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by

FREDERICK C. DAVIS

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# ONE

ON THIS dark afternoon in December, dry-throated at cocktail time, I set out across Times Square through a fall of downy snowflakes. A message from my lone assistant, Lucas Speare, had urged me out into the storm. My destination was an unfamiliar doorway on West Forty-sixth Street where Speare was waiting with important news about our latest assignment.

"I've got something, Schy," he had said cryptically, with tension in his voice.

"I hadn't expected it so soon as all this," I had told him.
"The case buzzed in here less than sixty minutes ago."

"I know, but it won't hold still," Speare said.

Neither would Speare, for that matter. He has intellectual ants. He is likely to exert a peculiar effect on any situation. Like a gas flame turned up under it, he is enough to bring it to a brisk boil.

As for me, I hadn't even met my new client so far — a man named George Goodlee. After listening on the phone to a hurried outline of Mr. Goodlee's troubles, I had made an appointment to meet him later in the day. Meanwhile I had sent Speare out to do a little preliminary checking. This he had no doubt done with his usual ease and rapidity but, being Speare, he hadn't stopped there. In his own eager-beaver way he had immediately come up with "something."

"Something hot," he had added.

Mr. Goodlee's embarrassment had excited Speare's interest because it had a curious professional angle. It concerned a competitor of ours, a Broadway-type private detective who was, of all things, missing.

"Don't tell me you've found Bricca," I'd said in alarm.

"Not already. You haven't, have you, Luke?"

"Would that be bad?" Speare asked.

Certainly it would. As Speare should very well know, I am an uncommonly honest private detective. I don't pad my expense accounts excessively, or stretch out my cases to fraudulent lengths. On the other hand there's such a thing as being too smart and efficient for your own good. If Speare was going to rush out and solve a case even before I found out what it was all about, obviously I would never make expenses.

"I charge by the day, Luke, remember? So if you've tracked down Bricca already, let go of him. Lose him again, say for

about a week."

"I haven't found Bricca." Speare's answer had seemed strangely quiet and guarded. "But there's something here you should know about."

"Where are you?"

"In Bricca's office."

In it? The still unseen Mr. Goodlee had told me that Bricca's office had been deserted and locked up tight for days. Speare must have gone beyond his instructions and committed a little well-meant illegal entry.

"Go back downstairs," I said quickly, "and wait there."

"Maybe I'd better wait in the cigar store on the corner," Speare suggested.

This sounded less and less good. "What have you found, Luke?"

"I don't quite trust this phone."

In other words, it might be tapped?

"Better see for yourself."

"Meaning I should hustle over there sooner than possible, of course, and never mind if there's a blizzard blowing?"

"In your shoes, Schy, I think I'd hurry a little," Speare agreed, and he hung up.

Hmmm.

So I had reluctantly left my snug office, still feeling that Speare should have taken it a little slower; he needn't have loaded himself with leading information in the very first hour of the case. Hurrying doesn't come natural to me, and I get tired just thinking how Speare shuttles about so energetically; but here I was anyhow, mushing across Times Square in an uneasy effort to catch up with my tireless and unpredictable assistant.

Snowflakes of purest white were spilling down in wondrous profusion like popcorn out of a movie-house machine. They dimmed the big Paramount clock overhead. The taller towers beyond the square were entirely blanked out. The huge "spectacular" signs all around flashed less garishly through the veil. Our hardhearted Main Stem had turned as pretty as a sentimental picture post card, except underfoot. All the lovely snowflakes were dying a quick death; the instant they touched the pavement they disintegrated into soot-black slush.

I passed three Santa Clauses before reaching the Astor. All over Greater New York, on nobody knows how many street corners or in how many department stores, squads of Santas were rattling their sleigh bells, ho-hoing and bouncing their padded paunches, and wondering when the hell the night shift would show up. The atmosphere was one of general rejoicing, largely phony but heart-warming just the same. The snowfall looked better than a Radio City Music Hall production, peace and good will abounded at least temporarily, and there were only thirteen more shopping days until Christmas.

I plodded on, plastered with melting snow. Taxis flowed by (none empty) with their varicolored running lights accenting the gay holiday spirit at recently increased rates. Finally I

turned with my misgivings into West Forty-sixth.

It was darker here, and drab, and the black slush was

deeper and wetter.

Not far beyond the corner a low, age-blackened building was squeezed between a florist's and a firehouse. The ground

floor was shared by a newsstand and a delicatessen. Inside the window a cardboard sign was propped against a tray of herring: TO LEASE WILL REMODEL. There was no legend painted on the second-floor windows, but another card, scotch-taped against one of them, announced simply: To LEASE. No fancy promises; take it as is. The windows on the top floor offered a slightly different and grimier one: LOFT FOR RENT. Nobody liked it here.

Speare included. He was waiting in the murky side doorway with a peculiar expression on his lean face. As best as I could read it, he felt elated in an edgy way, but regretful

about something too, and eager to be somewhere else.

"During the journey over I decided what I'm going to give you for Christmas, Luke," I said as I sidled in, slapping ice water off my coat. "A pair of gold-plated leg irons."

Speare didn't smile. "Maybe it was a mistake calling you over. This may be one you won't want to mix into. It might be smart to skip it altogether."

"When I first heard of it, less than an hour and a half ago, it sounded fairly routine," I reminded him. "Why shouldn't it stay that way?"

"It keeps sprouting new angles."

Speare leaned forward cautiously, sent a glance down the block to a neat white building on the opposite side of the street - it was the Knickerbocker Theatre, where a new musical had opened none too happily last week - then furtively pulled his head back in. I watched this with a darkening frown.

"If it's not asking too much, Luke, may I know what you're so itchy about? Has something else happened, even since you

phoned me?"

"The box office over there is pretty busy," Speare informed me. "People constantly coming and going. Some of them linger in the lobby to keep out of the snow. Usually it's for only a few minutes, but one patron of the drama has been standing in there since before I arrived."

"Somebody watching Bricca's office?"

"A woman. No details. Young or old, brunette or blond,

I haven't seen. Mostly she stays behind that display board in the middle door. She's pretty good at keeping herself hidden."

Since Speare is inclined to be overly suspicious, I suggested offhandedly, "She probably forgot her rubbers, that's all."

He gave me a slightly exasperated look.

"If she actually is casing this joint, she certainly has no interest in us," I insisted, "and it probably has nothing to do with my new client, either. Bricca was probably handling several cases besides Mr. Goodlee's and this woman must be connected with one of the others. She's doing the same thing Mr. Goodlee did. He waited just like that for Bricca to show and also got nowhere with it."

Speare gazed at me in silence, now seeming to feel sorry

about something. Me, most likely.

"All right, Luke." When Speare turns closemouthed like this my peace of mind curls up and dies. "All right, what's up there in Bricca's office?"

Speare about-faced and ran up the wooden stairs. Creaky and unswept, they led to a narrow landing, also unswept, where a two-hundred-watt bulb glared down on two doors. The second-floor tenant might be indifferent to the janitor service but he liked to see who was calling.

The pebbled glass on the first door was as blank as a show girl's face, and the second bore a legend in flaked gold leaf: ANTHONY BRICCA, CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATIONS. Confidentially I had it on fairly solid hearsay that Mr. Bricca would

bear a bit of investigating himself.

Speare turned the knob and quietly opened the way. He hadn't found the door unlocked like this, of course. I would ask him later which of several possible methods he had used to force it. I would also remind him that although the private eyes in Hollywood and Radio City do this sort of thing all the time, it is nevertheless a fact that breaking and entering is unlawful on West Forty-sixth Street whether committed by burglars or by us. What's more, a burglar only goes to jail for it, but we could also lose our licenses.

I went in slowly, smelling an indefiniable sweetish foulness in the stagnant air. Speare, pressing in close behind me, im-

mediately shifted toward the nearest front window. Stopping short of it so as to remain unseen from the street, he peered over the for-lease sign. He was still bothered by the half-visible woman haunting the lobby of the Knickerbocker.

The faintly nauseating odor lingering in these two rooms could have risen from the proprietor's ethics. Tony Bricca's reputation was a dubious one at best. An expert at operating just within the thin fringe of the law, he specialized in recovering stolen jewelry and had become suspiciously successful at it. I had expected to see a fairly flashy establishment here, but Bricca hadn't been tempted to put on the dog. This was the office of a cynical operator who used it only as a minor convenience. His real office was inside his hat.

"Supply closet in the rear room," Speare said from the

window.

So there was a supply closet in the rear room. I would get to it in good time, without tiring myself out prowling back and forth. Taking first things first, without undue haste, I began comparing this place with the persistent rumors I had heard about Bricca the detective.

The file cabinet in the far corner, for example. It was the only file to be found here, and three of its four drawers were entirely empty. Inside the fourth were a square frosted bottle half full of gin, a lady's small red hat with a white veil and a Gimbel's label, and a few file folders. These contained receipted bills, but not a single copy of an outgoing letter.

Check. Bricca reportedly committed nothing to paper. Even his reports to his clients were made orally. Also, visitors from Centre Street had found he had a knack for developing total

amnesia about a case as soon as it was ended.

His secretary's desk was the tidiest article in the place. She was literate; she even read books. Two best-selling novels from a nearby renting library were waiting for her delayed return, piling up costs of three cents a day each. Her little desk clock read ten-sixteen; it had run down.

"Bricca's secretary seems to be just as absent as he is," I

observed.

"Neither of them has been seen around here since last

Saturday morning," Speare answered without turning his head.

That also checked. The top leaf of the day-by-day memo pad on the desk was dated December 6. This was Wednesday, December 10.

"Bricca buys his cigars at the newsstand downstairs," Speare added, "and the girl likes to pick up snacks for herself at the delicatessen. They dropped in Saturday morning, separately, as usual. Both Bricca and the girl said, 'Have a good weekend, see you Monday,' but neither has been back since."

Check again. The Monday leaf of Miss Secretary's calendar bore a penciled note: Call J. O.K. for lunch. Jimmy or Johnny, or whatever his name was, she might have stood him up. Evidently she hadn't been in circulation at lunch time Monday, or since.

"Secretary's name?" I asked.

"Fern Something."

"Don't they know her last name downstairs?"

"She's been working here only a few weeks. Strictly a callme-Fern type of girl. They don't know her address, either." Any record of it here? I opened the middle drawer of

Any record of it here? I opened the middle drawer of Fern's desk. Pencils needle-sharp, ten-cent box of face powder unspilled, facial tissues neatly folded, everything shipshape. A small red notebook contained a few names, addresses, and phone numbers, Fern's not included. None of the entries meant anything except one in the B section which was nameless. It was a number on West End Avenue with a Riverside phone. Bricca's home?

"Let's call this one," I suggested.

"No answer," Speare said. "I tried it four times."

I should have known he had.

"It's probably an apartment building," I persisted. "The

superintendent may know something."

"The superintendent says Tony Bricca's mail hasn't been picked up since Saturday and he didn't leave any word where he might be reached."

Sometimes it's hard to find something left for me to do on

a case.

While Speare stayed at the window I went through a connecting door into the rear room. It was darker than a Tenth Avenue bar with television, and it felt just as homey. I found the wall switch, but the yellow ceiling light didn't improve it much.

There had once been windows in the rear wall. They had been bricked up since the erection of a new building behind this one, say along about the time of the Harding administration. This room was almost as bare as it could get — no rug, not even any linoleum, but just a desk in the center with a swivel chair behind it and a straight-backed chair beside it. This must be where Bricca and his clients got down to cases on his borderline deals. The bad smell seemed thicker in here.

Bricca's desk had absolutely nothing on it but a thin film of dust, and nothing in any of the drawers except a small, empty cardboard box that had once contained fifty .38-caliber center-fire cartridges.

About to shrug off this room as a total loss, I noticed a spot on the floor under Bricca's chair. There was a second spot, larger than the first, over near a door in the rear corner. Both were brown and scaly. Something had been spilled here and had dried. I was astonished that Fern, tidy girl that she was, hadn't cleaned it up.

"That's blood," Speare said from the doorway.

He said it positively, leaving no room for doubt. Like it or not, it was blood.

I gave him a hard look for not having drawn my attention to it earlier, then turned to the supply closet. I opened the

door wide and quickly stepped back.

Nothing came out at me and nothing inside the closet moved. The corpse inside the door was sitting on the floor with its head resting on its drawn-up knees, its face turned away from the light. It was female. It wore a black velvet pillbox hat, a tan gabardine stormcoat, and big galoshes. It had evidently been sitting in there for days and nights, long and lonely days and nights.

I swallowed twice and asked Speare, "What's Fern like?"

"Slender, dark, twenty-five."

This wasn't Fern by a wide margin. The corpse was more than plump, mostly gray-haired, and past forty. Without making a close examination — something I was willing to lack — I could only guess that she had succumbed to gunfire. Blood from the region of her chest had flowed down her dress and had become another dark brown stain on the floor where she sat. . . . The terrifying part of her was the way she put me in mind of a policewoman.

I shut the door on her.

"Out, Luke."

Speare made sure the latch of the entrance caught fast behind us. We ran down the stairs and hurried out into the snow, turning our backs on the Knickerbocker Theatre. I hoped the spooky woman was gone from its lobby. I wanted us to be lucky enough to get away from here unseen.

Luck seemed to be with us. We found an unoccupied taxi

waiting at the red light on Broadway.

We ducked in as the light changed to green. The taxi churned out into the slush and glitter of Longacre Square. I settled back, slowly drew in a welcome breath of fresh exhaust fumes, and remarked to Speare grimly, "Now I know

what you meant. I only wish I'd known it sooner."

Breaking into Bricca's office had been risky enough. Failing to report the corpse could be disastrous. Of course it was murder, and there was no question what a well-behaved private detective should do about it. He should run, not walk, to the nearest phone and call Spring 7-3100. We hadn't done that, and because we hadn't it would be possible for the district attorney to point out to the grand jury that thereby we had made ourselves guilty of compounding a felony.

Our taxi sloshed on eastward while I tried to reassure myself that I would do nobody any harm by taking a practical view of our predicament. Reporting that dead body—actually inviting the police to find us there with it—would have been at least foolhardy. Since cops consider all private detectives to be crooked, and themselves our natural enemies, they would have welcomed the opportunity to grill us, hound

us and smear us with enough eyebrow-lifting publicity to put us out of business. No, at that price our legal duty would cost far too much. Better to duck the whole thing if we could.

Yes, certainly, our smartest move would be to adopt an attitude of bland ignorance. If officially questioned, we would simply deny all knowledge of the homicide with an air of unimpeachable probity. "We didn't see any corpse, Officer. We weren't even inside the office. We went up to Bricca's door and knocked and didn't get any answer, so we just came back down again and went away."

As for our client, I would tell him that after carefully checking my commitments I had found, regretfully, that I was much too committed to take on another case at the moment.

That would do it. We were well out of an unsavory mess,

and it was as simply done as that.

"Maybe her rubbers were stolen," Speare said unexpectedly as he peered through the taxi's rear window. "She probably suspects we've got 'em. At any rate she's in another taxi right back there, tailing us."

#### TWO

WHEN WE reached Madison Avenue it was a question whether we had taxis on our tail or dog sleds. On every windshield the wipers were wagging like crazy and fighting a losing battle. Irving Berlin and Bing Crosby had dreamed too damned hard; we were getting a whiter Christmas than anybody else could reasonably want. Except, again, underfoot. Traffic was pushing by fits and starts through a marsh of licorice sherbet.

"While we were in Bricca's office she flagged a passing taxi," Speare had explained a couple of blocks back. "She waited in it until we came out. I still haven't had a clear look at her. All I know is that she's wearing a long transparent

plastic cape and has a black umbrella."

"But no rubbers," I reminded him wryly. "It's silly of her

to tag after us like this, with her feet so wet."

There certainly hadn't been a worse day for it since the big snow of '47.

"Can't see her taxi now," Speare reported. "Every window and license plate is all plastered over. If she's still with us,

she's better than most professionals."

I doubted that she was. We had barely missed a fendercrushing tie-up while crossing Fifth Avenue, and our sticky girl friend had probably been cut off there. I was willing to believe we had shaken her, preferably for good. Speare also seemed ready to give her up for lost. He relaxed a little. But not for long.

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"Last Saturday night, after nine-thirty," he murmured guardedly while our hackie concentrated on his problems of

navigation. "That's when it happened."

He was referring to the homicide we had uncovered in Anthony Bricca's office. He hadn't said maybe. He had said that was definitely when. For a few silent moments his assurance puzzled me. How could he be so certain it had happened then, rather than, say, Saturday morning, or Saturday afternoon, or even some time Sunday? He must have spotted a clue somewhere.

I decided it was the victim's galoshes. Last Saturday night the first snow of the season had started falling at about 9:30 P.M. Light but wet, it hadn't lasted long. The sidewalks had dried rapidly, as they do in Manhattan because of the subterranean warmth of the steam mains, subways, basements, and other catacombs. Snow had not fallen again until this afternoon, two hours ago. Therefore the woman would have needed her galoshes after nine-thirty Saturday night, but not earlier and not for very long thereafter. . . This little deduction of Speare's seemed so logical, now that he had made it.

"That's when, of course," I agreed, just as if I had seen it all along. "The reason behind it is pretty obvious too, don't you think?"

My theory had it that the woman, dangerously involved in one of Bricca's sharp deals, had been killed by Bricca himself. He had taken a quick powder and had warned his secretary to keep herself equally scarce. By now he might be basking in the sun at Cuernavaca. This struck me as a neat, realistic, even inevitable explanation for their sudden disappearance, and I looked to Speare for a confirming nod.

He didn't nod, but just sat there cerebrating. His agile mind had darted off into some more obscure cranny of the situation. Well, his interest in it would have to remain academic. I wanted only one thing from Bricca and his dead friend, and that was distance. This was a murder, and murder is strictly for the cops, and today, tomorrow, or any other day, they can have it.

I had instructed our driver to go to an address just east of Madison. Our taxi now sidled into the gutter and bumped to a stop against the curb. Speare, ducking out after me, sent searching but innocent-seeming glances into the other taxies churning past.

"We got away from her all right." He said it almost apologetically, as if it were bad news. "What are we doing

"Duty calls. Follow me."

I paid off the driver, led Speare across icy puddles, and pointed to one of several bronze plaques affixed to the marble frame of a doorway. It sparkled from frequent polishings: JACOBUS WELLS. In smaller letters underneath the name was a single word: Lapidary.

"I'm to meet Mr. Goodlee here. He didn't give me any phone number to call back, or any other address. This is my only way of connecting with him. Seemed a bit skittish."

"Skittish about what?" Speare asked.

"About hiring a private detective. Said his employer and his family must never know. They're all mixed up in something that's very hush-hush and explosive. It's giving him a rough time, and he's anxious to get clear of it, but Bricca faded before accomplishing anything for him - which is why he turned to us."

"Just in time, too," Speare remarked. "For us, I mean. We could use a fee or two before rent day rolls around again."

"Ordinarily I'd be glad to take him on for that very reason, but this case is too damn likely to blow up in our faces."

Speare looked unpleasantly surprised. "But would it be good policy to let Mr. Goodlee down?"

"It's certainly good policy for us to side-step any case that includes a murder behind the scenes. Pretty soon it's going to come out and start kicking up trouble. I'm trying to be prudent about it. I want to stay in business - though not too strenuously, of course - so I've really no choice but to go upstairs now and give Mr. Goodlee my regrets."

"Well, you're the boss, Schy," Speare grumbled. He added

quickly, as if he'd had a bright afterthought, "Don't let me

hold you up. I'll join you in half a minute."

With no more explanation than that — with none at all, that is — he hustled off through the snow. I watched him until he disappeared into an apothecary's shop on the corner. He hadn't intentionally left me guessing; he had simply assumed, as he too often does, that the mental processes behind this tangential excursion were as clear to me as they were to him. They hardly ever are; but this time, I imagined, he was simply hunting for a telephone. He probably wanted to ask somebody a few pointed questions. If his purpose was to clarify our position regarding Tony Bricca and the forsaken corpse, they would be questions well asked.

Passing through the marble doorway, I came into a clean little lobby having a white marbleized floor, walls paneled with beige marble, and a single elevator shaft faced with darker brown marble. For others it might have the feel of a one-room mausoleum, but after the starkness of Bricca's office I found it comparatively warm and refreshingly

reputable.

I became the elevator's sole passenger. The cage was specially equipped with a telephone and an electric alarm with shining brass bells as big as a halved grapefruit. As it rose, without haste, the operator took an interest in me. He was a block-faced, humorless, coplike man — barrel-chested, too, and the left side of his tunic bulged out more than the right. The deadly chunk of iron nestling in his shoulder holster must be a .38 if it wasn't a .45.

The lapidaries and wholesale gem merchants in this building valued their work. Any heister foolish enough to try lifting any of their stock would face a bit of a problem in

moving his loot out of the building.

Having delivered me to the sixth floor, my armed escort continued to watch me while I traversed six feet of corridor to the door bearing Jacobus Wells' name. I opened it and entered in my best law-abiding manner.

George Goodlee was not waiting in Mr. Wells' reception

room.

An attempt had been made to strike a note of hospitality in the décor here but it hadn't entirely succeeded. Big friendly chairs waited to embrace me and the rug was soft under my tired feet, but the sea-foam green of the walls couldn't conceal the fact that they were reinforced steel throughout. There was no way at all of softening the forbidding aspect of the iron bars and chained padlock in the information window. The business of being a lapidary, although a luxury trade, was clearly not a chummy one.

I was still alone except for a glistening blond head inside the barred window and a pair of interested violet eyes lifted

to mine.

I went close and gazed in at a girl whom nature had never intended to be as unreachable as this. She smiled an angel's smile. I spoke to her, a prosaic message to the effect that I had come here to meet Mr. George Goodlee. She glowed prettily upon hearing this and in a lovely voice murmured, "Just a moment, please." Immediately I was sorry I had mentioned it so soon, because she then rose from her desk and disappeared. I spent long moments with nothing to do but listen to strange whirring noises coming from deep within the impenetrable walls.

A steel door opened in the steel partition and there she was again, full-length. She was captivating all over. She said, "Come in here, please, Mr. Cole," and I didn't argue. As soon as I stepped inside she clanged the door shut behind me. Before I could fully realize we were alone together, she vanished again, through another door in the side wall. The

latch closed with a sharp, heartless snap.

She had left me locked alone inside this cold metal cubicle that was no larger than it needed to be to contain two straight-backed chairs and a table the size of a man's handkerchief. The furniture was dead black, the walls and ceiling were a neutral gray. A high, barred window let in a flat north light. This joint, in spite of a promising first impression, had turned out to be even more austere than Bricca's.

I sat there feeling like a condemned man, silent, miserably lonesome, hoping for a reprieve I feared might never come.

Above the inner door was an oblong opening for ventilation—barred, of course, and covered with a heavy steel screen besides. Hoping for another glimpse of my honeytopped cupcake, I climbed on a chair to bring my eyes on a level with it. She was not in sight. I saw instead a man who was lean, bald, and sixty.

He was moving slowly along a dusty bench, inspecting a series of small motor-driven machines. They sat in a row, all alike — simple, primitive machines which probably hadn't seen a major improvement in hundreds of years. On each a bronze disc was spinning horizontally and a short wooden arm rested one end on the disc at an angle. It traced a shining circle in the oily gray film flowing on the disc. While I watched, the artisan — Jacobus Wells himself, no doubt — removed one of the arms and examined its dome-shaped end under a loupe squeezed into his left eye. I knew, from having read about it somewhere, that Mr. Wells had begun this job by cementing a rough diamond into the tip of the dome, or dop, and that he was cutting facets on it.

The frosty-looking pebble he had started with would become, after weeks of the most meticulously careful work, a fiery gem ready for mounting in a beautiful setting of precious metal. A small handful of roughs worth a respectable fortune when the lapidary took them in might be worth five or six fortunes when their owner dropped back to pick them up. In Mr. Wells' shoes I would likewise find comfort in steel walls, iron bars, armed guards, and plenty of insurance against

all kinds of loss.

Something else I had read was becoming easier to understand — that those in the diamond business suffer chronically from the jitters. It was catching. I was picking up a fair case

from simple proximity.

Hearing a steel door clank, then footfalls crossing the reception room, I hopped off the chair — and none too soon. An electric lock buzzed like an iron-tailed rattlesnake and my cell was dynamically invaded by a stocky, broad-shouldered, rushed-looking man who brought to me instantly his feeling of long-suffering harassment.

"Mr. Cole, I'm George Goodlee."

His hand in mine felt strong but twitchy despite its firmness. He was wearing a gray topcoat over a double-breasted blue chalk-stripe suit. No hat. At forty-six or -seven his hair was thick, blue black, and unruly. And dry — not many snowflakes had caught up with him on his way over. A good guy, I decided on the spot — big-muscled, big-hearted, and evidently in big trouble.

"Couldn't get away sooner," he explained rapidly. "Might get fired for ducking out like this even so. We're crazy busy at Christmas time. You'd expect that at Jacquiere's, of

course."

Jacquiere, Ltd., of Fifth Avenue, had long ranked among the world's top-bracket jewelers.

"But you must never phone me there," he cautioned me earnestly. "I'm just a salesman, quite a minor member of the

staff, and personal calls are frowned upon."

George Goodlee was a possessed and driven man. He reminded me of my hustle-bustle assistant, but with a difference. Speare's energy manifests itself in a continuous natural flow; Goodlee seemed to squeeze his out under pressure, with effort and some little pain. He was a man running on eggs.

"Absolutely never call me at Jacquiere's, or at my home either," he insisted. "It might defeat us — make it impossible for you to do the job I must have done. I want this to be perfectly clear, Mr. Cole — when you have information to report, wait for me to call you. We'd better hurry along now and I'll tell you about it on the way."

"Hurry along where?"

Already turning back to the door, he checked himself. "Mr. Bricca said a photograph of Monica wouldn't do. I offered him a snapshot, but he said I'd have to point her out to him in person, so as to avoid any mistake in identity. I'd simply assumed you'd start the same way."

"That's standard practice in a shadowing case, Mr. Goodlee — although my methods may differ from Bricca's other-

wise."

"That's good to hear. Bricca left me high and dry. I need

help now even worse than before, Mr. Cole, because time is running out on me. We'll have to work fast." He reached for the doorknob again. "I happen to know Monica's plans—overheard her on the phone this morning making a late cocktail date with someone who'd called in. As I left the apartment she mentioned she might be out when I come home—shopping late, darling, she said. Quite a facile little liar, Monica. She'll be leaving soon to keep that date. We'll catch her as she comes out."

He shook the steel door noisily, a button was pushed somewhere, and the electric lock buzzed to release us. As he quickly crossed the reception room I followed less rapidly and turned an eager look through the barred information window. The little blond jewel gave me a twinkling good-by smile. I joined Goodlee in the elevator feeling buoyant, superbly competent, and unafraid of the attending gunsel.

So far I had found no chance to give Goodlee the brush. While we descended I reflected that since Goodlee was obviously counting on my help it might be a low trick to refuse him out of hand. It would only force him to find another detective, and in his urgency he might then get himself fouled up with one lacking even a nodding acquaintance with a scruple. The possibility bothered me. So did my unpaid bills.

By the time we had reached the lobby I had come to realize I couldn't afford the expense of cutting myself out of the case without good cause. First I should make certain Bricca would not re-enter the case and that Goodlee had no knowledge of the corpse in Bricca's closet. That done, I could set a safe course.

As we turned up our coat collars at the outer door I asked Goodlee, "What led you to Tony Bricca?"

"I simply happened to have heard his name. Among jewelers he has a certain reputation for getting results."

"But he didn't get any results for you?"

"He'd hardly made a good start on it when he dropped out of sight. The man went off without a word of warning or

explanation. Left me worse off than before, with the whole mess dangling."

"He may turn up soon and expect to carry on for you.

Would you want that?"

"Certainly not. I need help I can rely on."

Goodlee left the doorway, his dark curly head ducked between his big box shoulders. Snow was still swirling thickly through the neon-tinted twilight and slopping thickly underfoot. Halfway across the sidewalk Goodlee came to a slightly

splashy stop.

"If you're wondering what my dealings with Bricca were, it's quickly told. First I arranged to meet him in Jakus Wells' shop in the same way I met you. And for the same reasons—caution and convenience. I saw him only once. Gave him a retainer, enough to cover ten days at his regular rate, and he started working on it.

"I'll tell you as we go along what little he found out. I phoned his office every day for news, late in the afternoon, for three days running. By the fourth day something had gone wrong. He didn't answer his phone any more. Not even

his secretary answered."

"Who is his secretary, by the way?"

"I wouldn't know. Never laid eyes on her."

"When did this hiatus come?"

"Monday. Phone calls, telegrams — nothing was answered after that. Tuesday afternoon I took time off to go to Bricca's office. Door was locked, couldn't get in. I waited over an hour for him, risking my job, and he didn't show up. Today I spent my lunch period, and more, watching for him again, and still no sign. So the hell with Bricca. He'd cost me valuable time. I was beginning to get panicky — until I remembered your agency."

Ah. Here was an alert, informed man. Well. "In what

connection, Mr. Goodlee?" I asked, grinning proudly.

"You had a case about a certain Miss Ashley, involving a cache of precious gems, and others, I believe, involving rare books and valuable paintings. I made inquiries and learned your experience is certainly several cuts above the average.

Most of the private eyes I read about work on a back-alley level, but you deal with civilized people. Bricca did too, in a certain sense — that's why I went to him first. But let's forget Bricca. Let's get started."

A hardy figure was pushing toward us through the storm. It was Luke Speare, safely back from his mission with a thoughtful gleam in his eye. As Goodlee trudged on toward his waiting taxi Speare reached my side with a report.

is waiting taxi Speare reached my side with a report. "George Goodlee is not listed in the phone book."

This could simply mean that the Goodlees lived in a hotel, or in an apartment house having its own switchboard, like untold thousands of other New Yorkers.

"You don't look flabbergasted to hear it," Speare observed.
"You were a long time bringing in this epochal discovery.
I was about to send out a St. Bernard with a small cask of Three-Star Hennessy."

Speare frowned, searched his mind for news of a more sensational nature, then doggedly tried again. "You may or may not be amazed to hear that as far as the Missing Persons Bureau knows, Tony Bricca isn't missing. That means nobody's reported him so far. Skid checked that for me from the Trib city room."

Speare's reference was to a reporter named Skidmore on the local staff of the *Herald Tribune*. He was one of several of Speare's friends who worked in useful places. Skid was often a great convenience, but I felt that this time Speare had gone off on the wrong track. I didn't want to learn more about Bricca. On the contrary, I wanted to ignore him.

"Bricca's the lone-wolf type," Speare added. "Cold, calculating character. Few, if any, friends. Nobody seems to

care whether he's gone or not."

"Anything of a pertinent nature, Luke, before we set off with Goodlee?"

"No girl of Fern's description has been reported either. As for the deceased — she was harder and a little risky, because it might show foreknowledge on our part — it's the same story. Not reported missing. Or dead either, for that matter."

Which added up to three people unaccounted for, but none

of them officially so. Well, the score would probably correct itself very shortly, with no help needed from us.

"O.K., Luke. Let's drop it now."

"But murder's been done. Everybody who knows it is clammed up tight, including you and me. The whole thing's been hanging fire for days now. It's a pretty hard thing to overlook. Shouldn't we do something about it?"

"We're already doing the smartest thing possible. We're letting it ride. We're going to go right on letting it strictly alone. That end of it has nothing to do with Goodlee's troubles, fortunately for us. At least I see no connection whatever "

Speare said quickly, "It's perfectly possible for Bricca to have gotten himself hip-deep in homicide independently of

any client he may have been handling."

"Including Goodlee," I agreed, nodding. "I've been making sure Goodlee is as clean as he looks. I want to sound him out with one more question. Let's see if he has the right answer."

Goodlee was standing beside the open door of the taxi, looking harried and impatient for action. I introduced Speare to him as my co-worker. He responded, "Howdoyoudo, Mr. Speare, get in, Mr. Cole, it's late we may miss her."

"First, Mr. Goodlee - About Bricca's sudden absence

- any idea what caused it?"

"Not the faintest."

"Could it possibly have been caused by something he ran

up against in the course of investigating your case?"

"The possibility hadn't occured to me." Goodlee thought about it a moment, then went into a rapid explanation. "No, I can't see how. It's a routine thing. I hired Bricca to find my daughter. She ran away from home last week with a man who is unbearably handsome and a damned crook. He's the intelligent, highly polished type. If cornered he might blow his cork and strike back, but Bricca didn't come anywhere near them. He was following my wife about, on the theory that she would lead him to them, but that's as far as he'd gotten. That's the essentials of it, Cole. I can't believe this

could have caused him to take off into thin air without a trace. Do you?"

No.

I looked at Speare. His answer was a shrug, which could have meant anything, including no.

"If you're afraid you might disappear too --- " Goodlee

said wryly.

"Hardly," I assured him. "Let's get to work, Mr. Goodlee."

The three of us crowded into the taxi and it started off, sliding and crabbing through the slush. I felt relieved. I could see now that I had been overly cautious. I had very nearly lost a good case unnecessarily. As it was, Bricca concerned me not at all—he could stay gone, or reappear and take his chances with a murder charge, just as he might choose. As for the murder victim, circumstances would soon take care of her. She was a woman I could forget. . . . So Luke Speare and I rode on, our minds cleared of needless distractions, both of us eager to grasp and resolve the none too exceptional problem of our new client, Mr. George Goodlee. . . .

The gods on Olympus were yakking their mythical heads

off that fine winter's day.

#### THREE

OUR TAXI sloshed northward on Park Avenue, risking its fenders at every slip of its wheels. The snowfall was thinning, but there was still enough of the stuff flying around to fill the new night with fairyland loveliness and transform it into

a griping mess for homebound millions.

George Goodlee's first act was a measure of his earnestness and no-nonsense practicality. He asked me about costs, promptly plucked a blank check from his billfold, and filled it in to the amount of five hundred dollars, using a shining gold fountain pen. I thanked him for the retainer and pocketed it, feeling the case was straightening out auspiciously in spite of a bumpy beginning.

"Now. Let's forget Bricca ever heard your story, Mr. Goodlee," I suggested. "You're telling it here for the first time.

What started it?"

"God knows. I can't put my finger on a definite starting point. It's the result of perhaps a dozen scattered causes coming together. Let's keep it simple and begin close to home, with Avis."

"Avis is your daughter?"

"By my first wife, who died when Avis was still a baby. She's eighteen now. She graduated from junior college last June—just barely—with the lowest passing average in her class. In spite of that she's really rather bright. She has the charm of a princess—when she chooses to turn it on—

and the backbone of a cream-fed kitten. Her lovely head is full of holes and she likes it that way. Men fawn over her and she laughs at them to their faces for it and keeps them drooling for the sport of it. My telephone bill is incredible. She has the most beautiful figure of any woman in the whole country, including Hollywood — she says so herself. She may be right. At any rate it is always an expensively dressed figure, and sometimes it's just as expensively undressed, as her setting may require. She has one talent, and only one, which is to make the most of my weakness for spoiling her."

"You're at least clear-eyed about Avis, not to say bitter."

"I'm bitter as hell about what Avis has done to me, and I'm bitter also about Monica — I'll get to my wife in a minute — and I'm furthermore bitter about the lousy luck I've been loaded with lately. But don't misunderstand me, Mr. Cole. I see Avis for exactly the shallow, selfish girl she is, but also I see her as beautiful and warm and sensitive. She can be utterly winning and adorable, and I love her. What I complain about in Avis is mostly my fault. I should have given her a stepmother sooner, much sooner than I did. What's more, I should have given her one capable of coping with her, which Monica is not."

"As I understand this, Avis was the original contributor

to your present siege of hard luck."

"I wish to reiterate that I love my daughter very much," Goodlee muttered, "in spite of the fact that her giddy romantic foolishness has put me on a hot spot. A very goddann hot spot."

"Romantic foolishness?"

"Avis has screamed at me for calling it that. To her it's love, true, deep love, the most beautiful she will ever know. That's for sure because her heart has told her so. It's a glorious love that will not be denied even if she must give up the whole world for it. I'm quoting, of course," Avis' father added, looking nauseated.

Speare so far had said nothing — had made no comment, had asked no questions. He devoted himself to listening intently while we pushed fitfully up Park. Our driver was fol-

lowing instructions from Goodlee which I hadn't heard. Presumably our destination was the Goodlee apartment somewhere north of the fifty-ninth parallel.

