cigarette, and tossed the pack to the table.

She came back slowly, her red lips parted in an uncertain smile. When he nodded to the other chair she smiled, sat down, and picked up the cigarettes. Lighting one, she leaned back and inhaled. Then she looked askance at Heber and at the big man.

When Rocky told her they'd become sleepy she laughed as though that was very funny. He nodded at a beer and she took one, drinking from the bottle expertly. Rocky looked at his watch, saw he had an hour before plane time, smiled, and sat back in his chair comfortably. By the time his beer was gone he'd found out that Consuela was all alone, as Heber had said, and that the two other girls who worked here and the old man and woman who ran the place had been sent away.

All he had to do was wait for Hildegarde to show up in a taxi and take him back to the hotel.

But Rocky had to check. His hand in hers, Consuela took him through the place. The cantina was empty, the red guitar sitting silent on one of the tables. There was nobody in the other rooms. A swell place for a murder.

They went back into Heber's room. Neither man had moved although the big man was breathing hard. Rocky told her what he intended to do. "Listen, chick," he said, "bring more cerveza. I've got to stick around here for a while. Then we're taking a taxi downtown and I'm giving you money to go shopping."

She clapped her hands and laughed. Shopping! She was a woman, and women, it is said, are the same the world over.

Rocky didn't tell her he wanted to keep her busy and Heber and the half-breed tied up until after plane time.

She brought another frosty bottle. By this time the men on the floor were stirring but Rocky paid little attention to them. She backed up under Rocky's arm, smiling up at him. Taking his free hand, she pulled it across her slim shoulder. . . .

Rocky looked down at her. "Does that mean I'm top man around here?"

"Oh, sí. Yes," she said.

Rocky pressed a ten-dollar American bill into her hand and she laughed again and hurried away to put on her finest. While she was gone Rocky found his automatic and pocketed it.

By the time it took Consuela to change into dark skirt, white blouse, and lace stockings, a taxicab was bringing a cloud of dust into the patio. The cab had arrived from its roundabout route, coming in on the good road. Rocky looked out the window and grinned.

He called out: "Wait a minute, I'll be right with you." Then he went back into the room, turned Heber over on his back and glowered down into the cruel, vicious face.

"Listen," he said, "I'm giving you something to remember me by." He jerked his foot back, measured the fat jaw—But he shook his head, rolled Heber back onto his face, and strode out of the room.

Consuela was waiting in the patio, looking with bright, jealous eyes out into the street. "It's all right, chiquita," he told her. "Shopping."

Hildegarde stood there, her face flushed with excitement. "Oh, Rocky," she cried, "am I glad to see you! I didn't know whether to come or not when I got your telephone message. It's taken us so long. The driver couldn't find the place and we were lost and—"

"Hush," he said. "Meet my little friend Consuela. She's going downtown with us. And we've just about got time to catch the plane."

Hildegarde looked at Consuela; then she smiled. "Hello, darling."

Consuela smiled back at her. "*Señorita*."

As they got into the cab Hildegarde said: "I was afraid maybe you'd run into Heber."

"Whatever gave you that idea?" he asked. He was watching when the cab skirted a pond of rain water. He tossed the small automatic pistol out of the window.

As they rode on into town Consuela smiled with them but she was thinking about Avenida Serdán, the street of the shops. Ten dollars American money was fifty pesos Mexican, and fifty pesos would buy many pretty things.

C H A P T E R 18

Arrival in L.A.

IT WON'T be long now," Rocky told Hildegarde as the plane from Mexico began inching its way across the sky above what an illustrated folder called: *El Pueblo de la Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles*. . . . Below was the tiny

trickle of the Los Angeles River, and on each side of it, its larger, dusty bed. In this picture were the freight yards, the federal building, and the thirty-two-story city hall which pushed an inch up toward them.

Hildegarde sighed. "I keep thinking of Mary. If I hadn't had her stay—" She gazed out the window. "I wish you'd have let me wire Tabitha we were coming."

Rocky shook his head. "Stop thinking about Mary, will you; and look, we couldn't chance the Footes finding out we were coming back. As long as you're letting me handle this thing all the way, I've got to know for sure that Tabitha didn't have a hand in it."

She was quiet and subdued for a moment. Then she said slowly: "I'd rather suspect myself than sweet Tab. Sometimes you're terrible—"

Then the board was flashing: "Please Fasten Belts." Rocky fastened his and helped her.

"Home again," he said.

The cab from the airport let them off a block from the El Cabrillo. Rocky thrust the key to 420 into Hildegarde's hand. "Better go first. I'll be up as soon as it looks all right."

She smiled faintly and nodded.

He went into the drugstore on the corner, eager to start things rolling. He bought a picture post card of MacArthur Park and a stamp. Another nickel got him his private number at the Biltmore.

