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MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN MURDER

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1

THE late afternoon sun streamed in through the windows and traced a precise pattern on the floor. Nothing fancy. Nothing gaudy. Just a series of parallel black lines.

That was because the windows were barred. The sunshine could get in. Nothing could get out.

This was November 25th. Less than a half hour previously the prosecution had announced that it rested. The Judge had taken his cue, and called it a day. "Adjourned until tomorrow morning at ten o'clock." The jurors were given the customary instructions about not discussing the case. It was The People of the State of California versus Steven Blake. Seven million people in California, and only one of them named Steven Blake. I was that one. It was pretty tough odds. Especially since the charge was murder.

The jailer strolled down the corridor, his heels sounding a rhythmic tap-tap on the concrete floor. He rattled some keys and inserted one of them into the lock on my cell door. The door creaked a little as it swung open, and he jerked his head at me as though the effort of speaking would be a trifle too great.

I figured I could take a hint as well as the next man. I followed him down the corridor, through some more barred doors, and thence downstairs to what they call the Lawyers' Room in the Los Angeles County Hall of Justice. It was a big room, and you could tell right away that no interior decorator had ever been let loose in it. There were long benches on opposite sides of wire screens. Prisoners were supposed to sit on the safe side, with their attorneys facing them. They could talk, but not touch. The place had all the cozy intimacy of the visitors' room at San Quentin. I was

getting accustomed to it. San Quentin probably wouldn't be too much of a change after they finished doing to me what they were in the process of doing.

Two other couples were chatting through the screens at the other end of the room. The consulting business apparently wasn't flourishing. For perhaps thirty seconds I sat all alone. Then a door opened and my attorney bounced in.

Brian Garland looked as cute as a cherub in a painting by an Italian Master. He was thirty years of age, short, chubby and bright. His light brown hair was sparse to the point where you could get six, two and even that he'd be bald in another ten years. He had wide-open baby blue eyes which gave him a juvenile expression. He'd been a friend of mine since college days, and I had a good deal of confidence in what went on behind those eyes. Not that it was doing me any good. They had me out on a limb, and the District Attorney was working on that limb with a sharp saw.

Brian seated himself opposite me. He was trying to look optimistic and not quite bringing it off. He made a few remarks which were calculated to cheer me up, and then he said, "Tomorrow we start."

I said, "Start what?"

"Our defense."

"What is it? What've we got?"

His lips were still smiling, but the eyes were not. He said, "How does it look to you, Steve?"

"For ten days," I answered carefully, "I've been listening to the State build up its case against me. If I were on that jury, I'd vote 'Guilty.'"

Brian said, "It isn't that bad."

"Why not?"

"The State's case is entirely circumstantial. They haven't produced one piece of direct evidence: not one."

"Meaning that nobody actually saw me kill Jeff Nulty?"

"Right."

"Do they usually have eye-witnesses?"

"We-e-ell . . ."

I said, "Don't try to kid me, Brian. They've done a good job. They've established motive, intent and opportunity. Not one single witness has deviated from the truth. In fact,

some of them have so obviously been friendly to me that their testimony has hurt doubly. Right?"

"Yes . . . but look, Steve: it really is difficult to convict on circumstantial evidence. So long as no one actually saw the killing, there's always a reasonable doubt. And on a reasonable doubt, the jury is supposed to acquit."

"You think it will?"

"There's always that hope."

"Man to man, what's your honest opinion?"

Brian Garland let his worry shine through his eyes. He said, "I'm damned if I know, Steve. You can break down the best circumstantial case in the world if you've got a single piece of proper evidence. It's incredible that no one saw you leave Jeff Nulty's apartment, no one saw you walking home, no one saw you going into your own place. I've been hoping that all the publicity we've been getting would produce one alibi witness."

I lighted a cigarette. It helped ease the strain. I looked at Brian through the thin blue haze. He looked different, somehow, or perhaps the whole setup was so unusual it couldn't help but have an effect.

The trial that was now nearing its end was the only really dramatic thing that had ever happened to me. I'd been an average kid in an average family. I'd had a better than average basic education and had put in a lot of time at the California Institute of Technology, grabbing off a few degrees, the last one of which classified me as an aeronautical engineer. I hadn't even known the high spots or the agonies of war. The government had decided that I could be more valuable in research and plane designing than I would ever be shooting a gun, and that's the way I had hibernated during the hectic years of '42 through '45.

As a youngster I had possessed the usual strength and the usual weaknesses. I had been fond of sports and dancing, and had survived a period of jive addiction. Being, by education and profession, a scientist, I tried not to be a stuffy one. I was selective by temperament, but I liked people generally, and wanted them to like me.

That's why it seemed so odd to be talking to Brian through a steel netting. We had talked lots of times before,

but without urgency. We had spent long evenings in his very smart little apartment—or in my much more modest one—partaking comfortably of good scotch, not getting too excited about things that weren't worth getting too excited about. Two guys named Elmer, one an attorney, the other an engineer.

But this was different. It had been different for a long time. Not our friendship, but its background. I was worried about the way things were going. I had never kidded myself, and didn't propose to start now. Brian was even more worried, and his efforts to dissemble weren't too convincing.

I said, "Tomorrow morning, the Defense opens. How many witnesses have we got?"

He made a helpless gesture. "None."

"Do you intend to put me on the stand?"

"Good Lord, no!" He looked horrified.

"Why not?"

"Because you couldn't say anything that you didn't say when you pleaded 'Not Guilty.' And on cross-examination, the State would crucify you."

I said, "I know the jury is not supposed to be influenced by the fact that the defendant doesn't take the stand. But just the same they are, aren't they?"

"Ye-e-es. But not as much as they would be if you got up there and told the truth. All you could do would be to say that you left Nulty's apartment at nine o'clock, walked home, and stayed in your own rooms until the cops picked you up the next morning. I've brought out all of that on cross-examination. The D.A. is a smart cookie. He'd make you sound like a liar whether you were or not."

I argued the point with him. I said I hadn't killed Jeff Nulty, and wanted the privilege of saying so. Brian got pretty excited about that. He said that my proposed simple statement of fact wasn't going to get me anywhere. He said the truth wasn't worth a plugged nickel unless it sounded like truth. He admitted that he wasn't optimistic, but he promised to shoot the works when he addressed the jury. He was going to hammer on the circumstantial evidence thing; he intended to deride the State's failure to produce a single witness who had seen Jeff Nulty killed.

The more he talked, the weaker it sounded. It's all very well to say that under the law a man doesn't have to prove himself innocent, but actually he does. Not much proof is required. But some. Just a teeny tiny bit. Just enough so an honest juror can say to himself, "Well, maybe the poor guy *is* telling the truth."

Garland said, "If there were just *one* person. Anyone. Think back over that night, Steve . . ."

I shook my head. "That's all I've done since my arrest. It still comes up zero. I didn't see anyone I knew after I left Nulty's apartment. Obviously, no one recognized me."

"But it's incredible . . ."

"I know. The truth often is. You've done all you could, Brian. You've had nothing to work with. If you insist that I stay off the stand, I'll stay off. I don't know much about such things. And while you're making your address to the jury, I'll help you all I can by keeping my fingers crossed. Except that doesn't seem a highly efficient way to combat a charge of murder."

"We've got to fight with the weapons we've got. David did."

"He had a slingshot. We haven't even a pea-shooter."

"We've got fifteen hours, Steve. Miracles can happen in less than that."

I smiled at him. He needed plenty of reassuring. I knew I was innocent. He believed that I was. He'd gone all out on the publicity angle right through the trial, playing along with the press, encouraging them to print as many pictures of me as he could get his hands on, in the hope that someone would remember having seen me going back to my apartment on the night of October 4th at the time I said I did.

That was the case. All I needed was the tiniest bit of proof that I had told the truth about that to the police: the faintest bit of evidence that I had been at home at ten o'clock that night.

They knew definitely that Jeff Nulty had been shot exactly at ten o'clock. The shot which killed him had been heard by a dozen people. The time had been established by a procession of witnesses. My only defense was that I had

left Jeff Nulty at about nine o'clock, that I had gotten home at 9:20, that I hadn't left my apartment until the next morning when the cops took me away.

But no one had seen me. No one had telephoned me just before or just after ten o'clock . . . or at any other time during the night. It was one of those things.

Garland wouldn't give up. He said, "And you can't remember what happened to your gun?"

"We've been over all that," I reminded him. "I haven't noticed that gun for years. I didn't know it was gone until the police discovered that there had been a .38 registered to me long ago, and that I didn't have it when they nabbed me. Of course, if that gun was used to kill Nulty—the murderer took it. But when or how, I don't know."

Brian said thoughtfully, "I'll make a point of that, of course. Nulty was killed with a .38. You once owned a .38. Unless they have the gun, they can't do anything with ballistics. Lots of people own .38's."

"Pretty weak, isn't it?"

"Yes . . ." He shrugged. "I wish I could be more encouraging, Steve. But the plain truth is that we haven't a thing to go on."

I got up. I said, "Beat it, Brian. And let me do the worrying. Tomorrow you can tell the Judge that you haven't any witnesses. Maybe by tomorrow night the formalities will be over and the verdict in. No matter what it is, it'll be some improvement over this strain."

He told me good night, advised me to keep a stiff upper lip, repeated his hope that a miracle might happen, and walked out. They took me back to my cell and brought me something to eat.

Night had fallen outside. Way down below the blackness was relieved by millions of city lights. I could hear streetcars and automobiles and trucks scurrying along Main and Spring and Temple and First. From a long distance away I could hear the faint strains of a dance orchestra, and the shouts of some kids who were romping on the Spring Street side of the City Hall.

There were other cells all around me, and other men in them. I'd long since gotten accustomed to my surroundings.

I'd gotten accustomed to the idea that my fellow prisoners, and also millions of other persons, believed that I had murdered Jeff Nulty. I'd heard that the betting odds were 8 to 1 that I'd be convicted, and 2 to 1 that the verdict would be first degree. That wasn't a pleasant thought. I'd always had a suspicion that I was allergic to cyanide.

Well, that's how it was. I'd been caught in a chain of circumstance, and the State cleverly had welded every link of that chain. Tomorrow, or the next day, or the next, I'd know the answer. I was afraid right now that I knew what that answer must be.

I surprised myself by sleeping well. I ate a breakfast that wasn't too bad, smoked several cigarettes and fixed myself up as well as I could under the circumstances. I knew the jury would be regarding me with more than usual interest once the attorneys started their arguments. I understood the importance of looking innocent. I had a moment of regret that I wasn't a pretty boy. I looked rugged enough to have done what I was accused of doing.

When they took me down to the Superior Court room where I was being tried, I caught a glimpse of the crowds in the hall. Some of my friends would be there, but mostly the spectators would be strangers, attracted by the somewhat natural, somewhat ghoulish, desire to be in at the final curtain of a drama involving human life. My life. I felt no resentment. It seemed the most natural thing in the world. The court room was humming when they took me in. Every seat occupied. The press was there in force. George Walderson, the tall, distinguished-looking, too able, politically smooth district attorney, gave me a brief impersonal glance. I felt no animosity. His job was to prove people guilty if they were guilty. In this case he'd stepped out of bounds: he'd done a hell of a job of proving the guilt of an innocent man, but I believed he had been conscientious.

Brian Garland was not among those present. I wasn't too concerned. He'd probably been up most of the night trying to pull an impossible rabbit out of a nonexistent hat. The jury filed in, looking worried. They weren't half as worried as I was. Then the Judge appeared and everybody stood up for a few seconds while he settled himself.

The door at the back of the room opened and all heads turned in that direction. Brian Garland rushed up the aisle, through the little gate, and apologized to the Court for being late. Judge Gaston magnanimously forgave him. I looked up to say good morning to my attorney, but I didn't say it.

Something had happened to Brian. His pink cheeks were bright, his eyes were shining, he oozed confidence. The Court was saying something about the Defense getting under way, and so Brian had opportunity for only a few words. And those words amazed me: they brought the first faint hope I'd had since mid-October.

"It's happened," he said.

"What?"

"The miracle."

Judge Gaston's icy voice said, "If the Defense will begin . . ." It was an order.

Garland was as easy to read as an outdoor thermometer. Last night I had known he was in the depths. This morning everything was different. I hadn't the faintest idea what it was all about, but I was willing to bet it was good.

He faced the Bench. "The first witness for the Defense," he said in a voice which was far from steady. "Will you please call Mrs. Patricia Kingsley."

There was another craning of necks. This time I turned, too.

Walking slowly and steadily toward the witness stand was one of the most beautiful girls I had ever seen.

2

WHEN something vital is about to happen, you know it. You feel it inside.

Everybody else in the court room seemed to have the feeling, too. The spectators fidgeted, then quieted down as though by being more comfortable, they could derive more enjoyment from the spectacle. The lads and lassies representing the press did approximately the same thing. They tried to look bored—still playing up to the opinion of themselves they'd gotten from seeing too many movies. District Attorney Walderson was alert, not knowing just what to expect. He said a few words to his young and eager assistants and they did the same for him. Then Walderson shrugged and the gesture seemed to indicate that he was sharing my private fog.

This was a moment of drama. Brian Garland was making the most of it. I wasn't fooled by his cherubic countenance and baby-blue eyes. I knew he was right on the ball. He was standing beside me, shuffling a few papers around, beaming at the gentlemen and ladies of the jury with a wait-until-you-hear-this expression.

Mrs. Patricia Kingsley seated herself in the witness box. She seemed under a strain, but that was natural. Otherwise, she looked like someone it would be a pleasure to dream about.

She was in her early twenties. She had soft brown hair and hazel eyes. She was about five-three and slender, but not so slender that you'd doubt she was a woman. She was wearing just the right amount of make-up: not too much, not too little. She had on a simple gray suit with a maroon scarf wrapped around her throat and tucked in at the right place. Her hat was maroon in color and simple in design. It looked inexpensive and probably had cost fifty dollars. Her nylons were attractively filled.

I stared at her, which was only natural. She rang a bell. But only faintly. I knew I had seen her somewhere. But I couldn't remember where or when. I knew it must have been a casual meeting because—while I've never had ambitions to be a wolf—I wouldn't forget something like that if I'd ever said more than a dozen words to it.

I touched Brian's sleeve and said, "Who is she?"

He gave me a reproving look, as though I'd cracked a joke at the wrong time. He said, "Don't be that way, Steve."

"Don't be what way?"

He said sternly, "You should have told me."

That made considerably less than no sense. I opened my lips to ask another question, but Brian had moved away from me. I had earned his disapproval in some unaccountable way, but he was still busting out all over with triumph. My curiosity at that moment was stronger than my apprehension over my own plight.

In the witness box, Mrs. Kingsley was being required to swear that she would tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Silence settled over the room. Brian let it hold for a moment, then spoke in a gentle, reassuring voice which had an appealing, boyish quality.

"Your name?" he asked.

"Patricia Maxwell Kingsley."

I heard a sharp intake of breath from the spectators. I saw the reporters grow tense. The name meant plenty to almost everybody in the room. It meant something to me. I even remembered where I had met the young lady.

I had met her in my own apartment on Saturday, October 4th. I was host at a cocktail party in my apartment. A couple of caterer's men were handling it, and I was paying off a handful of social obligations in one fell swoop. I had invited about twenty people. Knowing Hollywood, I had prepared for twice that number. I was right. Friends brought their friends. Wade Ramsay had brought Mr. and Mrs. Kingsley. Ramsay wasn't a particularly close friend—he was a good ten years older than I—but he owned a swanky apartment house where I'd been trying to get an apartment, and to invite him seemed like a smart move.

I vaguely remembered shaking hands with him and having him introduce me to somebody named Pat Kingsley. There were too many people milling around in crowded quarters for her to register very strongly. I had met Mr. Kingsley, too, but what he looked like, I hadn't the faintest remembrance. I had been too busy playing host.

I did remember that my chance of chatting with Mrs. Kingsley was cut short by the intrusion of a big, bull-like man with a granite face who already had had too many drinks. Ramsay mentioned that the man was Jeff Nulty. I

said I was glad to meet him, which was a lie . . . and was pleased when Ramsay and the Kingsleys convoyed him to the table where the canapés were waiting to be eaten.

Jeff Nulty didn't look as though he belonged at anybody's cocktail party. But he was probably the most famous person in that room, which was something that could happen only in Southern California. He was manager of a classy night club: the Casa Linda, which was on the ground floor of the ultra-ultra Casa Linda Apartments. Wade Ramsay owned both the apartment house and the club. I was surprised that he had brought Jeff Nulty along, because the reason Nulty was famous was that everybody knew he was an ex-convict.

I had been in the Casa Linda several times. I had seen Jeff Nulty. I had heard a lot about him. But I didn't have the faintest premonition of what was going to happen in the next few hours. I didn't know that there would be serious trouble before my own party ended. I didn't know that at ten o'clock that night someone would visit Mr. Nulty's apartment on the mezzanine floor of the Casa Linda and put a bullet through his head. I didn't know that I would be charged with the murder.

I still couldn't figure where Pat Kingsley fitted in as a witness. I didn't know her: hadn't remembered her until she'd given her full name on the witness stand. It was the middle name, the "Maxwell," that did the work. It told all of us that she was the daughter of Carey Maxwell, who was Mr. Real Estate around Los Angeles. He was a dozen firms: all big, all important. He was supposed to be worth millions. The afternoon of my cocktail party no one had bothered to tell me that Mrs. Kingsley had once been Miss Maxwell.

Brian Garland let the witness's words sink in: the simple but startling statement, "Patricia Maxwell Kingsley." Then he asked, "Miss or Mrs.?"

"Mrs."

"Your husband's name?"

"Rex Kingsley."

"May I ask his profession?"

"He was a dancer. He is now manager of a night club: the Casa Linda."

Her voice was steady, but it was pitched low. She kept

her voice focused on Brian Garland. You couldn't mistake the fact that she didn't enjoy what she was doing, that she hated the white glare of publicity.

Garland continued, "Where do you live, Mrs. Kingsley?"

"In the Casa Linda Apartments. Number 7-A."

"With your husband?"

"Yes."

"How long have you been married?'

"Rex and I were married in 1944."

Brian allowed for a few moments of silence, his way of signaling that he was about to ask an important question.

"Mrs. Kingsley, can you remember the afternoon of Saturday, October 4th?"

"Yes."

"May I ask where you were at approximately six o'clock that afternoon?"

"At a cocktail party."

"Whose cocktail party?"

"Steve Blake was the host. It was at his apartment."

"Can you tell me where his apartment was?"

"On Franklin Avenue, east of Fairfax. It is called the Collins."

"Did you attend the party alone?"

"No. I went with my husband and Mr. Wade Ramsay."

"Anyone else?"

"Jeff Nulty went with us."

A murmur ran through the crowd. Brian repeated, "Jeff Nulty? The deceased?"

"Yes."

"He was a friend of yours?"

"An acquaintance. He was manager of the Club Casa Linda. My husband was, at that time, his assistant."

"And your husband became manager after Mr. Nulty's death?"

"Yes."

Brian glanced at some notes. It was an unnecessary gesture calculated merely to kill time, to let things sink in. He said, "There is no sense wasting the time of this Court. With the permission of the District Attorney, I will put my next question this way . . ." He paused long enough to glance

at Walderson, as though for encouragement. "There has been considerable testimony about what went on at that party, Mrs. Kingsley; that Jeff Nulty got drunk, that attempts were made to get him out of Mr. Blake's apartment, that eventually there was a fight between Nulty and the defendant in which Mr. Blake was badly battered. Were you there when that happened?"

"Yes."

"You saw the fight?"

"Yes."

"Did you see Nulty kick Mr. Blake in the face while Blake was on the floor?"

"Yes."

"You heard Mr. Blake say that he'd kill Nulty for that?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Kingsley—what did you do immediately after the fight between Nulty and Blake?"

"I went home."

"With whom?"

"My husband and Mr. Ramsay."

"I see . . ." Brian paused again. This had all been build-up to something. I knew it. The Judge knew it and so did the District Attorney. Every person in the courtroom knew it. Now the time had come for the $64 question.

Brian's voice was soft as silk. He said, "I ask you to think carefully, Mrs. Kingsley. Can you state definitely where you were that night—that same night of October 4th—at nine o'clock?"

"Yes . . ." I saw spots of color appear on Pat Kingsley's cheeks. "Yes," she repeated, "I can."

"Where were you?"

"In Mr. Blake's apartment."

I blinked. This was really a surprise. I didn't blame Brian Garland for having been excited.

"The same apartment where the cocktail party had been held that afternoon, and where Mr. Blake and Jeff Nulty fought?"

"Yes."

"You were *in* Mr. Blake's apartment at nine o'clock?"

"Yes."

"Who was with you?"

"No one."

"Did Mr. Blake come in later?"

"Yes."

"At what time?"

"Nine-twenty."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I had been watching the clock, waiting for him."

I started to get up, then thought better of it. My head was whirling. The girl on the witness stand was lying. She hadn't been there when I had returned at 9:20. She hadn't been there at all that night. No one had.

I didn't like what was happening. This was perjury, pure and simple. It occurred to me that Brian Garland—believing in my innocence—had framed this thing. But something was wrong there. I had known Brian all my life. He wasn't the sort of man who would pull a fast one—even for a friend. I was willing to gamble that he believed the witness.

He was continuing, smoothly. "Mr. Blake came into his apartment at 9:20. You were waiting there for him. No one else was there?"

"That's right."

"What time did you leave that apartment, Mrs. Kingsley?"

Her whisper carried to every corner of the court room.

Pat Kingsley said, "About three o'clock in the morning."

A hum rose from the spectators. The members of the press were writing like mad. A bailiff shouted for order.

I didn't get it. Lies were piling on lies; perjury on perjury. I should have felt elated, but I didn't. This was something I couldn't understand.

Garland resumed his questioning: "In other words, Mrs. Kingsley, you were with the defendant, Steve Blake, from 9:20 P.M., October 4th, until 3 A.M., October 5th?"

"Yes."

"Continuously?"

"Yes."

"Specifically—and this is of vital importance, Mrs. Kingsley—were you with Steve Blake in his apartment at ten o'clock that night, October 4th?"

"Yes."

"Of your own certain knowledge, did Mr. Blake leave that apartment at any time between 9:20 P.M and 3 A.M.?"

"No."

"Another question, Mrs. Kingsley. You stated that you entered his apartment alone at nine o'clock, before he returned from his admitted visit to Jeff Nulty's apartment. How did you get into Mr. Blake's apartment?"

"With a key he had given me."

"When?"

"About two months previously."

"Were you in the habit of visiting him alone at night?"

"Yes."

"I regret having to embarrass you, Mrs. Kingsley—but a man's life is at stake. I must therefore ask this question: Am I correct in assuming that you were Mr. Blake's mistress?"

The spectators were seething. Pat Kingsley was nervously twisting a filmy handkerchief between long, slender fingers. She looked straight at Garland.

"Yes," she said. "I was."

3

THERE it was: the perfect alibi, all tied up with pink ribbon, and handed to me on a golden platter. There was only one thing wrong with the picture. It wasn't true.

Despite the rapping of the Judge's gavel and the bellowing of the bailiff, the court room was in a turmoil. Behind me, I heard one newspaperman ask another, "Is the gal really Carey Maxwell's daughter?" and the answer, "You're damned right she is."

This was too fast and too bewildering for me. It wasn't

as though my lawyer had picked a floozie out of a hat in a desperate attempt to clear me of a false murder charge: he'd come up with a gal who rated tops in the Los Angeles social world; whose father was prominent, wealthy and influential; whose face had been made familiar to millions through the society columns of all the local papers.

By all outward appearance, this Pat Kingsley was a nice girl. She looked like a lady—even while she was telling the world that she was my mistress. She was properly embarrassed, properly brave. What I couldn't understand was the why of it. Why was she doing this? Why was she lying?

Some semblance of order had been restored in the court room. The Judge made a little speech. In precise, judicial language he informed the spectators that if there were any further disorder, they'd all be pitched out on their ears. Then he motioned Brian to proceed.

Garland said, "Mrs. Kingsley; may I ask you to tell the jury whether I sought you as a witness, or whether you came to me?"

She did not look up. "I went to you."

"Voluntarily?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I knew Steve was innocent. I had been with him at the time Jeff Nulty was killed. I waited and waited, hoping that someone else could and would clear him, hoping that my appearance here wouldn't be necessary. You will remember that when I went to you, I asked first whether you had any such witness, and you said no. So I decided to tell the truth."

"Which I'm sure everyone here appreciates. And you had no reason other than that you did not want to see an innocent man convicted?"

"That was all. I didn't come forward before because . . . well, because what I've done has been rather difficult."

"I understand . . ." Brian turned to the prosecuting attorney. "Your witness," he said.

George Walderson went into a huddle with his two assistants. He was perhaps remembering one of the fundamental rules of cross-examination: "Unless it is necessary,

don't!" He looked at Judge Gaston and said, "No questions."

So that was that. Walderson was letting bad enough alone. It was a smart move. Every person present knew that questioning would fail to shake the girl's story. Brian sat down beside me, and mopped his forehead. He said, "We got 'em, kid; we got 'em."

A deep, unreasoning anger welled up inside me. I didn't like any part of what was going on. I said, "Like hell we have."

"An alibi like that . . ."

"She's lying! From A to Izzard."

He made an impatient gesture. He said, "Oh, be yourself, Steve."

"I am being myself." I touched his arm. "I want to take the stand."

He turned incredulous eyes on me. "Are you crazy?"

"Perhaps."

"You'll ruin everything."

"Probably. But I still want to take the stand."

The Judge looked questioningly at Brian. My attorney asked for a brief recess. The Judge instructed the jury that it might retire for a few minutes. The jury filed out. No one else left the room. Brian and I went into conference.

It wasn't pleasant. He was stubborn and I was twice as stubborn. This was something I didn't care for in a large way. I wanted acquittal, but I didn't want it like this. I wasn't trying to be noble: according to Brian I was acting like a full-fledged dope. Perhaps I was. But up to this point I had let myself be pushed around; I'd watched a mesh of circumstantial evidence being forged tightly around me; I hadn't seen a ray of hope. Now that there was one, I didn't like it. Being freed on the strength of a story that was a tissue of lies made no appeal.

Brian was furious. His normally pink cheeks were brick red. Nothing I could say made him see things my way.

I got up. Instantly there was dead silence in the big, formal room. I said, "Your Honor . . ."

The Judge looked at me as though he didn't like what he saw. He looked like a man it would be fun to know under

normal circumstances: a little fellow with sharply chiseled features and a glint of humor in his gray eyes. But the humor didn't show now. I was stepping out of line, and that is something which is frowned on in Superior Court.

He shifted his gaze from me to Brian Garland, asking, without words, for the meaning of my outburst. Brian said, "My client is insisting on doing something against my advice, Your Honor."

I said quietly, "I wish to take the stand in my own defense."

"Your counsel is able," interjected the Court. "He has conducted this case competently. You would be well advised to do whatever he suggests."

I shook my head. I said, "I believe the law gives any defendant the right to testify in his own behalf, doesn't it?"

"Yes. But . . ." Judge Gaston was reluctant to go even that far.

"That's the way I want it, sir."

Gaston and my attorney looked at each other. They both thought I was crazy, and I was more than half inclined to agree with them. But this wasn't the first time in my life that I'd done something because I felt I had to. I didn't try to rationalize it, even to myself.

Judge Gaston said, "This Court cannot prevent you from taking the stand. But if you do, it will be under oath, and it is only fair to warn you that you will be subject to cross-examination."

I said that was how I wanted it. Judge Gaston wanted to know whether Brian would still represent me, and I said I hoped he would, but that I wanted neither help nor interference from him when I made my statement to the jury.

I caught a glimpse of the D.A. and his staff. They were trying not to look smug. I was opening new vistas for them. They'd won the case, then lost it, and now here I was, leading with my chin.

I wouldn't have blamed Brian if he had walked out. He'd done a heroic job. He had worried almost as much as I had. And now I was busting everything wide open, and heading myself straight toward San Quentin.

The Judge rapped for order, and instructed that the jury

be returned. They settled themselves, but not so comfortably that they failed to show surprise when I walked toward the stand.

I hoped I didn't look as scared as I was. I was doing this on my own. I was making what was probably a bum play. I was doing it not because I thought it was smart, but because I couldn't take the break that was being handed to me.

I was sworn in. I was a witness. The chips were down. The dice were rolling.

The hush was almost tangible. I moistened my lips and looked at the jury. I hoped my voice was steady, that I wouldn't get emotional. I had a story to tell, and the telling it carried a heavy price tag. I felt sure that what George Walderson would do to me on cross-examination would be considerably less than no fun.

I looked at Judge Gaston, and he nodded. He had a fine forehead and there was a little frown on it now, as though he might be worried about me. Well, that made the Judge and myself all even.

I said, "I'm not a lawyer. I don't know the rules of evidence. I have taken the stand voluntarily to tell my own story. I hope the District Attorney will be tolerant.

"My name is Steven Blake. I am thirty-one years of age. Single. I am an aeronautical engineer. I do research work and aircraft designing for the Varney-Wilson Corporation. I had no war record. I did the same work I'm doing now all through the war. That was at the request of the government. My job is a good one, and I'm in comfortable financial circumstances.

"Most of what I am about to tell you, you have heard from a parade of witnesses. With one exception, I believe they all have told the truth as they remember it. There are certain details, however, which could not be known to anyone except myself. I felt that you were entitled to hear those details.

"I have a two-room apartment in the Collins, on Franklin Avenue. That is about four blocks from the Casa Linda Apartments where Jeff Nulty was killed. I have dined frequently at the Casa Linda. For some time I've been trying to get an apartment there. In other words, I know the physi-

cal setup of the building, and also of the night club which is on the street floor.

"On Saturday afternoon, October 4th, I gave a cocktail party in my own place. As frequently happens at such affairs, people that I had invited brought friends along. That was neither unusual nor surprising. One person who brought friends has already testified. That was Mr. Wade Ramsay who owns the Casa Linda. He has been a casual friend of mine for years, although not an intimate. He brought with him Mr. and Mrs. Rex Kingsley and Jeff Nulty. As you know, Nulty was manager of the Club Casa Linda.

"I had met Nulty, but did not actually know him. I had met him only as any patron of a club might meet the manager. We had nothing in common and no other contacts.

"I know I'm not supposed to express opinions, but with the permission of the District Attorney, I'll try it. I believe that Nulty was drunk when he arrived at my party. From what I've heard from this witness stand, others at the party thought the same thing."

Walderson looked as though he were about to object. I stopped talking, to give him time. He half rose, then changed his mind and settled back in his chair. A solicitous bailiff handed me a glass of water. It was cool and it tasted good. I went on:

"As host, I was worried about Jeff Nulty. He was loud, profane and obnoxious. I asked Mr. Ramsay why he had brought the man, and Ramsay said Nulty had just trailed along. I asked him to try to get Nulty out of there, and he said he had tried already but without any luck.

"Nulty got more and more boisterous. He was annoying the guests, particularly some of the ladies. Several of them left. I felt responsible for what was going on.

"I went to Nulty—that was a little after six o'clock—and asked him to leave. By that time he was thoroughly drunk and thoroughly nasty. He said he'd leave when he got damned good and ready. I stated frankly that his manner made me angry. I insisted that he leave right then. I believe I called him a drunken bum.

"He swung at me. I don't remember whether or not his blow landed. I know mine did. I had had no idea of brawl-

ing in my own home with a drunken, uninvited guest . . . but lots of things happen that can't be foreseen.

"Nulty hit me then. Hard. I went down. He kicked me in the face, twice. A half dozen men jumped in and pulled him off.

"I have a violent temper. I am not, as you can see, a weakling. I'm as large as Jeff Nulty was, and a good deal younger. I got up—bleeding. My friends were holding me, too. It was then that I said I'd kill him. I don't remember the exact words—I was too mad to remember. But you may accept as fact that I did say I'd kill him. If I'd had a chance right then, I probably would have. But I didn't have that chance. They hustled him out of the apartment."

I paused. This was coming harder than I had anticipated. The more I talked, the more miserable Brian Garland looked.

"The party broke up pretty soon after that," I went on. "Several people offered to stay with me, but I wasn't having any. I was still mad. When everyone had gone, I took a shower and changed my clothes.

"A little before eight o'clock that night I decided to see Nulty. I couldn't forget that he had kicked me in the face when I was down. I didn't like the idea of having things end there.

"I cannot truthfully tell you what I had in mind except that I did not intend to kill him. You have every right to believe that I went there looking for trouble. What kind of trouble it would be, I didn't know, and I didn't care.

"Nulty lived in a little apartment on the mezzanine floor of the Casa Linda, right over the club. I went through the lobby and walked up the stairs to his office. I did not carry a gun.

"The door of his apartment was unlocked. I walked in. Nulty was sitting in an easy chair. He looked as though he was in the throes of a bad hangover.

"He looked up at me and said, 'So it's you. I know why you've come. Well, I don't blame you. If you want to take a poke at me, go ahead. I acted like a louse, and I've got it coming.'

"That took the wind out of my sails. I cooled off pretty

fast. I still didn't like him, I still resented what had happened at my apartment. But his attitude tied my hands. I told him a few things, and he took them all. He wasn't afraid of me: he was simply admitting that I was right. There was nothing I could do about it.

"There was no fight. There wasn't even a quarrel. I certainly did not kill him. By that time, I was feeling rather silly. I left him, and walked out through the lobby. I didn't see anybody and don't know whether anyone saw me. However, I did notice the lobby clock. It was exactly nine.

"I did not go straight home. My head was beginning to clear and I wanted to give it a chance. At about 9:20 I got back to the Collins and walked up to my apartment, which is on the second floor."

And now I had come to the important part: to the thing which had impelled me to take the stand against the dictates of my common sense.

I was trembling. The palms of my hands were moist.

I said, "I did not kill Jeff Nulty. I want to be acquitted. I want it more than I've ever wanted anything else in my life. But because it is so important, I'd rather not have it the wrong way. I want to be acquitted because you believe I'm innocent, and not on the strength of false testimony.

"The testimony you have just heard—the testimony of Mrs. Patricia Maxwell Kingsley—is not true. The only part of it that is true is that she came to my cocktail party with Mr. Ramsay and her husband.

"That was the first and only time I ever met the young lady. She was not in my apartment when I got home at 9:20. She was not there at any time that night.

"There is not, and never has been, any love affair between us. She is not my mistress."

4

GEORGE WALDERSON, the district attorney, got up. He took his time doing it. He looked at me with a glance that was almost affectionate, just about the way a cat would regard a mouse which had been tricked into a bad strategic position.

He was a nice-looking man. Distinguished. His clothes were a trifle too perfectly tailored, his shave a little too close, the faint suggestion of wave in his iron-gray hair a bit too calculated. His voice was on the sonorous side. It had a rich saxophone quality, with tremolo effects. He had a statewide reputation as a shrewd prosecutor. His record was impressive. He was politically ambitious. He was kind —oh, exceedingly kind—to reporters.

He moved closer to where I was sitting. He took the spotlight right away from me. Well, I wished him luck. He could have it.

I'd never been in the public eye before. Even back in the days when I'd played football for Caltech, they'd never stood up and given nine Rahs with a "Blake!" on the end. I hadn't been that kind of a player: just a guy who was good enough to get in there and be battered around for sixty minutes of playing time.

I was supposed to be all right in my line which was aeronautical engineering. But that's something that is of no interest except to another aeronautical engineer. Getting headachy over research and experimental problems is somewhat less than spectacular. At Varney-Wilson Aircraft I was referred to as a promising young man. That was before they'd arrested me for murder. I didn't know how they were referring to me now. I also didn't know how they'd refer

to me after the newspapers appeared with headlines screaming an approximation of "SOCIALITE DISCLOSES SEX ALIBI." Or words to that effect.

Mr. Walderson's voice was smooth as butter. Nice butter, the kind that sells for 88 cents a pound. I was probably the friendliest defendant he'd ever tried to send to the gas chamber. His smile was intended to show me that he had nothing against me, personally. I was a case, nothing more nor less. He appreciated my cooperation. I'd made it probable that he'd win a case which had just collapsed under him. That my life insurance would become collectible if he won was a matter of small moment—to Mr. Walderson.

He said, in a tone almost apologetic: "Just a few questions, Mr. Blake . . ."

I didn't say anything. I waited for him to clear his throat and flirt with the newspapermen.

"Mr. Blake," he asked, "have you ever owned a gun?"

I said, "Yes."

"What caliber?"

".38 Special."

"Is there anything about that gun—except the serial number, of course—which would enable you to identify it?"

"Yes," I answered. "A small triangular piece had been broken out of the grip."

"How long have you owned it, Mr. Blake?"

"Several years."

"Where is that gun now?"

"I don't know."

"Would you mind explaining that statement?"

"Not at all. I've never had any occasion to use the gun. I kept it in a dresser drawer. The last time I looked for it—it wasn't there."

"And when was the last time you looked for it?"

"When the detectives who were investigating Jeff Nulty's death asked me where it was."

"When was that?"

"The morning of October 5th: the day after Nulty's death."

"Did they tell you why they were interested?"

"They said they had established that a .38 revolver was

registered to me. They said that Nulty had been killed with a .38. They wanted to make a comparison test."

"Did they?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because the gun wasn't where I thought it was."

"You were surprised to find it missing?"

"Yes."

"How surprised?"

I didn't like the way he put the question. I looked straight at him and said, "As surprised as you want me to be."

"How long since you had seen the gun in your dresser drawer?"

"I don't know. It may have been gone for a matter of hours or weeks or months."

"Isn't it a fact, Mr. Blake, that you took that gun with you when you went to call on Jeff Nulty on the night of October 4th?"

"No."

"Isn't it a fact that Nulty had beaten you up that afternoon, that you had threatened to kill him, and that you actually took that gun with you intending to kill him?"

"No."

"Isn't it a fact that you entered his room and actually did kill him?"

"No."

"What did you do with the gun after that, Mr. Blake?"

"I had no gun with me."

"You planned to kill him with your bare hands?"

"I had no idea of killing him."

"Why did you go to his apartment?"

"To settle accounts."

"You are a man of violent temper, are you not?"

"I get mad occasionally."

"You had been brutally beaten and kicked in the face by Nulty, hadn't you?"

"Yes."

"You had stated that you intended to kill him?"

"Not the way you make it sound. I was fighting mad. I said I'd kill the so-and-so."

"Same thing." Mr. Walderson shrugged. "Did you know that Jeff Nulty was an ex-convict?"

"I had heard it."

"From whom?"

"From a dozen persons. Hollywood is full of screwy characters. Nulty was apparently one of them. A graduate of San Quentin running a fashionable night club doesn't seem quite as incongruous around here as it might in some other parts of the country. I believe that he made no effort to keep his record a secret."

"He even helped publicize it, didn't he?"

"So I've heard."

"Now then, Mr. Blake—it appears that you were bitterly angry with a man who had beaten and kicked you. You knew he was an ex-convict. You owned a .38 caliber revolver. You visited this ex-convict. He was killed with a .38 caliber revolver. Your gun has fortuitously disappeared. Have I stated the facts correctly?"

"The facts: Yes. The adjectives were your own idea."

He said, "Your attorney may object at any time."

"I'd rather he didn't, Mr. Walderson. Though it was my understanding of legal procedure that you were supposed to ask questions and not to testify."

Two or three of the jurymen smiled. Someone in the courtroom snickered audibly. Walderson didn't like it.

He said, "You're a pretty shrewd young man, aren't you, Mr. Blake?"

I let that one ride. He continued: "You're certainly smart enough to have disposed of the gun with which you killed Jeff Nulty, aren't you?"

I said, "I didn't kill Nulty."

"Naturally, you'd say that . . ." Brian Garland was on his feet this time, about to voice an objection, but Walderson didn't give him a chance. He said, "That will be all, Mr. Blake."

That was all. He was through with me. No questions about Patricia Maxwell Kingsley. No gilding that lily. My respect for Mr. Walderson rose again. I had been his best witness. He didn't propose to take the edge off my testimony.

Brian put in a few seconds of concentrated thinking. Then

he said, "Defense rests." Judge Gaston called a recess for lunch. Brian asked whether I wanted to talk with him and I said no. I told him I was sorry I had upset his applecart and he said it was my funeral—then got horribly embarrassed because his casual remark had a gruesome applicability to the situation. We shook hands and I went to my cell.

I wasn't sorry I'd played it that way. I didn't even do too much speculating about what would happen. Somehow my thoughts stayed with Mrs. Patricia Maxwell Kingsley and her startlingly false testimony.

Hers had been no altruistic gesture, nor could it be regarded as the move of a publicity fanatic. She wasn't the type to court the public gaze; she hadn't grown up in that sort of environment. She had looked like the kind of girl a young man would like to know provided she were still single and not the only child of a father who owned too many millions.

The more I thought, the foggier it became. She had done a heroic thing . . . or rather, it would have been heroic had it been true. Actually, it added up to absurdity—except for that insistent idea that there was desperate calculation behind her move.

Court reconvened at two o'clock. Noon editions of the papers had blazoned the news to an eager public. I knew all the lurid details had been on the air. I heard from a friendly court attendant that spectators were jamming the streets in front of the Hall of Justice.

The State and the Defense did their summing up. Both Walderson and Garland played it cagey. Neither ranted, neither raved. They were like two poker players, each of whom thinks he has the winning hand. For my money, Walderson made the better showing—perhaps because he had more to go on.

Simply and graphically, he dwelt on me. He lauded my fearless honesty—which was a smart move. He established me as a man to whom lying was an impossibility, except perhaps on the little matter of claiming that I hadn't killed Jeff Nulty. He stated that he rarely had seen such courage, or heard such unequivocal truth. And I myself—voluntarily,

without guidance or coercion—had sworn that Pat Kingsley's testimony was false.

Garland played it the other way. He ignored my testimony, and dwelt on Mrs. Kingsley's story. He drew a graphic picture of Mrs. Kingsley's social position and reputation; he reminded the jury that she was so obviously a lady. And, he claimed, her testimony must therefore be believed.

The Judge's charge was not too involved, but it wasn't too interesting, either. I was glad that the case was nearing its end. I felt all squeezed out, like wash that has been run through the wringer. I didn't have an emotion left in me.

The jury retired. They trotted me back to my cell. I did some chain smoking, which wasn't exactly unnatural because, after all, what they were discussing in the jury room downstairs was my life.

They fetched me shortly before five o'clock. Whatever verdict had been reached had come fast.

The court room was packed when they took me in. The Judge appeared from his Chambers a few seconds later. I tried to keep a grip on myself, but my heart was pounding. Brian Garland looked pitiful.

The expressions of the seven men and five women in the jury box told me nothing. The Judge rapped for order. It wasn't necessary. The quiet was something you could cut with a knife.

Judge Gaston said that the verdict would now be read by the clerk. He warned against any demonstration. Every muscle in my body was rigid. My head was throbbing. The next couple of minutes would tell a lot.

The foreman of the jury handed an envelope to the clerk. The clerk opened it. Veteran though he was, his fingers were unsteady. He started to speak and his voice cracked. He gulped some water and started again. He read the preamble . . . he reminded everybody that this was the case of the People of the State of California versus Steven Blake. He said, "We, the jury, find the defendant . . ."

His voice cracked again. He drew a deep breath, and then he said, "Not guilty!"

There was a roar from the crowd. I couldn't say whether

of approval or disapproval. It was just a lot of noise coming from every direction at once, and punctuated by pounding of a gavel and the bellowing of bailiffs.

I didn't move. Not even when an incredulous Brian Garland started pumping my hand, not when George Walderson came over to congratulate me. The strength had drained from my body. I couldn't trust myself to get up.