I asked Mr. Goodlee, "Who's the man who inspired this

passion in Avis?"

"His name is Millard, Jay Millard. He's exactly what you'd expect him to be. Out-of-this-world handsome, of course—handsomer than a musical-comedy grenadier. Older than Avis by fifteen years, smooth, sophisticated, and coolheaded. Women look at him and come unglued. He has a fine, cultivated talent for using them. I know he's using Avis now, as a trump card to play against me when the time's ripe."

"Taking first things first, Mr. Goodlee - Avis met him

where?"

"In my own home, of all places. I made the idiotic mistake of inviting him up for cocktails. Avis immediately fell into the habit of dropping in at the shop almost every day with a cheery greeting for Daddy dear. It was touching, but it didn't fool me. Her real reason was to see Millard. He was with Jacquiere's."

"Was?"

To that, Goodlee gave an emphatic nod. "Past tense. He resigned rather suddenly ten days ago. Left without recommendations, washed up for keeps in the jewelry business. His technique as a salesman was a shade too unconventional."

Our taxi slithered sidewise, causing the other cars around us to bleat like scared sheep. Speare was not distracted by this. He kept his whole attention pin-pointed on Goodlee's account of his daughter's crime-tainted romance with Jay Millard.

"It's hard to understand how a man of Millard's talents and assured future can go so wrong," Goodlee continued, "just as it's hard to understand why a model family man and highly respected bank president will secretly dip into his own till over a period of years, often to the tune of hundreds of thousands. Millard's operations were planned on a much smaller scale than that, but, even so, his sales methods were

set up to net him considerable loot - all unknown to

Jacquiere's, needless to say.

"I'd begun taking careful note of Millard as soon as my daughter started having dizzy spells over him. I'd felt wary of him even before that, not for any specific reason, but in the way an average-looking guy like me often distrusts a man who is too damned handsome for anyone's good, including his own, and supersmooth besides. I tried to cool Avis off by warning her that he was too old and too experienced for her — certainly a tactical error on my part. She defended him hotly, dated him like mad, and before I knew it love was rearing its silly head."

"Which caused you to keep an even sharper eye on Millard,

no doubt."

Goodlee nodded again, disgustedly. "Which in turn was his undoing, because that's how I happened to catch him red-handed. As it is, nobody else on the staff knows of Millard's trickery."

We slid to a stop at a red light, gently grazing a fellow wayfarer's fender. Still Speare hadn't opened his head. He remained remarkably attentive to Goodlee's story even during Goodlee's pauses for breath. He seemed somehow to be

taking some part of it as a personal challenge.

"It was late afternoon of a hellishly busy day — Monday of last week. I was in the vault. Millard came in and replaced a tray of diamond rings. He selected several necklaces to show and went out again. I looked over that same tray for something to show to my own customer and noticed something about one of the rings — a marquise-cut stone of about three carats set in white gold. We usually set a diamond of that size in platinum, and the index of refraction of this stone was too high. I simply mean its sparkle was too bright — perceptibly brighter than that of even a firstwater diamond. Only one stone outshines a properly cut diamond, and that is titanium rutile, a recent synthetic."

"Much cheaper than diamond, I take it."

"A chunk of titanium crystal of that size, set in white gold, would sell for fifty or sixty dollars — rather less than

the three thousand dollars on the price tag of this ring. Now, Jacquiere's handles no synthetics whatever, and our hallmark was stamped in the metal, so I decided hurriedly that my eyes were a bit bleary from fatigue and went back to my impatient customer. But it kept worrying me. First chance I found, only a few minutes later, I went back. The ring with the three-thousand-dollar price tag was still in the tray. This time I took a thoroughly good look at it.

"I couldn't believe it possible, but there was the truth, right before my eyes. The stone was synthetic, and that

meant the hallmark was forged.

"Imagine it! Jacquiere's selling synthetics as real!" Goodlee turned pale with the recollection. "I was as stunned as if I'd been slugged. For minutes I didn't know what to do. I sat at my desk, pretending to be busy, watching Millard. He was nervous. He got rid of his customer, hurried into the vault, and immediately came out empty-handed. I checked at once—and now the ring was gone."

"It must have been perfectly clear to you then how he was

working this swindle."

"Perfectly. Smoothly done, as Millard would naturally do it, nobody would be the wiser. He had begun by contriving this ring outside the shop. He had kept it in his pocket until he found a chance to slip it into a tray to show to a customer. It would easily be taken for an especially fine diamond, thanks to its brilliant fire and Jacquiere's impeccable reputation.

"If the customer bought it, Millard would accept the cash—almost all our sales are spot cash—but then register, at random, the sale of some genuine but cheaper ring—say one priced at five hundred. The customer would walk out happy with the phony. Millard would pocket the difference—twenty-five hundred in cash—and also the five-hundred-dollar ring, which he could pawn or sell outside the shop for about half that price."

"And if, on the other hand, the customer didn't buy, Millard would immediately switch the phony back out of

sight again."

"Exactly. It just happened that this time my presence in

the vault forced him to delay the switchback a few minutes. It wasn't too likely I'd notice the ring even so — but I did. Mr. Cole — Jacquiere's selling synthetics as real! Why, if news of this leaked out, it would wreck our reputation — really blow the roof off the house. It was a panicky thought, believe me. My good God, how long had this been going on? How many of our customers had Millard defrauded?"

Our cab jerked itself through a left turn. Horns squeaked at us in indignation and alarm. We skinned through and ventured on toward Madison. For all Speare had noticed, he might have been floating on a cloud on a bud-bursting day in May. He was still utterly engrossed in Millard's high-grade

skulduggery.

"I cornered Millard before he could leave the store — gave him exactly one minute by the clock to get into Mr. Jacquiere's office and make a clean breast of it. Mr. Cole — he laughed at me, actually laughed in my face. He said. 'Oh, come now. You don't really want me to do that, George. Hadn't you better keep this under your wig, old man, if only for the sake of keeping peace in the family? After all, you really don't want to send your own daughter's husband to prison, now do you?"

"Her husband? Wasn't this the first you'd heard that she

had one?"

"I blurted out something — damned if I knew what he was talking about, damned if I'd let him bluff me that way — and headed straight for Mr. Jacquiere's office on the mezzanine. Millard hadn't thought I'd dare do it, but he didn't try to

stop me. Instead, he got out fast.

"I pushed into Mr. Jacquiere's office without even knocking. I broke it to him bluntly and he responded by blowing his stack. After much pacing about and Gallic gesticulating and floods of French profanity, Mr. Jacquiere saw that Millard had us. We didn't dare arrest him — the publicity would be disastrous. We were helpless. All we could do was let him go and pray it would never come out.

"Then came my first chance to call my home. No answer. By that time any wild thing seemed only too possible. Half

crazy with anxiety now, I got home as fast as I could. Monica had gone shopping and was still out. Avis had been there and had left a note for me.

"'Daddy dear . . .' Jay had phoned to tell her the whole awful thing. It was utterly terrible of me not to have given him a chance to make it right. No matter what I might think of him, she loved him too much to give him up. Where he went, she too would go. They had had a marriage license for days. Avis was reluctant to give up her dream of a lovely big church wedding, but because I had forced them to it they were going to use the license right away. They might even be married by the time I read this.

"'Don't try to find us. We're going far, far away together and I'll never, never come back — not unless you promise never, never to make any more trouble for Jay. Your trust-

ing Avis . . . "

Trusting indeed. A big "unless," hers. Impossibly big, of course. I saw that George Goodlee was indeed in a ticklish spot and I felt the weight of his trials. I also felt grateful for my own single blessedness.

"For three days and nights I searched for Avis. First I looked into Millard's apartment on East Thirty-sixth. He had cleared out, leaving most of his clothes and some of the tools and equipment off his workbench, and had left no word. I racked my brains and tried every possible way to find Avis quietly. By the third night I was licked. The answer was probably simple enough—they were probably still in New York and living at some obscure little hotel under an assumed name—but I couldn't break through. I gave up in favor of a professional's know-how."

"Bricca's."

"In those three days Avis hadn't sent me any sort of message, but I'd begun to suspect she'd been in touch with my wife. Monica denied this — denied it so amiably and persuasively that I became convinced it was true.

"Monica is a smart woman. She has a smart woman's way of working things out to her own advantage. If Monica was

actually keeping me in the dark about my own daughter's whereabouts, it was for Monica's own reasons."

"What could she gain by it?"

"I can only say this - when Monica figures a deal for herself, there's nothing unselfish about it. She's out to win for Monica. Everyone else is fair game, including her husband. Frankly, I suspect she's toying with the idea of divorcing me. She has no grounds and she knows I won't let her bleed me. Monica may see, in this elopement, some possibility, in some way, of forcing the play and putting the bite on me. I'm not sure of this, you understand, but I do know that if there is an angle here to shoot, Monica will shoot it."

"We could be seriously misled if there's another man in the picture, Mr. Goodlee."

He shook his head. "Unlike my daughter, Monica is not at all inclined to go off the deep end for mere love alone."

"At any rate, Bricca began watching Mrs. Goodlee on the chance that she might lead him to Avis. But she didn't."

"She didn't directly, but she did do something that might still lead us there indirectly. Monica was an actress, and her first husband was a play producer. With a million contacts in the theater, radio, and television, she has no intention of going back to work and earning an honest buck, but she lets none of these people forget her. Always looking her most ravishing, she drops in on these producers and directors, incidentally to amuse herself by watching rehearsals, but principally to hear their blandishments and to turn down their offers. Bricca found her very much in circulation, including frequent visits to a place I don't know—in fact, one she has never mentioned to me."

Goodlee referred to a vest-pocket notebook and read off the address. "It's a classy new apartment building near Sutton Place. In seven days Monica went there four times, and each time she stayed several hours. At first we suspected she was meeting Avis or Millard there at the apartment of a mutual friend, but Bricca didn't once spot Avis or Millard near the place, and neither of them had been seen by the employees. Perhaps Monica was receiving phone calls from Avis there,

but that's simply a guess. Somehow I suspect there's more in it than that — there's something strange about these visits of Monica's, and they didn't get explained by the time Bricca disappeared. . . . Of course I can't ask Monica about this, because it would tip her off that I've been having her watched."

Our taxi had turned past two more icy corners, and now we again slid to a stop against the curb of East Eighty-second Street. Goodlee directed the driver to wait right here, then resumed the story of his harassments and frustrations.

"Now that I've told you this much about Avis and Monica and Millard, I realize most of it wasn't really necessary. I want from you, Mr. Cole, just one simple thing. Find Avis for

me. That's all. Find Avis."

"Your wife still seems to be the most likely lead to her?"
"I can't believe there has been no communication between them. In a rough-running romance like this one, women do get thick. Monica is actually the only real lead to Avis I know."

"I would prefer to let Tony Bricca go — even though he may have picked up more information than he actually gave

you."

Goodlee gave me the answer I'd hoped for. "I'm sure he hadn't located my daughter. Mr. Cole" — he repeated it earnestly — "find Avis. Just locate her. Just trace her down and tell me where she is. As for the rest — getting her out of Millard's hands even if she is married to the rat — getting that marriage annulled — I'll handle that myself. And forcefully, let me add."

At that point Luke Speare stirred. He had decided to make a note. He scribbled on a bit of paper, looking poker-faced. Just as he finished, Goodlee stiffened up and pointed across the street to the arched stone entrance of an apartment build-

ing wherein obviously people of opulence lived.

"There. That's Monica now."

She was alone. We caught a clear view of her as she paused under the marquee, tugging at her gloves. Very dark red hair; milky skin; large eyes, dark and bright. Oval face framed

in an upturned mink collar. High forehead, rounded like a child's but denoting unusual intelligence — the better to shoot angles with. Short, broad feet in spike-heeled pumps. No rubbers or galoshes to hide her exceptionally good ankles. From toes to hat — an expensive little dab it was — she was pure class. . . . Even though her husband had characterized her as a calculating woman, I suspected a warm nature.

Monica Goodlee waited there under the marquee while the doorman whistled at passing taxis and, no doubt, the

passengers of the taxis whistled at her.

"Notice how coolly and casually virtuous she looks," Goodlee said in his throat. "How irreproachably ladylike. I know that look very well. It means she's up to something. This may be a real lead, finally. Tail her."

"Take it, Luke," I said. "It will be your pleasure to tail

the lady."

The doorman just then captured a taxi for her. He opened its door with a flourish and protected Monica with his big umbrella while she boarded it — without having noticed us, I felt sure. Her taxi went off toward Park while Goodlee and I ducked out of ours, leaving it to Speare's uses.

Arriving on the sidewalk, I found a bit of paper inside my left hand. Speare's note. He had surreptitiously passed it to

me on my way out.

We watched Speare's taxi turn southward on Park after

Mrs. Goodlee's - her husband with heavy face.

"I will now go to my deserted home," he said miserably. "I live in this same building — not on the penthouse level, like the Jacquieres, but much more modestly, in the rear, on the court. Monica likes the tony address, you see." He wearily offered his hand. "Mr. Cole, you're not going to dump me as Bricca did, are you? I can really count on you to see this through, can't I?"

"Absolutely, you can count on me to the very best of my

abilities," I assured him warmly.

He sighed his thanks and went trudging across the swampy street through the snowfall, head lowered. I felt sincerely sorry for him and doubly determined to help him all I could.

When he had gone inside the building I turned away and opened Speare's note. To make it legible beyond a doubt he had printed his message in block capitals. It stopped me cold.

KEEP SHARP EYE ON GOODLEE. HE IS PITCHING YOU A FAST CURVE.

# FOUR

BACK IN my office, I waited for my feet to thaw and Luke

Speare to ring in.

It was quiet. The tarry slush in the streets was soaking up the harsher night noises of the city. The bookshop downstairs had long since locked up its greeting cards and canasta score pads for the night. The United Nations Secretariat, a great glass headstone visible through the windows beside my desk, raised its hopeful lights against the black moat of the East River and the ruddy glow of Brooklyn. It was so big a world, full of so many big things to worry about that it seemed unnecessary to add to them by suspecting George Goodlee of hoodwinking his own boy.

I hadn't closed my eyes to the peculiar fact that my assistant is the brains of my agency. I hadn't forgotten that my policy is to think at least twice before getting into any argument with him that might prove it too baldly. But this was exceptional; this time Speare was manifestly mistaken.

I had reached this conclusion with the aid of an important new addition to the office furniture—a so-called contour couch. I had bought it strictly as a business investment because I do my best thinking while relaxed in a reclining position. (I also do my best sleeping in this same position, but that's beside the point.) As the head of the firm, it is important for me to conserve my energies for the purpose of efficiently directing the field work of my assistant

as well as correcting his occasional errors. Tonight, as I do whenever an important problem rises, I reposed there on thick pads of foam rubber while mulling over Speare's obviously

baseless accusation against my client.

I was not unmindful of the fact that there are times, particularly on holidays and anniversaries, when my sympathies tend to take on a rosy glow and make a sucker of me. I recognized this as a danger to be guarded against, but I still felt my first estimation of George Goodlee was sound. His giddy daughter deserved no better than she was getting, but certainly her father's desire to rescue her from it was easily understandable, well founded and sincere.

Presently the phone rang as expected and I roused myself from my posture of cogitation. Speare was on the wire, sound-

ing brisk and busy.

"Monica went straight to her favorite Sutton Place address, Schy. She's up there now, somewhere on the seventh floor."

"How do you know it's the seventh?"

"I watched the elevator dial from the desk while inquiring about vacancies. The operator may be willing to give me the names of all the seventh-floor tenants. If so, it will entail certain expenses."

"Go as high as his minimum price. Where are you now?"

"Drugstore on the corner." In Manhattan there is almost invariably a drugstore on the corner. "I'm watching the building from this booth and making a few calls at the same time. For example, I just asked Skid to see what he can find on Tony Bricca in the *Trib's* morgue."

"Never mind Bricca. He's not for us. He hasn't anything to do with our case. What about George Goodlee? To me he seems to be an earnest man who's trying his best to work his

way out of a tangle of genuine trouble."

Speare answered quietly, "When I told you Goodlee is not listed in the phone book I meant he has an unpublished number. When you look it up it isn't there and when you ask Information you can't get it. That's a pretty offish kind of number for a salesman to have."

"Not if he likes privacy and dislikes telephones."

"Jewelry salesmen aren't paid much better than bank tellers," Speare went on doggedly, "but Goodlee's suit was custom-built and cost probably two hundred dollars. It has a Bond Street label. Shoes also custom-made, also with a London look. Wallet was real ostrich skin with solid-gold corners, cost at least seventy dollars, plus luxury tax."

"Less employees' discount of twenty per cent."
"He acted skittish," Speare reminded me. "You said that yourself. He didn't explain why he wanted to avoid showing himself at our office. I think he's afraid he's being tailed."

At that I sat up straighter.

"If he is being watched, he doesn't want his tail to find out he's hiring a brace of private ops. In fact, isn't that what you said he was feeling skittish about, Schy - hiring us?"

"It's only natural, after his experience with Bricca."

Speare passed over that observation and went on. "Besides - and this is something I checked over the phone just a few minutes ago - Jacques Jacquiere, the last of the family to be actively associated with Jacquiere, Ltd., disposed of his interest in the firm back in 1932."

Remembering Goodlee's frequent mentions of his employer by that name, and in the present tense, I couldn't help responding to this with a laugh of quiet incredulity. "On that one, Luke, your source is miles off the beam."

"It was the information service of the New York City

Central Public Library," he informed me.

I had already heard myself refuted out of my own mouth, but that wasn't enough. I must also find the entire metropolitan library system rallied against me.

"They couldn't find M'sieur Jacquiere in Who's Who," Speare added unnecessarily, "so they tried Who Was Who,

and sure enough --- "

"Damn it all, Luke, it must be a misprint. I simply can't see Goodlee as the liar and double-dealer you imply he is. We're supposed to work for our client, not against him, so please stop nibbling at the hand that writes the checks."

"That check he gave you," Speare said, "had the words Drawing Account printed on it. That probably puts your

retainer under the heading of a business expense, but a search for a runaway daughter is not exactly a business item."

"A drawing account is also used for making advances to salesmen against future earnings," I argued. "With a daughter like Avis, a wife like Monica, and his own taste for quality clothes, it's probably impossible for Goodlee to live within his income. But as long as his checks don't bounce, that's not our worry either. We have one objective and only one—to find a missing bride named Avis."

After a moment of tactful silence Speare said, "O.K., Schy, you're the boss. It's an odd thing, though, how many people in this case aren't here. Of the seven we know about so far, four — Bricca, Fern, Avis, and Millard — are all missing, but presumably alive, and one other is not only missing, but murdered also. Only two people of the whole lot are in sight, and that pair is not what they seem to be. I mean George Goodlee and possibly his wife ——"

"Please, Luke, leave George to me," I put in. "Your part

is to keep your eye on Monica, you lucky lad."

"O.K., Schy." After another thoughtful pause Speare added, "And that peculiar list doesn't include the last of the Jacquieres, who was still running his jewelry store although he didn't own it any more when he died in 1948."

Then he quietly hung up. . . .

I brought my client's check out of my pocket and examined it. I hadn't noticed the drawing-account imprint, but of course it was there. Merely by reaching for his billfold, Goodlee had revealed a series of significant personal details to Speare, whose eyes make a hawk's seem comparatively rheumy. For all Speare's perspicacity and acumen, however, I still felt his doubts could be reasonably answered.

As an intelligent, prudent man, Goodlee would recognize the risk in hiring a stranger to handle a delicate matter involving both his family and his job. In some states it's easier to go into the private detecting business than it is to get a driver's license; every year thousands of mail-order graduates pin on their shiny new tin badges; and even in New York, with all its strict regulations, two or three operatives lose

their licenses every year for malpractices and outright criminal acts. These are the two or three who aren't too smart about it; many more get away with it, mostly because clients, already trouble-ridden, won't prosecute. One of this skunky stripe could force Goodlee to pay through the nose to keep his daughter's and his employer's names out of the newspapers. If he had colored his story it was probably because he couldn't entirely trust us at first glance.

Now that Speare had raised the issue, however, he wouldn't rest, or let me rest either, until it was settled one way or the

other.

I turned out the lights, locked the door, and went back down to the wintry street. The snow had stopped falling. Shopkeepers were sweeping their sidewalks and the big noisy machines of the Department of Sanitation were clearing the gutters. My office is near Grand Central Station, where taxis are emptied endlessly, even on squashy nights like this one, when they are scarcer than great auks elsewhere. I found one within a few minutes and set it to carrying me northward toward Luke Speare's post.

I discovered him still inside the drugstore on the corner, seated in a booth with a cup of coffee and a scattering of scribbled notes. Every few seconds, as he gathered the notes into a neat pack, he glanced out the window at the apartment house diagonally across the intersection. It looked like a giant frosted cake with candied evergreen boughs festooned across the shop fronts and wreathed in the windows. Speare's view of it took in not only its glass doors but a section of its lobby, including a tall, white, sugar-coated Christmas tree

standing in a frosty mist of blue light.

At moments like this Speare looked sadly like a man wasting his talents. Instead of accepting low pay for sitting in a corner drugstore and waiting for a woman he had never met to come out of one building and go home to another, he might have been lolling in his own penthouse tonight, attended by servants and secure in his standing as a successful lawyer. In the same way, had I furthered my carrer in advertising, I might be spending this same evening lolling in my sump-

tuous quarters in Greenwich, with my Lincoln, my two mortgages, and the inevitable gastric ulcers. For both of us the war had rubbed the tinsel off the future.

I had become a private detective, after a stretch of the OSS, simply because it had seemed a fairly easy way to make a modest, honest living. Speare's motives in joining me are still something of a mystery. In some profound manner he is dedicated to an ideal of justice — not the legal vengeance that passes for justice in our courtrooms, but a special, merciful kind that heals. This may not describe Speare's passion accurately, but it's close. He may never achieve it really, and knows it, but works at it at every opportunity anyhow.

This was somehow behind his restive and difficult mood tonight. Monica was pleasant enough to watch, but she interested Speare less than the unattractive woman sitting dead

in Tony Bricca's closet.

As I slid into the booth at Speare's side he gave me an uneasy look.

"Something wrong, Luke?"

"Not with Monica. She's still up there. Nothing's happened. I've just been sitting here, drinking a lot of coffee — and making a few phone calls."

"Following up on Bricca — just to kill time, of course?"

He brightened at once. "Tony Bricca is the son of a Sicilian farmer. He started as an office boy for the Pinkertons. He put in a few years there, learning the ropes, then shifted to Burns. After opening his own agency he began specializing in retrieving stolen property, especially stolen jewels. He did so well at it that he got into trouble with the cops."

I nodded. "I remember reading about one of his dubious

successes."

"That must have been the time he recovered almost a quarter of a million dollars' worth of stolen jewelry in one lot. Shortly afterward the district attorney indicted him for compounding a felony."

"Of course none of this has anything to do with the case

we're working on."

"Bricca was a little careless that time. His dicker between

the thieves and the insurance company was a little too raw. He was still learning, but he beat that rap, and afterward he was smarter. So were the cops. When a really sizable jewel robbery occurs, Bricca is often in a position to save the police considerable effort and embarrassment. Of course he takes a juicy cut of the reward money for himself. That's no secret, but catching him off base with it is something else again." "Very interesting, Luke. Also very irrelevant, isn't it?"

"In playing a three-way game that way — that is, playing the thieves, the cops, and the insurance company off against one another - Bricca could easily get caught in the cross fire. That might be why he's suddenly so absent. At least he's not fouled up with the law again. There aren't any indictments or charges pending against him — nothing like that."

"Good, good. So now we can stop worrying about that

part."

"It's a question, though, whether Goodlee's story about Bricca's disappearance is entirely on the level."

I groaned and took a tighter grip. "Luke, we need more information from Goodlee about Avis. I want you to go back to the office and camp there. If he should happen to call in later tonight, ask him --- "

"You mean you're taking over Monica?"
"Yes, in order to shift you onto the main track of the case. Tell Mr. Goodlee we want a list of Avis's closest friends - also her favorite hangouts - any special interests such as tennis or bowling or ice skating. You know what to ask him for. Also, since he can't finger the girl herself, we need a good photo of her. Keep busy on it, Luke."

This was like asking steam to be hot, but Speare took it in his usual good spirit. He rose immediately, tucking his notes into a pocket and saying, "That taxi out there is waiting for you — and here comes Monica now."

She left the lobby and moved forward under the green canopy with a peculiar slowness, seeming to drift rather than walk. A uniformed attendant, having opened the glass door for her, hurried ahead and shrilled his whistle at passing taxis. She kept one dark-gloved hand closed tightly on the throat of her mink coat; with the other she held one of the posts of the canopy, steadying herself. She waited with a strained ladylike smile until the attendant had flagged down a taxi for her, and she wobbled on her spike heels as he helped her into it.

As my taxi started up First Avenue after Monica's, I caught a last glimpse of Speare trudging off toward our

office, dutiful in body if not in mind.

This chase promised to be short and purely routine. My driver, following instructions, kept Monica's in sight through a series of turns that brought us into Eighty-second Street. I was half a block behind her when she alighted.

She paid her driver and waved him off without waiting for her change. She stood there facing the entrance, strangely

immobile yet seeming to sway a little.

Perhaps she was waiting for the doorman to come, to take her arm and help her in. He didn't come. He was away from his post, ignorant that a woman in distress needed him. Nor did any gallant gentleman happen along. She lowered her head, overwhelmed with dizziness, unable to take a single step.

"Driver," I said quickly, hoping to reach her before she

dropped, "stop there."

She dropped even as I spoke — became a soft, still heap

of mink on the wet sidewalk.

I hurried to her and picked her up in my arms. Her face was drained white; a vein in her throat throbbed very rapidly. Still no doorman had come to help. I carried her in the door, pressed it open with the round of my back, then went on across the lobby to an elevator, wherein the operator, a frail white-haired man, was reading a child's discarded comic book.

He started up, suddenly frightened and breathless, and

blurted, "But - Mrs. Goodlee!"

"She fainted on the sidewalk. I'm a doctor. Take us up to

her apartment."

Monica Goodlee lay light in my arms while the car rose. Her breath came short and fast through her loosely parted lips. I smelled alcohol on it, but faintly. Her lashes were long

and black against the faint sick grayness of the skin under her eyes. She was out cold and she stayed that way all the

way up - but not from drink.

The operator jerked the panel open, scurried across a vestibule to a green door, and frantically thumbed a button. A long thirty seconds passed before George Goodlee opened the door. He stood still, coatless, staring first at Monica, then at me.

"I'm Dr. Cole," I said for the operator's benefit. "I saw her

fall on the sidewalk. Where do you want her?"

Goodlee blurted, "Bring her in here," then turned and walked rapidly, leading me down a hallway and through a door to a large, silk-covered bed. I lowered Monica to it gently and opened her coat. Her mint-green dress was sopping red with blood in the region of her right hip.

"Good God," Goodlee said softly.

I had felt something heavy in the pocket of Monica's coat and now I fished it out. It was a pearl-handled automatic. A .32 — not too heavy for a delicate hand.

Staring at it, Goodlee moaned. "That's mine. Belongs here."

"It's been fired."

He snatched it from me, tossed it to the foot of the bed, and bent over Monica. He found the zipper on the blood-soaked side of her dress. I saw the wound just below the bone and a little forward on her round hip — a dark blue spot and a blue-black line four inches long where a bullet had pierced and furrowed under the skin. The bullet was still in there.

Goodlee stiffened in dismay, jerked the fur coat back to cover the wound, and stayed bent, staring up at me.

"She — she has nothing on under her dress. Nothing at all."

He meant nothing but stockings.

"Its not serious, but you'll have to call your doctor," I said. "Doctors are required by law to report gunshot wounds."

"No, no." Almost too dazed to speak at all, he was staring down at Monica under her mink, trying to understand what

he had seen. "No, no, I'm sure — get around that — some way. Cole — leave this to me."

"She's staying out rather a long time. But did you notice

her eyelids flicker?"

"Leave this to me, I said." He turned rough, almost savage. "Get out of here now, Cole."

Evidently fearing Monica might recover momentarily and see me there, he pushed me out of the room, not gently, and

shut the door at my back.

I heard him flicking through the pages of a telephone directory, then dialing a number. I would get out of here now, in accordance with my client's wishes — taking with me a bit of information which I would give him later, if he didn't have it already.

Perhaps he hadn't noticed that although there was a bullet hole in Monica there was no bullet hole in Monica's dress.

## FIVE

THE WISPY white-haired operator was waiting inside the elevator.

"No cause for alarm," I assured him. "None at all. Well, well. It must be a year or more since I was last in this building. My old friends the Jacquieres still live here, I imagine?"

"The Jacquieres? We have no one by that name, sir."

Hmmm. I thought I'd better double-check this. "They must have moved away, then. Had the penthouse, you know."

"I'm afraid you've mistaken the building, sir. We have no

penthouse."

I descended the rest of the way in sober silence. The doorman had not yet returned to duty. I pushed my own way out and found it had started to snow again. Automatically I looked around for a taxi, although I didn't really want one. Facing abrupt readjustments, I felt urged toward caution and economy.

I walked toward the corner slowly and thoughtfully until I saw that a bus was stopping, then hustled on to catch it. Only half noticing a woman who hopped on behind me, I performed the ritual of paying my fare and finding a seat while fuming inwardly over the trickeries of George Goodlee.

"I live in this building," he had told me with a straight face, "not at the penthouse level, like the Jacquieres, but much more modestly, in the rear, on the court." But there

wasn't any penthouse. There weren't any Jacquieres. The Goodlee apartment wasn't in the rear, on the court. As I had just seen for myself, it was on the front, on the corner, and expensively high up. I had observed nothing overly modest about its furnishings, either.... Only one small part of Goodlee's statement was fact; he did live in the building.

The bus lumbered along the cold wintry avenue while the temperature under my collar remained tropical. I couldn't doubt that George Goodlee, for purposes of his own, had meant to go right on carefully misrepresenting himself to me. It showed at least bad faith. As for Monica and her bullet wound — she was a wide-open invitation to compound another felony and I would be smart to duck it. Under the circumstances I was left with no choice but to return Goodlee's retainer, less forty dollars and one day's expenses.

This would get me out of the Goodlee hassle, but it would leave me with another delicate problem — how to save my face while admitting to Luke Speare how goddamn right he

was.

When I dropped off the bus two long blocks from my office, still smoldering, I hardly noticed, again, the woman who alighted at the same corner. Not until I turned at Lexington did I happen to glance back and see her. She was still with me. She was carrying a black umbrella and wearing a transparent plastic-fabric cape over her coat.

She turned after me with her umbrella lowered to conceal her face except for an occasional bobbing glance to make

sure she still had me on the hook.

This was ridiculous. As Speare had already pointed out, most of the participants in this case were missing to begin with, and now it appeared that most of those still in circulation were busily tailing one another. Goodlee, while being tailed himself, according to Speare's all too solid theory, had hired us to tail his wife, and even before that an unidentified female had begun tailing us. There must be a reason for this undercover merry-go-round, but I didn't care to hear it. All I wanted was to stop the whole silly business dead in its tracks.

I turned abruptly and entered a cafeteria. After a moment the woman came in after me. Unable to use her open umbrella as a shield indoors, she had pulled the hood of her cape over her head. I bought a cup of coffee and took it to a table. She bought a cup of coffee and took it to another table, where she could watch my reflection on the glass of the window. That move had a professional touch.

Sitting there with her back to me, she lowered the hood of her cape. Her face remained concealed. Her hair was black, except at the roots, where it was lighter. This seemed to indicate she was a natural blonde who had dved her hair in order to become a brunette. Unusual girl. Either she was on the lam, or she was a girl who had ideas of her own, or both. Had a certain tenacity of purpose, too. We had shaken her once, but she had picked us up again somehow hours later, and she seemed willing to stick to me the rest of the night if necessary.

I finished my coffee and sidled into a telephone booth. She went on sipping hers and watching me while I poked at the dial.

"Cole Detective Agency." Speare's voice came brightly. "Has Goodlee called in, Luke?"

"Not yet, Schy."

"When he does, don't treat him like a client. Be cool. Tell him nothing, except that I damned well want to see him personally as soon as possible."

"Ah?"

"No comment, please. Here's something especially for you. Your web-footed girl friend - the one who shadowed us from Bricca's office this afternoon - is tagging after me again. If you want her, you can have her."

"Sure," Speare said without hesitation. "Thanks."

"Long enough to get rid of her, I mean. I'm in the cafeteria directly across from the office, on Lex. I'll wait here until you've had a chance to come down and get set. She'll follow me out, and of course you'll follow her. I'll lead her right around the corner into the Commodore and shake her there."

This could be easily managed because the hotel has multiple exits. I would leave her at loose ends in the large and busy lobby, and Speare would carry on from there, following her wherever she might go on her own. It was a nuisance, but it might help us to learn why she had become so devoted to us.

"O.K.," Speare said eagerly. "Let's go. . . ."

I was in my office an hour later, waiting, when Speare rang in.

"Here's where she went, Schy." He gave me an address near Riverside Drive and Columbia University. "It's an old house remodeled into small apartments. Students mostly, at a guess. Nice place."

"Get her name?"

"Right off her mailbox," Speare answered. "Fern Stevens."

Tony Bricca's secretary.

"Come away," I said instantly. "Leave her there. I have an overpowering lack of interest in Miss Fern Stevens. She's a girl I want to forget — and I hope I can soon make it mutual."

### SIX

AT SEVEN-THIRTY the next morning a hand shook my shoulder. It was a hand of nightmarish energy. Of course it was Speare's.

"News on TV," he said hurriedly. "She's turned up."

I pulled the back of my head loose from a pool of tar and asked, "She? Whosat?"

"Hannah Feger," he said, and went hustling off into foggy

space.

I pushed myself up to a sitting position and managed to stay balanced there, hunch-shouldered. This was my bedroom in the walk-up flat I share with Speare. Bright lamps were burning. The aroma of coffee put a semblance of life into the air. Without looking into Speare's room, I knew his bed was already made, its corners squared and coverlet smoothed, everything tidy enough to pass an army inspection. He had been up and buzzing about since some unreasonable dawny hour, just as he is every day, including Sundays. Usually he has bustled off on the job before I am able to gather sufficient strength to believe that life can be livable, but today he was giving me an unmercifully early start because something had come up.

Something about Hannah Feger . . . Hannah Feger . . . ?

I'd never heard of her, but no matter; she was urgent.

I groped my way into the living room. There I found Speare fully dressed, even to his topcoat and hat. He was

thoughtfully sipping coffee while watching the television set.

I blinked my eyes clear and watched also, with misgivings, still feeling depressed from the session I had had with this contraption after midnight last night. All I had asked of it then was the late-late news bulletins or perhaps a bit of diversion. Instead, it had blandly but persistently pointed out that we cannot hope to be more than mortal. Every station was showing an old movie, and on my first try I had found the shade of the late Leslie Howard enacting Shaw's Pygmalion. Not being in the mood for social comedy among specters, I had switched to other channels only to find myself face to face with the late Carole Lombard, the late Wallace Beery, the late Richard Dix, and the late Marie Dressler, all as bright as life and twice as chipper. They had all departed this earth years ago, and there I was with the ghostly lot of them, a living man who felt much less joie de vivre than they did. It was unnerving. I had shut off the damned spook box and had fled to my bed feeling inescapably haunted.

Its fare this morning was hardly more cheery.

A news program was on. An unseen announcer was speaking while a still photograph filled the screen. Even the goreloving tabloids might prefer to pass up this one. It showed several overcoated policemen standing over a human body lifelessly and gruesomely sprawled on stained snow. It had been hit by a car or a truck, if not actually run over. I could have started the day without this new graphic reminder that life is short and death sometimes damned messy. Murder, especially before breakfast, is not my dish.

"Passing driver found her at what they called an early hour this morning, on South Street, near Fulton Fish Market," Speare said, rapidly briefing me on the details already announced. "Dumped there, of course. Death occurred several

days ago, apparently, from three bullets in the chest."

I had recognized her from her clothing and knew that the supply closet in the back room of Tony Bricca's office was now vacant. The woman who had been sitting there so patiently for so long had been escorted out during the night. "Mrs. Hannah Feger, the widow of a police detective, be-

came a licensed private investigator two years ago," the announcer informed us. "She worked as a free-lance. Homicidesquad detectives are making an effort to learn which detective agency, if any, was using her services at the time she was killed."