"Hello, Charley," he said. "This is Rocky again. Wondered if I'd find you in. . . . Oh, yes. A fine trip. A little success, yes. I got to talk to Heber. He knew about the girl being dead all right—but somehow I'm still wondering if he killed her. . . . Heber said it was Mary Jaine, not Hildegarde, so our girl is all right. . . . Mixed up—I'll say it is! . . . Say, anything new on that Frisco business?—did you send up the \$1,500 I left you before I went away? . . . Okay, fine. Now we'll see what happens. Another thing, what's that police officer's name you know—the one

you play golf with? I want to phone him." He shrugged then and turned a pencil over in his fingers. "Okay, Charley—even if he is on his vacation, I'd like to speak to him—if he's in town. What's his number? . . . Okay, Charley, his name then. I'll look it up myself. . . . Yeah. . . . Harlan Bradford, and he works out of the District Attorney's office. . . . No, I can't come up now but I'll let you know how I make out."

Rocky used the drugstore's pen to print an address on the post card. He wrote: "The Crematory, 624 Rexford Drive, Beverly Hills." On the message side he said: "Hope you get away with it—a well-wisher." He wiped his fingerprints off the card and then dropped it into the drugstore's mailbox.

Entering the lobby of his hotel, he saw the desk clerk smiling and holding up a finger. The clerk said: "About that room for your brother—he hasn't arrived yet." He handed Rocky a note to that effect.

"He'll be along," said Rocky. "I'll pay up another week." The strained look came off his face. His smile broadened, broke into a laugh when he went on his way again.

At the phone booth he thumbed through the phone book, found the Bradfords, and then an H. Harlan Bradford. A nickel got him a gruff voice. "Mr. Bradford," he asked. . . . "This is Rocky Nevins, a friend of Charley's. . . . Yes. I'd like to see you. . . . Yes, in a way it's on business. But not official business. Charley told me you were on your vacation. You mind if I drop out? . . . Sure, seven this evening will be fine. Thanks—good-bye."

He went upstairs to his room. When he let himself inside he heard the water running in the shower. But there was no singing from Hildegarde today.

County Investigator Bradford looked as though he was enjoying his vacation. He was alone in his living-room, a fire he didn't need consuming a eucalyptus log in the fire-

place. Slippers were on his feet, a pipe in his mouth. When he waded to a chair and sat down himself it looked as though it would take a crowbar to move him again.

"The folks—off to a movie," he said. And then somewhat reluctantly he got up, went to the sideboard, and poured a couple of drinks. He came back and handed one to Rocky.

"Thanks." Rocky grinned around the room. "It would be a shame dragging you away from this."

The square-jawed man smiled. "I'm making sure that nobody does. No less than a four-alarm crime wave could make me budge from this chair tonight." He put his glass on a low, glass-topped coffee table and pushed the detective story he'd been reading aside. But he didn't push it very far.

The gesture was an invitation to Rocky to tell his story, talk it over a few moments, get an opinion, and then say good night. Rocky opened up but he didn't tell him everything. There was a lot he could tell. There were some things he couldn't. But he told him about Mary Jaine, a girl friend of Hildegard Ederlee's, and her hiring him to find the missing Hildegard; of Tabitha, the Footes, and Heber. He told of breaking into the basement of the Ederlee house, of finding a body suspended in the furnace, and of his reluctance to call in the police until he could run down a few facts about the possible murderer. He didn't tell him about having just come back from Mexico. That could come later.

The big investigator chewed at his pipe stem as placidly as though hearing a radio serial. He gave half a shake to his head. "It's always bad business not calling the cops." But Bradford's imagination had helped him in his many years in the district attorney's office. He pushed the magazine he'd been reading a foot farther away. "What else?" he asked.

Rocky rubbed the scar on his face. "Well, how about you taking a look? You'll know how to work it to trap the

real murderer."

Bradford grunted at the prospect of an early return to work. Rubbing his jaw, he looked through his fingers at Rocky. "You mean break into the house again?"

"The lock pulls apart," said Rocky. "I'll get the door open if you'll take the look. . . ."

Bradford smoked quietly at his pipe. He summed the case up: "The old folks had the best reason, best motive. They had to cover up fleecing the estate; then they were next in line for the inheritance if anything happened to the girl. Then this tall, skinny aunt could have done it, or had it done—anybody can buy a murder. Then there's the girl who hired you—this Mary Jaine. It could be her, it could be anybody, even you. It could have been the private detective, Hal Heber." In the process of reasoning Bradford's gray eyes lost a little of their mildness. He'd forgotten his vacation, his waiting magazine, and his drink on the coffee table. "It's pretty bad the way you worked it. If it were official you'd be liable—to a lot of things. But we'll skip that. What you want me to do is take a look unofficially."

"That's it."

The big deputy nodded slowly. Then he looked at his watch and frowned. "About three hours and a half for a double feature—about eleven," he said. "Okay, Nevins, come back at eleven o'clock and we'll go out."

As he drove his car into Rexford Drive Bradford said: "Charley told me you were all right but a little wild." He was smiling a little when they left the car. "I'd hate to run into any of these Beverly Hills men. We'd better keep to the shadows. If we see them I'm taking you in as a witness for something or other. But go easy with that door. You can't always have as much luck as you've had to date."

They moved on. The Ederlee house was a spectral thing in the gloom, its light burning upstairs like an unattended lantern in a haunted house. Rocky whispered: "We can

sidle in along the building."

Like two muffled ghosts they slipped along the darkened house, keeping close to it. Rocky led the way past the patch of back-yard light and down the stairs to the basement door. Better equipped tonight, it didn't take him so long to open the lock.