Photographers' flash bulbs were popping all over the place. One young man shoved a microphone at me and asked me to say something to my millions of well-wishers who were listening in all over the metropolitan district. I shook my head and shoved the microphone away.

"Not guilty!" The sheer surprise of it drained me, left me flat.

An ample-bosomed lady shoved through the crowd and took one of my hands in both of hers. I recognized her as a member of the jury. She was crying.

She said, "I'm so happy, Mr. Blake: so very, very happy. Your effort to save that woman's reputation was the most heroic thing I've ever heard."

5

FREE. Up to now that had been nothing more in my life than a word. It was something I'd taken for granted. Since my arrest I had refused to let myself think about it.

I had difficulty adjusting myself. One minute I was a prisoner. Perhaps I'd always be a prisoner. I was a criminal character. I couldn't move without escort, I couldn't sleep without having people stare at me through the bars of my cell.

Now I could do what I wanted, when I wanted, how I wanted. I was amazed that there wasn't any red tape. The

jury said "Not guilty" and I was as free as anybody. No papers to be signed, no formalities, no nothing. I could go downstairs by myself, I could walk the streets without having detectives all around me, I could answer questions if I chose, and refuse to answer them if I didn't choose.

I got through the crowd some way. Dozens of people tried to talk to me. I felt like a fighter who had been awarded a close decision. I thought a lot of funny things I might say —I was that close to being hysterical. I thanked Brian Garland for what he'd done and left him standing by the elevator looking as dazed as I felt.

Down on the ground floor there were a lot of people. Nobody knew me. Nobody cared about me. I was just someone walking out of the Hall of Justice. I went down Temple Street to Spring. I looked up at the magnificent white City Hall, stretching high up into the clear dusk. I walked up the wide steps and stood between two of the massive pillars near the bronze entrance doors and lighted a cigarette. I looked west where the streets climb sharply into a sordid area of ancient, decrepit residences and sodden apartment houses. That had been a nice section once. Now it was sordid and cheap and malodorous. But it looked beautiful to me. I could walk there if I wanted to. I could walk anywhere.

I smoked two cigarettes. I was thinking about what I intended to do, about what I had to do. Maybe it made sense, maybe it didn't. I wouldn't be knowing.

I went inside the building. I walked down a long, impressive corridor, way to the end. Through the big door at the east end of the hallway I could hear the noises of Main Street and see the furtive, flickering signs in front of cheap restaurants, cheap bars and flyspecked juke joints.

The corridor angled off to the right through an archway. Leaning against the wall was a painted sign, rather the worse for wear, informing Mr. John Q. Public that he might proceed only if he wished to transact police business. I went ahead, because that was what I wanted to do.

I'd been in this corridor before, but not alone. I'd been brought here for questioning. I could turn around now and walk right out. The other time had been different.

I passed the open doors of the police department business

office. Farther along, on the left, was a ground glass door which said, "Narcotics Division." Across the hall from Narcotics was a similar door marked "Homicide Division-43-Entrance in Room 42." I went to room 42 and walked in.

The room was large and informal. It wasn't impressive and it wasn't nicely furnished. There were two cheap desks, a long, flat-topped table on which old newspapers and magazines were scattered and behind which was a wooden bench. On one of the desks there were four telephones. The room had three doors. One of the doors led into a little room containing more battered furniture which hadn't been too good even when it was new. In this room was a water cooler, some scratch pads and some green steel lockers shoved against two of the walls. On the third wall, and in the main room, there were numerous calendars with brightly lithographed scenes depicting handsome gentlemen catching buxom trout in crystal streams, seductive ladies in seductive gowns and groups of very cute puppies. Each calendar was an advertisement for an undertaking parlor, a sort of last minute reminder for gentlemen and ladies who had just been arrested for murder. It was, to my way of thinking, a perfect decorative touch.

There were a lot of cops in the room: big ones and chunky ones and wiry ones. They wore all sorts of clothes, from plain, conservative business suits to California sport jackets and slacks. If you didn't look at their muscles or at their hard, shrewd eyes, you'd never suspect they were policemen . . . and even when you looked, you couldn't tell anything about rank.

The night watch, the four-to-midnight shift, was on duty. Some of the men from the day watch were hanging around, checking reports, kidding with their fellow officers, talking football. One of the telephones rang and the watch commander took a dead body report and jotted it down on a pad which was neatly ruled off in columns.

I stood just inside the entrance and looked around. Conversation eased off. The homicide detectives all looked at me. I had a feeling that they recognized me. They didn't say so, but I knew. They looked neither hostile nor friendly. I asked whether Lieutenant Marty Walsh was in, and a

heavyset detective with a slight Spanish accent motioned toward a larger room on the north side of the one in which I was standing.

That was the room where the big shots of homicide had their desks. It was the same size as the reception room, and the desks were newer and neater, but the calendars on the walls were still advertisements for morticians. The skipper —the captain of homicide division—was at his desk. Two men were talking to him. One was Marty Walsh.

Walsh had given my case his personal attention. He was slender, but that slenderness was deceptive. He was wiry as a coiled spring of tempered steel. He was one of the conservative dressers. He had brown hair and cold brown eyes. He was the smallest man in the room.

As I walked in, another man got up from a desk in the corner and moved forward. I recognized him, too. He was Sergeant Vic Tremont, who had been the partner of Lieutenant Walsh on my case. He was a big man: as straight up and down as six o'clock. He had a face like granite and a deceptively soft voice.

Obviously the skipper recognized me. He jerked his head in my direction and started reading a memorandum on his desk, which was the same as saying to Marty Walsh that he wasn't butting in. I noticed that the next room had quieted down, as though the detectives there were all humanly curious about what had brought me over to the Homicide fifteen minutes after having been turned out of Superior Court.

Walsh straightened up. That still left him shorter than I was. He looked straight at me, but his eyes told me nothing. He said, in a flat voice, "You played that mighty cute, Blake."

"In what way?" I asked.

"Taking the stand. Defending a woman's honor. I didn't know you were that smart."

I shook my head. "You get hold of an idea, Marty—you never let go, do you?"

"Why should I?"

"You think it was a frame-up?"

"Wasn't it?"

"No."

"It was awful pat. On Mrs. Kingsley's testimony alone, they might still have convicted you. There wasn't any rule they had to believe her. But when you made your pitch: fella, that slew 'em. You handed 'em so much reasonable doubt they couldn't ignore it."

Two or three of the boys drifted in from the next room. They were as curious as a bunch of women. I said, "You still think I'm guilty, don't you, Marty?"

"What difference does my opinion make? The jury said you were not guilty. In my book, that makes you that way."

"You still don't agree, though."

"There's lots of things I don't have to agree with."

I said, "You and Tremont here rode me pretty hard."

"That's our job. We try to be smart. But we ain't ever half as smart as a slick lawyer."

I smiled. It was the first time I'd smiled in a long while. I said, "Why do you think I'm here?"

"To gloat. You got the right. You're just a citizen again. You can laugh at cops all you want."

"I came for something else, Marty." I looked around. "Could it be just you and me and Tremont?"

"Sure." He shooed most of the others out of the room and closed the door. The nice-looking man with the prematurely gray hair remained seated behind the desk. "You can't object to him," said Walsh. "He's the skipper. Meet Captain Carnes."

I shook hands with Captain Carnes. He had a hard grip, but he didn't overdo it. I said that was all right, and took a chair which Tremont shoved forward. I said, "I've come here to find out whether you're willing to help me."

Marty looked puzzled. He said, "You seem to be doing all right. Why do you need help now?"

I spoke carefully: "As I understand the law, I could confess to the murder of Jeff Nulty and you couldn't touch me. Right?"

"Right. You thinking of doing it?"

"No. What I wanted to tell you is that you've still got a murder mystery on your hands. Jeff Nulty was murdered. I didn't do it. I'd like to know who did."

Marty and the skipper glanced briefly at each other. Then

Lieutenant Walsh faced me. He said, "Maybe you ain't as bright as I thought. Look, fella—you're clean. They washed you and hung you out to dry. Even if it's true you didn't knock Jeff Nulty off, what's it to you who did?"

"Can't you figure that one, Marty? Let me diagram it for you. My statement to the jury was the truth: nothing added, nothing held back. I've heard of Patricia Kingsley, but I never saw her before, except casually at my cocktail party. Fully half the citizens of this town are going to think that way. I'll always have the feeling that I'm suspected of murder, whether I'm technically free or not. It's a feeling I don't like."

"Just the same, it looks as though you're stuck with it."

"Not quite. You did a lot of talking about your job. Well, isn't it your job to find out who killed Jeff Nulty?"

"*That* again. I still think you did."

"Would I be here if that were true? Wouldn't I be content to let well enough alone?"

"You got no other reason: just curiosity?"

"It's more than that, Marty. I'm asking myself why Mrs. Kingsley did what she did? She looks like a nice girl, like a lady. She's of good family. She had a reason for going to bat for me, but it wasn't the reason she gave on the stand."

"You think she's covering for somebody? That she knows who did it?"

"What else could it be?"

"The way you tell it . . . being willing to check deeper . . . it doesn't sound like you and her was playing house."

"We weren't. I have the feeling that it adds up to unfinished business."

"Look," he said patiently, "why don't you lay off? What's the percentage in probing any deeper?"

I said, "I figure I'm in the middle of something. Don't ask me what, because I haven't even got a theory. But no girl of Mrs. Kingsley's character is going to do what she did without a pretty strong reason. Somehow I'm mixed up in that reason. There's an angle that puzzled me ever since I heard her lying on the stand. If she merely wanted to cover someone, she'd have kept her mouth shut. It was easy enough to stay away. But she went voluntarily to Brian Garland and

offered to testify. On the other hand, if she knew who killed Nulty, there was plenty of opportunity to say so. So why did she play it down the middle? Why did she wreck her own reputation? Why did she tie horns on her husband's head?"

I turned to Captain Carnes. I said, "Just for a moment, Captain, put yourself in my place. Try to believe I'm telling the truth—even if only because this play would be idiotic if it weren't the truth. After what I've been through, it seems I'm entitled to a little help in finding out."

Carnes said gently, "Is that what you intend to do?"

"Yes. But I'm not a detective. I haven't the ability or the authority."

He said, "Maybe if you keep this thing stirred up, it wouldn't be so healthy. If you're telling the truth, maybe the person who killed Nulty wouldn't like you messing around."

"I've thought of that. It's still not the danger I was in until a few minutes ago."

Carnes turned to Walsh and Tremont. He said, "You guys handled this case. Did you ever get the idea this monkey was off the beam?"

They shook their heads, and Walsh said, "Not until now."

The Captain said, "He's got a point. Nobody could be as crazy as he sounds. Maybe it wouldn't do any harm to string along with him."

Marty Walsh turned to me. "How?" he asked.

"The newspapers have been trying to get me to make a statement. So far I haven't. It's my idea to let them know —for publication—that I have no intention of letting the matter drop."

"You'll be leading with your chin, Steve."

I glanced sharply at Marty Walsh. It was the first time he'd used my given name. Maybe that meant something, maybe it meant that he was coming over on my side. I said, "I can't figure any other way out. I'd never have a comfortable minute the way things stand now."

Someone opened the door. A mountainous detective said, "The newspaper boys are here. They know you got Blake. They're asking why."

I said, "I'll tell them."

Marty got up. "Better think twice, fella."

"I've thought twice." I walked into the main office. I started telling the reporters what I'd been telling Marty. Behind my back I heard Captain Carnes say something to Walsh and Tremont. "I know just how he feels," said Carnes. "I'd suggest that you fellows play along with him. I got a hunch he might be in a pretty tough spot."

6

I PICKED up a taxi on First Street and told the driver to take me to Hollywood. I gave him the name and address of my apartment building. He nodded, started his motor, and then began craning his neck in a way which made his driving more perilous than usual.

After awhile he said, "Look, Jack—I gotta ask you somethin'. No offense . . ."

I said, "I know. You're asking am I this Steve Blake who just got acquitted of a murder charge. That it?"

"Well, yeh . . ."

"You're the tenth person who has asked me that in the last couple of hours," I said. "It gets to be annoying after awhile."

"Sorry. It's just that you and him look enough alike to be brothers."

"Well," I answered truthfully, "we're not."

He cut over to Sunset and went faster than the rest of the traffic. Los Angeles drivers are—to put it mildly—intrepid. Nothing stopped us, although a red light slowed us down occasionally.

Night had settled: gently, like a downy blanket. The sky was so clear you could make out the vast silhouette of moun-

tains in the background. There were lights scattered through the hills, some solitary and some in clusters. Houses. Places where families lived: nice little houses with patios and geraniums and outdoor barbecues and pepper trees and mortgages. There were tiny places way high up—higher up than all the others—and smaller. Those would be the places that you saw advertised in the classified real estate columns as artists' or writers' retreats. Not much house, but plenty of solitude.

We left Los Angeles proper and wound in and out toward better residences. Off to the right were the lights of Los Feliz and up ahead was the brilliant glow that marked Hollywood Boulevard. Traffic lights were closer together now. They seemed simply to increase the occupational hazard of the driver.

A black-and-white T car hovering back to us slowed the driver down to a reasonable regard for regulations. We turned right on Wilcox, went one block, then swung left on Franklin. It was quieter here, a full block away from the brummagem brilliance of the Boulevard. The mountain rose sharply from the right of the avenue, and just above street level were huge homes which had once been mansions and were now boarding houses, schools of music, beauty parlors, and kindergartens.

The Collins Apartments, where I lived, was a nice, clean, respectable place with nothing ornate or showy about it. There was little to mark it from several neighboring structures except the name over the front door. It was a walk-up because it was only three stories high and for no other reason.

My taxi went to the corner, waited for a traffic opening, and made a sharp U-turn. I added a fifty-cent tip to the fare and the driver thanked me. As I started to walk away he said bitterly, "So it ain't my fault you look like this Steve Blake."

The lobby of the Collins was small and neat: the sort of lobby you'd expect to find in a building which was lived in by a young aeronautical engineer who could afford something better, but hadn't succeeded in finding it. Off to the left there was an alcove containing a cabinet which was cut up into little boxes, one for each apartment. That was where the mail was put twice a day. There were two chairs in the

lobby and one in the alcove. I went in to see whether there was anything in my box and someone got up from the chair.

Mrs. Patricia Maxwell Kingsley said, "I've been waiting a long time, Mr. Blake."

I stared at her. She still looked like a lady. She didn't look like someone who would publicly proclaim that she was having an affair with me or with anybody else.

She was still wearing the gray-and-maroon outfit which she had worn on the witness stand, but she had done things to her face: the right thing here, the right thing there. She was smiling, but with her lips only—not with her eyes. She was nervous and ill at ease. She was making an effort to be nonchalant, and not quite getting away with it.

I took two envelopes out of my mailbox and turned back to her. I said, "Well . . . ?" and left it dangling. I wasn't cordial. She said, slowly, "You don't have to make it more difficult than it is."

"That depends," I said, "on why you're here."

Obviously, she'd been expecting more cooperation. She said, "It's important that I talk to you. Alone. Would it be possible to go to your apartment?"

I said it was possible. Then I said, "Why didn't you let yourself in? You testified that you've got a key."

"Oh, that!" She gave me a tiny little smile. "I'm afraid I lost it."

Studying her, the situation made even less sense than it had in court. She wasn't someone to be brushed off, she wasn't a person to whom it was easy to be discourteous.

I did some fast thinking. My mind had been trained to work logically. I had made a statement to the press. I had announced that I wanted to find out what was behind all this. Well, here was my chance. Why not talk to the girl? Why not listen to whatever it was she wanted to tell me? Maybe I wouldn't have given in so readily if she hadn't been so attractive.

We walked upstairs and I unlocked the door of my apartment. I had a fair-sized living room with a nice view, a tiny bedroom, a little kitchen complete with dinette, and a tiled bath. She seated herself in an easy chair and watched me walk around opening windows to rid the place of that

musty odor which accumulates along with dust and disuse.

I said, "I'm fixing myself a drink. Will you have one?"

She said, "Thanks." I went into the kitchen and wrestled with a refrigerator which hadn't been defrosted for much too long. That's the trouble with being in jail: you lose out on your housework. I fixed two Scotch and sodas, putting a double dose in mine. She took the glass I handed her and sipped it gratefully. I sat down, gave her a cigarette, and took one myself. I held a match for her. Then I waited. But not long.

She said, "You didn't seem too surprised to find me downstairs."

I shrugged. "Maybe I've gotten hardened to surprises today."

"I came, Mr. Blake, because I felt there would be things we should discuss . . ."

This wasn't the way it should be. Not at all. I felt a sudden unreasoning surge of anger. I said, "Isn't that 'Mister' a trifle formal from one's mistress?"

She said steadily, "Must you be brutal?"

"Sorry. I don't know just why I said it. Maybe I'm too full of thoughts I don't understand. Perhaps we'll get along better if I explain that I don't appreciate what you did this afternoon."

"Why not? I may have saved your life." She regarded me thoughtfully. She had nice eyes. Hazel eyes. She said, "You're an odd person, Steve." She used my first name hesitantly—as though she were trying out something.

"I never used to be. What happened in the last couple of months may have changed me. But one thing has remained the same. I've never enjoyed being pushed around. I've never liked things I didn't understand. The position I'm in now is both awkward and ridiculous."

"How so? You're clear of a murder charge. You could admit killing Jeff Nulty and they couldn't touch you."

"I'm afraid that doesn't enthuse me much Mrs. Kingsley —or should it be 'Pat'? Up to the time you testified for me, things were running by the book. The police were wrong about me, but they were doing their duty. That was something I understood, whether or not I liked it. It could turn

out well or turn out badly. What I don't understand is you."

"That's what I'm here for: to explain."

"All right." I blew a cloud of smoke at the ceiling. "I don't know why I'm telling you this, except perhaps I feel you have a right to know. I'm in the middle of something I don't like. I have no intention of staying there."

"What does that mean?"

"If possible, I'm going to find out who killed Jeff Nulty and why. You're in it somewhere. It occurred to me that in the course of my probing, you might get hurt."

She took her time about answering. Then she said, "So might you."

"Is that a threat?"

"No. You might call it a suggestion. Why not let well enough alone, Steve?"

"Because it isn't 'well enough.' I don't feel that I've been acquitted. I feel that I've been turned loose under the old Scotch verdict, 'Not proved.' Half the people who've been reading about this case still think I'm guilty. I don't like the idea."

She said, "Arriving at the truth the wrong way doesn't make it any less truth, does it?"

"Yes. In my book, it does."

I got up and walked to the window. I could see all the garish neon glitter of Hollywood Boulevard, hear the roar of impatient traffic. Off to the right I could see the austere architectural beauty of the Casa Linda Apartments stretching upward into the night. That was where Jeff Nulty had been murdered. By someone.

Unfinished business. A hard, stubborn streak in me made me want to know. It was a deeply personal thing, something you couldn't expect another person to understand. I turned and fired a question at my visitor: "Why did you come here?"

She hesitated. Then: "I thought you might be willing to help."

"How?"

"Testifying as I did wasn't easy. For a lot of reasons. When I went on the stand, I took a calculated risk. I committed perjury. By doing that, I exposed myself to the pos-

sibility of a term in the State prison of from one to fourteen years."

I shook my head. "They don't actually prosecute for perjury."

"In this case, they would. They'd figure by lying under oath I had brought about the release of a guilty man. They wouldn't like that."

"Do you think I'm guilty?"

"I know you're not."

She made the statement simply, without emphasis or adornment. But it still carried a wallop. I asked, "How do you know?"

"I can't answer that."

"You mean you won't?"

"Perhaps."

New ideas were crowding in. I said, "Surely, you're not going to tell me you invented that wild story simply because you didn't want to see an innocent man convicted."

"Would you believe me if I answered 'Yes'?"

"No."

"What would you believe?"

"That you had an additional reason: one that I have no way of figuring. You played it straight across the board. You didn't have to. You could have said you saw me leaving Nulty's apartment at the time I claimed to have left. That would have given me enough alibi."

"No. Not nearly enough, and you know it. Whatever story I told had to be one that they couldn't help but believe. It had to be so startling that they couldn't question it."

"I still don't get it. What am I to you?"

"Nothing."

"Who are you covering for?"

"I haven't said I was protecting anyone."

"Did you kill Nulty?"

"No."

"Then you must know who did. You're too sure about everything." I shook my head. "You know, even *that* doesn't make sense. If you were merely trying to protect a person you knew was guilty, you could have stayed on the sidelines.

If I'd been convicted, the person you were protecting would have been safe."

"I hoped you'd see that point."

"Sure, I see it. But that doesn't mean I understand. Your testimony got me off, but it didn't solve anything. Doesn't that make you understand why I can't drop it? What's this thing I'm in the middle of? What's the next move, and who makes it?"

She said, "I've never met anyone just like you, Steve. I suppose there *is* such a thing as compulsion. So I won't press the point. But I'm still going to ask the favor I came here to ask."

"Which is . . . ?"

"I'm not as brave—or as foolhardy—as you are. I loathed what I had to do this afternoon. I'd hate even more being prosecuted for perjury. I'd like to give the impression that I had told the truth."

"That's reasonable enough. But where do I fit?"

She seemed to have difficulty putting it into words. "I wish we could act as we would if my story had been true. For a while at least I'd like to be seen in public with you."

That set me back on my heels. I said, "You and me: playing the role of lovebirds?"

"I didn't put it quite that strongly."

"Suppose I did what you ask. Do you understand clearly that it wouldn't put me on your team? If I find the right answer, I'm turning it over to the police."

"That's a chance I'll have to take."

"There's one other chance. What about your husband?"

She said quietly, "I don't think we need worry about Rex."

"If he wanted to make trouble, he'd have a lot of unwritten law behind him."

"He won't make trouble."

"Do you intend to leave him?"

"Not now. No."

"Will he kick you out?"

"No."

She was sure of herself. Disturbingly sure.

I thought as hard as I could. She let me do it. Just sat

there, and watched me. For some reason, my answer was important.

Then a thought came to me. It was simple, it was logical, and—in view of the little I knew—it seemed to be the only answer.

This girl's husband—Rex Kingsley—must have killed Jeff Nulty. She knew it. Being her husband, she couldn't quite bring herself to the point of turning him over to the police, but she also was too fine and too decent to let an innocent man be convicted.

It had to be that way. She looked like the sort of girl who could make a heroic gesture if she were pressed hard enough. And it explained why she wasn't afraid her husband would cause trouble, why she was so sure he wouldn't throw her out.

I was making progress. I had wanted to learn things: well, I was learning them. My theory looked pretty neat. I thought Lieutenant Marty Walsh would see it that way, too.

I said, "Going around publicly with me won't help your reputation much."

"It won't be hurt, either. After today, it couldn't be."

"How do we start?"

"We might dine at the Club Casa Linda. Soon."

I blinked. She was throwing 'em fast. "Isn't your husband the manager there now?"

"Yes."

"Lovely setup. Family dinner. You, me and the third inglorious member of the trio. Isn't that needling him a trifle too much?"

"It'll accomplish what I want in the shortest time."

I took time out to fix a couple more drinks. She looked like she needed one, and I know I did. I had more time for tabulating the score while I was in the kitchen.

I questioned myself. I inquired of me whether I'd been honest in saying I intended to follow through regardless, or whether I'd merely blown my top too impulsively. I still could back out. But if I *had* been sincere, I couldn't ask a better chance.

I handed her a drink. I raised my glass. I said, "Here's to the Great Lovers."

"Your answer is yes?"

I nodded. I started to sip my drink, then put it down abruptly.

She had placed her glass on the little end table. Quite suddenly, her poise vanished. She covered her face with her hands. She was crying.

I liked her better this way. I liked her a lot better.

7

THERE's one thing about having been acquitted of a murder charge: it puts you and your friends in a silly position. They want to say something, but they can't figure what. Especially when a rich, beautiful girl—who happens to be another man's wife—is involved.

I found out all about that at the plant Friday. I went into the designing department, and everything looked about as I had left it the day before Jeff Nulty was killed. The same faces, the same routine, the same scientific ideas. The boys all looked me over and said, "Hiya keed!" and other bright things. All eyes were full of unasked questions, and I knew the most important one was whether Pat Kingsley had told the truth on the witness stand, or whether I had. If it was the former, then I was a Lothario, and they'd never thought it of me. If the latter, then I was a gent of the old school or a damn fool, according to the point of view.

Word must have gotten around that I was there because lots of people drifted into the room who ordinarily wouldn't have come in. Even the Old Man showed up. He walked over to me and said, "Nice going, old man," without explaining just what he meant. He said he was glad to have me back, and I said I was happy to be back. That kind of stuff. It was okay coming from the Old Man because it was his

way of reassuring me about my job. I'm fond of my work. I wanted to go on with it. Besides, if they'd pitched me out on my ear, I wondered what my references would be like: "Mr. Blake is an excellent aeronautical engineer except for the fact that he is slightly addicted to murder and married women."

That night I dined alone at a little restaurant on Hollywood Boulevard, just east of Gower. I bought myself an extra-special New York cut steak, charred on the outside and rare in the middle. Then I went to a movie. It was all about murder. I didn't enjoy it much.

I wasn't supposed to work Saturday, but I had a lot of catching up to do. I had read all about myself in the newspapers. This had been what reporters term a solid story. I was getting downright sick of me. I had bathed, shaved, dressed and had coffee, and was about to shove off for the plant—when the telephone rang. I picked up the receiver and said, "Hello . . ." leaving the word hanging there with a slightly rising inflection.

A woman's voice said, "Mr. Blake?" It was quite a voice. Warm and vibrant. It seemed to project a lush personality at me over the wires. I said, "This is Blake."

"I'm Wilma Mason, Wade Ramsay's secretary. I'm calling for Mr. Ramsay. He wonders whether it would be convenient for you to drop by his office at the Casa Linda this morning about eleven."

"Anything special?"

"Oh, yes. I think you'll like it."

I said I'd be there. Miss Mason—provided it was "Miss"—sounded interesting. Also, there were possibilities tied up in a call from Wade Ramsay.

Ramsay was a nice guy. He had inherited the Casa Linda from his father. He wasn't in my league. He was older and he had a barrel of money. But I had known him for several years, and I'd been working on him in the effort to get an apartment in his building. They were the nicest apartments in Hollywood. Not the most expensive, but the nicest. Realizing that apartments are best obtained by pitching curves, I'd gone out of my way to be cordial to Wade Ramsay. I'd managed to establish what passed for friendship. I had in-

vited him to my cocktail party on October 4th. That had been a good idea when I thought of it, but it hadn't worked out so well. He had brought Jeff Nulty with him. Also Pat Kingsley and her husband. Maybe he was sorry about the part he'd played in that affair.

I drove to the Casa Linda. It was a truly beautiful building in the Hollywood area of Los Angeles, just east of the county line. It was at the corner of Sunset and Calzada. It was all white and plate glass and chromium. It was twelve stories high, and from almost any apartment, except those right on the front, you could get a breath-taking view of the city.

On the street level, an awning stretched from doorway to curb. On the awning was a sign which said "Club Casa Linda." A neon sign facing Sunset verified the statement. A little west of that, double doors of plate glass opened into the lobby.

The lobby itself was immaculate and chaste. There were the usual sofas and chairs and smoking stands and tables and lamps: everything expensive, everything simple, everything in the best taste. There was a desk, backed by a mailbox grill. There was a clerk behind the desk. I said I had an appointment with Mr. Ramsay and the clerk told me to walk right up to the office which was on the mezzanine, just over the club.

The stairway was located at the right of the two elevators. I came out on a balcony which contained a couple of writing tables and a few chairs. There was a hallway to my left, and several doors. Sticking out in the hallway, though not intrusively, was a little sign which said "Office." I went there and knocked on the panel which was marked with the word "Entrance." The same sultry voice I'd heard over the telephone told me to come in. I wondered whether the voice would fit the person to whom it belonged.

It did. I paid very little attention to the office itself; to its big desk and little desk, its swivel chair and two club chairs, its two storage closets, its row of filing cabinets. Those things were all there, and I saw them; but when Miss Wilma Mason was in the picture, the average male wasn't supposed to take inventory of the furnishings.

She was probably on the near side of thirty, though not by much. She was radiantly blonde, with lots of light corn-colored hair which looked as though it had grown that way and had not been subjected to retouching. There was more than a hint of red in it, too. I couldn't see below the line of the desk at which she was sitting, but what I saw of her above that line was something to remember. Twelve poses in filmy drapes, done in pastel, and you'd have a calendar in which the dates would be of secondary importance. She had deep violet eyes, a dimple and a manner as friendly as a Boston.

My first thought was complimentary to Wade Ramsay. If this was his secretary, I'd better revise my opinion of him. Here was the sort of girl every wife thinks her husband prefers to employ . . . except that Ramsay was single. But I had never regarded him as the type. He was about forty-one, a natural stockiness being slightly overlaid by the beginnings of a paunch, a rather fussy and fastidious person, and definitely not the tomcat type. I figured maybe I was doing him an injustice—or paying him too much of a compliment. Maybe he'd hired her for her efficiency.

I said, "Miss Mason . . . ?"

"You're Mr. Blake?"

"Yes."

"You're early. Mr. Ramsay is tied up. Won't you have a seat?"

She motioned me to a chair which was strategically placed so that I could see the half of her which I hadn't seen before. It exceeded expectations. She shoved a pack of cigarettes toward me and we each took one. I held the match for her.

She turned her dimple in my direction. She said, "You seem surprised."

"I am. I'm sorry I never visited Ramsay in his office before."

That seemed to amuse her. She said, "I think you're going to like this."

"You mean I'm getting an apartment here?"

"Well, I suppose Mr. Ramsay would rather tell you . . ."

I said, "Don't raise false hopes, Miss Mason—please."

"I'm sure I'm not. And my friends call me Rusty."

I said, "There's hardly any red in your hair."

"There's more than you think." She tapped the ash off the end of her cigarette. Then she looked straight at me. "You know," she said, "I think you're pretty wonderful."

"Huh?"

"What you did. The other day."

"Oh, *that!*"

"I probably shouldn't have mentioned it . . ."

"Why not? Everybody else has."

"Well, it's so personal. Of course, I've seen lots of pictures of you . . . but they didn't do you justice. Now I understand Mrs. Kingsley better."

This was coming fast. Too fast. She saw I was startled and said, quickly, "I shouldn't have said that, should I? I mean it, anyway. There are so few men like you nowadays. A girl gets to think chivalry died out long ago."

I was embarrassed. I said, "You'd be disappointed if things weren't really that way, wouldn't you?"

"A hundred people could tell me, and I'd never believe 'em. I guess I know a real gentleman when I see one."

The smile she gave me was full of invitation. "I hope things work out all right for you, Mr. Blake. And I don't care if you think I'm forward, I'm going to say it: If you move in here, I hope you let me see something of you. I think you're swell."

"Thanks, Rusty . . ." I didn't know how to go on. Fortunately, I didn't have to. The door opened. Ramsay was personally conducting his visitor out of the office. He said, "Right with you, Steve," as though to make it clear to his client that he didn't have any more time to waste.

He fairly shoved the man through the door and closed it after him. Then he came across the room and gave me a hard, friendly grip. He said, "Come on in, Steve."

I followed him into the room marked "Private." It wasn't as large as the outer office, but it was warmer and more relaxing. I took a chair and sat facing him, but my mind was elsewhere. I looked at the door through which we had just come and said "Wow!"

He chuckled. "Rusty? She been working on you?"

"I don't know. But whatever it was, I liked it."

Ramsay said, "She's nice. And I mean exactly that. Enthusiastic, intelligent and friendly."

"How friendly?"

"Not that way. She's been with me for two years, and believe me, she's the most efficient secretary I ever had."

I said, "She was certainly giving me the business. Wants to see more of me. Thinks I'm chivalrous."

Wade Ramsay said seriously, "So do I."

"I wasn't. I was probably a fool, but I wasn't chivalrous."

"The jury thought different."

"And the cops thought I pulled a smart play to make 'em think that way."

He said, "It's your business, Steve. And the thing I wanted to see you about is your business, too. It'll require a bit of thinking."

I waited.

"I've had you at the head of the tenant list for some time," he went on. "Apartment 7-B has just come vacant. One bedroom, kitchen and dinette, and bath. You can have it if you want."

"What makes you think I wouldn't?"

He regarded me steadily, an older man who was willing to explain something, but who avoided giving advice. "You shouldn't jump too quickly, Steve. Things are different."

"I know. Jeff Nulty was killed here. The Kingsleys live here."

"That's the idea. After what Pat Kingsley testified—well, there'd be talk if you moved in."

"There's talk anyway."

"You'd probably run into them occasionally." He leaned forward earnestly. "I'll be frank with you, Steve: I'd hate anything else unpleasant to happen here. There's always that chance if Rex Kingsley should decide that he is an outraged husband."

I said, "But you didn't have to tell me about the vacancy, did you?"

"No-o. Except it seemed fair. I know you, Steve. I know you're a gentleman. That you wouldn't provoke trouble."

"You're a little wrong on the last count, Wade. I'll probably be seeing Pat occasionally from now on. Publicly. Perhaps right downstairs in the Club Casa Linda."

"You're not serious!"

"Yes, I am. What damage might be done, has been done already. If we ever had a secret, it's not secret any more."

He said, "There's something about this I don't understand."

"There are a lot more things that I don't understand. I told the truth in Court. I stated afterward that I wasn't going to drop it there."

"Why not let well enough alone?"

"I don't believe I could. No matter what I did, or didn't do, I believe I'd hear more of this. Maybe some day I'll get the answer. Until I do, I'm not likely to rest comfortably."

He shrugged. "If you intend to be seen with Pat—here—I don't see what difference it would make whether you lived here or not."

"Right."

"But I still say you shouldn't jump too fast."

"You're right, of course. Can you hold your offer open for twenty-four hours?"

"Certainly." He looked at me curiously. "You've got something in mind, haven't you?"

"Yes." I told him briefly about my talk with Lieutenant Marty Walsh downtown at Homicide. "I'd like to talk it over with him."

Ramsay got up, which was a signal to me to do the same thing. He said, "Whatever you do, Steve—I'm wishing you luck. But watch out for Rex Kingsley."

"He's dangerous?"

"Not basically. But he's a prime louse. He's acutely sensitive to public opinion. Being a husband, he could get the idea that he was being shoved too hard. And *that* would make him dangerous."

8

THAT afternoon I saw Marty Walsh. I told him I had a chance to move into the Casa Linda, and I wanted his angle on it. He took his time about answering, and then stated emphatically that I was a screwball.

"What's in it for you?" he asked.

"A nice apartment. I've been trying to get in there for a long time."

"What else?"

"Maybe a chance to learn something. Jeff Nulty was killed there. The Kingsleys live there. If anything else is in the cards, it's liable to break there."

"You ain't scared?"

"Who gave you that idea, Marty? I scare as easily as anybody else—perhaps easier. But there are some things you do whether you're scared or not. You should know that."

He nodded. "All the time," he commented, "in my business. You go on a stakeout. Bad hombre, maybe. You don't know what's going to happen or when or how. You see the suspect coming in. You know he's got a gun. You're scared, all right."

"But you don't walk out, do you?"

"Nope. But I also don't lead with my chin. That's what you're fixing to do. You're inviting trouble. You're flushing the covey, provided there is any covey."

I smiled. "Of course you're still not quite sure."

"Something like that. Except it doesn't make sense any other way." He started chuckling, and I asked him to let me in on the joke. "Cozy," he said. "You and the gal friend and her husband." The chuckle became a laugh. "It could turn out awful funny."

"What could?"

"Suppose you and this Rex Kingsley had a beef about the broad. Suppose you knocked him over. That'd be twice you would be tried for killing managers of the Club Casa Linda."

I said, "You think of the damndest things. And as for Kingsley, I'm not particularly worried. If he'd been the sort to do anything, he'd have done it before this."

"You haven't shoved yourself at him till now. Maybe that would be the touch he wouldn't like." He shook his head as though reluctantly becoming reconciled to something. "In my work you meet lots of guys off the beam. They got angles: maybe good ones, maybe bad. What I'll say for yours, it's different. So go ahead. Move in. It's your neck that's being stuck out."

I got up and started for the door. I said, "Thanks, Marty. Come up and see me some time."

"You ain't kidding, Steve. I'll be around. Maybe just socially."

I hung around downtown for a while. Saturday afternoon, December, Christmas not so far away. People on the streets looked like lines of black ants swarming after something. Stores were jammed, their windows brilliant.

I had time to kill, so I killed it. I went up to the toy department of one of the biggest stores and watched a sallow chap with a wispy mustache operate an intricate miniature railroad outfit: the sort of thing I'd have given my right eye for when I was a kid.

Darkness was settling over the city when I started back for Hollywood. It took me slightly longer than forever to get my car out of the parking lot, and even longer to get to the Casa Linda. Wade Ramsay wasn't in. Rusty Mason was. She gave me a welcome of atomic bomb quality, and said Mr. Ramsay had gone to play golf—his regular Saturday afternoon foursome, but that he'd be in any minute—or maybe not until a lot later. She said I could wait, or she'd call me wherever I said, or I could have dinner downstairs and catch the show, and if she were with me, she could check every so often to see whether Ramsay had returned.

I got the idea. I said I hated to eat alone and asked whether she'd care to join me. She would, and did. When we walked down the dark little back stairway which led from the hallway on the mezzanine direct into the club she was only slightly less noticeable than a searchlight.

It was about 8:30 when we entered the club. Rusty knew everybody, or almost everybody—and the few men who didn't know her already seemed eager to remedy that oversight. She kidded with the dapper maitre D., whom she called Mario, and we found ourselves at a ringside table. "You've seen the show?" she asked.

I said I probably hadn't, unless it was the same one they'd had before I went to jail. "It's all new," she told me. "Except Conchita."

"The cute little Cuban number?"

"Yes. She was out of the show for a bit—just about the time you got into trouble. But she's been back ever since Rex Kingsley took the reins. The public loves her."

I had a vague recollection of Conchita. Tiny, shapely, raven hair, flashing black eyes. Cute as a bug. Her act was a single: she sang Cuban numbers in Spanish, then one or two in delightfully accented English . . . and then did what she could do best: her rumba. She did it alone, a little whirling flame, an eyeful of seductiveness. Yes, I remembered. It was something no one could forget, or would want to.

I talked enthusiastically to Rusty about Conchita. The big blonde girl leaned across the table and said, "You'd like to meet her?"

It was something I hadn't thought about. I'd always been strictly audience. I'd never been afflicted with backstage mania. But the man wasn't human who wouldn't enjoy meeting Conchita. I said I'd like to, and paused a moment to do a little more wondering about Rusty.

She had forced herself on me as a dinner companion. She was still taking the angle that I was something special. And right along with it, she was offering to introduce me to someone who was really special. I didn't understand Rusty or the Conchita angle. Both girls had the attributes which tend to make optimists of the most gentlemanly gentlemen.

We had dry martinis and a nice dinner. We got extra special service. I told Rusty I'd be moving in as soon as they got 7-B ready for me. She asked about my place at the Collins: she had a friend who had been looking all over for that kind of an apartment, and maybe I'd be willing to sublet. I said I would, and asked her whether that was the angle.

"On what?" she asked.

"Being so nice to me? Can it be that you don't love me for myself alone, but that you're merely interested in my beautiful apartment?"

She thought that was very funny. I didn't, but I helped her laugh. She said, "I just like you, that's all."

"You embarrass me, Rusty."

The look she gave me embarrassed me even more. It said a lot of things which even the greatest egoist among men wouldn't expect to have said to him on such brief acquaintance. I didn't get it. She said, "There ain't many men like you, Steve."

I thought of a bright answer to that one, but held it back. She said, "I'm glad you're moving in here. Maybe you'll take pity on a lonely blonde and look in on me occasionally."

I said maybe I would. I started to say something else, but we were interrupted. Someone bore down on us and banged me on the shoulder. It was Brian Garland, my friend who was also my lawyer. He'd had maybe one too many. He wasn't drunk, but he wasn't feeling any pain, either. He said, "Freedom—it's wonderful!"

I introduced him to Rusty and invited him to pull up a chair. He was genial and expansive. He said to Rusty, "You know about this guy?"

"Oh, yes."

"He's lucky. He gets the smartest lawyer in the world —that's me. Then he double-crosses him. And he still goes free. That makes one of us something: I can't figure what."

"Steve is a wonderful person," stated Rusty, "the most wonderful man I've ever met."

I saw a question in Brian's eyes. He wasn't as far gone as he seemed. He looked from Rusty to me and back again.

He was trying to figure the score, which was something Brian Garland always would do.

I told him about getting an apartment here in the Casa Linda. About that time Rusty said she'd give the penthouse a buzz to see whether Wade Ramsay had come in yet. The minute she swayed across the room, Brian sobered up. He looked at me sharply and asked, "What gives?"

"With her?"

"Yes. You're a charming fellow, Steve. You have good looks and wit and strength of character . . . but not that much of any of 'em. Why is she making a pitch for you?"

"So you caught it?"

"Hell, a blind man couldn't miss. What's the gimmick? And who is she?"

"Wade Ramsay's secretary. Her attitude—what we might call her 'excessive cordiality'—started the moment she met me."

He said, "That's where I've seen her. Around here." He drummed on the table with his fingers and looked worried. He said, "I wonder how well she knew Jeff Nulty? Or how friendly she is with Rex Kingsley?"

"I'd like to find out," I said. "I've got a hunch she isn't doing all this just for free."

"Check." He spoke seriously. "Maybe you're smart to move into the hornet's nest, Steve. I don't think so, but I know you too well to argue when your mind's made up. But you might watch your step."

I was just promising I would when Rusty returned to say that she hadn't gotten any answer from the penthouse. I ordered B-and-B's for Rusty and myself and a highball for Brian. I wasn't worried about his sobriety any more: he was strictly among those present.

The orchestra returned to the rostrum after a brief rest. The lights went down, a spotlight made a bright circle in the middle of the floor. The master of ceremonies walked out.

This wasn't the first time I'd seen Rex Kingsley, but it was the first time I'd ever noticed him. He came out into the spotlight, walking with a slight limp, and waited patiently—happily even—for complete silence.

Rex Kingsley was a tall young man. He was lithe and dark and handsome. He was dressed in immaculate and conservative dinner clothes, and when he smiled he showed a lot of shiny white teeth.

He wasn't more than twenty-eight. He had been one of the best tap dancers in the world. He'd had one shot at a big picture and hadn't done badly. Some enthusiasts had pegged him as a second Fred Astaire. That I wouldn't know anything about. Now—as Rusty explained to me in a whisper—he was all washed up. He had injured his foot in an automobile accident, and that had ended his career. He'd been a mediocre actor, just good enough to get by on the perfection of his dancing. Take the dancing away from him and he had nothing left except what he was doing: running a night club and filling in as master of ceremonies. I felt sorry for him. I wondered what it must feel like to be slapped off the top of the ladder, to lose the only thing that made you different from any Joe Blow in the world.

I felt sorry for him, but I didn't like him. The fact that he was oddly involved in my life right now had nothing to do with that. From the minute he started announcing the show certain things became obvious. In show business they'd call it lack of personality . . . the inability to establish that necessary subtle contact which flows between first-rate performer and audience.

I tried to avoid analyzing. I kept my thoughts to myself. Anything I might say would sound wrong. Brian Garland said softly, "If the guy can't dance, he ought to stay off the floor. As an M.C., he's repulsive."

I asked why he thought so.

"Ego," he snapped. "It sticks out all over him. Smugness. An extra special brand of conceit."

Rex Kingsley took a long time to say very little. Then he made way for the first act which consisted of two comely young ladies with fresh youthful figures who did amazing acrobatic feats. Or maybe the stunts were only amazing because the girls didn't look as though they'd be able to do them.

