

DORIS MILES DISNEY MB
**FIRE AT
WILL**

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ANTIQUES by BIG JOHN

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This Book 25¢

MURDER IS NO MYSTERY

if you have a suspect in mind. But Detective O'Neill was faced with too many likely killers:

Blanche, who hid a secret she'd share
with no one

Dr. Crusely, who knew about potions
and how to mix them—how to
make them deadly

Rita, who left a trail of broken hearts
and then disappeared—or had she?

Harry, who wanted love and would
take it, even from a forbidden
woman

Too many corpses and only one killer.

But which one?

FIRE AT WILL

DORIS MILES DISNEY

MB

A MACFADDEN-BARTELL BOOK

A MACFADDEN BOOK 1971

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OF THE ORIGINAL EDITION.

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Chapter 1

County Detective Jim O'Neill, attached to the state's attorney's office for Hampton County, Connecticut, found himself one morning late in June with a relatively empty desk and a silent telephone. He had on hand at the moment only four cases of importance that were still open. Reports on one of them, a case of assault with a deadly weapon, lay on his desk. The first report said the victim was making satisfactory progress at the hospital; the second, that his assailant had been traced to a rooming house in Bridgeport from which he had fled before daybreak that morning.

It was a routine affair. Jim yawned and pushed the papers aside. Today, tomorrow, possibly not until the day after, the fugitive would be caught and bound over to superior court for the fall term. He'd have a few years in state prison to weigh the drawbacks to settling an argument with a spanner wrench.

The county detective lay back in his chair, clasped his arms behind his head, and looked out the window of his office in the county court building. It was a warm, bright summer day, too nice to spend indoors. It was just the kind of a day when it would be pleasant to go home to lunch, pick up his wife Margaret and his small daughter Sarah and start off somewhere for the afternoon. He was entitled to a few hours off, wasn't he? He'd been working like a dog on the Inkerman case right up until yesterday; a man couldn't neglect his family all the time.

He thrust the reports on the assault case into the file, locked his desk and left the room. Stopping in the outer office, he said to his secretary, "I'm going home, Jenny. If anything comes up within the next hour or so, you can reach me there. After that I expect to be away until perhaps seven or seven-thirty. I'll give you a ring around four to find out if anything's going on. Okay?"

She had worked for him for several years. She said, "Have fun. It's time you took an afternoon off."

He grinned. "You're a smart girl, Jenny. You know all the answers."

He had a twelve-mile drive home. A year ago, when Margaret had persuaded him that three-year-old Sarah should have the chance to grow up in a smaller community than a Hampton suburb, they had sold the house they owned there and bought another in Warrenton. It was an old brick place of no particular style or distinction, but Margaret had settled down happily in it, started a garden, associated herself with town activities, and lent encouragement to Jim in making the many repairs and improvements their property required and in fencing in a section of their back yard so that Sarah would have a safe place to play.

Jim, a city product himself, regarded the move with divided feelings. There were disadvantages as well as advantages in knowing everyone on your street. There was the longer drive back and forth to his office. There were the various clubs and civic organizations in Warrenton which importuned him to swell their ranks. There were the people who stopped him when he appeared in the Center to ask questions about cases he was working on.

Still, it was a nice house and Warrenton was a nice town. He'd bought a power mower last week, and cutting the grass—acres of it, he'd complained, although he knew very well that the lot on which their house stood was only ninety feet wide and twice that in depth—was no longer going to be the chore it had been last year.

Coming into Warrenton, he glanced up approvingly at the cloudless sky. Let the farmers worry about the drought. The longer it lasted the less care his grass needed. He could inspect the brown patches on his lawn without a qualm.

He turned the car into his driveway and blew a single light blast on the horn.

Margaret O'Neill was just opening the gate to Sarah's play yard. She turned around, smiled delightedly, and ran toward her husband, Sarah trailing after her.

"Hello!" she cried. "However did you happen to get home at this time of day?"

He leaned out the car window and kissed her. "I'm taking the afternoon off. We'll beat it out in the country

somewhere, you and Sarah and I."

It was the moment he had been anticipating on his way home, the moment when Margaret would fling her arms around him and tell him he was the best husband in the world, always thinking of his family.