Inside the furnace room he led the way to the fire door of the furnace where the tiny pilot light flickered in the darkness. The big investigator was close behind him. Both had flashlights, one painting the floor with its wide circle of light, the other, the furnace door.

Rocky slowly pulled the iron door open and shot the beam of his flashlight inside. Staring into the hollowness, he heard Bradford grunt behind him. There was nothing in the fire box except the eerie shadows tossed about by the beam of the flashlight. "The body's gone," Rocky said unnecessarily.

He moved slowly back to the wall and clicked the light switch. The room blossomed into light. But the light didn't bring back the body. All they saw were the row of shaded windows, the empty bins, and the empty furnace. A slight clanking of the chain came from above their heads and a red-tipped gas flame popped on to fill the fire box. Rocky tiptoed over and shut the iron door. He grinned weakly at the investigator and clicked off the basement light.

Rocky pulled the door closed and locked it. Reaching the street without being seen, they walked over a block and got into Harlan Bradford's car.

Bradford spoke first. "Don't grieve. When you've been in the business as long as I have, you won't let it get you down. You don't need to explain. It works like that a lot—I know you didn't get me out here to show me an empty furnace."

Rocky lit a cigarette, said nothing.

Bradford pulled his pipe from his coat pocket, stuck it into his mouth, and talked past it. "Somebody's getting

panicky. Or they figured the cadaver was burned enough—probably down to a few bones. They'd likely put what was left into a sack, drop it into a waste barrel somewhere, bury it in the yard, or toss it into the weeds along some highway. To us, that means the same old story—corpus delicti."

"Thanks for understanding."

"Now you can see what I meant about it being bad business not calling in the cops. You could have saved everybody a lot of trouble if you'd yelled the night you found the body. Now, you're in a hell of a fix."

Rocky stared into the windshield.

Bradford put the car into motion and headed toward Los Angeles. After a few moments of pipe puffing he said: "After all, I am an investigator for the district attorney's office. This was unofficial but there was supposed to be a body; if not a body, a missing person. As far as I know, nobody's reported a Hildegard Ederlee missing from Beverly Hills." His faint smile summed it up. "I've still got two days left on my vacation but I believe you enough to think there was a body. That's why I've got to turn something in. If I didn't I'd be a hell of an investigator."

"I was afraid of that." Rocky inhaled smoke and shook his head in disgust. "Goddam! Why do people have to go around killing other people?"

"To keep up the police department," Harlan Bradford said. There was no attempt at humor in his words. He proved this by saying: "We'd better go on in to the office and talk it over with somebody."

"No!" Looking at the big man's reflection in the mirror of the windshield for a minute, Rocky added: "You owe me something. And it's not going to hurt your stock any to take in a murder case when you do go back to work. The thing'll be no worse a couple of days from now. Mind laying off till then?"

Bradford drove a block in stiff silence. Then he sighed. "Two days and I'll be back to work. God, only two days

left!—where did the time go?” He increased the speed of his car as though to save as much fleeting time as possible. At a stop signal he turned to Rocky. “All right, Nevins, I’m a sucker.”

“You mean you’ll hold off?”

“Yeah—because Charley vouched for you. I’ll hold off till I get back to work. But for Chrisakes, forget we even went near that house tonight! When I get on the case I’ll pick it up from a different angle—say from where you’re telling me about it.”

Rocky grinned at him. “That’ll be swell. By the way, there’s a couple of guys that might break down and do a lot of talking although I couldn’t get anything out of them myself. Simms and Fred work for Hal Heber and they live at the Enright Hotel on Spring Street.”

Rocky left Bradford’s car at a taxi stand. He bade good night to the big investigator without having told him about the post card he’d sent the Footes—nor what he had in mind to get a confession from the murderer or murderers. All Rocky wanted was a couple of days in which to work.

C H A P T E R 19

Tea for Two

ONE DAY left—that was all.

In twenty-four hours Harlan Bradford would go back on the job. Then Rocky would phone him about a missing girl, as per arrangement.

Now Rocky tried to make Hildegarde feel better. “Look, Boo-hoo, everything’s been taken care of. She’s at rest and can’t be hurt any more. You’ve got to stop thinking about it.”

She smiled sadly at him. “I know.” But her eyes closed as memory surged over her.

She was already dressed for the street. She wore a plain white blouse, a softly detailed blue suit, and a blue hat. Because of the paleness of her face her beauty this morning was almost fragile.

"If it hadn't been for Mary it would have been you," he told her. "And, look, you can do something about it if you want."

"I can?" she asked quickly. "What in the world can anybody do?"

"You can take care of her, can't you? And she'll have folks. There's a lot of things you can do."

A little luster came back into her eyes. "Thanks, Rocky," she said simply.

"Now we've got to get busy."

"Shall I phone the house again?"

He nodded. "But not here. We'll meet downtown. We'll need a letter too—something on your own stationery." He got up from his chair and put his hand on her shoulder. "Let's make it the Marine Room downstairs at the Clark. That's on Hill at Fifth."

Her brown eyes were still a little listless. "In about an hour?"