The obituary ended there and the picture switched to a

shot of a waterfront fire in Hoboken.

"There are approximately two hundred and fifty private detective agencies in New York City," Speare remarked, "and most of them are morning glories" — meaning that they open up brightly and after a brief day die on the vine. "If and when they get around to Bricca's, they'll find him deep in another spell of amnesia, if they find him at all."

Speare was so unbearably awake. I found my way into

the kitchen in search of fortitude.

"Last night was made to order for getting Hannah out of there," he went on. "Very few souls venturing about."

I reached for the life-giving coffeepot.

"This doesn't necessarily mean it was Bricca or Fern who did the dumping," Speare pointed out. "Neither has a car registered in this state."

"You checked on that?"

"Yesterday. Of course either of them, or both, or even a couple of other guys, could have hired a car for the job."

I poured a brimming cup.

"We don't actually know whether Bricca is the murderer or another of the murderer's victims. He may even be an innocent bystander. He still hasn't shown at his apartment -I just checked that too, with the building superintendent but now that Hannah is out of the way he may come back into circulation."

I was through kidding myself. Orders or no orders, client or no client, there was no really effective way of keeping Speare off this case.

"As for Monica, our next move seems fairly inevitable," he said, all eagerness to get at it. "We want to know in which seventh-floor apartment a gun boomed last night."

I shook my head. "So far I have had no instructions from

Goodlee to find out where Monica abandoned her lingerie. In fact, as you know, Luke, I've had no word at all from him since the blood-letting."

When telling Speare about it I had, of course, included the evidence indicating it had occurred while Monica was naked. I had pointed out that the most obvious inference to be drawn here was probably true, although Monica's nudity at the time of the shooting did not necessarily disagree with her husband's description of her as strictly an angle-playing woman rather than the passionate all-for-love type. Conceivably she might have been playing a fancy kind of angle that somehow required the removal of all her clothes.

Speare had listened to this in a curiously rapt silence, with a bemused expression on his face. I had gone on to explain that the shooting might or might not have something to do with our assignment to find Goodlee's runaway daughter. Either way, Monica's injury had put her out of action tem-

porarily as a lead to Avis.

I had not yet told Speare that the incident had also served to bear out his suspicion that Goodlee had not come clean with me, I suspected he really didn't need telling.

"Having slept on it, Luke, I've decided to bow out of the case. It's too risky. I can't let Goodlee involve us in a tangle

of hushed-up felonies."

"But you're not going to drop it as it is, are you, Schy?" Speare asked with an astonished stare. "Shouldn't we find out what we've been sucked into, if only as a measure of self-defense?"

"I expect to have something of a showdown with Goodlee

when I hand him my refund check."

"This is unheard of," Speare observed. "A private detective returning a man's money for no reason other than one of ethics."

"It's an expensive decision to make all right, and painful too, but naturally I've got to think of the future of my agency—assuming it has one. I'm convinced the smartest move we can make is to kiss all the Goodlees good-by, then sit down and wait for a less slippery case to walk in."

Speare looked crestfallen.

"But," I added, chiefly to keep him happy, "I want Goodlee to understand he hasn't exactly played me for a chump. When I face him I want to feel solidly backed up with the facts of who and what he really is."

"That's for me," Speare said, pouncing on it.
"Certainly. See what you can dig up, Luke, while I hold down the fort."

He went out, brisk and eager. He hurried back in five seconds later, fished into his pockets, found a memo, and left it in my hands.

"That's a complete list of the tenants on the seventh floor, including the one who punctured Monica, perhaps. Since we're out of the case now, I thought you might want to dis-

pose of it."

He hastened out again, leaving me puzzled, not by his tactics, but by his choice of words. What did he mean, "perhaps"? Was there any doubt that somebody living on the seventh floor had put that bullet into Monica's bare hip? To me it seemed a sure thing. However, I didn't intend to argue the point. Monica was not my headache. I disposed of her assailant by dropping Speare's list into the wastebasket.

After three more cups of coffee I began to feel the stirrings of a sense of survival. Showered, shaved, and dressed, I went out to grapple with another day and found little remaining of last night's storm. The pavements were cleared except for the blackish frozen stuff piled along the gutters. The sun was a floating smear in the smog above Brooklyn. The dim gray day was made a little brighter by the gift-wrapped cartons of cigarettes in the drugstore windows, by Miss Rheingold in her ermine-lined parka smiling from every bar, and by the ubiquitous Santas (morning shift) tending their cold chimneys along the way, with only thirteen more days to go before extinction.

Speare, busy with his researches into Goodlee's character, had not stopped in at the office. There was no mail, not even any bills. The Times had no mention of Monica Goodlee, which meant the police hadn't yet heard about her gunshot

wound, which meant in turn that her doctor was risking his professional neck.

While waiting for Speare's return I added up my expenses

on the Goodlee case, then got busy with the phone.

My resourceful assistant is not the only member of my agency who knows people in useful places. My old friends of my four-martini-two-hour-lunch advertising days also have their ins, and they are glad to do a favor for a pal even though he has gone straight. After three calls and ten minutes I had the unpublished telephone number of George Goodlee's apartment.

I was answered by a hushed feminine voice. "Yes, please?"

"Is that Mrs. Goodlee speaking?"

"No, sir. Mrs. Goodlee is not to be disturbed."

"May I speak with Mr. George Goodlee?"

"Mr. Goodlee has left for the day."

I should have let it go at that, but this quasi client of mine was a man I wanted to see.

"I'm Dr. Cole, Dr. Schyler Cole. I saw Mrs. Goodlee yesterday before her family physician took over. This is purely a courtesy call."

"Yes, Dr. Cole. Nurse Brennan speaking. Mrs. Goodlee is sleeping now." Lucky girl. "Dr. Knox says she can get up if she wants to, provided she takes it slow and easy."

"Very good. Now. I would like to speak with Mrs. Good-

lee's husband."

"I'm sorry, Doctor, but he really has left for his place of business."

I thanked her and said good-by.

"I'll tell Mrs. Goodlee you called, Dr. Cole."

The telephone number of Jacquiere, Ltd., was nobody's secret. It was right there in the phone book in bold, black type so that anyone wishing to buy a diamond necklace could find it without the inconvenience of asking the butler to fetch a reading glass. Disregarding Goodlee's orders, I dialed that one next.

At this inelegant hour Jacquiere's famous door on Fifth Avenue was probably sealed as tight as Fort Knox, but there

was activity inside the vaults. I was answered. The voice was male and as dulcet as that of a poet reading his own works.

"Jacquiere, and good morning."
"Mr. George Goodlee, please?"
"Certainly, sir. One moment."

This seemed too easy. It was. The next voice I heard was not Goodlee's, but a woman's, also melodious.

"Miss Scott, good morning, may I help you?"

I had a feeling I was wasting my life away in this telephonic ritualism. "Yes, indeed you may, by telling Mr. Goodlee he's receiving a call from Mr. Cole."

Miss Scott asked me politely if I would mind holding on for just a moment. I said I wouldn't mind. There followed a period of murmuring on the wire, several moments long.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Cole," Miss Scott said then, "but we've

just had word that Mr. Goodlee won't be in until later."

"Until how much later?"

"I really can't say, Mr. Cole."

I was beginning to burn again. I can recognize a brush-off when I'm getting one. It was coming straight from Goodlee himself. He was there, all right — this man who had been so desperately in need of my help last evening but so willing to get along without it this morning.

"Please tell Mr. Goodlee that Mr. Cole has a check for him to the amount of \$453.15, which I will deliver to him

personally not very much later in the day. . . . "

I was writing the check, with regrets, when Speare hurried in with an air of uneasy achievement. Obviously he had the goods on Goodlee. He came straight to my desk with several still damp photostats in his hands.

"Easy pickings," he said, short of breath. "Right out of the

Trib's morgue," and he handed me the first news clip.

It was distinctly minor — a single-deck headline followed by fifteen or twenty lines of type, the kind of item used to fill a newspaper page between the big stories above and the ads below. Date-lined Johannesburg, South Africa, November 3, it was a matter-of-fact report of the finding of a large

rough diamond by a planter and prospector named Garibaldi De Vecchi.

The diamond weighed 616 carats and was described as being slightly smaller than a hen's egg. The fortunate De Vecchi had come upon the stone almost at his own doorstep, in a puddle of blue mud that had been washed down a rugged hillside during the night by a heavy rain. De Vecchi had accepted the offer of an undisclosed sum of money from an affiliate of the De Beers syndicate, and the stone had been flown to London.

"So?" I said. "Has this something to do with us?"

"In a way," Speare said, handing me the second item.

This one was only four lines long. It was date-lined London, November 4. An option to buy the De Vecchi rough had been given by the Diamond Trading Company to George Goodlee, the well-known owner of Jacquiere, Ltd., of Fifth Avenue, New York.

Owner? This man had told me, straight-faced, "I'm just a salesman, quite a minor member of the staff. . . ." Owner?

Speare quietly showed me more items, all relating the progress of the De Vecchi rough. George Goodlee, of Jacquiere, Ltd., had flown to London to devote several weeks to examining the stone. George Goodlee of Jacquiere, Ltd., upon completing his examination of the De Vecchi, had entered his bid. George Goodlee, of Jacquiere, Ltd., had been permitted to purchase the De Vecchi at his bid price of six hundred thousand dollars. . . .

"What does it say there, Luke?"

"It says six hundred thousand dollars."

This was not a typographical error? The correct amount was not six thousand, or sixty, but six hundred thousand dollars and no cents?

"Goodlee wrote his check for the full amount," Speare explained, "then walked out with the rock in the same way that you or I might buy a golf ball."

I went on staring at the news items. The last of them was the longest. It reported the arrival of George Goodlee, of

Jacquiere, Ltd., at Idlewild Airport "this morning" — which was exactly two weeks ago — and it went on:

Mr. Goodlee personally brought back with him the De Vecchi diamond, which he had succeeded in acquiring in London over the stiff competition of jewelers from all over the world, including several of the most prominent in this city. Mr. Goodlee declared himself proud and delighted to be the owner of the De Vecchi, which he asserts is flawless, of perfect blue-white color, and undoubtedly one of the world's most notable treasures.

His purchase of the De Vecchi, Mr. Goodlee readily admitted, was the first step in a carefully planned investment. He expects the stone, after cleaving, to yield more than twenty pieces. The largest fragment, to be fashioned into a pendant of about fifty carats, will be known as the De Vecchi I, and will become one of the ranking

jewels of history.

All the gems cut from the De Vecchi will be offered exclusively at Jacquiere, Ltd., of which Mr. Goodlee is sole owner.

Sole owner, it said.

While we were briefly on the case I had charged Mr. George Goodlee, sole owner of Jacquiere, Ltd., expenses totaling six dollars and eighty-five cents.

The telephone rang then. I didn't hear it, but Speare did, and answered it. I became aware in a dazed way that he was

pushing the phone into my hands.

"Mr. Cole?" a sweet feminine voice was saying. "Mr.

George Goodlee calling."

"Cole?" a decisive male voice said next. "Can't blame you for feeling I owe you an explanation. I do, and I intend to give it to you. Come on over here and let me put my cards on the table."

"That I'd like to see."

"Eleven o'clock. All right? I'll expect you. And Cole. As for that check you mentioned to my secretary — bring it."

Then he hung up. Hard . . .

I had no cause for complaint really. After all, I had wanted out, hadn't I?

#### SEVEN

THE FRONT of Jacquiere's still resembles that of an aristocratic town house at the turn of the century, which it then was. Its original wrought-iron gate, stoutly mounted in ageless gray stone, is locked with a giant brass key every evening at five. This is purely ceremonial. Any amateur Raffles could open this tired old lock in ten seconds flat, using a bent bobbypin. The real job of protecting the shop's contents from five until ten the next morning is adequately done by two walk-in vaults, six modern safes, a touchy burglar-alarm system, and two insomnious night watchmen.

The famous name of Jacquiere appears on the fanlight above the entrance in chaste white script. Each of the three show windows, no bigger than a suitcase, displays a single piece of jewelry against a background of dark velvet—a pearl necklace in this one, a pair of diamond and emerald dress clips in the next, and in the other a ruby-encrusted cigarette case. It is all so genteel and modest and fabulously expensive that thousands of men pass by every day without noticing it's there.

But women notice. The female's eye is mysteriously and magnetically drawn. Her feet stop; she turns to feast and dream. To her the sidewalk at Jacquiere's, like those at Cartier's and Tiffany's farther up the avenue, is quicksand, where feminine vanity, or self-idealization, or illusion, or

whatever it is, sinks in hopeless yearning. Especially at Christmas time a long look into Jacquiere's window can convince a hitherto happy woman, fresh from lunch at Twenty One, that's she's little better than a luckless waif.

Luke Speare and I, arriving at five minutes before eleven, passed two such unblessed creatures on our way in. We found ourselves in an entrance room where four crystal chandeliers hung from the high vaulted ceiling on long velvet-clad chains. Their light played on a burbling fountain of cut glass in the center of the deep gray rug. It was like no other room I had ever seen — not a shop, or a parlor, or a waiting room, or least of all a conventional jewelry store. No jewelry was on display.

Instead of showcases and counters there were desks—French antiques—six of them in two rows, luxuriously spaced. Customers—clients, rather—seated at two of them were waiting while salesmen brought them trays of rings and broaches. The salesmen didn't look like butlers, as I had vaguely expected; they were ordinary business suits—courte-

ous men, casually dignified, and a little musty.

At another desk a thin-lipped woman in sables was scrutinizing her image in a mirror while a salesman draped a diamond necklace about her throat. There was no glow, no flush of pleasure on her face. Her eyes were narrowed; she was a study in shrewd, cold calculation. There was something blood-chilling about her — but this, I later learned, was quite normal in a woman choosing one of the world's costliest adornments for herself.

With a small shudder I turned to a lean, bald man who

was approaching with a vicar's pink-cheeked smile.

"Mr. Goodlee is expecting me," I said, with a feeling of guilt that this hardly justified my presence.

"You'll find him on --- "

"The mezzanine?"

"Yes, sir. If you'll just take those stairs ——"

"To what was formerly the office of the late M'sieur Jacques Jacquiere?"

"Why, yes, sir. Did you know him?"

"Briefly," I said in wry tones, and went on, with Speare following.

The sabled woman had decided against the necklace. She just didn't like it. The sale would have added possibly two or three hundred thousand dollars to the day's take. The salesman accepted her decision as mildly as if she had declined a second cup of tea.

We climbed a curving marble staircase. Halfway along the balcony an open door invited us into a reception room. More cut-glass chandeliers hung — fine old museum pieces, probably — from another high ceiling. The windows were as narrow and as deep as phone booths and twice as tall. The rug and the upholstery were pale blue against eggshell walls. George Goodlee wasn't here, but we were getting warmer.

The young woman behind the desk in the far corner was dark and sleek, with high cheekbones and a lively smile.

"Mr. Cole? And Mr. Speare? I'm Miss Scott. Mr. Goodlee will be all yours in half a minute. Would you like to look around?"

No. I would rather keep looking at Miss Scott. It occurred to me that she was the only female employee I had seen in the place so far — a circumstance which might possibly make her job a ticklish problem.

Speare, acting on her suggestion, began by examining the pictures on the walls. Some of these were the designers' finished drawings for various costly pendants, chokers, and similar gewgaws custom-made by Jacquiere for its fussiest and best-heeled clients. A large group of framed photos in one corner had been presented to George Goodlee by various celebrities, tycoons, and potentates. Surprisingly few Hollywood actresses were included, but considerable space was given to four portraits, big as posters, of dark-skinned men—the Maharajah of Durbanga, the Nawab of Rampur, the Maharajah of Jaipur and the Rajah of Dhragandra. Their inscriptions unanimously expressed affection for George Goodlee as a seller of trinkets.

"Is it true," Speare asked Miss Scott casually, "that some

famous gems have a curse on them - the Hope diamond, for example?"

Surprising question, coming from the unmystical Speare.

Miss Scott responded to it with a shining smile.

"Silly superstition, isn't it? Obviously, anyone who owns a

forty- or fifty-carat diamond is not exactly jinxed."

"Sensible way of looking at it," Speare agreed affably. "Proportionately, then, the man who owns the De Vecchi should consider himself loaded with good luck."

"Mr. Goodlee is marvelously fortunate to have the De

Vecchi. We're all proud as peacocks. Perhaps you would like to read about it?"

Miss Scott offered Speare a morocco-bound book from her desk. He immediately took it over to a pale blue chair. I would have preferred to do my researching directly with Miss Scott, but she was suddenly engrossed with a problem in communications — her intercom and two telephones all sounded off at the same moment. I left her reluctantly to join Speare, who was already leafing through the book.

The gold-stamped cover read, The De Vecchi of Jacquiere. This expensive, privately printed job, published in an edition limited to fifty copies, was designed to impress feature writers as well as prospective clients. It reproduced the same news clips Speare had turned up and added others from papers in South Africa, London, Antwerp, and Paris, to fill out the

glittery story of discovery.

The De Vecchi, said the book, in form and composition was characteristically a river diamond. It showed the typical specks of iron oxide and sand, some of these forced into the open cracks by the action of flowing water; it had also the typical soft blue fire and frosted gray coat. Unlike other sizable diamonds, there were only a few skin flaws; internally it had not one.

The frontispiece of the book was a life-size photograph of the De Vecchi rough. It was disappointing. Certainly this must be a poor likeness of the diamond. It looked like nothing more exciting than a melted-down coke bottle.

"Six hundred grand for that," I muttered in Speare's ear.

"It must be the next to the biggest damn diamond in the whole damn world."

"Not quite."

Speare flipped pages and pointed to a list:

	The largest known pieces of rough are:	
1	The Cullinan	3025.75 carats
2	The Excelsior	971.75
3	The Vargas	726.60
4	The Jonker	726.00
5	The Jubilee	640.00
6	The De Vecchi	616.00

So the De Vecchi was only the sixth biggest. Small-time stuff. A mere six hundred thousand dollars' worth. I won-

dered dizzily how much the big leaguers had cost.

"It just doesn't make sense," I complained. "There isn't a person on earth who can't live without that thing. Nobody really needs it. Chemically it's the same substance as common coal and the cores of penny lead pencils. What makes it worth so much of anybody's money?"

"The fact that George Goodlee paid six hundred thousand dollars for it makes it worth at least that much," Speare answered, "plus the fact that other people are going to pay him a handsome profit on the deal. Other than that, the

whole thing, as you say, is silly."

The brochure went on to discuss the coming crisis in the De Vecchi's career — the cleaving of the rough into a number of smaller chunks preparatory to cutting these into gems. Diamonds, it explained, have grain like wood, although the grain is far finer and almost invisible. Its direction may elude even the most skilled gemmologist's eye. The finding of the one correct plane of cleavage is a complex problem, full of potential disaster. In diamond splitting there is no margin for error — it is either done perfectly, to the fraction of a millimeter, or the stone shatters into worthless bits, utterly ruined. Three of the world's greatest stones, the Cullinan, the Jonker, and the Vargas, were successfully cleaved, but

two other fine ones, the Philippe and the Sforza, were lost by fracture. To make the risk even greater, a cleaving cannot be insured.

"In this respect, however, the De Vecchi is an unusually straightforward project. Mr. Goodlee himself is plotting the plane, and the actual cleaving will be done by the master lapidary Jacobus Wells, in whom Mr. Goodlee has complete confidence. One fine day when the moment feels propitious—after having practiced the stroke for months—Mr. Wells will take up his specially constructed, counterbalanced mallet and his dull-edged wedge. Under a single light blow, calculated to carry no more than two foot-pounds of force, the De Vecchi will fall apart in the lapidary's hand exactly as planned.

"The first cleaving will be followed by seven others, and the eventual result, after more months of sawing and meticu-lously careful cutting, will be twenty-two perfect blue-white gems mounted in specially designed platinum bracelets and

necklaces."

The largest of these, the pendant of approximately fifty carats to be known as the De Vecchi I, would be priced at one million dollars, including its chain of emerald-cut diamonds. Altogether the De Vecchi would add up to more than one and a half million dollars' worth of historic jewelry.

"Nine hundred thousand dollars profit," I mumbled, "less

certain small expenses and overhead. Not bad. Not bad at

all - except that I can't really grasp it."

"Well, anyhow," Speare answered quietly, "we're no longer

concerned."

He was so right. Now that I knew George Goodlee outranked, astronomically, any previous client I had ever had — or ever would have, for that matter — we were no longer concerned. Any other private detective in Greater New York would have clung to him, considering him a diamond mine on legs, but me, I had lofty principles. It might also be said I had a skull full of rocks. . . .

Looking at the other side of it, however, my decision seemed not entirely knuckleheaded. It was still true that the

Goodlee assignment had led me straight into a dangerous acquaintance with at least two concealed crimes: one woman murdered and a second shot while nude. I found it hard to think levelly about the problem here, the atmosphere being as heady as it was, but I still felt it would be prudent of me to avoid compounding these several felonies, even for a VIP of Goodlee's magnitude.

"I would like to give Goodlee his money back and clear out of here," I said. "I feel like a kleptomaniac in Fort Knox,

and it's scaring the bejeepers out of me."

There followed a moment of minor activity. Speare rose with an air of reluctant finality to return the book and at the same time a uniformed delivery boy entered from the balcony, evidently following up one of the many messages Miss Scott had received. One sleeve of his natty tunic bore in gold the name of Orpingham's, a super-classy gift shop located near by on the avenue. He bore to Miss Scott a cubical box, almost as wide as his shoulders, gorgeously wrapped in black cellophane and topped by an enormous fancy bow of silver ribbon. She signed for it, and as the boy withdrew, George Goodlee appeared in the doorway behind her. Without greeting us he frowned at the box.

"For you, Mr. Goodlee," Miss Scott said. She had found an envelope containing a vellum card. "With esteem and af-

fection from Mrs. Parker Edgerton."

"Oh, God, not a Christmas present." It was a tired moan. "Please, not from a woman of her taste. Well, open it. Cole,

Speare, please come in now."

He followed us into his small comfortable office and gestured us to a pair of modern wrought-iron chairs. No cutglass chandeliers dangled here. The traditional décor of the downstairs regions did not penetrate this far; this room was contemporary at least. Goodlee's metal desk resembled a stratoliner in flight, and his chair, body-molded of plastic and glass fiber, was one of those that win prizes for excellence in modern design and look like nothing so much as the east end of an old-fashioned bathtub heading west.

These surroundings served pleasantly for conferences with

favored clients. An open door connected with another office in the rear, an even more businesslike one, containing a massive safe and a table scattered with letters and sketches. Together the two were the managerial fountainhead of Jacquiere.

Miss Scott entered carrying the unwrapped gift. It was a terrestrial globe of cloudy gray glass mounted on a hemispherical shell of burnished steel. The continents were outlined in red, and in East Africa a red dot indicated Tanganyika, where the De Vecchi was found.

Goodlee looked at it without comment, but dejectedly. He pointed to a table in front of a window; as Miss Scott placed it there it gave off a tinny ring. Noticing an electric cord attached to it, she plugged it in. The globe shone with a

misty light and began slowly to revolve on its axis.

Goodlee shrugged unhappily. "A hazard of the trade, gentlemen. I'm stuck with this objet d'art. It had damned well better be out in plain sight, and running, whenever Mrs. Edgerton calls. Otherwise she would be offended. Then she would take her business up the avenue to Harry Winston, which would cost me about sixty thousand a year." He sank heavily into his tublike chair. "That's all for now, Miss Scott. No interruptions, please. You have my permission to giggle."

Miss Scott didn't giggle. Leaving the donor's card on his desk, she went out looking sorry for him — and with reason. His square, strong face was dark with anxiety and fatigue. He had had a wicked succession of bad nights, beginning eleven days ago with a runaway daughter and culminating

eleven hours ago with a bullet-punctured wife.

In my hand I had the refund check — a trifling item to Mr. Goodlee, of course, though still an important one to me. Before letting go of it I felt I should observe the amenities.

"And how is Mrs. Goodlee feeling this morning?"

"Better than she lets on. I don't know what that wound really means. She explained it, but her explanation is a bit unlikely. She's lying her pretty head off about it and I'm letting her think I believe her. Kicking her out wouldn't help

matters now. I still haven't had one word from Avis, and Monica is still my only visible lead to her." He stared at me a moment. "You refuse to go on with it? I don't understand your objections."

"Neither do I exactly," I admitted, and I proffered the check, half hoping he would wave it back. But he didn't. He accepted it, dropped it into a drawer, and there it lay, gone

forever.

"My real purpose in hiring you, Cole, was exactly what I said it was — to find Avis. True, there's more to the case than that — far more — but I meant it when I said I would handle the rest myself. In its essentials I gave you a straight story."

"While at the same time giving me a very phony picture

of yourself. What for?"

"I didn't know you. I desperately needed professional help—and still do—but offhand I couldn't judge how far I could rely on you to find the way out of this foul-up. Already I'd been let down by one detective, and I couldn't risk any jockeying about on your part. By that I mean that if you knew the true stakes in the game you might get jittery and fumble, or you might begin stringing it out for fees. Besides all this, Cole, as we both know, too many private detectives are looking for a juicy sucker to bleed, and I'm fully aware of the fact that I'm wide open to blackmail.

"There it is. I simply took precautions. I still think it was

a sensible thing to do. Can you disagree with that?"

"A private detective is like a lawyer," I said without committing myself. "Hold out on him and you handicap him, to your own disadvantage."

"I naturally tried to minimize the danger to my daughter."

"Danger?" I asked that one quickly. "Isn't this something you haven't mentioned before?"

"By that I mean Millard is in a desperate spot himself and

there's no telling what crazy thing he might do next."

Goodlee turned his chair to gaze moodily at that slowly revolving globe. It seemed to have no other purpose than to remind us our lives were inexorably reeling away.

"There is a certain diamond I recently bought called the De Vecchi."

"There's no need to give us a rundown on it," I said. "We learned about the De Vecchi a couple of hours ago. Six hundred thousand dollars' worth."

Goodlee nodded, still gazing at the glowing globe. "Remarkable thing about diamonds. Although they cost a lot of money they're not in the least snobbish. In themselves they have no more morals than a stray puppy; they're perfectly willing to belong to anybody. They just don't care what company they keep."

Speare sat up straighter, his eyes intent on Goodlee.

"A diamond as rare as the De Veechi, however, can exert a powerful effect on the people around it. It has beauty, subtlety, allure. It's hard—the hardest substance on earth—and remote and glacial. It can inspire awe and reverence in the human heart. It can also arouse greed and cupidity and lust."

The ghost of Hannah Feger reared up in my mind. Homicide too?

Goodlee turned back to face us squarely across his desk. "Of course no sane thief would attempt to steal the De Vecchi. It would be too big, too valuable, too hot. The most distinctive gems are never stolen, except possibly by starryeyed lunatics. Instead, they are held for ransom."

Speare's face lost color. He began to fill up with repressed excitement and unasked questions. This was plainly a tender subject with Goodlee. We would be smart to keep quiet now

and let him venture onto it in his own way.

We listened without interrupting while he told us how, for him, the De Vecchi had loomed as an opportunity in a million. Another flawless diamond of that size would probably not come to light in his lifetime. Moreover, this one had been found on ground not belonging to any affiliate of the De Beers Diamond Company, which fact had thrown the stone into the open market and made it possible for an American dealer to acquire it. Goodlee had entered the bidding feeling badly outclassed by the competition, particularly

that of Harry Winston, the fabulous lone-hand jeweler of East Fifty-first Street, whose collection of historic gems ranks second only to that of the royal family of England.

"I may have overextended myself, but anyhow I accomplished my mission — I brought back the De Vecchi. It rode across the Atlantic in the same plane with me as ordinary registered mail. Lloyd's insured the passage. It's now insured against loss by another big company here in the states for seventy-five per cent of its value, which is average and as high as I could push it."

He paused there, his gaze shifting from me to Speare and

back again.

"Which brings me to the point where I must begin revis-

ing the story I told you last evening."

This second edition would no doubt be truthful. If not, I reminded myself ruefully, I had Speare to point out its flaws.

"I enjoyed a victorious home-coming," Goodlee said, sounding grim. "During the four weeks I was in London this shop was managed by my first assistant, Ellis Branham — very able, very reliable man. At this point, on my return, Jay Millard was still on the pay roll. Avis was still seeing him every day, Monica was enchanted with my triumph and my acquisition, and all was felicitous. Actually we were sitting on a case of dynamite, but we didn't know it until several days later, when it suddenly blew up under us.

"I told you Millard's trickery was my own discovery. It wasn't. Ellis Branham really gets the credit for spotting one of the fake stones Millard was selling our customers as the real thing. Instantly he reported it to me - here, in this room, at this desk, where I was studying the De Vecchi. As I told you before, it was staggering news. It rocked me so badly that I was minutes grasping it and deciding on the safest

move.

"I had Branham bring Millard up, using some routine question as an excuse. I wanted to catch him unawares search him then and there. Finding a fake stone on him would clinch it. He sensed he'd been found out. The instant Ellis touched him he made a break for it - knocked Ellis down, tripped me backward over a chair, and ran out.

"He had a clear track all the way. Miss Scott had been down in the fountain room; she passed Millard running down the stairs as she came back up. We'd let him go without sounding off any alarms. Wouldn't do at all to call in the police; by all means I had to keep it out of the papers. For Jacquiere the quietest way out was certainly the best way. As for Millard, he would be punished - without references he was damned well finished in the business anyhow. There was one danger left - the synthetics Millard had sold as real might bounce back at us, but with luck we might handle even that. After a minute it began to seem not too bad."

Goodlee lifted his head in a mocking laugh. "It was far worse than I knew, particularly because, by that time, Millard

was out of the shop and gone."

"With the De Vecchi," Speare said.

Goodlee sat staring at the globe, without seeing it, and after a moment went on in tones of blistering self-reproach.

"I had put it down on this desk in its chamois bag. Ordinarily it would have been as safe here as if it had been locked inside my vault. The Millard thing had left me so stunned I didn't notice it was no longer here until Miss Scott rushed in, saying she'd seen Millard running out hiding one hand inside his coat. He'd snatched up the diamond while Ellis and I were sprawled on the floor. . . . By then, of course, it was too late to stop him. He was already out of the building and away."

"You mean there were two witnesses to Millard's abduction of the De Vecchi?" Speare asked quickly. "Two besides your-

self?"

"There were," Goodlee said emphatically. "Of course Millard couldn't possibly have planned it. The fool had done it on sudden wild impulse. He knew he was done; he'd soon be broke, without a chance of finding himself a new job in the trade, but he could hold the De Vecchi for ransom. I knew I'd get it back from him, and probably soon - of course at a stiff price. But I also knew it would be a tricky business to

handle because Avis was so emotionally involved with Millard. What was more, it was perfectly clear, within three minutes by the clock, that Millard meant to use this as a

weapon against me.

"He phoned me from a pay station somewhere near by and threatened me. I've already told you the substance of his threat: I'd better keep quiet about this, if only for Avis's sake, because I wouldn't want to send my only daughter's husband to prison, would I?"

Goodlee raked his fingers through his hair — a gesture of distress. "It went on from there much as I gave it to you vesterday. I failed to reach Avis by phone, then rushed home to find she had already run off with Millard, leaving me that spiteful note. Next I found Millard had already cleared out of his apartment, taking a few clothes and a good part of his workbench equipment. He and Avis probably hadn't gone far; he'd want to stay fairly close in order to get set for the pay-off.

"There was nothing I could do to hurry it up. I had to

wait for him to make the opening move.

"Meanwhile I had reported the loss to Assurance Associates, the company that had insured the De Vecchi against theft. I explained the ticklish personal involvements and asked for enough time to work it out on my own. They were tough about it, but with certain conditions they agreed."

"Assurance Associates agreed to sit tight and leave the recovery of the De Vecchi to you?"

"Actually it was a good break for them. Assurance maintains no staff of detectives of its own. When it has a theft to investigate it hires a private detective agency for the job, which was exactly what I proposed to do on my own. They put a deadline on me - three weeks. They stipulated that they must O.K. the agency I selected and I must keep them posted up to the minute. Moreover, I must pay not only all fees out of my own pocket, but the ransom as well. In fact, they refused outright to take any part in bargaining with a thief. They said that would be illegal — compounding a felony."

There were those haunting words again.

"It was a hard bargain, but I didn't haggle. The arrangement safeguarded Avis and left control in my hands. . . . Then Tony Bricca walked in."

"You didn't go to Bricca?"

"Millard had called him. They had met outside Bricca's office and had made a deal between them — Bricca to act as the go-between. The ransom, fifty thousand, in the usual small bills, to be paid on delivery of the De Vecchi. Bricca had all the details worked out, and of course the whole thing must be kept strictly under wraps.

"A hitch developed in the negotiations. I had one demand to make — that Avis come back with the De Vecchi. No go. She wouldn't do it — sent a message through Bricca saying she meant to go with Millard wherever he went, even to the ends of the earth. It had an authentic ring. I sent word back, promising not to prosecute Millard if only Avis would come home, with or without him. Millard answered, indirectly again, insisting the deal involved the De Vecchi only, not his wife also. He added another threat. Unless I came across in a hurry he would light out for South America with the De Vecchi and Avis both."

"In that case," I put in, "Assurance Associates would certainly blow the whistle on you and take over."

"No question of it." Goodlee stood, pushing his fists deep into his coat pockets. "We agreed on terms and the pay-off was arranged. The place, the north crosswalk on the traffic island at Sixty-eighth and Park Avenue — an open place, approachable from six directions and also good for a quick getaway. The hour, three-thirty in the morning. Since Millard refused to deal with me directly, Bricca was to swap the money for the diamond. No cops anywhere near, no insurance dicks, nobody but Bricca and Millard out there in the open, safely making the exchange. Any suspicion of trickery, Millard said, and the deal was off. This out-and-out crook couldn't fully trust his victim, you see.

"By midnight everything was set and waiting."

Goodlee began pacing slowly back and forth behind his desk.

"I'd made certain arrangements of my own. A friend and client of mine, a doctor, has his office on Park Avenue within a few doors of the rendezvous — a suite on the street level, with a private entrance. I persuaded him, for certain fictitious reasons, to lend me a key. An hour before the time of the meeting I was waiting inside the reception room there, in the dark.

"I wasn't alone. I'd been keeping Assurance Associates posted on all arrangements, including this one. They'd wanted a representative of the company to be present and they'd sent a man named Mark Usher. He waited there in the dark with me and we watched the street from the windows.

"Two minutes before the hour Bricca passed by, carrying the bundle of money. I had put forty-five thousand in it. The other ten per cent was Bricca's share. He waited on the corner until Millard materialized on the opposite side of the avenue. They made sure not another soul was in sight, then each crossed halfway and met on the tip of the traffic island. Usher and I watched them — he'd even brought binoculars — and saw the exchange made.

"Millard immediately faded off toward Lexington with the money package while Bricca turned back the way he had come. As he passed the doctor's door Usher and I collared him. We pulled him inside and turned on the lights. He was pretty indignant about this, and we'd scared him—he had a tight grip on the chamois bag rolled up in one fist. I took it from him, opened it——"

Goodlee stopped pacing to face us bitterly. "One look was enough. This wasn't the De Vecchi. It rather resembled a rough diamond but actually it was glass — a glass model of another famous stone, the Jonker, a stock item obtained from a museum-supply house for a few dollars. Here it is."

He was using it as a paperweight.

"What then?"

"Usher gave Bricca a few rough minutes after that — not liking him or trusting him to begin with. Grilled him as to

what exactly had been done at the moment of the exchange. For example, had he opened the bag for a look at the diamond before handing over the money, as had been agreed? Bricca said yes, but Millard was jumpy and wouldn't allow him enough time; anyhow it was too dark out there in the street for a really good look — and so on. To top it off — to make sure Bricca wasn't pulling a fast one of his own — Usher searched him. We wound up as sore as three boils and and barking at each other. Thanks to this nasty little double cross of Millard's I still hadn't gotten the De Vecchi back and I was out fifty thousand besides."

It was becoming easier to understand what Goodlee had meant when he had said the De Vecchi could inspire cupidity

and greed in the human heart.

Luke Speare had listened to all this with intense concentration. Now he asked, "As of right now, Millard still has the De Vecchi?"

"He still has the De Vecchi — I hope — and Avis too."
"You hope? Is there a possibility he no longer has it?"

"This man may be enough of a psychopath to ignore all the obvious risks and try to dispose of the stone through underground channels."

"Could he succeed?"