Then came a group of three men. The waiters trundled out a tiny piano, and the trio started a zany act, kidding

radio. It was clever and funny. It drew a lot of applau

Then there was another dose of Rex Kingsley. He made quite a talk about the Cuban sensation who thus far had appeared exclusively at the Club Casa Linda, and who seemed destined for great things. He gave Conchita such a build-up that he made it tough for her to live up to it.

The crowd quieted. You could feel its warmth and its welcome. There probably weren't a dozen people in the room who hadn't caught her act previously.

She looked tinier than I remembered her. She was the neatest, prettiest, friendliest, brightest, most dynamic little trick I'd seen in years. She sang with an eager breathlessness, with just enough shyness and self-consciousness to make the crowd love her. Her Spanish was nice: her English was charming.

And then she danced. Alone. Vince Mabry's band, augmented by a genuine Cuban bongo player, furnished a marvelous background.

Conchita was fire when she danced. The shyness was gone. She was the personification of uninhibited youth. She swayed and whirled and spun. She finished with mad, savage gyrations of her young body, and then vanished. When she came back into the thunder of applause, she was again the shy, almost childlike, demure youngster who was surprised and grateful.

The lights went on. The show was over. Rusty said, "I'll bring her over as soon as she's had a chance to change. You'll like her, Steve."

Brian Garland caught it. He said, "More and more I understand less and less."

Which made Brian and myself all even.

9

WHEN somebody stares long enough at the back of your head, you can feel it. You get uncomfortable, then you fidget, then you look around. You find a pair of eyes boring into you: maybe friendly, maybe hostile, maybe curious. The starer usually looks away and you look away and you both feel embarrassed, and that's that.

But this man didn't look away. He didn't seem embarrassed. He didn't seem to give three hoots whether or not I knew he was staring at me.

He was sitting alone at a table which was up against the wall. He was a hefty lad, perhaps thirty-four years old and weighing about one-eighty. His hair was a nondescript shade of light brown and was brushed carefully over an encroaching baldness. The eyes which gazed steadily into mine were of some light color: blue, gray . . . something like that.

There was nothing insolent in the stare, and—oddly enough—nothing that I could peg as simple curiosity. He didn't look like the curious type. He didn't look like a man who thought it would be fun to stare at another fellow just because he'd recently been acquitted of murder.

He was dressed in a conservative gray business suit, gray shirt and a gray tie that was flecked with red. He had a rugged face and a square jaw. We looked at each other a long time. I felt an impulse to stare him down. But I didn't. It was I who looked away. I didn't like it, but I didn't see what I could do about it. I didn't even mention it to Brian Garland.

Rusty Mason reappeared with Conchita in tow. Patrons turned to stare, and a few bright remarks were tossed in their direction.

They were in startling contrast to each other. Rusty was a pretty good-sized gal, but until this moment I hadn't thought of her as tall. I did now. She towered over Conchita like Pike's Peak over an ant hill; she was radiantly blonde where Conchita was dark as midnight. They came straight to our table and Brian and I stood up. Rusty did the honors:

"Conchita, may I present Mr. Garland and Mr. Blake? Boys, this is Señorita Conchita Montero. Don't touch, or you get your fingers burned."

Conchita said she was delighted to meet us. She seated herself and, in answer to my invitation, said yes, she'd love to have a drink: an orange juice. Rusty made a face and ordered a double Scotch for herself.

Little Miss Montero had a personality that bubbled. There was nothing artificial about it. I had an idea that she was always this way: bright, eager, friendly and astonishingly naive. She smiled at me and said, "I know all about from you, Señor Blake. I see your picture many time in the newspaper."

"And I've seen yours. I enjoyed your act."

"Poof!" She gave an expressive shrug. "Is nothing. Only I sing and I dance. No *mas.*"

Rusty and Brian seemed to be hitting it off nicely. The waiter brought our drinks, and I raised my glass.

"To Havana," I said.

"Habana?" Her eyes sparked. "You have been to Cuba, Meester Blake?"

"Yes. It's a wonderful country."

"Ah, *sí.* So wonderful. So much beautiful weather and so much cyclones. So easy the life and so difficult to earn the money. So many beautiful, jealous ladies and so many charming *caballeros* who are what you call wolfs."

"And such a beautiful harbor," I contributed. "And wonderful food. Those Morro crabs—"

"—and *ostiones de Sagua*—"

"—and black beans and rice—"

"—and *caldo Gallego.* And politicians—"

"—and jai alai."

"Sí! The jai alai. You see that game, Steve?"

"I went every night I was in Havana. And now that they've opened a *frontón* in Tia Juana, I'm going to see some more of it."

She put her hand over mine in a childish, unselfconscious gesture . . . or perhaps it wasn't childish and unselfconscious. She said, "You will go soon to see the jai alai in Tia Juana?"

"I think so."

"You take me with you. We go together. We have mooch fun."

I shook my head, like a man who has just taken a hard punch on the jaw. I couldn't figure whether Conchita was as simple as she sounded, or whether she was pitching curves.

Brian Garland said, "What is this strange power you've suddenly developed, Steve?"

I said, "Conchita's kidding."

"I no keeding, Steve. We go together to Tia Juana."

"Without a chaperone?"

She laughed. "Gentlemans like you do not need a chaperone. I can trust you, no?"

"No," I said.

She made a little embracing gesture which included Brian and Rusty. "Is sooch a funny man, thees Steve Blake. He think he made me escared."

Rusty said, "If he wants to run off on a little trip, Conchita . . . and if you wouldn't go . . . I would."

I said, "That settles it. I'm being taken for a ride."

"What you mean: ride?" That was Conchita. "I no understand."

Brian said, "He thinks you're ribbing him, is all."

"You sure explain things," commented Rusty. "I'm sure that by now Conchita is only twice as confused."

Vince Mabry and his boys went into a rumba. Conchita said, "You dance the *son*, Steve?"

"That? I'm not awfully good at it."

"I show you. Come!" She got up and waited: vivid, vibrant, eager. I put my right hand on her slender waist, placed my left palm against her right one, and grinned down into her laughing eyes.

"I'll try to remember," I said. "Short steps. Heels on floor. Let the hip movement flow up from the knees and not down from the hips. How'm I doing?"

She said something in Spanish. It sounded nice. I caught a glimpse of Brian and Rusty. They were laughing about something and looking at us. Rusty made a little circle of her thumb and forefinger. Then she wrinkled her nose as though to inform me that she was jealous.

It was all over my head. For a guy who had spent thirty-one years convincing himself—however reluctantly—that he was considerably less than the answer to a maiden's prayer, I was being snowed under. I couldn't figure what was happening: I hadn't been taking magic pills or overcharging myself with vitamins; I wore the same homely mug that had been mine since birth; I hadn't acquired any bright line of repartee, and my personality was just as dull as it always had been.

But in an incredibly short space of time three women had barged into my life. Pat Kingsley had appeared from nowhere to clear me of a murder charge. A gorgeous blonde named Rusty Mason had openly declared herself interested in me. And now this little Conchita Montero was making a much too obvious play.

There was only one possible answer: None of it was spontaneous, all of it was calculated.

I quit worrying and devoted myself to the rumba. Conchita bubbled with enthusiasm. She continued to deluge me with compliments, and I made a gallant effort to pay her back in kind.

If you dance the rumba with anything approaching correctness, you don't travel very far. We'd gotten only halfway around the floor when again I felt someone staring at me. This time I knew where to look. It was the man in gray, the man with the sparse, sandy hair. His gaze was still unwavering, unyielding. I still didn't like it. And other things were about to happen that I didn't like even more.

There were two main entrances to the Club Casa Linda: one from the street and the other through the lobby. I saw Mario bustling toward the latter.

Wade Ramsay was standing there. With him was a girl:

a very lovely girl with brown hair and hazel eyes; a girl who was wearing a smart suit and no hat. A girl named Patricia Maxwell Kingsley.

I hadn't kidded myself that I hadn't been recognized and commented upon by some of the guests. I also didn't kid myself that not many of them would fail to recognize Pat Kingsley. I tried to concentrate on Conchita. I didn't succeed too well.

I watched what was going on near the entrance. Pat Kingsley was apparently insisting on something, and Wade Ramsay was shaking his head. Whatever the argument, Pat apparently won just as the rumba music stopped abruptly and the floor commenced to clear. By the time I got Conchita back to our table, Ramsay and Pat Kingsley were there.

Over Pat's shoulder, Ramsay arched his eyebrows, shook his head and shrugged. That was to tell me that he would have preferred to avoid this, but that Pat had insisted. He looked ill at ease, and I didn't blame him. I felt that way myself.

But Pat didn't share my embarrassment. She smiled and held out her hand. "Steve!" she said. "What a surprise!"

I flashed a quick glance at my gentleman in gray. He was still staring. But he seemed surprised, too. Everybody was surprised. That made everything just ducky.

Brian Garland said, "All we need to make this perfect is the Judge and jury."

The comment sounded funnier than it was. Mario shoved two more chairs up to the table, and Ramsay and Pat seated themselves. Curious conversation was buzzing all around us. Well, I had asked for it, and I was getting it—though perhaps sooner, and in a larger dose, than I had anticipated.

Wade Ramsay said, "I got a message that you were down here, Steve. The telephone operator said you wanted to see me. I met Mrs. Kingsley in the lobby."

"I forced myself on him," said Pat. "It was quite a job. And he protested violently when I insisted that he bring me over to your table."

I said, "That's understandable, isn't it?"

She looked at me quickly, and frowned just a little. I

started telling Ramsay that I was taking the apartment when Conchita interrupted us.

"You have the apartment in thees place now, Steve?"

"Yes."

"Oh!" she said. "How very . . ." she groped for the word. "How very convenient."

Rusty was in the act of sipping her drink when Conchita crashed through with that dilly. She swallowed it the wrong way, and choked. We worked her over, and we all laughed. It was funny, really. The only person who didn't think it was funny was Conchita herself—and she didn't know what she had said.

When we had quieted down, Pat said, "Do we dance, Steve?"

I shook my head and made some inane remark about being tired. But she got up and stood there waiting. I started dancing with her, but I was angry. I said, "Aren't you playing this a bit too strong, Pat?"

She looked up at me, her eyes troubled. "Ever go swimming in cold water, Steve? A quick plunge is the best."

"But not so deep."

"I understand you wanted it this way. Or have you decided you were wrong?" Her look was slightly mocking. "Maybe you'd rather forget the whole business."

I said, "I'm not accustomed to the spotlight: not even after all the days of the trial."

"But you haven't changed your mind about finding out?"

"No. I'm more curious than ever. My scientific training, perhaps. I never rest easy until I find out what makes the wheels go."

She said, "You seem to be quite popular tonight."

"Abnormally so."

She said, "It wasn't very sporting of me to put Mr. Ramsay right in the middle, was it?"

"No."

"But I didn't have quite enough courage to do it alone. And I did want to make my first public appearance with you as soon as possible."

"You've done it," I said, not too cordially. "It couldn't be more public."

"You're angry?"

"No. Puzzled."

"About what?"

I didn't answer. What I was thinking right then was something I didn't care to put into words.

I'd been thinking that there might be another answer to Pat Kingsley's inexplicable attitude. My theory about covering for her husband might be sound. But there was an additional idea that kept intruding.

How did I know that Pat herself had not killed Jeff Nulty? I didn't know anything about motive or opportunity, but those were things I might find out. But suppose she had?

It would hit her pretty hard to see an innocent man take the rap for a killing she had done. And if she had murdered Jeff Nulty, her testimony wouldn't assay quite so shockingly. or would it? I wasn't sure.

She stopped dancing. She said, "Let's go back to the table. I won't bother you any more tonight."

I didn't argue. I took her arm and guided her through the crowd of dancers. I looked across the room toward a little door marked "Office."

The door opened and someone came out. He stood staring at us: at Pat Kingsley and myself.

I didn't like what I saw on Rex Kingsley's face. He looked ugly and dangerous.

10

THE next several days were hectic. There was a lot of work to be done at the office, and I experienced some difficulty getting back in stride. Before they'd tried to stick

me with the murder of Jeff Nulty there had been nothing in my life to distract me from the study of aerodynamics. Research and design; design and research. Theories that might work and theories that might not work. The young scientific mind exploring a young—a very young—subject. It had seemed vital and exciting. Well, it was still vital, but some of the excitement had been lost.

Too much had happened to me about which I could do nothing. I hadn't understood it then, and I didn't understand it now. Especially I didn't understand this sudden fascination for women I had developed. Up to six weeks ago, the fair sex had let me alone in large quantities. If I happened to be there, they didn't actually object, but they didn't swoon, either.

I wondered why Pat Kingsley was so constantly in my thoughts. For a while I figured it was because of the spectacular way she had entered my life. But by now I'd accustomed myself to that, and I thought of her more, rather than less.

It wasn't that she was pretty. In Hollywood pretty girls were a dime a dozen. Maybe curiosity played a large part in it, but I was commencing to suspect that the ancient and ubiquitous biological urge wasn't entirely missing from my make-up.

Up to midnight Tuesday I did my packing, with the help of two gentlemen from a big company. They were thorough and efficient. My apartment at the Collins was full of big wooden boxes and portable wardrobes. I was amazed at how much junk I had accumulated. Wednesday a huge van appeared and my stuff was carted out, leaving the old two-room homestead looking naked and forlorn.

They'd done a swift and pleasant redecorating job at the Casa Linda. I had one room less, but my bedroom was the sort of thing that didn't look like a bedroom. The bed folded away into the wall. When that happened, the apartment assumed a respectable look.

The movers helped with the unpacking, carted off a million tons, more or less, of excelsior and barrels and packing cases. A house-service maid showed up and swept in the corners and did a bit of dusting. A boy brought me a big

vase of masculine-looking white chrysanthemums with a card saying, "With the compliments of the management." Down in the corner was written, in neat, feminine script, "And from Rusty."

After a little, Rusty herself appeared. For whatever reason, she was still pretending that she thought I was something extra-special. She asked whether everything was as I wanted it, whether I was comfortable, and she informed me that I was welcome. She also mentioned that in case I lost my key, she had an extra one in the office. "And if you're nice to me, I'll use it some time."

"For what?"

"To haunt you. Do you like to be haunted?"

"By gorgeous blondes? There's nothing I'd like better."

She gave me a long, lingering, promising look. "You might be surprised," she said, and I offered to bet her I wouldn't. She said she didn't know whether to feel complimented or insulted, and as I myself couldn't figure what I had meant, I let it ride. It was very snappy dialogue—strictly 1947 model. Lots of bright words with no significance. I informed Rusty that I needed a shave, a shower and a change of linen. She took the hint and shoved off.

An hour later I had done a bit of straightening up and had relaxed with a cigarette and a small drink from my own private stock, which consisted of a half dozen bottles of assorted things. My two windows faced east, but I got an angled view of the lights of the Wilshire district. It was very lovely and quiet and peaceful. I discovered that I was tired. I decided to eat downstairs. Alone. I could be through before the show went on. I'd come back upstairs and lose myself in a good book. I didn't know just where I'd find one, or whether it would be a classic novel or a scientific work, and I didn't care. Relaxing with a good book sounded like the correct line for a plushy background like the Casa Linda.

I opened my door and stepped into the hall. Right next to me the door of apartment 7-A opened and closed. Somebody else was standing there.

Pat Kingsley and I looked at each other. 7-A and 7-B. She said, "Are you the new tenant in 7-B?"

"Yes. And that's your apartment?"

"Yes."

All of a sudden she started to laugh. I watched her for a while, and then it got me. I laughed, too. It was funny as hell. I said, "You made a lot of public believe a lot of lies. Try to make someone believe that this was just an accident."

Next door neighbors. Walk, do not run, to the nearest apartment. Rap on the door and ask for Steve. I said, "I didn't know . . ." and she said, "Neither did I." But we knew now.

She looked prettier and sweeter than usual. She looked less like a fallen woman than anybody else I'd ever seen. I said, "Does your husband live there, too?"

"Naturally."

"Well, I didn't know . . ."

"I told you," she declared quietly, "that he wouldn't kick me out."

I started to remark that he was unusually broad-minded, but that seemed to be a type of humor that wasn't in order, so I held it back. Tactful me. Instead I said, "Going down to dinner?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps . . ."

"Delighted."

The elevator boy was still on. He'd be on until 7:30. After that, you worked the cages yourself: push the right button and the rest was done automatically.

The boy rode us down to the club. It held a fair sprinkling of diners: mostly tenants and people who lived in the neighborhood. The bandstand was empty. Waiters moved about unobtrusively. Mario wasn't there, but his assistant conducted us to a corner table. On the way we passed a wall table where a man sat alone.

It was the gent in the gray suit: the one who had seemed so interested in me last Saturday night. He was still interested. He looked straight at me. He was smiling, as though he saw something which amused him. He made me feel uncomfortable.

When the captain seated us, I asked whether he knew the man. He took a quick look and shook his head. "He's been in several times recently, but I don't know him."

"Is he a tenant here?"

"Not unless he just moved in."

We ordered cocktails and started fiddling with the menus. I asked Pat whether she knew the stranger and she said no, and asked why. I told her. She didn't appear to like it any better than I did.

We chatted about nothing of importance until the waiter took our order. A few people were looking at us. Maybe they knew who we were, but I still felt superior. I knew something they didn't know. I knew that Pat and I were now living within a few feet of each other.

Someone walked down the dark, narrow flight of steps that led from the mezzanine to the club. The apartment house office was on the mezzanine and also the apartment in which Jeff Nulty had been killed. And the dressing rooms.

Rex Kingsley stood at the foot of the stairway and looked around. He saw us. He hesitated for a moment, and then started in our direction.

I felt my right ear begin to twitch. That always happens when I'm nervous. This might be good. Quite a setup for a first meeting. Boy friend dining with wife. Outraged husband approaching. Anything could happen, and probably would.

Kingsley was in dinner clothes. He looked beautiful. He also looked strong. I wondered how we'd make out if anything violent happened.

Pat didn't seem worried. But Mario had come in by this time, and he looked worried enough for two.

Kingsley stopped at our table. I didn't get up. That might have invited something I didn't want. I hate brawls, and this had all the makings of a good one. Pat said steadily, "Rex, this is Mr. Blake. Steve, my husband."

Neat. Neat and gaudy. All the privacy of three monkeys in a zoo. I said, "How do you do?" which sounded foolish because all I was interested in was *what* he would do, and not how.

He nodded and said, "I've heard of Mr. Blake," which seemed to be a superb understatement. Some of the tenseness flowed out of my muscles. Kingsley obviously didn't

intend to punch first and talk later. Pat said, "Have a seat, Rex."

He pulled up a chair and sat down. He looked me over at leisure and with some insolence. He said, "I hear you've just moved into the building."

"Yes," I said. "7-B."

"Oh! *That* close."

I didn't invite him to have a drink. The line had to be drawn somewhere. He said, "We'd have to meet sooner or later, Blake. That's why I came over."

Not bad. Not even hammy. Just plain common sense. Pat said, "I invited Steve to have dinner with me. It wasn't his idea."

"What difference does it make whose idea it was?"

This was getting too fast for me, but I didn't see any reason why I shouldn't string along. I said, "I'll probably dine with your wife—right here—frequently."

He said, "That's your business. And hers. If you're trying to find out how I feel about it: I just don't give a damn."

He got up on that one and walked off, leaving me wondering whether to believe him.

11

THE following Saturday night—December 13th—I invited Pat Kingsley to have dinner with me.

I kidded myself that I did it on impulse. If I'd been honest with myself, I'd have known better. Pat wasn't just impulse any longer.

I hadn't known many girls intimately, but Pat was different from any of those I had known. Maybe because she was Pat Kingsley. Maybe because she had a nice sense of humor. Maybe because she'd exploded on my limited

horizon in a dramatic way and thus had made a more profound impression than she might otherwise have done. Whatever the reason, I liked her. How much, I didn't know and didn't try hard to find out.

The idea was that she and I would have cocktails and dinner and watch the first show. That would give us a lot of time for conversation. I'd been a resident of the Casa Linda long enough to be taking it in stride, the general public had turned from me to a later and juicier scandal, I was back in the groove at the plant and was strictly in the mood for a little congenial feminine companionship. Or a lot of it, if things happened to be that way.

What I hadn't yet learned was that things never turn out exactly as planned. My cozy little dinner for two developed into a big party and a large evening. Maybe it was the air-conditioned climate of the Club Casa Linda, maybe it was that things just naturally had a habit of happening there. Maybe it was a warning that the snowball I had started rolling downhill couldn't possibly stop short of becoming an avalanche.

The dinner itself was okay. Pat looked prettier than usual, which was saying plenty. She had on a black-and-beige dress, but I couldn't possibly describe it. She was the sort of girl the details of whose clothes were lost against the background of her own radiant personality.

We didn't talk about Jeff Nulty or murder or courtrooms or even her husband. We just talked. Little half-confidences, brief glimpses into each other's past: nothing important, nothing that would be of the slightest interest to anybody else. I even forgot that I was dedicated to the task of discovering the identity of the person for whom she was covering up, and the reason; that I was supposed to learn whether or not she actually had killed Jeff Nulty. And that when I found out any or all of these things I was to play the role of hard guy and turn my information over to Lieutenant Marty Walsh of Homicide Division, Los Angeles Police Department.

The first intrusion on our public privacy occurred just as we were finishing dinner. Rusty Mason appeared. The cocktail dress she was wearing was startling, but not nearly

as startling as she was. There was a lot of Rusty showing, and it was all interesting. She was only slightly less noticeable than the Aurora Borealis. And the person she was with didn't dim the picture any.

I recognized the man. He was famous. His name was Pete Connolly and he was a jockey: a very fine jockey. He was supposed to be taking a needed rest before the opening of the racing season at Santa Anita.

If there's one thing successful jockeys have in common it is their weakness for tall, voluptuous, dazzling blondes. That being the case, Pete Connolly was one up on the rest of the world. His choice of Rusty Mason was little short of inspirational.

He weighed well under a hundred pounds, and wasn't much bigger than a minute. Standing in the doorway beside Rusty, he looked like an exclamation point alongside a telegraph pole; a Brussels sprout rubbing elbows with a cabbage.

He wasn't young—about thirty-two—but he had that oddly boyish quality which belongs to very small men. He was flashily dressed, but still looked somber beside the girl he was escorting. He had black hair and a swarthy complexion. He was wiry and hard, and he didn't wear elevator shoes—which probably wouldn't have helped anyway. His own personality was lost in the radiance of Rusty Mason's flagrant blondeness, and he didn't seem to mind it. You couldn't mistake the fact that he was either crazy about the girl or giving a good imitation of it.

Rusty saw us. She grabbed Pete Connolly by the arm and dragged him toward us. A dozen people spoke to him. He waved back at them and smiled with his lips, though not with his hard black eyes. Rusty performed the introductions, pulled up a couple of chairs, and they both sat down. She told the little jockey—rather too effusively, I thought—that I was the most wonderful man she'd ever met. He didn't seem to agree with her. She continued to pile it on. I caught him staring at me, and I grinned and winked. He seemed to like that. He winked right back. That made everything fine between us. I liked him, and for some odd reason I hoped he would like me.

Rusty was playing him strong. But she was playing with

me, too. Maybe that's the way she was: chronically friendly and not too exclusive. It didn't quite check with being a hard-working secretary, but I figured she was entitled to live her own life after hours. Watching her work on Pete Connolly, I understood more about her approach to me. Just a weakness for men. Could be, though instinct told me it was something different.

They definitely dug in at our table. A little while later Brian Garland came in. He and Pete knew each other. Brian stated that he was queer for jockeys and that Pete was the best: right up there in the first ten. Brian wanted to talk racing. He wanted to talk a lot of it. So Mario had two waiters shove up another table, and we now had grown to a party of five.

Conchita Montero breezed in, all wrapped up in a cloth coat and shivering as though it was colder outside than a California December. She stated that it was not so cold like this in Cuba. She said she had to dress for the first show, but she wanted to talk to Rusty. She dazzled Brian with a smile, and reminded me about our trip to Tia Juana to see jai alai, which was getting to be a gag. My hope of a tête-à-tête evening with Pat Kingsley already had gone overboard so I invited Conchita to rejoin us after the show, and she accepted eagerly. I figured we might as well make a convention of it, so when I saw Wade Ramsay talking to Mario just before the show started, I beckoned him to the table and insisted that he stick with us.

Up against the wall was my inquisitive friend in the gray suit—except that tonight he was wearing blue. He was still interested in me, or seemed to be. I started to introduce myself and invite him to join us, but that didn't seem like such a hot idea, so I let it drop.

The place was fairly well filled by the time the show went on. It would be packed for the second show. Everything ran according to schedule: same acts, same applause, same encores; same handsome, arrogant, too long-winded Rex Kingsley as master of ceremonies. Once, as Rex left the floor, I fancied that he glanced at my table and saw his wife. I couldn't be sure, but it didn't seem to matter anyway.

A few minutes after 10:30 Conchita returned. She had

been only slightly less than sensational. She sat next to me. She should have been next to Pete Connolly. They were of a size.

She exuded good humor. She was as fresh and keen and unspoiled as a person could be. It was impossible not to respond to her uninhibited charm.

Rusty looked across at her and said, "What was it you wanted to ask me about, Conchita?"

"Is pictures. You have the memory of many pictures was sent to you from Cuba before I come here?"

"Pictures of you?"

"*Sí*. Much, much pictures. Conchita singing. Conchita dancing. Conchita not too much wearing clothes. My agent, he tell me he would like. You give me?"

Rusty looked defeated. She said, "You can have 'em, all right, if you're willing to dig. There are two closets in my office. One is neat as a pin. The other is a catchall. Everything I get that hasn't a proper place, is pitched in there. It's a mess. Somewhere in the middle of all that junk you'll find your pictures. But, honest, I'd hate to tackle the job myself."

Conchita rose promptly. "I look," she said. "You maybe show me where is?"

Conchita's bag fell from the table to the floor. She bent to pick it up, but I beat her to it. The catch had come open and a half dozen things spilled out: compact, lipstick, little coin purse . . . things that you find in every woman's bag. I shoved them all back in and handed the bag to her. She thanked me prettily and stated that I was a grand caballero, which seemed to be considerably too much enthusiasm for what I had done.

She and Rusty walked across the floor and vanished up the little stairway that led from the club up to the mezzanine. Within three minutes Rusty was back. She said, "That kid! Never still a minute. Got to do everything right now. Can't ever wait until tomorrow. Brother, I sure don't envy anybody who has to excavate in that closet."

We talked generally and pleasantly, waiting for Conchita to return. It was a mixed group, but a nice one: Pat Kingsley, Brian Garland, Rusty Mason, Wade Ramsay, the little

jockey and me. I don't remember what we talked about, except that it wasn't important. I was enjoying myself. This was more social life than I'd had in a long time.

Shortly after eleven o'clock—maybe ten minutes after—Conchita came back. She was a different Conchita. Everyone at the table noticed a change. Rusty said, "Did you find the pictures?"

"I no find. Maybe some other time I look." She reached for my highball glass and took a long drink. I said, "I thought you didn't go for strong liquor, Conchita."

"I drink now," she said. "I am disturb."

That was obvious. Her eyes were wide and frightened. She edged her chair closer to mine. She took my hand. Her fingers were icy. She leaned close and whispered, "Weeth you I must talk."

"All right," I said. "Here I am. Start talking."

"Not here. Somewhere else. Is important."

I said, "Snap out of it, Conchita. It isn't *that* important."

"Is most very important. Is about you. The trouble you have."

I saw Rusty staring at Conchita. Her big blue eyes held a speculative light. I didn't understand any part of what was happening. Conchita was serious. She was frightened. She wanted to tell me something about myself, about my trouble. That could mean only one thing. The murder of Jeff Nulty was my trouble.

Conchita whispered a question. "We no can talk here. Is what number, your apartment, Steve?"

"7-B."

"I go there. I wait for you."

I couldn't combat the urgency in her voice, her eyes. I said I'd meet her at my apartment in a few minutes. I offered to give her the key, but she shook her head. "I wait in the hall," she said breathlessly. "You no let anybody know you meet me there. Is so much important, Steve."

Rex Kingsley appeared from nowhere. One instant he wasn't there, and in the next second he was. He looked tall and handsome and not very happy. He nodded briefly to all of us and said, "Good evening." Then he bent over Conchita. He said, "I want to talk to you."

She shook her head violently. "Not now," she said. "We talk after while perhaps. Twenty-thirty minutes, no?"

"Right now. In my office."

She didn't want to. She said, "How long it take, Meester Kingsley?"

"I don't know. It's about your new rumba routines." He closed his fingers around her arm and started walking away with her. She turned long enough to throw me a helpless look over her shoulder, then jerked her head upward as though to ask me to go upstairs and wait. I nodded, and she smiled—thanking me.

The music started. Couples began spilling onto the floor. I saw Rex Kingsley and Conchita vanish in the general direction of Kingsley's office, which was at the far corner of the room.

Pat Kingsley got up. She said, "Let's dance, Steve."

That was the last thing in the world I wanted to do. But she was pulling me onto the floor. Well, I had perhaps twenty minutes to kill, until Kingsley had finished with Conchita. I started to dance. Just as we moved away from the table I heard Rusty excuse herself with a remark about powdering her nose. That left Brian Garland, Pete Connolly and Wade Ramsay sitting there. Brian suggested a drink at the bar. All three left the table and walked into the next room.

Pat was silent for several minutes after we started dancing. I could see that she was thinking, I could feel the tenseness in her body. She asked, "What's wrong with Conchita?"

"I don't know."

"I heard some of what she said. About your trouble. That could only mean one thing."

"What?"

"She was a different person when she came back. She looked frightened."

I agreed, but said nothing. After a few seconds, Pat said, "I don't like it, Steve."

"You don't like what?"

"I can't explain. Something. A hunch."

I asked, "What's between Conchita and your husband?"

"Nothing." She answered that one quickly. Maybe too quickly.

"Did he engage her originally?"

"No. Jeff Nulty did."

"Rex's office. Did that used to be Nulty's?"

"Yes." She stopped dancing. "Buy me a drink, will you, Steve?"

"Why not?" As we walked toward the bar, I said, "You're jittery, Pat."

"I'm silly, that's all."

Pete Connolly was sitting at the bar. He was surrounded by several men I didn't know. And no one I did know. They were obviously discussing racing. I found two stools at the other end and ordered drinks for Pat and myself. She said, "You're meeting Conchita in your apartment, Steve?"

"You heard what she said?"

"I was trying to."

I said yes, I intended to go upstairs in a few minutes. Pat Kingsley said, "Take me with you."

I shook my head.

"Please, Steve."

"Why?"

"I'd like to hear whatever she is going to tell you."

"I may sound repetitious, but I'll ask again: Why?"

Her lips were pressed tight. She said, "No particular reason."

Somehow, my party had gone sour. It wasn't fun any more. This, especially, wasn't nice. I said, "I don't care about playing it that way, Pat. Whatever Conchita wants to tell me, I'll listen to alone."

She argued. She argued with more vehemence than the situation seemed to justify. We killed a lot of time tossing the ball back and forth. My answer remained no.

My wrist watch told me that it was getting along toward twelve o'clock. The second show would be on at 12:30. I thought of Conchita waiting for me in the hallway upstairs. I told Pat I was on my way. She walked with me through the lobby to the elevator. No operator on duty at this hour. I got in and Pat followed. I didn't like it, and I said so.

The cage was moving upward toward the seventh floor. She said, "I'm not going in with you. I'm going to my own apartment."

That was next door to mine. I knew it was an excuse, but there was nothing I could do about it. Except that when I found Conchita, I could take her into 7-B and lock the door.

The hallway was empty. No Conchita. I said, "You could have saved yourself the trouble, Pat. She's evidently still with your husband."

"We'll go back downstairs."

I said, "I thought you were going to your apartment?"

She didn't say anything. More to get rid of her than anything else, I took out my key and unlocked my own door. I wanted to be alone, to do a little private thinking.

I reached inside the door and snapped on the light. I turned to say something to Pat and caught a glimpse of her face.

She looked awful. Her lips were parted and her eyes were wide with horror. Then she moved forward. Swiftly. She shoved past me, into my apartment. I heard her say, "Good God . . ."

I followed her. I closed the door. For the first time, I saw the thing which had brought that look into her eyes.

It was Conchita Montero.

I looked at Conchita and knew that she wouldn't ever dance again, that she wouldn't go with me to Tia Juana to see jai alai. She wouldn't laugh and she wouldn't sing. Not ever.

She was lying on the floor.

I didn't have to be a medical expert to know that she was quite dead.

12

For a few seconds we stood staring down at what had been Conchita Montero. We could look out through the window and see a lot of lights and hear the hum of traffic, but here there was nothing but death. And us.

Pat and I knelt beside the body and felt for the pulse that wasn't there. There was no blood. Pat pointed to some ugly red bruises on Conchita's throat and looked at me inquiringly. I nodded. That must have been what did it. She had been choked to death: neatly, swiftly, silently. It was such a fragile throat.

We stood up. I felt as though I might be sick. Pat was beginning to tremble. Her slender body started shaking all over. I put my arms around her and held her tight. It wasn't a caress. It was my two-bit effort to keep her from breaking down completely. I said, "Steady, kid—steady."

She bit her lower lip, and I could see the top of her head moving affirmatively. Finally she withdrew from my arms and said, "I'll be all right, Steve."

I didn't like what I saw in Pat's eyes. There was more than horror: there was fear, too. Of what or for what, I couldn't guess, and this was no time to ask. Neither of us questioned the fact that Conchita had been murdered. Even to an amateur it was unmistakable, except the thought hit me that maybe the police might not peg me as an amateur. I was fresh out of Superior Court, where I'd been tried for murder. A murder which had happened in this same building.

I called Michigan 5211. The young lady on the other end informed me that I had the City Hall and I said I wanted to report a murder. That brought me a man's voice

in a hurry. He fired a few questions at me: my name, where I was, and not to touch anything. Just before he cut off, I told him that Lieutenant Marty Walsh would be interested in this. Yes, Walsh of Homicide. No, he wasn't a friend of mine, but I suggested that he be notified.

I took Pat's arm and walked her across the room. I turned a chair around so that she could sit there without looking at Conchita. She was crying. It was a quiet, terrible sort of crying, and there was nothing I could do about it. We didn't talk because there really wasn't anything to talk about.

I couldn't understand what was going on inside myself. Pat hadn't asked for her husband, or expressed any need for him. That should have surprised me, but it didn't. I couldn't make myself remember—not constantly, anyway —that she was a married woman, that she was Rex Kingsley's wife.

That made less sense than usual under these circumstances. By all the rules, I should have been thinking of Rex Kingsley. For one thing, I couldn't rid myself of the belief that Pat was covering up for him, and with that thought there came the inevitable, additional one: "Why?"

But the important thing was that we were in this together, though I couldn't quite grasp what it was we were in. We were alone, and that seemed right and natural. Even under these ghastly circumstances—or perhaps because of them —she had a disturbing effect on me. The sort of effect you might expect to get from a pretty, intelligent girl who was not the wife of another man.

Things happened swiftly. The sound of a police car siren split the night. A few seconds after that, I heard another car. Neither one would be Marty Walsh. He'd have to come from way downtown, and that was quite a distance. I heard the elevator door open and close, and then someone rapped on the door. I dropped a hand on Pat Kingsley's shoulder, gave it a reassuring squeeze and walked across the room.

I opened the door and two uniformed radio car men came in. Both were young, both stocky, and both looked too efficient with their service revolvers, their handcuffs hanging to their belts, their Sam Brown belts over tight-fitting blue

shirts. They asked me whether I was Steve Blake and I said I was. They took a quick look at Conchita and one of them said, "Dead as a mackerel." He wasn't being tough about it: just making a statement. He asked me whether I had murdered her, and I said no. He looked at Pat, and I volunteered that she hadn't, either.

I heard people in the hall. Then the elevator again. Two more men came in: men in plain clothes. One of them was tall and rawboned and looked like a Wisconsin farmer except that his gray eyes had that unwavering coldness that you learn to associate with policemen. He showed me a badge and said he was Lieutenant Lane of the Hollywood Detective Bureau. The man with him was shorter, heavier, and rather handsome. He was introduced as Sergeant Ehrlich. Lieutenant Lane told the uniformed officers to stand outside the door and keep people away. He suggested that one of them might notify the coroner and the crime lab. Before they left I went into my Marty Walsh routine again. Lane suggested to one of the uniformed cops that it wouldn't do any harm to give Homicide another buzz and ask whether my message had been relayed to Walsh. The two blue uniforms went out, leaving Pat and myself in the apartment with the two detectives.

They looked like nice guys: the sort you'd like to eat steak with provided they weren't wondering whether or not you'd just committed a murder. They were coldly efficient. They examined Conchita, and Sergeant Ehrlich started searching the room. Meticulously. If there was anything around that was of importance, he'd find it.

Lane stood in front of us. He smiled with his lips, but not with his eyes. His voice had a slow drawl and seemed friendly. He asked whether we weren't the same Steve Blake and Patricia Kingsley who had been in the middle of the Jeff Nulty case. I said yes. He asked who the dead girl was, and I explained. He asked, almost apologetically, whether either of us had killed her, and we said, no, we hadn't. He asked whether we knew who had, and we said no to that, too.

Ehrlich had opened Conchita's bag. He jerked his head toward the Lieutenant and the men went into a brief huddle.

Then I heard Lane say, "We'd better leave all that for Walsh. This is his baby."

We must have killed more time than I knew. Or else Marty Walsh had driven faster than police cars usually drive, which is pretty fast. First thing I knew, the door opened and he came in. Behind him was Sergeant Vic Tremont. Walsh still looked dapper, dynamic and dangerous. Tremont looked big and rugged and shrewd. The four detectives did a little quiet talking, none of which could we hear, and Lieutenant Lane said maybe he and Ehrlich would be shoving off. Marty suggested that they stick around awhile. Police protocol. Hollywood detectives first on the scene because Conchita had died in their Division: Homicide taking over.

Walsh walked across the room and stood looking at us. He said, "You two again, eh?"

No need to answer that one, so I let it slide.

"How did it happen?" he asked.

I told him. I told it briefly, and as straight as I could remember it. Once or twice Pat broke in to correct me on some minor detail. The recital didn't take long because Walsh didn't interrupt. His unswerving attention was rather disconcerting: it was as though he were reading into each sentence something that wasn't there.

When I finished, he took his time about asking questions. But once started, he did pretty well.

"No quarrel downstairs?"

I said, "No."

"You intended to come up alone to see her?" By "her" he meant Conchita.

"Yes."

"Mrs. Kingsley just trailed along?"

"Yes."

"That seem odd to you?"

"No. Her apartment is next door."

Marty said, "Cozy." Then: "See anybody on this floor when you got here?"

"No."

"Just you and Mrs. Kingsley?"

"Yes."

"You can testify that she didn't kill Miss Montero?"

"Yes."

"And you, Mrs. Kingsley, can testify that Blake didn't do it?"

Pat said, "Yes."

Marty said, "Sounds like where we came in. You two alibiing each other seems to be a habit."

I'd been thinking the same thing. I'd also been thinking that in the Nulty affair I had told Walsh that Pat's story was untrue. There wasn't anything to compel him to believe that this was different.

He started throwing questions again. "You give Conchita your key?"

I shook my head.

"But when you got here, she was inside the apartment, wasn't she?"

"Yes."

"How did she get in?"

"I don't know."

"Does she live here? In this building?"

Pat Kingsley answered. "I don't think so," she said. "I'm rather sure she doesn't."

Sergeant Ehrlich wanted to know why it wouldn't be a good hunch for him to find out from downstairs where Conchita lived and then go there and shake the place down. Lieutenants Walsh and Lane thought that was a good idea. Ehrlich said he'd be back right away, and before he left Marty Walsh told him not to tell anybody downstairs that there had been a murder. "They know something's wrong," he said, "but they're not sure what."

Walsh said, "Did Conchita give you any hint why she wanted to see you alone, Blake?"

"No. She only said it was very important."

"Who suggested meeting here in your apartment?"

"She did."

"But you didn't come up immediately."

"No. Rex Kingsley wanted to talk to her in his office. They left the table together."

Walsh said to Pat "Kingsley is your husband?"

She nodded.

"You and he are still living together?"

Her face flushed, but she said steadily, "Yes."

"He didn't get sore about your testimony in the trial?"

"I don't know how he felt about it."

"Not so good, Mrs. Kingsley. Not half good enough. Something's wrong with this whole setup. I'd like to know what."

She didn't say anything. Walsh pulled up a straight chair so that his eyes would be on a level with hers. He said, "I'm not interested in morals, Mrs. Kingsley. I don't care who is playing house with who. My job is murder. You got Blake here out of a murder rap by testifying that you were his mistress. You come back from court and move in with your husband again. Blake starts living right next door to you. You don't leave your husband, and he doesn't kick you out. You're partying together publicly in the night club your husband is running. You come upstairs together and walk into Conchita Montero. Maybe she was dead when you saw her, maybe she wasn't. Even accepting what you say, it still comes out bad. What's your idea, Mrs. Kingsley?"

Pat said, "I don't know, Lieutenant. I only know that what Steve told you was the truth."

"Okay. Something else, then. After Conchita went to your husband's office with him, did you see her again before you found her lying here dead?"

"No."

"Did you see your husband?"

"No."

"Did he hear Conchita make the appointment to meet Blake in this apartment?"

"I don't know."

I said, "I don't think either of us know how long Kingsley had been standing there."

"How long after Kingsley and Conchita walked off did you two come upstairs?"

I said, "I don't know."

"Why don't you know?"

"Pat and I danced. Not long, but some. Then we went to the bar."

"Anybody see you—that you know?"

"Pete Connolly may have. He was at the bar."

"Where were the others?"

"Miss Mason had gone to the powder room. Conchita was with Kingsley. I thought Brian Garland and Wade Ramsay were with Connolly."

"But they weren't?"

"Not when I saw him at the bar. He was with a group of men I didn't know."

"So nobody can say positively that you—or you and Mrs. Kingsley—didn't come straight up to the apartment and wait until Conchita came in?"

I said, "I don't know who else might have seen just what we did."

"Provided it was like you tell it. That, I ain't sure of. Maybe we can prove it's like you say, but if we can't—it doesn't mean anything." He let that sink in. Then he started again. "You are—or were—Steve Blake's mistress, aren't you, Mrs. Kingsley?"

I could see that this was getting tough for Pat. I said, "That's what she testified, Marty."

"But you told me it wasn't true. You told everybody it wasn't true. One of you lied. So let's make you the patsy for a minute, Blake. Suppose it was like the jury thought, and you were simply being chivalrous. Suppose Mrs. Kingsley got jealous of Conchita falling for you . . ."

"She didn't fall for me: that's ridiculous."

"Didn't she say something about you taking her to Tia Juana?"

"That was all kidding."

He looked me over, but he didn't speak to me. He turned to Lieutenant Lane. "How you figure it, Bert? What's this guy got that makes him so irresistible to women?"

Lane said he didn't know: maybe it was something only a woman could understand. Lane said, "Women are funny that way. Now this Blake: he ain't pretty and he ain't too rich. But you never can tell."

Walsh said, "Some people have all the luck. The way the dames leave me alone is disheartening. Some day I gotta study Blake's technique. Maybe he's so good, a girl might

strangle another girl rather than leave her alone in an apartment with him."

I said, "You're not talking to see how it sounds?"

"I reckon I am. But it doesn't sound too bad, either."

He got up and went into a corner with Lane and Tremont. They did a lot of talking. I put my hand over Pat Kingsley's. I said, "I'm sorry, kid. But they have to ask questions."