"Okay. That'll be eleven. Here's what I think should go into the letter you write." He made a few notes and gave them to her. "I'll see you later. I've got to keep tabs on Heber. He hasn't got back yet."

It was shortly after eleven when Hildegarde called the Crestview number. She asked Grafton if she might speak to her aunt, Mrs. Foote.

When a strangely pitched voice came over the phone Hildegarde whispered: "Aunty? . . . Aunty, this is Hildy. Why is it I can't get to talk to you? I keep trying so hard. I want to tell you something—" She stopped talking and handed the receiver to Rocky.

Rocky took up the conversation in a gruff voice. "Operator, operator, please get me Gladstone 7-3480. Hello, hello. . . ."

There was no answer from the Beverly Hills end of the line. Nothing but silence. Then a faint cry of "Ned!" came over the wire and a click that closed the connection. Rocky hung up and looked at Hildegarde.

"The post card might not have been taken seriously but these phone calls certainly are. Wait till they get the letter. They'll check your signature and writing and find it's really yours. Whether they believe in ghosts or not, it'll get them."

"It's a horrible thing to do," she breathed. "But anything is justifiable if it'll catch—" She couldn't finish. She brought out the letter she'd written and handed it to him. He read:

Dear Aunty:

It was a terrible thing being in there so long. Every time you'd turn on the heat upstairs the chain would clank and the fire would come up through the grate, and then—then it was horrible, Aunty. It's very unpleasant being where I am now. I've tried to talk to you, but I'm always cut off before I can hear your voice.

Please tell them where I am, so somebody can do something about me.

Your loving Hildy.

Rocky looked into Hildegarde's pale face as he took her back to the booth. "I'm sorry as hell but this way's the only way, Boo-hoo. The more of it you can take now, the sooner your grief will wear off." He wiped off the letter. "I don't know whether fingerprints stick or not but we might as well be safe. It's all right if your prints are on it, but not mine."

She mailed the letter at a branch post office in the Broadway Department Store when the man told her a special-delivery letter would be delivered in Beverly Hills that afternoon.

Rocky kept out of sight, taking no chances. He'd forgotten to ask Heber about the night he'd been raided at the Etoile Apartments on Bunker Hill—were the police still looking for him? He smiled grimly at the thought.

When Hildegarde joined him she'd left part of her sadness behind. Her spirit regained, she stood very straight. Her poise and bearing made her hard, young breasts push at the front of her blouse again.

He asked: "Mind talking about it?"

She looked through her lashes at him before she took his arm to cross the street. "Why not?"

"Victor Daro first. You sure he wasn't mixed up in this thing—with the Footes, I mean?" He used the past tense without her noticing it.

"I don't think he is," she said slowly. "He was only blackmailing me. I'm sure he didn't tell the Footes I was Hildy." When they reached the other side of the street she said: "Wait," and straightened the blue bow tie he'd tied himself. Then she looked him over and nodded her approval.

He said as he guided her into a drugstore: "A few more phone calls and we're through."

He got the Dells on the phone first, asked for Wesley Bell, and got Wesley Bell.

"Rocky Nevins," he said. "Fine. . . . Yes, she's fine too. . . . Daro? Sure, I know who killed him. I'll let you in on it later." While he listened to Wesley Bell he smiled through the glass door at Hildegarde, who was giving a superficial inspection to the toilet articles on display. She looked sad, sweet, and—innocent. He said: "Thanks, Mr. Bell. Sure, we'll be seeing you." Then he hung up.

Rocky got rid of his last nickel. He got Harlan Bradford's house but not Harlan Bradford. A gentle feminine voice told him that her husband had been called back to work. Something had come up—some emergency. Rocky said: "I'm from the office. Know where he is now? . . . You

mean at the airport?" Rocky thanked her and hurried from the booth.

When he joined Hildegarde he said: "I was talking to Wesley Bell. Daro's out of the picture all right."

"Oh," she said, and looked relieved. She still hadn't seen the newspapers.

He studied her face for a moment. "Boo-hoo, it's coming. This is it! Do you want to be in at the finish?"

"Could I? Gee, if we only had the convertible."

"The car's still in jail unless they've sent it back to your house. I didn't see it when I was out there."

"But, Rocky, do you think the police are still hunting us—me?"

"I don't know. But we didn't kill—"He stopped talking about death when he saw her face grow cold. "I'll find a cab," he said.

"Why not rent a car?"

"Good idea—here we go again."

The man in the Drive-It-Yourself didn't bother about references when he found his customer was leaving a fifty-dollar bill as deposit. In a very short time they were driving a new Chevrolet out of the garage.

"We're closing in, Boo-hoo. I didn't tell you before but Heber was down in Hermosillo!"

Hildegarde shuddered. "Heber? Why didn't you?"

Rocky smiled. "You were worried enough down there. Now we're on our way to the airport to see a fellow by the name of Harlan Bradford."

Leaving Hildegarde in the car, Rocky went into the waiting-room of the airport. He found Bradford and another man from the DA's office standing around. Rocky greeted Bradford with a "Thought you were going to hold off."

"Hello, Nevins," said the investigator. "We couldn't hold off after what we found out. By a little guessing we arrived at the conclusion that Heber might be on the next

plane from Mexico. We'd like to talk to him."