Instead, a flicker of what was undoubtedly dismay crossed her face. She said, "Why—uh—why, that's a grand idea. Maybe we could manage it—late this afternoon, that is."

"But what——"

"Hello, Daddy. Daddy, look what I've got!" Sarah was tugging at the door handle. "Look, Daddy." She held out a grubby hand and a pale pink worm coiled itself lazily around her fingers.

"Sarah, I wish you wouldn't play with worms, darling," Margaret said. "They belong in the ground. They help things grow. . . . The trouble is, Jim, I've got Helen Saunders and Lenore Uxley coming over soon. We've got to work out details on the publicity for the Women's League—the fund-raising projects in the fall, y'know."

"I don't know a thing about it. . . . Here, pudding, give Daddy the worm." Jim climbed out of the car and contrived a touch of frost in his voice while he was addressing his wife that vanished when he spoke to his daughter.

"No," said Sarah, her fist closing over the worm. "I found it. It's mine."

"All right, it's yours. You got any plans for it?"

"Jim, you know perfectly well that I'm on the publicity committee. . . . Sarah, what have you got in your mouth? Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you had. . . . I can't just call them, Jim, and tell them not to come. I've asked them to tea. I could serve it early, of course, and we could leave around four-thirty. Sarah shouldn't skip her nap, so she wouldn't be ready before three, anyway."

She slipped an arm through her husband's and turned him toward the house. "If I'd known ahead of time," she continued reasonably, "I could have put them off until tomorrow."

"Damn the Women's Civic Improvement League," said Jim. He felt flattened. He felt that he had suffered a

serious injury at his wife's hands. Here he was, hurrying home to give her and Sarah an outing, and here she was

...

He glanced at his daughter, who gave him a radiant smile. He swooped down on her and lifted her high in the air. She shrieked with laughter, her hands flew out and the worm landed on his forehead. He brushed it off, swearing under his breath.

"My worm! I lost it, Daddy."

"We'll find another later."

Margaret was ahead of them going into the house. "Sarah's having baked potato and cube steak," she stated. "I'll open a can of soup for you, because I was going to have just a glass of milk and a cream-cheese-and-peanut-butter sandwich myself. I don't think you'd want that."

"No," he said. "I'm not what you'd call crazy about cream-cheese-and-peanut-butter sandwiches. By all means the soup."

He sat down in the breakfast alcove, drawing Sarah up on his lap. The kitchen was a cool, pleasant place. It wasn't sensible to be sore at Margaret because she, not expecting him home, had made her own plans for the afternoon. He remarked contentedly, "Remind me one of these days to sit down and write letters to some of the soup people, will you? I ought to thank them for all the lunches they've provided me with."

Margaret laughed. "You'll have to write to every one of them then. I haven't missed a single kind along the way."

"Daddy, do worms die and go to heaven like people?" Sarah asked.

Her father considered the question and gave her a truthful answer. "I don't know."

"But they could go if God wanted them?"

"Sure they could."

"I was just thinking," Margaret said brightly when they had started lunch, "that you might give the trellis by the garage a second coat of paint this afternoon. There's nearly a full can left over from the window sashes, and the trellis does need a second coat. It wouldn't take you more than an hour and then you could take a shower and by that time——"

"No!" Jim interrupted. "I didn't take the afternoon off

to paint trellises. What I will do is find something to read among the books you got at the library yesterday, mix myself a tall drink and sit outside, nice and comfortable, under a tree. When your guests go home I'll take you out to dinner. But as long as we're going to get a late start you'd better check with Mrs. Oldfield and see if Pam can come over and take care of Sarah."

It was, therefore, through his own words that he robbed himself of the leisurely afternoon he had outlined.

Margaret made the call and turned away from the telephone to report that Pam was swimming at the park pool but would be available later that afternoon. She then took Sarah upstairs for her nap. Jim, deciding that it was too soon after lunch for a drink, went into the living room to scan the titles of the books Margaret had brought home from the library. Among them was Winston Churchill's *Their Finest Hour*. He picked that up and, just in case something lighter might appeal, a new mystery.

Out in the back yard he settled himself in the shade of the largest maple tree, glanced at the acknowledgments on one of the front pages of the Churchill book, and laid it aside to open the mystery story. He had got no farther than the opening sentence, "Gertrude Maltby sank into a chair and let the anonymous letter she had just read drop to the floor," when he was hailed from the yard next door.