"I know."

"You really haven't any idea who might have done it, have you?"

Her eyes flashed to mine. There was fear in them. She pressed her knuckles against her lips and shook her head. I said, "You think it was your husband, don't you?"

No answer. I couldn't guess what she was thinking. I said, "If he'd done it to you—or to me—I could understand. But why Conchita?"

Marty walked back to where we were talking. He said, "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

I waited. Walsh was holding Conchita's bag. He said, "Ever see this before, Blake?"

"Yes."

"Before you came in this room?"

"She had it downstairs."

He fished around in the bag. His eyes were hard. He withdrew his hand. With two fingers he was holding something. Something big and ugly and heavy.

It was a .38 Special revolver. He dangled it in front of my eyes. He gave me plenty of time to look it over.

"Recognize it?" he asked.

I looked closer. I said, "Yes, I recognize it. It's my gun."

"The one you've had for years, but that you couldn't find after Jeff Nulty was killed?"

"Yes."

"What makes you so sure it's yours?"

"The little triangular piece that's been chipped off the grip. That was mentioned at my trial. Anybody could identify it."

Walsh said, "We can check it easy enough against the bullet that killed Nulty. We've still got that. But what in-

terests me is this: How come Conchita had it in her bag?"

That was a hot one. I said, "You're sure . . . ?"

"I ain't just playing games, Stevie-boy. Right there in her bag, it was. One shell fired."

"But she wasn't shot, was she?"

"Nope. Strangled. This gun hasn't been used for a long time. Since October 4th maybe. But finding it on her still brings up an idea."

"What sort of an idea?" I asked.

"Well . . . it ain't a very good idea, maybe—and then again it might be. It's just something for you to chew on. Just suppose . . ." He was deliberately dragging it out, letting it sink in: "Just suppose you killed Nulty with this gun. Suppose you gave it to Conchita to keep on account she was crazy about you, and you thought you could trust her? How do you like that idea, Steve?"

I said, "Not very much, Marty. And besides, I've been tried and acquitted on the Nulty thing."

"Right." Walsh smiled cheerfully. "But you haven't been tried for the murder of Conchita Montero. Not yet, you haven't."

13

THE Casa Linda was a classy building. It was strictly prewar construction. The walls between the apartments were almost soundproof. However, noises could filter out through the doors which opened into the corridors.

There were plenty of noises now. Every few seconds you could hear the uniformed cops in the hall telling people to stand back, you could hear them saying that they didn't know what was happening inside, and that they wouldn't tell if they did know. Then one of them opened the door and

motioned to Marty Walsh. He said bitterly, "There's a slew of reporters out here, Lieutenant. They want in. They say they got a right!"

Bert Lane went into the hall, leaving the door just a little ajar. I could see his pleasant, friendly face and hear his soft voice. He asked the press boys to take it easy: there'd be plenty to say after a while, but not quite yet. He was a sharp cookie, that Lane: knew how to handle them without making them mad. Then I heard his voice tighten. He said, "Look, Mister—nobody's allowed in."

Another voice. "But I'm Wade Ramsay. I own this building. I have a right to know what's going on."

Lane stuck his head in the door and looked inquiringly at Walsh. Marty nodded. "Hell, yes—let him in, Bert. We need him."

Usually, Wade Ramsay looked as serene as a desert sunrise. But not now. His forehead was corrugated with horizontal worry lines, he was mopping his face with a crumpled handkerchief. He said, "What goes on in here?"

Then he saw Conchita's body. He said something under his breath. He said, "Dead?" and Marty Walsh nodded.

Ramsay's eyes flashed to mine. Then he looked at Pat Kingsley. He didn't ask questions in words, but it was simple enough to know what he was thinking. Bert Lane said, "We don't know anything yet, Mr. Ramsay—except that somebody killed her."

"But Good Lord! Conchita! Who in the world . . ."

I knew what he meant. It was one of those things you could know and still not believe. She was—she had been—a kid: a vivacious, gay, bubbling, intense, vital, lovely kid. She couldn't have any enemies. Walsh was saying, "That's the way murder is, Mr. Ramsay. We're sorry. We know this is bad publicity for the Casa Linda."

"I'm not worried about bad publicity. I'm shocked, that's all." He looked again at where Pat and I were standing. You could see the questions crackling in his brain.

Walsh was talking. "Isn't there some place we could use as a conference room, Mr. Ramsay? The technical boys will be here in a little while. It'll be pretty crowded. There are a lot of people we want to talk to."

Ramsay said, "The office, if you'd like. It's on the mezzanine."

Walsh said, "You were in the group tonight, weren't you? With Steve Blake?"

"Yes."

"I wonder whether you'd be good enough to round up the rest of 'em. Take them to your office." Walsh consulted a list he had made while Pat and I were talking. "That'll be Miss Mason, Pete Connolly, Brian Garland and Mario." He paused for emphasis: "And Rex Kingsley. Definitely Kingsley."

I saw a strange, frightened light deep inside Pat's eyes at mention of her husband. That setup was still something I couldn't understand. Maybe I never would. Ramsay left to find the others. I said to Marty Walsh, "I know you won't answer this if you don't feel like it, so I don't stand to lose by asking. Have you been having me watched since I moved in here?"

Marty said, "No. What gives you the idea?"

I told him about the man I'd caught staring at me in the club, the man in gray who was wearing a blue suit tonight. Walsh said, "He's not one of our men. We're too shorthanded as it is. The people who vote the money for the police department forget we're not a village any more. If this lad is interested in you, it's probably just because you're a famous person. Had your picture in the paper and all. That carries a lot of weight around Hollywood." He showed me the ghost of a smile. "Maybe he's a movie producer who wants you to star in the story of your life."

I said something short and profane, and Marty told me I shouldn't take it so much to heart. He was needling me, but I sensed what he was doing and managed to keep the brakes on.

Someone showed up from the coroner's office, and right behind him came the photographers and fingerprint men. Marty went outside and closed the door after him. I learned later that he herded the reporters down the hall and gave them enough for their stories. He said they could get pictures after the technical crew was finished. They were as satisfied as police reporters ever are.

Lieutenant Lane suggested that he remain with the body, and Walsh accepted the offer and thanked him. Then Marty led the way through the crowd which jammed the hallway. We trailed behind: Pat and myself and big, granite-faced Vic Tremont acting as rearguard. We rode down in the elevator, got off at the mezzanine, and went to Rusty Mason's office.

Ramsay had worked well. The others were all there: Pete Connolly, looking small and hard and bewildered; Rusty, gorgeous and frightened; Brian Garland, still short and portly, but looking less like a cherub than I'd ever seen him. And, leaning insolently against Rusty Mason's desk, with his arms folded—Rex Kingsley. He looked us over as we entered and said, "Again! How interesting!"

Wade Ramsay was acting like a nervous mother hen with a brood of very young chickens. He opened the door to his own office and told Marty that if there was any private talking to be done, he could use that room. Walsh patted him on the shoulder and told him to quit worrying: he'd make out fine. Ramsay offered cigarettes, cigars and liquor, and Walsh said we wouldn't start the drinking quite yet: he wanted everybody's head clear. I felt sorry for Ramsay. The poor guy was really taking a beating.

Marty checked over the events of the evening as Pat and I had related them, and asked for confirmation. Everyone agreed that was the way they remembered. Walsh said, "Miss Mason, where did you go when you left the table?"

"I powdered my nose." Her voice was steady enough, but she was trembling.

"And after that?"

"I went back into the club. Our table was empty. I looked around for the others, but didn't see them. Then I found Mr. Connolly in the bar. He was with a group of men who looked important. So I waited until I could catch his eye. Then he left them and joined me. We danced."

Walsh checked with the others. The stories they told sounded plausible enough: Pete Connolly said that he had gone to the bar and stayed there until he saw Rusty waiting for him. Brian Garland stated that he'd had a couple too many and had gone outside for a little fresh air. No, he

didn't see anyone he knew. No, he wasn't drunk. Yes, he was feeling better now. No, he hadn't gone upstairs and hadn't seen Conchita. Wade Ramsay had chatted with Mario, had visited the lobby and had relaxed there long enough to smoke a cigar. He said he hadn't seen Conchita, either; nor had he seen any member of the party in the lobby. Mario had been skittering around, he said, looking after the comfort and well-being of the guests, listening to their complaints, receiving a few tips for better tables. Walsh turned to the tall, handsome man who was still leaning against Rusty's desk.

"And you, Mr. Kingsley?"

"I was in my office."

"That's on the same floor with the club?"

"Yes."

"How long was Conchita with you?"

"Two, three minutes."

"What did you want to see her about?"

"I wanted her to start rehearsing a new song. I also told her she should change her rumba routines. She's been doing those same numbers too long."

"Did she like your suggestions?"

"No. She gave me an argument. We didn't get anywhere."

"Where did she go when she left you?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"And you stayed alone in your office? No one came in?"

"Correct."

"Then nobody can prove that you were there, can they? No one can prove that you didn't leave the office?"

Rex said, "You smart cops give me a pain. But you can't tie me up to Conchita's death."

"Maybe not . . ." Marty left that hanging. "But the fact remains that you could have walked up to the mezzanine and either gone from there to the seventh floor on foot or by the automatic elevator, couldn't you?"

"Sure. And I could have followed Conchita into Blake's apartment and killed her and come back downstairs without being seen. Except that I didn't. I never commit murders on Saturday night."

"Jeff Nulty was killed on a Saturday."

"So he was. But I didn't do that, either. This is my Sabbatical year. One out of every ten, I don't commit a single murder."

Vic Tremont said, "Listen, buddy—you ain't doin' yourself a bit of good by that kind of talk."

Rex looked him over slowly, insultingly. "What a big boy scout! Doing his good deed for the day."

Marty Walsh's voice was hard as nails. He said, "Jeff Nulty hired Conchita, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"How did you and she get along?"

"I'm usually irresistible, but she managed to fight me off."

"Did she fight Nulty off, too?"

"I'm sure I don't know. They didn't sell tickets when they were together."

"Very cute, Mr. Kingsley. Too damned cute. I'm not applauding."

Rusty Mason asked whether she might say something. Walsh nodded. "Conchita came here from Cuba," she explained. "This was her first engagement in the States. She had picture ambitions. They all have. She and Jeff Nulty had a quarrel. I don't know what about, but I think he was making passes at her. That idea is based on things I put together from what she told me. Anyway, on the night of October 3rd—that's the night before Mr. Nulty was killed—he fired Conchita. She told me about it the next day. She was terribly upset. She had a contract and would continue to draw her salary, but the fact that she had been fired promised to ruin any movie chances she might have had. Right after Nulty's death, Mr. Kingsley was made manager of the club. He put Conchita back in the show. She's been our headliner ever since."

She stopped talking. Rex Kingsley said something, and Pete Connolly moved fast. He looked like a mosquito about to attack a leopard, but he didn't get there. Sergeant Tremont caught his arm. He said, "Take it easy, fella. If anybody's gonna kick this louse's teeth in, I'd like it to be me."

Rex ignored him. He said to Walsh, "What's all this talk about Nulty, anyway? I thought that issue was closed."

"Oh, yeah? Well, listen, Mister Kingsley: it ain't closed. For the first time we're finding out things we didn't know before. Miss Montero's death seems to tie in some way with Nulty. So do you. So does the Casa Linda. Mr. Blake was tried for that—and acquitted. But that's not to say that if somebody else killed Nulty, we couldn't start the ball rolling all over again."

Kingsley sneered, "Gestapo!" but Walsh ignored it.

He turned his attention back to Rusty Mason. He asked about Conchita's pictures, and Rusty showed him the catchall closet where they had been tossed. She had described it pretty accurately. It was a mess. The floor was piled high with theatrical photos: things that had been sent in by performers and agents. At Walsh's request, Rusty got down on her knees and rooted. She came up with four excellent pictures of the dead girl. "She evidently didn't find them," she said, holding them out to Marty.

He said, "She found something. Something she recognized. Something that was more interesting to her than the pictures she wanted. She found Steve Blake's gun. I've got an idea we'll be able to prove that's the gun that killed Jeff Nulty. So it keeps right on tying in." He stopped long enough to light a cigarette. "This your office, Miss Mason?"

"Yes."

"How long have you been Mr. Ramsay's secretary?"

"A little more than two years."

"How long have you known Kingsley?"

"Ever since I came to work here. He was Mr. Nulty's assistant then."

"Does he have free access to this office?"

"Mr. Kingsley? Sure. He comes in all the time to discuss business with Mr. Ramsay."

"And if Kingsley had had a gun, he would have known that the closet yonder might be a good place to hide it."

Brian Garland broke in. He said, "Wait a minute, Lieutenant. Isn't that reaching a little far?"

Walsh looked at him. "Our little Clarence Darrow. You're not in a courtroom, Mr. Garland. You're not defending anybody. Or are you? And if so—why?"

Vic Tremont said, "Conchita musta found the gun in

that closet. It adds up that way. She'd recognize it by the broken butt—the gun's I mean. If she had fell for Steve Blake, she'd wanna give it to him. Maybe she didn't know nothing about double jeopardy: maybe they don't play it that way in Cuba."

I said, "Listen, Marty. Just before Conchita left the table tonight, she dropped her bag. I picked it up for her. There was no gun in it. Nothing heavy. So she obviously found it some time between then and when she came back to the table all excited and said she wanted to talk to me privately."

Walsh let his eyes rove over the assemblage. He asked, "How many of you heard her make the date to meet Blake in his apartment?"

Connolly said, "I did."

Pat Kingsley said, "So did I."

The others all said they hadn't. Walsh asked, "How about you, Kingsley?"

"I don't remember."

"The longer I know you, Kingsley—the less I love you."

"You break my heart, Lieutenant."

Walsh continued, as though talking to himself. "Of course, the gun doesn't have to have been in that closet at all. We don't even know for sure Conchita went there. But we do know that the last time she was seen, she was on her way to Rex Kingsley's private office. That had been Jeff Nulty's office, too. What's to say she might not have found the gun there, that Kingsley might have seen her, and that he followed her upstairs? If it was that way, then hearing her make the date with Blake would mean plenty to him."

Rex asked, "How will you have me, copper? In one pair of handcuffs, or two?"

Walsh made an effort to ignore him. I could see it wasn't easy. Kingsley went on, "Of course you couldn't think of the obvious thing, could you?"

"Which is?"

"That the date might have been filled as planned. That Conchita could have given Blake the gun. And that he might have killed her."

"Why?"

"I wouldn't be knowing exactly, but why couldn't it be that Blake was willing to do a second killing in order to protect a lady."

"Meaning your wife?"

"Perhaps." Rex was loving it. "After all, it wouldn't be the first time he had risked his neck to protect her."

The telephone rang and Rusty Mason answered it. She said, "For you, Lieutenant."

Walsh spoke briefly, and in monosyllables. He put the phone back on its cradle and looked at us.

"We're on the right merry-go-round," he said. "That was the crime lab. Jeff Nulty *was* killed with Blake's gun."

14

AT FOUR o'clock in the morning, Marty Walsh told us all to go home. He looked as fresh as a daisy and probably could have continued the grind for hours, but we were all in.

Vic Tremont had taken our names, addresses and telephone numbers. So many questions and answers had flown back and forth that none of them made sense any more. Walsh told us to hold ourselves in readiness for the inquest. He said it might be Monday or Tuesday or some other day. That sounded reasonable. He got a report from somebody and told me my apartment was all prettied up.

Someone asked him about discussing the case and he said we could use our own judgment: some of us were going to talk anyway, and it was silly to try to put the brakes on. He shooed us out of Rusty's office, and invited the newspaper boys in. They were tired and disappointed, all except the evening paper lads who still had plenty of time.

There were two elevators. Rex Kingsley pressed the down button on one. Where he was going or why, I don't know and was too tired to care. Wade Ramsay poked his forefinger on the up button of the second elevator and let Pat get in first. He and I followed. Pat and I got off at the seventh floor, telling Wade good night—which seemed rather ridiculous when you thought about it.

Pat and I walked slowly down the hall. My apartment was nearest the elevator. I took out my key and looked at her. Fatigue showed in dark circles under her eyes. She looked completely drained out. I said, "Does coffee keep you awake?" and she said that nothing could keep her awake now. I suggested that she come in my place. I said I wanted to say a few things that I might not say tomorrow after I'd had time to think them over. She hesitated and then followed me in.

The apartment looked different. Not even a dead body lying on the rug. The cops and technical men had made an effort to leave things neat. They hadn't done a perfect job, but it was pretty good. I motioned Pat to a chair, gave her a cigarette and went into my little kitchen. I propped the door back so we could see each other. I put coffee in the percolator and started it going. I stood in the doorway while it perc'd. I could watch her and the coffee.

I said, "Tell me it's none of my business, Pat—but I still don't get it."

"You don't get what?"

"How you can live with a louse like Kingsley. Why you went to bat for me while I was on trial. Why you didn't walk out on your husband right afterward, or why he didn't kick you out. Why he led with his chin tonight and got the cops sore. Why you came in here with me, knowing he might come upstairs any minute and discover we're together. What there ever was between you and that sort of a stuffed shirt to begin with."

Way far back in her eyes a little glint of amusement tried to break through. She said, "Is that all you don't understand?"

"Not quite. But it's enough for the present."

The percolator started making little bubbling noises. A

delicate, tantalizing aroma began to fill the tiny kitchen and seep through into my bedroom, which looked like a living room at the moment.

"Maybe," I said, "he's a hotshot in his own league. But that isn't where you belong."

"What makes you so sure?"

"You're out of different molds. No matter why you've made this screwy pitch about me, you're not that way basically. And he's just an ex-hoofer with a limp."

There was a touch of color in her cheeks. She sat silent for about a minute, studying the tips of her fingers intently, as though she'd never seen them before. She looked very lonely, very weary and very lovely. There was no reason why I should either trust, or like, her, but things were still working out that way. Aside from the spectacular manner in which she had barged into my formerly placid life—she was different from any other girl I'd ever met. I felt a certain way about her. I didn't want to feel that way, but I couldn't help myself.

The coffee made noises like it was done. I brought in cups, saucers, spoons, sugar and cream. I brought the percolator, poured two cups, and placed it on the coffee table. That left us sitting side by side on the couch.

She said, suddenly, as though no time had elapsed since my broadside of questions, "I've been Rex's wife for more than three years."

"To marry a man," I said, "you only have to be wrong once. For a very little while."

"He's handsome."

"Granted. I'll also concede that he knows it." I drank some of the coffee. It was still too hot, and it scalded my throat. But it tasted good. "It isn't economic necessity that keeps you together," I continued. "You've probably got all the money you need."

She nodded.

"It must be love, then." I didn't like the way that sounded. "Perhaps the old biological urge got off the track and stayed off."

She spoke softly. "I don't love him," she said. "I haven't for a long time."

"Then why . . . ?"

"It's no use, Steve. There are some things I'm not talking about. To you or anyone else. You don't know me well enough to understand. Probably nobody does. I've already told you more than I intended to tell. That's because I'm worried about you."

"Why should you be concerned?"

"I . . ." Her eyes met mine. Held. Then the color mounted to her cheeks again, and she turned away abruptly. "Skip it."

"Let's not skip it. What's going on between us? Why should we worry about each other? Why should I be concerned over what might happen to you? Why should you be bothered about me?"

She said, "I don't know. I don't think I want to know."

"Well, I do." We had put our coffee cups on the table. I reached out and turned her toward me. I didn't do any thinking. I pulled her close and kissed her. She didn't pull away.

I had no feeling of guilt, no feeling that I had kissed another man's wife. I kissed her again. Then I released her and stood up. I felt no regret. But I was definitely embarrassed. I said, "That was out of line. I'm sorry, Pat."

"I'm sorry, too."

"I don't know why I did it."

"I could have stopped you," she said steadily. "Especially the second time."

"Why didn't you?"

Instead of answering, she got up. She picked up her bag and started for the door. "For some reason," she said, "you're sorry for me. That's nice to know. But it still isn't your affair, Steve. I'd be much happier if you kept out of it."

I started to laugh. Just a little laugh, so small it could scarcely be heard. I said, "If the public could have seen us just now—could have listened in—they'd have been surprised."

"Yes . . ."

"But not as surprised as I am. And I'll probably go right on being surprised until I understand it."

She put her hand in mine and said good night. We were standing close. But she wasn't inviting me to kiss her again. I said good night, too, and opened the door.

Rex Kingsley was standing in the hallway. He was leaning against the wall opposite my door. The door to his own apartment, 7-A, was open.

He said, too sweetly, "Time for us to go home, darling."

He took her arm. I went back into my apartment and closed the door. Mr. Kingsley was becoming highly unpopular with me. With a few words he had caused something which had seemed beautiful and right to turn sour.

I knew I didn't have a chance of sleeping. I turned in as a matter of routine. I hit the sack and didn't know anything more until ten in the morning. I heated up the coffee I'd made the night before, smoked a cigarette and picked up the Sunday papers outside my door.

Conchita's death had happened too late for there to be many details about it, but the boys had made the most of what they had, and the first pages had been remade. The headlines were eight-column and they sizzled. I could imagine what the stories would be Monday when they'd really had time to get their typewriters oiled. Not that I blamed them. This was definitely a hot story.

After I had bathed and dressed, I called operator and asked for the penthouse. Wade Ramsay answered the phone. He didn't sound sleepy, and in answer to my suggestion, he told me to come right up. I went.

His place was gorgeous: two bedrooms, two baths, huge foyer, tremendous living room, kitchen, dinette, serving pantry and a tremendous terrace with a breath-taking view.

Ramsay looked somewhat punch-drunk, but otherwise okay. He told me he'd checked out of his regular Sunday-morning foursome: didn't feel quite up to it—particularly the inevitable questioning—after what had happened last night. That brought me right into the subject of my visit.

I told him how sorry I was. I said, "But what I'm really concerned about is that you're involved, Wade. What happened last night only proves that I was right. It was all unfinished business. I had a hunch things were going to keep right on happening."

My words sounded like doubletalk, but I knew what I meant and so did Ramsay. He seemed worried, which was only natural, but he took it philosophically. Maybe the curtain had been rung down, maybe this would be all. I shook my head. I said, "You don't think that, really?"

"Why not?"

"Because nobody knows anything yet. Because Jeff Nulty is coming back into the picture. Whether you believe it or not, I didn't kill Nulty. But the case against me was so strong that the cops didn't bother looking for anybody else. I've managed to stir things up. Nulty has suddenly become important again. And I still don't know anything about him."

Ramsay said, "You knew he was an ex-convict."

"Everybody knew that. But I'd like to know more."

"I haven't all the minor details," Wade said, "because they never seemed to matter. He was convicted in San Francisco for armed robbery. He served approximately three years in San Quentin, from 1938 to 1941. I haven't the faintest idea what he did immediately after being released. But I do know that he went to work for my father in October, 1943." He broke off for a question. "Do you know anything about my father?"

I said I didn't except in the most general way.

"He was an invalid," Wade explained. "He was also somewhat eccentric. He was a shrewd businessman, of course, and a successful one." He made an apologetic gesture. "He wasn't at all like me. As a matter of fact, he didn't approve of me. He thought I didn't take life with sufficient seriousness. He was bitterly disappointed because I didn't take advantage of the profession he had forced on me. I was a graduate electrical engineer. He wanted me to work at it. But I didn't. Oh, I always enjoyed fooling around with gadgets, and electricity, as such, amused me. But that's as far as it went. I couldn't see burdening myself with hard work I didn't like when we had plenty of money. Result: I enjoyed myself. I went at it rather efficiently. Dad didn't have much tolerance for gaiety. But he was a charitable man. He had established the Ormond Ramsay foundation, and he was always reaching out a helping hand.

"He suffered his first paralytic stroke in August of 1943. These apartments were new then. Dad lived here in the penthouse, alone. He had a male nurse: not a very satisfactory one. Through one of his charities he met Jeff Nulty. Nulty appealed to him. He had worked in the hospital at San Quentin. That appealed to Dad. Anyway, Nulty went to work for him—as nurse—on October 10th of that year.

"For a big, tough man, Nulty was amazingly good. He was gentle as a woman with Dad. There was a housekeeper, too, of course, but Jeff apparently became a companion as well as a nurse. He was the shining star in Dad's diadem of good deeds. I didn't see very much of them, because I had the unfortunate faculty of making Dad angry when we argued about things. But from what I could observe, and what Dad told me, Jeff Nulty was tops.

"When Dad died in June of 1946, I wasn't surprised to discover that he had left Nulty ten thousand dollars in cash. He also left ten thousand dollars to Mrs. Martha Collins, his housekeeper. I got what was left: which was quite a bit. It included this apartment house.

"In spite of the fact that I hadn't been too close to my father, I was fond of him. I deeply appreciated the care he had gotten from Nulty. So when Jeff came to me and reminded me of the many times Dad and I had discussed a night club here in the building—a proposition which my father vehemently disapproved—I was interested. I built the club and put Nulty in charge. Anywhere but in Hollywood, it would have been a silly thing to do.

"The place was successful. Jeff ran it well. My effort to continue Dad's kindness to Nulty turned out profitably. And that, Steve, is the story."

It was simple enough, and understandable. I said, "As far as you know, Nulty never slipped back into any criminal activities?"

"Never. He didn't need to. Dad had left him ten thousand dollars. I gave him a large salary, a percentage of the club profits, and an apartment on the mezzanine."

"Who lives in that apartment now?"

"No one. Not since . . ." He paused, slightly embarrassed.

"I remember the place," I said. "That was where I visited him the time I didn't kill him." I lighted a cigarette. "How do you like Rex Kingsley?"

"Not at all. But he was the logical choice for manager of the club."

"Why?"

"He knows show business. He probably did the actual running of the place for Nulty. I'm giving him the same salary and bonus that Nulty got."

"Who do you think killed Conchita?"

He shook his head. "We'd all like to know that, Steve."

"Do you tie it up with Nulty's death?"

"I haven't any fixed opinion. But it looks that way."

"It could have been Rex Kingsley in both cases."

"I don't agree with you."

"Why not?"

"Not enough in it for him. The most you can figure he'd get out of it would be Nulty's job as manager. That's not a terribly strong motive."

I said, "Motive doesn't have to be financial. Suppose they both liked Conchita?"

"And . . . ?"

"Well, if she was fond of Nulty, and if she discovered that Rex killed him . . ."

Wade Ramsay got up and dropped a friendly hand on my shoulder. "I think you're squeezing that idea too hard, Steve. It could be, of course. Almost anything could. But not that. And I'd like to advise you—"

"—to stay out of the mess? It's a little too late for that, Wade. I've got to keep going. It isn't curiosity any more. It's self-preservation."

"And Pat Kingsley, perhaps?"

I nodded. "Yes," I admitted. "She probably has a lot to do with the way I'm thinking."

15

ONE of the troubles of being mixed up in a couple of murders is that you haven't any privacy left. Reporters, they're the worst. You've got to keep telling yourself over and over again that they're just doing their jobs, you've got to keep under wraps so you won't blow your top when they ask questions that are more than a little over the line.

I had been right in the middle of two juicy ones. The first had produced Pat Kingsley, a former Junior Leaguer, daughter of a million dollars, wife of the manager of a swank night club. In the second, a cute little trick from Cuba had been strangled to death in my apartment, aforesaid Pat Kingsley again being my alibi. What made it still better was that in both cases her husband had been cast in the role of innocent bystander. A portion of the general public thought Rex was wearing his horns gracefully, others put him down as only half a man. I didn't figure him either way. I really didn't have him pegged at all. He was grinding his own ax, and I wondered whether, or when, it was destined to fall on my neck.

Tuesday was the inquest. It was brief and chatty and full of people. There were lots of questions and answers. After careful deliberation the jury decided that Conchita Montero was dead, that she had been murdered, and that they didn't know where to place the blame. I don't know much about legal procedure, but I had a feeling that Marty Walsh had engineered that. I knew he wasn't sold on my innocence, but he also wasn't restarting the old rat race unless he was sure he could make it stick.

I was sure of only one thing: Even if I hadn't made my own pitch, even if I hadn't gone 'way out on a limb, I'd

still have been up to my ears in trouble. It was seeking me out, for reasons which became less and less understandable the more I thought about them. For a lad who had spent his life in the background, I was hogging a lot of spotlight, and not enjoying it.

One of the big bosses phoned me from the office and told me not to be in any hurry getting back to work. He meant it the right way, but it came out wrong. I hung up the phone and started figuring on a new contract: maybe they'd write in a clause that allowed me a specific number of days off each year for various forms of homicide. It would simplify everything.

Tuesday, after the inquest, Brian Garland talked things over with me. He used a lot of words and said nothing. At least he said nothing I hadn't heard before. Except that now he agreed I couldn't get out if I wanted to. He said this was the damndest thing he'd ever run across, and that if we ever got it washed up, he'd stick to civil practice.

That night I ate alone in the Casa Linda. I had no intention of seeing the show. A dance team had been booked to replace Conchita, but I didn't want to see them: they'd remind me too much of the girl who had been killed in my apartment.

People stared at me while I was eating dinner, but they stared less here than they might have done some place else. I could have eaten upstairs, but this was something which had to be faced, so I faced it. The odd thing was that business was good. Maybe they'd change the name: Club Homicide—Murder with Your Meals. Cute idea for Hollywood.

There was only one thing about the meal I found hard to take. My friend with the gray suit, the sparse hair, the compact figure and the inquisitive gray eyes was at his usual wall table, watching me. There was something disturbing about it. He had been too inquisitive too long. He made me nervous. I had a hunch that he wasn't interested in anyone there except myself.

Well, that made us all even. I wanted to know more about him: who he was, where he lived, why he made so little effort to conceal his interest in me.

I finished dinner, paid my check and strolled into the apartment house lobby. Very soon thereafter the gent in gray appeared. He stopped long enough to light a cigar, looked me over once, and then went out into the street. I watched him through the plate glass doors.

He climbed into a car. It was a convertible, one of the less expensive makes, and the top was down. He sat at the wheel, looking back at the Casa Linda as though undecided whether to come back. His decision was evidently against that because I saw him take out a bunch of keys and fit one into the ignition.

I acted on impulse. My car was outside, not far behind his. I had parked there because when I returned from downtown the basement garage of the Casa Linda had been full. I had nothing to do, no place to go. It might be fun to follow this man. I probably wouldn't learn anything, but then again I might.

When he rolled west on Sunset, I followed. It was easy enough. Convertibles are as common as termites in Southern California, but in December there aren't many with their tops down. I stayed a block or so behind him, being careful that he didn't lose me behind a changing traffic light.

He drove fairly fast once he passed the Beverly Hills line and traffic thinned out. Then he swung off into one of the roads that winds into the mountains. I didn't bother to notice what road it was.

If he was headed home, he sure lived in a wild area. The canyons of the Santa Monica mountains are all of that. The air was crisp, and it had the fragrance of fresh green that you get in Southern California after the first rains. All summer the gardens are green, but not the hills. They are parched in the hot weather. The seasons are turned backward as far as vegetation is concerned.

The road turned and twisted and got more and more lonely. There were cliffs on one side and steep drops on the other. The sky was full of a million stars. Most of the time I couldn't see his headlights, the road twisted so, but there was no way he could lose me because until we reached one of the main highways, there were no turnoffs. I could afford to take my time.

I didn't see the car behind me until it started coming up fast. I don't know why I noticed it even then because fast, reckless driving is commonplace in that section. It came up the road behind me, and I felt myself getting tense. No reason: just an idea. I forgot the car I'd been following, and concentrated on the car which seemed to be following me.

There is such a thing as premonition of danger. I pressed the accelerator experimentally. I jumped ahead, and immediately the pursuing car speeded up. I became increasingly aware of the desolate country all around me. I was close to the city, but I still might as well have been a thousand miles away.

I had no accurate idea of where I was. I knew in a general way of course, but not precisely. I told myself that the car behind me was just another car, but I couldn't make myself believe it. I don't scare any more easily than the average guy, but I was scared then. I told myself that it was my imagination, nothing more. I couldn't even sell myself that idea. I was prepared for anything. I got it.

The other car was a sedan, a big one. It caught me on a curve and swerved toward the high side, pressing me against the mountain. Of course, I didn't have to stop. I could have crashed.

This was trouble with a capital T. The maneuver had been carefully calculated. I was no less frightened than I had been, but I commenced to get angry, too. I might have been killed. For that matter, I knew I might still be killed. Death had a habit of happening in my vicinity.

Two men stepped out of the other car. One was tall and lean. The lights of both cars were still on, and I got a fairly good look at him. He looked as though he had been through a lot of trouble and had thrived on it. His shoulders were broad, his forehead narrow. The man who had been driving was shorter, stockier and looked even more dangerous. That was because he was carrying a gun. The gun was pointed at my belt buckle. He said, in a voice which sounded like a file, "Out!"

I didn't do anything. He came a couple of steps closer and said, "Do you get out, or do we pull you out?"

I decided to get out. I'd always wondered what the cornered rat felt like: now I was learning. Being afraid wasn't buying me anything. I said, "What is this, a stickup?"

The chunky man said to the tall one, "He wants to know is this a stickup. Him!"

That didn't make too much sense to me, but it amused the tall one. He said, "You'll find out."

Lovely situation. I got ready to do the best I could, but I suspected that it wouldn't be half enough. They converged on me from both sides. The tall man spoke. He had a nice, nasal voice—one that sounded as though his mother had been frightened by a switch-engine. He said, "Listen, Blake —you ain't in no healthy spot."

I agreed with him so completely that there didn't seem to be any sense in commenting. Tall boy went on, "You're mixin' up in things that ain't your business."

"What?"

The short lad said, "What? Listen at that, Slim. He wants to know what."

Slim said, "You're clean on that thing you was tried for. You better stay that way."

"Did you chase me way out here to tell me that?"

Shorty said, "Listen at him. He asts did we chase him way out here to tell him that. He asts the damndest questions."

Slim went on. "Stop leadin' with your chin, Blake. It ain't healthy."

"For whom?"

"Hey, Slim . . ." that was Shorty again. "Listen at the guy say 'Whom.' Classy, that's what he is. Gotta use good grammar way out here where nobody's listenin' even."

"From now on," said Slim, and his voice had a deadly, flat, emotionless quality, "you're mindin' your own business. Otherwise you get hurt. Bad."

"Slim, look . . ."

"I know," I snapped. "Tell Slim I said 'How bad?' Maybe his hearing isn't so good."

"Wise guy," murmured Shorty in a hurt tone. "Always wise guy I run into."

Slim asked, "What do you say, Blake?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know, all right. You been buildin' up trouble. You was in a jam and you got out. You keep on throwin' fast ones, an' you'll be in a worse one."

"Who are you working for?"

"Just us. Just me and Ernie. We work for ourselves."

"Did you know Jeff Nulty? Or Conchita Montero?"

"Fella, you ain't takin' us serious enough. Ernie, you show him how serious he oughta take us."

I didn't see Ernie move. He swung with his right hand and the barrel of his gun smacked against the side of my head. I staggered. The blow hurt so badly that I forgot to go on being afraid.

"We got to teach the guy a lesson," stated Slim from what seemed like a great distance. "He ain't reasonable."

This time I saw Ernie's right hand move. I ducked and hit. It was a nice satisfying blow, though it didn't seem to hurt the stocky guy too much. I stepped in and grabbed the gun hand, and at the same instant a pair of steely arms closed around me. That was Slim, attacking from the rear.

It wasn't a very even battle, nor a spectacular one. Slim was strong. Ernie was vicious. He let his gun drop, wrenched his left hand loose and swung at me. The blow caught me on the cheek, the cheek the gun hadn't hit.

Ernie slugged me again. Before I went down I kicked him in the groin. Slim did something to me and I hit the road like a sack of meal. I was all over pain. Ernie jumped on me and I started butting and kicking. Ernie said, "I'll kill you, you so-and-so," and I didn't question his sincerity.

Slim kicked me in the side while I was down. He said in his harsh, grating voice, "This ain't only a sample. Next time you get it all the way."

I wasn't wasting any breath in conversation. I wasn't doing much good, either. I'm fairly powerful; but either of these men could have handled me alone. Ernie quit punching me. He reached for his gun, but Slim picked it up. He said calmly, "We'll save that for later, Ernie."

A car whirled around the curve, coming toward us, coming straight into our headlights. Brakes screeched, a door

opened and a piece of human dynamite landed on Slim before he could produce the gun again.

This guy was good. He fought fast and he fought hard. I tried doing a little better than my best. I don't know whether I shook Ernie off, or whether he got off by himself. The battle between the stranger and Slim was sizzling. Ernie yelled, "Let's get the hell outa here." He jumped for the car and I was too bruised and wobbly to follow.

The motor was still running. I heard Ernie mesh the gears. Slim's right hand came up. He hit the stranger with something: not the gun. A sap, maybe. The man sagged long enough for Slim to make the car. It roared away. The stranger stood looking after them, swearing steadily in a low, intense, bitter tone. He spoke to me without turning, "You hurt bad, Blake?"

I got a good look at him. It was my friend of the gray suit, the man whose car I had been chasing. There was a thin trickle of blood running down from his forehead. I said, "I'm not hurt at all. I feel lovely. I . . ." Then I fell flat on my face.

When I came to I was stretched out on the road, a seat cushion under my head, and the stranger was giving me the business. I struggled up to a sitting posture, and said, "I'm all right now. Really."

He said, "Stickup?"

I started to say "Look, Slim, the guy wants to know is this a stickup," but it didn't seem funny enough, so I didn't say it. I said, "They were working me over, trying to scare me. They succeeded on both counts."

"They know you?"

"Yes."

My face felt like forty-two cents worth of ground round. I said, "I owe you plenty."

"Forget it."

"How'd you happen to come back?"

He grinned. "I wondered why you stopped chasing me."

"Oh! So you knew?"

"Hell, yes."

I said, "Shall we go to my place for a drink or somewhere else?"

"Your place will be okay. Can you drive?"

"I think so. If I go slow and use only one eye at a time."

"You go first. I'll follow." He grinned again. "You were doing all right, Blake."

"You just say that to be sweet. I was having the tar knocked out of me." I lurched toward my car and climbed in. I said, "I don't even know your name."

He fished out a card and handed it to me with a flourish. I glanced at it in the glow of the dash light:

FLOYD ANDREWS
Insurance

"Insurance," I said. "I'm the wrong guy, Andrews. On the basis of what those monkeys promised, I'm the world's worst risk."

16

I CAME out of the bathroom, seated myself opposite Floyd Andrews, knocked off a slug of straight Scotch, and tried to make believe that I didn't feel like a disaster. Andrews had a knot on the side of his head, and his natty gray suit wasn't natty any more, but otherwise he didn't look too bad.

I was bruised and battered. Whatever I looked like, I felt worse. Salves and ointments are all right, but they don't work fast. I groaned as I settled back in my chair, and he smiled. I liked his smile. Other things I didn't like.

I said, "You've got me over a barrel, Andrews."

"How come?"

"I'm supposed to be sore at you. But after what happened . . ."

"Hell!" he said, "I'd have done that for anybody." He lighted a cigarette, blew a long, thin streamer of smoke and looked me over. "Nothing wrong with you that time and sleep won't cure. How serious were those guys?"

"I don't know, and that's on the level. I think they meant to beat me up and scare me. But I managed to butt and kick the chunky one a few times, and he got mad the big way. I think he'd have killed me if his gun had been within reach."

"Know 'em?"

I shook my head. "One was called Slim and the other one Ernie. They may have been just wearing those names for the occasion."

"What'd they say? What gave you ideas?"

"They didn't say much. Just that I'd better start minding my own business or it would be just too bad."

"Why were you chasing me?"

"Because I wanted to know who you were and where you lived and why you were spying on me."

"I wasn't spying. You're a famous person. I like to look at famous persons. That's why I dine in places I can't afford."

"You're really an insurance man?"

"What else would I be?"

"A private detective, for instance."

"Naaah! I was almost one once. Insurance adjuster. You learn the ropes that way."

"You didn't," I said. "You were as obvious as a crinoline girl in a burlesque chorus line."

"That was the idea. I thought maybe you'd brace me eventually."

"If you were that anxious, why didn't you introduce yourself?"

Floyd Andrews shrugged. "And have my ears pinned back for impertinence? That wouldn't have been very smart. I wanted you to do just what you did do. The two muggs and the battle royal were just icing on the cake."

"Did you hire those guys?"

He shook his head and said, "No."

I said, "What's it all about? Tell me all you can."

"I will. But not all of it. I'm interested in you."

"Why?"

"Private reasons. I'd like to ask you a question."

"You haven't been shy so far."

"Who told the truth on the stand—when you were being tried for Jeff Nulty's murder: you or Mrs. Kingsley?"

"That's none of your damned business."

"Granted. But I'd still like to know."

"You a friend of hers? Or Kingsley's?"

"I don't know either one. Never even met 'em."

"Then where do you fit in?"

"I don't. I'm merely trying to find out things. Maybe I'm on your team. I'm not sure yet."

"What would make you sure?"

"A word-of-honor answer to my question: who told the truth on the stand, you or Pat Kingsley?"

"I did."

His eyes looked straight and hard into mine. "I'll buy that," he said. "You wouldn't make a good liar. So that puts me on your side."

"So you say."

"Believe it or not: it doesn't matter to me. But if you've handed it to me straight, then I can give you a lot of information."

"About what?"

"Pat Kingsley. Her husband. The general setup around here. Of course, if *she* was telling the truth, then you know it already."

"I told you once . . ."

"Okay, Blake—okay. Keep your shirt on. How much do you know about Pat?"

"Nothing."

"Like her?"

I felt a slow flush mounting to my forehead. I started to say something and found myself looking right into Floyd Andrews' grin. "That's enough answer, Blake. You like her. Or you could, easy as pie. I don't blame you."

I said carefully, "I don't know why I'm talking to you like this. Just because you save me from a really prime beating—and maybe saved my life . . ."

"If it'll make you talk, go on being grateful. Talking and listening might make things easier for you. You say you want to learn the score. So do I."

"What's it to you?"

"That's the thing I'm not telling."

"I thought you were a cop."

"I'm not. I never was. But I think it's a hell of a good profession. Shall I tell you a few things about Pat Kingsley and why she stays hitched to a louse like Rex?"

That was something I really wanted to know. I massaged a couple of my sorest spots, stopped the massage abruptly because it hurt worse than before . . . and listened.

"Pat's old man," Andrews said slowly, "is Carey Maxwell. He's nice people. He's also rich. He never handled the reins right on his daughter. He'd let her run wild for a while, and then try to check her. It didn't work out so well.

"About four years ago—she was twenty then—she met Rex Kingsley. He was a lovable louse, and even if you didn't think he was lovable, he was still that other thing. He was one of the best tap dancers in the world. He was drawing top salary, and had made a picture. Maybe he was going to make others. He was hell with the women. One word from him and they'd fall flat on their faces and yell Uncle.

"Pat met him. She went for him in a big way. She represented the only things he hadn't been able to win for himself: a million dollars, social position, the works. He wasn't the marrying type, but this was something extra special. He slung his personality at her in chunks. She either fell in love with him, or convinced herself that she had. It added up to the same thing.

"Her old man went wild. He wasn't class conscious or anything like that. If it was what was good for her, she could have married the iceman. But Kingsley was a wrong Joe. He was wrong clear through: not bad wrong, necessarily, but wrong. Crammed full of ego, big in the head and small in the brain. A guy with a good torso and a pair of clever feet. Carey Maxwell warned his daughter a dozen times. He tried every form of parental persuasion. She accused him of being prejudiced, and he admitted it. They

quarreled, which was bad tactics on the old man's part. She up and married Kingsley. He prophesied that she'd regret it, and she said if she ever did, no one would know. And she's just the kind of girl who could take a beating and keep her mouth shut—which is precisely what she's been doing."