Rocky smiled faintly. "So would I."

Bradford looked at him sharply. "You were in Mexico with him."

Rocky nodded. After a minute he said: "You mind if I talk to him first? He might get sore and spill what you want to know."

"You can talk to him first if I can hear it. How about getting him into a corner of the men's room?"

The talk went on like that until the plane was announced. Heber was the first off, a mad-looking, heavy-set man. He came striding toward the building and into the men's room. Rocky looked at Bradford and smiled. "How'd you know he'd go in there?"

"Doesn't everybody?"

Rocky grinned at him and went in through the swinging door. He waited a moment, then said: "Hello, Heber."

"Why, you!—" Heber's small, surprised eyes were murderous. He blurted out: "I suppose you got the whole L.A. police department here?"

"Did I ever call cops on you?" Rocky tossed his cigarette aside when he saw Bradford pay a nickel to go into the far toilet. "I'd like to talk to you, Heber. Come over here in the corner."

Heber followed him, his thick, fat face a little unhealthy looking. His small eyes were darting furtively from corner to corner.

In the corner Rocky stopped and swung around. "You surprised me, coming back like this."

"Yeah?" Heber seemed to have regained a little confidence. "I've got a job to do. I'm hunting a gal by the name of Hildegard—and Ned Foote owes me a little money."

"Aren't you afraid they'll pin that Daro killing on you?"

Heber flushed angrily. "I found Daro dead when I called on him."

"I suppose you found Mary Jaine dead too!"

Heber flared. "You son-of-a-bitch!"

Rocky's fist lashed out. Heber's fleshy jaw jerked back. Under the same impelling force he slid down the wall to the floor, his hand on his jaw.

A door slammed close at hand. "Cut it!" cried Bradford. Then: "Keep the people out, Jim."

Heber got slowly to his feet a little at a time and glared at Rocky. Then he glared at Bradford. "A cop, huh? A double cross."

Bradford shook his head. "It's no use. We've just come from the Footes'. The old folks talked—plenty. About the girl's body in the furnace, all that. All we want now is—you!"

The man called Jim came back and slapped handcuffs on Heber's wrists. Heber broke away, his back to the wall. Sudden fury twisted his face as the remnants of his shattered dream fell around him. A trapped wolf, he cursed savagely. But a few coherent words got past his drooling lips. "They done it!" he said, panting. "The Footes! They done it all!"

Rocky leaped at him. "That's no good, Heber! The Footes never leave the house; so they didn't try to kill the girl riding back from Granite Dells with me. And they didn't kill Daro and try to frame me with a murder!"

Heber's small eyes were unstable with fury. His twisted brain tried to save him. He said: "You got to have a body! You got to have a body to prove I killed the girl!" Then he collapsed, so intense was his bitterness and hate.

When Rocky rejoined Hildegard waiting in the rented car he was trembling. "Bradford was inside and Heber came in on the plane all right. But God, it was terrible the way he folded, practically admitted everything!"

"Gee! Then it wasn't my uncle who—who killed her?"

"It was all of them. But the deputy DA, Bradford, pulled a fast one and told Heber the Footes talked. Bradford hasn't seen the Footes yet but he's going to. Shall

we get out there first?"

She nodded. "All right."

On the way to Beverly Hills he asked: "Something just occurred to me—you don't mind talking about Mary again, do you?" When she said she didn't he went on: "Ned Foote would have had to prove you were dead before he could inherit. He'd have to produce a body, which he couldn't have done if it was destroyed. . . ."

She smiled wanly. "Uncle Ned didn't need to inherit anything. As long as he could run the estate unmolested he'd finally get it all."

"I see," he said and lapsed into silence for the rest of the trip.

A touring car with a sign, "U.S. Mail" on the windshield was just pulling away from the Ederlee house when they turned into the street. "Some more of our propaganda has been delivered," said Rocky. "Now, can we get into the house without Grafton or the Footes seeing us? Bradford will be along any minute."

"I've got a key—don't you remember?"

He nodded. "It's the end of the trail—look!"

She looked toward the house when two men were getting out of a car. "Who are they?"

"The DA's men. Harlan Bradford, investigator, is the big one."

Rocky didn't move until the two men were walking onto the Ederlee porch. As soon as they rang the bell and were admitted Rocky caught Hildegard's arm and they ran across the street. Two houses away, Hildegard said: "We can go in on the Anson's lawn. We can't be seen from there."

He followed her across the lawn, over a small foot-high hedge, and across another lawn. At the Ederlee side porch she unlocked the door with a key she had ready. They slipped noiselessly up a back stairway—then moved slowly, cautiously along the carpeted floor of the balcony.

Inside Tabitha's room they heard someone whistling

softly. It sounded like Archie. Then they moved forward silently until they could see below without being seen.

The balcony railing gave them a slatted view of the rectangular living-room, the fireplace, the thin-legged furniture, and the old-fashioned furnishings. A pot of tea and several cups were on the tea table but no one was pouring or drinking tea. In the room were Aunt Alice, Uncle Ned, Harlan Bradford, and the deputy he'd brought with him.