"He couldn't possibly sell the De Vecchi as a single stone. As I've said, it would be too big, too hot. It would cost too much even at a fence's ninety-per cent discount. Millard would make much more money on the deal by splitting and sawing it into thirty or forty pieces. He could sell these easily, at good prices. I'm afraid that's actually his plan. It was probably the thought behind his threat to take off for South America. He has the equipment and the ability to do it—and also the daring."

"Is it possible he's split the diamond already?"

"Not likely — thank God. Millard may have a twisted mind, but he's no fool. He knows you have to study a diamond a long time, with the utmost care, before you attempt to cleave it, and even then you can never be sure in advance that you're right. He knows that being wrong, even a little

wrong, would be disastrous. So, if this is his plan, he's giving it the time it needs. That's an advantage for me — but who can tell how long it will last? I've got to work fast — get at Millard while the De Vecchi is still intact."

"He knows you're hunting for him," Speare pointed out. "He's feeling the pressure of that. It could push him into it."

Goodlee closed his eyes in anguish for a moment — no doubt picturing Millard making a hasty mistake with his cleaver's mallet and reducing the six-hundred-thousand-dollar De Vecchi to a handful of worthless gravel.

"On the other hand," he said with an effort toward hope, "Millard may simply think it would be clever to put the bite on me all over again. He may bait me the next time by offering to throw in Avis for good measure. If it actually comes off that well, it will mean my luck has finally taken a turn for the better."

Odd thing here. This man who owned a store full of top-

bracket jewels really needed a break.

He frowned over me. "Now, Cole. You know the problem fully. Simplified, it's exactly what I told you it was at the beginning. I want to find Avis. I want to find her not only because I'm half crazy with concern for my daughter, but also because finding her means finding Millard, which in turn means getting the De Vecchi back — assuming I reach them all in time. The job is important to me, Cole. Getting it done is worth rather more to me than your usual forty a day plus expenses."

He had removed a checkbook from a drawer. From it he ripped a check he had already filled out and signed. He handed it across the desk to me. It was drawn to the order of the Cole Detective Agency to the amount of five thousand

dollars.

I looked again. That was correct. Five thousand dollars and no cents.

"When you have found Avis for me, Cole, and when I have both Avis and the De Vecchi safely back home, I will be glad to complete payment to you with another check for the same amount. Is that arrangement satisfactory?"

I sat there mutely with my pure white principles disintegrating like yesterday's snow. Pulling my gaze off the check, I found Speare watching me with a peculiar smile of gratification. It reminded me that except for his astute estimation of Goodlee's importance I would still be working in complete ignorance of the De Vecchi for a ridiculous pittance of a fee

While I stared at the check - reminding myself of those ominous words, compounding a felony, compounding a felony - Miss Scott opened the door, stepped in, and closed it quickly behind her.

"There's a man here insisting on seeing you right away, Mr. Goodlee — and he scares me," she said a little breathlessly. "His name is Anthony Bricca."

#### EIGHT

ONLY Luke Speare was pleased by Bricca's unexpected return. Having, in spite of all my discouragement, begun a clinical study of the man *in absentia*, he now felt rewarded with an opportunity to observe this adroit cutter of legal corners in person.

As for Cole, I would have liked Bricca to stay lost. The mere proximity of him put me on edge. He embodied the trickiest dangers in the case: he had harbored a murder victim in his supply closet, and prior to that, as we had just learned, he had acted as a thief's agent for a share of the loot. His cunning probably reached even deeper than that. So far his evil luck had held, but it might suddenly run out, with disastrous effects on everyone involved in the case. Potentially he was hot, too hot to touch.

Besides, I didn't want Bricca to jeopardize my growing attachment to Goodlee's five-thousand-dollar retainer.

"What's he want here?" Goodlee gave Miss Scott no chance to answer. He decided abruptly. "Tell him I can't see him."

"But he says he has information for you — something important and confidential. He wasn't able to bring it to you before now."

Goodlee turned to me. "He hasn't counted himself out of the case, apparently. I don't like this."

"Then it's up to you to get rid of him," I said, putting it

bluntly. "But first find out what he's got and what he's after." Goodlee nodded to Miss Scott. "I'll see Mr. Bricca in a few

Goodlee nodded to Miss Scott. "I'll see Mr. Bricca in a few minutes." He waited until she had gone back and closed the door. "I don't want him to know you're taking over, Cole, because he might get in your way, but you'd better listen in on this."

He led us into the rear room. Moving quickly, he switched off the table lamp, lowered and closed the venetian blinds, then shut the connecting door.

We could see through the upper panel of the door as clearly as through an open window. It was glazed with argus glass — the kind that presents an opaque silvered surface on one side and no obstruction at all to one's vision from the other. I had first learned about this unlikely substance during prohibition, when it was used in the peepholes of speakeasy doors, and I knew the FBI was finding it highly useful in its counterespionage operations. Goodlee's desk in the next room and the chairs facing it were plainly visible through the closed door, but Bricca would not see us watching him.

Goodlee flicked a cam of the intercom on the table. "You'll

hear every word," he said uneasily, and turned back.

Speare touched his arm. "Could you give us a quick fill-in? What followed that three-way hassle in the doctor's waiting room?"

"I sent Bricca to his office and went home, both of us to wait for some further word from Millard. That was the last I saw of Bricca."

"He disappeared that same night?"

"Apparently. Next time I tried to get in touch with him there was no answer. He stayed missing, and this is the first I've heard from him since then." Turning back to the door, he added, "Of course I'll get rid of him, Cole. You've got to have a clear field."

He stepped from the room, shut the door — and remained in sight. Closed in there, in semidarkness, we watched while he crossed to the opposite door and opened it. He said, "Come in, Mr. Bricca" — his voice faint in the intercom

because of his distance from it — waited until Tony Bricca was inside, then closed the outer door again, firmly.

Bricca entered limping, helping himself with a cane at every stiff-kneed step. It caught Goodlee by surprise and disturbed him.

"What happened to you?"
"Ah-h," Bricca sighed.

On my part, I hadn't expected Bricca's shabby appearance. His topcoat had come out of a bargain basement years ago. Its pockets sagged, its cuffs were threadbare, and another winter would see it out at the elbows. All his clothing was black — topcoat, suit, unshined shoes, stringy tie — with the single exception of his hat. That hat, still on his head, was incongruous and startling — a smoke-gray Homburg, new and expensive.

Instinctively Speare and I tightened as he moved closer to our magic door, but our nerves eased off again as he turned aside, having glimpsed not a hint of us. He was a spare, dark, sad-eyed man. Normally he would have the soft oval face of a sentimentalist, which he by no means was, but today it was drawn, almost gaunt, and a suggestion of sickly pallor showed

through the olive tan of his skin.

Luke Speare kept an alert eye on him while he limped to the chair I had just left. He didn't sit there, but remained standing, with little twitches of pain flickering across his face. He removed the gray Homburg now and placed it carefully on Goodlee's desk — an act that for some obscure reason absorbed Speare's keenest attention.

Goodlee faced Bricca across the desk. "Where's Avis?"

"Ah, a good question, Mr. Goodlee." Bricca's voice came through the intercom with a sardonic nasal quality. "Very good question. Unfortunately I don't know the answer."

"Why not? Haven't you been doing anything at all about

it?"

Bricca lifted his black eyebrows and dropped them — a sort of facial shrug. "Nothing."

Goodlee insistently repeated his first question. "What happened to you?"

"I have been in bed," Bricca said. "For days and nights in bed. I have been a little indisposed, the result of getting shot."

Goodlee stared at him — no doubt sharply reminded of Monica. "Shot?"

"With a gun, Mr. Goodlee. In two places. Once here." Bricca indicated a spot six inches above his right knee. "And once here." He put his palm gently over the fleshy part of his left shoulder. "Both at the same time."

"When?"

"The same night I passed the money for you." Bricca showed his fine white teeth in a mirthless smile. "The intention, of course, was to kill me."

We could see the back of Goodlee's neck turning red. "This

is what kept you off my case?"

"Off it? Mr. Goodlee, I am explaining to you that I was shot and almost murdered while working on your case."

Goodlee blurted, "I don't understand this!"

"What's so hard about it? I was shot. Twice. In an attempt to kill me. While working for you. Very simple, Mr. Goodlee."

Goodlee's next question was the inevitable one. He asked it heavily. "Who shot you?"

"Your son-in-law, naturally," Bricca said. "Who else would?"

Goodlee braced both his hands flat on his desk, his back bent under a steadily increasing weight of troubles. His only daughter had romped off with a crook; his firm's reputation was in jeopardy; his big diamond had been kidnaped; he had gotten nothing in return for his ransom money; his wife had been injured evidently by a hot-blooded lover; and now he had been told that his unwanted son-in-law was not merely a thief and a swindler, but also a would-be murderer. To Goodlee there must seem no limit to it.

Now after a moment of silence both men sat, Goodlee

with a thump, Bricca gingerly, with pain.

"All right." Goodlee's tone was one of caustic resignation to the worst. "Go ahead, slug me with it."

"Will it hurt you worse than it has already hurt me, Mr. Goodlee?" Bricca asked pungently. He shrugged, grimaced, and rubbed his wounded shoulder. "All this while I've been in hiding, in fear of my life. Mr. Millard still wants me dead."

Goodlee glared. His patience was running out. "Get to the

point."

"When I took this case I didn't bargain on dying for you, Mr. Goodlee."

Speare gave me a wry glance and I answered with a knowing nod. Bricca's purpose was to renegotiate the contract. He would presently mention that he expected compensation for his two gunshot wounds and also for his silence. Goodlee was fully aware of this and grimly waiting for it.

"I came so close to bringing your daughter back that night, Mr. Goodlee. Only those two little bullets stopped me."

Goodlee clenched one fist and began slowly and soundlessly

to pound his desk.

"Before passing the money that night I took a little precaution — for your sake, Mr. Goodlee." Sensing the dangerous tension in Goodlee, Bricca was speaking more rapidly now. "I hired a free-lance operative to tail Millard. It was safe — I figured he wouldn't suspect a woman. I picked one of the best in the business. A cop's widow — Hannah Feger."

Speare watched sharply for Goodlee's reaction to that

name. There was none.

"Hannah was in a doorway near the corner when I passed Millard the money. She tailed him back to where he'd come from — a rooming house on Third Avenue." Goodlee jerked in his chair upon hearing that, but Bricca sadly shook his

head. "The address is no longer any good to you.

"Somehow Millard got wise to Hannah tailing him. Maybe he spotted her himself. Or maybe your daughter was covering for him." Bricca lifted a dark hand to stifle Goodlee's protest. "She's living with him, she's married to him, for all we know she's stashing your diamond in her bra for him. She is positively watching out for him, and I think it was your Avis put the finger on Hannah."

The back of Goodlee's neck was dark red; his face must

be ominously stormy. This crude talk was picturing his

daughter as little better than a common moll.

"Hannah called my office right away, from the first phone she could find at 4 A.M. No answer. I wasn't there yet. She found herself a taxi and headed straight over — not knowing Millard had her play figured."

"Meaning what?"

Bricca's lids drooped over his sad, dark eyes. "Millard is a born double-crosser. He'd just done it to you. He figured I'd do it to him — I'd tip you off to his hide-out. He was absolutely right, Mr. Goodlee. I would have told you that, provided you would pay a reasonable fee for my extra work. But I didn't get the chance. When Hannah came up I was there, waiting to hear from her, and while she was telling me where Millard and Avis were hiding out, Millard came up after her. Fast. With a gun."

"The man's reckless — insane," Goodlee said in bitter disgust. "Chasing a woman across town with a gun when he could have simply pulled out of there and gone to some hotel ——" He paused. "No. No, he couldn't, not safely. Not

at four in the morning."

"Besides that, there were his tools you told me about, his bench probably all set up. If he went tearing out of there he'd have to abandon all that equipment, and trying to buy more, he'd get caught. He couldn't stay, either. You'd come like a bat — he'd lose at least Avis, who is the hook he's got in you. He'd lose the De Vecchi besides, and to top it off he'd lose your forty-five grand, too. And take a beating and go out broke, as good as dead. At least . . . Mr. Goodlee, I understand this Millard. In his shoes — playing for such big stakes, for keeps, maybe I would have done the same — committed murder."

Goodlee stiffened up. "Murder?"

Bricca gazed at him sadly. "Hannah wasn't so lucky as I was. She was bigger. She was harder to miss."

Unmoving, Goodlee said, "Actual murder?"

"Millard rushed in looking crazy in the eyes, with the gun in his hand. 'You told him yet?' He was winded from run-

ning — gasped it out. 'You told him yet?' Hannah made a mistake — got scared, didn't think. She squealed out, 'No, no!' — which was exactly what Millard wanted to hear. He wanted to stop that information from getting to you, Mr.

Goodlee. So he began shooting.

"He got me first, then Hannah, then me again. I went down hard, like I was already dead. Hannah was hurt but she didn't fall. She threw herself on Millard to stop him, to pull him down with her. The gun went off again, twice more, and then Hannah crashed. It felt like the whole building bounced. Then it was over, except for Millard standing there, breathing hard, looking down at us, making sure - but not too sure, thank God. Then I heard him running out."

Goodlee passed one hand across his feverish face and let

Bricca go on.

"I hope no one will blame me for wanting to live. I picked myself up and got out of there. Leaving Hannah, leaving everything, I got out fast — as fast as I could with two holes in me leaking blood. That wasn't even the worst of it for me. Sooner or later Millard would find out I wasn't dead and then he would want to finish the job, with more reason than before, because now I am an evewitness to his murder of Hannah Feger. So I crawled away to nurse my hurts. I was lucky enough to have a good friend to take me in. If nobody minds I will keep the address to myself; after you come so close to being murdered it's hard to trust everybody. Meanwhile, of course, Millard and Avis pulled out of their first hideaway and shifted to a new one."

The new one was for Cole and Speare to find - both of us

being fully as vulnerable to gunfire as Bricca was.

"How can a nice girl get used to living in sewers, even with such a handsome rat?"

Ignoring Bricca's remark, Goodlee made a gesture of disbelief. "This woman, this Hannah - her dead body was left lying there in your office?"

"For only a few days and nights, Mr. Goodlee. Understand, I couldn't do anything about it personally, not while I was in bed fighting pain and infection. But just this morning

— "Bricca opened his billfold, removed a news clipping, and passed it to Goodlee. "A small item you would naturally overlook."

"Did you do that - dump her body in the street?"

"I didn't hear the question, Mr. Goodlee. I may say that when I went back to my office today, Hannah's body was gone. You have your interests to look out for and I have mine."

"I don't doubt you're looking out for yourself. You've taken your own time about it. You could have told me most of this

days ago."

"You must give a man time to heal. I didn't get up from bed until yesterday, wasn't able to go out until today. But that's not all that concerns me. I have run risks, even coming here. Still, this is something I could not tell you through a switchboard. Even though Millard is still watching for me, Mr. Goodlee, and hasn't stopped wanting to kill me."

Goodlee pushed the clipping back at Bricca, glowering

down at him.

"This — this story of yours, involving my daughter in murder — it's more than I can believe. God above, I can't accept this from you without question. What proof have I

that this is what actually happened?"

Answering with another of his thin, mirthless smiles, Bricca pushed the gray Homburg across the desk. Goodlee immediately looked inside it. From our position behind the one-way glass Speare and I could see the initials punched in the inner band: J.G.M. I noticed then something Speare had seen minutes ago — creases indicating that the hat had once been badly crushed, and a black mark on the crown. This was part of a shoe print — an impression in dirt left by a woman's shoe.

"Hannah knocked it off Millard's head in the struggle," Bricca said. "Stepped on it, then fell on it. The print will match the shoes they took off Hannah down at the morgue. There is even a little of her blood on the brim."

Goodlee dropped the hat on his desk and dusted his

fingers.

"This is very conclusive evidence, Mr. Goodlee. Very valuable evidence."

With his dark head lowered, Goodlee frowned across at Bricca. "I've already paid you a generous retainer. I see no reason to pay you more. You've gotten yourself involved on your own responsibility — removing evidence, concealing a murder — all without instructions from me."

"But all in the service of my client, Mr. Goodlee. Isn't it true that I have rendered special service? Also, I have suffered severe pain. Of course there are certain expenses. A doctor who will treat a gunshot wound without reporting it to the police, as the law requires, is very hard to find, and very expensive."

Bricca could not know how ironically that news fell on

Goodlee's ear. Goodlee didn't comment.

"Without compensation for all this, Mr. Goodlee, I could feel quite resentful. I would want to get out from under, no matter who it might hurt — even a lovely young girl."

The hard-pressed Goodlee made a growling noise in his throat. "All right. Just how much of my blood are you thirsting for?"

"I'll leave the amount to your generosity."

Goodlee brought up his checkbook and slapped it open. Bricca smiled, lifting a cautioning hand.

"Surely you have the cash?"

In stifled anger Goodlee rose, turned, and marched straight at us. We stepped back as he thrust in the door. Leaving it open behind him, he passed us without a glance and went to a safe sitting in the rear corner. Speare and I remained out of Bricca's sight while Goodlee went through the business of extracting currency from the safe. I couldn't see the denominations of the notes he selected but undoubtedly they were high. He went back with a sizable handful, still without a glance in our direction, and shut the trick door behind him again. We watched him as he proffered the money to Bricca—and then, as Bricca reached for it, he drew it back.

"You're off the case, of course. Through."

"To be sure, Mr. Goodlee, I'm finished with it — as a detective."

Bricca held his hand ready for the money and Goodlee held the cash beyond Bricca's reach. Perhaps Goodlee meant this gesture to be a warning to Bricca not to bite him too hard. If so, Bricca wasn't frightened by it. I could easily understand why.

Goodlee, as I saw his predicament, was cornered even more tightly than before. The job of finding Avis was only the first step toward a solution. She must then be taken out of Millard's hands, of course against her will; her eyes must somehow be opened to his unconscionable talent for doing evil; the marriage, if it had actually taken place, must be annulled. The De Vecchi must be safely returned to its owner also. Finally Millard should be banished — forced to get out of the country and to stay out. Once all this had been accomplished, strictly under wraps, Goodlee would finally be in the clear, and he could then tell Bricca to go to hell.

But not until then. There was still a long way to go — long, hard, and expensive. So far, in fact, we hadn't even made a fair start. The first step, the one all the others must wait to follow — finding Avis — was the responsibility I had let Cole and Speare take on.

With five thousand dollars in pocket and five thousand more promised, I was already beginning to regret it.

Goodlee, no doubt feeling more keenly than before that time was of the essence, abruptly pushed the money into Bricca's hands. Bricca slipped it into an inside pocket and rose, pushing himself up on his cane — not quite so painfully as before.

"Thank you, Mr. Goodlee. It will do - for a starter."

"I told you, you're through."

"But not through with feeling pain, Mr. Goodlee. And not through with the danger. Remember, I am being hunted by a killer who is your daughter's husband, and I do not wish to die at cut-rate prices."

He smiled his thin, mirthless smile and turned away. Good-

lee sat there in fuming silence, little lumps of fury showing hard at the sides of his jaws, while Bricca limped out.

I wondered how Bricca's price for leaving us quietly in this mess compared with the fee I was expected to earn by getting us out of it.

"There's one satisfaction, Schy," Speare said in an attempt to soothe my apprehensions. "This is the same murder we've had since the beginning. Bricca hasn't added any new crimes to the list — except, of course, a bit of blackmail."

"But the murder is no longer an outside thing," I said. "Suddenly it's right smack in the middle of Goodlee's family."

And our case.

### NINE

For the next two days Speare and I dug. Together and separately, day and night, we dug.

Results: nil.

Over our breakfast coffee and over midnight hamburgers we griped about it. Our frustrations were doubly exasperating to Speare, and doubly tiring to me, because our job was essentially so clear-cut and routine. We felt certain Avis and Millard were still holed in somewhere in the safest and most convenient region for them, central Manhattan. Probably at this very moment she was cuddling in his lap in a rooming house just around the corner or in a hotel in the next block. Under similar circumstances — though certainly less larcenous ones — thousands of other runaway girls had been tapped by other detectives with no particular difficulty. We had done it ourselves on six or eight occasions without straining a gusset or calling for help. But this time —

This time I had hired three free-lance operatives to drag the midtown sector for us, and after these two long, footsore days they were still dragging. Avis, Millard, and the De

Vecchi were simply staying out of reach in the dark.

Several special factors combined to make this girl hunt a tough one. Millard, an operator of professional finesse, was taking extra-careful measures to keep himself covered, and so far he hadn't made a single slip. Avis, through sheer girlish pique or fearful obedience to Millard, hadn't once communi-

cated with her father; we had had no message to trace. And Monica, still our most promising lead, had chosen to stay

circumspectly out of action all this while.

Still, my languishing hopes clung to Monica Goodlee. She wasn't a woman to sit it out for long, even with her bullet-caressed hip. Sure enough, news of her came buzzing in shortly before eight o'clock Saturday night, just as I was about to knock off for a little overdue rest.

The voice on the phone, dryly cheerful, was that of Oliver Jeremiah, another free-lance operative — the fourth to be added to the pay roll. I had used him in previous cases, and yesterday, arming him with a detailed description of Monica, I had put him to watching the Goodlee apartment.

"Dark red hair, Mr. Cole? Big dark eyes? Mink coat?

Pretty feet and ankles? Very, very classy lady?"

"That's the one."

"Well, she came out twenty minutes ago and got into a taxi and rode straight down here to that building in Sutton Place you told me about. She's just went up."

My client had tipped me off to the probability of this several hours ago. Keeping in touch with me now, he had phoned to say he might be reached in an emergency at dinner at Mrs. Parker Edgerton's town house. Monica had begged off, pleading her wound, but Mr. Goodlee had suggested wryly, "Her hip might improve rapidly while I'm out." He was a husband who knew his wife well.

"Don't let her get away from you, Oliver. We badly need a break. This probably isn't it, but keep the joint covered anyhow."

"Ha," Jeremiah said, and hung up.

Fascinating woman, this Monica, in more ways than one. A keen-witted angle-shooter, according to her husband. Audacious, too, manifestly. Instead of shying away from that seventh-floor apartment where she was shot three nights ago, in something rather more violent than a lovers' spat, she had boldly returned to it.

I remembered that Speare had obtained a list of the tenants

on the seventh floor — which I had immediately tossed out with the trash, unfortunately — and when giving it to me he had referred to "the one who had punctured Monica perhaps." I still had no idea what he had meant by that "perhaps" and it still bothered me.

The phone soon rang again. It was Speare calling.

"It really is his hat," Speare said.

Hat? The gray Homburg, no doubt.

"I gave it a good looking-over before we left Goodlee's office," he went on. "The store where Millard bought it—the Man of Fashion Shop on Madison—has a patented way of blocking the hat to fit the head. The record they keep is as individual as a fingerprint—no two alike."

I had not suggested this line of inquiry. Speare had gone after it on his own initiative. Instead of tracking down a missing girl — and a six-hundred-thousand-dollar diamond which might turn into so much dust if we didn't reach it in time — he had slipped off on a tangent after a damn hat.

"Besides all this, the salesman knows Millard well," he

added. "He wanted the hat to wear at a very chi-chi morning wedding and reception."

"Is the hat really worth all this work?"

The edge of impatience on my voice caused Speare to pause. "I thought it might be. I don't trust Bricca."

"Look, Luke, it's all right for you not to trust Bricca provided it doesn't take your attention off our real job, which is to smoke out Avis."

"I had to find out whether that hat was a plant," Speare explained. "If the hat wasn't really Millard's, then Bricca had lied—it was faked evidence and Millard hadn't actually committed that murder. At the very least it might have taken a big load off Goodlee's mind—and off ours, too."

Well-l, yes. Matter of fact, it would have carried more force than that. Exposed as a piece of trickery on Bricca's part, it might have changed the whole course of the case. . . . Now that I could see it Speare's way, his move made excellent sense.

"But it is Millard's hat," he repeated — and he said it in a strangely ominous tone.

"That settles that, then. Millard's still our key man."

"About Bricca, though. I suspect he's putting a fast one across somebody — probably us. Personally I wouldn't trust him to give us the right time of day, much less —— "

"Luke, please. *Please* drop Bricca for the time being. Let's take first things first. Finding Avis, I mean. We should have made some real headway by now, but so far we haven't even opened a crack in it."

"We're probably pressing in the wrong place," Speare

suggested. "There's more here than meets the eye."

"Oh, lord," I groaned, "don't start that again. Where are you?"

"Phone booth on East Thirty-sixth. Just came from visiting Millard's flat."

"Legally?"

"The landlord let me in. He's getting used to it. One caller has been back twice since Millard skipped. Man named Mark Usher."

Ah. Usher, representative of Assurance Associates. The insurance company had declined to bargain with a thief but meanwhile it wasn't entirely neglecting him. Possibly it was being quietly a bit more active in the case than even Goodlee knew.

"Usher probably thought Millard might sneak back at odd hours to pick up parts of his abandoned wardrobe," Speare said, "but of course he hasn't been that dumb. The clothes he left behind include everything from spats to a silk-lined opera cape, enough to keep a man about town spruced up for years — but with forty-five grand in pocket he can afford to replace it."

"That's another dead end then," I said, again noticing an odd undertone in Speare's voice. "We're running out of leads, Luke. Fact is, we're back with the only one we had to begin with — whatever it's worth. Anyhow it's suddenly hot again. I mean Monica's extracurricular love life."

"I'll take over," Speare said instantly.

"But just a minute. Are you sure Monica would like you to?"

Jokes I make yet, when I'm jittering around fit to loosen the fillings in my back teeth. Speare didn't laugh either.

"Maybe we're underestimating Monica," he said earnestly. "I think she's playing a very cute hand here. In fact, I'm afraid she's outsmarting us. So let's check."

"If she's really as sharp as all that, we'd better."

"O.K. This afternoon I went over the list of seventh-floor tenants with Mr. Goodlee ——"

"I thought I'd lost that list."

"I kept a copy."

Naturally.

"One name on it rings a bell, but just faintly. Monica's husband thinks she's mentioned it once or twice — Val Wayne. Apartment 7C."

"Monica's there right now, Luke. Oliver Jeremiah is casing the place. Better shift him to Fern Stevens' apartment when you take over."

"Fern Stevens?" Speare sounded delighted with me. "Good move. She's probably keeping in touch with Bricca."

"Maybe yes, maybe no, but at any rate she's spooking around in the background and we'd better not overlook any bets because time's getting shorter every hour."

"So long, Schy."

"Wait, Luke. About this Wayne character. He shoots people. Don't get in the way of any of his bullets, please. I'm doing too much of my own work as it is."

Speare promised for my sake he wouldn't get shot if he could avoid it, and was off in a cloud.

I turned back to sifting my notes with the masterful feeling of an executive directing a huge, smooth-running organization. Never before had I had so many assistants working for me at one time — five, including Speare. This was the first case I had ever handled on a hang-the-expense basis. My fee was the highest I could ever reasonably hope to collect.

The only fly in the gravy was the likelihood that I might have to burn up five thousand dollars' worth of effort and hire another five thousand dollars' worth of help in order to earn it.

These notes were those I had taken during the long session we had with George Goodlee in his inner office following

Tony Bricca's expensive visit.

Goodlee had pointed out, in a justifiably harassed manner, that he would be forced to continue to meet Bricca's demands for blood money as long as he remained on the hook and he was relying on me to get him off it at the earliest possible minute. Trying his best to help us along, he had patiently answered scores of our questions about Avis. Speare had shown an apparently irresistible tendency to digress to secondary subjects, such as Tony Bricca, but on the whole we had covered the ground thoroughly. It was direct, leading information and in an ordinary missing-person case it would have brought quick results. But in this one, no. None.

Avis, for example, had not used any of her charge accounts since romping off with Millard. She hadn't been seen in any of her favorite spots, such as the Stork Club, Mr. John's for hats, Delman's for shoes, or the hairdressing salon of Emile. She hadn't ventured into her bank or cashed a check elsewhere. Her favorite drink was, of all things, sloe gin, but she seemed to be doing her imbibing in private, not at bars. Other standard lines of inquiry were utterly useless to us—she hadn't, naturally, ordered a phone installed or had the gas turned on, at least not under her right name. To make it even harder, descriptions of young women can be hopelessly misleading now that they can give their own hair a different color every day in the week.

Millard, on his part, had avoided all his accustomed places, including his barber and his haberdashers.

Avis and Millard had the easier side of this game. All they had to do, really, was to avoid attracting attention by staying indoors as much as possible. In their cozy room, with something to read (they hadn't rented a television set) and food

and drink sent in, they could remain almost as far out of

reach as if they had skimmed off in a flying saucer.

Of this elusive trio — Avis, Millard, and the De Vecchi — the diamond could easily remain the least conspicuous. Being smaller than a hen's egg, it was much easier to keep out of sight than, say, a stolen Rembrandt portrait or a Rodin in bronze.

Except for the irresistible retainer, this was precisely the kind of thing I wanted never to take on. The job mocked me twice, first by demanding unlimited hard work, then by resisting it. Come to think of it, that's life, and the only way to live through it is to keep on butting your head against it. That will make it feel good when you die. So I went on trying vainly to sniff out a new trail in my notes.

Before long the phone rang again. Luke Speare was back.

"There's something definitely fruity here, Schy."

"There in Sutton Place, I presume?"

"Before sending Jeremiah over to Fern's I took time to poke around with a few questions. In the first place, Val Wayne is not up there in her apartment."

"Her apartment?"

"She's a woman, all right. Divorcee. Lives alone. Does her work there, too. Some kind of designer."

"Has she gone out for the evening so that Monica can use her apartment for a rendezyous?"

"Not that, either."

"You can't mean Monica makes these mysterious visits for the purpose of sitting alone in there. That couldn't be the way she got shot."

"Neither Val nor Monica is up there. Nobody's home at all. At least nobody answered the phone when I rang it a

minute ago."

"Monica slipped out past Oliver somehow?"

"Past me, too, the other night, apparently," Speare said, sounding sore at himself. "If so, this really is a hot lead to Avis and it's well worth a look-see."

"Easy does it, Luke. Not another illegal entry, please."

"Not necessary this time. I've just concluded a deal with

an assistant to the building superintendent. I am renting a key to that apartment for one half hour for twenty dollars."

"Hold it, Luke, hold it a few minutes," I said promptly.

"I'm on my way."

#### TEN

LUKE SPEARE, fidgeting with impatience, was waiting inside the door of the drugstore on the corner. I had asked a great deal of him. For Speare, the task of holding himself still requires a prodigious exercise of the will.

He hustled out to meet me and I quickened my pace to keep up with him. As we crossed the avenue he informed me the coast was still clear, but he plainly was afraid it wouldn't

stay that way long.

We didn't go in by way of the front entrance, where the beautiful sugared Christmas tree stood; instead, Speare pressed me on around the corner to a dark door marked SERVICE AND DELIVERIES. His confederate, the assistant superintendent, opened it. He then smuggled me along a bare cement corridor to the automatic freight elevator. At the seventh-floor level we stepped out of the atmosphere of bare utility into one of secluded luxury.

Speare led me straight to the silver-gray door of 7C. He touched the button and a buzzer sounded inside. Nobody came. Without taking time to buzz again, Speare used the

"rented" key and we went in quietly.

Mrs. Wayne used her living room as a studio. The conventional furniture in it was almost lost in the spread-out confusion left by her day's work. Costumes and fragments of costumes were everywhere — trailing across chairs, hung over pictures on the wall, pinned to the window curtains, draped on

floor lamps, and spread out on the carpet. Some were Elizabethan, some contemporary show girl with spangled skirts slit to the waist, and others were unidentifiable. A drawing table big enough for ping-pong sat near the broad casement windows; it was scattered with the sketches from which these costumes were derived. One wall was almost covered with display-size photos in color of entertainers wearing Mrs. Wayne's creations. There were playbills and newspaper clips crediting her as the costume designer of numerous television shows, several musical comedies and ballets. . . . All this was here, but Monica Goodlee wasn't.

Speare was already disappearing through a door. I followed him. This was the bedroom, also overwhelmed by Mrs. Wayne's industry. The only sleeping space left in the room was a couch pushed aside in one corner. Another corner was curtained off for use as a dressing room. All the rest of it was taken up by sewing machines, cutting tables, and fitting stands. Scraps of fabric littered the floor in a crazy-quilt

pattern.

Again there was no one here — but obviously this was where Monica had found the invisible cloak that had enabled her to steal out past even the hawk-eyed Speare.

Now Speare had moved to a trash basket sitting among the sewing machines. It was half as big as a barrel and overflowing with discarded bits of material. He began pulling them out by the handfuls — all colors, all odd shapes, hundreds of pieces — and dumping them on the floor. He dug deeper rapidly and soon made a sound of discovery.

He straightened with a piece longer than any of the others. This was a whole garment, badly wrinkled now, and white—all white except for a brown-black stain halfway down one side. Speare held it by its slender shoulder straps—a

woman's slip.

He tossed the slip at me, then dug again. Immediately he came up with another whole garment, this one smaller, but, like the other, white except for another brown-black, crusty stain covering one side of it.

Panties.

Speare gave them a closer look while I inspected the slip, feeling as sneaky as a Peeping Tom. We each found a small ragged-edged hole within the area of the stain. Bullet holes,

of course - both made by the same bullet.

Speare wore a grin of elation. I remained puzzled, although my theory of the shooting of Monica Goodlee was undergoing a rapid revision. She hadn't met that bullet in the nude after all. She must have had her dress off, because I had carefully noted the lack of a puncture in it, but she had been wearing at least her panties and her slip. So. The incident now seemed much less lurid. This new light on the shooting made it romantically disappointing and confusing. Speare probably knew exactly what it meant, but I was still fumbling around with it when an electrifying noise reached us.

The hallway door had opened and closed.

A woman had come in. Her footsteps were crossing the

living room toward the connecting door.

Speare and I moved quickly into the curtained-off corner. Still holding the bloodstained lingerie — I the slip and Speare the pants — we backed against the garments hanging from hooks on the wall. We heard the woman come directly into the room, then stop short.

The curtains hung closed except for an inch-wide gap. We didn't dare touch them now. I did venture to bend sideward and peer out with one eye. The woman was standing beside the emptied wastebasket and the scraps heaped on the floor.

A nun.

The nun's face was hidden within the wings of her black headpiece. She swept her gaze across the opposite side of the room, abruptly marched to another door, pushed it wide open, and leaned to look through. It was the bath. What she was looking for wasn't in there. She turned about and came back, and now I saw her face. It was the face of Monica Goodlee.

Looking straight at our hiding place, she said musically, "Come out, Mr. Cole. Or should I say Doctor Cole?"

We were hardly left a choice. I pulled the curtains open

and bowed Speare out with a you-first gesture. Monica's eyes widened at us in the shadow of her black-and-white coronet.

"Both of you!" she said, sounding delighted. "Well, this is

really fun!"

Fun for her, maybe. Fun for me, no. I couldn't really enjoy feeling as idiotic as this. As for Speare, his expression was one I'd never before seen him wearing. He looked hotfaced, sheepish, nettled, and admiring, all at the same time.

Monica Goodlee, now that her stratagem was discovered, might have blown her wig and screeched. Instead, she faced

us with an amused, unabashed smile.

"I haven't kept you waiting, I hope?"

"We haven't been bored," I said.

She removed the headpiece of the nun's costume and dropped it to a table, leaving her dark red hair in lovely disarray. Hers was a stylish face, a calculated kind of loveliness. She was an exciting, experienced woman who knew how to use her allure to create a contretemps and remain coolheaded throughout. Dangerous type. Her dark bright eyes at this very moment were beautifully asparkle with vulpine audacity. She scared the hell out of me and reminded me sharply of something her husband had said to us during one of our conferences of the past two days.

"If ever you should talk with Monica about this, don't believe a word she says. She's captivating and a convincing

liar and not to be trusted half an inch."

Monica said disarmingly, as if laughing at herself, "Wasn't it silly of me to think I could fool a pair of professionals?"

Hardly, hardly. Fact was, she had neatly outsmarted us all — not only Cole, Jeremiah, and Bricca, which was not too sensational, but also Speare, which was a rare achievement.

"Such a simple dodge," Speare murmured, eyeing the costume that so effectively concealed her personal elegance. "So wonderfully simple."