I was listening, not saying anything. Floyd Andrews was making things clear as crystal. He was doing it with an earnestness which interested me. I figured there had to be something between him and Pat. It was the way he talked, the way he expressed himself. He didn't sound as though he was talking about a girl he didn't know. Maybe he was in love with her himself, maybe he'd just wanted to be darned sure that she hadn't developed into the cheating type. A man in love can think things and do things.

"Pat married Kingsley in 1944," Andrews went on in his quiet, steady voice. "I don't think it took her a hell of a long time to discover that she had drawn a blank. But she wasn't the kind of gal to advertise it. In 1945, he got a two weeks' date headlining the show at El Rancho in Las Vegas, Nevada. They drove up together. She was doing the driving. In her car.

"Between Barstow and the Nevada line the road isn't too good. It's smooth enough, but it's narrow. Maybe she dozed off. Maybe she was careless. Maybe it was the truck's fault. Anyhow, there was a bad accident. Rex Kingsley's foot was crushed. He had a half dozen operations. He came out of it with only a slight limp, but with the certainty that he'd never dance again: not acrobatic tap certainly, perhaps not even simple tap. That accident took away from him the one thing he'd ever had.

"He's a whiner. He started blaming it on Pat before he was ever out of the hospital. She had been driving. It was her fault. She had ruined his career. He couldn't get a job dancing, he didn't know how to do anything else. He sold her on the idea that she was responsible. He never let her forget it. And no matter what she really thought about him, she never let on. She took it on the chin, and still is taking it.

"She supported him. She probably always had supplied most of the luxuries, but from the day of the accident, he contributed absolutely nothing. Her old man knew Wade

Ramsay. When Ramsay's father died and they dug his will out of the safe in his penthouse apartment in the Casa Linda —and then when Ramsay decided to install a swank night club—Pat made a pitch for her husband to be manager. The one thing he knew was show business.

"But Jeff Nulty got the job because he'd been Ormond Ramsay's pet. He got the job plus ten thousand dollars. So the best Rex Kingsley could get was assistant manager. I'm making a point there, an important point. To the average man being manager would be just a job: to Rex Kingsley it was more than that, it was getting somewhere again in show business."

He paused, obviously expecting me to say something, so I obliged. "You mean a job wouldn't be much motive for a man killing another, but that *this* job meant a lot more than that to this man?"

"Something like that. I'm not saying it was enough motive for murder, but Kingsley has become ingrowing and belligerent since his accident."

"Why couldn't Pat leave him?"

"That's not the way she stacks up. For better or for worse, that stuff. She's not the sort who would stick with a man when he was riding high, wide and handsome—then throw him over when he'd had his teeth kicked in. Especially since she felt responsible. She's got a loyalty streak a mile wide. Maybe a stubborn streak, too. My guess is that their romance died long before the accident, but that he's her albatross. Which is why I never got the angle of her public humiliation of him by testifying that you and she were playing games. Unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"Unless she *knew* that you hadn't killed Nulty."

"How could she be sure of that?"

"Only by knowing—actually knowing—who did kill him."

"Kingsley?" I asked.

"Could be."

"And she would protect a man she didn't love even if she knew he was a murderer?"

"That's more than possible. It's also possible that while she would not throw him to the wolves, she wouldn't let

an innocent man take the rap. To get you off, she had to go whole hog. Does the setup make more sense now?"

I said it did. I said, "I've thought—even though I didn't want to—that she may have killed Nulty."

"I don't go for that."

"Because it's Mrs. Kingsley?"

"No. Because it doesn't hold. She'd rather confess a killing than wreck her own character. Which brings us back to tonight."

"What about it?"

"Let's assume that Rex Kingsley killed Nulty. Let's say Pat knew it. You and she start going together—right in the open for anybody with the price of a Casa Linda cover charge to see. Yeh, I know why you're doing it: I can guess anyway. Maybe it'd keep her from being sloughed for perjury. But Kingsley wouldn't like you. Perhaps it would be jealousy. Or hurt pride or something. But more than that, you've proclaimed that you intended to find out who knocked Nulty off. The more intimate you become with Mrs. Kingsley, the better chance of learning whatever it is she knows. So who's to say he didn't hire these two guys to scare you off?"

I couldn't see any flaw in the conclusion, provided the premise was correct. I said, "Suppose I continue being seen in public with Mrs. Kingsley—what's your idea of his next move?"

He looked me over. "You'd make a cute corpse."

"You don't really think that."

"I wouldn't give long odds against it."

"What would you advise?"

"Tell the cops. Those two monkeys who worked you over probably have juicy records. They can be picked up. You might also get a permit to carry a gun."

That struck me as funny. "Oh sure," I said. "I'm just the kind of applicant they're looking for. Just freed of a murder charge on perjured evidence. Caught right in the middle of another murder. They'd probably present me with a submachine gun."

We freshened our drinks, took more cigarettes and looked at each other. I said, "For a guy who never met Pat or her

husband, you seem to know a hell of a lot about them. You told me everything except what I really want to know. Where do you fit in?"

"I fit. That's all I'm saying. I'm sticking around, whether you like it or not. If I can help again, don't hesitate to call on me."

I said, "I won't need any more help."

He threw back his head and laughed. "You aren't that dumb," he said. "All I'm telling you is this: You'd better keep your guard up every minute. For my money, you're in a dangerous spot."

17

THE week before Christmas is no time to drive an automobile on Hollywood Boulevard—or to do anything else, for that matter. On both sides of the avenue, all the way from the Roosevelt to Vine Street there were huge, unnatural-looking Christmas trees, made of metal, painted green and white (the white representing snow and studded with lights. The Boulevard was festooned with lights and tinsel and good-cheer banners, the store windows were decorated gaudily, and every night there was some sort of a parade, topped by the passing of a Santa Claus float much too big to be called colossal. Just to make it perfect, every automobile in the county converged on that street between seven and ten. Get your car caught in that traffic and you could sit there and watch the snails whiz by.

Downtown Los Angeles was gay, too; and each of the innumerable residential communities in the metropolitan district became a minor imitation of the Boulevard. But none of them actually approached its glitter and tawdriness. It was calculated to fill you with the spirit of good cheer,

but actually all it accomplished was to make you cuss if you wanted to get anywhere.

But nothing the merchants could do, nothing the Chamber of Commerce could cook up, no mike-amplified greetings from the phoney Santa Claus in the super-duper float, could imbue me with Christmas spirit. I was up to my neck in things I either didn't like, or didn't understand, or both. I was getting sick and tired of strangers staring at me, of friends so pointedly avoiding the subject of homicide that they might just as well have been asking the questions they were thinking. The focus of too much unwelcome attention, I felt lonelier than ever before in my thirty-one years.

Not that I had to be lonely. That was the funny part of it. Rusty Mason was still giving an excellent imitation of a beautiful woman pursuing a homely man. I was the man. She had gone cute on me, saying, in effect, "If you chase me, you'll catch me." It made less than no sense. I was willing enough to admit that she might be worth chasing, if one was inclined that way. I simply couldn't figure why she had picked on me. She had all of Los Angeles County to choose from.

She wanted me to talk about myself. Why, I couldn't guess. An aeronautical engineer hasn't got much to talk about socially. She certainly wasn't interested in drafting-board development of supersonic planes, or of jet-propelled commercial transports. But I played along the best I could because there were things to know about the voluptuous Miss Mason: her relationship to the gone-but-not-forgotten Jeff Nulty, what personal interest she might have had in his demise, where she had been at the moment Conchita Montero had been murdered in my apartment, what went on between her and Rex Kingsley. Those two ignored each other so obviously that it looked unnatural.

I had talked to a couple of Detective Lieutenants: Marty Walsh of Homicide Division and Bert Lane of Hollywood, about the slugging I'd gotten out in the hills. I'd gone over the details so many times it sounded like a phonograph record. They thought they knew the two men, and all detectives and prowl cars had been instructed to watch for them. I had agreed to identify in case they were brought

in. The cops didn't make me feel any more comfortable by suggesting that I'd be wise to keep my guard up at all times. They told me they had checked on Floyd Andrews and that he really was in the insurance business. Neither had any theory—so they said—about why he had taken so much trouble in my behalf, or why he had told me as much as he had. They said they couldn't peg him at all: why he was interested, where he fitted in. Sure, he might be in love with Patricia Maxwell Kingsley, but then again he might not . . . which seemed a reasonable conclusion. Maybe he was just some lad who didn't like Rex Kingsley, which automatically threw him into the majority group. He certainly wasn't a private detective or a public one. And he had been very much present the night Conchita had been killed. Where he might have been when Jeff Nulty journeyed into the hereafter no one could do any more than guess. They asked whether the whole affair in the canyon could have been staged by Andrews—whether it looked like one of those things—and I said I didn't think so. They didn't tell me what they thought. They went away and Marty asked me to get in touch with him as soon as I stumbled over my next murder victim, even if his name was Steve Blake. I didn't laugh quite as heartily as I was probably supposed to do.

Another thing that amazed me was the obvious friendliness of Pete Connolly. He was another stranger who suddenly liked me for no apparent reason. I figured I ought to write an essay, "How to Make Friends and Murder People."

Pete Connolly was one of the best jockeys in America. That rates high in any book, in California it puts you two up on the Emperor of India. Pete was presently vacationing: taking treatments for a sinus condition and getting himself in shape for the opening of Santa Anita. Most people sought him out because they figured he had private conversations with the horses and might be prevailed upon to tell them profitable things once the racing season got under way. Others enjoyed being with him because he was just naturally a right guy. And—in or out of silks—he was a celebrity.

I liked him. He was so small that I looked on him as a kid when actually he was a year older than I. He had a terse, graphic manner of speech and an astonishing vocabulary. He was hard as nails, wise as Solomon, communicative as the Sphinx and disingenuous as a kid. If I hadn't felt sure that he was cultivating me for reasons of his own, I'd have let myself go and enjoyed a most unusual companionship.

That was where Rusty Mason intruded again. No matter which way I turned, there was Rusty. She was making a play for me, for no discernible reason. She was obviously fond of Pete Connolly. And the little jockey was completely overboard about her. Like a high school kid in the throes of his first grand passion. There were times when he just wanted to talk about her, there were other times when he seemed worried. Of only one thing I was sure: he and Rusty were not having an affair. I don't know how the lady might have felt about that, but Pete had other ideas. What he was thinking of in connection with Miss Mason was matrimony.

I continued to watch and wait and wonder. I was getting nowhere fast. I was beginning to think that whatever was in the cards had already happened, that I could go back to being a research engineer and forget such things as physical violence. I was thinking that way, but not believing what I thought. The end couldn't have come, not possibly. There were too many loose ends.

I saw Pat Kingsley occasionally. I hated the thought that she was all wrapped up in trouble. I had a lurking fear that what I was doing might not be so good for her. We met around the building, chatted casually, said nothing serious, and went on. Except that I found myself thinking about her all the time: wishing that things were different, wishing that homicide hadn't reared its ugly head, wishing that there wasn't any such person as Rex Kingsley.

Then one night it happened. It wasn't exciting to anybody except myself. I had come in from the plant I passed through the lobby and saw Rex Kingsley chatting amiably with the cuddly little number at the switchboard back of the lobby desk. He didn't seem to have telephones on his mind.

I went up to the seventh floor. I stood outside my apart-

ment and fumbled with my keys. That was when I heard Pat crying.

The Casa Linda is nicely constructed. Between apartments the walls are very nearly soundproof. But you can hear through the doors. And what I heard was a woman crying. In 7-A. That had to be Pat. Maybe she was alone, maybe not.

I entered my apartment, closed the door, and stood there thinking. This was a new angle. I'd seen Pat cry the night Conchita was killed, but that was different. This was just simply crying. It seemed, oddly enough, to humanize her. The more I thought about what was happening next door, the more I wanted to do something about it.

I picked up the phone and asked operator for 7-A. I didn't realize until later that Rex might still be downstairs trying to make time with the operator. I heard Pat's voice.

I wasn't at all adroit in my approach. I said I thought it was time for us to get together without spectators. I said I wanted to take her out to dinner. Anywhere except the Casa Linda. Where we could talk. Where we could perhaps get to know each other a little better. I sounded silly, even to myself, and was actually surprised when she said yes. I asked her when and she said I could name the time. I did some lightning calculation, figured bathing, shaving and changing time down to a split second, and said I'd rap on her door.

She was waiting when I did. She was wearing a natty little maroon outfit, with an Ascot at the throat. She had on a cute little hat that looked like a beret but wasn't. She looked young and fresh and lovely.

I said, "Let me explain something before we start out. I've wanted to do this for a long time. But I never had the courage. Then I heard you crying . . ."

She looked embarrassed. "I get that way occasionally. Not too often. I'd been thinking about Conchita . . . It got me, that's all."

"I understand. But my idea is this. We'll get out of this goldfish bowl. We'll go somewhere, anywhere—that nobody knows us. We'll agree not to talk about anything unpleasant. Right?"

She put her hand in mine and said, "Right." Her eyes were eager and lovely. We went down to the basement garage and climbed into my car. It wasn't much of a car, but it was nicely tuned and easy to drive. We went out Sunset to Beverly Glen and cut across toward the Valley.

We talked about nothing at all. It's fun doing that sometimes. Lots more fun than discussing tragedy. We didn't press it too hard: just let things roll . . . and when either of us found ourselves approaching things we wished to avoid, we'd let the conversation lag.

This was my real introduction to Pat Kingsley as a person: as a nice, wholesome, attractive, pretty girl. We weren't exactly gay, but we weren't soggy, either. Nothing we talked about was important, yet somehow it all seemed important.

Out Ventura Boulevard we approached a huge, brilliantly lighted drive-in. I poked the nose of my car toward the round building. A neat little waitress in a V-neck blouse and slacks which were alarmingly tight around the hips, bustled up, slipped a numbered card under the windshield wiper, gave us each a menu and asked me to flash my lights when I had decided what we wanted to eat. Then she rushed off.

It was mid-December, but the air was balmy. The kind of weather that often makes Hollywood Christmas tropical. There had been some rain, recently, and the mountains and desert were in bloom. The skies had been washed by the rain so that the stars were clearer and nearer.

I don't remember whether the food was good. I know we ordered sandwiches and got productions. And coffee. And salad. The order came on two trays. Mine was hooked onto the steering wheel, hers on the side of the car. Nothing was important except that nobody seemed to know us, nobody was staring and we were not under any strain.

We wound up with hot fudge sundaes, which is a gastronomic ritual at California drive-ins. We each had a second cup of coffee. I flashed the lights, and the little waitress in the open-throated blouse and too tight pants came running. I paid the check and gave her a fancy tip. She gurgled her delight, said she hoped we'd enjoyed our dinner and invited us to come back soon. We backed through the crowd of cars, and I turned toward Hollywood.

I drove right past the Casa Linda. I glanced at Pat and thought that she pointedly refrained from looking at it. I rolled along Sunset to the Strip and climbed a curving road lined with snug homes which all seemed a little surprised at finding themselves up so high. We came to a promontory and I pulled over to the side of the road and parked.

The city stretched out below us: millions of lights, odd black and purple shadows, long brilliant lanes which were the main boulevards, the garish glitter of Christmas decorations, and all around us—quiet and solitude. I cut off the motor and lights and we sat there looking.

The view was impressive. The soft air crept in through the open windows so that you couldn't believe it was December. We were close to, and above, a great city; we were surrounded by homes with yellow-lighted windows . . . and yet we were alone. Alone as we had never been before. I said, "I'm going to do a little cheating, Pat."

She looked at me, not understanding.

"It was my suggestion," I explained, "that we have one evening together without talking about things we'd like to forget. But I'm not strong enough. One question has been hammering at me."

She said, "Go ahead, Steve. What is it?"

"This. The thing that gave me the idea of calling you tonight was that I heard you crying. It worried me."

She didn't look at me. Finally she said, "I was crying about Conchita."

That didn't register very strongly. I said, as gently as I could, "That doesn't make much sense, Pat. Sure, you were fond of Conchita. But not to the extent that you would suddenly begin crying about her."

She said, "I was reminded . . ." Then she turned and looked at me. "Lieutenant Walsh had been visiting me."

"Oh!" I said. "Walsh."

"He was there quite a while. He was talking about Conchita. Questioning me about her. As though he thought I might know a lot of things I wasn't willing to tell. He's a shrewd detective, Steve. He painted a rather pathetic picture. By the time he left, I was pretty badly upset. I started crying."

I said, "Did he find out anything?"

"There wasn't anything to find out . . . except what I'd already told him."

I didn't like it. Walsh frightened me, too. He was like a bulldog. He got hold of an idea, he didn't let go.

Pat dabbed at her eyes with a filmy bit of handkerchief. She was trying not to cry. For a few minutes I sat there like a dope, wondering why I felt the way I felt.

I was doing flip-flops inside. Timidly, I reached over and took her hand. She sighed, ever so lightly, and relaxed against the cushions. After a while she said, "This is nice."

I said I thought so, too. We sat there, not talking much, but getting closer and closer. Not physically, but emotionally. It wasn't too difficult to cast unpleasant thoughts aside. What was happening to me was new and exciting. I didn't even warn myself that I had no right letting myself fall in love. It wouldn't have done any good, anyway. It was something completely out of my control.

I was afraid to try to kiss her. I'm not the bold type, and I had a lurking fear that she might not like it. The fact that we talked very little made small difference. We were alone in the world: that was what counted.

After a long time she said, "I feel better than I've felt in months."

I pressed her hand, and she gave mine an answering squeeze. I knew what she meant and she knew I knew. That was enough. I said, "I'd better watch my step, Pat."

"Why?"

"I'm getting too fond of you."

"Is there any such thing as being too fond?"

"I don't know . . ."

Not much brilliance. But people in love aren't usually brilliant. They feel things too deeply to say them well.

I don't know why I was taking so much for granted. All I was positive about was the way I felt. And I was sure that her mood matched mine. Perhaps I'd merely done her a favor, making it easy for her to forget trouble.

A lot of time passed swiftly. We still hadn't said anything, and we'd said everything. I started the motor and started downhill toward the Strip.

We rolled into the garage without meeting anyone we knew. We rode up to the seventh floor together. I went to her door with her. I knew she wasn't going to ask me in.

She put her hand in mine and said, "Thanks, Steve."

I felt myself flushing. I said, "Now that you're safe, I'll confess something."

"What?"

"When we were parked up yonder . . . I wanted to kiss you."

She said simply, "I would have liked that."

18

BRIAN GARLAND was having dinner with me in the Casa Linda. Brian was a mighty good lawyer, but he didn't think I was a good client. He was telling me that I'd had him worried ever since the day they'd acquitted me downtown. He stated that if I'd been normally bright, I'd have let well enough alone—and kept right on doing it.

He still looked like a cherub, but not as much like one as he had before the Jeff Nulty thing. His idea was simple, that I was sticking my nose into places where it didn't belong, that I wasn't going to learn anything, and that I was going to be hurt in the process. He didn't see what business it was of mine anyway, and I told him if he didn't understand that by now there wasn't any use of me trying to explain. I said, "If a man's going to slug you, you don't just stand still and watch the punch coming."

He said, "Yes, you do, Steve—provided you don't know which man it's coming from."

"Or which woman."

"Rusty Mason?" he asked.

"Possibly. She seems to be around when things happen."

He said, "I'm asking you something, Steve: just between us. Have you noticed that I'm kinda crazy about Wilma?"

"Wilma?"

"Rusty."

I said that a blind man could have noticed it. I also raised my guard a trifle because I figured he might have observed the play Rusty was making for me, and maybe he didn't like it.

"You think she likes me?" he asked.

"Of course . . ."

"She runs with a lot of men. They won't leave her alone. But I don't mean that: I mean more."

I said I didn't know, that Rusty had never discussed him with me. He said, "She's a funny babe. I can buy her dinners and drinks. I can take her stepping. But that's all. She won't let me give her any presents—except just cheap stuff."

I didn't think that was in character, but I didn't say so. Rusty had impressed me as a young lady who knew the score, and would not be too reluctant about accepting presents: the more expensive the better. I said, "Maybe she's in love with you."

"Then how come she won't marry me?"

Another surprise. I hadn't known for sure that that was what he wanted. I said, "Have you asked her?"

He gave me a twisted grin. "Hell, I always ask her. It's gotten to be a gag. I meet her and I say 'Evening, Wilma. Will you marry me?' And later maybe I say, 'How about another drink? Will you marry me?' "

"What does she say?"

"She stalls. She says 'maybe' and 'perhaps.' She doesn't say yes, and she doesn't say no. She says if she ever marries anybody, it'll be me. That's all I got to hang onto. It ain't enough." He leaned forward confidentially. "Look, Steve, I'm spillin' my guts on account I know Wilma likes you. She thinks you're real people. She says you ain't even made a pass at her, though she's given you lotsa chances. In her book, that's a miracle. So maybe you can do something for me, huh?"

"What?"

"The only argument she gives me against this marriage

business is her job. She says it wouldn't be fair to Mr. Ramsay if she walked out on him. She says she likes to stand on her own feet. But look: the more you think that over, the less sense it makes. She earns maybe seventy-five bucks a week. That's peanuts. I make around twenty thousand a year. So if she likes me, why won't she marry me? I ain't that repulsive."

I wasn't saying anything. Not right then. I never had been able to peg Rusty Mason to my own satisfaction. She hadn't impressed me as the sort of girl who would refuse fancy presents or say no to a $20,000-per-year marriage bid. There had to be a reason.

Pete was talking again. "I got an idea, Steve. It ain't as screwy as it sounds. You and Wade Ramsay are like that . . ." He held up two fingers, close together. "You throw a lot of weight with the guy. I got an idea that if I upset her applecart, she'll have me pick up the apples."

I said I didn't get what he was driving at, which was an understatement.

"Okay. So I'll lay it on the line. Supposing you was to go to Ramsay and ask him to fire Wilma. Then she couldn't go on giving me this malarkey. She'd either have to marry me or think up a new excuse. But I ain't figuring to do her dirt, either: see? If Ramsay will play ball, why you explain the setup. And arrange that if Wilma still doesn't marry me, he's to give her back the job. So you help us—maybe—and no matter what gives, nobody gets hurt. How's about it, Steve?"

Instinct told me to keep out of this, but there wasn't any logic to go with the instinct. I said I'd do what I could. I had the feeling that Rusty Mason wasn't good enough for him. Okay as a playmate, perhaps, but not as a wife. On the other hand, she hadn't been gold-digging.

I didn't get hold of Wade Ramsay until the next morning. He was out on his terrace enjoying the warm sunshine of a December summer. He said, "This is California. Who could believe that Christmas is only a couple of days away?"

We settled ourselves in a couple of wicker chairs with fancy cushions, and Wade asked me what was on my mind. I told him. It sounded silly, but there it was—just as Pete

"So am I," he said calmly. "I was at your cocktail party. Nobody knows where I was at the exact time Nulty was killed." He grinned. "Even I. I had succeeded in getting beautifully tanked by that time. I was among those present the night Conchita was killed. No alibi there, either. I was grabbing a few lungfuls of fresh air outside."

I laughed. "So why did you hide my gun in that catchall closet in Rusty's office?"

"Darned if I remember," he said.

The waiter brought us some food. Mario was riding in his wake. He hovered over the table, seeing that everything was more perfect than perfect. Then the waiter and Mario went away, and Brian stared after them. He said, "You get awful good service around here, Steve."

"Mario?"

"Yes. Extra special. Was it that way before you moved into the Casa Linda?"

"I didn't eat here much."

"Has Mario made any effort to sound you out?"

I shook my head. "I think he wanted to, but I've discouraged it."

Brian said thoughtfully, "He's of Cuban descent. He and Conchita probably knew each other pretty well. Maybe he hopes you'll find out who killed her or maybe he's anxious the other way. Jeff Nulty was his boss. He could have disliked Jeff in a large way: it wasn't so hard to do."

I said, "He wouldn't have known about my gun. He couldn't have gotten it out of my apartment in the Collins."

"Somebody did," stated Brian calmly.

I agreed to talk to the wiry little Maitre D. I got my chance a few minutes later. It netted me exactly nothing. Yes, Mario had known and liked Conchita. She was lonely and they talked a lot of Spanish together. As for how he felt about Jeff Nulty, he shrugged and grimaced and let it go at that. I could figure it any way I wanted. Rex Kingsley? Mario was more positive there. I only know six cents worth of Spanish, but I still managed to get the drift of what he said about Rex. It was somewhat less then complimentary.

I asked him who he thought might have killed Conchita, and he threw up his hands in a typically Latin gesture. "But

nobody, *Señor*—nobody! She have only friends. She is *simpatica.* She is beautiful. She is good. So nobody would want to make for her the killing."

"She's dead," I reminded him.

"Is true. Dead by some very wicked person."

"Men liked her, didn't they?"

"*Sí, Señor.* All men love her very much."

"Even you?"

"I am man. Like other men, I love her very much, too."

"Enough to be jealous?"

Mario shook his head sadly, as though aware—and tolerant—of my ignorance. "*Señor,* I esplain you thees. When Mario has the love, and because of it he kill somebody—it no is the girl. Is the man. *Claro?*"

I said it was claro, and he walked off looking like a slightly harassed bantam rooster. Brian asked me what I thought. I said, "Marty Walsh told me something when he was interrogating me in connection with Nulty's death: he said that in a murder case everybody sounded innocent and everybody sounded guilty. You can figure that one out yourself."

"Just the same," said Brian judicially, "Mario is going out of his way to make you like him. It could mean something."

As soon as dinner was finished, Brian Garland checked out. He had to see a young lady about a trip to Las Vegas. She was planning to remain there forty-three days and to come back unmarried. I signed the check, left a tip and started out. Someone beckoned me from the bar. It was Pete Connolly, looking smaller, more wiry, more dapper, than usual. He was alone. On the bar in front of him was a glass of ginger ale. Pete wasn't a drinker.

I liked the little jockey. He was a rough, tough, hard-boiled character, but I'd gotten to know him well enough to realize that underneath he was plain as an old shoe. Fame hadn't spoiled him. And the fact that he so obviously liked me gave me a warm glow.

He motioned me to a place beside him, and insisted that I order something. I compromised on a B. & B. From the moment I sat down, I sensed that Pete had something on his chest. He was a long time getting around to it, but finally it came out.

Connolly had dished it out to me. He didn't start talking the instant I'd finished. Instead he thought it over as though it were a major problem. Finally he said, "I don't quite see myself doing that, Steve."

I probably showed surprise, because he continued: "I think she'd be lucky to land Connolly. From what you tell me, he's really in love with Rusty. I'm too fond of both of them to rig the machinery."

I told him I didn't get it.

"If she wants to marry him, she can say yes. But if they're ever going to have a chance to be happy, it should be that way." He smiled apologetically. "You know, Steve—every once in a while I find a streak of my father's righteousness cropping up in me. This is one of the times. I wouldn't feel right about playing Cupid with brass knucks.

"You can tell Pete that I think his approach is all wrong. I can replace Rusty if she wants to get married. I wouldn't stand in the way of her happiness. But I'll be damned if I'll try to shove her into something she doesn't want."

"Your answer is definitely no?"

"That's it. The scheme seems just a little too sly and underhanded." He smiled pleasantly. "I hope you'll tell it to Pete so he won't be sore at me."

The buzzer sounded, and Wade's Filipino boy came in to announce Rex Kingsley. I got up to go, but Ramsay waved me down. Rex and I said Hello to each other, but without cordiality.

Rex and Wade plunged into a discussion of a Christmas Eve gala which was scheduled for the Club. Fun and souvenirs for all. Personal visit from Santa Claus promptly at midnight. Make your reservations early. When they finished discussing it, Wade surprised me by saying to Kingsley, "Is Rusty Mason in love with Pete Connolly?"

He said, "Hell, how would I know?"

"Pete wants to marry her," Ramsay explained. "She isn't having any. Pete's been confiding in Steve Blake. It's an odd situation."

Kingsley said, "I thought they were just having fun."

"Maybe that's the way Rusty would like it. But Pete has different ideas."

"Wants to make an honest woman of her, eh? Well, that'd be a novelty in this day and age."

He didn't look at me when he said it. But the thought of his wife passed between us like an electric current.

I figured this was a good time to get out. When I left, they were still talking. I took the elevator and asked the girl to let me off at the seventh floor.

I could have telephoned Pete Connolly, but I didn't. His romantic little scheme had laid an egg. I thought it would be nice to stall him for a few days.

I had some sentimental notion about not wanting to spoil his Christmas. I could have saved myself a lot of worry if I'd any idea of what was about to happen.

19

COMES Christmas Eve, you feel it's up to you to have a helluva good time. Maybe you're not in the mood, maybe you're lonely for the folks back home or the girl who is with someone else, but the sleighbells still tinkle in your memory; you remember the stockings you used to hang up when you were a kid and the before-breakfast indigestion that used to hit you—and you know this is it. Christmas! Merry Christmas! 'Twas the night before it, and all through the joint, the guests their insides with champagne did anoint. Not so good, but it kept my thoughts away from how lonely I was.

The Club Casa Linda was decorated as gaily as a lady of leisure who had been on a shopping spree. There were garlands of imitation holly with big, red, unnatural-looking berries. There was some real holly hanging around looking apologetic. Mistletoe dangled from the ceiling at strategic spots. Just inside the main entrance was a vast Christmas

tree, a white one, jeweled with blue lights which looked ghastly rather than beautiful.

Everywhere there were signs wishing you a Merry Christmas; big red placards with the lettering done in gold tinsel; little green cards with silver lettering. Similar greetings topped the menus, and just to make it good, the prices had been upped an average of 50 per cent. Two specials tonight: eggnog and plum pudding. You could buy either or both and weep for your creditors.

The general public was going for this in a big way. Mario was as busy as a one-armed paper hanger. He flitted around with menus under his arm and a big card on which a reservation list was inscribed. If you wanted a table and had forgotten to telephone in advance, and if you showed him the numbered corner of a bit of currency, he invariably happened to remember that Mr. So-and-So's party had canceled at the last minute, and presto! there you were.

Rex Kingsley was in evidence, too. He was sufficiently the show-business type to revel in all this glitter and glamour. He was putting on only one show: that would be after midnight, after Santa Claus had distributed his souvenirs to all the paying guests . . . and he moved through the crowd now, estimating the celebrities and trying to estimate which of them would respond to clamor for free entertainment. I knew it would be a good show. But Conchita still wouldn't be in it.

I told myself that I didn't know why I was there, but I was only kidding. I knew perfectly well what had brought me: the hope that I'd run into Pat Kingsley. Of course, she was probably at her father's home, welcoming Christmas as it should be welcomed . . . but that didn't keep me from hoping.

Brian Garland barged in with a gang. Most of them were still sober, but they obviously had no intention of remaining that way. I was invited to join the party, but begged off. I preferred to be alone unless—and until—Pat Kingsley showed. I felt I'd kind of like to reach across a table exactly at midnight and say Merry Christmas.

I was invited to Wade Ramsay's table, too, but the people he was with were too important and too stuffy. None

of them looked like Pat. And right now I wanted someone who looked like Pat. I wanted Pat herself, because she looked more like Pat than anybody else I knew. That's the way I was thinking. Cute. Cute, like any other dopey guy in love.

I didn't see Pat. I didn't even see Rusty Mason. That was odd, because Christmas Eve at the Casa Linda couldn't possibly be official without her. I didn't see anybody I wanted to see. Then suddenly a voice sounded at my elbow. It said, "Even Christmas can't be as miserable as you look."

It was Floyd Andrews. He looked stocky and competent and not too festive in a plain blue business suit. He said, "How's about a quickie?"

That sounded like a good idea. I waved him to the other seat at my table, the one I hoped Pat Kingsley might occupy. He wasn't my first choice. He wasn't even my second. But at least he wouldn't talk too much.

We ordered drinks, and he looked at me over the rim of his glass. "Skoal," he said. "Let's sing 'Silent Night,' but silently."

I drank. It tasted good, all the way down. It made me forget how lonely I was. I asked Andrews if he'd like a spot of eggnog or some plum pudding or even a hunk of mince pie. He said he wouldn't: not then, or ever. His mood matched mine beautifully. "Let's us have a real gloomy Christmas," he suggested.

People were circulating. This wasn't the night for being still. There was a lot of silly chatter, of too gay laughter, of greetings called back and forth. When Vince Mabry and his boys gave out with the dansapation, the floor jammed instantly and stayed that way. Everybody seemed to be demanding service, most of the people didn't get it—and no one minded very much.

About ten-thirty I saw Pete Connolly standing in the archway which separated the main dining room from the bar. His raiment matched the decorations in gaiety, but his face was different. He looked mean and ugly. Something had hit him wrong. His wiry little figure was tense, his lips pressed tight. Several people spoke to him, and he shrugged them off. Obviously, he didn't bother to be polite because

each person who spoke to him got away from there fast. I was willing to lay six, two and even that he was gloriously drunk.

That was one of two surprising things about Mr. Connolly that merry Christmas Eve. I knew he wasn't a drinker. He was a bearcat on ginger ale, but ginger ale hadn't gotten him the way he was now. The second surprising thing was that Rusty Mason was nowhere around. She should have been gleaming and glittering right alongside him. But not this night.

Pete's sharp little eyes quested through the crowd. They picked me out eventually. He started toward me. I didn't think I was going to like it. He looked as though he'd had several too many, and I'm not partial to drunks.

He shouldered his way roughly through the crowd and came straight to where Floyd Andrews and I were sitting. I started to greet him, but he cut me off. His voice was hard as nails and deadly as cyanide. He said, "Blake, you're a dirty rotten louse."

I blinked. Maybe this was a Christmas gag. Maybe I was supposed to laugh and call him names, too. But he didn't give me a chance. Taking it from where he'd left off, he proceeded to express his real opinion of me.

It wasn't flattering. He called me everything I'd ever heard, and a lot of things I didn't quite get, being not too familiar with racing-stable profanity. There was no expression in his face or his voice. The vilification came out slowly, deliberately, bitterly.

I knew he must have discovered that I'd seen Wade Ramsay, and that Wade had refused to check in with his little scheme for influencing Rusty Mason. But even so—take that plus all the drink he'd had—it seemed that he was carrying a logical idea too far.

He kept it up: steadily, relentlessly. People at the adjoining tables heard, and turned to look. Some of them looked embarrassed, some looked shocked, some seemed to be frightened. The male guests who were overhearing seemed particularly ill at ease. They didn't know whether to interfere and create a scene, or whether to let their lady friends continue to hear what was being said.

I tried to keep my temper. I sat there and took it, pretending that it was all right because he'd been drinking. I didn't want to start something: I was too much in the public eye anyway. In addition to that, Pete was half my size.

Once again it was Floyd Andrews who pulled me out of a jam. He got up slowly and ranged alongside Connolly. He said, calmly, "Let's go have a drink, Pete."

Next thing I knew he was leading the bitter little jockey away from my table. I don't know how he did it. Maybe Pete had run down. Maybe he was fresh out of bad words. But there they went, Andrews and Pete. They disappeared through the archway, and went straight to the bar.

Floyd rejoined me in about ten minutes. This time he was welcome. Being alone after what had happened wasn't easy. He said, "Mad little turkey, isn't he?"

I nodded. "That's twice you've helped me," I said.

"What's his beef?"

"Romance gone sour, I think."

"Mind spreading that out, Steve?"

"He's nuts about a gal named Rusty Mason—Wade Ramsay's secretary. Wanted me to grease the tracks of true love so they'd roll smoother. The deal got loused up. He probably thinks I did it deliberately."

"Did you?"

"No," I said, "I didn't. I like Connolly. I thought he liked me."

"He probably does. He merely expresses himself badly."

Mario bustled up, all smiles and worries. "You will perhaps have sometheeng, *Señor?* As we say in Spanish . . ."

"I know. Joyous Noel." He looked blank. "Mr. Andrews and I have decided to celebrate, Mario. Bring us some eggnog, plum pudding and mince pie."

"All of them for each both of you?"

"Right."

"Is maybe good," he beamed after a moment of hesitation. "Will maybe take the effect of the drink from the head to the stomach."

We didn't drink the eggnog. We didn't even nibble at the plum pudding or the mince pie. They all sat on the table forlornly, as though hurt at our neglect.

Shortly after 11:30 sunshine burst through. I glimpsed Pat Kingsley standing alongside the white-and-blue Christmas tree. Just as though she'd been passing through the lobby and happened to look in at the merrymaking. I was on my way instantly. I grabbed her arm and said a couple of silly things and smiled for the first time that night. I said, "You've got to join me," and she said she wasn't that kind of a girl but that I had talked her into it. It was an old gag, and corny—but we both laughed.

Floyd Andrews stood up as we reached the table. I had a flash of sanity and watched them closely as I made the introduction.

I still couldn't tell if they'd ever met before. I got no hint of why Andrews had seemed so interested in Pat, or in me, or of how he happened to know so much about her. They shook hands and she took his chair while he swiped an extra one from another table.

He stuck around for about ten minutes. Then he excused himself. I protested, but not vehemently. Miraculously, this was working out as I had wanted it. Pat, myself, and Christmas fifteen minutes away. At that moment I really liked Floyd Andrews. He seemed always to be doing the right thing at the right time.

He vanished into the crowd. Pat said, "I watched you from back yonder, Steve. You looked like a funeral."

"I was busy missing you."

Pat smiled. "You say that as though you mean it."

"I do. I was afraid it wasn't going to be a merry Christmas, even at the beginning."

"Feeling better now? Or isn't it fair to ask a question to which there can be only one polite answer?"

I said, "I was afraid you were with your father."

"No." Her face grew serious for a moment. "I was upstairs."

"Doing what?"

"Thinking a little. Maybe crying a little."

"About what?"

"On the thinking part, I can confess. Some of it was about you."

"Willing to tell me more?"

"Do I have to?"

The look she gave me did more than all the drinks I'd had. I started to say something, but the band broke in on it. Vince Mabry waved his baton, and the boys started playing Jingle Bells. They were solid senders. They practically rammed the Christmas spirit into you.

A big spotlight made a circle in the middle of the floor. All the other lights went out except the little blue lamps on the white Christmas tree. Rex Kingsley limped onto the floor, looking very handsome in white tie and tails.

He wasn't a good announcer, but with the crowd as high as it was, he didn't have to be. He told us that in a few minutes it would be Christmas, he put in a plug for the Casa Linda, he said that on the stroke of twelve Santa Claus would appear with presents for everybody. He said that Santa had left his reindeers up on the roof, but I don't think anybody fell for that.

He stopped talking and the band hit it up. Heavy on the Jingle Bells. I wanted to take Pat's hand, but that didn't seem quite in order, so I restrained myself.

A few seconds before midnight, the big spot went off. A smaller spotlight moved across the floor and came to rest at the foot of a little flight of steps. Those were the back stairs leading from the club to the dressing rooms on the mezzanine. That was where Santa Claus had been getting ready.

The crowd hushed. The music died down, just a gentle melody of Jingle Bells to hold the mood. Rex Kingsley said, "And now, folks—Santa Claus!"

Everybody waited. Everybody watched the stairway.

From the head of the stairs we heard a deep, jovial voice saying, "Here I come . . ." Then suddenly everything changed. The voice rose to a bellow. There was a crash which grew into a series of bumps and thuds, punctuated by the clatter of a hundred gay little packages which rolled down the steps.

A man's terrified yell rose above the din. Down the stairs came Santa Claus, battered and bedraggled. His hat was off, his whiskers awry. He banged to the bottom of the stairway and sat there surrounded by his scattered gifts.

His eyes were wide with horror. He was gazing up the

way he had come, and then, grotesquely, he scrambled away.

A body came rolling down the stairway. It rolled down awkwardly, slowly, as though reluctant to interrupt the festivities. It reached the bottom and sprawled there, sightless eyes turned upward, lean little legs spread.

Someone said, "Good God! It's Pete Connolly!" and someone else said, "He passed out."

A man who said he was a doctor rushed across the room. He bent over Pete Connolly's body, then straightened. He said in a voice which he couldn't quite control, "He isn't drunk, folks—he's dead."

The electrician in the basement didn't know about that. All he knew was that he had orders to do something at midnight. He threw a switch and an elaborately gay sign blinked on over the bandstand. It said MERRY CHRISTMAS.

20

SOMEBODY telephoned somebody and two radio-car cops appeared. Maybe by this time there was a private line into Hollywood Division, to be used only for Casa Linda murders. Anyway, the uniformed men stood next to the Christmas tree and told everybody to keep calm and to remain where they were. They stayed put, all right, but nobody kept calm, especially not Steve Blake.

Pat Kingsley had risen and was staring at the body of Pete Connolly. The color had drained from her cheeks. Her eyes were wide. She wasn't doing anything, but she looked as though she'd scream if somebody said Boo.

Several of the women guests were throwing minor wingdings. The men were either swearing quietly or trying to look protective and masculine. The battered Santa Claus had crawled as far as possible from Pete's body and was

saying, over and over again, "He must of been lying at the top of them stairs. It was dark and I tripped over him." The doctor who had pronounced Pete dead, now stated that he had been shot. The word spread. Men and women said they hadn't heard any shot, but that was understandable: there had been a lot of noise, and nobody knew when the shot had been fired. Some time between eleven o'clock and now, that's all I could be sure of.

Two more cops appeared. Lanky, efficient Lieutenant Lane of the Hollywood Detective Bureau, and the stocky, good-looking, prematurely gray Sergeant Ehrlich. Lane saw me, walked over to my table and said, "Howdye, Blake. Just like old times, huh?"

I didn't say anything. Ehrlich said, in a nice, quiet, conversational tone, "You reckon this is tied up with Jeff Nulty and that Conchita babe?"

I said I didn't know, but that I'd guess yes. Lieutenant Lane said he'd already asked the complaint board downtown to notify Marty Walsh. He said that this was a hell of a way to spend Christmas Eve, and I nodded to indicate that Pat and I agreed with him. Then the two detectives went over to where Pete Connolly was lying.

In a few minutes Marty Walsh and Sergeant Vic Tremont came in. All present or accounted for. The fireworks could begin. They joined the other two detectives at the foot of the steps and started talking. Lane whispered something, jerked his head in my direction, and Walsh looked over at me. His eyes were cold and hostile. Then he turned back and started talking to Rex Kingsley and Wade Ramsay, both of whom had been summoned.

I wondered what they'd do, how they'd go about it. This was a dilly: hundreds of witnesses, a superabundance of confusion. Everybody talking, everybody saying the same thing. It couldn't have taken the cops thirty seconds to discover that Santa Claus had tripped over the body of Pete Connolly and that both of them had come rolling downstairs.

I closed my fingers on Pat Kingsley's arm and begged her to relax. At first she paid no attention to me, but finally I won out. I got her back in her chair, and pulled mine close

alongside. I took her hand. It felt as though I had picked up a piece of ice. There was a bottle of brandy on the next table. I borrowed it, and poured a slug. I insisted that Pat drink it. She did, and a little bit of color came back to her cheeks, but she was still a long way from relaxing.

It was natural for her to be upset, but I still didn't understand the effect the tragedy was having on her. She seemed shocked, but not as surprised as I might have expected. I tried to get that thought out of my mind. I told myself that I was imagining things. Well, perhaps, I was—but that still didn't alter the fact that the more I saw, the less I understood.

I was too interested in Pat and in my own thoughts to pay close attention to what was happening elsewhere. The dicks were talking to everybody but us. That didn't mean a thing. Marty Walsh was my buddy. He wasn't planning to neglect me. He'd get around sooner or later, and I had a disturbing hunch that I wasn't going to enjoy it.