The Footes were in their usual tintype formation, Aunt Alice in her comfortable chair and Uncle Ned standing at her side. The little man's gray mane was bristling and he was regarding the investigator with cold, hostile eyes. A thin smile came and went when the big man put away the pipe he'd brought out of his pocket. Aunt Alice looked at her spouse and smiled.

Bradford did the talking.

"Mr. Foote, if it means anything to you, we've just come from seeing Hal Heber. He arrived on a plane. He did a lot of talking trying to save himself."

Rocky's hand tightened on Hildegard's arm. "Here it comes!"

But Ned Foote wasn't excited. "Mr. Heber would do a lot of talking," he said, and the thin smile came back again. "The bungling idiot. Talking seems to be the only thing he does get done."

"Not quite," said Bradford. "He did a lot of other things."

Uncle Ned's lips twisted with scorn. "Continue. We don't have to be naïve about this thing. We know why you've come." He smiled down at his wife.

"Indeed we do," Alice Foote said and patted his arm on her shoulder. Her face was as soft as a bride's. "Dear, please tell the larger man not to lean on the Chippendale chair." When Bradford stepped away from the chair she smiled and nodded. "Tell him he can be assured that we're glad it's over. There is no longer any reason, Ned, dear, why

you can't tell him who killed the girl."

"I shall," said Uncle Ned.

The big investigator stiffened. The man with him moved a little to the side.

But Rocky wasn't watching them now. He was watching Hildegarde. She held her breath and stared below. She seemed transfixed by the information that her Uncle Ned was about to reveal the name of the murderer of Mary.

The phone rang. The tension broke—upstairs and down. Grafton's shadow moved past the foot of the stairs. Uncle Ned's voice was harsh. "Grafton! We're not taking any more calls today!"

Aunt Alice looked relieved. Looking at the pot of tea as though it had just arrived, she leaned forward to reach it. Pouring the tea into a fragile teacup, she smiled up at her spouse. "Why don't you tell them, dear?"

Rocky whispered: "God, it's like a play!"

"Ye-es," said Hildegarde. "Isn't it?"

He smiled oddly at her. It was hard to tell her real thoughts. You couldn't tell about women. Women were all actresses. "Are you afraid to hear who did it, Boo-hoo?"

"Yes, darling."

Uncle Ned was talking again. "We're glad it's over," he said. "To get it straight, Talbot Ederlee was my half brother, not my brother. It was his fault the girl had to die. The girl's mother died when she was born, but there was always a question whether the two were married. We don't believe they were. We never saw the certificate. And we thought Hildegarde, being born out of wedlock, was never a legal heir. Therefore, she wasn't his rightful heir! We didn't feel she was entitled to all this—so we eliminated her."

Hildegarde's hand clutched Rocky's. "He's practically calling me a—a bastard."

"Yes, Boo-hoo." Rocky grinned savagely. "But that's not important now—didn't you hear Ned Foote? He virtually confessed to the murder!"

"I won't stand for it," said Hildegarde. "Nobody can call me a—"

"Shut up, sweetheart," he whispered. "You're a lovely bastard if I ever saw one."

Below, Aunt Alice was looking up into her husband's face. "Ned, dear, tell them how weary we've become of the whole thing—post cards, phone calls, letters." She lifted his cup to him and then sipped at the tea in her own. "Tell them everything, dear."

Uncle Ned said: "Mr. Heber was to have eliminated the girl, taken her away. He told us he had a plan—that he could make her leave. He didn't tell us how. Then we found he'd killed her and put her into the furnace."

Aunt Alice put in: "We were very angry with Mr. Heber."

"Yes," said Ned Foote. "Before he went away we made him dig a grave at night under the rose bushes. You'll find Hildegarde just outside the side door—under the rose bushes at the south side of the porch. Mr. Heber buried her there."

Hildegarde gasped and leaned heavily against Rocky. "Poor Mary. She told me once she wanted lots of flowers—roses—when she died. She said she'd never seemed to get flowers—"

Rocky stopped her.

Hildegarde pushed ahead. "I can't stand to hear any more. Aunt Alice—the poor, simple thing." She held her hands over her face.

But Rocky stared below. Harlan Bradford had a surprised look on his face at last. He was apparently amazed at the simplicity of the confession just given by Mr. and Mrs. Foote. Both host and hostess were now drinking their tea as though alone and discussing affairs of the household.

The investigator needed a bracer too—if only tea. He moved forward to the table, wiping his brow with a handkerchief. Reaching out, he picked up the lacquered teapot and reached for an empty cup on the tray.

Aunt Alice caught her husband's arm. "Dear, tell him he mustn't have any tea. Tell him it isn't right that too many should die."

Strangely, in that instant none grasped her meaning. Then Bradford did. His hand jerked away from the teapot in his hand. But it was too late to stop Aunt Alice and Uncle Ned—their cups were empty. Aunt Alice raised her eyes from the fragile cup and gave a start. The empty cup dropped from her fingers and smashed like an eggshell on the floor. She stared upward where Hildegard had moved to the balcony railing.

Aunt Alice cried faintly: "I can see her! I can see her now!"

And then she couldn't. Her eyes failed her completely—and then her weakened heart. She slumped into her chair, her head falling forward as though in sleep. . . .