"Hi, Jim!"

He looked up and saw the chunky, middle-aged figure of George Oldfield bearing down on him. He waited until his neighbor was crossing the O'Neill driveway before he said neutrally, "Hello."

"Jim, I'm in a terrible jam," the other man announced, hurrying toward him. "Terrible. When your wife said you were taking the afternoon off I told Martha it was the answer to my whole problem, a lifesaver pure and simple."

"That so?" Jim's tone was wary. His hand swept out to indicate a chair nearby. "Sit down, George."

George straddled the chair. "Yes, sir, it's a lifesaver," he repeated. "Y'see, Nate Chesery is being buried this afternoon. He belonged to the Veterans' Corps—was one of the charter members as a matter of fact—and always was active in the organization. Well, he died late Friday

night, and Mrs. Chesery didn't even let me know he was dead until noon Saturday. By that time half the post was out of town for the week end. When I called around again last night they either hadn't got back or they couldn't get off from work this afternoon for the funeral on such short notice. So here I am"—he flung out his arms expressively—"short one man to make up the firing squad. God, I've been on the phone all morning, I've cleaned out the list and I'm still one short!"

"I hope you're not thinking of me," Jim said quickly. "I can't help you. I don't belong to your Corps, and I'm not even a veteran."

"I know it. But you could fill in, couldn't you? You're a policeman. You at least know how to handle a gun. We'll give you one of the post's hats and armbands, and no one will know the difference."

Jim settled deeper in the chair, resistance in every line of his body. "I'm sorry, George, but I couldn't do it. I don't belong to the outfit, I don't know the procedure, I'd only make a fool of myself and the rest of the squad. No, I just couldn't."

"Jesus, though, will you think of the jam I'm in?" George pleaded. "I'm post commander. It's up to me to get someone, and I'm stuck, I tell you! You've got to help me out. I'm desperate!"

His round face was indeed set in lines of desperation. He added, "If you were in a jam like this, I'd try to help you out."

The county detective ran his fingers through his thick black hair and shook his head. "I couldn't do it," he declared immovably. "I'm sorry as hell, but I couldn't."

He was lost, though, and he knew it. George Oldfield went on pleading with him and he couldn't very well tell his neighbor that as far as he, Jim, was concerned all veterans' organizations could fold their tents and steal quietly away; or that the trappings of a military funeral for a sedentary merchant of fifty-odd, whose only claim to the distinction lay in having served six months in a training camp thirty-one years ago, struck him as ridiculous. He could and did continue to refuse, but George Oldfield brushed aside his every objection and eventually he found himself on his feet heading toward the house, his books,

his comfortable chair, his prospects of a tall drink all left behind him.

"And, say, would you mind speeding it up, old man?" the commander of the Veterans' Corps called after him. "It's two-thirty now and the service is scheduled for three o'clock at the Sturges funeral home. We should be there ahead of time. I'll blow my horn for you when I'm ready."

"All right," Jim called back sourly.

"And thanks a million. I hope I get a chance one of these days to do a favor for you."

"By God, I hope you do too," Jim said under his breath as he climbed the back steps. "And I hope it's something where you have to make as big an ass of yourself for me as I'm going to make of myself for you."

Margaret was in the living room tidying it for the arrival of her guests. He leaned against the door frame and uttered bitter complaints over what had happened to his afternoon off.

"You'll wear one of those caps and carry a rifle?" Laughter glinted in his wife's eyes and pushed at the corners of her mouth, but she held it back and spoke sympathetically. "It's a shame," she said. "Especially when you have so little time to yourself."

"It's a shame you had to spread the word to Martha Oldfield that I was going to be home all afternoon," he retorted. "That's what did it."

"Oh, but your car's in the driveway. They knew you were here. And when I asked about Pam taking care of Sarah, Martha wanted to know why you weren't at your office. So I told her. After all, I didn't know about the funeral and the firing squad."

"No," Jim conceded, "you didn't. But still—"

Muttering further complaints, he moved on to the hall and upstairs to the big front bedroom he shared with Margaret. Sarah's door across the hall was ajar and he looked in on his daughter. She was already asleep, a bedraggled stuffed elephant hugged close to her, her dark lashes an arc against her cheeks. She was a picture to melt the heart. Her father's heart did melt and he went to his own room in a better state of mind.