The rest of the routine followed specifications. I was rapidly becoming an expert. Coroner, boys from the crime lab, photographers. And in addition, a raft of reporters and gents with cameras from all the local papers. This was their field day. Plenty of people to interview, fancy pictures to be taken. Maybe they'd have tricky headlines the next day: SANTA STUMBLES OVER CORPSE AND FALLS ON FACE. Or perhaps CHRISTMAS COMES BUT ONCE A YEAR BUT MURDER AT THE CASA LINDA IS EPIDEMIC.

Pat and I didn't talk. We just sat there with her hand warming up a little in mine, looking at nothing and seeing less. After a while I said, "Get a grip on yourself, Pat. Walsh is storing up ammunition. He's going to ask an awful lot of questions."

I was right, but Marty took his time about it. It was almost one-thirty before he came over to where we were sitting and invited us into Rex Kingsley's office, which was on the same floor—way over in the corner. I thought this was a neat touch, but I didn't say so. People stared at us as we walked across the room: Walsh, Lane, Pat Kingsley and myself. On the way I passed Floyd Andrews. He was staring at us hard. For the fraction of an instant, I forgot my own prob-

lems and wondered where he fitted in. He knew a lot of things he hadn't told me. Maybe the cops could find out.

Kingsley's office wasn't much. It was a little square room shoved off in the corner of the club. It had a nice, modern desk and against the opposite wall a flat-topped table piled with a mass of things which I presumed had to do with the running of a night club. Over that desk were a lot of shelves, also crowded with papers, books, professional photos, pamphlets, and miscellaneous stuff. There were two closets. The open door of one indicated that it, too, was overcrowded and not neatly kept. The place had a faintly musty odor with an overtone of cooked food and night club liquor. It had one little window, high up. I didn't know what it had been used for originally, but probably something in connection with the janitor. Its conversion into an office had taken place only after this part of the first floor had been changed into a night club.

Rex wasn't there, which was fine with me. Marty Walsh motioned Pat to the swivel chair in front of the desk. He pulled over a second chair, placed it next to hers and invited me to sit in it. The idea was simple: he could see both of us all the time. And what he missed could be observed by Lieutenant Lane who was leaning against the door frame looking casual and friendly. Except that his steel-gray eyes didn't seem to be missing anything.

Marty Walsh said, "Quite an evening, eh Steve?"

I said it was quite an evening.

"Of course you've got an alibi." It was a statement, not a question. "Mrs. Kingsley was with you. She always is when people are being killed."

I didn't say anything.

"What did you and Pete Connolly fight about?"

I said, "We didn't fight. He walked over to my table and started cursing me. He cursed me steadily and bitterly for several minutes."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

Marty leaned back against the table, but his eyes didn't waver. He said, "Let's don't play like that, Steve. A man doesn't blow his top that way without reason."

"I didn't say he had no reason. I said I didn't know what it was."

"You had any fuss with him recently?"

"No. I liked him, and I thought he liked me."

"What made you think that?"

I told him about the Rusty Mason setup. "About all I can figure is that he found out it wasn't going to work, and figured I'd double-crossed him."

"How?"

"Perhaps by advising Mr. Ramsay not to fire Miss Mason, even temporarily."

"Why would he think you might do that?"

"I don't know. I also don't know whether someone might have told him that Rusty had tried to be friendly with me."

"How friendly?"

"More friendly than I wanted. I can't say for sure how much ground that would cover."

He said, "You must have something that ain't visible to the naked eye. Women kinda go for you, don't they?"

"They never used to, Lieutenant. And I have an idea that they don't now, really. My opinion is that Miss Mason had ideas of her own, and that they weren't what you're thinking."

"Are you accusing . . ."

". . . I'm not accusing anyone. Miss Mason tried to make me think that I was a Big Moment in her life. I didn't fall for it."

"Why would she try that?"

I said, "Look, Marty, all you've asked me to do is guess. I can tell facts—as I know them. I can't speculate about what other people thought or what motives they might have had."

He said, "You don't look like the kind of lad who would let another guy bawl you out in front of a crowd and do nothing about it."

"I liked Pete Connolly. I didn't get too mad because I thought he was drunk."

Marty said, "I think you killed him."

"Of course you do. You thought I killed Jeff Nulty."

"Didn't you?"

"No."

"But if you did, you could also have killed Conchita Montero and Pete Connolly. It's my guess they're all three tied up."

"I think so too. But I didn't do any of the killings."

"Always the little guy that wasn't there, the boy with the cast-iron alibis. You got ideas, too?"

"Yes," I said, "but you probably won't like them. I think that so long as I was on the spot for killing Nulty, the real murderer was content to take it easy. I was the patsy. If I'd been convicted, that would have ended it. But when I was acquitted, the case was re-opened. That seems the answer to why things were tranquil until they turned me loose—and have been popping ever since."

Marty said, "You make it sound good, Steve. Too good maybe. Sort of like you want it to sound that good."

"You were wrong before, Marty."

"I still ain't sure of that. What a jury says and what I think are two different things." He dropped his cigarette and ground out the light with the toe of his right shoe. "After Connolly finished bawling you out, what happened?"

I told him about Floyd Andrews convoying Pete back to the bar. Lieutenant Lane said, in a placid, drawling voice, "That's the lad who came up in the ninth inning when those two hoods were working Steve over."

"They been picked up yet?" asked Marty.

"No. But we think soon."

Marty asked, "What's this Floyd Andrews to you, Steve?"

"I don't know. He's interested in me, but I don't know why."

"You ever met him, Mrs. Kingsley?"

"Not until tonight." Pat's voice was under control. "Mr. Blake introduced us."

Marty was focusing on her. "Where were you before you joined Steve?"

"In my apartment."

"Did you come down by way of the mezzanine?"

"No. I took the elevator to the lobby and walked into the club from there."

"Anybody in the elevator when you came down?"

"No."

"Do you—or maybe your husband—do either of you have a small caliber gun? We don't know yet the exact size, but probably a .32 or a .25."

"No."

"We don't know how long Connolly's dead body had been laying at the top of those stairs. It could have been there even before you entered the club. Could be you're so accustomed to dishing up for Steve, here, that it had to be that way."

I said angrily, "That's lousy, Lieutenant."

"So it's lousy. So I'm just a cop doing a job. So I ask a lot of personal questions. It's just one of those silly things they make detectives do."

Pat touched my hand. She said, "He's right, Steve. He's got to learn the truth."

"Or anyway," stated Marty, "he's got to keep on pretending like he thinks he is. Me, I ain't optimistic. Everybody is throwing curves at me."

He walked across the room and started whispering to Bert Lane. Lane's head moved up and down in affirmation. He said, "It ain't a bad idea, Marty not bad at all. I'll go get her."

He opened the door. Noise surged in at us, then choked off as the door closed again. Marty grinned with his lips, but not with his eyes. He said, "Either of you see Rusty Mason tonight?" We both said no.

"Lane's bringing her in. It oughta be good. She comes in, you keep your yap shut, Steve. Savvy?"

I nodded. I didn't know what was cooking, but whatever it was, I figured it couldn't make things much worse.

Several minutes passed. They seemed like hours. Nobody said anything. The silence hung over us so thick you could have cut it with a knife. Then the door opened and Lieutenant Lane appeared. He was holding Rusty's arm.

She looked terrible. Still tall, voluptuous and reddish-blonde. But her eyes were big and wild and haggard. Grief had etched deep lines on her face.

She stood just inside the door, taking it all in. Then she looked at me.

She called me a name. She threw the epithet at me. She waited a second, then repeated it. All the venom in the world was behind it.

She said, "If I had a gun, Steve Blake, I'd kill you."

21

THAT one went by me so fast I couldn't catch it. This was too much of a switch, too fast. Up to yesterday the fair Miss Mason had been playing easy to get—especially for anybody named Steve Blake. Here she was talking about putting a bullet into me, and she wasn't kidding.

The two detective lieutenants had become spectators. They were watching Rusty closely, but they were even more interested in me.

Rusty kept staring at me: stark hate in her eyes. I could understand that she had been hit hard by Pete Connolly's death, but why I rated all this was beyond me.

Marty Walsh let her run down. He didn't rush her, didn't prompt her. But he didn't try to stop her, either. He let her call me all the names she wanted, as though he'd have liked to do the same thing. Then he said, "Sit down, Rusty."

She sat down. Hard. Her lovely body sagged. Her blue eyes travelled around the room as though searching for a friend. There were traces of tears on her make-up, but she wasn't crying then. She'd evidently squeezed all the tears out of her system and nothing but anger remained. Anger, and perhaps fear.

Walsh looked at me. He said, "How much do you know about Miss Mason's past, Steve?"

I said I didn't know anything. I said I'd met her for the first time the day I went to Wade Ramsay's office to get the jolly news that I could move into the Casa Linda where hot water, steam heat and murders were furnished free.

Marty asked, "Ever know a girl named Olive Palmer?"

I shook my head.

"Try again. Maybe you'll remember."

"The answer is still no, Marty."

"In San Francisco, maybe?"

"No."

"You ever hear the name?"

"No."

He looked at Lieutenant Lane. The tall night watch commander of the Hollywood Detective Bureau shrugged as though to indicate that he didn't think Marty would get very far on that road. Walsh said, "This Olive Palmer was connected with Jeff Nulty. Long time ago."

There wasn't much I could say about that. He was telling me things now, not asking questions. Only odd thing was Jeff Nulty cropping up again. He seemed to be having a hard time staying dead.

"The thing Nulty did three years in San Quentin for," Marty went on quietly, "was armed robbery. His girl friend helped him. She was the lookout. Part of the loot was a fur coat. That he gave to the girl. The San Francisco police found her wearing it. The rest was easy. They had Nulty hog-tied in less time than it takes me to tell it. Nulty knew they had him. He evidently liked the girl, because he advised her to make a deal: turn State's evidence, and buy her freedom that way. No use both of them taking the rap. So she did. Her name was Olive Palmer."

Walsh took a long, narrow envelope out of his pocket. From it he extracted a couple of yellowed newspaper clippings. "These," he explained, "are from San Francisco newspapers. 1938. All about what Jeff Nulty done. The second clipping is about his trial, and about Olive Palmer testifying against him. Pictures of Nulty, and pictures of Olive. Take a look and see do they register."

He handed me the clippings. Nice, big, sensational stories. Nulty's picture didn't mean anything to me. I hadn't known him well enough to guess what he would have looked like in 1938.

The girl—this Olive Palmer—jumped right out of the clippings and hit me in the eye. One was a studio photo;

the second a full-length snap taken as she was walking into the court room. She looked young and tall and beautiful and frightened and nervous and familiar. She looked exactly like Rusty Mason.

She was Rusty Mason.

I showed the clippings to Pat. She was as surprised as I had been, and as shocked. Walsh let her hold the clippings, as though to say she could read 'em if she wanted to. Then he said to me, "Guess where we found them, Steve?"

I looked at him, knowing he'd follow through.

"Right in this envelope. And the envelope was in Pete Connolly's pocket. It was there after he died and probably before he died. It was mailed in Los Angeles day before yesterday. We figure it was delivered to Pete Connolly this afternoon . . . or yesterday afternoon if you remember that it's now Christmas morning. Mean anything to you, Steve?"

"No."

"You claim you liked Connolly, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Could it be that you liked him enough to figure he shouldn't marry a girl unless he knew all about her, unless he knew, for instance, that the woman who called herself Wilma Mason was really named Olive Palmer and that she'd been mixed up in a criminal affair a good many years ago?"

I said I didn't know what this was all about. He paid very little attention. He continued calmly. "Of course, we might have a little bit of the answer why Miss Mason didn't rush into matrimony with Pete. Could be she was afraid to get a marriage license under an assumed name, and didn't want to let anybody know she was Olive Palmer."

I said, "But I didn't know any of this Oliver Palmer business. How could I know?"

"She tells me Jeff Nulty had the clippings. So maybe whoever killed him found them."

"Oh, for the love of Mike!" I made a hopeless gesture. "We're back to that!"

"Yep. We seem to swing back to it no matter how hard we try otherwise. So I'm asking you again . . ."

"Save your breath, Marty. I didn't kill Nulty. I didn't

find any clippings in his apartment. I didn't mail them to Pete Connolly as a warning he'd be smarter to steer clear of Rusty Mason. I didn't kill Connolly."

"But you know now why he got drunk and started cursing you, don't you?"

"Why?"

"He obviously thought you sent the clippings. He thought it was your answer to his plea for assistance in getting Miss Mason to marry him."

I didn't like that, but it made sense. If it were true, it could explain a lot of things, but not the important one. I said, "I never saw those clippings before . . ."

"He's a dirty liar!" Rusty's voice swept harshly across the room. "I've known from the first Blake had them. I knew he killed Jeff Nulty . . ."

I said, "Look, Rusty . . . that doesn't check. You've been more than friendly."

"Sure. And why? because I wanted those clippings. Nobody in Los Angeles knew I was Olive Palmer. You're thinking I made a play for you. Well, I did. But what I wanted was the freedom of your apartment. I wanted to find out if you had 'em. I wanted to get my hands on them and burn 'em. I never wanted any part of you. That was a stall."

"But why . . ."

"I think you suspected all the time that I knew you killed Nulty. You figured I'd keep my mouth shut as long as you could hold this over me." She turned to Marty Walsh. "Jeff wasn't a bad guy, Lieutenant. He treated me swell. It was his suggestion that I turn State's evidence. I never saw him again until I read in the papers about him being made manager of the Club Casa Linda. I went to him for a job. That was a couple of years ago. Good secretaries were scarce. He recommended me to Mr. Ramsay. He was a right guy."

"But tough."

"Yeh, sure. Why shouldn't he be? But he was running straight."

"Why didn't he give you back your clippings? You knew he had 'em, didn't you?"

"Yes. He told me. He was an angle player: a guy like

Jeff always is. He was keeping them just in case. But he wasn't using them."

Walsh asked, "How about you and Nulty? Were you playing games after you got the job with Ramsay?"

"No. That was all washed up."

"Why? Wasn't he still human?"

"We just didn't, is all. I don't give a damn whether you believe it or not."

"But you'd have been happier if you had known those clippings were destroyed, wouldn't you?"

"Sure. But what . . ."

"Well, what's to say you didn't try to get 'em? What's to say you didn't kill him yourself and then hunt for them?"

She stared at him, badly shaken. She said, "It wasn't that way. Why would I make a pitch for Steve Blake . . ."

"You knew he'd been in Nulty's apartment the night Jeff was killed. Could be he somehow got the clippings without killing the man. It wouldn't have to be that way. If you just thought so—that's all was needed."

She said, "Steve Blake killed him. You don't want to think it, because a screwball jury acquitted him. You gotta hang it on somebody. You're trying to elect me."

"That wouldn't be difficult, Rusty." Marty wasn't any more excited than a teacher explaining something to a classroom, "See how this sounds. You helped a criminal in San Francisco. You got off on a State's evidence deal. You came to Los Angeles under an assumed name. You reestablished contact with Nulty after he got out of San Quentin—as soon as he fell into something which looked like soft money. He held you in line with a batch of clippings which could ruin you if he ever spilled about them. You had other men on a string: perhaps Blake, certainly Pete Connolly. There may have been others. You weren't at Blake's cocktail party, but you knew all about the beef he had with Nulty. That could have been your chance. You could have killed Nulty with Blake's gun, knowing the finger would be pointed straight at Steve. You hid the gun in that catchall closet in your office where nobody but you ever went. You maybe forgot it was there until the night Conchita found it. You didn't have anything against her personally, but you were at the table

and heard her insist on talking privately to Blake. And as for Pete, it's a cinch bet you and he quarreled tonight—last night—whatever it is. He had received the clippings. He'd maybe ended your romance. So you killed him right there at the top of the stairs outside your office. You kept out of sight all evening."

She said, with an odd, haggard dignity, "I didn't kill Pete Connolly. I was in love with him."

"You quarreled, didn't you?"

"It wasn't a quarrel. I was upset. So was he."

"That's the way you tell it, Rusty. A jury might not think that way."

She said bitterly, "You jump on the first suspect, don't you, Walsh? Once it was Steve Blake. Now it's me. Anybody you've got a case against. To hell with you."

Marty took that in stride. He said, "Is that why you hired those two hoods to work over Blake? Maybe if this lad, Floyd Andrews, hadn't got there in time, they'd have beat out of him where he had the clippings."

She said something to indicate her supreme disgust. But she wasn't fooling anybody. She was a badly frightened woman.

She had every reason to be. The case Marty had built against her was good, almost as good as the one he'd constructed against me on the Jeff Nulty thing. But I had known that I didn't kill Nulty. I knew I hadn't killed Conchita or Pete Connolly. That made it sound bad for Rusty Mason. Motive, opportunity, everything. There were flaws in Walsh's logic, of course, but not many. I don't suppose any murder case is perfect unless you have eyewitnesses.

Pat leaned over and whispered to me. "She didn't do it, Steve. I'm sure she didn't."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Woman's intuition, I guess."

I looked at her sharply. "You wouldn't have any other reason for thinking that way, would you?"

She hesitated. Then she said, "No. Of course not."

The "of course not" was gratuitous. It was a particularly false note in a cacophony that was all false notes.

Lieutenant Lane was doing things. He walked over to

Rex Kingsley's desk. He pulled out the side compartment and a typewriter popped up. He looked through the drawers and found an envelope. He examined the envelope carefully. Then he slipped it under the platen of the machine and typed slowly, using one finger of each hand.

When he finished he went over to Marty Walsh and took from him the envelope in which the clippings about Olive Palmer had been mailed to Pete Connolly. He studied them for a half minute, then drew Marty Walsh into a corner. I saw Walsh's face brighten, and heard him say, "You got something, Bert—you sure got something."

Lane's soft, friendly voice floated across the room. He said, "This is mighty interesting. This envelope was typed on Rex Kingsley's machine."

Pat Kingsley's hand flew to her mouth. It pressed tight against her lips. She said, "No! Rex wouldn't have killed Pete Connolly. He had no reason to."

She was too sure, too vehement. Looking at her, listening to her words, I got a sick, sinking sensation in the pit of the stomach.

22

The cops worked hard on the Pete Connolly murder, but they didn't get very far. They stuck around the Club Casa Linda until after four in the morning. They went home to say Merry Christmas to their kids and were back at work before noon. During their few hours off, the day shift took over. The total result of their findings added up to a lot or very little, I couldn't figure which. In any event, Christmas Day was a mess.

Within seventy-two hours several things were discovered, none of them terribly important. Connolly had been shot

through the heart, once, with a .32. There were a lot of .32's in Los Angeles, registered to a lot of different people, any one of whom might have been in and out of the Casa Linda during the festivities.

There was a bruise on Connolly's forehead which could have come from a fist, or perhaps he had walked into a door. There was very little blood, and the floor of the dark, narrow mezzanine hallway indicated that he hadn't been shot where the body was lying—the place at the head of the stairway where Santa Claus tripped over it. He'd probably been killed somewhere else, somewhere close, and carried there. Since he weighed only ninety-seven pounds soaking-wet, that wouldn't have been too difficult, even for a woman.

Everybody I knew and a lot of people I didn't know could have been on the mezzanine at some time between eleven o'clock and midnight. Including myself. Mario and Rex Kingsley admitted they had been there: the former to see that things were going okay with Santa Claus, and Kingsley to make sure that no pieces of his costume were missing. Both said they hadn't seen any corpse.

Rusty Mason said she had stayed in her room, crying. That was because she had battled with Pete Connolly. Brian Garland, Wade Ramsay and Floyd Andrews claimed not to have been on the mezzanine at 11. They had, according to their stories, just wandered around spreading good cheer, and, in the case of Garland particularly, inhaling a good deal of it.

The verdict of the coroner's jury was the usual thing: that deceased came to his death by a bullet fired from a .32 caliber gun in the hands of a person or persons unknown. That struck me as having a ghastly form of humor, inasmuch as I couldn't very well imagine a plural number of persons clutching a little gun like that. Anyway, the gun wasn't found.

I spent the next few days adjusting myself. I saw Pat Kingsley infrequently and for not too long at any one time. She looked drawn and tired. I thought she was avoiding me, but I couldn't be sure. Business downstairs spurted. Nothing like a few good murders to draw a crowd. New Year's Eve was already a sellout, at ten bucks per cover. Wade

Ramsay met me in the lobby one evening and commented bitterly that folks were all crazy: you run a nice respectable place and you have trouble getting by. Let it become an amateur slaughterhouse, and people will pay to take a look. The best brains of Hollywood were working overtime wisecracking about the Casa Linda. Some of the wisecracks were funny, all of them were in bad taste.

The newspapers were having fun, for which I didn't blame them. This made the Black Dahlia thing look like bushleague stuff. Here was class with a capital K. You didn't have to give it a fancy name. You didn't have to gild the lily. Well-known people being knocked off right and left. Plush background. Some smart newspapermen called them the Champagne Murders.

On the night of the 28th I was alone in my apartment. I was struggling to concentrate on a tricky problem of wing design, and getting nowhere fast. The telephone rang. It was Lieutenant Lane of the Hollywood Detective Bureau. He asked me if I was Steve Blake and I said I was. He said a couple of his boys had just brought in two men who answered the description of the pair who had battered me around on a lonely canyon road aeons ago. Could I come down and make positive identification before they started being persuasive? I said I could. I asked him whether he'd told Marty Walsh and he said he was trying to contact him and that Walsh would probably be at Hollywood by the time I got there.

I drove to the corner of Wilcox and De Longpre. The Hollywood station was an unimaginative two-story building of yellow brick. It looked exactly like a police station. It looked as though it couldn't possibly be anything else.

Downstairs there was a jail and a desk behind which clustered a lot of uniformed policemen. They sent me upstairs to the Detective Bureau, which was on the second floor. I walked into a little room with a railing which seemed to make the small space smaller.

It was full of detectives: some large, some larger. Lieutenant Lane was behind the desk taking a report from a gimpy gent who was incensed over having had some hubcaps stolen and wanting the fingerprint men to give his car

a going-over. Lane looked up at me, grinned, and waved me to a chair. He went back to his job of taking the report and trying to make the irate citizen understand that the police department had neither the time nor the facilities to fingerprint every car which had been tampered with. He got the signature of the complaining taxpayer, sent him off down the hall to the Record Bureau, and stood up to shake hands with me.

The detective outfit occupied a series of tiny squad rooms. Lane took me into one of them and beckoned Sergeant Ehrlich to follow. Two other detectives came in also: a long, lanky one with a round face, very little hair, glasses, and a big gun; and another, equally tall, but much younger and heavier. This one sported a shiny Magnum. They all wore guns. Even Lane was carrying one: a .38.

Lane said they had picked up the two men in a bowling alley. Both had denied knowledge of the incident, and the cops didn't want to start really arguing with them unless they were sure. They took me back into the main office and let me peep through a gimlet hole into the next room where two F-car men were sitting stolidly with the prisoners.

I recognized them right away, but I wanted to be even surer than that. While I was still looking, Marty Walsh and Sergeant Tremont came in. They'd driven all the way from Homicide Division in City Hall. We said Hello all around, and Lane asked me the score.

I said, "Those are the two, all right. I'll take an oath on it."

"Mind walking in on them?"

I said that was okay with me. We opened the door and walked in: Walsh, Lane, Tremont and Ehrlich. They shooed the F-car men out of the room. Slim and Ernie looked at me and tried being poker-faced. It didn't quite come off.

I repeated my positive identification. They swore they'd never seen me before, and—what was more—that they had never beaten up anybody in any canyon at any time. Marty Walsh started talking to me in a placid conversational voice. He said, "The public has a lot of wrong ideas about third degree, Steve. Walloping a statement out of a man

isn't worth soup. It doesn't stand up in court, and it hurts your case. But when you're dealing with hoods, and when you know you've got the right ones—when you're sure of it like we're sure of these mugs—why we got to go as far as they make us go to get some truth out of them."

He looked at Tremont and Ehrlich. Both were big men, both powerful. Calmly and dispassionately, they took off their coats and folded them neatly. One stood in front of the two prisoners, in whose eyes the faint, flickering light of apprehension was beginning to show.

Marty Walsh spoke softly. He said, "This is going to hurt you more than it does us, boys. You've both been around. Will you have it the easy way or otherwise?"

Slim cracked first. He growled, "We ain't done nothin'."

"How much nothing ain't you done?"

"Well, not entirely nothin', but we ain't mixed up in them killings."

"Then you *do* know Blake, eh?"

"Sure, we seen him."

"When?"

"The night we had that mix-up in the canyon."

"You've decided to talk?"

They looked at each other, and again Slim acted as spokesman. He said, "Hell, there ain't no percentage gittin' it beat out of you."

Ehrlich and Tremont calmly put their coats on again. They didn't look elated and they didn't look disappointed. Just routine. Walsh said, "This is your chance, boys. Don't try playing cute. We want it all."

Slim said, "It's so screwy, you ain't gonna believe it. But I'm givin' it straight, and no matter how hard you bounce me, I ain't gonna be able to change it."

The officers waited, patiently.

"It was like this," Slim went on. "Me and Ernie, we live in one of them backstreet Hollywood hotels. One day comes a letter addressed to the both of us. We open it and there is five one-hundred-dollar bills. No letter, no nothing. Just that dough. We think maybe we're crazy, only we ain't. Then we think it's phoney. We take it to a bank and ask the teller right out is it real. We say we won it, and maybe

it ain't genuwine. They look it over, say it's okay and break it up into little bills for us. We go back to the jernt, wondering what's happening.

"Maybe an hour later, the manager calls us to the phone. It's on the street floor, under the stairway. Just the one phone. There's a guy on the other end. He asks me have we got an envelope with five hundred smackers in it. I say yes. He asts would we like another five hundred to go with it, and I say yes again. I ask him who is it, and he says that doesn't matter.

"Anyway, he gives me a description of Mr. Blake here: name, size, coloring, everything. He says he knows me and Ernie have got a car. He says we're to park every night outside the Casa Linda. Some night Blake will come out alone and drive away. We're to follow. If we get him in a dark spot we're to grab him, work him over, and tell him to keep his nose out of things that ain't none of his business. He says he'll know if and when we do it, and the day after we'll get a second five hundred."

"Did you get it?"

"Hell, no. Can you imagine a guy welshing on us like that?"

Walsh said, "Keep going. You're doin' fine so far."

"Well, anyway, the third night we're staked out, things work beautiful. Except we don't have no easy time following Blake on account he drives fast and far. But we get him. We tell him what we was told to say, and we work him over. Then somebody else comes along and that makes it two on a side. It doesn't look healthy so we beat it. And that's the truth, Chief—I don't care how nutsy it sounds."

Walsh thought it over for a moment. He said, "You wouldn't happen to have the envelope the money came in, would you?"

"Yeh, I got it." Slim fished around in the pocket of his dirty sports jacket and produced a battered, typewritten envelope. He handed it over to Walsh. He and Lane looked at it and walked into the front office together. Walsh took two other envelopes out of his pocket and they examined the three together. Then they called me in.

"Interesting," Walsh said. "They check with the envelope

Lane typed on the machine in Rex Kingsley's office, and with the typing on the one which was used for mailing the clippings about Rusty Mason to Pete Connolly. You wouldn't be knowing anything about them, would you, Steve?"

"No. Lots of people had access to that office. Any one of them could have typed the envelopes. And I'm sure even you wouldn't believe I'd pay two hoodlums five hundred dollars to beat me up."

"I don't think you would, at that." Walsh walked back into the squad room. He said, "One thing more, boys. Would you recognize the voice that talked to you over the phone?"

They said they thought they would. Marty said, "I'm going to talk to somebody. When Lieutenant Lane here gives you the word, you're each to pick up one of the extensions. You're not to say a word. Nothing. Just listen. When I've finished talking, I want to know is it the same voice. And if you ain't sure, say so. I don't want any guessing."

He went in the front room and dialed a number. It was the Casa Linda. He identified himself and asked to speak to Rex Kingsley. A few seconds later he said, "Hello: that you, Kingsley?" Then he motioned me to open the door to the squad room. Lane picked two telephones off their cradles and handed one instrument to each of the prisoners.

The conversation didn't mean a thing. Marty asked a few questions about how the club was running, whether Kingsley had observed anything unusual, did they have many customers, how New Year's Eve was shaping up. He stretched it out for about three minutes, doing a pretty clever job of making it sound as though he wanted something different from what he did want. Then he hung up, and Slim and Ernie did the same. He said, "What's the answer, boys?"

Slim said, "That's the guy."

"You can swear to it?"

"Yeh. Couldn't miss."

Ernie said, "I'll ride along with that, Chief."

"How would you know?" asked Walsh sharply. "Slim was the one talked to him from the hotel."

"Yeh. But I was interested, 'count of the five hundred.

see? I was crowdin' the phone all the time they was talkin'. That's the guy."

Walsh and Lane nodded at each other. Lane said to Sergeant Ehrlich, "Take these monkeys down an' book 'em, will you, Jerry? A.D.W., A and B, anything you can think up."

Slim uncoiled himself sadly. "It's better'n what we was scared of anyway," he said. "An' listen, Chief—if you see that guy you was just talkin' to, tell him he owes us another five hundred. Looks like me and Ernie are gonna need it."

They disappeared down the hall. Marty looked at me and then at Bert Lane. He said, "You busy, Bert?" and Lane said no.

"How's about riding over to the Casa Linda? Maybe you and me and Stevie-boy could have a cozy little talk with Rex Kingsley, huh?"

Lane said he thought that was a good idea. We started down the hall. Marty Walsh said, half to himself: "And we might as well make it real good, while we're at it. We'll bring Mrs. Kingsley in, too."

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Marty Walsh, Bert Lane and I went through the lobby and up to the seventh floor. Walsh pressed the buzzer on 7-A, and Pat Kingsley opened the door.

She had on a powder blue negligé. The general effect was Grecian, and didn't hide the fact that she was a perfect 34. It was very lovely, very intimate and—to me at least—very exciting.

She recognized the two detectives. Then she looked at me. She asked, nervously, "What is it? What's wrong?"

Marty said, "May we come in, ma'am?"

She stood aside and we walked in. It was quite an apartment: a fairly long foyer that opened into a living room. There were two doors in the living room. Both opened into bedrooms. Walsh asked which was Kingsley's. Pat flushed slightly and pointed to the nearest one. "That's my husband's bedroom," she explained. "The corner one is mine. Each has its private bath."

The living room was huge. Lots of windows, lots of view. Its decorative scheme was quiet, restful, artistic and expensive. Not too much furniture, not to many gimcracks, not too much of anything. Just right. Evidently Pat had been reading, because an open book lay face down in an easy chair under a standing lamp, and a half-smoked cigarette smoldered in an ashtray alongside. Off the other end of the room there was a dinette and quite a kitchen: much bigger than the setup in my next-door apartment. There was a telephone on the little table which stood just beyond the archway separating living room and foyer.

Marty Walsh said he had merely dropped in for a little chat. He asked Pat to phone downstairs for her husband. She hesitated, but only briefly. Her eyes were still full of questions. I managed to grin, trying to convey to her the information that everything was all right—or as nearly all right as it could ever be while indiscriminate homicide was in the air.

Less than ten minutes after she phoned, a key grated in the lock, the front door opened and slammed and Rex Kingsley walked in. He looked very handsome in his M.C. outfit: handsome and annoyed. He took three steps into the living room, looked at each of us in turn and said, "What the hell goes on here?"

Marty invited him to have a seat. Rex didn't refuse, but he didn't sit down, either. He was overflowing with hostility and ill temper. It seemed to me that he wasn't playing it very smart.

Walsh started talking, his voice soft as silk. He described Slim and Ernie. When he finished, he said, "Do you know either of those men, Kingsley?"

"Why should I?"

"I didn't ask that. I asked, do you?"

"No."

"They're a couple of rough characters," Marty stated. "They trail people and beat them up. They do it for money. They're not awfully good at it, but they try their best."

Kingsley asked, "What has this got to do with me?"

"They say they know you. Not personally, but by mail and telephone. Just a little while ago when you and I were talking on the telephone, they listened in. They identified your voice. They claim you sent them five hundred dollars anonymously, through the mail, and then followed up with a phone call offering an extra five hundred if they beat up Mr. Blake and warned him to keep his nose out of things that didn't concern him. They say you never sent that extra five hundred. They asked me specially to tell you they didn't like that."

"Where are they?"

"In the tank at Hollywood police station. I'd take you down to see them, but it wouldn't mean much. By their own story, their only personal contact with you was over the phone. They've already identified you that way."

Kingsley said, "They're both liars."

"Maybe. I'm just trying to find out."

"Couple of cheap hoods. Why wouldn't they identify any voice you asked them to identify?"

"You got a point there, Kingsley. We ask 'Is that the guy?' They think we want them to say yes, so they say yes. Could be that way. Only I don't think so."

"You'd take their word against mine?"

"I've done dumber things than that. But this time I got a little logic on my side."

"You cops! Always running around in circles."

"Here's the setup, Kingsley. Those clippings we found in Pete Connolly's pocket after he was killed: they were typed on a machine in your office downstairs. The envelope these two characters say they got the five hundred in—that was typed on the same machine."

"So what? I don't keep that office locked. People are in and out of there day and night. Anybody could use that typewriter."

"But *do* they?"

"How would I know?" He picked a cigarette out of a cigarette case that looked like solid gold, and lighted it with a lighter that also looked like gold. He said, "You boys will have to do better than that if you're trying to tie me in."

Walsh said, "We're not trying to tie anybody in, Kingsley. We're prospecting, is all. We're asking questions, and sometimes we're getting mighty unsatisfactory answers. I'm going to try a few on you. I'd advise you to answer straight. You might fool us for a little while, but not always."

"I'm not certain of that, Walsh. You've been fooled before."

"About Steve Blake? Tell you the truth, Kingsley—I'm still not entirely sure I *was* fooled. That's one of the things I came up here to talk about. Blake was acquitted on the strength of your wife's testimony. You know what she testified, so I won't rehash it. What's been happening since ain't exactly according to Hoyle."

Rex's expression was ugly. "What kind of a crack is that?"

"You understand me, all right. Either you know she lied on the stand and know *why,* or you know she told the truth and you go right on living with her. Which is it?"

Pat started to say something, but Marty cut her off. He said, "Just a minute, Mrs. Kingsley. What I've just stated is fact. If it's embarrassing, I'm sorry. Maybe there's a good answer. If there is, I'd like to hear it."

Kingsley said, "Just what way is your dirty mind working, Walsh?"

Marty's eyes grew a shade colder. He said, "You ain't buying yourself a lot of good will, Kingsley."

"I'm not asking for it. What happens inside this apartment—between my wife and myself—is our business. It's going to stay that way."

"She couldn't have been covering for you, could she?"

Rex didn't answer. He leaned against the mantel, obviously enjoying the theatrical quality of the scene. "Or is it," continued Marty easily, "that you were willing for her to play house with Blake for reasons of your own?"

"Why, you lousy . . ."

Lieutenant Lane's long figure uncoiled and ranged alongside Rex. He said, gently, "Ain't any sense getting mad, fella."

"But when he insinuates . . ."

"He ain't insinuating. He's saying it right out. When a man's wife tells the world she's another man's mistress, the husband usually does something about it. Not shooting, or anything old-fashioned like that . . . but maybe just walking out on her, or throwing her out. He doesn't just take it. Kind of makes him a ridiculous figure if he does."

That got under Rex's hide.

"Of course," Lane went on, "could be you're a noble guy. Could be you think Mrs. Kingsley killed Jeff Nulty. Only you don't strike me as the noble type, Kingsley. You look to me like the wrong end of a horse."

Marty picked up the needling. He said, "Who pays for this apartment, Kingsley? You or the Missus?"

"None of your business."

"Did she buy you that swank new convertible you're driving?" No answer.

"And all those expensive new clothes you had tailored recently? And those gold accessories? You couldn't afford those things yourself, Kingsley. You got a good job, but it ain't that good."

Whatever Marty Walsh was trying to do, he was succeeding. He was whittling away at Rex's ego. "Killing Nulty, I could figure," Walsh went on. "You don't mind being kept by a rich wife, but you'd hate to be anybody's assistant in a night club. Maybe also you and Nulty didn't agree about Conchita. And maybe Conchita didn't agree about you. Must have hit you hard, too . . . when you're such a bearcat with the women. Now about Rusty . . . there's a gal who could have gone overboard for a collar ad like you. You're the type who might think she was worth having. You could hate Steve Blake because Rusty went for him, so it might have been worth five hundred dollars to get him beat up. And since you knew that Rusty and Pete Connolly were talking about getting married . . . that could have made you mad, too. So damned mad maybe you would put a .32 right through his heart."

Kingsley moved away from the mantel. Bert Lane moved with him, his arctic eyes watching warily. But Kingsley didn't do anything except talk. He started telling Walsh what he thought of him. His language was straight out of the gutter. It was vile and shocking. He sounded bold rather than brave. He sounded as though somewhere along the line Marty had hit a little too close to the truth.

Walsh relaxed on the couch and took it imperturbably. When Rex ran down, Marty said, "You sure waste a lot of words, Kingsley. I could have done better than that when I was sixteen years old."

Rex said, "Are you accusing me of murder?"

"Not yet."

"Do you plan to?"

"It all depends. But I'm interested. You're in the middle of everything. You're neck deep in motive. I came up here to give you a chance to talk your way out. You haven't played it that way. You know why? I think you're scared."

"Of a cheap cop like you?"

"Nope. Of something else. Of something I might have overlooked. It could be you're scared of your wife, or of Steve Blake."

"You mean you haven't enough evidence to arrest me, is that it?"

"Perhaps. I believe those two hoods I've got locked up. But they could be lying. Maybe they're covering for somebody they know. What they said didn't *have* to be the truth. For all I know, that telephone call they got could even have been from a woman. Maybe they just said it was a man to throw us off." He turned to Lieutenant Lane. "Smart crooks pitch curves like that all the time, don't they, Bert?"

Lane nodded gravely. He said, "It ain't impossible that Mrs. Kingsley did the telephoning. Keeping on living together this way, how do we know but what she and this louse are still crazy about each other?"

I felt myself getting tight inside. I said, "Take it easy, Lane. It couldn't be . . ."

"You keep out of this, Blake. It ain't your party. And take my word for it, anything *could* be. Especially where there's a lot of murder concerned. I'll ask you just one ques-

tion, then you can get back to the side lines: Haven't you done some wondering why Kingsley and his wife didn't bust up after what she testified about her affair with you?"

His shrewd eyes were on me. There wasn't any way I could answer the question without making things worse.

Pat Kingsley said quietly, "It probably does look odd, Lieutenant. But that's the way things are."

"Why?"

"Isn't that our business: Rex's and mine?"

"I ain't so sure."

"It certainly is," broke in Kingsley, "unless you get something more to go on. And I've had enough of this. Either you arrest me or get the hell out of my apartment."

Marty asked, genially: "What are you, Kingsley—tough or frightened?"

"Get out."

Bert Lane said, "Looks like we ain't welcome, Marty."

"You're not!" That was Kingsley again, whipping himself into fresh fury. "You'd crucify me if you could. You get one idea and you squeeze it to death. Why don't you talk to Rusty Mason some more. Find out everything she really knows. She's a crook, isn't she? She was tied up with Jeff Nulty. The gun they found in Conchita's bag was hidden in the closet in her office, wasn't it?"

He paused and Walsh said softly, "Keep goin', sonny. You're doing fine."

"Check on Mario, why don't you? Where was he all the time people were getting killed? Ask him whether it isn't true that he hated Jeff Nulty's guts. Ask him if he wasn't jealous of Nulty making passes at Conchita. Ask him if he and Conchita weren't good friends . . . better friends than just being able to talk Spanish together. Yes, and ask Mr. Brian Garland a few questions. Blake's lawyer. He knows more than he's ever told. He was always around. And this other guy: this Floyd Andrews. Where does he fit in?"

"You see," said Marty Walsh, "Mr. Kingsley is on our team after all, Bert. He's trying to help us."

He and Lane started for the door. They motioned me to follow. Rex stood where he was. But Pat walked halfway across the living room with me.

We looked hard at each other. In her face I saw worry and fear. But I didn't see guilt. Maybe that was because I was prejudiced—because I knew then, unmistakably, that I was in love with her.

24

For several days I did nothing more than work and think. But my thoughts were not of aerodynamics. No matter what I tried to think about, it would come back to Pat.

That scene in her apartment hadn't been pretty. Not much of a personal nature had been discussed that she and I hadn't touched on before. But this was bringing it out in the open, parading it nakedly. It made things sound worse. It was no longer a private matter, no longer merely something that a man and a woman—Pat and myself—might talk about tactfully and discreetly.

They had a lot on Rex Kingsley. Too much perhaps. By all the rules, he should have been scared to death. He *had* been frightened, but not nearly enough. He had played it like a man who held pretty good cards and was determined to play them for all they were worth. He hadn't even reacted violently until they needled his vanity. I tried not worrying about Pat. It was an impossible job, but I gave it a whirl. I thought back over the other accusations Rex Kingsley had tossed around. Rusty Mason, Brian Garland, Floyd Andrews, Mario. Except for Rusty, I couldn't see where any one of them had a motive. I certainly couldn't figure Brian in: To my knowledge he hadn't done anything worse than to be my attorney and to permit Pat Kingsley to testify in my behalf. There was the off chance that he may not have believed her story, but that was as far as I was willing to involve him in this mess.

Rusty had motive enough and opportunity aplenty. Mario was apparently nobody but a jittery little guy who could talk Spanish and share confidences with Conchita. Floyd Andrews was poking his nose into places it didn't belong, but that didn't automatically make him suspect.

There were the two hoods, Slim and Ernie, who were still in Hollywood jail. They might have lied from A to Izzard. They said a man telephoned them. It could have been any man, not necessarily Kingsley, whose voice they had too readily identified. It could have been a woman. Someone they might like to hold in reserve for a future touch. It could have been Rusty Mason. It could even have been Pat Kingsley.

Anybody could have typed the matching envelopes. Rex hadn't lied about his office being a thoroughfare. If someone wanted to cover, there couldn't be a more logical patsy than Kingsley. I didn't like the guy, but I couldn't see that they had any more on him than they had on me when they'd thrown me in the cooler for the murder of Jeff Nulty. Not half as much, actually.

New Year's Eve came and went. The Club Casa Linda did pretty well for itself. You couldn't get within a block of the place. Lots of patrons who would have been there anyway, because it was a nice spot; plus all the ghouls who hoped a nice fresh murder might be served under glass to usher in 1948.

I glimpsed the merrymaking from the corner of the lobby. I didn't go in. I saw a jammed, smoke-laden room; I saw countless bottles of champagne and all sorts of people wearing paper hats and energetically making the most of the noisemakers which had been placed on each table. I watched the beginning of the show, and was surprised to see that Vince Mabry, the orchestra leader, was emceeing. I wondered what was ailing Rex Kingsley.

I went upstairs alone and let myself into my apartment. When midnight came and the whistles blew and bedlam broke loose in the streets, I poured myself a small drink, looked at myself in the mirror and said, "Happy New Year." But it wasn't happy. It was a miserable New Year's Eve, shot through with doubt and worry and uncertainty.

I didn't see Pat. Maybe she and her husband were together somewhere, celebrating privately. I didn't relish the idea. I finally turned in and flopped around on the bed for hours before getting to sleep. When I woke, the clock told me it was after nine, and outside there was that oppressive quiet that follows a too hectic night.

The day passed miserably. I was certain of only one thing: no matter what happened, I wasn't going to contact Pat Kingsley. It was a New Year resolution, and I wasn't one of these weaklings who make resolutions idly. I kept that one until afternoon: the early afternoon of Friday, January second. And even then circumstances had to conspire against me.