Harlan Bradford pointed to Ned Foote. "Grab him, Jim." Then he pulled the lid off the teapot and sniffed at the contents. "It's poison—but I can't make it!"

Uncle Ned gave a pained smile at the investigator and at the deputy. He hung onto his wife's chair. His eyes raised to the balcony where Aunt Alice had looked. But his eyes were glazed. "I—don't—know—whether—I—can—see—her—" he said slowly. Then he gave a gentle cry: "Alice," and slid to the floor, dying as close beside her as he had lived.

When Rocky turned to Hildegard he saw Aunt Tabitha—Tabitha and Archie. They'd been there long enough to hear the last lines of the tragedy. Tabitha cried: "Hildy!" and took the girl in her arms.

When Rocky ran down the stairs Harlan Bradford's man was already on the phone. Bradford was bending over the body of Ned Foote. He looked up and then shook his head. He smiled dimly at Rocky. "I kind of thought you were up those stairs. I saw you in the car outside."

Rocky cocked one eye at him and said bluntly: "I nearly

missed the final act."

Bradford got to his feet. "Heber did some more talking before we turned him over to the wagon. He—accidentally, he says—killed the girl and then had the insane idea of getting rid of her body in the furnace. When later the old folks found out what he had done—well, you heard the rest. The Footes, plagued by telephone calls and letters, broke down and confessed—mostly because they felt morally guilty."

Rocky nodded. "That explains a lot. And when Heber found out he'd killed the wrong girl he had to go after the right one."

"Yeah, he had to keep on. His first attempt to kill her was the night he was out to the Dells spending some of the old folks' money. He ran into this other girl and, in spite of what you did to throw him off the track, suspected that he'd gotten the wrong girl. In fact, he must have been sure of it or he wouldn't have wrecked the car and tried to kill her. He did the dirty work himself; his men, Fred and Simms, were just driving for him."

Rocky said: "Then that's why he was waiting outside her apartment when I got there; he'd found out where she lived and was checking to be sure she was dead."

Bradford nodded. Brushing off the knee he'd knelt on, he jammed his pipe into his mouth and looked toward Aunt Alice. Almost triumphantly he lit his pipe.

"When Heber let loose he really babbled. You were in his way. He wanted you out of the way so he could get to the girl. Even holding you in jail a week or so would help him. He did that Daro killing at the east-side hotel, too. Daro, it seemed, wouldn't play ball and lure the girl away for him. After Heber killed Daro he got the idea of framing this job on you. He evidently knew where you were staying and phoned the cops. . . ."

"God!" said Rocky. "Until I found the girl's body in the Ederlee basement furnace I thought Heber was really hunting for a missing girl. I thought he and his men beat

me up to get me off the case and because I'd practically broken into the office."

The big investigator was smiling. "Anyway I'm glad it came out the way it did. Nevins, I don't mind telling you now, you had me puzzled. And don't think you weren't right up there as a suspect—for a while number-one suspect. Everything you did and said seemed too pat. I've had a man on you most of the time—but you outguessed us on the Mexico jaunt. Heber told us about the Mex business."

"Well, I'll be—" Rocky turned and wiped the surprise off his face. Hildegard was at his elbow. He was glad to introduce the two.

"Hildegard, this is Mr. Bradford. Mr. Bradford, Hildegard Ederlee."

The big man grinned at her. "Am I glad to meet you!" He glanced significantly toward the window where a rose bush projected itself up over the sill.

Rocky said quickly: "I guess the Footes were never told the dead girl wasn't Hildegard. They died not knowing the mistake they'd made. They thought they were seeing Hildegard's spirit up on the balcony." He took out a cigarette, looked at the frail, peaceful face of Alice Foote, and put the cigarette away again. He said: "Hildegard can supply any of the missing parts you'd like to know, Mr. Bradford."

"Thanks. But I think that Heber covered about everything. I understand now what he was trying to tell us about the wrong girl."

Hildegard's brown eyes were wet and glistening. "Poor Mary! It was all my fault. If I hadn't had Mary stay here this would never have happened."

Aunt Tabitha was a mountain of sympathy and comfort. "Don't even think of it, pet."

Bradford rubbed a big hand across his face. "It was one of those things. If it hadn't been for Mary Jaine, it would have been you out there under the rose bushes."

It was two hours later. Most of the cops and newspapermen had gone. Hildegard said: "Oh, Rocky, can't we get out of here? Everything's done that can be done. I've told my story twice. As far as I'm concerned I never want to see this house again."

Rocky got Harlan Bradford aside. "We'd like to get away. We'll be at the El Cabrillo if you need us—Rooms 420 and 422. Two rooms—get it, two rooms!"

Bradford grinned. "If I need you I'll call you. And just wait till the chief goes over my report here."

Rocky and Hildegard said good-bye to Tabitha and Archie. Tabitha cried a little over her. Archie said: "Rocky, you're a right guy."

Tabitha's long face settled into a wan smile. "You can say that again, Archie."

"Rocky, you're a right guy," repeated Archie.