Outside the Sturges funeral home, complete with cap, armband, and a rifle which he decided was Spanish-

American War issue, the county detective waited with the rest of the firing squad for the mortal remains of Nate Chesery to be brought down the steps. The members of the squad were at ease, talking in undertones. Recorded hymns reached them through the open windows. The hearse was drawn up at the curb, its driver outside conferring with one of the undertaker's assistants. Beyond the row of funeral cars Clinton Street stretched itself out to the afternoon sunlight in empty, tree-shaded peace.

The firing squad was amiably shredding the reputation of a woman whose name was familiar to Jim as one of Warrenton's elect. He only half listened to the talk about her until the last name of the man they were linking with hers struck his ears. "Leck?" he said then. "Do you mean Russ Leck who lives on my street?"

"Yeah, that's the guy," someone told him, and then George Oldfield said, "Attention!"

The squad drew itself up in a more or less smart, orderly row on each side of the walk, the bugler hovering behind, his moment yet to come. The double doors of the funeral home were opened wide and Sturges, the undertaker, revealed himself, imposing in striped trousers, black coat, and gray gloves. He stepped aside to allow the people filling the doorway to pass him. There was no reason for Jim to notice Anna Ellery, a slender erect woman with gray hair; she was merely one more of the stream of relatives and friends of the dead man entering their cars.

When the last mourner had emerged from the funeral home there was a brief hush heavy with waiting. Jake Fleetwood of the firing squad, standing beside Jim, said under his breath, "That woman we were talking about: she's here at the funeral."

The county detective whispered back, "How could she have been carrying on with Leck while her husband was away in the Navy? I understood Leck was in the Navy too."

"Oh no," the other man said out of the corner of his mouth. "Leck wasn't in the Navy. He was in Mrs. Gabriel's bedroom."

The casket was being borne down the steps. It was no

moment for laughter. Jim stared hard at the man across the sidewalk.

North Cemetery, the oldest one in Warrenton, was a mile away on the outskirts of the town. It was spread across a gently sloping hill with a few houses to the north and east of it, a wooded ravine in back of it, and a small, thick wood pressing against it to the south. The Chesery lot lay at the edge of the cemetery beside the wood.

As the committal service began the sun disappeared behind a mass of clouds. Before it ended a sudden wind blew up and distant rumbles of thunder drew nearer. There was a momentary pause when the minister's voice died away; the group around the grave cast quick, calculating glances at the darkened sky.

"Load!" George Oldfield commanded the firing squad crisply.

Jim found himself sweating with nervousness. What if the gun jammed? What if the blanks didn't fit it?

The gun didn't jam. The blank cartridge went in, the bolt clicked smoothly into place.

"Aim . . . Fire!"

The volley of shots came raggedly. While the final laggard echo of it still hung on the air Jake Fleetwood breathed against Jim's ear, "Fire at will, eh?"

"Load . . . Aim . . . Fire!"

This time it was even worse. One shot was a full second behind the rest.

"Load . . . Aim . . . Fire!"

Not until the third volley resounded across the hillside did Jim have time to notice that a subdued little commotion was taking place off to his left.

"Old lady Ellery," one of the squad muttered. "She fainted. Norman Delmaine's carrying her to his car."

The county detective caught a glimpse of the gray-haired woman in black, limp in Norman Delmaine's arms, another woman hurrying ahead to open the car door.

That ended the incident. The bugler raised his bugle to his lips and sounded taps. A roar of thunder drowned him out. Lightning shot across the sky. The funeral was over, the people present making haste to reach their cars before the shower burst over them.

As it happened, the rain held off until the last car left the cemetery. It was a brief downpour, already lessening when Jim got out of George Oldfield's car and ran across the lawn to his own front door.

Margaret's guests were preparing to leave. Pam Oldfield, she informed her husband, had taken Sarah home with her. The rain stopped and the two members of the Women's Civic Improvement League left.

It was half-past four. Margaret stacked the iced-tea glasses and cake plates on a tray and carried them out to the kitchen, Jim following her around describing the funeral. She looked down at the chambray dress she was wearing.

"D'you know, I think I'll change. It's cooler since the shower. I'll put on a suit. . . . I'm not sure I believe that story about Mrs. Gabriel and Russ Leck. She's in the Women's League."