It was indeed. On six or more occasions Monica had come up here to Apartment 7C, had changed into a suitable costume, and had immediately left the building again, unrecog-

nized. The building employees had no doubt seen many actors and actresses similarly costumed on their way from Mrs. Wayne's studio to the producers' offices or television theaters near by and had probably thought little of it. Returning incognito each time, then changing back to her own clothes and leaving again, Monica had made it appear that she had staved here all the while.

"But you weren't a nun the other evening," Speare said, "not the night you were shot." He lifted his head, suddenly remembering. "You were a Salvation Army lassie that time."

"I thought I looked very fetching in my black bonnet, what's more," Monica said. "I was almost tempted to go into the drugstore and rattle my tambourine at you." She added, "Val was so sweet about it when I told her — said a little patch on the hip wouldn't be noticed."

So Monica had been shot not while nude but while wearing a complete Salvation Army uniform. There went the last of my charmingly erotic theory. It could hardly have been more wrong. Splendid example, this, of the male's capacity for clothing, or more often unclothing, the female in illusion.

"So you've known it all along," I said. "That you were

being tailed, I mean. Haven't vou?"

"Of course I have, because of course I know exactly what to expect of George. Wasn't it tiresome for you, sitting so long in the drugstore with nothing to do?"

She hadn't resisted an impulse to taunt us. At that a chal-

lenging glint appeared in Speare's eye.

"Did you worry about us really?" I said. "I mean, when you came back a few minutes ago and saw we weren't waiting in the drugstore this time, did you wonder what had become of us?"

"Yes I did, until I realized you just wouldn't give up so soon — so that meant you'd caught on. Of course I've been expecting it. It was a good trick, though, while it worked, wasn't it?"

We laughed lightly together without meaning one lilting note of it, and I said, "But of course you realize the jig is up now. You can't do this again."

"Oh, obviously. It didn't get me anything anyhow, you

know, except shot."

We laughed again, cheerily and falsely. Monica's tactics had become clear. She meant to disarm us with sporting candor.

"Now that we're putting our cards on the table and all that," I went on, "Luke and I have been pretty transparent, haven't we? How you knew my name, for example. Having heard from a Dr. Cole, you merely looked for the name of Cole in the list of private detectives in the red book, and there I was, in big bold type."

She smiled and began removing her guimpe. "I'd like to use the dressing room now. My suit's hanging in there. But

don't go 'way."

"May I hold your gun for you while you change?"

"No gun tonight. In fact, nothing. Tonight's a bust." Now she stopped smiling. "You're going to tell my husband all about this — naturally — since that's what he's paying you for."

"Naturally — although I'll feel a little foolish about being so late with it."

"I know exactly what it will mean," she said soberly. "George will demand to hear the whole thing, and I'll tell him the truth, but he won't believe it and there'll be a hideous row. I'm sure we'll get somewhere faster if I tell you first." She stepped behind the curtain while loosening buttons. "Because from here on out, you know, we'd damned well better all work together or George will find himself sunk out of sight."

Ah. Having been forced to abandon one angle, Monica was now skillfully drawing a bead on another. Having shown that she meant to hide nothing from us, she had now begun to operate behind a new false face. She was the loyal little wife — wasn't thinking of herself at all, only of George.

Speare and I exchanged here-we-go-again glances.

"It's for George you've done all this dodging about in disguise?" Speare asked with a straight face.

"For George and Avis both." Monica looked out through

the curtains, her face all lovely innocence, the nun's habit now loose in her hands. "After all, I am the silly dizzy child's stepmother. I've been doing all I can to get her back to her father, where she belongs."

"The De Vecchi too?" Speare asked quietly.
"Frankly, gentlemen, I wish George had never gone overboard for it. If he doesn't get it back the insurance company will only pay him three quarters of its value. He'll be left a hundred and fifty thousand in the red on the deal. That will hurt, particularly since he's had such an unlucky year anyhow. It's worth saving, don't you think?"

Yes, rather.

"That's exactly what I've been trying to do for George, like a good little wife. Under dangerous conditions, what's more. As you very well know, Dr. Cole, I tried so damned hard I very nearly got shot dead."

She'd been shot slightly, anyhow, and probably not so altruistically as all that. More likely this was one of her facile lies, uttered to cover her real purposes. I bore Goodlee's warning in mind — "Don't believe a word she says" — and Speare kept that ominous glint in his eyes while we listened.

"But I couldn't tell George why. Not a word. Jay demanded it. As long as Jay has Avis with him, and the De

Vecchi, too, he can call every play."

The curtains weren't quite closed. Monica was out of the nun's costume now and in no apparent hurry to get her suit on. Her slip this time was jonguil yellow.

"Was it Jay who got in touch with you first?" I asked. "Not

Avis?"

"Jay, while George was out racing around madly trying to find him. That call and all the others came from a pay phone, a different one each time. Jay was really silky about it - so sorry he'd caused this trouble for everyone, so anxious to work it out quietly. A very cool operator, this Jay Millard. He charmed Avis out of her senses, but I'm no starry-eyed child. I knew exactly what he wanted - to use me as a tipster on George's moves."

This could be a stray morsel of truth.

"So you played him along?"

"But strictly on his terms. Not a single word of this to George or anyone else. What else could I do? Jay was so jumpy that one suspicious move would have scared him off into the tall timber, and Avis would have gone flying off with him. If not that, then he might take too quick a crack at the De Vecchi and wreck it."

"Ticklish situation," I agreed. "Called for the most careful

handling you could give it."

"For George's sake," Speare added. She ignored that. Now in her stocking feet, having shed a pair of flat-heeled black oxfords, she stepped into her skirt but stiffly, because of the surgical dressing strapped on her hip. We could clearly see how she had suffered in the line of

duty.

"Trying to talk it out on the phone was no good. I had to see Jay and Avis face to face. He O.K.'d the plan I thought up — using Val's stage costumes — after warning me to watch out for private detectives on this end, particularly Tony Bricca. He intended using Bricca as a go-between and he was afraid the man might start playing both ends against the middle."

Why not expect it? Thanks to a piece of rock somewhat smaller than a hen's egg, the double cross seemed to have become the standard of conduct among this lovely crew.

"Every single time I saw Jay after that I tried my best to make him hand over the De Vecchi and send Avis back home. He just laughed at me, then went on pumping me about George's moves. All the while he was figuring tricky ways of building up a bigger deal. I - "

"When you saw Jay like this," Speare broke in, "didn't you

see Avis at the same time?"

"Jay always sent her out, usually to a neighborhood movie, when I was due. He was afraid I'd soften her up. The kid's so fuzzbrained she might go sobby - might even decide to run back home."

Ah. Finally a hopeful note. Avis, when reached, might be made to see she owed her long-suffering father a small break.

"For another thing," Monica went on confidentially, "I picked up the impression that Avis was a little doubtful about the De Vecchi incident. She could go along with Jay on his synthetics swindle — after all, the poor boy needed pocket money, didn't he? — but possibly she felt snitching the De Vecchi was overdoing it a bit."

"She knows her father tried to ransom it back, doesn't

she?" Speare asked with an edge on his voice.

"She believes her father actually got it back," Monica said derisively. "That's what Jay told her, so that's the way it was."

"But you know better? Jay still has the stone?"

Monica emerged from the curtains with a knowing smile. "I know better than to take Jay's word for anything at all. At that point I decided it was time for drastic measures. I arranged another meeting, became a Salvation Army girl and — But you can take it from there, I'm sure."

Speare evidently could. He had suddenly lost interest in Monica's story; he turned away, looking about the room. I shook my head, and Monica obligingly filled in the picture

of the shooting for me.

"It was perfectly simple and perfectly silly. I actually attempted to force Jay at the point of the gun to hand over the De Vecchi. He went wild — tried to take the gun away from me. I wouldn't let go of it and in the struggle it went off. Didn't hurt very much — felt like a brisk pinch — but it made a thoroughly stupid mess."

"Where was this?"

She left the question dangling and went on. "Nobody else seemed to hear the bang, and the wound didn't seem too bad. We used towels, and after the bleeding stopped I started back. On the way something inside let go and the bleeding started again, worse than before. Here in Val's bathroom I managed to stop it again, but my slip and pants were soaked. I couldn't take them home because then I'd have no end of explaining to do, so I got rid of them here. Then, just as I arrived home, the shock of it or something seemed to catch up with me.

But you do know all about that, Dr. Cole. Thanks for rushing to my rescue."

By now I was practically an old pal and playmate.

"And when I went back tonight for one more desperate try, Jay and Avis were gone. Moved again. Now I don't know where they are."

Speare had found the phone and was using it. His conversation was remarkably brief. Disconnecting, he came back

with a look of wry gratification.

"Mrs. Goodlee," he said, "I've heard all this with deep interest and after giving it careful consideration I've come to a deplorable conclusion. In your estimation Schy and I are a pair of gullible imbeciles."

Monica stiffened, looking hurt. "You mean you think I've

been trying to put something over on you."

Speare nodded. "Yes, Mrs. Goodlee, that's just what I mean. In telling us what you did you probably came fairly close to the facts, so long as they served your purpose, but as to why you did it — " Speare shook his head. "Your halo just doesn't fit. It's fallen down around your lovely pointed ears."

Monica made an angry spluttering sound. "You don't be-

lieve me. And why not?"

"From the first you knew where Jay and Avis were to be found. If you had told your husband this, the case could have been ended within an hour - ended safely and quietly, just as he hopes to end it. In other words, you could have given him easily, at any time, exactly the same information he's hired us to get for him."

"So I've held out," Monica said in an icy voice. "For George's sake, for Avis's, because I'm afraid of Jay --- "

"No, Mrs. Goodlee," Speare said gently. "Not for George's sake, or for Avis's, but for Monica's. Entirely for Monica's. You've been angling to get your hands on the De Vecchi for yourself - and you still are."

Monica had frozen under Speare's directness. "Really. What good would the De Vecchi be to me? I don't happen to

know any fences."

"It would be worth many thousands to you, simply as a lever. You'd like to divorce your husband, Mrs. Goodlee but not for free. He's a rugged man and you know he won't let you bleed him. You need something to force the play. If you can only latch onto the De Vecchi, that will do it nicely — you will use it to squeeze a juicy settlement out of him, a far bigger one than you could ever hope to get otherwise."

All the color had gone out of Monica's face. "Not a bad idea," she said, tight-lipped. "Where'd you pick it up?"

The answer, of course, was George Goodlee himself.
"But that isn't quite all," Speare said with a pleasant air of certainty. "If, besides all this wifely extortion, you can also steal Jay from Avis, that would be the frosting on the cake."

Monica stood very still, frigid with fury. I stood still also, dazed and amazed that I somehow hadn't glimpsed this side of it.

"Just a moment ago I interrupted Mr. Goodlee's dinner at Mrs. Edgerton's to ask him about this," Speare explained. "He said he was actually a little relieved that day to find Millard had gone off with his diamond and his daughter rather than his diamond and his wife."

"Well-I! George has really taken his hair down to you boys, hasn't he?" Monica reached for her coat. "I'd like you two fine gumshoes to realize one thing. You just don't scare me."

"Does murder?"

Turning away, she paused and looked back, her dark eyes wider - and not cold now, but smoldering. "What's this about murder?"

"Hasn't Millard mentioned an incident in Tony Bricca's office last Wednesday night, when he attempted to kill Bricca and actually did kill a woman named Hannah Feger?"

"Jay - did that?"

"Bricca says so, and he was there. You see, Mrs. Goodlee, I thought you ought to know what the stakes in this game really are. You're playing for more than a very handsome man and a very valuable diamond. You're also flirting with a homicide rap."

Monica continued to gaze at Speare thoughtfully and long. Then without speaking she moved off — left us there and quickly crossed the living room to the entrance. We heard

the door open and close again.

I couldn't at the moment see what Speare had thought to accomplish by jarring Monica off her spike heels like this, but there was one thing I could be certain of. With her went our first, last, and only lead to Avis, Millard, and the De Vecchi.

## ELEVEN

TEN O'CLOCK the next morning found me in the inner office on the mezzanine of Jacquiere's, winding up a personal re-

port to George Goodlee.

"Yesterday I suggested putting a tap on your home phone," I reminded him. "It's installed now. An automatic tape recorder will catch all calls, both ways, twenty-four hours a day."

"Fine, fine," he said morosely. "If I know Millard and Monica — as I have reason to — they'll connect again, some-

how, before long."

"Frankly, I'm afraid the tap won't help us much. Millard certainly isn't overlooking the possibility. He may try to finesse it, but so far there's nothing suspicious on the tape."

"Maybe Avis will call. I can't believe she's cut me off

forever."

"I've put three more men to dragging midtown Manhattan, making six in all, not counting those on other assignments. Comparatively small area — reasonable to expect results, but on the other hand it's like raking all of the Gulf of Mexico in the hope of scooping up a certain specified oyster."

"One with a whopping big gem in it," Goodlee said with a

grim nod.

"We're also keeping a constant watch on Mrs. Goodlee, of course. It's never been a secret to her, but it may begin to have a certain psychological effect."

Goodlee entwined his hands on his desk and leaned gravely toward me. "After I came home last evening I found myself on the receiving end of a certain psychological effect caused by your friend Speare. Indirectly he gave me a pretty bad night of it. Why did he pull the roof down on Monica's head like that?"

As Speare explained later, he had done it for a whole bundle of reasons.

"For one thing, Mrs. Goodlee was making a pitch to use us. She'd lost touch with Millard and thought she would gain an advantage by getting chummy with us. Luke saw immediately we wouldn't help our work along by acting like a pair of chumps for her, so he smacked it down. Now she's at loose ends."

"Don't expect her to stay there," Goodlee said quietly. "It will surprise me very much if she suddenly becomes a good girl."

"She probably won't give up her game now, but from here on out it will be twice as tricky and twice as dangerous. She'll have to scramble her hardest to get there ahead of us, knowing that this is the last hand, all her chips are down, and we're watching every move she's making. One misplay on her part might end the case with a sudden bang. . . . I say 'might.'"

"Your tactics are rough on your client," Goodlee said

heavily, "but they do seem to make sense."

"Another thing, thanks to Speare. She now knows there's a murder involved. Cool as she is, it may work on her nerves—and jittery people make mistakes."

"How well I know." Goodlee frowned at the terrestrial globe with its red-limned continents. It was still glowing with its unearthly light and relentlessly revolving. "Anything else?"

"One final point. Thanks entirely to Mrs. Goodlee, Millard knows who we are and that we're hunting for him. Of course that gives him an advantage and makes it even tougher than it was."

Goodlee rose to face me. "That's unfortunate, Cole, I know. The thing keeps backfiring. What's worse, time is run-

ning out on us. We still have a little left, but it's too late for a change of plans. I'm still relying on you to find Avis. That's still the all-important thing, the first thing. For pity's sake, find Avis."

Earnestly I assured him I would continue to do my utmost — and my assurances sounded hollow in my ears. I gripped his hand, promised him a further report soon, and went out.

In passing I was awarded a smile by Miss Scott — but a worried one. Goodlee's somber mood was having, it seemed, a depressing effect on his associates. Leaving through the fountain room, I sensed that even the salesmen bearing their jewel-laden trays to their well-heeled clients were a bit less casual about it than before. But then, this could be simply the normal strain of a busy Christmas season.

I walked down thronged Fifth Avenue among packagebearing shoppers — passing on the way two Santa Clauses and one group of Salvation Army women — with the guilty feeling that so far I had given my client very little value for

his money.

Some of the bits of information I'd picked up weren't even worth passing on to him. For example, he would find small comfort in the news that Oliver Jeremiah, watching Fern Stevens' apartment most of the night, had noted no activity whatever on her part except one round trip to the corner delicatessen. He would hardly be uplifted to hear that another new operative on my pay roll, a man elegantly named Sydney Fontaine, had reported Monica even more quiescent than Fern — no doubt because she was waiting for another message from Millard. Nor would he feel cheered by any false assurances that the Feger killing seemed destined for the unsolved file — one small mischance, or one vengeful word from Tony Bricca, could bring it out again, resoundingly and disastrously.

I felt sorry for my harried client. No other small agency could have done more for him than we had done, but my spirits refused to soar with the thought.

The most discouraging part of the whole muddle, amazingly

enough, was - Luke Speare. Yes, Speare. There it was, an incredible thing but painfully apparent. Speare, the old reliable, the militant idealist, my all-seeing eye, my brilliant think box on wheels — Speare was letting me down.

True, he was as beaver-busy and tireless as always, but he

was strangely and persistently straying off the beam. Instead of directly attacking the crucial, central problem, he was showing this new, exasperating, incontrollable tendency to slip off on diverting side trips. This really was the gloomiest worry of all. I was being nagged at every turn by a sense of my own inadequacies, and added to my chagrin was the fear that without Speare's all-out co-operation my big case would go on heading straight for a crashing failure.

Reaching Lexington Avenue, I dragged my tail up the stairs and down the hall to my office, where I found a note stuck on the door: Back at ten o'clock. It was well past ten now.

The phone was ringing in a vacuum. I went in to answer it, and within the next half hour answered five more rings. Each time it was another of my girl-hunters calling in. Unanimously they reported no results, complained of aching arches, and asked for further instructions. I gave them all the same answer: Get a new pair of feet and keep on searching.

Oliver Jeremiah rang in to tell me Fern Stevens hadn't stirred except for another brief visit to the corner delicatessen. I ordered him to stay with it and to expect nothing exciting. There had been no very good reason for putting him there in the first place except the hope that it might help to turn Speare's mind from the Fern-Bricca complex and back to Avis.

I lay on my thinking couch, staring moodily out the window at the United Nations Secretariat, where statesmen were gravely passing resolutions permitting tomorrow to come while other statesmen were obdurately vetoing it. Even the weather seemed futile today; it was neither briskly cold nor pleasantly warm, but a sort of indifferent in-between favorable to nothing except the propagation of nasty viruses. The sun wasn't shining, the wind wasn't blowing, it wasn't even snowing. Prices were still climbing out of sight, time was ever more of

the essence, and if Speare was off chasing intellectual butter-

flies again, that would be the last straw.

Ten minutes thereafter he came hustling in, bright-eyed and alert. He seemed to bring with him an air of accomplishment. I sat up expectantly — even daring to hope a little.

"Hiya, Schy," he greeted me, not smiling.

He sat at his desk, fished a handful of memos from his pocket, shuffled through them, shrugged — and dropped them all into the wastebasket. Following this unique gesture of labor lost — Speare usually cherishes his notes — he just sat there, teetering in his chair, thoughtfully gazing across at the Secretariat and saying nothing. This was unnatural and unnerving, and when I couldn't stand the silence any longer I asked wryly, "Well, Luke, anything stirring?"

"About Avis? Nothing, Schy. Sorry. Nothing at all."

Another silence stretched out even longer.

"Nothing new, Luke?"

"About Avis? Not a thing. She's still as far out of sight as ever."

Although normally a man of keen awareness, Speare seemed perversely oblivious of the pain he was causing me. I didn't know how to take it. My breakdown came in a matter of seconds.

"Well? Don't just sit there rocking like a gift-shop Buddha, goddammit. Out with it."

He looked at me with the eyes of a lamb. "With what, Schy?"

"Bricca, of course. Tony Bricca. Don't tell me you haven't found out something new about him!"

Speare's response to that upset me even more. He sprang up and began pacing around his desk, as agitated as I had ever seen him — and besides, his answer seemed to have nothing to do with his favorite crook.

"Schy, we're scared."

"Scared? Who, us?"

"Yes. I am, anyhow, plenty. Aren't you?"

Well, a little. Well, yes, certainly. In fact I was scareder

than hell, and with good reason. On the one hand I was coping with a really rare crew of high-bracket cut-throats. On the other I had made myself legally vulnerable. I could easily get trapped in this tangle of hushed-up felonies - one of them a homicide. It could cost me my license, wreck my agency, and worse.

If it happened I could never truthfully plead that I hadn't seen it coming. I had seen it all right, perfectly clearly from the very start, when Speare had called me across blizzardy Times Square to view the corpse in Tony Bricca's office.
"It's too late to drop out now, of course," Speare said.

"Much. I feel too sorry for George Goodlee. I'd like to help him. Besides, he has paid me an irresistible chunk of coin."

Speare kept pacing around his desk, both hands pushed flat into his hip pockets.

"I shouldn't have taken it," I admitted. "It was undoubtedly

a bit injudicious of me, not to sav imbecilic."

"To make that kind of money you've got to risk something," Speare observed, "even if it's your neck."

"I do feel my poor abandoned principles brought quite a

good price."

"You haven't hurt anyone by taking the money," Speare said. "Not yet, at least. But we might hurt somebody - ourselves included - by letting the case work out the wrong way."

"You're worried because it may work out wrong? I'm wor-

ried because it's not working out at all."

"By that you mean we're not finding Avis." Speare shook his head. "That would make Goodlee happier, but it wouldn't actually wind up the case - not the real one." Before I could ask him what he meant by that startling remark, he hurried on earnestly, "Look, Schy, when you decided to play this long shot, you must have had a good idea how we might make out."

"I'm hoping for three simple things from this case, Luke. First, I hope to feel I've made myself worth the five thousand I've already accepted. Second, I hope to collect the second five thousand for services rendered, as contracted. Third, I

hope to stay out of jail."

It seemed a far bigger order now than it had before, and a harder one to fill — and I probably didn't know the half of it. Speare had evidently sighted new hazards. He seemed to be trying to tell me, without putting too sharp a point on it, that he still feared the case was booby-trapped.

"I can't see it any longer as a simple case of larceny and

elopement, Schy."

"What is it, then?"

"It's a two-way, or three-way or more-way battle of wits — and we're caught in the middle of it."

"Sounds bad."

"It's what scares me."

"Let's start with the simplest, or two-way, possibility. You mean it's a clash of wits, a catch-as-catch-can thing, between Millard and Bricca? Or Millard and Monica? Or Monica and Avis . . . ?"

"There isn't any doubt in my mind who the key man is.

Tony Bricca."

So here we were, right back where we'd started on the old merry-go-round. Resolving to stay calm, I warned myself that something had evidently happened to justify Speare's morbid preoccupation with Tony Bricca. Unavoidably contradicting policies previously laid down, I urged him to hurry up and get into it.

"To begin with, Bricca's office is still closed up tight."

Seemed a minor point. "He doesn't want to make himself a sitting duck for Millard, that's all."

"But he doesn't need to close up shop entirely because of Millard. He could go on doing business as usual with two or

three rodmen to keep him company."

True enough. Many a man afraid for his life, as Bricca was, had stayed safely in circulation by flanking himself with armed bodyguards. Bricca preferred to crawl deep into a hole where the killer couldn't reach him. When risking his first public appearance he had chosen a spot where the killer would have found himself closed in by many potential wit-

nesses. Jacquiere's was a place where no circumspect mur-derer would ever try to blast down another victim. At the first alarm the whole place would clap shut tighter than an electronic clam.

"It's costing Bricca real money to stay under cover," Speare pointed out. "New York's having another epidemic of jewel thefts this winter — one even bigger than last year's, and that means Bricca might be having a bumper crop of recovery cases. Instead, he's passing it all up. Must be for worth-while reasons."

Fern hadn't gone back to watch the office either -- not since we had come into the case. Maybe she had just been making sure the coast stayed clear until Bricca mended enough to be able to dump Hannah. On the other hand, Speare and I may have been just what she'd been waiting for. . . . On the other hand again, it was possible that neither Fern nor Bricca had any further interest in the joint.

Echoing this thought, Speare said ominously, "Bricca will never go back. He's left it for good."

Suddenly I saw meaning in the starkness of the décor there. It wasn't merely a sign of tightfistedness and cynicism. Bricca had wasted no money in prettying it up, and had kept no records, because he was cop-shy. He had been constantly fearful of getting nailed for his triple-dealing and had kept himself constantly ready to take a fast powder. When the time had abruptly come for him to make a break for it, he had done it for an unexpected reason. It wasn't the law's long arm that had reached for him, but a murderer's bullets.

"If Bricca is actually chucking his agency, as I believe he is," Speare went on, "I see two strong reasons behind the move. The first is that he's really afraid of getting murdered and no fooling. He actually got shot up. He had a very narrow squeak. No doubt about it, he's an intolerable danger to the man who's trying to kill him and he'll never stop being that as long as he lives. He knows the killer is deadly persistent, deadly determined to get him. One unguarded step on his part could be fatal. But in spite of all this he's play-

ing it through — relying on his wits to stay alive and cop the prize."

"There's only one thing the prize can be - the De Vecchi."

Speare nodded. "The most sizable loot that's ever come Bricca's way."

"But Millard has it," I reminded him, "and Millard's the man who's looking for a fair chance to murder Bricca on sight."

"Situation's further complicated," Speare muttered, "by the fact that neither Bricca nor Millard knows where the other is

hiding."

"If either finds out, guns will boom again and the De

Vecchi may vanish forever."

Speare nodded again. I was staring at him in a gulping panic. If it was true that Bricca was making a life-or-death play for the De Vecchi —— If that was what we were really up against —— The mere thought of it caused frost to form on my spine.

"Wait a minute, Luke. You're doing some extra-fancy guessing here, aren't you? What makes you think there's anything more on Bricca's mind than simple, straightforward

blackmail?"

He didn't waste a second leaping into that one.

"Take it right back to the moment when the bullets stopped flying there in Bricca's office. What would an honest man have done following an attempt to murder him? He'd have grabbed the phone, howled for the cops, and pulled himself clear of the whole homicidal hassle then and there. But instead, Bricca covered up the killing of Hannah, then crawled into a hole to give his wounds time to heal."

"And his mind time to work out avaricious plans."

"In the second place — again showing Bricca is thinking of much more than simple blackmail — Goodlee can't be shelling out enough money to compensate Bricca for the long-term loss of his agency. Third place, Goodlee is chiefly protecting Avis. Once he has his two treasures back home and has let Millard go, he'll stop bleeding for Bricca — and Bricca is certainly smart enough to know this."

"So Bricca is angling, not for a little blood money now, but for bigger, richer stakes — maybe even enough to retire on."
"Besides," Speare continued with another brisk nod, "now

having no ties, Bricca is already nicely set up for a quick

grab and a fast getaway."

My spade-calling assistant was giving me a bad shaking up. I had listened to him closely hoping to find a heartening flaw or two in his reasoning. I hadn't discovered any and I couldn't

think of any arguments.

Speare noticed the anguished look on my face. "Keeps getting tougher, doesn't it? Millard's clever enough, but Bricca's even sharper. Sharper, colder, harder, more experienced — and he plays rough. I know you don't like hearing this, Schy, but I can't conscientiously keep it under my wig."

"I asked for it, didn't I, right out loud? Does that cover

it?"

Speare shook his head. No. There was more.

"This all-or-nothing game of wits I'm speaking of - it's partly between Bricca and us."

"And us?"

"We've been worked on by a professional swindler. Compared to Bricca, the rest of the lot are amateurs. Bricca has given us his special treatment."

How? When?

"When Bricca paid his surprise visit to Jacquiere's he brought in a smell like a fleet of shrimp boats was a-comin'."

How was that again? Fishy, he meant?

"Think what he did, Schy - taking it first at face value. He walked right in, cold. He sat down, described himself as a participant in a murder, and demanded blood money. He did it without taking a single precaution that he wouldn't be overheard. He didn't check to see whether the intercom was open or off. A man as canny as he is ought to suspect any mirror on any wall anywhere, but he didn't bother to look behind that one. Instead, like the dumbest sort of punk, he sat right down in front of it and calmly incriminated himself as a blackmailer, a concealer of evidence, a transporter of a dead body, and an accessory after the fact of first-degree homicide."

Now that Speare had drawn a diagram of it, I could see that Bricca's had been a remarkably peculiar performance.

"You mean this wasn't what it appeared to be?"

"Bricca couldn't be that stupid. Bricca knows exactly what he's doing, why he's doing it, and what he hopes to gain by it. I think his visit to Goodlee was a slick trick pulled off for our special benefit — if benefit is the word for it."

"But he didn't even know we were there, Luke."

"I think he knew it, all right. He would never have walked in blind, just taking a chance Goodlee would be in. No; he'd cased the place first, maybe for hours with Fern's help. He knew for sure Goodlee was there. That means he also knew"—Speare emphasized this with a sternly uplifted finger—"he also knew you and I were there with Goodlee—two detectives working for him."

Fern had told him about us? She had never tailed us quite as far as our office, but perhaps she hadn't needed to. Speare and I may not look the part, quite, but possibly we act like

detectives.

O.K., O.K., I could understand that much. Thanks to Fern, we had never been a secret to Bricca. But as for the rest —

I didn't get it at all.

I couldn't separate Speare's statements from his implications. Did he mean that Bricca had deduced our presence behind the one-way mirror and had put on his act in Goodlee's private office especially to impress us? If so, I admired his masterly timing. But how did it add up? What had he meant to gain by committing extortion and confessing assorted felonies before known witnesses?

Speare no doubt felt his theory was solidly valid. I felt I would like it better if only I could understand it. So far it

left my mind dizzy and groping.

"I'm too tired and too jittery to puzzle all this out for myself, Luke. Spell it out to me, pal, slowly, please. Why did Bricca do it?"

"Good question," Speare said, giving me an oddly compassionate look.

"Well, answer it, answer it before I get too sore to listen.

Not sore at you, Luke. I mean, goddammit, practically everybody in this case has made an earnest effort to play us for a royal pair of suckers. It began in a mild way with Goodlee himself, then we got it from Monica. Now it's Bricca. Next ——"

I broke off, listening to footsteps in the hallway. The door in the adjoining room opened and closed. Our caller entered and came to a standstill. He hadn't taken a chair, but had

simply stopped and was waiting there on his feet.

He turned to face me as I went in — a square-shouldered, rod-backed man, trim and spare. Although I guessed him to be under forty, his crew cut bristled with gray. His face was youthful in a peculiar wooden way. He wasn't frowning when I discovered him and he didn't smile as I greeted him. He didn't look worried but he didn't look unworried, either. He just looked self-possessed, imperturbable, and intelligent.

I said, "Good morning."

He didn't answer good morning and didn't ask, "Mr. Cole?" He didn't speak at all. He just removed a business card from

his pocket and gave it to me.

The name printed in the center of it was Mark Usher. In the lower left-hand corner was the name Assurance Associates and an address on lower Broadway. In the opposite corner occurred the words Chief Adjuster, Department of Claims.

"Sit here, Mr. Usher? What can I do for you?"

Mark Usher sat there beside my desk, looking at me. He shifted his gaze briefly as Speare followed me into the room. I handed Usher's card to Speare. No further introduction seemed necessary.

"Mr. Cole," Usher began in a brisk but strangely dry voice, "my company has a stake in the De Vecchi diamond.

Specifically, four hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

I responded with a pleasant, interested silence. Speare lifted his eyebrows slightly as if to ask, "And what has this to do with us?"

"In the past the Department of Claims of Assurance Associates has sometimes operated on the principle that it's more economical to pay a ten-per cent reward for the return of

stolen jewels than it is to pay fifty to one hundred per cent of the full value to the owners."

I nodded affably. Seemed reasonable enough.

"Unfortunately this same policy has made it much safer and more profitable for thieves to collect that reward than to dispose of their loot through fences. In this way it has actually encouraged jewel thievery. Also, it has drawn certain private detectives into the shady business of acting as go-betweens who retrieve stolen jewels for a split of the reward."

"I think I have heard of an instance or two," I said non-

committally.

Mark Usher leaned forward. "We have found ourselves in an anomalous and intolerable position. On the one hand we have insured our clients' jewels against theft while on the other we have, in effect, made it attractive for crooks to steal those same jewels for the rewards we offer. In addition we have jockeyed ourselves into the very questionable position of dealing with the crooked go-betweens. Putting it plainly, we have come to feel ourselves to blame, in no small part, and to our cost, for the rash of jewel robberies that broke out in this city last winter and again this year."

I felt the power behind Mark Usher. When a huge moneymaking organization gets religion it's a force to reckon with.

"We cannot be complacent about this," he said, his cold, intelligent eyes fixed on mine. "In fact, we have abandoned the practice permanently and we are determined to take drastic measures to reform the situation."

"Good," I murmured. "Good, good."

"We're fed up with the type of private detective who acts as a crook's go-between for a share of the loot. He is himself a crook because, when he does that, he is compounding a felony."

Those haunting words again.

"When a private detective knowingly deals with a crook and allows him to escape the law, that also is compounding a felony."

As if I didn't know. . . . While I sat there chilled and wordless Speare stepped into the discussion.

"Mr. Usher, possibly you're in the wrong agency. We are not looking for anybody's stolen diamond. We're simply trying to find a runaway girl."

Usher must have heard this, but no sign of it showed in his

face.

"We will not again reward evil. This is now our inflexible policy, as adopted unanimously by our board of directors yesterday. We will not deviate from it in a single instance. If necessary, we will make a smashing example of the case of the De Vecchi."

Speare said patiently, "Perhaps I didn't make myself entirely clear, Mr. Usher. Mr. Goodlee retained us, not to find the De Vecchi, but to find his daughter. If incidentally Miss Goodlee's husband, or lover, whichever he may be, is in possession of the De Vecchi, that fact concerns Mr. Goodlee, and it concerns his insurance company, but it does not concern the Cole Detective Agency. We suggest — in fact, we insist — that you verify this statement with our mutual client."

Speare might as well have been talking to a judge who had

already pronounced sentence.

"Furthermore," Mark Usher said, "we will not act alone. I'm sure you've heard of the National Stolen Property Act. It makes the interstate transportation of stolen goods a federal offense. The instant the De Vecchi is taken across the Hudson, or out of New York State in any other direction — or the instant there is a reasonable suspicion of this — the FBI will move into this case. When we crack down, we will do so with the solid backing of the United States government."

The chief adjuster of the Department of Claims of Assurance Associates then rose, went to the door, and opened it. He said, "Interesting meeting you," and quietly went out—leaving me numbed with despair and Speare full of heated

exasperation.

As if this hadn't quite rounded off the morning for me,

Speare added the finishing touch.

"I've seen that man before. It was yesterday noon, outside Jacquiere's. He was waiting on the sidewalk. I'd intended to go in and ask Miss Scott a few questions, but just then she

came out. I faded back because this righteous zombie named Usher immediately took her arm. They went off together."

I heard myself asking, "Where?"

"To lunch. Nice, expense-account place. I found a corner table and watched them — also expense-account, of course. Usher made himself as charming as hell to her. She seemed entirely co-operative, too." Speare was frowning at me. "For whatever it's worth, that's where I saw him before."

For whatever it was worth Assurance Associates, having almost half a million dollars at stake, had quietly set up a listening post deep inside George Goodlee's office.

## TWELVE

THAT WAS Saturday morning.

Saturday afternoon added no new page to this casebook — not even a footnote.

Sunday was a blank.

Monday died.

On Tuesday nothing happened until late afternoon. Then two developments broke at once — both bad. A new snowstorm began whipping down on the city and at the same time our dormant case violently woke up.

At a little past five-thirty I stepped out of the marble entrance of a small building on East Forty-sixth Street. It was here, surrounded by pastel-tinted steel walls, that I had first

met George Goodlee six days ago.

I had just descended from the well-guarded establishment of Jacobus Wells after attempting an interview. Both the lapidary and his honey-haired receptionist had been as close-mouthed as people associated with fine gems are reputed to be. After working on them for the better part of an hour I was leaving with a large burden of fatigue and a few grains of information.

It was information that Luke Speare should be delighted to hear. Eager to tell him all about it, I looked for an unoccupied taxi, vainly, then started walking toward my office with unaccustomed briskness.

It was already dark. The snow had begun driving down two hours ago. Now it was overflowing the gutters and plastering every hanging sign. There was no sky — just the icy scud flowing overhead between the truncated towers. The needle-pointed wind had already prodded countless Santa Clauses and Salvation Army lassies indoors. This snarling bully of a storm was utterly lacking in Christmas cheer.

I made it on foot all the way, the sharp sleetlike snow blowing hard against my back, my neck pulled deep into my turned-up collar. The Cole Detective Agency was blessedly warm and cozy, but deserted. Speare had gone out, probably in an urgent hurry. He hadn't taken time to leave me a note.

I had fully recovered, of course, from the misapprehensions I had had that Speare was letting me down. I should have known the real obstacle was my own myopia. Actually Speare was beating his brains out trying to find an answer that would leave us justly happy, prosperous, and outside Sing Sing. It was a big order. Might be impossibly big, in fact; but if defeat was in the cards, it wouldn't be because Speare had been derailed or bogged down. Wherever he had gone this dirty evening and whatever he was doing, I could be sure he was out there tirelessly hewing away at it.