Rocky smiled. Then he and Hildegard slipped outside and hurried to their rented car. As they drove away, Rocky said: "Boo-hoo, get that horror out of your eyes if you can. I'm taking care of everything for you."

"You are?" She managed a smile. "All right, I won't even think, period. But I believe I'd like a drink. A good, strong one would help." She caught his arm in a gesture of confidence. "You know, Rocky, I don't drink a lot, really. I've been doing most of it because—well, I thought you liked to see a girl drink."

He laughed softly, kept laughing. "This is wonderful!" He explained: "I've been hitting the stuff myself, thinking I had to keep up with you." He saw a cocktail bar ahead and swerved in to the curb. "We'll take it easy, Boo-hoo—after this one. We both need it now. We'll see if the gin slinger can put together something special, like a whisky float."

The bartender could and did. They had their drinks—several of them. They went on. . . .

As they made the swing that Wilshire Boulevard makes through MacArthur Park, Rocky almost shouted: "Hey!"

Hildegarde caught his arm. "Gee, what's wrong?"

He grinned at her. "Something I've been wanting to tell you for a long time. It's about your business. You'll need somebody honest to take care of the legal aspect of it. I know a fellow. With one hand behind him he could settle your estate, put things on an even keel, get your car back from the cops. He could take care of your business like nobody's business."

"He could, darling?"

"Yes, Boo-hoo. Shall I phone him?"

She nodded, her nose crinkling with that little smile of hers. "I'll leave it to you. You phone him if you're sure he's that good."

"He ought to be good," said Rocky. "He's my brother."

"Your brother?"

"Sure. He's good. He's been taking care of my affairs up in San Francisco. He wants me to continue my law, go into his office. Maybe I will. Look, we'll phone him now."

Inside a drugstore he dialed a number and in a minute said: "Charley? . . . Rocky again. First, how about Frisco? Did the guy get well when your agency gave him my life's savings? . . . Ah, I thought he would. It's worth it, though, and it sure teaches me a lesson. It's swell to be free and clear again. I ought to do an Indian war dance.

"Look, Charley, this may come as a surprise—but I've got a job for you. An estate. I can promise you it's a good account. Get the late papers tonight, you'll read about it. It's the Ederlee estate—the girl. . . . No, Hildegarde Ederlee is safe. I've got her here. . . . Sure, she's alive and she's in love with me—speak to him, Boo-hoo."

"Hello, Charley," said Hildegarde. "This is Boo-hoo."

Rocky waited. Then he said: "We'll be around to see you in the morning. No, we can't come up now. . . . Just a minute, Charley—what, Boo-hoo?"

"Darling," said Hildegarde, "you said Charley was a very smart person. Maybe he can tell me something I

should know—Charley, why does a girl always pick up with some no-good-for-something-or-other when—”

“Charley, don’t mind her. The first thing we want to do is set up a joint account. I’d like to get down to business, do some investing.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said, “the money’s already invested. In orange groves, ranches, and things. You won’t have to do a thing.”

“But,” he said, “it might be embarrassing to you. What will people say? If I go around studying law and doing nothing, people will say I’d married you for your money.”

“Aren’t you, darling?”

He sniffed scornfully. “What’s a couple of custom-built cars, a chateau overlooking Beverly Hills, a couple of orange groves, a ranch in San Fernando Valley, a few stocks and bonds. You know I’d feel the same way about you if you only had fifty thousand. I think you’re wonderful.”

“Who, darling?”

“I said—”

“Did you, darling?” Her mouth against his didn’t let him answer.

There was a slow, almost reluctant click at the other end of the wire as Charley hung up. But Rocky and Hildgarde didn’t hear it. The receiver was hanging from the box when they moved away from the booth. . . .

This Bantam books contains the complete text of the original edition. Not one word has been changed or omitted. The low-priced Bantam edition is made possible by the large sale and effective promotion of the original edition, published by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

*A fantastic murder
on a quiet street . . .*

An explosion wrecked their home, and rocked their lives . . . at first they only knew they'd lost everything they owned in the world. Then the body was found, the body that shouldn't have been there, buried in the cellar of the ruined house. That was when the police stopped trying to explain an accident, and began hunting for a murderer. That was when a nice, ordinary family . . . people just like the folks on *your* street . . . began looking for a *killer in the family!*

.

. . . What happens in the lives of thirteen unlucky people when crime and violence intrude on everyday life . . .

EXPLOSION

by DOROTHY
CAMERON
DISNEY

WHEREVER BANTAM BOOKS ARE SOLD

she was

BOLD!

beautiful!



was she missing...

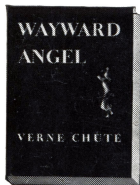
or

MURDERED?

She had more beauty than brains... more courage than common sense. She went her own sweet willful way through life... and maybe straight to death.

Plenty of people wanted her... but none as badly as Rocky Nevins, who had a murder rap to beat. He had to find her, dead or alive, and he went out hunting fully armed... and with a permanent grudge against all pretty girls. Rocky Nevins was no saint himself... but he was just the man to trap a

WAYWARD ANGEL!



This low-priced Bantam book, complete and unabridged, is made possible by the large sale and effective promotion of the original edition, published by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

PRINTED
IN
U.S.A.



BANTAM BOOKS