"You mean you can't be in the Women's League and be having an affair at the same time? The one excludes the other?"

Margaret laughed. "It's just that she doesn't seem that kind of a person. Oh, well——"

They went upstairs together companionably, Jim lounging on the bed while she changed into a suit and put on fresh make-up. It was her turn to give an account of the afternoon, the problems that beset the Women's League.

She moved back and forth between bedroom and bathroom. "I can't understand the attitude some people take," she declared. "No pride in the town, nothing but opposition to everything we try to do. For instance, that plan we presented to the Chamber of Commerce for improving the appearance of the Center. Not one of the merchants——"

The extension telephone beside the bed interrupted her. Jim leaned over and picked up the receiver. "Hello," he said. "Yes, speaking."

Margaret was at the closet, taking her suit jacket off a hangar. He said. "What? At the Chesery funeral?"

The tone of his voice was enough. Resignedly she put the jacket back in the closet. This was a case coming up. They wouldn't be going out to dinner.

He said, "All right, I'll meet you there," and dropped the receiver back in its cradle. His face looked bleak. "That was the Warrenton police chief," he informed her. "A Mrs. Anna Ellery was shot at the funeral this afternoon. Right under my nose. Everyone, including me, thought she'd fainted. They got her home and called her doctor. He said the cause of death was a heart attack. Now Sturges has the body and five minutes ago he phoned the police chief to tell him there's a bullet hole in her back."

The county detective was on his feet, pulling on his coat as he talked. "Right under my nose," he said again. "I've got to get over there."

"Yes," said Margaret.

Chapter 2

Police Chief Strader was waiting for the county detective at the Sturges funeral home. He was a thin, serious-looking man with blond hair going gray, light eyes of no definite color, and the general appearance of a Yankee farmer. A capable, conscientious officer, he took much pride in Warrenton's fatality-free traffic record that had not been broken for the past three years. Murder, however, was outside his experience; there had been none in Warrenton during the seven years he had headed the police force.

He was waiting with Mr. Sturges for the county detective in the hall of the funeral home and greeted Jim with open relief. Then he said, "Mr. Sturges knows more about this than I do; I'd better let him tell you about it."

Death of all kinds was too familiar to the undertaker for him to have suffered any loss of urbanity. In his carefully modulated voice he began, "Well, Mr. O'Neill. It was a pretty unexpected thing to have happen. When they called me they said it was a heart attack——"

"Who made the call?"

"Norman Delmaine, the husband of one of the Ellery girls. After I'd talked to him I talked to Dr. Crusely. Mrs. Ellery's been his patient for years. He said he saw her yesterday, so everything was in order for signing the death certificate. General sclerosis, he said, with a resultant coronary accident. But she kept active, you know, in spite of her condition; it just meant she had to take things a little easier than most of us do. This afternoon she went to the Chesery funeral. You were there yourself, Mr. O'Neill."

"Yes," said the county detective shortly.

"It must have happened when she was supposed to have fainted. I saw Delmaine carrying her away and I thought the strain had been too much for her so soon after her own husband's funeral."

"When did he die?"

Mr. Sturges made silent calculation and said, "He was buried two weeks ago Saturday."

"I guess I saw his death in the *Courier*. What was the cause of it?"

"Heart."

"Oh." Jim frowned, not liking the coincidence of Anna Ellery's death at first being attributed to the same cause as her husband's. "Was Crusely his doctor too?"

"I suppose so. He called when Mr. Ellery had the attack." The undertaker paused, expecting a comment. There was none and he resumed, "Delmaine drove Mrs. Ellery home. She was still alive, apparently, when they got her into the house and phoned her doctor. He went right over, but she was dead when he arrived."

"And he diagnosed a coronary accident, overlooking a bullet wound. Didn't the woman bleed at all?"

"Very little—externally, that is. What blood there was didn't show on her black dress. It's a small wound anyway."

"In her back, you said. What about an exit wound? Or is the bullet still in her?"

"No, it passed out through her right shoulder; and it's not as big a wound as you'd expect. Not much blood."

"You've notified the medical examiner, of course. . . . Let's see, it's Dr. Wright, isn't it?"