A portable tape recorder sat on Speare's desk — part of the equipment we had rented for the purpose of eavesdropping on Monica Goodlee's phone calls. We used this one for playbacks only. A basic unit for recording was planted, with the connivance of an employee, at the connection box in the basement far below the Goodlee apartment. Speare had evidently gone back there today and had brought in a reel of freshly exposed tape.

I turned on the instrument, switched it to Fast Reverse—Speare hadn't taken time to rewind it after listening—then put it on Play-back. The several other reels we had picked up on previous days had failed to provide us with any kind of

a lead. This one seemed no more rewarding.

For twenty solid minutes I listened to Monica Goodlee's voice engaged in conversational trivia. She discussed a dress with her couturier, made an appointment with her hairdresser,

ordered scotch and brandy from a liquor shop, ordered food from a market, and made chit-chat with several high-pitched females. There was a brief exchange between Monica and her husband; he told her he wouldn't be home for dinner because he must work late at the shop. All this talk was above suspicion. The only possible exception was the final recording on the tape, and even that one could be a thing of virtue.

It was an incoming call from a young woman with a cultivated voice who identified herself as "Miss Lynn, personal secretary to Mrs. Gerard." Miss Lynn said Mrs. Gerard was dreadfully sorry Mrs. Goodlee hadn't been able to reach her, but really, Mrs. Gerard was "simply frantically busy with the last-minute details of the health-cruise plan." However, Mrs. Gerard would definitely be at a committee meeting at nine tonight, and would Mrs. Goodlee please call her there, at Circle 8-9492? Mrs. Goodlee promised to do so and Miss Lynn thanked her and they both politely said good-by. . . . Playing it back a second time, for no very good reason, I detected an anxious strain in Miss Lynn's voice, but after all, as the secretary of a madly bustling society matron . . .

The phone rang then. "Cole Detective Agency."

"Schy," Luke Speare said quickly over the wire, "can you join me here right quick?"

"If you're in Miami the answer is yes."

"I'm in a lunchroom just around the corner from Fern

Stevens' apartment."

The last time he'd done this to me I'd only had to push across a few slushy blocks to Times Square. This time he was calling me all the way up to Morningside Heights. It was twenty times farther. And unlike last week's beautiful downy snowfall, tonight's blizzard was a beastly blow that meant to stay thoroughly malevolent all night long.

"I've finally found something that feels like a lead," Speare added hopefully. "It may be hot. It may be no good at all.

But at least it's a lead."

We needed nothing worse. Obviously it was no good trying to argue with this. Whatever it was, I couldn't pass it up

or even ask it to wait until morning. Not with just the weather as an excuse. Speare was already in the thick of it, dutifully

battling the lousy elements, wasn't he?

"I sat there in the office about an hour ago," he explained rapidly, "when Oliver Jeremiah rang in again. He gave me another negative report on Fern — she still hadn't gone out much farther than the corner delicatessen. But then I began asking him questions. Got hold of two details that didn't mean anything to Oliver but may mean a lot to us."

I prayed so.

"Fern has been buying food in larger quantities than one small girl can comfortably get away with. Also, early this afternoon she went into a neighborhood store and bought a

can of pipe tobacco."

So. Speare had learned last week that Fern Stevens lived in two rooms on the ground floor — alone. Supposedly alone, at any rate. It appeared now that she was harboring a man in her apartment — one who was taking care to avoid showing himself in the open.

"Wait right there, Luke. If I can find an empty taxi Fern

will soon have two unexpected visitors."

A hoarfrosted taxi dropped me at the corner and immediately went scurrying off toward Riverside Drive with its ears laid flat and its tail tucked in.

I stood alone in a place of bitter desolation. By comparison the region around Grand Central, from which I had set out forty minutes ago, seemed aglow with lively sociality. Here the wind in untempered blasts exploded out of the vast interstellar space above the Hudson. Each gust trailed more snow through the streets in snaking streamers, piled it dangerously over the doorsteps, packed it in hard drifts across the sidewalks. The cold pressed in with an antarctical edge. There wasn't a spark of human mercy in this night. It had been seized by devils. It was a man-hater of a night, a killer.

Here on this corner was Fern's favorite delicatessen, offering cole slaw and kosher pickles to the frozen wayfarer. Just down the block, past several dark shops and across a grow-

ing drift, another heartening light shone from the ice-crusted window of a small restaurant. Speare was looking out,

signaling.

I stomped in, shaking sleety snow off myself, and found him to be the only customer except two young men who were bent over soup and textbooks at a rear table. This bright, friendly place offered a low-priced menu for the benefit of the students of Columbia University, who ordinarily moved in droves hereabouts. I slid into the booth beside Speare. He had a fresh pot of hot coffee waiting for me. While I revived myself with this incomparable nectar he gazed out the window and diagonally across the intersection at the small white stone house wherein Fern Stevens lived.

"She's in there," Speare said. "Probably not alone, although there's been no sign of the man."

Of course there was the possibility that Fern herself liked to smoke a pipe, but no doubt Speare had considered it.

Bricca's secretary, or ex-secretary, was a subject I had previously rejected out of hand. Since then, my vision having broadened, thanks to Speare, she had gained in importance. In fact the case as a whole had become a double-edged problem. The task of returning Avis to her father was still our number-one headache, but we could no longer hold the position that the De Vecchi was no concern of ours.

The De Vecchi was the exciter of all the evil in the case. It was the catalyst that had brought into action the thievery, the cross-currents of deceit, the double-dealing, the greed, the homicide. In spite of Mark Usher's formidable warning, it

had become our number-two objective.

"I saw Jacobus Wells this afternoon," I said while we watched Fern's snowbanked doorway. "It was hard work getting him to open up, except about George Goodlee. On the subject of Goodlee he gets voluble. In Wells' estimation Goodlee is a prince of a fellow and a truly great man."

"Why?" Speare asked.

"When you were combing West Forty-seventh Street" (this being the diamond-trading center of New York, where Speare had done considerable scouting this past week) "did you

happen to pick up any uneasy rumors about Jakus Wells?" "No."

I nodded. "There it is. Wells and Goodlee shared a fairsized disaster early this year and Goodlee was kind enough to keep Wells' part in it hushed up."

"A diamond-splitting?"

"Comparatively small one that time. Worth only two hundred grand."

Speare looked pained. "A total loss?"

"Total' is the word for it. Wells simply hadn't the plane of cleavage figured right. Result, worthless splinters. Another result, a nervous collapse on Wells' part. Goodlee took it not nearly so hard — just absorbed it as a hazard of the trade. Went even father than that, in fact — took care not to let it get noised around. It might have wrecked Wells' reputation, and his business as well. For that Goodlee earned Wells' undying gratitude. Quite a guy, our client."

"And in spite of such an expensive mistake," Speare asked in wonder, "he's going to let Wells take a crack at the De

Vecchi?"

"Wells will do the actual splitting of the De Vecchi, but Goodlee has taken on himself the responsibility of plotting the plane of cleavage. The book said that, remember?" I added, "That is, they'll do it that way if they ever get the damned diamond back."

We dwelt on that wishful thought for a moment while

watching the blinded windows of Fern's apartment.

"However, that's just a side light," I resumed. "What's more important, Wells said the De Vecchi would be a white elephant in the hands of any ordinary thief. He swore there isn't a single diamond cleaver in the trade who would be willing to operate on a big stolen stone."

"That's where Jay Millard enjoys a rare advantage, then,"

Speare said.

"One that probably freezes Goodlee's blood every time he thinks of it. Goodlee told us Millard is a man with an inborn affinity for precious gems. In fact, he seems to be something of a misguided genius. To judge from what Wells

told me also, there's no doubt that Millard has the equipment and the know-how to pull it off. I mean, to split the De Vecchi successfully himself."

Once the De Vecchi was cut up into small bits, as Goodlee had pointed out, it would be much easier to dispose of,

either in this country or abroad.

"It will take time," Speare said gravely, "but time is on

Millard's side."

"All this simply verifies what Goodlee has already told us, Luke. I went to Wells for a special reason, to ask him a pointed question. That is, is it possible to tell a genuine rough diamond from a lump of glass at a glance, in dim light?"

Speare lifted his head and cocked both his ears.

"Wells told me it's standard practice for diamond traders to judge the fire of a gem by dull light. That's why the little consultation rooms there in Wells' shop have gray walls, black furniture, and a north light. Conditions weren't too bad when Tony Bricca paid the ransom money to Millard. Besides the street lights Bricca had the bright light of a pocket flash."

"Bricca said Millard was too jittery and in too much of a

hurry to let him have a really good look."

"That's what he said, but the look Bricca had was good enough. He's no stranger to precious stones. They've been his business for years. He knows as well as any jeweler the difference between a glassy glitter and the brilliant fire of a genuine diamond. Wells assured me that under the conditions I described — the light conditions in the street that night — a man of Bricca's experience wouldn't need a second glance."

"So Bricca knew exactly, then and there, what Millard had

given him," Speare said softly.

"He knew, all right. No doubt of it. If Millard hadn't actually handed over the real diamond, Bricca wouldn't have paid him the ransom money. That means Millard kept his end of the bargain by giving over the De Vecchi."

"Yes," Speare said.

He agreed with me. Encouraged, I went on, "So here we can make a solid assumption, that Bricca had cooked up a

slick scheme of his own. He was in a really sweet position to outfox Goodlee and Millard both."

Speare tasted his coffee thoughtfully. I felt for an instant he might be 'way ahead of me, but I went on anyhow, en-

thusiastically spelling it out.

"Like this. Bricca takes the De Vecchi from Millard there on the traffic island in the middle of the avenue and turns back. He has planned to make the switch as soon as possible. Hannah Feger, by previous arrangement, might be waiting for him there on the corner, or out of sight in the nearest doorway. Or, walking down the avenue close to the buildings, Bricca could simply put the diamond in his chamois bag on the sill of the first window he passed. Hannah would follow along in a few seconds to pick it up. Either way, it could be done so smoothly that it wouldn't be detected by anyone who might be watching him."

"Bricca probably expected to be watched," Speare said. "He couldn't have been too surprised when Goodlee collared

him pretty promptly."

"When Goodlee and Usher popped out and grabbed him he already had the glass substitute in his fist. Bricca simply credited the double cross to Millard. Seemed entirely credible. Remember, Usher and Goodlee had been watching Bricca through binoculars — they'd had him in sight all the while except for a few yards between the street corner, where Bricca turned, and the doctor's door, where they nailed him. Besides, Usher searched Bricca on the spot. There was nothing else to think — Millard had pulled a fastie. Very slick of Bricca. Beautifully simple, perfectly effective."

"The only one who wasn't fooled, of course," Speare said

quietly, "was Millard himself."

"Exactly. Millard may have heard of the switch through Monica, probably within minutes. We know Goodlee went storming home. Most natural thing in the world for him to blurt it all out to Monica. Suppose then there was a phone call — Millard wanting to ask was it all right, was the pressure off now? Instead he heard himself called a dirty double-

crosser by Goodlee, or by Monica, or both. To Millard this meant Bricca was the real crosser-upper."

"Necessarily?" Speare said.

"It's logically inescapable. It gave Millard a hot reason for pushing into Bricca's office with a gun in his fist and murder in his heart. It was a desperate attempt to get the De Vecchi back."

Speare was soberly silent again.

"I doubt that he succeeded," I hurried on. "Bricca is too smart to have lost the diamond again that soon and that easily. It's a sure bet he'd already ditched it somewhere and Millard was forced to leave the office without it."

"You think Bricca still has the De Vecchi?"

"What else? It strengthens Bricca's reasons for staying holed in so deep. He's afraid of losing the diamond, whether or not he loses his life besides."

"He's afraid, all right," Speare said laconically, and stopped there.

"Bricca's blackmail deal with Goodlee was evidently just a preliminary move. He's probably working up to a king-size ransom for the De Vecchi. Or he might be feeling out a way of getting it split and selling the pieces — he has plenty of crooked connections to help him with that. Or, again, he might prefer to skip the country with the whole diamond as soon as he's comfortably healed up. See, Luke?"

"This is why Bricca is willing to chuck his business overboard?" Speare said. "Because the De Vecchi is worth half

a dozen private detective agencies?"

"At least," I agreed wryly. "Also, this is why Millard has gone on working under cover here instead of powdering out. He's trying to find Bricca, trying to snitch the De Vecchi back for himself. Dog eat dog eat dog, and so on, until all the dogs devour one another."

Was it my keyed-up imagination, or was Speare receiving

this with mental reservations?

"All this points to the big answer, Luke. The way to knock this case down is for us to get our hands on the De Vecchi. The minute we bring that diamond back to George Goodlee,

all these lovely thugs will have the ground cut from under them. That'll lick the whole lot of 'em. After that, what's more, bringing Avis back to her papa will be much easier."

Speare remained remarkably calm.

"What's the matter with you, Luke? All this bears out the theory you've clung to from the very start — that Bricca is the chief engineer on this back-stabbing merry-go-round. Why aren't you more enthusiastic?"

"Let's not overlook Assurance Associates," he reminded me. "They'll be pretty stuffy about it. So is this really the best

way out - the best for the Cole Detective Agency?"

"It's dangerous, certainly, but how can we avoid running risks? Look here, Luke. What's really bothering you? This is no time to go cryptic on me. Out with it. What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that if I had the De Vecchi case in my possession I'd keep it close at hand, where I could constantly

watch over it."

"So would I," I agreed, sliding out of the booth. "That indicates our next move. It's high time we dropped in on Fern and her skittish lodger."

# THIRTEEN

WE TRAMPED across the wind-packed drift on Fern's doorstep and tracked snow into a little square vestibule, cautiously.

There we stopped for a moment to send out feelers.

The dim hallway ahead was unexceptional: stairway on the left, two closed doors on the right, a single frugal ceiling light, a clean, uncarpeted floor, painted dark green, reaching into a gloom that seemed to say nobody had any business going back there. A well-behaved quiet prevailed, complete except for the whirring of the wind outside and a phonograph somewhere upstairs playing, of all things, Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata."

On a less lyrical level someone had had fish for dinner. Someone else was frying pork chops. We sniffed again, test-

ing the air for the aroma of pipe tobacco. . . . No.

We went in deeper, quietly, to the first door, and I knocked. After a moment the door opened on the safety chain and a blue eye peeked out at us.

"Miss Stevens?"

The eye grew suddenly round, the door shut with a snap. Brief pause.

After a few seconds I said through the door, "We'll wait

here, Miss Stevens."

After a few more seconds the safety chain was unhooked. This time Fern Stevens opened the door all the way, boldly, just as if she didn't know us from a pair of stray Eskimos.

She was pale. She was trying to pretend she wasn't frightened. She wasn't smoking a pipe.

"You want to see Fern?" Fern asked.

We nodded.

"Fern isn't here," Fern said. "She's gone out — won't be back tonight."

We smiled at her.

"I'm Fern's roommate," Fern added.

We smiled more brightly.

"Oh, all right!" she snapped, and turned away, leaving the

door open.

Speare followed me in and closed the door, and while Fern stood frowning at us we loked around. Her desk in Bricca's office had been a model of tidiness, and this room was just as shipshape. I took particular notice of the ash trays; they were all empty and clean. Even more particularly I looked at the door that connected with the rear room. It was shut.

Fern personally deserved closer attention. She was a small, slight girl with a round, warm face. Cuddly. At the moment she was narrowing her blue eyes at us in an attempt to be forbiddingly indignant, but in spite of herself she looked childlike and sweet. Unaffected, homey sort of girl. Could be very comforting to have around, provided one wasn't an unwelcome dick.

As tidy as her apartment was, Fern herself was the neatest item in the place. From her bright red scuffs to her soft dark hair. . . . In the cafeteria the other night I'd noticed her hair was lighter at the roots, but tonight it was a uniform blue black.

"I'm a natural blonde who looks better as a brunette," Fern said forthrightly, bristling at me. "So I dye it. I've done it for years. You taking a survey or something?"

"I like it," I said, "and I salute your unconventional courage. I was a little undecided about you, though, the night you tailed us from the Goodlee apartment down to our office, almost."

She blinked.

"I hope it won't hurt your pride to learn we deliberately shook you that night, then tailed you back here. We've had vou watched ever since."

That wasn't precisely the fact, but Fern recognized the possibility of it. More color went out of her cheeks. . . .

Faintly, just faintly now, I detected the aroma of pipe tobacco. Fern may have noticed my nose twitching.

"See here, men," she said with a quick swallow. "If we want to talk over old times, let's take me out to a nice place where we can sit and have some nice hot Tom and Jerrys, hmm?"

It wasn't a bad suggestion — except that it tipped her hand. What Fern really wanted, of course, was to lure us away, because there was a man behind the closed door of her bedroom. He was listening to us - no doubt listening in fear, feeling trapped. Possibly he had a gun in his fist, a gun looking toward us while he waited and hoped for a chance to sneak out of his cul-de-sac unseen.

Fern was trying hard to make an opening for him. "Let's go," she urged us. "I know a little place just around the corner \_\_\_\_ "

"But it's so bitter out there and so pleasant here," I protested. "We couldn't possibly find a nicer place for bouncing a few friendly questions back and forth. You won't mind, will you?"

"I might," Fern said, frowning again. "Depends on the

questions."

Speare put in quickly, "Well, let's try this one first: Have you been persuaded recently to step on a man's hat?"

She gave him a full, round-eyed look. I thought Speare must be referring in some oblique way to Millard's gray Homburg, but I couldn't guess why, unless he simply wanted to disorganize Fern's defenses with a cryptic attack. If that was it, he was succeeding nicely. Fern just stared at him wordlessly while I groped for a more promising opening.

I hadn't quite found it when Speare got in another: "You may not appreciate how sought-after you are, Miss Stevens. We know of several people who are dying for a chance to

drop in on you like this. Monica Goodlee, for one. Jay Millard for another. Then there's ——"

"I don't even know those people," Fern said quickly. "Who

are they?"

We gazed at her in thought. Her denial sounded spontaneous and sincere. Possibly, just possibly, it could be true.

"Let's all sit down," I suggested.

We all sat on the couch, side by side, Fern in the middle. She seemed so warm and companionable. I was stimulated to wonder what sort of tie bound Fern to the man she was hiding in the rear room. Was it simple sympathy, or love, or perhaps just payments of money? She had harbored him as long as we had cased the place, and longer, and she was covering him now as best she could in her inexpert, quietly panicky way — this man who was so near, there in the next room now, motionless and silent as he listened to us.

"Now let's start over again, Miss Stevens," I went on amiably. "You know about us — who we are and why we're here. We know about you — enough to send you to jail. So let's take it from there."

"Jail!" Fern blurted, in what seemed to be genuine alarm. "What have I done?"

At that inconvenient moment, before I could point out to her that she had compounded several felonies, the telephone rang. She sprang up, leaving us sitting there with the conviction that this third degree was getting off to a badly rattled start on the part of the inquisitors.

Fern murmured an anxious hello to the instrument. It answered in a loud, raucous voice that carried across the

room to us.

"Miss Stevens? Benny. This is Benny, Miss Stevens, over at Columbia Delicatessen and Catering. I just got another of those ——"

"Benny," Fern broke in, "Benny, could I call you back in a few ——"

"But we're closing up right now, Miss Stevens. Bad storm, no customers. If we stay any longer we'll be sleeping here with the herring, ha ha. But first — like the radio says — but

first I got here just now another of those messages for your friend Danny. He —— "

"Danny hasn't come in," Fern said quickly. "I don't know

when --- "

"Here's the message, Miss Stevens. Mike wants to see Danny right away, as soon as possible tonight, and never mind the little weather we're having. Same place as before. Don't phone, Mike says, just get over there fast. Very necessary, very urgent. Got it, Miss Stevens?"

"I'll tell him, Benny, the minute he comes in. Thank you,

Benny. Good night, Benny."

She disconnected, red-cheeked, and sat again — not between us this time, but facing us. She was frightened and shakily defiant.

"That was for a friend lives upstairs hasn't got a phone,"

she explained rapidly.

Speare had both his ears aimed at the bedroom door. I preferred to watch Fern — she looked so adorably agitated.

"Jail! I've just tried to be helpful and friendly. What's

illegal about that?"

"Miss Stevens, it's a sad fact that the worthiest motives in the world can get you jugged just as fast as the basest, or even faster. So much depends on who you help and what you help him with. Take as an example a man who comes clawing at your door and tottering into your apartment in the middle of the night, shot up, bleeding, and in terror of his life."

She looked away quickly and swallowed a lump.

"You put him to bed, take care of him at great inconvenience to yourself, and keep it hushed up. That's undoubtedly an act of human kindness. It is benevolent, charitable, merciful, and generous. It also gets you fouled up in a murder case."

"Murder?" Fern said with a gasp. "What murder? Who got killed?"

Could this be on the level? Was she actually unaware of Hannah Feger's violent death in her employer's office?

Fern had worked for a boss who could outclam anybody

in this closemouthed business. It had been Bricca's policy to deal with his clients outside his office; he had needed to tell his secretary nothing at all about Goodlee and Millard. Even the attempt to murder him at his desk had been made at a time when Fern was absent. She knew only what he had chosen to tell her - and with his characteristic cunning Bricca apparently had not overlooked the advantage of cultivating a condition of unincriminating ignorance in Fern.

"There wasn't any murder," she said positively. "Mr. Bricca told me what happened. He knows and you don't, because he was right there and you weren't. So stop trying to scare me. And anyhow, when he came here like that, what would

you have done in my place?"

"I might have called an ambulance."

"He asked me not to, so I didn't. He doesn't want me to tell anybody anything about it, either, so I won't."

"Surely he coached you in a convincing story to tell the

cops, if it should come to that."

"I believe what Mr. Bricca told me," Fern said, lifting her chin. "Mr. Bricca is a nice man who gave me a job when I needed it bad, and he's never made any kind of a pass at me, and what he told me about the shooting was that he hadn't done anything wrong, and I believe him. So don't try to tell me different."

"I won't, honey child," I sighed. "I really won't."
A trusting girl, Fern. Trusting indeed. Out of simple compassion and blind loyalty she had taken Bricca in and nursed him, and in addition she had gone on working under cover for him - and she had done all this in a spirit of sisterly service, not doubting him or asking nosy questions. Whatever he had told her about the shooting, he had no doubt whitewashed himself thoroughly - and she still believed every word of it.

Well, bless her heart. She was more to be hugged than censured. I really loved her for this. Aside from our client, she was the first really decent, unselfish person we had met in this case. Coming after Millard, Avis, Monica, and Bricca,

Fern was as soul-warming as a breath of spring.

To what lengths did her innocence go?

"Bricca told you who shot him, of course."

"No, he didn't. He said he wanted to protect me from having that knowledge. And even if he had ——"

"But when he put you to casing his own office he must

have told you who to look for."

"He said he thought sure another private detective agency was trying to cut into his business and get him in trouble with the insurance companies. He wanted me to watch out for

them in case they came around."

Hmmm. Pretty slick excuse, this, particularly since a pair of private detectives named Cole and Speare actually had turned up — and Fern in good faith had accordingly tailed us about. Actually, as I saw it, Bricca had wanted to make sure the coast stayed clear until he found a chance to get Hannah's corpse off the premises.

"Mr. Bricca only stayed here for a couple of nights, you know," Fern went on. "Then he went to some other place — but he didn't tell me where. Haven't seen him or heard from

him in just days."

It was a nice try, but Fern simply wasn't by nature a con-

vincing liar.

"I'm glad to hear that," I said soberly. "Because the man who shot Bricca knows he didn't succeed in killing him. He wants to finish the job. He's hunting for Bricca right now, and sooner or later he's likely to find him. If they should happen to meet here — well, it wouldn't be so good for your rug."

Fern stared at me with her round blue eyes and almost

stopped breathing.

"So I'm really very glad for your sake to hear Bricca isn't

staying here any more."

I had remained keenly aware of the presence behind the closed bedroom door. Speare, saying nothing, had beamed his attention on it. He gave me an alert glance now — a signal that something was stirring back there. Against the background noises of the storm in the streets I heard a betraying sound — a faint squeak. It could have been that old betrayer, a floor board yielding under a man's weight.

While Speare concentrated on him I began bearing down on my simplehearted girl friend.

"Fern, you deserve to know more than Bricca has told you. What does the name of Jay Millard mean to you?"

She shook her head.

"Jay Millard is the man who's looking for Tony Bricca. He wants something Bricca has. You know what it is, don't you?"

Fern said stoutly, "Mr. Bricca didn't need to tell me his

business if he didn't want to."

"Come, come, Fern. It has been pretty nerve-racking for you, living with that rock, hasn't it?"

"What do you mean? What rock?"

So she didn't know about the De Vecchi, either? Bricca had been nesting on the diamond all this while, right here in Fern's apartment, and she wasn't even aware of its existence ...? Well, it was possible. Fern was a girl who could become entangled in the crime of the year, involving homicide, the grandest sort of larceny, and a dozen other felonies, and remain as untouched as an angel.

"Let's get back to Jay Millard," I suggested. "He is the danger Bricca has been hiding from, Fern. He might find

some way to reach you."

"Me?"

"On the assumption that you're still keeping Bricca under wraps. No basis for it, of course," I added disarmingly, "but if Millard should happen to break through to you ——"

I heard it and felt it—the noise of the storm becoming a little louder for a moment, the force of the wind bursting into the hallway. Someone had opened and closed the entrance. But no one had come in. There were no sounds of an arrival—no stamping of snowy feet, no huffing and puffing. Instead, someone had gone out. Someone had sneaked out.

Tony Bricca had left Fern's bedroom by way of the connecting door in the rear of the hallway. He had crept forward along the hallway and past us, making no noise at all except that single squeak of the floor board. Now he was outside the building and heading for safer cover elsewhere.

Speare sprang up with his overcoat and hat and streaked across the room. Fern stared after him openmouthed as he snatched the door open. He was turning to run into the vestibule when three muffled noises broke through the whirring of the storm. *Brump*, *brump*, *brump*.

Fern was rising tightly from her chair. "Mr. - Bric-

ca ---- ?"

I pushed her back. "Stay right here. Don't move at all."
I hurried after Speare. He had left the street door open in his haste, and snow was swirling in. Stumbling out after him, I stopped calf-deep in a hard drift and struggled to get into my overcoat and hat. The snow was a torrent tumbling out of the night above the river, thick, blinding. I turned my back on it and pushed out after Speare.

We had heard three gunshots. As soon as Bricca had left the building the gun had fired. Someone had been waiting

for Bricca in stormy ambush.

Under the street light on the corner there was a blur of dark motion. Two men were kicking their way along, the one yards behind the other — Bricca tottering in the lead with the doubtful help of his cane, Speare stalking him. Nothing else in the world was moving — only the two men fighting across a drift in a slow, nightmarish chase and the snow rushing down on them.

I pulled my head down between my shoulders and let the wind shove me along. When I looked up again yards later Bricca had fallen. He lay still in a bed of snow while Speare slogged on toward him. I reached them, gasping for breath, as Speare stooped over Bricca and tore his overcoat open.

Blood was shiny black on Bricca's chest. Two of the three bullets had hit him squarely where he lived. With the bullets burning in his body he had tried vainly to outrace death.

Crouched there, we looked back. The storm was the killer's accomplice, covering him perfectly. There was nothing at all to see along the cross street except the snow pouring down between the building fronts and the dimly shining windows.

A flickering veil of light now touched us. It was a pair of head lamps on the avenue; they seemed far away, but actually

they were shining at us from halfway along the next block. Harsh mechanical noises rattled through the whining of the wind. A monster of a snowplow was crawling down on us.

We drew back from Bricca and turned into the suffocating blasting of the storm and saw, just then, Fern Stevens leaving

the warmth and light and safety of her doorway.

She had thrown a coat over her shoulders and was clutching it at her neck, and the wind was trying to tear it away. She was still in her red scuffs and at once she lost them both. We yelled at her but she didn't hear. She kept coming under the lash of the wind.

A sparkling dot of light appeared behind her — two bright bursts of orange-white flame. And doom knocked again, dully and flatly — brump, brump. Fern stopped, lifting her head in astonishment and disbelief; she stumbled forward two more steps, then fell softly.

We tried to throw ourselves into a run toward her. The wind was a ram of ice. It was a sadistic giant poking icicles into our streaming eyes and crushing the breath out of our

chests.

Speare dropped to his knees beside Fern and I pushed past, too wind-beaten to realize fully what had happened. I could see no one to chase. There were footprints here, but shapeless, being swiftly swept over and filled in by the malevolent wind. They traced a ragged curve out to a bare spot in the center of the street and from there ——?

The killer might have gone off in a waiting car without lights, the storm blanketing out all its sounds. He might be hiding now under a stoop or in a doorway on this side of the street or the other. He might be waiting, gun lifted, for me to turn a few steps closer... No. This was empty panic. He was already gone. The devils of the storm had whisked him away invisibly.

I bent against the wind to stare back. Fern lay in the snow on the sidewalk, in the light fanning out from her doorway. Speare was no longer with her. While I wondered where he was, numbly, he reappeared — came hurrying from the open door. He paused beside Fern's body, hunch-shouldered under

the pressure of the wind, gazing toward the intersection where Tony Bricca lay in the drift with the snow already shrouding him.

The huge street-brushing machine had reached the corner, had turned toward us, and had stopped. A man was dropping out of its cab. He had spotted Bricca in the glow of the street lamp.

At the same moment a snow-plastered taxi rounded the corner from the avenue and found its way blocked by the big machine. The taxi driver also hopped out. The two men moved cautiously closer to Bricca. Then, looking up, they found Fern also, with Speare standing beside her, and they halted in suspicion and fear.

Within another half minute one of them would be at the

telephone in the restaurant, calling the police.

Speare dodged off toward me. The wind wrapped our coats around our legs like shackles. With a feeling of utter helplessness we shifted from one wind-bared spot to another, trying to run. With luck we might eventually find a subway station.

In a kind of blizzard-blown delirium I found myself thinking that murder is always in season. People get killed by intent, and by accident, and die natural deaths too, even on our cheeriest holidays. Anyone else wishing to get murdered this year with the customary yuletide trimmings had better hurry. Tonight was December 16 and there were only eight more dying days until Christmas.

# FOURTEEN

On THIS luckless night, this night that had been fatally unlucky for Fern and Bricca, we had had the freakish luck to find an unengaged taxi on Riverside Drive. We had come all the way without attempting to talk about the double murder. Our driver's ears had looked too big. We simply hadn't had the heart for it. We were still shuddering and short of breath when we reached my office.

Why had Fern been killed? To shut her up? This amiable,

loyal girl who had actually known nothing to repeat?

We bent over the steam radiator, warming our stiff hands. I could picture Fern so vividly, huddling there in the snow in her stocking feet, her red scuffs lost behind her. By now, of course, both bodies had been picked up. The morgue would not be much warmer than the storm. Fern would lie there near her sister victim, Hannah Feger, in a refrigerated crypt.

I wanted a drink, a strong, hot one. A Tom and Jerry.

"It had to come just when I was telling her about Millard — warning her he might break through to her."

Speare's face was lean and bleak.

"Goddamn that goddamn diamond. She never saw it, never even heard of it, but she's dead because of it."

"Bricca didn't have it there, either," Speare said.

"How did Millard find out finally where Bricca was hid-

ing?" I turned for a quick, hard look at Speare. "What? You say Bricca didn't have it there?"

He shook his head. "Not possibly."

"The De Vecchi? Bricca didn't have it?"

"No attempt was made to search his body or to get inside and search his room."

"Bricca had ditched it somewhere else, you mean? And

Millard knew this? But how could he know?"

"The killer didn't even try to search for it," Speare insisted. "That proves knowledge."

He was frowning intently at the clock. His mind was switching to something else. Mine was reeling with confusion.

"You went back to Fern's apartment, Luke. What for?

Wasn't it to hunt for the De Vecchi?"

"For one thing, I wanted to see the bedroom. It looked well used. Bricca had evidently stayed there all along, ever since the night of the shooting."

Watched over by Fern, hiding in constant fear of the

same killer who had finally caught up with him tonight.

"That telephone message Fern took," I said. "The one that came through Benny at the delicatessen. Very important, he said. For Danny. But wasn't it really for Tony Bricca?"

"I think so."

I was suddenly certain of it. "Sure it was. That's why Bricca stole out. Not to duck us but to answer that urgent message."

"Not realizing it was bait," Speare said.

"That phone message was intended to draw Bricca into the open. Millard was waiting out there with a gun. He used the storm to make his getaway easier. And that finished it off — the killing he had bungled last week."

Now Bricca was no longer a witness against Millard in the Feger homicide. But in correcting that error he had committed a worse one. He had mistakenly thought he had to silence Fern too, because he was afraid Bricca had told her too much.

"What would he have done if Fern hadn't come running out like that? Would he have gone in after her? Or waited?

He must be kill-crazy. If ever a murder was utterly unnecessary ——"

I was babbling. I needed to get hold of myself, so I shut

myself up and tried to think.

It was clear enough that Bricca, while hiding in Fern's apartment, had set up a method of receiving messages with a minimum of risk. Fern's own number, of course, could have been traced directly to his hide-out, so with Fern's help he had used the delicatessen as a relay station. Fern was a friendly girl, and no doubt a favored customer, and Benny had been glad to co-operate. In this manner someone on the outside could get word to Bricca without knowing where Bricca was.

All right. But — and here was the puzzler — this implied that in some way Bricca and Millard had been in touch with each other previously. This in turn implied that there had been some sort of deal cooking between these two fine-handed crooks. Considering the fact that Millard had wanted to finish the job of murdering Bricca — and also considering the fact that Bricca was a master of the art of playing both ends against the middle ——

It didn't seem to make sense on this basis, but what else was there to think? In some devious way Bricca had given Millard the telephone number of the corner delicatessen. Benny would take Millard's call and immediately pass the information along to Fern at her apartment. Ordinarily it

was probably a number for Bricca to call back.

Safe? Safe enough. The safest Bricca could arrange it under the circumstances. But it had a hole in it, a hole big enough

for a killer to shoot through.

Benny, in answering his phone, probably didn't say simply, "Hello?" Instead, he probably said, briskly, "Columbia Delicatessen and Catering." Millard could then look for that name under the obvious heading in the Red Book. That would give him its address in the general region wherein Bricca was hiding. Millard could quietly watch the neighborhood. Sooner or later Bricca would have to show himself—as he had, for example, on the occasion of his visit to

Jacquiere's. Or Millard could bribe Benny. Or he could use a tricky message to draw Bricca into the open just as he had done tonight. Anyhow Millard had learned exactly where Bricca was holed in. All that remained was to wait for the right moment, then send another message that would cause Bricca to make an easy target of himself in the street.

So Millard had become a three-time killer tonight, but he was something worse than a killer because he had destroyed Fern Stevens with such heart-sickening needlessness. I would be more than gratified to see him fry for it. If the official executioner should happen to feel indisposed that evening, I would be glad to fill in and throw the switch on him myself.

The telephone had rung and I had hardly heard it. Speare had answered it, while I had gone to pacing around my desk, and was speaking in low tones. His worried frown warned

me the news was bad.

"That was Fontaine," he said, disconnecting — Fontaine being one of the free-lance ops we had hired. "He's been trying to reach us. He lost Monica."

"Lost her!" I stopped short. "Where?"

"In the RCA Building. She took a taxi down, went in the

plaza entrance, and hasn't been seen since."

Damnably canny woman. She had picked the perfect place for shaking our tail. The RCA Building has not only multiple entrances, but also multiple levels and bank after bank of elevators, not to mention several tunnels to other nearby buildings and subway stations. People swarm through it at all hours, in and out of the underground shops, in and out of the sleepless honeycombs overhead. . . . I recalled that Monica had many professional acquaintances in radio and television. She might have gone up to one of the NBC studios. More probably she hadn't.

"How long has she been missing?"

"Two hours."

"Is Fontaine still watching for her?"

"With his eyes wide open and his conscience aching."

More than that we couldn't do.

Speare had begun searching through his desk, one drawer

after another, rapidly. I didn't know what he was hunting for and I didn't ask. I was too busy fishing through my pockets for a slip of paper having George Goodlee's unpublished phone number scribbled on it.

Goodlee himself answered my ring.

I asked him if he was entirely alone there, if he could talk safely. He said he could. Next I asked for what purpose his wife had gone out on this nastiest of nights. He said he had come home late from the shop to find Monica already out and no message left. Did the signs indicate Monica had some new scheme afoot?