Twice my apartment telephone rang. Twice I answered it. Twice the line had been crossed with the line to the Kingsley apartment. Twice I heard Pat talking—not about anything in particular. Just talking. Both times I replaced the instrument on its cradle, but the second time convinced me happily that I didn't have as much moral courage as I feared.

I went into the hall and rapped on her door. We were both embarrassed. She said, "I've been wanting to talk to you, Steve . . ."

I suggested having dinner together. She thought that was a good idea. I didn't ask what Rex would think of it, and she didn't volunteer her opinion. I said I thought it'd be fine if she got dressed right away so we could have a long pleasant drive and just talk. She said she'd rap on my door as soon as she was ready.

I was feeling swell when I went back to my apartment. I prettied myself up. That was quite a job, but I gave it all I had. The only trouble was that when I had finished, I still looked like me.

She knocked on the door. I opened it with my hat in my hand. She said, "May I come in a minute first?"

I said sure, gave her my best chair, and offered her a drink which she declined. She said, "If you hadn't come to see me, I was going to telephone you, Steve. I'm worried."

"About what?" It was just a question. I felt sure I knew the answer.

"About something we might discuss before we go out." She looked everywhere but at me, as though wondering whether to go through with it. Then she raised her eyes to mine and said, "Rex has disappeared."

"Disappeared? You mean . . . ?" I didn't finish that sentence because a Casa Linda disappearance had recently meant something violent and permanent.

She said, more steadily, "Nothing wrong that I know of. He's simply gone."

"Where?" I asked. "When? How?"

"I don't know. The first time I was aware of it was night before last, just before the show. Wade Ramsay dropped in to see me. He was up in the air a mile. Asked me where Rex was. I said I didn't know. He said Rex wasn't in his office, wasn't anywhere around the club. He said their special New Year's Eve show was about to be ruined. He said it wasn't his idea of the way a man who had spent years in show business should act: walking out on the biggest night of the year. I telephoned all the places I thought Rex might be. He wasn't at any of them. It was late by that time, so Mr. Ramsay rushed downstairs and got Vince Mabry to act as master of ceremonies."

"You haven't heard from Rex since?"

"No . . . I'm afraid I won't."

"Why?"

"His big suitcase is gone. He has taken a lot of his clothes, about all he could jam into that suitcase. His new convertible isn't in the garage. He drove out in it about four o'clock Wednesday afternoon."

I said, "He wasn't here at all New Year's Eve or last night?"

"No. This morning I contacted his bank. I spoke to one of the officers who happens to be a friend of Dad's. He had no right to tell me, but he told me anyway. The day before New Year—Wednesday—Rex drew out, in cash, practically all the money he had in the bank."

"How much was that?"

"Around eight thousand dollars."

I said, "Wow! I should have been a night club manager."

"The amount surprised me, too. Anyway, he took it and

left. It sounds as though he didn't intend to come back."

I said, "He's made a stupid play. The cops scared him the other night, but they didn't pin anything on him. If he's really taken a powder, that'll be all they need."

I said, "Listen, Pat—I've got to ask you something. What's between you and Rex, really? Most times you act as though you hated his insides. Other times—like now—you seem about to break down because maybe he's gotten himself into a jam."

She looked at me a long time. Then she said, "How much do you know about Rex and myself?"

"Quite a bit. Not as much as I'd like, though."

She said, "I feel directly responsible for whatever mess he's made of his life. There was an auto accident . . ."

"I heard about that. It seems to have paid off pretty well."

"It kept me tied to him. That, and my pride. I went against Dad's wishes when I married Rex. I knew better than he did. Or, anyway, I thought so. I was very much in love with Rex. Then."

"Not now?"

"No. Not now. I haven't been for a long time. But I owe him something. Right or wrong, any time he's in trouble, I'll do my best for him."

"Meaning you're not reporting this to the police?"

"Not immediately. I asked Mr. Ramsay not to. Rusty Mason called Rex this morning. I said he wasn't able to come to the phone. I didn't lie straight out, but I deliberately created the impression that he was here, sick. Of course, if a lot of time passes and I don't hear from him . . ."

I said, "That could be awkward, Pat. Marty Walsh won't like having you hold out on him. Tell me this: do you think that his flight indicates . . ."

"I'm worried. He's my husband, legally at any rate. I won't be a party to having anything happen to him."

"That's just another way of saying you know something you're not telling. Isn't that obstructing justice, Pat?"

"No." Her answer was direct, as though she had thought it over for a long time. "The law provides that a wife can-

not be compelled to testify against her husband. There's another provision which holds that she isn't even a competent witness against him except in certain types of actions. That seems to indicate to me that if I know something which might injure Rex, I'm legally as well as morally justified in keeping it to myself."

I said I wouldn't argue the point with her. The important thing was that she had elected to follow a certain course, and it was none of my business whether or not she was right.

We got ready to go somewhere. She was standing at the door waiting for me to close the windows when the telephone rang. It rang long and loud. I knew it was important before I even said "Hello."

It was important, all right. A woman's voice asked whether this was my number. I said yes, and the other voice said, "Victorville calling." That meant a station-to-station call. Pat was close to the phone. She came even closer. That was fine with me.

I said "Hello," again. There was a brief pause and then a man said, "Who is that?"

"Steve Blake."

"Are you alone?"

I thought I recognized the voice. I said, "Yes. Who is this?"

"Rex Kingsley." He sounded shaky. "I need help. Lots of help. Right away. You're the one person in the world I feel I can trust."

That struck me as odd.

Kingsley continued, nervously: "Will you keep this to yourself—no matter what you decide to do? Will you give me your word of honor on that?"

I said, "Yes."

"Okay. You've got to come to where I am. No one else knows where that is. It's terribly important."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because," he said tensely, "if you do exactly what I say I'll be able to give you tangible, documentary proof which will clear up all three of those murders."

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Pat was standing close. I put out my left hand and let it rest on her shoulder. It was a soft, warm shoulder and it made my hand feel good. I squeezed a little. I meant the gesture to be reassuring, but I wasn't denying that it was fun, too.

The distant voice said impatiently, "Hello—hello!" and I said, "I'm still here, Kingsley."

Rex said, "Are they looking for me?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure they know you've checked out."

"Well, I have."

"Why?"

"Where I'm going, the climate is healthier." There was a brief pause. "You know the San Berdoo-Victorville road?"

I said I knew it.

"How soon can you get started?"

"Fairly soon."

"I'll meet you at ten o'clock tonight. You won't throw me down, will you, Steve?"

"Where are you staying?"

"It doesn't matter where I'm staying. Where I'll meet you is the important thing. Listen carefully, but don't write it down. Don't write anything. Ready?"

"Yes."

"You don't go all the way into San Bernardino. You swing left before you get into town. That'll put you on the Las Vegas road. Keep on it until you get almost to the top of Cajon Pass. There's a curve in the road—a left curve the way you'll be driving. On the right of it there's a gas station with a few auto cabins scattered around. Everything painted

in black and white stripes like zebras. Your headlights can't miss it. Follow me so far?"

I said I followed him.

"Okay. Right in front of the gas pump, check the mileage on your speedometer. Exactly three and two-tenths miles from there, a narrow dirt road winds off into a canyon. The mileage is important; you'd miss it otherwise. Be sure no other car is anywhere around when you turn off the main highway. Go about a quarter of a mile along that dirt road. I'll be waiting for you."

I said okay. I thought of a lot of questions, but I knew he wouldn't give me the right answers. He talked as though this might be pretty important. He made it sound like this was my big chance to get somewhere. He said, "You won't tell the cops, Steve?"

"No. I won't tell the cops."

"You'll be there at ten, sharp?"

"Yes. Unless I have car trouble or something like that. If I'm delayed, just wait. I'll be on the way."

"You got plenty of time. Even driving slow you can make it in less than three hours. That gives you two hours leeway."

"I'll be there," I said. "Now let me check back on the directions." I repeated them carefully. Rex said nervously, "You haven't written any of that, have you?"

I told him I hadn't. He said good-bye and the line went dead. I put the telephone down and looked at Pat. Her cheeks were pallid, her eyes too bright. She said, "You're not going, are you?"

"Why not?"

"Steve! You mustn't! I know this sounds melodramatic, but how do you know it isn't a trap?"

"I don't know it. It's a chance I've got to take."

"You might be killed . . ."

"By Rex?"

"Even that. He's frightened. He sounded desperate."

"He sounded on the level," I said. "Just because he was frightened and desperate. Figure it out, Pat. He didn't have to tell me where he was. He took that chance voluntarily. I have to believe he's got something."

"What's your guess, Steve?"

"You won't like this," I said. "I haven't much admiration for your husband. Maybe he thinks I'm in love with you. Maybe he'll offer a trade: he'll step out of the picture if I'll help him. There's nothing chivalrous about that, but it might be the way he's thinking."

She looked at me oddly. "Suppose he shot you?"

"If he's got that in mind, he's certainly doing it the hard way. Uh-uh, Pat. This I've got to do."

"You'll tell Marty Walsh?"

"No. Walsh will get mad later. But maybe I'll know enough to pacify him."

She said, "I'm going with you."

"No soap."

"I'll either ride with you, or follow in my own car. Take your choice, Steve."

She wasn't kidding. I asked what she had in mind, and she said—plausibly enough—that she knew Rex better than I did; she'd be able to evaluate whatever it was he intended to say; she'd know whether he was trying to pull a fast one. I finally gave in.

We took my car. We stopped at a gas station and I had the tank filled up, and the oil, battery, tires and water checked. The attendant put a high polish on my windshield. He seemed to have his own ideas about where a young man and a young woman might be going, and I didn't disillusion him. I didn't even say that we were on our way to meet the young lady's husband who was probably an escaping murderer. And he wouldn't have believed me anyway. It's odd how phoney the truth can sound.

I chose Sunset and drove slowly. Traffic both ways was heavy and careless. On the highways of California, people are courteous about dimming their headlights, but not inside city limits. They whirl at you out of nowhere, blinding you. They make abrupt left turns, inches away from your radiator. No one seems to care until after there's a bad accident, and even then they don't care too much.

We turned left on Figueroa and eased into the Arroyo Seco parkway connecting downtown Los Angeles with Pasadena. It's a beautiful divided highway, with ample room

for speeding on each side of the split. On that highway you can breeze along at 55 and never know it. It's the fanciest piece of roadbuilding in Southern California.

I went straight to Colorado Avenue and turned right. Progress through Pasadena was slow. Plenty of traffic cops lurking around, and I didn't want to buy a ticket. We continued moving at a modest pace until after we'd passed the town and come within sight of the gaudy magnificence of the Santa Anita track. After that we picked up a little speed.

Not much traffic now. And what there was of it was moderately considerate. We went through little towns, all of them clean and neat and chockful of homey homes and civic pride. We passed roadside stands where they invited you to gorge yourself with orange juice for a dime—all you could drink. We passed countless motels with neon signs saying "Vacancy," in heartening contrast to the "No Vacancy" signs of the war years.

The road was straight and smooth. We passed acres and acres of orange and lemon groves. We passed huge areas, stretching way off into the night, where wine grapes were grown. We passed drive-ins and roadside restaurants and a few furtive structures which had flickering electric signs inviting you to dine and dance.

The night was crystal clear. It was so clear that we could see the huge bulk of a mountain range on our left—way off. We hadn't talked much up to now. We'd been too busy thinking, too busy relaxing. A car is a great place for that, especially a car purring through a California night.

Just short of San Bernardino I pulled up across the street from a big lunch room which specialized in short orders, thick malts and juke boxes. I said, "We've got a lot of time to kill. We'd better eat something."

She said she wasn't hungry, but I insisted. I locked the car and we walked across the road and found a booth. A chubby little waitress waltzed up, dropped two menus on the table and shoved two glasses of water at us. She was friendly as a kitten and wanted to talk, business being at low ebb. We said we'd look over the list and call her, and she went back behind the counter to resume her conversa-

tion with another girl whom she called Myrtle, a girl who was shining up the glass cases where sliced pie was on display.

I insisted that Pat eat something. I kept it as light as possible, but finally sold her an order of bacon and eggs, and ordered the same for myself. She ate a little, but not much. I did all right by mine. We each had three cups of coffee, and we wound up on lemon meringue pie which was surprisingly good. Some high school kids barged in, dropped nickels in the juke box slot, and a name orchestra began to beat out some loud jive. I bought fresh cigarettes, paid the check, tipped the waitress and we went back to the car. We leaned against the cushions and just talked. We still had too much time. We weren't going anywhere right now. No sense reaching the rendezvous before the appointed hour.

The food had helped me, and it had done wonders for Pat. She was still tense, but not jittery. Finally she said, "I can't help being apprehensive, Steve."

"I hoped you had quit worrying."

"Worrying has become a habit with me." She lighted a cigarette for herself. "Will Rex be there?"

"I think so."

"How far will you play along with him?"

I said carefully, "I can't answer that one, Pat. It all depends on what he's got on his mind."

"You'll be careful? Every second?"

I said I'd do my best. I didn't like the setup any better than she did, but it still looked like a smart play. Anything seemed preferable to the doubt which had been plaguing me for so long. And there was another angle I hadn't discussed with Pat, which was that Marty Walsh hadn't checked me out of his calculations. Not by a long shot, he hadn't. He couldn't touch me for the killing of Jeff Nulty —and he didn't have any gripe against me personally— but he still thought the jury which acquitted me had been wrong; he still thought I was a long way from being lily white on the Conchita Montero and Pete Connolly deals.

We jogged left at a highway intersection, and I stopped for more gas. We didn't need it, but a check-up is always in line when you're heading out into the mountains and

desert which stretch interminably north of San Bernardino.

I headed north, avoiding the town. I knew the approximate distance we still had to travel. By taking it at a conservative twenty-five or thirty, we ought to hit it on the nose.

The road started to climb a few miles north of the town. It would keep right on climbing. This was the beginning of Cajon Pass. Getting over the pass was a cinch if your car was right: if it wasn't, you could boil over and have gobs of trouble.

Up and up. Twisting and turning. Nice motorists out here who dimmed their lights for you. We were in the mountains now: peaks and ravines and canyons. There was a quarter moon and a million stars. The air was cool but not cold. It was fragrant with the odor of sage and manzanita. It was mountain and desert all together: lonely, stupendous, impressive country. It could be hot, it could be cold, it could be windy and dusty. Tonight it was perfect: a wonderful night for lovers. A wonderful night for almost anything except interviewing the husband of the girl you'd gone overboard about.

We were almost at the top of the Pass. The road swung left in a long, leisurely arc. Our headlights picked out a gas station and a half dozen forlorn cottages painted in broad, diagonal zebra stripes. This was our checking point. I looked at the speedometer, made a mental note, and added 3.2 to the total.

I drove meticulously from there on, remembering Rex Kingsley's warning about the danger of overshooting the mark. Precisely at the 3.2 point I saw what looked like a trail jutting off to the right. I made sure there were no other cars about, went into second, and nosed cautiously along the path.

Thirty feet after leaving the road, it dropped downward. It kept right on dropping. I wondered how a car could manage to turn around, but that was something to worry about later. I shifted into low, and moved even more slowly. This was blank, deserted, dangerous country. It made you feel a million miles away from everywhere.

A quarter of a mile. That's not far, but it's still difficult

to estimate. I put my lights on bright. Lots of sage, a few Joshua trees. Hills, ravines, nothing else. It was so lonely and quiet that for a few minutes I was afraid I might have taken the wrong path.

Then suddenly my headlights picked out a long, sleek, new, expensive convertible. Rex Kingsley's car. It had been backed off the trail, as though in preparation for starting its upward climb suddenly.

I didn't see Kingsley. I got out from under the wheel, leaving my lights on. Pat got out on the other side. I took her hand.

We approached the car slowly. I called Rex's name. My voice seemed to carry forever. There was no answer.

That was odd. If he was anywhere around, he couldn't have failed to hear me. But even when I called again, he didn't answer.

And then, suddenly, I knew why. Rex Kingsley was there, all right. He was lying on his face on the far side of his new car.

It took me less than ten seconds to realize that he was utterly and completely dead.

26

WHATEVER I had expected to find, it wasn't this. I had looked forward to a long, informative, perhaps unpleasant, talk with Rex Kingsley. But the man wouldn't talk again. Not ever.

Pat was down on her knees beside the body. She was limned in the headlights of my car as sharply as a stage star in a big scene. Only she wasn't acting that way. She wasn't acting at all. She had one hand on Rex Kingsley's cold forehead, the other on his shoulder. She showed more shock

than grief, but I couldn't be too sure. It hadn't been so long since she reminded me that she had once loved this man. You've got to grieve a little when someone you've known that well dies violently.

The scene was too brilliantly lighted, too stark. I walked back to my car and got a flashlight out of the glove compartment. I snapped off the headlamps. I went back to where Pat was, throwing a little circle of light wherever I wanted it to go.

I put my hand on Pat's head. It wasn't much of a gesture, nor all that I would have liked to do, but it was something. More than anything else in the world, I wanted to help her, to soften the blow that already had fallen, and to shield her from what was still in store.

I didn't know how to go about it. I had the insane feeling that Rex Kingsley was listening to whatever I might say; that he could see me with his wife, that I must be careful not to intrude on things which were none of my business.

I had disliked Kingsley from the moment of our first meeting, but I didn't dislike him now. I was sorry for him. And if I was experiencing that much of an emotional impact, what must his wife be feeling?

Her voice came up to me, scarcely more than a whisper. She said, "This doesn't make sense, Steve."

"What doesn't, Pat?"

"Rex. Killed. Why? By whom?"

I couldn't answer that. So I just stood there silently, feeling like hell myself; feeling incredibly sorry for her.

"I—I can't understand it," she said. "It doesn't check in with anything."

I knew approximately what she meant, and I wanted to know more. But this wasn't the moment for questions. Meanwhile, there were things to be done.

I made a quick but thorough examination. Rex had been shot twice, both times just under the left breast. Either of the bullets could have killed him. Why he was on his face, I didn't know. The ground was fairly steep there. Maybe he had rolled after he dropped.

I turned the flash on Pat. She looked as though she might crack wide open. I didn't relish the thought. Not that I'd

mind nursing her under ordinary circumstances, but this was something different. Possibilities chased themselves around inside of my head: so many and so fast I couldn't begin to sort them out.

I said, "Listen, Pat—and this is awful important. Until later, try to forget it's Rex. Keep a grip on yourself. Promise?"

She nodded stiffly.

"Things have got to be done," I went on. "I have to look around. I'll have to get someone out here pretty soon. I want to go through his pockets."

"Why?"

"He said over the phone that he had documentary proof which would clear up all the mess. If that proof is still in his pocket, or in his car, I want to find it first."

I heard a sound a little way up the hill. I snapped off my flashlight. I was jittery as hell. I got the idea the killer might be lurking somewhere. It could be a lovely setup for him. Rex Kingsley dead. Pat Kingsley and Steve Blake in perfect target position. I didn't want to be murdered anywhere, but most particularly I didn't want it way out here where nobody would ever find us.

I squatted down alongside where Pat was sitting. I wanted to put my arms around her, but I didn't. I wondered whether she understood why I couldn't help feeling that this was Rex's last scene, and that I ought to leave the spotlight to him. I tried to be casual, nonchalant. It was tough going. My heart was hammering. The fear that someone was lurking up the hill persisted. My intelligence told me that the murderer was long gone from Cajon Pass, that the sound I had heard was just a coyote who was probably twice as scared as I was, if that were possible.

I turned the flashlight on again, and handed it to Pat. If someone wanted to do something, this was his chance. I said, "This isn't going to be easy, Pat. You know I'd spare you if I could. But I need a light, and I also need both my hands. Will you help?"

She didn't answer. But she did what I asked. She held the light steadily.

I flipped back the right side of Rex's coat. The first

thing I saw was a long, slim wallet. Expensive tooled leather. It was halfway in the pocket, halfway out. Someone could have taken something else from that pocket and left the wallet that way.

I looked inside. It was filled with nice new currency: hundreds and fifties. I didn't take time to count it, but Pat had said he'd drawn eight thousand dollars from the bank, and this would come pretty close to being that much. In any event, it was a lot of money, and it was still there. You couldn't quite make yourself believe that robbery had been the motive. A holdup artist would have been able to take his time here. He could have followed Rex down the narrow, twisting trail, shot him twice and robbed him at leisure.

There was another wallet in his left hip pocket. Perhaps a hundred dollars in that one. In the other trousers pockets, some dollar bills and a little silver. The smaller wallet had identification cards: membership in the Southern California Automobile Association, membership in the N.V.A., three gas station credit cards, Rex's draft registration, a pink slip proving ownership of the lovely convertible—showing that he had paid $3,100 for it very recently. In his other pockets were cigarettes and matches. There was the beautiful gold cigarette case I'd seen before. He was wearing an expensive wrist watch and a ring set with a too large diamond. You could think anything you wanted about his death, except it couldn't be robbery. Whoever had killed Mr. Kingsley had done so because he wanted Mr. Kingsley to be dead. Period.

I looked all around for a gun or a shell. No sign of either, but that didn't mean anything. A gun could have been tossed forty feet away and I could have looked for a week without finding it.

I got up and pulled Pat to her feet. She didn't protest. She followed me to Rex's car, walking like an automaton. His keys were still in the ignition. Again I had her hold the flash for me, while I went over the car. Everything seemed to be shipshape. I flicked the light around, looking for a third set of tire tracks. I didn't find them. Whoever had killed Rex had walked down the trail. Or had ridden with him.

I found a hummock nearby which was just about bench height. I pulled Pat down beside me, and put my arm around her. I told myself that I was merely doing this to steady her, not as a caress. Then I told myself that I was a liar. Because I knew that—no matter what the circumstances—I would always be poignantly aware of her nearness, that I would always want my arm about her. I tried to keep my feelings out of my voice. I said, "Whoever killed Rex took whatever it was he wanted to show me. It must have been in his inside coat pocket, where the long wallet was. Have you any idea what it could have been?"

She shook her head.

"Anything you can think of," I prompted. "No matter how farfetched it seems."

She shook her head again. Then she began to tremble, as a person trembles at the beginning of a chill. It wasn't the cold, although it was plenty chilly here. It was a trembling that came from inside, from too much emotion pent up too tightly and too long.

She started to cry. She put her arms around me and kept right on crying. It was a quiet crying, rather dreadful. I made no effort to stop her. She had seen what she had seen, she had been shocked beyond measure, she hadn't yet been able to reorient herself. I didn't try to stop her. I didn't say a word. After all, what was there to say? I kept my arm about her, holding her body close against mine. I reached over with my free hand and stroked her cheek. Eventually the crying stopped and her body was still again, and we sat that way, just the two of us lost in a world that was bigger than all eternity.

After a long, long time she got herself under control. I told her we had to do things. We had to get word to the sheriff in San Bernardino. Yes, this was San Bernardino County. Biggest county in the State. It extended slightly beyond everywhere. I had to invite the sheriff out, and ask him to notify Marty Walsh. Walsh would be mighty interested in this. Whatever he was doing back yonder in Los Angeles, he'd burn rubber getting to us.

I said I was going to try to flag a car headed for San Berdoo. I explained it would be better if we didn't leave the

body of Rex Kingsley. I took her hand and we walked slowly—terribly slowly—up the trail to the main road.

Three cars appeared, traveling south. They didn't even slow down in answer to my thumb appeal. I said, "They don't want any part of a man hitch-hiker on this lonely stretch, Pat. I'll step back here in the darkness. You flag the next one. They'll stop for a woman."

She nodded. She seemed to be doing pretty well. Her nerves were probably still jangling, but she hadn't gone to pieces.

After a long time, a couple of pale yellow headlights showed from the direction of Victorville. The sound of the motor indicated that the car was a prewar model: pre-World-War I. Pat stepped into the road and waved her hand. The car coughed to a halt. There was one man in it, an old man who looked as decrepit as the car he drove. I stepped out from the background and started to ask the old man for a lift. He took one look at me, remembered a few wild stories he'd read, and gunned his motor. He went away from there, but fast. Down the pass at every bit of 45, and that was speed for that old wreck.

I insisted that we try again. One car ignored the lonely woman on the deserted highway, but the next one stopped. There was a couple in it, a young man and his girl friend. Or maybe she was his wife. They had been seeing the new year in at Las Vegas and were headed home. Even when I stepped into the picture, the man didn't turn a hair.

I pointed down the hill and said there had been a bad accident. I let them think it was my car. I said a man had been killed. Instantly the man and woman became solicitous. They wanted to help. They were nice.

I said there was only one thing they could do. Get into San Bernardino as fast as they could and go straight to the sheriff's office. I handed the man my card and asked him to give it to the sheriff. I told him it was of vital importance to ask the sheriff to telephone Lieutenant Marty Walsh of the Los Angeles Homicide Division.

The woman in the car looked at my card. Then she looked at Pat Kingsley. I saw recognition leap into her eyes. Steve Blake and Mrs. Patricia Maxwell Kingsley. All alone in

the mountains with a dead body. Sure, they'd know about us, if they could read. I repeated my directions. I wrote the location and Marty Walsh's name on the back of my card. I thanked them for what they were doing and said I'd wait.

The driver reached into the glove compartment of his car. He said, "It's cool up here. Maybe you and the young lady might be able to use this."

I accepted gratefully. He gave me his card, renewed his promise, and drove away. His car was a good one. It vanished swiftly and smoothly. Pat and I found another hummock by the side of the road, far enough back to be clear of headlights. I made her take a big drink. Then I took one. It helped.

We sat silently for a long time, for much too long a time. I began to think back over all the things that had happened since I had first seen her: the things I understood and the ones I didn't expect ever to understand. I took her hand and started to talk.

I said, "I don't know what's right and what's wrong about this, Pat—but there's something I'd like to say. Now. For whatever it's worth, I want you to know that I love you."

Yes, I wanted her to know. That was the only way I could tell her under the circumstances. The body of her husband was lying at the foot of the hill yonder. I went on, "I've loved you for a long time. I've never understood you, but that still hasn't made any difference."

I stopped talking. I had said it all. It was the first time in my life I'd said that to any woman.

She was silent. I started worrying. Maybe I had been miles out of line. Maybe I had said the wrong thing. Maybe I had said the right thing at the wrong time. In those few uncertain minutes, I didn't know. I only knew that the words had been spoken, and that I was glad.

And then her voice came to me, ever so faintly. She said, "I've loved you for a long time, too, Steve. I couldn't help it, either."

I drew her closer in the circle of my arm. It was out in the open now, for better or for worse, for happiness or for misery. I made no attempt to kiss her. We simply clung to

each other, not talking at all. It was a hell of a love scene, but for the moment I forgot tragedy and doubt and uncertainty, and remembered only that I was happy.

Two people in love can say a lot without words. Pat and I were that way. For a while there wasn't anybody else in the world. The mountains and the desert were there just for us. Some day perhaps we could act like normal human beings who loved each other. Now we could just sit quietly and know that it was so.

A car came whirling up the Pass. I touched Pat's hair with my lips and said, "Steady, darling." It was the first term of endearment I'd ever used with her. It gave me a nice, possessive feeling.

I walked out on the road and flagged the car down. I knew it had to be the sheriff. It was.

The car jerked over to the side of the road, and three men tumbled out. One of them carried quite a bit of extra weight, but he was solid, too. He showed me a badge and said he was Sheriff Watterson of San Bernardino County. I told him who I was and introduced Pat. He, in turn, introduced the other two men. They were deputies. He said, "Who's down yonder?"

I said, "Rex Kingsley. Mrs. Kingsley's husband."

"Accident?"

"No. Murder."

He took it in stride. His soft, pleasant voice didn't betray any excitement. He said, "Got any ideas, Blake?"

I said no. I told briefly about finding the body. I didn't mention the thing Rex had called documentary proof, and which was apparently missing. He conferred with his deputies and sent them down the hill. They looked tall and rangy and efficient. I suppose they had to be. Policing an area as vast as San Bernardino County must be a considerable job. He told them to search carefully, and not to disturb anything, especially anything which might have fingerprints on it. "Even these folks' prints," he finished. "Of course, you've kind of poked around, haven't you, son?"

I said I had. He didn't seem surprised. I don't think he was ever surprised.

I asked him about Marty Walsh. He said he'd phoned

right away and had contacted Marty. He said the lieutenant seemed mighty interested. He was on his way. He was coming right here: we were all supposed to wait for him. "And if I know those L.A. homicide boys, he's practically here now," the sheriff finished.

He asked a few questions. I told my story, again—still omitting the supposedly missing document. That I was saving for Marty. Watterson listened patiently. He spoke only two or three times, and then merely to say, "Ain't that a helluva note? Excuse me, ma'am."

The story took quite a while in the telling. Down the hill I could see two flashlights poking around. Then the ravine was lighted up. That would mean that they had turned on the headlights of both cars. If there was anything down there I had missed, they'd find it.

The San Bernardino coroner showed up. The official photographer was with him. They chatted with Sheriff Watterson and stumbled down the hill.

Watterson didn't try any tough cop stuff. He was plain as an old shoe, and as comfortable. He put himself out to please Pat Kingsley. He said he wasn't asking a lot of silly questions because it was Marty Walsh's case.

Another car came racing. Watterson said, "That'll be your friend from L.A." He was right. It was Marty Walsh, looking slender and dapper and dangerously efficient. Behind him bulked the tall, solid figure and granite face of Sergeant Vic Tremont.

Sheriff Watterson and Marty shook hands. They conversed in whispers. Then they approached us. Pat and I got up.

Marty was neither friendly nor hostile. He said, "The Sheriff tells me Rex Kingsley is lying down yonder, dead."

I nodded.

"You think it was murder, Steve?"

"Yes. He was shot at least twice. Right around the heart."

Marty Walsh looked up at the moon and the stars. He looked at me. He looked at Pat Kingsley.

"Same old rat race," he commented. "Just a different background."

27

Sheriff Watterson was a nice guy. He sat around with us until they'd taken what remained of Rex Kingsley far away from Cajon Pass to the morgue in San Bernardino. Then he took us to his home: us being Pat, myself, Lieutenant Marty Walsh, Sergeant Vic Tremont and one of his two deputies.

Watterson lived in a nice, average home in a nice, average part of San Bernardino, which is a nice, average city. He had a chunky little wife who was nicer than average. She didn't seem to mind being waked at three o'clock in the morning. I don't know whether the sheriff informed her privately that Pat and myself were notorious characters, but if he did, she didn't turn a hair. We were her guests, and she made delicious coffee for us, produced a bottle of local brandy, and announced that she'd be glad to prepare ham and eggs any time we felt in the mood. Then she vanished with a smile, leaving her husband and his guests to their rather grim business.

We sat around and talked. Everybody knew the questions, but no one seemed to have the answers. It was like that. Same old story against a fresh backdrop. Cajon Pass instead of the Casa Linda. Watterson didn't try to take the case away from Marty just because it happened in his territory. That was good, because otherwise he'd have had to do a lot of explaining about things that never had been in the newspapers. He made notes of all the routine stuff; informed Pat and me that we'd have to come back to San Bernardino for the inquest, and he told Pat that if she'd like to stay at his house overnight, they had a guest room and he'd be honored to have her. She thanked him and

declined, but his kindness did things to her. He was swell.

Marty Walsh checked it up to us whether we'd prefer to hole up in some San Berdoo hotel for the night or beat it right back to Los Angeles. He didn't suggest that we were under arrest or likely to be, but that didn't mean he wasn't considering it. Pat said she'd prefer to go home. It was decided that Vic Tremont would drive my jeep while Marty, Pat and myself rode in the police car.

Mrs. Watterson came down to tell us good-bye. Pat kissed her impulsively and Mrs. Watterson patted her on the shoulder and said she was a nice girl and that she shouldn't worry about anything. The Sheriff and his deputy shook hands all 'round, and invited us to drop in any ol' time we happened to be in that neck of the woods. I made up my mind that if I ever again got mixed up in a flock of murders, I'd try to set it for San Bernardino County.

Marty stopped long enough to buy gas, have his oil and tires checked and lay in a half dozen packages of cigarettes. While he was doing that, I sat in the front seat of the police sedan with Pat. I held her hand. I said, "You've been pretty splendid, darling."

She said, "Don't do that, Steve."

"Don't do what?"

"Call me darling. I could go to pieces on much less."

"You poor kid." It sounded silly, even when I said it, but it fitted, just the same. "Some day I'll make it all up to you."

She kissed my cheek. It was a kiss light as a butterfly's wing, but it made me tingle all over. I had just started to do something about it when a voice broke in: Marty Walsh's voice. It came from right close, and it was friendly. It said, "Like that, huh?"

He climbed under the wheel and we started west. Pat was in the middle. The car wasn't too new, nor the seat too wide, which made it snug and cozy. We passed beyond the city limits and rolled into the vineyard area. Marty Walsh said, "Well . . . ?" and let it hang there, waiting for one of us to pick it.

Pat did. She said, "I'd like to do some talking, Lieutenant . . ."

"Couldn't you change that to 'Marty'? After all, we're old friends." He said it pleasantly, not as though he was needling her.

I couldn't classify Marty's attitude. Until recently I'd never had any contact with professional policemen. I had shared the public misconception that they are a dull lot. Now everything was changed. I saw them as shrewd and tenacious and too doggone efficient for comfort.

Marty Walsh, for instance. Right now. For my money, he was being too cordial, too friendly. He was too obviously unconcerned about the part either or both of us might have played in the death of Rex Kingsley. He was a man of many attitudes, many moods, many approaches. I was never sure whether he was being himself or being a policeman. There had been times when he had questioned us with almost brutal frankness. Now he was sugar-coating everything. I liked him better this way—but he worried me.

Pat said, "I can talk now, Marty. I was going to tell Steve while we were waiting up yonder in the mountains. But I couldn't see any sense going over it twice." She was staring at the broad ribbon of road which stretched out ahead of us. "I can clear up one part of this case."

"Which part?" Walsh's voice was unemotional, but I detected a note of eagerness in it.

"The beginning," stated Pat quietly. "I can tell it now because my husband is dead. Rex killed Jeff Nulty."

For a few seconds silence hung heavy in the car. Then Marty asked, "You sure of that, Mrs. Kingsley?"

"Yes."

"What makes you so sure?"

"He told me."

More silence. I could feel Marty thinking. His profile didn't show whether he was surprised. I don't know what mine showed.

Marty tried to make it more specific. He said, "Are you telling me that your husband confessed to you that he killed Jeff Nulty?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"The day before I went on the stand to testify for Steve."

"Go ahead, please."

I was sorry for Pat. She wasn't finding it easy. But she kept going. "Rex and I haven't hit it off for a long time, Marty. I stuck with him because there had once been affection, because I had perhaps too much pride . . . and maybe also because I was stubborn. I hadn't made out too well, I had married Rex against the advice of my father and friends . . . and I was determined to make the best of what seemed like an exceedingly bad bargain.

"We didn't quarrel much. Maybe you'll understand if I say he nagged me. Ever since I caused his injury in that accident—so he couldn't dance any more . . ."

"It wasn't your fault," I broke in harshly.

"I was driving. I was careless. The only thing in the world that meant anything to Rex was his dancing. When he learned that he could never dance again, I think he hated me. He didn't say so, but he was bitter. And, no matter how I felt about him, I was terribly sorry for him. Sometimes pity can be a stronger emotion than love."

Marty said, "Yeh. It sure can, Mrs. Kingsley."

"From the day I heard about Jeff Nulty being killed, I had a suspicion that Rex had done it. I didn't believe it was Steve . . ."

"It couldn't of been," said Walsh. "Wasn't you with him in his apartment when it happened?"

I tried to stop Pat, but she ignored me. She said calmly, "No, Marty, I wasn't. You knew all the time I was lying."

"Uh-huh. Especially after I met you. You ain't the type you advertised you was."

It was a backhanded, rather elephantine, compliment. But it was well-meant. Walsh went on, "Then of course it could of been Blake."

"I was sure not. Rex hated Nulty. I think they were both fascinated by Conchita. What was fully as important was that Rex loathed being anybody's assistant, especially someone like Nulty who didn't know the first thing about running a night club."

"Seems to me he did a pretty good job."

"Rex was doing that. He knew it, and Nulty knew it. They never quarreled because Rex didn't want to be kicked

out. But he'd get sore at Nulty and tell me about it. After a while, his hatred got pretty deep. Holding it in all the time, I suppose that can cause a sort of . . . well, a sort of emotional corrosion."

"Yeh . . ." Marty was just stringing along. "Kinda eats on you inside."

"Rex was present at Steve's cocktail party. He saw Nulty's brutal attack and heard Steve's threat. That night, before I heard anything about Jeff having been killed, I knew something was wrong. Rex had a bad case of the jitters. When I learned what had happened, I figured that Rex had done it."

"Reaching kinda far, wasn't it, Mrs. Kingsley?"

"No. I knew Rex pretty well. I didn't know how he had gotten the gun . . ."

"That'd be easy," Walsh volunteered. "Anybody could get a key to a lock like was on Blake's door at the Collins."

"Rex took too much interest in Steve's trial. He did more than brood over it: he seemed worried. He was too anxious to see Steve convicted. That seemed to check with what I already suspected. Then the day before the trial ended, I told him I knew he had killed Nulty. At first he was panicky, then he got mad. We quarreled bitterly. Finally he admitted that he had killed Nulty. He told me to go to the cops with it. He said I had wrecked his life and ruined his career: now I could top it off by sending him to the gas chamber.

"I knew I couldn't ever do that." Her voice had become low and tight and almost pleading. "I don't even expect you to understand how I felt, Marty. Or you either, Steve. But you can't be married to a man, you can't have been in love with him once, you can't feel responsible for his misery . . . and say the words that will cost his life.

"Nulty was dead. There was nothing I could do about that. Right or wrong, I never seriously considered telling the police that Rex had killed Jeff Nulty. But I wasn't going to see an innocent man convicted, either.

"I told Rex what I intended to do. He seemed relieved, rather than otherwise. I think if he'd believed that I intended to betray him, he would have killed me."

"So you were scared of him?"

"I suppose so. I don't know how frightened I was. Or how much courage I might have had. I cooked up the story I told on the stand. I went to Mr. Garland and volunteered to testify. He didn't know I was perjuring myself."

"You sure went whole hog."

"I had to. The jury *had* to believe me. The only way I could be sure they would was to show that I was sacrificing something. They'd believe I wouldn't ever do that unless it was true. I'm not defending myself, Marty. I'm not saying how you, or anyone else, would have felt or what you would have done. I'm only explaining how I felt and what I did. I committed perjury—"

"We can skip that for a while. Alongside of murder, it ain't important. Tell me this, Mrs. Kingsley—why did your husband hide the murder gun in the closet in Rusty Mason's office?"

"I don't know. I can only guess that it was because he didn't care where suspicion fell so long as it wasn't on him."

"Were there any shenanigans between Miss Mason and Jeff Nulty?"

"I don't know. But there could have been. Not only because of what we know now about their previous association, but also because Rex insisted that Nulty was a tomcat."

Walsh nodded. "Could be, of course. And that Rusty—she's the luscious type." He passed cigarettes around and slowed down to light his and hold the match for Pat. He said, "You sure loused us up good, Mrs. Kingsley. You sure did."

"You believe me now?"

"Why not? Your boy friend here is safe on the Nulty deal. Your husband is dead. Yeh, I believe you. Your story is just screwy enough to be true. And it sounds reasonable to me that you'd prefer to sacrifice your own reputation than to see an innocent man convicted. Provided Blake *was* innocent."

Walsh turned his attention to me. "What do you think of the setup, Steve?"

I said, "I believe Pat. I understand her motives. When a person confesses that he murdered another man, you've got to believe him. Everything she did was based on that belief.

It was aggravated by her odd relationship to her husband." I drew a deep breath. "But I still don't think Rex Kingsley killed Jeff Nulty."

"Well, I'll be a sonovagun!" The car slowed down to a meager twenty. "Stevie-boy, I didn't know you had it in you."

"What?"

"To think so clear and talk so straight."

"I talked straight on the witness stand."

"Yeh. What you said then didn't sound right smart to me. This sounds even less smart."

"Why?"

"Because if Kingsley didn't kill Nulty, somebody else did. And Conchita and Connolly have been murdered since then. You haven't been tried for those killings. And nobody has even started asking you a lot of questions about whether you knocked Kingsley off."

Pat said sharply, "But he didn't. I was with him . . ."

"Sure. I know. The one thing you two got between you is alibis. Now mind you, I ain't accusing Steve. Maybe I don't even think he did any of these murders. But I agree with him that Kingsley didn't kill Nulty, and I'll go one step further. I'll say whoever killed that guy also killed Conchita and Pete Connolly."

I said, "You haven't gone far enough, Marty. Who killed Kingsley—and why?"

"Meaning if you didn't?"

"Yes."

"I'll be damned if I know. You got any ideas, Steve?"

I said I hadn't. Marty said, "I'm not jumping at any conclusions this time. The only thing I know for sure is that our prime suspect is out of the picture. Looks like I got to start all over, right from the beginning. Some of the trail will be pretty cold by now. And the most thing I can't figure is motive."

"If a person commits one murder . . ."

"You're right as two rabbits, Steve." Marty took one hand off the wheel and waved it generously. "Kill one, and it's easy to go on from there. Somebody knows too much, somebody finds out something. You gotta protect yourself—that's

the way the killer figures. He dopes it out that they can't execute him but once."

The lieutenant had gotten himself all wound up. He kept right on going. "Take you, for instance, Stevie. I could think of plenty of motive if I wanted to. Like for instance, you could have killed Nulty. You maybe hid the gun in Rusty Mason's office. It might never be found, but if it was, it could point to the girl. Conchita found that gun. She knew it was yours. You couldn't tell whether she'd spill or whether she'd keep the info to herself. It all depended on what she wanted. Connolly had a quarrel with you. Maybe on account of him being in love with Rusty and the gun being in her office, he might have done some sharp thinking and hit on something. So you shoot him. By that time you've fallen for Mrs. Kingsley. You learn where Rex is hiding, drive up there and kill him—taking your alibi along. Like it?"

I said, "Not very much."

"I could do a lot of figuring that wouldn't make Mrs. Kingsley so hard to convict, either. First, perjury. Why? Not because she thought her husband was guilty, but because she knew *she* was. Conchita and Connolly rubbed out to save the guy she had saved once before and then fallen in love with. The killing of her husband could fit right in. Maybe the proof he wanted to give you, Stevie, was about Mrs. Kingsley being the bad girl." His voice took on a mournful note. "I bet you don't like that, either."

"I don't. Being logical doesn't make it true. How about Rusty Mason?"

"Now you got something. Criminal tie-up with Nulty. She keeps the gun because it's yours. She could figure that it would point the finger straighter at you. Conchita, I don't get, but maybe I could toss up a good motive even there if I put my mind to it. Connolly and she had quarreled. He had received the clippings, and could have told her off. Not so bad, huh?"

"How did she know where to find Kingsley?"

"You ask the damndest questions. So I'll ask a few, myself. Questions I got to find the answer to sooner or later." He was talking impersonally, but his police brain was clicking merrily. "I think Kingsley hired the two hoods who

beat you up. If so, why? If not, who did? If neither you or Mrs. Kingsley killed Rex—how did whoever killed him know where to find him? If Rusty Mason killed Nulty, why did she keep the gun? I know I've given a couple of reasons, but they don't make a lot of sense, even to me. How much did Mario like Conchita and how much did he hate Nulty? Who would have any motive for killing Nulty except you and Rusty and Kingsley . . . and I don't think Kingsley's motive, the job business, is strong enough. Who is this guy Floyd Andrews? What's his real interest? Where does he fit into Nulty's life or Connolly's or Conchita's or Kingsley's? And one more thing, Steve . . . maybe you haven't thought of it . . . your pal Brian Garland has always been around when things were happening."