"She's become unusually jittery," Goodlee answered. "I may know why. I think she's afraid Millard and Avis may skip town very soon now, never to come back."

"Has she heard from them again?"

"I suspect she has."

But how . . . ? Never mind now. Go into it later.

"To put it bluntly, Mr. Goodlee, which is she more afraid of losing, Millard or the De Vecchi?"

Goodlee answered without hesitation, dryly, "I believe she would prefer to latch onto both."

Yes.

Warning him to repeat none of the information I was about to give him, I then told him how Anthony Bricca and his secretary had suddenly died. There were certain perplexities in the situation, I added, but none, to my mind, as to the identity of the murderer, who was Avis' Prince Charming. I pointed out that any attempt on our part to shield Millard for Avis' sake, or for any other reason, would make us all accomplices after the fact.

I did not dwell on the possible consequences of this, but I did remind my client that I had not committed myself to the extent of having my fundament electrically toasted, Avis or no Avis. The problem, I stated, was getting impossibly out of hand, and I could promise no more than to try as best

I could to hold the inevitable disaster to a minimum.

When I finished, George Goodlee was a thoroughly sobered man, I was shaky from hearing myself talk like that, and

Luke Speare was still searching—through my desk now, having exhausted his own.

"If we don't get out of here right fast, Schy, we'll be too

late," he said anxiously.

Too late? Too late for what? "Where the devil's our gun?"

Gun? He must mean the Smith & Wesson .38 revolver I'd bought secondhand shortly after opening my agency. There had been no particular reason for acquiring it and I had never had the slightest need for it — hadn't once felt impelled to lug it about, much less fire it, or even slug somebody with it. I had once used it for a paperweight, but it had made clients nervous. For a while we had propped the window open with it, until it began to get too rusty. It must still be around somewhere, but I hadn't seen it for at least six months.

Speare was so anxious to have it, somehow, that I forced myself to think back, and suddenly I remembered. I opened the supply closet, got down on my knees, reached past a mop bucket to the far corner and fished it up. I had used it to plug a mouse hole last spring because the mice had begun nesting in our galoshes. It was rustier than before and covered with dust and cobwebs. Of course it wasn't loaded.

Speare immediately took care of that. In delving through our desks he had found a box of cartridges.

"What will we need the gun for?" I inquired.

"For good luck," Speare answered.

Silly question, really, considering that we were coping with six hundred thousand dollars' worth of murderous greed.

"Let's roll," Speare said urgently.

"Where are we going?"

"Waikiki," he informed me, moving rapidly toward the door. "Should've been there before now."

## **FIFTEEN**

I FOLLOWED Speare out, hustling to keep up.

Sometimes my assistant forgets to tell me things. Well, it isn't that he forgets exactly; he just assumes that what has been communicated to him has also been automatically communicated to me. Sometimes, too, seeing a thing with perfect clarity, he takes for granted that it is equally plain to me. It's generous of him to believe that I'm as smart as he is, but there is a big practical difficulty in this — too often it leaves me groping around in a fog of ignorance.

Waikiki, for instance. This was positively the first time Waikiki had shown up in connection with this case. I was utterly blank as to why it had become so important to us. I

only knew we were in a tearing hurry to get there.

Well, it would be a welcome relief from this dirty weather we were having. The storm was still making the night fairly unlivable, although it had spent the most of its evils and here in midtown the mountainous buildings helped to break its force.

We hustled through the flying flakes, heads lowered, and at the Lexington Avenue entrance of Grand Central we went into the hit-or-miss business of capturing a taxi.

As we ducked into it Speare instructed his driver succinctly,

"Waikiki."

"Where's that, bud?" the driver asked.

"West Forty-ninth, between Sixth and Broadway."

We lurched off, wheels spinning, then went into a clunkclunking advance with a broken tire chain beating against our left rear fender. Speare was silent and tense. On any other night I might have played along with him just for the sport of it, but tonight this was as far as my patience could stretch. I eyed him grimly.

"Who do we know in Waikiki, Luke?"

After a puzzled moment he recognized his omission. "Oh.

Sorry, Schy. Lynn is Avis's middle name, of course."

Was it, of course? Well, possibly I'd heard this before, or possibly I hadn't. Evidently it was a pearl which Speare had dredged up from the deepest bottom of the Goodlee file.

"And Gerard is Millard's," he added.

My mind turned a backward flip-flop and landed on it. That telephone call, the one I had run through the tape recorder twice — that conversation between Monica and "Miss Lynn, personal secretary to Mrs. Gerard." Something about it had bothered me at the time, and now, Speare having switched on the floodlights in my mind, I knew why. Of course it was a call from Avis couched in cryptic terms calculated to fool a wire tapper.

How had she put it? "Dreadfully sorry you haven't been able to reach Mrs. Gerard" — meaning Jay Gerard Millard. The difficulty wasn't too surprising really. Immediately following the altercation in which Mrs. Goodlee had acquired a bullet in her hip, "Mrs. Gerard" had make a quick shift to

a new hide-out.

What else had "Miss Lynn" said? "Mrs. Gerard has been simply frantically busy with the last-minute details of the health-cruise plan." So. For "health-cruise" read "getaway." It could translate into nothing else. George Goodlee had been doubly right about Monica. She had indeed heard from Avis, and her agitation since then had indeed been caused by a well-grounded fear that both the De Vecchi and Millard would soon pass beyond her reach. Jittery, was she? Why not? The possibility jarred me, too.

The rest? However, Mrs. Gerard would definitely be at a committee meeting tonight, and would Mrs. Goodlee please

call there, at Circle 8-something? The number escaped me. No matter. After a rapid fender-banging trip — the avenues were being cleared of drifts — we were now arriving at Waikiki, the arctic weather notwithstanding.

Speare paid off the driver and we entered Waikiki together, in what we hoped was an unnoticeable manner. This was a restaurant and bar with unimaginative South Sea trimmings; but we noticed the décor only incidentally. First we gave the joint a fast once-over for Avis and Millard.

The wall lights were a murky pineapple yellow. On both sides of the room there were deep, dark booths, and in several of these customers were smoking and drinking. Nobody looked our way. Maybe Avis and Millard were already here and waiting to catch Monica's incoming call, and maybe they weren't. In this phony tropical dusk it would have been difficult to recognize Frankenstein's monster at ten feet.

We declined the advances of a pretty Polynesian hat-check girl and went on quietly. Speare's sharp eyes scanned the dim faces as we passed them in the gloom. We slid into a booth in the rear and a dark wraith of a waiter came. I ordered a double scotch and Speare ordered a beer. One of the fathomless mysteries of Speare's nature is that he invariably orders beer, even when we are operating on an expense account in Hawaii.

We watched the street door in silence until the drinks came. Speare then slipped away. After a moment he slipped back, having briefly visited a row of three telephone booths in the farthest corner.

"The one in the middle," he informed me quietly. "That's Circle 8-9492."

He had no doubt learned the location of this number from the same friend who had divulged the unpublished number of the Goodlee apartment. It was, of course, the number which "Miss Lynn" had asked Mrs. Goodlee to call tonight. Avis had unquestionably acted under Jay Millard's instructions in arranging this telephonic rendezvous. It was essentially the same system that had failed Bricca, but it was safer for Millard because, being more mobile, he could use a different

call number every time. Besides, Monica's feeling toward Millard was more amorous than murderous — or at least I hoped so.

Thinking of Monica, I startled myself by asking, "Luke, is

it possible Monica found out where Bricca was hiding?"

"Why not? Provided she had the delicatessen's number.

But why would Bricca have given it to her?"

"Offhand I can't say — but for that matter, why did he give it to Millard? Seems to me every crook in this case has been cooking up an underhanded deal with the others."

We watched the street door all the while. Our eyes were now adjusted to the gloom. The palm fronds spreading overhead hadn't been dusted since Pearl Harbor. The murals depicted bronze hula girls dancing in a jungle of coco palms while all around chimpanzees munched bananas. According to a number of placards nailed to the foliage, the bar offered many specialties of the house, all these consisting of pineapple juice or coconut milk mixed with various intoxicants, including even scotch and vodka. The U.N. should unquestionably look into this.

"There's only one way I can figure the groundwork of this case, Luke. Bricca and Millard were somehow working together to double-cross Goodlee, meanwhile looking for a chance to double-cross each other — and Bricca lost."

"Too clever for his own good, no doubt of that," Speare agreed.

We watched the street doors for another minute.

"I keep worrying about crazy little things," I resumed. "Those rental library books Fern left on her desk, for example. I feel I owe it to her to pick them up and take them back. And Goodlee — how's he going to make out even after he's got the De Vecchi back? The biggest chunk of it will become a pendant selling for one million bucks flat. How many people in the world have an extra million on hand to spend on a necklace? Might have a little trouble finding a buyer, seems to me."

Speare nodded gravely. "I keep thinking about that silly

globe."

"The one Mrs. Whatsername sent to Goodlee as a Christ-

mas gift?"

"Goodlee must have had an embarrassing moment at dinner with Mrs. Edgerton the other night when he thanked her for it — because she isn't the one who sent it to him."

"She isn't? How do you know?"

"I made an excuse to phone and ask her where I could get another globe like it. That was after I'd seen Miss Scott being chummy with Mark Usher. I suspected something tricky might be going on there. Sure enough, Mrs. Edgerton told me she'd had nothing to do with it."

"What's behind it, then?"

"I began worrying about what might be inside it. Possibly a microphone, plus a small amplifier like a hearing aid. Audio frequencies can easily be sent over the light lines for short distances. Miss Scott could connect a tiny receiver with ear-phones into a plug near her desk. In that way she could listen in on all of Goodlee's conversations, most of which she wouldn't hear otherwise."

And some of which we wouldn't want Mark Usher to get

wind of, either. The possibility threw a chill into me.

"I checked deeper on it and ran into a little obstacle," Speare went on. "It seems the salesman at Orpingham's who took the order is unable to remember who had the gift sent to Mr. Goodlee. In other words, the person who bought the globe also bought the salesman."

That could be the work of Usher the righteous - Usher carefully covering himself while ridding the world of two loathsome felony compounders named Cole and Speare.

"A man who has sold his silence for a price will talk if you simply raise the ante," I said. "In this dizzy case expense is no object. Anyway, where we're going we won't need money."

"I'll try again, using a billfold as a lever," Speare agreed. Speaking of financial matters, there was another question that had occurred to me. Where was the blackmail money we had seen Goodlee pay to Bricca? Stashed away with the De Vecchi, perhaps?

Just as I was about to mention this to Speare I felt him tighten. He said quietly, "Excuse, please," rose, and disap-

peared through the door labeled Gents.

I intensified my watch on the entrance. Snow was still flying in the street. Customers remained scarce. Somnolence prevailed over all of Oahu. Nobody even moved until a man turned from the bar up front. A dark figure in topcoat and fedora, he crossed to the telephone booths in the rear corner. Happily he didn't choose the middle one, which we were momentarily expecting Monica to call, but shut himself inside the rearmost.

Speare was still gone when the girl came in.

She came in alone, wearing a snugly belted stormcoat, black rubber boots, and a black scarf tied over her sunshine-yellow hair. She shook snow off her coat, smiled at the barman and the hatcheck girl in passing, and came unhurriedly across the long, dim room. She sidled into the middle phone booth and unfolded the door to close herself in. She didn't feed a coin into the phone but just sat there on the perch, waiting.

Finally there she was.

At long last, incredibly, she was right there within reach. Avis.

Avis Goodlee herself, my client's precious runaway daughter, five thousand additional dollars on the hoof, right there across this room, ready to be collected.

Alone, too. Still alone. No Millard. Millard the killer was

keeping out of sight and letting Avis run the errands.

I didn't dare move. Speare was staying away — now, of all times, staying away. With a crisis at hand he was dawdling back there in the men's room — with our gun, too. I couldn't understand such an uncharacteristic dereliction on the part of the ever alert Speare. His return would create a ridiculously awkward moment. I'd have to mumble, "Don't look now, but ——"

Avis huddled inside the booth, quiet as a bunny, and within one minute by the clock her phone rang. She answered it instantly. Monica had called on the dot — no doubt from somewhere inside the RCA Building.

As the conversation began I slid from the booth carefully, so as not to attract Avis' attention with any sudden motion, and took a casual course between several unoccupied tables. Arriving at the booth beside Avis', I gently closed the door, spun the dial a few times for the sake of the sound effect, and brought my left ear to the intervening panel.

Avis' voice was barely audible. Monica had evidently begun by scolding her; Avis seemed to be trying to explain or defend herself. It was an exchange of rising emotion; Avis' voice grew louder. I caught a few words here and there, then

whole phrases.

"Jay says I ——
"Jay says we ——

"Jay says I mustn't tell you where we're staying now.

"Because Jay says you just make trouble. You wouldn't believe him before, you wouldn't listen to him, you insisted, and look what happened.

"Daddy will never believe him either. Jay says Daddy absolutely never will, so there just isn't any use even trying ——

"We're going away. Jay won't let me tell you how soon. Or

where. Or anything. You just won't ever see us again.

"I suppose I ought to say good-by to Daddy somehow, but Jay says ——"

A man had appeared in the gloaming just outside my door—one wearing a dark topcoat and a dark felt hat pulled low over his forehead. He was the same man who had gulped himself up in the third booth several minutes prior to Avis' arrival. He was holding his right hand against his side at waist level. He had a gun in it. He was aiming the gun at me.

I stood stiffly still for a second, feeling fatally trapped, then grabbed at the door handle and missed. Jay Millard shook his head. He wanted the door to stay closed and me to stay inside this booth. I had no wish to cross him. My chances were those of a fish in a barrel.

I stared down at his gun and told myself that this was the same gun Millard had used to kill Hannah and Bricca and

Fern. He kept it concealed against his body, pointing it un-

movingly at me.

Avis had stopped talking. Millard signaled her with a jerk of his head. She squeezed herself out of the booth, took one terrified look at me, then went hurrying toward the street door.

"Stay in there," Millard said.

Helplessly I watched Avis go. She was well outside and hurrying away through the snow before Millard made a move to follow her.

"Stay in there," he warned me again.

He turned away - and froze.

Another man was suddenly standing close behind Millard. It was Luke Speare. He had popped out of the men's room like a fast-moving shadow. He had the firm's ill-treated revolver pushed into the small of Millard's back. He couldn't be sure it would go off when the trigger was pulled, but he had it where it would get results if it did.

Millard's instant response was to thrust his own weapon deep into his topcoat pocket. Mine was to get rapidly out of that booth and crowd him. Speare and I had him between us. While Speare kept Old Rusty pressed forcefully against him I pulled his right hand up from that pocket. It came up without the gun. I fished the gun out and stuffed it inside my belt. Glancing about, I saw that we had attracted a few curious eyes but on the whole the brooding tropical calm remained undisturbed.

"Look there," Speare directed Millard. "There at the bar where you were sitting."

Two patrolmen. Two cops had come in a moment ago to warm themselves. They were not aware of us. I wanted to avoid stirring up their attention and I assumed Millard did also.

We prodded him over to our booth. While getting into our hats and coats we kept him between us. The waiter joined us. Speare paid him for the drinks. Millard stayed still, watching us with an épéeist's eyes.

"Straight out now," I suggested. "Quietly, of course, Sorry, none for the road."

We permitted Millard to lead the way - slightly. Speare's gun was out of sight now — in his pocket, with his hand on it. We nodded affably to the hat-check girl and the barman as we passed, and ignored the two cops. I reached forward to open the door for Millard. We pressed closer at his side as we came into the street. The snow puffed into our faces and made the pavement slippery underfoot.

"Taxi, of course, Mr. Millard," I said. "Like so many other things you've had, it's on George Goodlee."

We stood at the curb, Speare wagging one arm while I held Millard down with one of mine linked through one of his. A taxi with its signal lighted veered toward us. Speare and I pushed Millard into the cab. I gave the driver the address of our flat off Second Avenue and away we went, sitting alertly with Millard wedged between us. It was as simple as that.

But what did we have? Not Avis, the girl we wanted. We had a killer and a diamond thief, the biggest diamond thief in the world. We weren't really helping him to get away from the law, but on the other hand we had no desire to turn him in. This was something the Police Commissioner of New York City would frown upon. Mark Usher of Assurance Associates wouldn't like it either.

### SIXTEEN

EXCEPT FOR his all-over tightness and the ceaseless, wary shiftings of his eyes Millard might have been a friend casually invited in for a nightcap.

We steered him to my favorite chair in the living room a deep, soft one without arms, not an easy one to get out of. It occupied the corner farthest from the entrance. There lay between Millard and freedom a long room, a longer hallway,

and two men with guns.

However, he didn't act as if he were contemplating a getaway — not yet, at any rate. In fact, he seemed to feel he needn't even try for one. He slouched in the chair still wearing his topcoat and his hat pushed high off his forehead and fired a cigarette and went on watching us with his restless,

calculating eyes.

Here in the light we could see for the first time that Jay Millard was indeed remarkably handsome, although not so impossibly handsome as Goodlee had described him. His mouth was too thinly cold and his eyes too coldly crafty—but these were defects an infatuated woman might readily overlook. With his imperious good looks, his gentleman's taste, his capacity for charm, his cool intelligence, and his undoubted talents, he might have become a man of rare character and success. Instead, because of some psychopathic splinter festering in his personality, he had played it crooked.

Besides this, he suffered a serious deficiency - no conscience.

As we stood back looking at him, Speare asked me, "Would we by any chance have a pair of handcuffs stuffed away under a cushion somewhere?"

"I've never owned any," I said, "but Oliver Jeremiah has a pair of ankle irons he inherited from his grandfather, who was a jailer during the Spanish-American War."

"We may need 'em," Speare said, frowning.

A question had bothered me during the whole trip over. "Luke, I didn't want Avis's dreamboat. I wanted Avis. Why

did you let her walk out like that?".

"I'd seen the two cops come in," Speare explained. "If Avis had started screaming it would have fouled us up with the law. Besides, I figured it would work out just the same in the end."

"Because Avis can't live without lover boy, here, you mean—she'll sooner or later come after him? You're probably right. Millard, did she actually marry you?"

He swallowed smoke, slowly blew it out, and said in a low,

soft voice, "Why not?"

I went on without trying to answer that one. "Where have you been staying with her? The last place, that is."

He shook his head. "I forget."

Obviously Heaven's gift to Avis was going to be no pushover. Evidently he believed that through his control of the girl he could control her father and swing the whole deal his way.

Wasting no argument on his arrogance, I reached to the telephone and dialed the number of the Goodlee apartment. The ring was answered immediately by a woman's voice.

"Mrs. Goodlee?" I said. "Not to push a poor quip too far, this is Dr. Cole calling. Miserable night out, isn't it? Good to be back home where it's snug and warm, I imagine?"

She didn't comment. I thought of my man Fontaine, still prowling the snowy wastes of Radio City in search of her.

"You'll very probably have another call before long from

Miss Lynn," I went on. "You remember Miss Lynn, personal secretary to Mrs. Gerard? I've a message for her."

Millard was narrowing his eyes at me.

"Please tell Miss Lynn that Mrs. Gerard is detained. Mrs. Gerard is indefinitely detained and her health cruise has been

cancelled. I'm sure Miss Lynn will understand."

Monica continued silent and I continued to watch Millard. He wore a handsome scowl. Knowing Avis' nature so well, he undoubtedly realized she wouldn't wait for him for long in her lovelorn solitude without raising a noise.

"May I speak with your husband now, Mrs. Goodlee?"
There was an agitation on the line. Presently Goodlee was

there, sounding tired and edgy.

"I've hooked Millard for you."

"What's that?"

"Not Avis with him. I'm fairly sure she'll come in later, under her own steam. Millard's here at my flat." I gave him the address. "You want to discuss certain matters with him, I assume."

"I do," Goodlee said tersely. "Has he — Does he have — "

"The De Vecchi? Not on him. It may be with Avis, wherever she is, but he's not telling — so far."

"Coming right down," Goodlee said in ominous tones.

"Will you tell your wife he's here?"

"Certainly not."

"One other thing - her gun."

"What?"

"The gun your wife had in her mink coat the night she was wounded. Please bring it with you."

"If you want it - but what for?"

Monica and her angle-shooting were still a suspicious factor. Specifically I wanted to know if Monica had taken that gun along on tonight's excursion to parts unknown.

"It had better be checked. In order to eliminate her, I

mean."

"All right, Cole," Goodlee said shortly. "Leaving right now."

"Good. Meanwhile Speare and I will do a little spadework

on our guest."

We drew up chairs and faced Millard. He was looking a little more thoughtful than before, and considerably more uncomfortable.

"You mentioned the De Vecchi," he said quickly. "Haven't got it. Turned it over to Tony Bricca and haven't seen it since."

Speare responded, surprisingly, "That's possible. Tell us more."

Millard shrugged. "Nothing to add. Gave Bricca the diamond, Bricca gave me the money. Far as I'm concerned that was the end of it."

"Not the end — really the beginning," I said. "Afterward you phoned the Goodlee apartment and heard yourself called a double-crosser. In that way you learned Bricca had pulled a switch. You got over to Bricca's office fast and found him there with a woman detective named Feger. In trying to get the diamond back you shot them both."

Millard's cleft chin dropped with amazement.

"You left Hannah dead and Bricca supposedly dead, but only wounded. You had to leave without the diamond — it wasn't there."

Millard stared; he was speechless. I credited him with another career lost. His talent as an actor was exceptional. This performance was impressive, though hardly convincing.

"See here," he put in earnestly. "Couldn't have been that way, you know. I didn't learn about it as soon as all that. Fact is, it was late the next morning before I heard."

"How?" Speare asked. "Who told you?"

"Monica, of course," he said with a wave of his cigarette. "Called her at her apartment to ask if everything was all right and learned it damned well wasn't. You could ask her about this, couldn't you?"

I could, but what would her answer be worth? A collaboration between these two could be a piece of rare embroidery.

"To go on," I said. "After making that murderous grab for the diamond in Bricca's office that same night, you had

to leave without it. Then you learned in some way that Bricca wasn't actually dead - for one thing there was no news report of it and for another he'd left blood-drippings on the stairs on his way out - so you began hunting for him."

"I did go to his office, of course," Millard admitted, "but that was at noon of the next day, just after I'd heard. It was locked up tight; no one there. To me that meant he'd already made off with the De Vecchi. All I could do about it - being a little sought-after myself, you know — was shrug it off."

Speare asked another eager question. "When you came

away from Bricca's office were you tailed? By a girl, a small

dark one?"

"I'm rather certain I wasn't. Who would she have been?" Skipping the question, Speare agreed soberly, "It was a little too early for it. At that point Bricca was still too shot-up

and too scared to've begun planning --- "

"To go on," I said again, with a frowning glance at Speare for his interruptions. "You began hunting for Bricca for two reasons - to get the De Vecchi back and to silence Bricca as a witness to your murder of Hannah Feger. You were clever and lucky. First, somehow, you found out where he had hidden the diamond. Then you found Bricca himself, and tonight you killed him and his secretary both."

Cigarette smoke burst from Millard's mouth. "According to this brain storm of yours, I've murdered three people. It's simply not true, you know. I give you my word I've never

killed anvone."

His word?

I had kept one hand resting on the automatic I had taken from Millard, and now I pulled it out of my belt. Having been absorbed in observing Millard himself, I had paid little attention to the weapon. It was old, scratched, and nicked, as if it had knocked around the underworld for quite a while before Millard had acquired it. It added another felony to his accomplishments. Of course he lacked a permit for the gun, which made it a violation of the Sullivan Act — a stiff rap in itself.

I snapped out the clip and found it fully loaded. I sniffed

at the muzzle and smelled machine oil. The gun was as clean as a whistle.

"Of course you picked up two guns while you were about it," I said. "You used the other for your killings tonight, then got rid of it."

As we had already learned to our pain, Millard couldn't have picked better conditions for his evil operation. He'd had only to kick the gun into the nearest gutter. A snow-plow would soon chug along to scoop it up unseen and presently it would be dumped into the bay and oblivion.

"See here now," Millard said earnestly, sitting straight. "You don't really believe this, do you? I'll admit to a lot, you know — to selling synthetics to Jacquiere customers, to snitching the De Vecchi, to being a barefaced liar and a user of women and an all-around scoundrel. I freely confess I've done plenty of unscrupulous things. But murder isn't one of them."

In the same breath this fabulous romancer could call himself a barefaced liar and ask us to believe him regardless.

"Really," he insisted. "I assure you I haven't murdered anyone. I wouldn't do it, you know, not even to keep the De Vecchi. It simply isn't a gentleman's way of handling a job."

He was a man of principle after all.

While I sat there incredulously staring Speare did an odd thing—reached and gently lifted the dark brown fedora from Millard's head. He was giving it a casual once-over—it was just an ordinary felt hat, somewhat worn, so far as I could see—when a decisive knocking sounded in the far reaches of the hallway.

It alarmed Millard, but I heard it with a sense of relief.

Reinforcements had arrived.

I unlatched the entrance and opened it for George Goodlee. His face was hard, his dark curly hair flecked with melting snowflakes. Without speaking he strode the length of the hall and diagonally across the living room. He paused to frown down on Millard, and Millard sat still, a cigarette pinched in his mouth, expecting anything. Goodlee had evidently had, like us, a rugged day; he seemed harassed almost

to the cracking point, but he was still a big, powerful man

and he had never looked bigger or stronger.

Still without having spoken a word, he shook off his topcoat. Then he removed his suitcoat and vest. Next he loosened his tie and began rolling up his sleeves. . . .

So the long, long night grew longer. . . .

Three hours thereafter we were glassy-eyed with fatigue and frustration.

Millard slumped low in the same chair in the same corner, haggard and sullen but in better shape than any of the rest of us.

None of us had yielded to the temptation to beat the juice out of him. Nobody had hit him even once. Goodlee had had the excellent sense to see that doing Millard personal damage would very probably have the effect of wrecking his

hoped-for reunion with Avis.

Instead, working in turn, and in pairs, and sometimes all together, we had belabored him steadily with every verbal weapon we could lay our minds on — everything from bawling threats to fraternal appeals to his chivalry. Goodlee had even topped it off by offering him an additional ransom for the De Vecchi — to which Millard had answered, "That's very generous of you, but I simply haven't it, you know." None of this had left a mark on him. After three solid

None of this had left a mark on him. After three solid hours of it he still refused to tell us where to find Avis, he still insisted he had carried out his end of the ransom deal in good faith, he still declared himself ignorant of the whereabouts of the De Vecchi, and he still denied he was capable

of an act as ungallant as murder.

Now we had to face it: we were bushed out and plain licked. It would be silly to punish ourselves by going over all this again, for the *nth* time, when manifestly Millard could outlast us all. Now I felt that in calling himself a barefaced liar he had understated it by miles, but we were utterly unable to prove it in any degree.

George Goodlee rolled his sleeves down again, tightened his necktie, put on his vest and his two coats, and gave Mil-

lard a last grim look. Leaving Speare to guard our guest, I followed Goodlee as he trudged heavily back to the entrance.

"Item I should have asked you about sooner," I said.

"Monica's gun."

He looked at me darkly. "Couldn't find it, Cole."

"Couldn't find it?"

"Wasn't where I'd put it."

"Did you ask your wife?"

"No. Should I?"

"It's pretty important."

"All right; I'll ask her. Cole, this development has put doubts in my mind about the De Vecchi. Until tonight I'd felt confident of getting it back. Now, thanks to Millard ——"

"Bricca was in it too. There's some reason for believing Bricca had it, at least for a time."

"Can Millard prove he actually passed the diamond to Bricca?"

"Can't see how he could possibly prove that now."

"There it is, then. I admit it, I'm prejudiced against Millard, but there it is. Cole, this has really knocked my hopes in the head. I'm not sure I'll ever see the De Vecchi again."

"No way to talk," I mumbled. "Feel better after you've

had some sleep."

He shook his head and was despondently silent for a moment. "About my daughter's ideal man, back there — only one thing left to do. Hold him, use him as bait to draw Avis back home."

"It raises certain problems, Mr. Goodlee. Implicates me in Millard's crimes — something I've tried to keep out of. Not only the police to look out for, but also Assurance Associates. They've gotten pretty stern about ——"

"I know, Cole, I know it's risky, but I've tried to make it worth your while, and anyhow, my God, man, what the hell

else can we do?"

We shrugged at each other.

While Goodlee trudged down the stairs into the dawn I

went dizzily back to the living room, where Speare was stand-

ing thoughtfully over Millard.

"Call Oliver Jeremiah now, Luke. Get him out of bed. Get him right over here with his grandpappy's Spanish-American ankle irons before I fall on my face, if I still have one."

What else could we do? Yes, what else indeed? There was nothing else, of course, nothing else but to roll merrily along to prison in the wake of this criminal cavalier who wasn't even in the contract.

### SEVENTEEN

I woke as from the dead to find the windows brilliant with sunlight and prettily heaped with snow. The whole flat was quiet. Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.

Speare of course had been up and gone for hours. In the living room Oliver Jeremiah lay flat on his back on the couch, fully dressed, including his high-laced shoes, and sound asleep. Millard also lay sleeping on blankets on the floor of the bath, one of his ankles shackled inescapably to

the plumbing.

Letting them slumber on, I gulped some of the coldish coffee Speare had left on the stove. During the night a crucial decision had crystallized in my overworked brain. I had come back to life on this Christmasy morning knowing exactly what I should do about this case. Buoyed up by new hope, and with uncharacteristic haste, I immediately set

about doing it.

When I left the flat, locking the door behind me, Jeremiah and Millard remained undisturbed. Walking at an unnaturally energetic clip, I noticed how quickly and matter-of-factly the city was sloughing off the effects of last night's blizzard. Traffic was moving between the high-heaped gutters in an almost normal stage of congestion. Our Santa Clauses were swarming back to the grind, their beards bedraggled but their spirits rekindled by their night off.

I picked up the early editions of the afternoon papers, stopped in a drugstore for a container of coffee and two jelly doughnuts, then found my office door locked.

There was no mail. There was no Speare. Also there was no memo to tell me where Speare had gone, what he was

doing, or when he would be back.

I looked quickly at the papers while munching on a doughnut, and there it was, spang on the front pages of three of them. The double murder of Bricca and Fern was not only loudly reported, it was also significantly linked to the murder of Hannah Feger last week. The ballistics experts on Centre Street had been busy with their comparison microscopes and had found that all three victims had succumbed to bullets fired from the same gun.

The chances were a million to one that the police would never find the weapon of murder, but this thought wasn't especially comforting. Chances were much better that Jay Millard and all my many compounded felonies might be found in my flat before I could manage to bounce them out.

Sensitive to that danger, I dialed the number of Jacquiere on Fifth Avenue. Miss Scott efficiently put me through to Mr. Goodlee — and then no doubt proceeded to listen in.

To judge from the sound of him, Goodlee should have stayed home and in bed. Before I had even bid him a good morning he began talking in the tones of a miserably disheartened man.

"Yes yes, Cole. About that matter relating to my wife, the item you wanted me to ask her about. She says she can't explain what became of it."

Monica could have disposed of a gun last night as easily as Millard.

"Says she went downtown to watch several rehearsals—television shows," Goodlee added distractedly, "but they were called off because of the weather, so she dropped in at the Music Hall before coming home. That's probably only part of the truth, but——Cole, you don't actually suspect——"

I hadn't forgotten Miss Scott, the beautiful insurance spy,

or Speare's suspicions of the terrestrial globe. "Better talk to

you in person," I said guardedly.

"Come over, then. Probably be here the rest of the day."

"However, I can say this now... My original assignment was simply to find your runaway daughter. It was our understanding that once I'd found her you would handle the rest personally. Mr. Goodlee, it's not working out that way."

"No, it isn't, Cole," he admitted.

"As the matter stands, it's loaded with disaster for all of us. We simply can't live with it. Well, I've a plan for improving the situation. If it works we may see my original mission accomplished fairly soon — possibly within hours."
"That's the best news I've heard since Millard skipped."

"Details when I see you. Of course no word from Avis?" "Not yet. Cole," he sighed.

"You probably haven't much longer to wait for it. I feel confident this is our big day."

"At least I sincerely hope we've seen our worst one,"

Goodlee said.

"Certainly. Take heart. A good break is due. I'll start over

as soon as my assistant shows up."

Disconnecting and frowning at the clock, I muttered aloud, "Come on, Luke, time's a-wastin'. Whatever you're doing, drop it and get back here, boy. We're about to wriggle our way out of this nightmare."

Since last night I had gone back to feeling uneasy about

Speare, but for a new reason.

He had shown no particular aversion to Millard. As a matter of fact, he had seemed ready to accept Millard's plea of innocence. Of course he had helped with the grilling, but he had left the heaviest work to Goodlee and me and had been willing to call it quits much earlier than we had.

This lack of eagerness on Speare's part had seemed out of character until I'd looked at it twice; then I'd seen it for what it really meant. Speare was up to something special — working as diligently as always, but at an angle of his own, one he hadn't mentioned to me.

Why hadn't he told me about it? It couldn't be simple for-

getfulness this time; it was strategic. Probably he feared I would call him off again. Whatever his reason might be, he was, in plain words, getting around me. I wouldn't go as far as to call this gross insubordination because I felt sure Speare had my interests at heart, but I could assert categorically that, no matter what he was up to, I could do without it.

Of course I was being inconsistent about this. A few days ago I'd felt Speare was letting me down; now I was afraid he was doing too much. Paradoxical or not, it worried me. This case had already grown into something far bigger than I'd ever bargained for, and now I was possessed with a desire to

get out from under it as fast as possible.

My plan was to transfer Jay Millard immediately from my flat to the Goodlee apartment. When in her yearning Avis phoned for news, she would be told he was there. Inevitably she would fly to him. This would complete my original agreement with her father and earn me another five thousand dollars. Also as agreed, it would leave entirely to him the two problems of Millard and that damnable chunk of hot ice, the De Vecchi. In addition this arrangement would, I hoped, tend to expiate my unintended sins and help to keep me out of the pokey.

As soon as Speare came in I would get going with it.

There were footsteps approaching my door now, but it wasn't Speare who came in. It was the man I least wanted to see this morning — the chief adjuster of the Department of

Claims of Assurance Associates, Mark Usher.

Usher's spine was freshly starched this morning. His face for all its youthfulness seemed a little more wooden than before, and the woodenness seemed peculiarly menacing. His crew cut bristled stiffly. He looked around the room in a selfconfident, challenging manner, and asked, "Where's your accomplice?"

"My assistant, Lucas Speare, will be in presently. He's no

more felonious than I am, though. Won't I do?"
"He phoned me and insisted I should come over here," Usher answered in his dry voice. "Said he had a deal in mind. What do you know about it?"

I knew nothing, nothing whatever. A deal with Assurance Associates? It seemed the rashest project Speare could possibly attempt, yet he hadn't let me in on it. I would have been embarrassed to admit this to Mark Usher. Thankfully I

was spared because Speare came in just then.

He entered alertly, full of energy and good cheer. He gave me a chummy greeting, apologized for being a bit late, and pressed upon Usher the offer of a chair. Usher unbent far enough to sit, straight-backed, and in his wooden way he looked expectantly at Speare. He was ready to hear about the deal whereby, he felt sure, we would deftly cut our own throats.

"Schy, we've hardly any use now for all the men we hired,"

Speare reminded me.

"I know. The job's practically done. All we need to do is sit back and wait for Avis to come fluttering back home. Then we'll be finished with the case for good." I had made a point of this for Usher's special benefit. "So go ahead, Luke, and call in the men."

"I've already done it," Speare said apologetically. "First

thing this morning. I thought --- "

"It's all right, Luke. That's that, then. We can congratulate ourselves on doing a good job and keeping our hands clean."

A small change occurred in our caller's face. It could have

been a sneer.

"Look here, Usher. Ten seconds with you," I said, "are enough to throw me into a high burn. Why take it out on us because you bungled a job? After all, you're the man the De Vecchi really got away from."

Usher resented that, but Speare immediately pressed the

point.

"He can't deny that, Schy. This man witnessed the exchange between Millard and Bricca — using binoculars, no less — then made what he thought was a fast grab for the diamond and missed."

"Because by then it was already gone from right under his nose!"

"Imagine taking that kind of report to your bosses. 'I'm

sorry, sir, but it must have slipped through my fingers'—an item worth four hundred and fifty thousand dollars to his company. Imagine the dressing-down he must have taken for it."

Usher's immobile face was slowly turning white.

"So now he's sore as a boil over it," I agreed. "Well, let's be fair — he's really in a rough spot. If he doesn't get that diamond back to Goodlee it'll probably be his neck."

Usher's face began turning red again, indicating a bull's-

eye.

"Looking back at it now, Usher, with the aid of whatever hindsight you may possess," I went on, happily needling him, "what do you think you did wrong?"

"I did nothing wrong," Usher answered through unmoving

lips.

"Oh, come now," Speare said cheerfully. "There must have been some little thing that wasn't quite right — otherwise you wouldn't have lost the De Vecchi."

"I did nothing wrong," Usher insisted bitterly. "Millard double-crossed us. I'm positive Millard did not actually pass

the diamond to Bricca."

"You really believe Millard was then, and still is, the prime culprit?"

"I do - in fact, the only one. After all" - Usher's face

nearly expressed distress - "who else?"

A long argument could have gone through that opening. As a matter of prudence we refrained from starting it, since we were harboring the crux of it in our flat. Besides, it might sidetrack us from the purpose for which Speare had called Usher in. I had no idea what that purpose was, so I answered with a shrug and left the play to Speare.

"Isn't it possible the reason you don't like us," Speare asked, "is that you're afraid we'll succeed where you failed?"

Usher quickly tried to regain the offensive. "That's certainly a significant remark. It's an admission. You really are after the De Vecchi."

"Indirectly," Speare answered with a casualness that shook me, "yes."

"I thought so. I expected this. You admit you want to make a deal with me. Well, you're getting yourselves into serious trouble. I've warned you from the beginning—"

"Mr. Usher," Speare broke in gently, "you're letting these rancorous suspicions of yours run away with you. Stop and think back. The Cole Detective Agency entered this case with your company's full approval."

Usher stiffened.

"The agreement between Goodlee and Assurance Associates included us an integral part. You okayed us as a reputable agency. Goodlee is paying our fee under this special arrangement, but the fact is we're acting indirectly as your agent."

"Nonsense," Usher said. "Our only interest is in the De Vecchi. Assurance Associates is not interested in recovering

Avis Goodlee."

"Assurance Associates has very well known that finding Avis would be a long step toward finding the De Vecchi," Speare pointed out. "You insist Millard, Avis's man, is the one you want. There you are, then."

"We will not bargain with a thief," Usher reminded us flatly. "We will not connive with a client, or with a crooked detective agency for that matter, to compound a felony.

"But I'm talking about an entirely legitimate deal." Here Speare was arriving at an important point. "If we were to return the De Vecchi to Assurance Associates with no cooperation whatever on the part of the thief - or even better than that, if we were to turn over to you both the diamond and the thief — you wouldn't object?"

The peculiar look on Usher's face was probably a confused frown. "Of course we wouldn't object to that. How could we? It's our whole purpose — to recover our client's property

and to punish the criminal as well."

"In such an event," Speare went on smoothly, "it's customary, isn't it, for you to pay a reward?"
"Goodlee is paying you."

"Goodlee is paying us to bring back his daughter only. The

return of the De Vecchi goes beyond that. It would call for separate compensation from Assurance Associates."

"Well, yes — but the question, coming from you, is purely

academic, of course."

"Assurance Associates would give out separately at the es-

Assurance Associates would give out separately at the established rate of ten per cent?"

"That's the established rate," Usher said. "I doubt that you could ever convince me you'd earned it honestly. All this fancy talk is a ridiculous waste of time. You're simply trying to mislead me. I warn you again, any trickery—"

Speare was extending his hand. Usher hestiated, then

gripped it, shrugging meanwhile, but thereby sealing the bar-

gain - for whatever it was worth.

I watched this as in a dream. It couldn't be what it seemed. Since the De Vecchi's owner despaired of ever seeing it again, it would be excessively hopeful of Speare to imagine we might come anywhere near it — especially under such stainless circumstances that Usher might be willing to construe them as legal. . . . I couldn't guess what Speare's real purpose might be, but I would welcome an opportunity to call him off it.

"Now this is more the way it should be," Speare said brightly. "Now we understand each other much better. Were

you about to say something, Schy?"

"Yes. I was about to say that I favor peace on earth and good will among men, especially at this season of the year, but unfortunately we'll have to call a recess. George Goodlee is expecting us. Being almost at the end of the case—"
"Since we're all working together now," Speare put in,
"Mr. Usher should certainly come with us."

How could I say no? Mr. Usher's doubts of us hadn't been assuaged; if anything, he felt he had even better reason than before for keeping us in sight. Speare on his part seemed actually eager to have Usher along. I didn't get it — but I couldn't argue with it either. This unpredictable assistant of mine had left me with no choice but to wave them out and follow along.

Speare must have some sort of reason for this, I told my-

self. He must know our chances of recovering the De Vecchi were nil, so was he putting on an act? His purpose must be to whitewash us, just as Usher suspected.

If so, this meant we had something new to cover up, something bigger and worse. Something happening during the night, or this morning on Speare's circumambulations—something still unknown to me, something he couldn't tell me in Usher's presence—had made our future even blacker.

As for my plan for pulling us quickly and wisely out of the case, it must at least be postponed. If Speare hadn't already wrecked it, that is — and with it my last whimsical

hope of keeping us on the south side of Sing Sing.

## **EIGHTEEN**

As we neared Jacquiere's on Fifth Avenue another taxi, directly ahead of us, pulled aside and stopped in front of it.

A woman in mink burst out — Monica Goodlee. She was in a feverish hurry. Without a glance to the right or left she pressed her way across the crowded sidewalk and disap-

peared inside Jacquiere's famous door.

A moment later the three of us alighted at the same spot. I hadn't enjoyed the trip, but Speare had seemed cheerful enough, it seemed to me — more high-spirited than the circumstances warranted, I thought. Usher had maintained his air of righteous skepticism, and I had come the whole way with the darkening certainty that this maneuver of Speare's, whatever he meant to accomplish by it, would presently backfire in our faces.

I was ready to admit it now — I had become superstitious about the De Vecchi. The accursed thing was a lodestone for crime and tragedy. Goodlee and Assurance Associates would not concur, but I felt we would all be better off it would stay lost. . . . Brooding over this, I had wondered incidentally about a technical point concerning the insurance. While Speare paid the hackie I asked Usher about it.

"Just when is a missing jewel presumed to be permanently lost? You won't pay off, I imagine, unless you're pretty sure

it's gone for good. When and how do you arrive at the con-

clusion it's never coming back?"

"It depends on circumstances, and also on my recommendation to our board of directors," Usher answered, being careful to give us no information that might be helpful in our nefarious practices. "However, a diamond as big as the De Vecchi can't simply melt into thin air, you know."

"It can disintegrate into dust," I reminded him as Speare joined us. "One small tap in the wrong place can make splinters of it. What then? The thief would be left with no choice but to shrug it off — easy come, easy go — and dump the remains down the drain. He'd never admit he'd had it, and you'd never know what really became of it. You'd be stuck then, wouldn't you?"

"A cleaving is not insurable."

"But a loss by theft is, and that's exactly what it would

appear to be."

Usher gave me what was presumably an irritated look, but he didn't answer - perhaps because the question was too

shuddersome for speculation.

"Then again," I went on as we bumped our way across the busy sidewalk, "large stones have been known to go their mysterious ways into oblivion. One called the Great Mogul, belonging to the fabulous Shah Jehan, disappeared somehow, and to this day nobody can account for it. There's a theory to the effect that it later reappeared as the Orloff of Catherine the Great, but nobody knows for sure. Anyhow, the Soviets have it now."

I had done some research on diamonds to fill my spare time earlier in the case. This was the first opportunity I'd had to show it off.

"There was also the Tavernier Blue, first heard of when it was brought from India to Europe by the famous traveler Jules Tavernier. He sold it to Louis XIV and it stuck around for well over a hundred years, then in 1792 it was stolen, never to be seen again. Some experts believe it was split into three parts and that the biggest of them is the Hope diamond. But of course nobody has ever proved it."

My erudite remarks were not making Usher happier. They were intended to neutralize Speare's unaccountable optimism, and apparently I was getting the desired reaction. Usher pulled open the entrance of Jacquiere's and impatiently waved us in. I paused just outside, having one more question to ask.

"Since the De Vecchi is flawless — that is, since it has no characteristic internal marks, couldn't it turn up sometime under a different name, already cut into pieces? And if it did, isn't it true that there would be no way of proving these chunks were originally part of the De Vecchi?"

I was worrying Usher deeply. He had an expression on his face now, a definite expression of pain. Resentment, too. I had reminded him too vividly that if he failed to recover the De Vecchi he would soon cease to be the chief adjuster of the Division of Claims of Assurance Associates - after which he would have a rugged time finding another job in his field.

We stepped into the entrance room of Jacquiere's, where the glass fountain burbled and the crystal chandeliers hung on their long, velvet-clad chains. We found our way up the stairs to the mezzanine and then into the large blue-andwhite room where Miss Scott presided. She was at her desk, busily paying no attention to Monica and George Goodlee.

He had just stepped out to meet Monica. They stopped talking and looked across at us. Monica seemed distrait. Goodlee was again showing himself to be a man of amazing stamina. Despite the strain he was suffering, he came

striding toward us with a look of elation.

"We've heard from Avis," he said, short of breath. "Finally!

She called Monica at the apartment."

Not quite so delighted, Monica informed me with a cold face, "I gave Avis your message, Mr. Cole. Of course I don't know what response you expected from her, but it did have an effect. She flew off into hysterics."

"Hung up on Monica - but she'll call again," Goodlee

said hopefully. "After she calms down—"
"I hope so," Monica broke in, eying me with ladylike hostility, "but having heard that outburst of panic, frankly,

I'm not so sure. Hadn't it occurred to you, Mr. Cole, that you might drive this high-strung, impetuous child to kill herself?"

No, I hadn't thought of that; and I preferred not to think

of it now.

"No need to dramatize it, Monica, please," Goodlee said. "Avis is moon-struck, God knows, but let's pray she isn't really as silly as all that. We'll hear from her again, and soon, I'm sure we will. Come in here now, all of you."

Miss Scott occupied herself at her desk while we filed past her into Goodlee's inner office. I watched for some glance of secret significance to pass between her and Usher. . . . No, none. I hadn't really expected it. This game was not for

amateurs, but for experts - and for keeps.

That thought turned my attention on Monica. Lovely woman. Intelligent. Audacious. Selfish and ruthless — ruthless enough to have set out shrewdly to capture the De Vecchi, and possibly Millard as well, to her husband's considerable cost. Did her ruthlessness stop short of murder? I didn't know her quite well enough to judge either no or yes — but she was unaccounted for at the time of last night's killings and a gun she had taken to a previous bloodletting was now missing.

I had developed a theory of sorts pointing to Millard as the killer. There had been, as I'd seen it, a deal on between Millard and Bricca while both were in hiding, each fearing death from the other. Somehow Millard had broken through and it was Bricca who had lost both the De Vecchi and his life. The theory could apply just as closely to Monica. Take it as before, go over it again with only the names changed, Monica for Millard wherever it occurred, and there you had

it.

It occurred to me, chillingly, that to go ahead and prove this would cost me money. Goodlee would probably not feel inclined to reward me with five thousand dollars for pinning two or three murders on his wife.

I looked at Monica's cool, stylish smartness and felt the dangerous attraction of her. I thought of all the avaricious

ones, the greedy dead and the greedy living, and felt the need of a pulpit. I would take as my theme, brothers and sisters, the thought that the most destructive human forces in the world can be expressed in words beginning with "I want." The basic crime here was not really thievery, or even murder; these were only surface signs, only symptoms of the real crime, the deeper crime of self-seeking. . . . End of sermon.

Goodlee waved us all to chairs. Usher and I removed our topcoats, but somehow Speare preferred to leave his on. Monica chose to sit remotely in the corner while her husband went behind his desk and tipped a cam of his intercom. He asked Miss Scott, in the event of a call from his daughter, to shoot it right through. Miss Scott having promised she would do so, he switched the box off and inquired wearily, "What news, gentlemen?"

"One moment," I suggested.

I was advancing on the terrestrial globe. There it sat, just where Miss Scott had originally put it, still glowing with its spooky light and revolving with unchanging, doomful regularity. Without a by-your-leave I pulled the plug out of the wall. The light died out, the globe stopped. A small world had ended.

I glanced quickly at Usher. Did he look startled by this move? Chagrined? Thwarted? I couldn't really tell. Mostly his face looked just the same as it had before — wooden.

"Do you mind?" I asked Goodlee.

"Not in the least. Been hoping the damned thing would blow a fuse or jam a gear anyhow. I like it better this way."

So did I, particularly if Miss Scott happened to have a small concealed wire recorder connected at the other end. An electronic transcription of one's statements is hard to deny.

"We're face to face with the end of our case, Mr. Goodlee," he said happily. "Our assignment will be completed as soon as Avis pops back home. You will take it on from there, however, and it may be helpful to you to have the straight story on Jay Millard."

"I've already got that, haven't I?" Goodlee said wryly.

"About his theft of the De Vecchi there's no question, of course," Speare agreed. "Millard snitched it all right. Witnesses saw him grab it and run out with it. Your own daughter can testify to his possession of it."

"And will, I hope, once her all-consuming passion cools

down a little."

"Yes. This much is unquestionably true, including the arrangements Millard made through Bricca to ransom the diamond back to you. Here's another witness - Mr. Usher, who watched the proceedings that night as an official representative of Assurance Associates. . . . Right at this point, however, is where a difference of opinion sets in."

"It's hardly a matter of opinion," Usher stated.

"I mean it's possible, on the one side, to believe Millard held back the De Vecchi, for obvious reasons, and in its place fobbed off a lump of glass."

"It's certainly possible to believe that," Usher agreed

laconically. "It's what actually happened."

"But it's also possible to believe, on the other side, that Millard carried through his end of the bargain. Ever since that night he has consistently insisted he did actually deliver the De Vecchi to Bricca - hasn't he, Mrs. Goodlee?"

"And how would I know that?" Monica said coldly, shifting

a little in her chair to ease her healing hip.

It wasn't necessary to get into a rhubarb over this. Her husband had listened to Millard himself on the subject for hours last night. Speare went on.

"He told the truth about it," Speare said. Goodlee lifted his dark eyebrows. Usher made an impatient sound. I kept quiet. Speare's statement was a body blow to my own convictions, but something in his manner warned me not to waste any effort in arguing with him. Thinking back, I remembered signs that he had been certain of this even before hearing Millard's denials.

"True, you say," Usher remarked, "but of course you can't

possibly prove it."

Speare shrugged. "Very simple actually. Bricca would not

have paid the ransom money to Millard without first making sure he really had the De Vecchi."

"It was too dark --- "

"It was light enough," Speare insisted, "according to an expert named Jacobus Wells who was consulted on that very point by Schyler Cole. Very solid men, both of them."
"Granted," Goodlee agreed. "Neither is given to frivolous

statement. What did Jakus say?"

"He said a man of Bricca's experience, who for years had made precious stones his business, would immediately see, under those conditions of light, the difference between a glassy glitter and the brilliant fire of a genuine diamond. He said Bricca wouldn't have needed a second glance. Do you agree, Mr. Goodlee?"

Usher cut off Goodlee with a quick protest. "Millard was jumpy and wouldn't let him have a good look. Bricca had to

take it on trust."

"Never," Speare said emphatically. "Bricca was neither a fool nor a man of faith. In order to protect his own interests, whether his intentions were crooked or honest, he had to make sure he actually received the De Vecchi. The look he took was good enough."

I spoke up with the conviction of a convert. "I can't see any room for reasonable doubt here. When Bricca left Millard and started back he had the De Vecchi in his fist all right."

Usher obdurately shook his head. Goodlee said, as if reserving judgment, "Go on with it, Speare. Follow through."

"This makes a great deal of difference. It means Millard had decided to be satisfied with pocketing the ransom. It leaves him without any reason to go rushing to Bricca's office in a rage. In fact, he had less than no reason at all to go there, because — " Speare paused, looking at Monica. "When was it Millard phoned you and learned for the first time the De Vecchi had gone astray?"

Monica thought it over for a moment. Evidently she decided it might be to her advantage to help to clear Millard.

"He called just before noon of the next day."

Check. Maybe this had been prearranged between Millard

and Monica, but anyhow it checked.

Speare smiled as he said, "I think that's perfectly true too. You see how much it means, Mr. Goodlee. Millard didn't learn that a switch had been made until hours after the shooting in Bricca's office. He simply can't be the party who cornered Bricca there with murder in his heart."

Usher was tense and stiff-backed, as if catching on the fly anything that might be self-incriminating in Speare's words. Goodlee simply gazed at my assistant in a silence of con-

flictions.

"This ought to make you feel better, Mr. Goodlee," I said brightly. "What Luke has shown is that Avis's man is guilty of much less than we thought."

Speare nodded agreeably. "As to murder, in fact, I'm say-

ing Millard has been framed."

"Framed?" Goodlee tossed his hands. "But — Bricca himself said — Sitting right there, he told me how Millard — "

"He did," Speare conceded. "We heard him. That's why he said it — he knew we were listening. It helped in a big way to frame Millard."

Speare had told me of his suspicions to the effect that Bricca's visit to Goodlee, here in this office, had been arranged beforehand and carefully staged. Here was a solid reason for it. Now I understood, too, all the puzzling confessions Bricca had volunteered. They were an integral part of the frame-up; they had helped forcefully to nail it on Millard.

"But — we had more than Bricca's word for it," Goodlee reminded Speare, still gesticulating. "There was material evi-

dence --- "

"The hat — the gray Homburg?" Speare said. "Still have

it here? May I see it?"

Goodlee hesitated, gazing uncertainly at Mark Usher — as well he might. We could hardly count on Usher to connive with us at concealing evidence in a homicide case. As for Speare, he was giving me the willies — carrying his candor much too far, I thought. With no reluctance at all he was

admitting our implication in crimes which Usher hadn't previously connected with the case. He seemed so unworried, too, so confident of getting away with it — though I couldn't at the moment see how.

Goodlee shrugged off his misgivings, rose, stepped into the rear room, and immediately came back with the smoke-gray Homburg. He placed it on the desk in front of us. Speare bent to examine it — then reached into a pocket of his top-coat and brought up a woman's shoe.

It was a smart little black sling-back with a cuban heel. Speare applied it gently to the mark on the hat. It was a very close match. The print on the hat had undoubtedly been made

by a shoe of about this same size.

"Bricca said the woman stepped on it in the struggle — but she was a hefty one, with big feet, and she was wearing galoshes. The girl who wore this shoe was much smaller. She pressed this mark on the hat under Bricca's instructions, days after the shooting. The print is a forgery."

Speare had asked Fern Stevens, "Have you been persuaded recently to step on a man's hat?" Small wonder the question had disconcerted her; she had actually done it. . . . Then, while Fern lay dead in the snow, Speare had hustled into her bedroom to get one of her shoes for use in proving the fact he had just demonstrated.

That clinched it. Speare was absolutely right about the frame-up, right six ways from breakfast.

Come to think of it, now that he had exposed the fakery so clearly, no fugitive in his right mind would try to make himself inconspicuous by wearing an expensive smoke-gray Homburg. On the contrary, a man in Millard's spot would have abandoned that one and worn instead an old, dark one, exactly like the snap-brim Millard was wearing when we bagged him. Obviously the Homburg had been taken from Millard's apartment after he had ducked out of there, leaving it behind with the greater part of his wardrobe. It had been taken with the special purpose of framing a murder rap on him by Bricca and a confederate who——

Then it hit me — a high-voltage realization. It dazzled me, chilled me, stopped the breath in my lungs. I sat there rigidly staring at Mark Usher.

## **NINETEEN**

Speare lapsed into quiet for a moment. The others waited uncertainly for him to go on. It was just as well for me he'd stopped talking; it wouldn't have registered on me anyhow. I was too stunned by the bomb-burst that had just now caught me squarely on the brainpan.

Usher the claim adjuster, intimately ranging through the jewelry business from fine shops like Jacquiere's down to the lowest breed of fence —— Had anyone ever faced richer opportunities for fraud or been in a more ideal spot for mak-

ing the most of them?

When the De Vecchi was stolen Goodlee had immediately notified Usher. I could imagine him thinking, "This is it, this is the big one, the biggest I'll ever have a chance at in my lifetime." I could look back and see him jockeying himself into the perfect position to pull it off — singlehanded, moreover, and without stirring the slightest ripple of suspicion in his own direction.

My mind spun it out. It was so clear now. Like this . . . Usher's opportunity had come the night the ransom was passed — an opportunity he had created for himself simply by insisting he must be present as his company's representative

I pictured it — first Bricca actually receiving the De Vecchi from Millard. Then Bricca — and this was something I hadn't previously imagined him capable of doing — coming back

with the De Vecchi in his possession and the intention of returning it to its owner. Coming back until he reached the spot where Usher and Goodlee had sprung out of the doctor's doorway and collared him.

There. That was the zero moment. In my mind's eye I saw Usher snatching the De Vecchi from Bricca and making the switch himself there on the sidewalk while diverting Goodlee's attention and helping him to jockey Bricca into the doctor's waiting room.

It spun on so beautifully.

Usher had needed only a few seconds to do it. Once inside with Bricca and Goodlee he had taken control of the proceedings. He had searched Bricca, but of course not himself. And afterward, I pointed out to myself, all he had needed to do was to walk off with the De Vecchi still in his pocket while unshakably denouncing Millard as a double-crosser.

The rest of his scheme might have gone just as neatly. Presently he would have reported to his superiors in Assurance Associates that unfortunately the De Vecchi seemed to be permanently lost. If this should happen to cost him his job, it would be for a very good price. The De Vecchi actually would be lost, moreover, because meanwhile he would have been carefully arranging to dispose of it.

A pretty fine plan of operations, really. A pity it hadn't worked out that way. If it had, Fern and Bricca and Hannah

would still be alive.

But Bricca had had his look at the De Vecchi. He knew for sure he had had the diamond in his hand. He also knew for sure he hadn't rung in that lump of glass himself. A man of Bricca's natural-born chicanery wouldn't have to think twice what to do about this. He had promptly phoned Usher that same night and had said, in effect, "I'm hep, my fine lad, and I'm cutting myself in for fifty per cent."

Beautifully, beautifully it spun on.

Usher couldn't have that, naturally. It was both too expensive and too risky. With that hold on him, Bricca—the unscrupulous detective whose business was retrieving stolen gems—might feel privileged to bleed Assurance Associates

white. For another thing, in spite of the high value Bricca put on his silence, it might spring a leak. Well, Usher had also known exactly what must be done. He had lost no time getting over to Bricca's office with a gun.

Hannah Feger had been little more than an innocent by-

sitter.

Results had not been what Usher had hoped for. Learning a little later that he hadn't finished off Bricca, he had had to face the disquieting fact that instead of eliminating a menace he had armed it.

Then the strange, slow, secret manhunt had begun. While hiding in fear of his life Bricca had greedily persisted in making his deal with the very man he knew would finish the job of murdering him at the first opportunity. Bricca had negotiated by phone and had arranged for incoming messages to be relayed through the corner delicatessen. He had gone so far into it as to agree, as part of the bargain, to help Usher frame Millard for the murder he had fully committed on Hannah and nearly committed on Bricca himself. In doing so Bricca had simply been protecting his investment.

It had to be a high-class frame — there must be evidence to give it weight. One of Millard's hats would fix it. Speare had reported early in the case that one caller had come twice to Millard's abandoned apartment — a man named Mark

Usher.

There it was, complete and unanswerable. I wouldn't be amazed to learn that Speare had seen all this much earlier than I had. That was why he had been so seemingly friendly toward Usher this morning, and why he had wanted Usher to come along with us. He had cleverly led his man into the best possible spot for exposing him. He was about to hit Usher with it now. Because here it was, the whole case cracking apart like a diamond.

Lovely, lovely indeed.

So clear.

However . . .

I wasn't utterly happy with it. Something about it bothered me. It left a few little things unexplained. Monica's missing

gun, for example. And there were certain details I'd been uneasy about from the start. I still didn't quite understand——

I dropped off of my cloud of speculations.

Speare was speaking again.

"Unusual thing about this frame-up. There was no need to make it watertight legally. Millard wasn't to be brought to trial for murder. Instead, the plan was to let him go free and get lost. Much better that way — no unsavory publicity, no chance for Millard to defend himself, no smart attorney to dig out the truth."

"What was the idea, then?" Goodlee asked. "To make Millard's guilt a *moral* certainty." "That would serve some purpose or other?"

"Several, all big ones. First, it would persuade Assurance Associates to pay off — and that one ties in closely with another, very essential, which was that the De Vecchi would never again be seen."

Usher's face went waxy.

"It was also hoped that this would turn Avis against Millard," Speare added.

Goodlee sat perfectly still, gazing darkly across the desk at

him.

"At the outset it was a pretty simple situation," Speare went on. "A man had run off with a diamond and a girl. As simple as that. But it didn't stay simple. At a definite point complications set in. That was on the night the ransom was passed."

We were all watching Goodlee.

"I remember your telling me what happened then. It went like this. As Bricca passed the doctor's door, you said, you and Usher stepped out and grabbed him. You pulled him inside, you said, and turned on the lights. You took the little rolled-up chamois bag from Bricca, you said, then opened it —— "

Usher broke in, aghast. "That wasn't the way it went."

"How did it really go, Mr. Usher?" Goodlee asked very quietly.

"As Bricca passed the door we grabbed him all right," Usher answered, "but you took the chamois bag from him before we went inside and turned on the lights."

Then realizing what he had said — seeing for the first time an eloquent detail he had overlooked — Usher stared at

Goodlee with his jaw dropped in utter stupefaction.

"That is to say," Speare resumed, supplying the words Usher couldn't speak, "it wasn't Millard who pulled the switch, or Bricca, either. It was the De Vecchi's owner."

Goodlee pushed his chair back and lifted the muzzle of a

gun just over the edge of his desk.

Monica gasped out, staring at it, "That — that's the one ——"

Her husband interrupted in low, tired tones, "Let's do this as quietly as possible. I don't want to hurt anyone, but I'll

shoot any of you if you make it necessary."

For another moment he sat there carefully estimating us with his dark eyes, the gun watching us over the rim of the desk. My mind was shivering under the shock — realizations were twisting across it like distorted images on the screen of a sick television set.

The hat . . . According to Goodlee's own story he had been

the first to visit Millard's abandoned apartment.

The hat conveyed to Bricca, probably through Fern, to be made into phony evidence. Bricca's appearance in this office with it—an appearance carefully planned for the special benefit of Cole and Speare, who were thereby primed unwittingly to bear false witness against Millard.

Now I knew why, at the very outset, Goodlee had feared to come to my office. He had suspected Bricca was having him watched — as indeed Bricca was, with excellent reason. Fern had been casing both Bricca's empty office and Goodlee's apartment. Bricca had shrewdly foreseen that Goodlee would hire new detectives, probably to hunt him down, and he had naturally wanted to know who they were. He was greedy for the sizable blackmail he could bleed out of Goodlee, and at the same time Goodlee was doggedly striving to destroy the

danger of Bricca. It had become an under-the-surface, life-or-

death game of wits.

We had heard Goodlee admit to "overextending" himself in buying the De Vecchi. In his newspaper interviews he had spoken of the stiff business competition he must buck. The whole Goodlee family had lived extravagantly beyond their income. As Monica had put it, her husband had "gone overboard" with the De Vecchi while having "an unlucky year." Last spring he had lost by fracture a diamond for which he had paid two hundred thousand dollars. . . . Jacobus Wells, in gratitude for Goodlee's generosity in covering up this costly disaster, would no doubt have been willing to split and cut the De Vecchi for him in secret.

The so-beautiful theory I had spun around Usher applied to Goodlee in every detail and fitted him much better. Usher would have come out of it with only a small fraction of the De Vecchi's value. Goodlee had planned to collect four hundred and fifty thousand dollars in insurance money, plus the retail value of the diamond after it had been transferred into a handful of nameless but flawless gems — perhaps another million. . . .

Goodlee was rising. He kept pointing the gun at Speare.

"I'm going to walk out now. I want all of you to stay exactly where you are, inside this room, until I've had time to leave the building. Please, don't any of you be so foolish—

so fatally foolish - as to try to stop me."

The De Vecchi... The diamond was still a riddle. Where was it hidden? I turned my stare from Goodlee to Speare. It wasn't possible that Speare had reasoned out not only Goodlee's guilt but also the secret whereabouts of the diamond. It simply wasn't possible — but I knew in advance it would seem a ridiculously simple thing once he had shown me how he had done it.

"I learned this morning at Orpingham's who really sent you the globe," Speare said. "George Goodlee did. You sent

it to yourself."

Watching us all, Goodlee moved to the table where the globe sat. With his free hand he whipped the cord around it

loosely; then he hooked it under his arm. He crossed the room, carrying it and turning to keep the gun aimed steadily at Speare, and paused with the door at his back.

"I ask you again, please don't try to stop me. I'd rather not

have to kill any of you."

Then, quickly, he slipped the gun into his coat pocket,

snapped the door open, and was gone.

We all bounced to our feet. Monica stood gazing incredulously after her departing husband. He had left her without a farewell. I watched Speare. He was moving unhurriedly to the window. He loosened its catch, leaned out, waved an arm, then closed it again. That was all he did.

Usher had instantly leaped to the door. He had opened it the narrowest crack and was standing there, all taut, watching Goodlee go. He waited in tortured self-restraint until Goodlee had crossed the entire length of the blue-and-white room and had disappeared onto the mezzanine. Then he threw himself out.

"Alarm!" he blurted to Miss Scott. "Hit that alarm!"

Miss Scott reached to a small cluster of pearl push buttons and touched one. Nothing happened. No doubt it would ordinarily have started several loud gongs to bonging. No doubt Goodlee had operated a switch under his desk to cut them off. Realizing this, Usher stood rooted in horror. There would be no alarm — just the customary decorous quiet while Goodlee made his way out, presumably with the De Vecchi.

Speare, moving rapidly now, was trailing Goodlee. I trailed Speare. We hustled across the mezzanine and down the stairs. Next the entrance room — and there I found an astounding

thing happening.

Goodlee had stopped, the globe clenched under his left arm, just short of the street door. His way out was blocked. It was blocked by two Santa Clauses who had just pushed in.

Behind these two Santa Clauses, two more Santa Clauses

were planting themselves just outside.

Beyond these four Santa Clauses, two more Santa Clauses were warily standing by, ready to assist any of the other Santa Clauses in the event of a crisis.

The foremost Santa Clauses were watching Goodlee with a hard light in their eyes and their hands slipped inside their red tunics.

Goodlee had halted with an expression of despair and revulsion on his face, unable to stomach the prospect of a gun battle with six St. Nicks.

This dumfounding assembly was the effect of Speare's signal from the upstairs window, of course. Behind their false beards these Santa Clauses looked suspiciously like six free-lance operatives I knew.

What followed was confusing to me, as well as to the clients, whose purchasing had been interrupted, and the salesmen, who had never before witnessed anything as startling as

this inside elegant Jacquiere's.

Usher, rushing up from behind, snatched the gun away from the undone Goodlee. Next he grabbed away the globe. Having acquired it, he found himself at a loss as to what to do with it. Speare offered a suggestion — he lightly tapped on its hemispherical steel base. Usher turned it over. He peeled off a circle of felt. This exposed a fresh white surface of plaster. I remembered, when Miss Scott had first placed the globe on the table, its base had given off a tinny ring. Now it was solid; plaster filled it.

I also remembered Speare's saying, "If I had the De Vecchi in my possession I'd keep it close at hand, where I could

constantly watch over it."

Usher now went into a kind of frenzy, his face remaining uncannily wooden throughout. He banged the base of the globe against the top of one of Jacquiere's antique French desks. At the second violent whack a half sphere of plaster dropped out of the shell. With this Usher continued his mad pounding until it shattered. He plucked from among the chunks a chamois bag speckled with white particles. He emptied the bag and stood there almost weeping over the De Vecchi.

Even I, lacking any experience with rough diamonds, could clearly see this was no lump of glass.

Usher might well feel joy. Not me. I felt again the dread

that this virtuoso performance of Speare's was going to cost me money. I had reflected a few minutes ago that Goodlee would not be entirely willing to pay me five thousand dollars for pinning two or three murders on his wife. He was even less likely to reward me for pinning them on him.

Next in this delirium I became aware that Speare was

speaking quietly to Goodlee.

"The second half of our fee becomes payable, as I understand it, Mr. Goodlee, on Avis's return. You won't mind if we settle up now?"

From an inner pocket he removed a billfold. As he opened it I saw it contained, in one plastic pocket, a license having a photo of Tony Bricca pasted on it. This was Bricca's wallet, then. Speare had evidently acquired it a few seconds following Bricca's death, while I was still struggling toward them through the storm. Somehow he had overlooked mentioning the matter.

"This is the money Bricca extorted from you," Speare explained. "Since he came by it illegally, it's still your property. It amounts to just five thousand dollars. We accept the five thousand, with thanks, as payment for having succeeded in returning Avis to you."

He handed five one-thousand-dollar bills to me, and to

Goodlee he proffered the empty wallet.

Avis? What was this about Avis' return?

I stared around and found her. She was there in the street, just outside the glass door, trying frantically to get in — and one of our overly conscientious Santa Clauses was dutifully keeping her out.

## CASE CLOSED

AT THE first quiet moment I found, although still not entirely clearheaded, I tapped Speare with a reminder.

"You held out on me. Those men in false beards --- "

"Couldn't tell you in Usher's presence," Speare answered, reasonably enough. "Seemed wise to put them in costume. At this season of the year the street-corner Santa Claus is practically the invisible man. Besides, if I'd had them loitering around Jacquiere's in street clothes they might have gotten rounded up by the cops."

True. Unfortunately detectives tend to look very much like

crooks.

"And about Goodlee," I went on protesting. "You began suspecting him as soon as you saw the gray Homburg. You let me blindly go on with a killer for a client."

"What would you have done, Schy, if I had told you he

was that?"

"I'd have pulled out of the case faster'n a bat."

"That's what I thought," Speare said with a wry smile. "Staying in was a little risky but much more profitable. There was, besides, a question of justice. . . ."

Yes. We were having both justice and profits. Had I pulled out, I would have left five thousand dollars unearned. Far more than that, as a matter of fact. Speare's tactics really

paid off on the afternoon of the day before Christmas, when Mark Usher came in.

He put into my hands a check written by Assurance Associates to the order of the Cole Detective Agency. The amount was forty-five thousand dollars.

"The usual ten per cent," he explained. "May I add I only

wish it might be more?"

After I had stared unbelievingly and swallowed lumps for a while I said, "Mark, my dear friend, you're coming out on the town with us tonight!"

"That's very kind of you, but you see, I don't drink," Usher demurred, "and besides, I've already promised to

baby-sit for my sister."

He went out then with something resembling a glow on his face.

Speare smiled over the check and I made gulping noises, trying to find words to thank him. It had become an unforget-tably mixed-up day. The repercussions of George Goodlee's arrest for murder were still rumbling. We had been happy to let Usher take the whole credit for it. Assurance Associates, a grateful group, had put in a strong pitch at high levels to forestall the unreasonableness the police sometimes show over technicalities.

Millard had also been jugged by Usher, and I had heard earlier today that Avis had tearfully consented to an annulment. It had come to light that Goodlee had secretly sold a substantial interest in Jacquiere to several wealthy friends who had now taken over the management. I had even heard that Monica and Avis were already looking for jobs. Very mixed up, all this. This yuletide had brought us fortune and disaster together.

"Usher or no Usher, Luke, we're going definitely on the town tonight," I declared. "As a matter of fact, we're going on the town every evening from now until Twelfth-night. I'm going to give this office the finest redecorating job money can buy. I'm going to install new furniture and equipment, including a new gun and a pair of handcuffs, in case we might need

'em again someday. I'm going to put your name on the door. I'm taking you into this agency, Luke, as a full partner."

"Thank you, Schy, but no," Speare said. "The headaches

"Thank you, Schy, but no," Speare said. "The headaches of running the business are not for me. I'd rather just help to bring them on by working for you. . . ."

Amazement upon amazement.

I will be a long time recovering from the jolt of discovering that the nicest guy in the case was actually the most vicious, and that the two men who were known crooks had both performed their parts in the ransom deal in purest good faith.

As for the De Vecchi — its effect on us had been forceful and lasting, but that moment in Jacquiere's entrance room was the only time I ever saw it.