I said, "That's the first really ridiculous idea you've had."

"I guess so." He touched the accelerator and the car speeded up. "We're all three tuckered out. Tough night. But what I'm thinking is this: I'm gonna appreciate all the help I can get from here in. If you two are clean, you'd ought to be willing to help."

Pat and I said we'd be glad to.

"That's swell," Marty said. "Simply swell. Except that if I'm being kidded, why two mighty nice people—both of whom are right here in this car with me—those two nice people *could* wind up in San Quentin."

28

It was seven o'clock when we reached the Casa Linda. Marty said, "Good-bye for now," and rolled off.

Pat and I crossed the lobby to the elevator, trying to look as though this was the most natural thing in the world. We pressed the 7 button and started moving, smooth as silk.

She invited me in. Perhaps she was thinking of Rex, back there in San Bernardino. Perhaps she was thinking of me. Even at this hour of the morning, the apartment was lovely: it was everything an expensive apartment should be. It was also homey-looking. I sat on the couch and beckoned to her. She understood what I meant. As soon as she seated herself, I put my arm around her.

I said, "I know this isn't the time or the place to make love to you, but I'm doing it, anyway. Maybe it's because I want to."

I kissed her. Her arms went around my neck, and she clung tight. There didn't seem to be anything wrong with the picture, and there was a great deal that was right with it.

She hadn't been in love with Rex. Not for a long time. Loyal, yes; but not in love. She had experienced an emotion which was more shock than grief. She had been pushed around. She needed comforting. I did what I could to comfort her. The fact that there was lots of daylight outside seemed to make it quite respectable.

I'd never been in love before. Not really in love. Not the kind of in-love that makes you oversentimental and gooey. I wanted to turn myself inside out so she could see . . . and could know me better.

It was good to be together this way. I'd wanted it so much and had fought against it so hard. I had begun by being suspicious of her. Even yet I couldn't have sworn that she was in the clear. But that didn't matter any more. Not too much, anyway.

We didn't talk much, but what we did say had nothing to do with what we'd just been through. We probably sounded like a couple of high school kids caught in the riptide of a first love. Each affectionate cliché assumed the magnitude of a profound utterance. I was learning a lot of things about being in love, and I liked them all.

It had to end. And it did—at eight o'clock. We were both exhausted. I kissed her, once for good night and once for good morning. I suggested that she get some rest and promised to do the same thing. We agreed to phone each other as soon as we'd grabbed some sleep, or had discovered that we couldn't. I closed her door and stepped into the hall.

A man was leaning against the wall, near the elevator. He didn't seem surprised to see me walk out of Pat Kingsley's room at an hour when other people were eating breakfast. He didn't look shocked.

It was Floyd Andrews. I hoped he wouldn't crack wise. I needn't have worried. He stopped in front of my door and waited for me to get there. He said cheerfully, "Good morning, Blake."

I said good morning. I wondered what he was doing there at this hour, and how long he'd been playing watch dog in the hall. He said, "I'd like to talk. May I go in with you?"

I shook my head. "Sorry, Andrews. Not having some company this morning, please."

"It's about Rex Kingsley's murder," he said quietly.

This lad could say the damndest things. I said, "What do you know about that?"

"Not much. Just what's in the morning papers under a San Bernardino date line."

"Whatever you've got to say, it'll keep." I didn't want to talk to him. I didn't want to discuss murder any more. I was sick and tired of it. All I wanted was to be let alone, so I could concentrate on adding up how much I was in love. I said, "You been up all night, Andrews?"

"Nope. Had a good sleep. But I can't prove it."

No use wasting time on this guy. He was primed for it. I wasn't. He'd probably figured out every answer. It would take a lad who was much smarter than I—and much more wide awake—to learn anything worth knowing. I said, "If you want to talk about Rex Kingsley, call Lieutenant Walsh."

He said, "Look, Steve—there are things I've got to know . . ."

"I'll tell you only two," I said. "Pat Kingsley had nothing to do with his death. Neither did I."

I unlocked my door. The last thing I saw before I closed it was Floyd Andrews looking at me reproachfully. Well, I felt reproachful, too. He had gummed up some of my new exaltation. I got my clothes off, opened a window and shoved myself under the blankets. The next thing I knew it was two o'clock. I peeked outside my door, but the hallway was

empty. Nobody there. Not even Floyd Andrews. The lad was slipping.

The next several days combined happiness, discomfort and downright misery. The happiness came from Pat. She did not pretend a grief which she did not feel. When we were alone—which was as often as I could wangle it—she was marvelous. We didn't question each other. The rest of the world was attending to that: detectives, newspapermen, and private citizens who said they were friends and just wanted to help.

There was a trip to San Bernardino for the inquest. There was a funeral which I didn't attend. There was a long conference with my boss who was quite sympathetic, but who conveyed the impression that he thought I might possibly be overdoing this homicide thing. He told me not to worry about anything and to call on him for whatever I might need. He didn't hint that I had outlived my usefulness as a research engineer. He didn't ask any embarrassing questions, which made him a minority of one.

I was alone a great part of the time. I did a lot of thinking. I was back at the beginning of things. My bumper crop of theories had to be discarded, now that Rex Kingsley was dead. What I wanted to know was who had killed him, and why. Not much to ask. Just something which was puzzling the entire Los Angeles police department.

I had been trained in the science of precise thinking. I had a mathematical mind. I could reduce everything to equations. I started doing it now.

I listed everything I knew about the case. I started at the beginning and worked right through to the night on Cajon Pass when I had helped to find Rex Kingsley's body. I felt certain that whoever had killed Rex had also killed Jeff Nulty, Conchita Montero and Pete Connolly. Whoever it was had a lot of desperate courage.

I had a hunch that the answer was right there, if only I could see it. Little by little I remembered every detail, every gesture, every scrap of conversation. I was looking for the thing which fitted all the murders. I was looking for the keystone. I was looking for the unknown factor, the X of my equation.

It was like working at the plant, except that it was more important. In research work, you acquire infinite patience. You learn that it is okay to be wrong a thousand times if only you're right once. You take your failures in stride and keep reaching out for the element which has eluded you.

I recalled each happening, each spoken word, and gave it a going-over. Patience: that might pay off. Limitless patience. Look at everything, evaluate everything, probe for hidden meanings in casual words. Remember, remember, remember! You're a scientist, Blake: this is what you've been trained to do. This is what you do so well that the government kept you out of uniform because they figured you could do more with your brain than with your body.

You've got to make it, Steve. It's there, if you can only see it. When you're working at the plant, you're never sure. You're reaching for something which might not exist. But this thing *does* exist. You're sure that someone you know committed these murders. You've been with these people, you've watched them, listened to them. All you need is a hint. Is your unknown factor a man or a woman? What was the basic motive? What predates Jeff Nulty's death? Who wanted to kill that stocky ex-convict and saw the golden opportunity when you quarreled with him and threatened to kill him? Who worked fast then, getting into your apartment, stealing your gun and setting you up as the perfect patsy?

It was tough going. I tried to maintain a clinical attitude. With Pat Kingsley in the background—and a lot closer than that very frequently—it wasn't easy. I wondered whether the X factor might center in her, whether the fact that I was in love with her might not be blinding me to the obvious. I hated the thought, but I went right ahead. I might not succeed, but it wouldn't be for lack of trying.

Facts! They're stark and unyielding when you get them on paper. You can put them down—big and small—and study each one. A sort of qualitative analysis. You've got more than a barrel of apples. You've got a carload of them, and you're looking for the one that's rotten, except that its rottenness might show only by a tiny spot, and you must see that spot and recognize it.

And then, after six days and nights of work: almost a week during which I didn't go near the plant, didn't think about aerodynamics, an idea hit. Just the faintest, most elusive, most intangible of thoughts. A sentence casually spoken, an idea that wasn't really an idea at all, but merely a hunch.

I felt myself quivering inside. I had felt it before when weeks and months of ceaseless concentration had brought a hunch that promised results. I sat up most of the night thinking about it. I couldn't tie it up tight: there were things to be done, angles to be investigated.

I went downtown to see Brian Garland. He was busy, but I dragged him away from his work. I didn't tell him what I wanted, gave no hint of where I hoped I was headed. He kidded me about being so mysterious. He wanted to know why I wasn't content to let the police do police work.

He went with me to the Hall of Records, where he knew his way around and I didn't. I asked him about a lawyer named George Lamar Grandin, and Brian laughed that off. Grandin had been dead since the summer of 1944. We stuck around the Hall of Records for a long time. We spent the afternoon together. Brian Garland was beginning to look worried. He was also more than slightly fed up with me. He accused me of having become a monomaniac. He asked why the hell I wasn't content to leave well enough alone. He asked me all sorts of questions, but I didn't bother to answer any of them.

Brian went with me to the home of a friend of his. This friend lived out in Sherman Oaks. He was a hobbyist and a rich one. His hobby was scale model electric trains. He was a nut about them. I got him talking about his hobby, and about electrical gadgets in general. I stuck around a long time while this man talked and ran his little trains for us and explained remote control and automatic coupling. When we left there Garland was supremely disgusted. "It's got you," he said. "Escape mechanism. You've been flirting with tragedy so long, you've suddenly got to play with toys yet."

I took my theories home with me. Pat called up and wanted to know where I'd been keeping myself. I told her

I was busy. I told her I loved her, but that I needed to be by myself for a while longer. I got into a lounging robe and sat at my desk. Papers spread all over it, all the notes I'd been making for a week. All the hopes, all the disappointments.

My idea was there. Now I was merely giving it the test. Was the theory sound? Was it certain? By two in the morning I decided that I wasn't sure, that perhaps I'd never be sure. Certainly not unless Lieutenant Marty Walsh would play ball with me.

At nine o'clock I was in room 42, City Hall. Homicide Division. I stuck my neck in, and walked in after it. Marty was there. I said I wanted to talk to him alone. He took me into room 41, which was a bare space containing a table, a few chairs and some blank walls. He said, "This room is bugged, but nobody's listening." I looked blanker than usual and he explained that the room was wired.

Marty was a wonderful listener. That's the basic tenet of a good cop's credo . . . as long as the sucker will talk, let him do it. Eventually I finished talking. He said, "Steve, you're as nutty as a fruitcake. But maybe you got something. Just maybe."

"Will you play along, Marty?"

"Sure. What can I lose? On just what you've told me, we couldn't make it stick. This way, the quarry might be flushed."

"When?" I asked.

"Saturday night? That ought to be good. I'll get Bert Lane to help out." His eyes held an eager hopeful gleam. "This may not work," he said, "but we'll have a lot of fun trying it."

I got up. I said, "It'll work, Marty. It's got to."

He walked down the corridor with me. Just before we said good-bye, he asked one question: asked it with an earnestness which bothered me. He said, "You won't even tell Mrs. Kingsley about this?"

"I won't even tell her," I promised. And as I walked away from him, I commenced to worry about why he had been so insistent.

29

I've never acted in a play. I've never produced one. But I've read about opening-night jitters, and that was what I was feeling now.

This little scheme of mine was either going to work or it wasn't. If it did, we'd know before morning just who killed Jeff Nulty and the others. We'd know why. But if the scheme didn't work, I'd be up the creek without a paddle. I might even be in jail.

Marty was playing it my way, but he wasn't sold 100 per cent. He figured my idea was solid enough to try. He probably figured also that I might simply be playing cute. It was complimentary in a reverse-English sort of way, but not calculated to fill me with good cheer and optimism.

His friendly attitude driving back from San Bernardino hadn't fooled me for little green apples. Marty Walsh was a smart cop. He had gotten to be a lieutenant by being smart, he was high up on the captains' list because he was smart. He was aces in the Homicide Division because he was smart. He had started this thing by building a good case against me and then having it blow up on the strength of what he now knew was perjured testimony. If things went wrong, I'd be behind the eight ball and still visible to the naked eye. What bothered me almost as much was that they'd also slough Pat Kingsley on that perjury business.

There was a lot dependent on what was about to happen. Much too much for comfort.

I kept in touch with Marty Saturday afternoon and during the early part of the evening. You'd have thought we were fraternity brothers, we were that cordial. It was Steve and Marty and "Hiya, keed?" and jolly little references to

a bright and sunny tomorrow. But neither of us was fooled for one little instant. We knew this was the pay-off or else.

We wanted certain folks to be at the Casa Linda that night. I assured Marty we could rely on Floyd Andrews. That lad had stuck to me closer than a lonely flea to a long-haired dog. If I spent Saturday night at the club, so would Floyd Andrews. You could bet that one straight across the board.

Mario would be there. It was his job: he'd have to be there. Marty had suggested checking on Vince Mabry, the dapper, temperamental little orchestra leader. That didn't make much sense to me, but Marty argued that nothing else made sense, either, so I checked on Vince and discovered—not at all to my own astonishment—that he'd be right up there on the platform waving his stick at the other musicians.

I had a little trouble with Pat. She said she wanted to be with me, but why couldn't we make it somewhere else. The atmosphere of the Club Casa Linda wasn't calculated to fill her with joy. I told her I had reasons, but didn't tell her what the reasons were. I played it strong. I played it Marty's way. I promised that if she'd spend the evening down there with me, I'd never invite her to the Casa Linda again.

Even then she showed no enthusiasm. Sitting through a show there: a show which wasn't emceed by Rex Kingsley and in which Conchita wouldn't dance or sing . . . that wasn't going to be easy. But she finally gave in. She was so reluctant that I experienced a few moments of fright. I had made valiant promises to run this thing down if I could. I had my own ideas, but that didn't mean they were right. Things could conceivably work out badly for Pat.

I invited Brian Garland to be my guest. I told him we'd be a party of three: Pat, himself and me. I said I'd furnish him with all the Scotch he wanted, and he assured me that that was an impossibility, but that if I'd promise him all he could consume, he'd be there. Any time after ten o'clock.

Rusty Mason presented a problem that I couldn't solve. I was no longer on her eligible list. I didn't dare approach her. But she had to be among those present. I called Marty,

and he gave it some thought. Finally he said, "I got an idea. Get Wade Ramsay to bring her."

"How'll I do that?"

"You're a friend of his. Tell him something's cooking and that we want Rusty downstairs. He's her boss. He can work it."

I said I'd try. I rode up to the penthouse, and told Ramsay what Lieutenant Walsh wanted. That was late afternoon. He said he didn't see much sense to it, but he'd do his best. He said he was sick and tired of having his club managers murdered, and if Walsh thought he could crack the case, he'd string along. He said, "But why is he so anxious to get Rusty down there? Does he think she's the one?"

I said, "I don't know what he thinks. And I certainly don't put too much stock in what he says."

Ramsay called Rusty Mason while I was still there. He talked in a solicitous, fatherly manner. He said she's been doing herself lots of no good recently—which meant since the night Pete Connolly was killed. He said he was prescribing a remedy and intended to supervise the first dose. He insisted that she let him pick her up, take her to dinner somewhere and then move back to the Club Casa Linda for the last show. From his end of the conversation, I figured she said no, but after a while she gave in.

I stuck around awhile, smoked a couple of Ramsay's cigarettes, and then checked out. I went downstairs, dolled myself up for whatever was coming, and then gave Pat a buzz. Wade Ramsay's approach to Rusty had given me an idea. I invited Pat for dinner: just the two of us.

We ate way downtown at a place where the food was superlative. We used up a lot of time getting there, getting a table, getting back. The first show had just ended when we walked into the Casa Linda and seated ourselves at the table which Mario had reserved for me. Brian Garland was at the bar, getting a head start on his week-end inebriation. He never actually got drunk, and he never missed it too far. He joined us at the table. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes bright, his manner just a little louder than might have been correct for a brilliant young attorney.

Marty Walsh was nowhere around. He wasn't supposed

to be. I knew where Marty was, and when he was supposed to enter the scene.

But Lieutenant Bert Lane of the Hollywood Detective Bureau was very much in evidence. He was the key man of this trap which I had built and Marty had baited. Lane was the come-on. On the excellence of Lieutenant Lane's performance the success or failure of the whole plan depended.

If I hadn't known the guy was putting on an act, I wouldn't have believed it. Even knowing it, I had moments of doubt. If he was acting, then the stage had lost one of its best bets. He was giving a performance of which the folks back in Racine would have been proud.

Lane was supposed to pretend to be drunk. He was supposed to let himself become a trifle boisterous, very friendly and much too talkative. Especially too talkative. It was his job to make certain persons believe that he was spilling a lot of information which shouldn't be told. Before we'd settled ourselves solidly and given our order, I saw that Lane was on the ball. So much on the ball that I was afraid he'd either overplayed his hand or underestimated his capacity. You couldn't miss his long, lanky figure. He was wearing a neat gray suit, a blue shirt and a blue tie. His sparse hair was just enough disarranged to give a who-the-hell-cares impression.

When I first saw him, he was sitting with Floyd Andrews at a corner table. That part of his job was easy. Lane had been in on this thing almost from the beginning. All the murder suspects knew him: they'd never think it was odd that he'd seek them out and bore them with too much conversation.

He spotted us and waved gaily. He looked as though he was having himself a hell of a time. He got up and moved toward where we three were sitting. He didn't weave. He didn't overdo anything. On the way he encountered Mario. Lane's sharp-featured face broke into a grin of delight. He clapped the little maitre D. on the shoulder and started talking. Mario looked interested. Lane shook his head a couple of times—coyly—as though he really didn't want to tell. Then he bent over and whispered something. Mario looked startled. Lane nodded emphatically, Mario gave an

expressive Spanish shrug. They talked some more. Then Lane slapped him on the back again and moved off. Mario stood watching him; a worried, speculative light in his eyes.

Now the elongated, red-faced detective lieutenant from Hollywood was at our table. He said, "Don't get up, folks —don't think of it. I'll just siddown in passing."

He lowered himself into a chair which he snitched from the next table. He did it with the meticulous care of a person who isn't quite certain whether or not he can stand a few more, but is willing to try.

He exuded friendliness. The grin he gave us was so foolish that I wondered whether Marty Walsh hadn't picked the wrong actor. I invited him to drink with us. He said, "Been drinkin' with everybody. Everybody wonderful to me. Nice people here. They treat cops swell."

"What'll you have, Lieutenant?"

"Nothing." He shook his head in solemn reproof. "Regulations say can't drink while on duty. I'm on duty." He stopped and gave it a mental going-over. "Yep! I'm on duty. Only I ain't. I'm a watch dog, but what I'm watching is asleep. So I don't have to watch too hard. Get it?"

We said we got it, but we didn't. At least Pat Kingsley and Brian Garland looked bewildered.

"I'm on duty, but got no duty to do. So I can drink. Sherry."

"What?" That was Brian, shocked and unbelieving.

"I'm a wino." Lane's smile was fatuous. "Lots of winos around L.A. Y'oughta get to be one some day, Garland. Wunnerful feeling."

A dancing couple, oblivious to everything except their enjoyment of the dance, bumped into our table. Pat said, "Oh!" Brian reached out quickly to keep her drink from spilling, and the masculine member of the couple stopped to apologize. In the brief moment of distraction, Lieutenant Lane looked me straight in the eye and gave me a barely perceptible wink. That made me feel better. So he wasn't out on his feet; so it really was an act that hadn't been made too realistic. The guy was superb.

The sherry was brought. Bert raised his glass. He said, "Here's to crime. Here's to all the free drinks it gets me."

Brian Garland leaned across the table. He said, "What was that about being on duty, Lieutenant?"

Lane shook his head. "Top secret," he stated. "Very 'ficial."

"Aw! don't be that way." Garland was insistent: too insistent, I thought. "What's up?"

Lane beamed at us. "All friends, huh?"

"Yes. We're buddies."

"Won't tell secrets?"

Brian promised. Lane lowered his voice so it wouldn't carry beyond the table. "Tomorrow morning," he said impressively: "tomorrow morning we crack this case wide open. Comes the dawn, we identify the person who did all those killings." He looked grieved. "Very naughty person," he finished.

Pat said sharply, "How can you be sure, Lieutenant?"

"Witness," whispered Lane. He pointed to his eye. "Eye-witness."

"You mean . . . ?" That was Garland again.

"We've got a man who saw the killing of Rex Kingsley. Saw it with his own eyes. Saw the killer drive away. Tomorrow morning he identifies positively. Boom! Like that! Case all closed. Then I go back to detecting who stole somebody's hubcaps."

"If you've got an eye-witness," asked Pat. "Why do you wait until morning?"

"Old man," explained Bert Lane. "Very old man. Somebody's grandfather, at least. Maybe great-grandfather. Maybe a real ancestor. Awful old. He drove all the way down from Victorville this afternoon. Doin' his duty as a citizen. Fine ol' ancestor. Only he's sick. He's real sick. So sick when he got here, he couldn't identify anybody. Wasn't even sure who he was. All in. Doctor said sort of temporary physical corrapse. But in the morning . . ." he waggled a finger. "In the morning, he'll be fine. Then he'll show us who did it."

Garland said, "Where is he?"

"Here! Right here in the Casa Linda. You know the apartment on the mezzanine where Jeff Nulty was killed. Tha's where he is. The Doc gave him a shot. Big shot. Out

like a light. Gi'm strength for his ordeal tomorrow. Identifyin' is a tough job. But until then, he doesn't know anything." He reached for his sherry. "I'm guarding him."

"You're *what?*"

"Guarding him. Only he's sleeping, so why should I stay in there with an old dope who ain't got any more sense than to be an ancestor? He ain't gonna wake up tonight. Not a chance." His voice got warmly confidential. "But don't you tell this man. Don't you tell him."

"Don't tell him what?"

"That he's sleeping right in the apartment where Jeff Nulty got murdered. You mustn't ever tell him that. Promise?"

We promised.

"Cross your hearts?"

We crossed our hearts. Then Lane got up. He said he had to see all his old friends. He didn't want to disappoint anybody. He said he'd see us later. He disappeared in the crowd. I wanted to applaud. If he was giving each of the suspects as good a performance as he'd given us, things stood a better-than-even chance of jelling.

I didn't see him again until the last show got under way. Then, during the roller-skating act, I saw him at the table with Wade Ramsay and Rusty Mason. He was having a glass of sherry. He was waving his long arms and talking earnestly and confidentially, the same foolish grin on his cheerful Wisconsin countenance. Rusty was taking it all in. Every time he'd stop talking, she'd start. Questions. You could tell it by the way she leaned forward, by the tension which showed in her splendid body.

The show ended at one-thirty. The guests started paying their checks and moving toward the exit. I saw Lieutenant Lane talking to Mario. The little man seemed worried. He put Lane's arm around his shoulders and started across the floor with him.

The detective was having difficulty. He got almost to the middle of the deserted dance floor. His eyes looked glassy, his face blank. He removed his arm from Mario's shoulders, drew himself up to a dignified six feet, swayed alarmingly, spun . . . and fell flat on his face.

This was the topper: the perfect curtain. The fall was sickeningly realistic.

Lieutenant Lane lay on the polished dance floor, stiff as a poker.

A couple of women said "Oh!" in shocked voices. One blonde cutie who had a pretty, doll-like face, a gorgeous figure, an elderly escort and a mess of sables said, "How incredibly disgusting! Leave us get out of here."

Mario didn't seem to know what to do. He hovered over the prostrate figure of the detective, wringing his hands. Brian Garland and I went over to see what we could do. Pat came along and stood behind us. I saw Floyd Andrews watching from just inside the entrance to the bar.

Brian Garland motioned toward the office that had once been used by Rex Kingsley and before that by Jeff Nulty. He said, "Isn't there a couch in there?" and Mario said Yes.

"Why don't we drag him in? He won't wake up till morning."

It was an excellent suggestion. I was supposed to have made it, but Brian had beaten me to it. I walked over to where Ramsay was sitting with Rusty. I paid no attention to her, and she returned the compliment. I asked Wade whether we could put the Lieutenant in the corner office until he slept it off. Ramsay said we could.

It still wasn't an easy job. We tossed Lane on the couch, removed his coat and shoes, and loosened his collar. Mario snapped off the lights and we all went out.

The club was virtually empty. Bus boys were cleaning up, and workers were starting to pile tables and chairs in preparation for the onslaughts of the cleaning women. Rusty Mason, Wade Ramsay and Floyd Andrews had disappeared. Vince Mabry and his boys had long since left the bandstand. Brian Garland said good night, and I took Pat upstairs. I kissed her good night. I did it right in the hall, where anybody who happened along could see. But nobody saw, and so I did it again. She went into her apartment and closed the door. I went into mine and did the same thing.

I doused my face in cold water. I waited perhaps ten minutes. Then I eased out of my apartment, walked to the fire steps and went downstairs. I went out through the ga-

rage. I walked around the corner and said Hello to Marty Walsh, who looked cold but eager.

I gave him a full report. He was the vital, alive homicide cop approaching the pay-off. I told him how wonderful Lane had been. He said he had known it would be that way . . . Lane was one of the best men in the detective bureau.

We waited a half hour out there in the cold. Then Marty produced a couple of master keys. He unlocked the door of the service entrance. We pussyfooted up the dark back stairs to the mezzanine. Another master key let us into Jeff's apartment. We left the door unlocked. There wasn't any witness in the apartment. There never had been.

I was jumpy as a cat. The chips were down. Nothing to do but wait and hope and wonder.

Marty and I sat in the bathroom on a couple of straight chairs which had been brought in earlier for the purpose. I was scared as hell. I couldn't guess what might happen. I was even more afraid that nothing would. I voiced my doubt to Marty. He said, "It should, Steve."

"Why?"

"Suppose you were a murderer . . . and we'll hope for the moment you're not. But if you were, if you had killed four people, what would you be thinking?"

I didn't answer, and he went on. "You'd know that a dumb, drunken cop had spilled his guts. You'd know he'd stay paralyzed for the next half dozen hours. You'd know he was down on the street floor, dead to the world. You'd know that an eye-witness—the one unexpected element in this case—was in the midst of a drugged sleep on the mezzanine, in this apartment. Away from everything and everybody. Unguarded. So if you had killed before, you'd do this one more killing to make yourself really safe. It was your own idea, Steve. Don't go sour on it now."

That was the setup. It was logical thinking. But it still might not work. I fidgeted nervously. Marty's voice came to me through the blackness. He said, "One thing you can bet your pants on, Stevie-boy. If anybody *does* rise to this bait—if anyone comes in here, the case will be closed."

If! A mighty big word. Much too big a word.

We waited an eternity. Silence. Darkness. Marty showed me the illumined dial of his wrist watch. Almost four o'clock. Not so good. I was beginning to fear that my figuring had been faulty.

Then suddenly my body got rigid. I heard something outside, the faintest whisper of footsteps. I felt Marty move. I heard my own heart pounding.

Slowly, with a dreadful, inexorable slowness, the apartment door opened. The hallway was dark. A figure which I felt, rather than saw, moved into the room, closed the door gently.

Then a beam of light from Marty's electric torch flamed across the room and pinned the intruder against the wall. Marty's voice had a cold, metallic sound. He said, "Hold it! Or I'll shoot!"

The intruder stared at us with wide, blinded, terrified eyes.

It was Wade Ramsay.

30

THERE'S a basic principle in police procedure: when you've got a prime suspect on the ropes, start pounding and never let up until he breaks. You take advantage of the fact that he has been emotionally upset, that he isn't thinking fast or clearly. You figure he'll either give himself away or trip himself. It's something every good cop knows.

Marty Walsh was a good cop. He moved toward the door. His flashlight continued to glare into the blinking, frightened eyes of Wade Ramsay. The gun in Marty's right hand was held negligently, but it was there.

Walsh said, "The party's over, Ramsay."

Wade Ramsay, rotund, immaculately dressed, looking more than ever like a prosperous banker, made a futile effort to pull himself together. He said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Like hell you don't. I know that you murdered Jeff Nulty, and why. You followed that up by killing Conchita Montero, Pete Connolly and Rex Kingsley. Too bad they can only execute you once."

Sweat stood out on Ramsay's forehead. Marty went on: coldly, implacably. "And don't kid yourself I can't make this one stick, fella. We had plenty on you before this visit. But you walking in here, figuring to knock off the eye-witness you thought we had . . . that was icing on the cake."

There's a truism about a cornered rat. There's a certainty that if a man knows he's going to die violently, he owes himself any forlorn chance. Ramsay knew Marty wasn't bluffing, he recognized the end of the trail.

I saw his hand move. His right hand. I jumped before the hand reappeared, holding a vicious little .32. I grabbed his wrist with my right hand and slugged him with my left.

He slugged right back. He was stronger than I would have expected, and more agile. He knew how to handle himself. I pressed my body against him. We wrestled around, and he butted me with the top of his head. It hurt.

So that was the way he wanted to play, was it? No Marquis of Queensberry rules here. I gave him the knee and felt his body sag. I dodged a kick that would have been excessively uncomfortable. He stumbled, the gun skidded across the floor and I landed on top of him. I wondered why Marty didn't do anything, but even the fact that he was a spectator was reassuring.

The door opened behind me. I saw a pair of lean powerful hands grab Wade Ramsay's collar. I loosened my grip, and watched Lieutenant Bert Lane haul Ramsay to his feet. He did it with superb efficiency and unsuspected power. Lane grabbed one of Ramsay's wrists and I heard the soft click of a handcuff. He twisted the other arm, and another handcuff made a soft, reassuring sound. Ramsay stood trembling, hands pinioned behind his back.

I started to thank Lane for what he had done, but Marty

Walsh spoke. He said, "That was neat, Stevie. But you spoiled everything."

I said, "Spoiled everything how?"

"Barging in like that. I was all set to plug him." He looked over at Lane. "How you feelin'?" he inquired.

"Foggy," grinned Lane. "That sherry routine almost floored me. Think I'll go back to vodka after this."

Marty said, "How'd you happen to come in at the right time?"

"Ramsay played it cute. He walked into the office where I was supposed to be sleeping it off. He talked to me. He even shook me a little. Wanted to be sure I was out. When he left I knew where he was headed."

The two detective lieutenants closed in on Ramsay. "You telling us, Ramsay," Marty asked, "or do we tell you?"

Wade didn't say anything. He looked sullen and scared.

"Okay," snapped Walsh. "I'll talk, just so you'll know for sure we ain't bluffing. You killed Nulty because he was bleeding you, because he had something you thought you could get your hands on. You killed Conchita because you thought the gun she found would tie you in, and because you didn't know how much Nulty might have told her before he died. Your killing of Connolly had something to do with those clippings about Rusty Mason. I ain't entirely clear on that one. As for Kingsley, you finished him off because he inherited Nulty's racket. What Nulty had, Kingsley also had. He was milking you dry. And you walked in here tonight to make the record perfect. There was, in your mind only one witness; only one person in the world who might crab your deal. The cop who was guarding him was somewhere else, supposedly plastered. Am I right?"

Ramsay bit his lower lip, but didn't say anything. Walsh stepped away and picked up the shiny little gun. "Neat little .32," he commented. "Connolly and Kingsley were each killed with a .32. We'd have been puzzled as hell to find our witness dead in the morning with a .32 slug in him, and the gun lying on the floor. I gotta hunch this is the gun that killed both the others, Ramsay. If it is, you might as well start singing. Ballistics tests will prove that for us within the next hour."

Wade Ramsay stared at the gun, and then at Marty's hard face. You could almost hear him thinking. The gun was the ultimate proof. Ballistics tests were as accurate as fingerprints, and Ramsay knew it.

He said, "I did it. There's no use prolonging the agony."

I had known it must be that way, but his confession still shocked me. This man who had been genial and kindly, who apparently had everything good the world could offer. It was grotesque.

Lane said, "That washes us up, eh, Marty?"

"Just about."

"Pretty neat thinking, kid."

Walsh said, "Hell, I didn't think it out. It was Steve Blake." He grinned at me, the first really friendly smile I'd gotten out of him. He said, "It's your show, mastermind. Tell Brother Lane how you doped it out."

I said, "I was lucky, that's all. I put in a lot of time trying to figure motive. Nobody seemed to have enough, nobody we had thought of seemed to be tied up tight enough with all the victims."

Bert Lane said, "Motive! That's something I can't figure yet."

"When I got back from Cajon Pass," I said, "after Rex Kingsley had been killed, I tried going back to the beginning. I listed everything that had happened, every word I could remember. That's where Wade Ramsay came in, and once I figured him, the rest was sheer logic."

Lane said, "Makes us look like a couple of dopes, doesn't it, Marty?"

"No," I said, "it doesn't. Because the thing that put me on the right track wasn't even said in front of either of you. You didn't have any way of knowing."

Ramsay asked whether he could sit down. They shoved him into a straight chair. He looked awful uncomfortable with his hands behind his back.

"Here's what happened," I said. "We all knew that Wade Ramsay and his father didn't get along any too well. What we didn't know was how rabidly the old man disapproved of everything about his son. In 1943, Ormond Ramsay made

a will containing a few specific bequests and leaving the bulk of his estate to various charities. He was that kind of a man.

"The lawyer who drew that will has been dead for several years. No way of proving anything there. Ormond Ramsay was a paralytic during the last two years of his life. In line with his hobby, which was rehabilitation, he found Jeff Nulty and gave him a job. Nulty evidently was an expert and conscientious nurse.

"The way I figure it, Wade Ramsay was burning. His old man was going to die pretty soon, and Ramsay knew he wouldn't inherit a penny under the will. He knew Nulty was an ex-convict. Perhaps Jeff would remain loyal to his employer as long as the employer lived, but having been a criminal once, he was certainly open to the right approach.

"The will was kept in Ormond Ramsay's apartment: the penthouse where Wade Ramsay lives now. Wade hired Nulty to substitute a forged will for the real one. It must have been a rather simple procedure. The old man died. They found his papers in the safe in his apartment. Everything was in apple-pie order. The will was there, the lawyer who drew it was dead. The signatures of the witnesses who had signed it had also been forged. They weren't even questioned, but if they had been, everything would have seemed okay to them. It's customary to tell the witnesses that you're signing a will, but not at all customary to read it to them.

"There wasn't anything about the will to excite suspicion. A rich man dies. He leaves $10,000 to his housekeeper and $10,000 to his faithful attendant. In this case, Jeff Nulty. The remainder of the estate went to the dead man's one and only child: Wade Ramsay. It was as simple as all that. It would have stayed simple if I hadn't realized that the murder motive had to reach way back."

Ramsay was staring at the floor. He wasn't saying a word. There was nothing he could say.

"Where'd you get the hunch?" asked Lieutenant Lane. "You didn't just pick it out of thin air."

"That's true. It hit me when I was listing everything I could remember. One of the things was that although Or-

mond Ramsay didn't die until June 1946, his will was dated October 6, 1943."

"So what?"

"So this. Jeff Nulty didn't even go to work for Ormond Ramsay until October 10, 1943. That was four days *after* he had supposedly been willed $10,000 for faithful services."

Lane said, "Well, I'll be damned." Then he said, "But if this guy was forging a will, why didn't he make a good job of it? Why didn't he change the date?"

"Too much danger," I suggested. "The witnesses might be questioned. They'd remember when they saw the will signed. They'd remember the approximate date. It was Ramsay's one bad slip, but he probably didn't know it was a slip. He'd gotten so accustomed to Jeff Nulty being with the old man, it must have seemed like forever. It's my guess he never even thought he was taking a chance."

Marty Walsh said, "What I can't figure is why Rex Kingsley confessed to his wife that he had killed Nulty when he hadn't."

He directed his attention to Ramsay. "How do *you* figure that?" he asked.

Ramsay answered in a flat, dead voice. He said, "I don't see any point to holding back now. Nulty had been bleeding me. He kept the real will after he stole it from my father's safe. The day he and Blake had the fight in Blake's apartment, I found Steve's gun. That gave me the idea. I didn't intend to kill Nulty: just to scare him into giving me the will. After I shot him, I hunted for the will, but didn't find it."

Walsh asked keenly, "But Kingsley did?"

"Yes. Evidently hidden among the night club papers in the office. Rex warned me that if the same thing happened to him that had happened to Nulty, they'd find the real will. He said he had hidden it where it couldn't be found as long as he was alive—but that if he died it would be discovered sure. That tied my hands."

Marty said to Lane, "Once Steve got his hunch, he checked the dates at the record bureau, which made Nulty's inheritance look sour. Brian Garland helped him trace the

practice of the dead lawyer who had drawn the original will. It had been divided up among a lot of other law firms. In the files of one of them they found the carbon copy of Ormond Ramsay's real will. It hadn't any legal standing as a will, but it'll be a nice piece of evidence in case this monkey tries to repudiate his confession."

Lane asked, "And you killed Conchita because she had found Steve's gun hidden in the closet in Rusty Mason's office?"

Ramsay said tonelessly, "Not entirely. I thought the missing will might have been hidden where the gun was. I thought Conchita might have it in her bag. She wouldn't tell me what it was all about, so . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Pete Connolly?" asked Marty. "What about him?"

"Pete came to my office Christmas Eve. He was ugly drunk. He was sore because I wouldn't check in with some silly scheme of his to force Rusty to marry him. He told me he had something in his pocket which tied up with the murder of Jeff Nulty. I didn't know anything then about what it was—that it was the clippings connecting Miss Mason and Nulty. I thought it must be the will." He shrugged his shoulders. "The rest you know."

"Where'd you get the gun?"

"It's mine. Registered to me. I've had it for years. I hid it in apartment 11-A. The tenants there are in Europe. It was a safe hiding place. I put it back again after the death of Rex Kingsley."

I said, "That's something I don't yet understand, Wade. Kingsley's part in this whole thing: why he was leading with his chin?"

"Helping me," explained Ramsay. "Deliberately beclouding the issue. He didn't care who was punished for the murders, so long as it wasn't me. He wanted me to be clear so he could blackmail me. I believe he found the clippings when he found the will. He sent the clippings to Connolly just to foul things up some more."

"I see . . ." I was remembering that Kingsley had walked in on the end of my conversation with Ramsay about Pete's love life. I was beginning to see something else, too. "And when you listened in on Kingsley's telephone call to me

from Victorville . . ." I started, but Bert Lane broke in. He wanted to know what that meant.

"Just another little detail that tied Ramsay in," I said. "He's a graduate electrical engineer, which doesn't necessarily mean much, except that he would understand telephone wires. Shortly before the call came in from Rex at Victorville, my phone rang. I picked it up, and heard Mrs. Kingsley talking to someone. Crossed wires, I thought, and let it go at that. The same thing happened a few minutes later. Afterwards, when I started thinking along new lines, it made more sense. I went with Brian to see a friend of his: an electrical expert whose hobby is scale-model trains. I asked him about how a telephone could be rigged, and he explained it to me in detail. I checked the back of the switchboard at the Casa Linda. What Ramsay undoubtedly had done—"

"Jumper wires," broke in Lane. "He had put on the jumpers to connect his phone, Pat Kingsley's phone, and your phone. If one rang, all rang. He could listen in—which is exactly what he did when Kingsley called. That would be how he knew the details of the appointment in Cajon Pass. Right?"

I said I thought he was right. I said I thought a further investigation of the wires behind the switchboard would show that those three, and no others, had been connected with jumper wires and disconnected later. Ramsay didn't even bother to verify the theory. He knew the police could find that out for themselves.

I said, "Look, Wade—I hate this, but I've got to ask it. Kingsley had the real will with him at Cajon Pass, didn't he? Wasn't that the documentary proof he said he had?"

"Yes."

"What was he planning to do?"

"Turn it over to you. He was afraid that as long as I was free he might be killed. But he was wrong. I wouldn't ever have killed him while he had that will."

I said, "That explains why his pockets had been rifled, but no money had been taken . . ." I stopped to light a cigarette and drew the smoke deep into my lungs. "He was an accessory," I said.

"Doesn't mean much in this State," volunteered Marty Walsh. "Accessory after the fact carries just a few years. That's a small enough risk to take for all that he stood to win."

Lane was persistent. He said, "You had to start thinking somewhere, Steve."

"Yes. It doesn't make a lot of sense, where I started. But it was when Pat told Marty and me that Rex had confessed to her."

"Haven't you got that in reverse?"

"No. It struck me then as wrong. I didn't believe a murderer would ever confess if he didn't have to. But he might if he was covering for someone, if he had reasons of his own. And there seemed to be only one person Kingsley *could* be covering for. His boss. Wade Ramsay. At first, the idea sounded absurd. But the more I thought about it, the less absurd it seemed."

Marty spoke to Ramsay. He said, "Did you hire those two hoods to beat up Steve?"

Ramsay shook his head. "That was another of Kingsley's cute ideas. I think he was afraid Blake might discover the truth if he kept at it hard enough. He wanted him scared off." He fidgeted in his chair. With handcuffs on, he couldn't get comfortable. He said, "Listen, I've told you everything. I know I'm sunk. But I'm tired, too. I'm awful tired. Can't we call it a night?"

They took him out of there. They walked down to the club and through the stark, unromantic atmosphere of a spot which had been gay and would be gay again, but which now was nothing more than a huge room, reeking of stale liquor and tobacco. They vanished into the lobby: Lane and Marty Walsh, with the handcuffed figure of Wade Ramsay between them.

* * *

I rode up to the seventh floor. Day was beginning to break. I was staggering with fatigue and nervous as a cat. I rapped on the door of 7-A.

I heard a light switch click. Pat Kingsley opened the door. She had on the same lovely powder-blue negligé which I

had seen once before. It still made her look the way I most wanted her to look.

I went inside the closed door. I drew her down beside me on the couch. I gave her the highlights of what had just finished happening downstairs. I held her tight all the time I was talking.

When I finished, she sat quietly for a long time. Then she said, "I'm glad it wasn't Rex."

I said I was, too. Then she said she had something to tell me. It wasn't important, but maybe I'd like to know.

It was about Floyd Andrews. She said she had just learned —within the past few hours—that he had been employed by her father to learn the truth of what had happened, to estimate the danger she was in, to protect her from anything which might tend to make more of a mess of her life.

I said, "Then he did lie to me. He said he wasn't a detective."

"He wasn't," Pat explained. "Dad was too shrewd to employ a private investigator. You could too easily have found out who and what he was. So could I. So could the police. That would have defeated his purpose.

"Dad told me he had known Andrews for a long time. Before the war he was one of the shrewdest insurance investigators on the west coast. He had been competently trained for any type of investigative work. During the war he was with Army Intelligence, which meant he got additional training, though of a different sort. It wasn't until after the war that he went into the regular insurance business.

"Dad had confidence in him and his ability. He was in a position to ask a favor of Andrews, and he knew the man could be trusted. His job was to learn the score, and to protect me at all costs."

It was clear enough now. So simple and so logical that it hadn't occurred to me before. But Floyd Andrews didn't matter now. Nothing mattered except that Finis had been written. There would be no more murders, no more inquests, no more sensational publicity, no more doubt and uncertainty.

Exhaustion was creeping up on me. The girl in my arms was soft and warm and relaxing.

I said, "Will you marry me, Pat?"

I saw the top of her head move affirmatively and heard a whisper that sounded like "Yes."

"We'll go on a honeymoon," I said. "A lovely honeymoon. And I'll sleep forever."

THE END

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"I'm his MISTRESS"

Everyone in the courtroom stared, shocked and amazed at the beautiful girl in the witness chair who had just tossed a bombshell into the murder trial of Steve Blake.

"His mistress?" The lawyer's voice was hollow.

She nodded. "I've been to his apartment almost every night for the past three months."

"Were you there the night of the murder?"

"I was with Steve until three that morning," she said bluntly. It was the most amazing testimony any court had listened to. But no one was more amazed than Steve Blake — because he'd never laid eyes on the girl before!

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