The police chief answered. "We got in touch with him and with Dr. Crusely. Dr. Wright's on his way over now, but Dr. Crusely's out on calls. His office is trying to locate him."

"The sooner we talk to him the better I'll like it." Jim's frown had deepened, but still the undertaker ventured an opinion.

"I can't understand how a live bullet could have got mixed in with the blanks the firing squad used this afternoon."

Jim had a sudden previsionary glimpse of newspaper headlines: "Hampton county detective member of firing squad at military funeral where elderly woman was accidentally shot."

"It didn't happen like that," he stated, chopping off the words. "We fired into the air."

"That's right, you did," Mr. Sturges agreed. Bewilderment ruffled the precise, neat lines of his face. "How, then, did she——"

Jim made no answer. He was remembering the noticeably laggard shot that had followed the second volley over the grave. It was no longer a subject for laughter; it loomed large now, and mentally he condemned himself for not connecting it with Mrs. Ellery's collapse.

"Damn Oldfield and his firing squad and his Veterans' Corps to hell," he thought. "If I hadn't been all wrapped up in getting the rifle loaded and fired without making too big a fool of myself, I might have caught on to what had happened."

It was the police chief who spoke next. He said, "I've called Oldfield, Mr. O'Neill. He's going to pick up Skip Wilson, who was in charge of issuing the rifles and blanks and they'll get down here right away."

"Good. What about Mrs. Ellery's family? Do they know yet what happened to her?"

"No. When Mr. Sturges called me I cautioned him to say nothing to anyone until you got here."

"Okay. Now let's get going. Mr. Strader, will you call the state's attorney's office? They'll get the men we need out here right away. You can leave a message for the state's attorney that I'll report in to him a little later myself."

"Certainly." The police chief started toward the telephone and was checked by a further request. "After you've called Hampton will you rout out whatever men you have available on your local force and send them over to the cemetery? Tell them not to overlook the woods right beside it either. They're to hunt for the gun and the bullet and, in case it was an automatic, the empty cartridge case." Jim turned to the undertaker. "If you'll show me the body—"

The embalming rooms were in the basement. In one of them Anna Ellery's body lay face downward on a table. There was a small blue-black hole in the middle of her back and a larger one, the skin around it shredded, in her right shoulder. Folded on a stand beside her was the clothing she had been wearing. When Jim was finished with his examination of her body he lifted her black dress from the top of the pile and held it up to the light. It was a heavy ribbed silk material, stiff with dried blood around the hole the bullet had made going in. There wasn't much

blood, though, he noted; she had bled more from the exit wound, but the shoulder pad had soaked that up. A rip in the shoulder seam was the only outer indication of the bullet's passage.

The quiet of the funeral home was soon broken. The medical examiner was the first arrival; after him came George Oldfield and Skip Wilson, the latter, who had issued the rifles and ammunition for the Chesery funeral, loud in his protestations of the impossibility of making a mistake in passing out the blank cartridges. The next to come were the state police laboratory technicians; they were followed by two state police officers from the nearest barracks, and Detectives Cobb and Bailo from the state's attorney's office.

Jim assigned the two detectives to assembling the dead woman's family for questioning. The state police officers were sent on to the cemetery to aid the local men in their hunt for gun and bullet. A roundup of the firing squad was begun by one of the Warrenton supernumeraries; two more of them began making up a list of all those present at the Chesery funeral. The state police technicians busied themselves with photographs and measurements and fingerprints of Anna Ellery and then moved on to the cemetery. In the midst of this coming and going Dr. Crusely appeared.

Jim saw him at once, taking him first to the embalming room to look at the dead woman and afterward to one of the dim empty parlors on the first floor. He raised the Venetian blinds to admit light and made no effort to conceal his prolonged scrutiny of the doctor. He saw a tall man with a crop of healthy-looking white hair that offered an arresting contrast to black brows and dark eyes. The doctor was somewhere in his sixties, a well-groomed man with a narrow, intelligent face that was handsome enough, the detective thought, to bring him any number of women patients. His medical skill could be called to account: he had passed up a bullet wound and diagnosed a coronary attack as the cause of death.

Dr. Crusely sat down in the chair Jim indicated. He was pale. His hand shook as he lit a cigarette. He didn't wait for questions; he was too anxious to explain himself, to try to justify the mistake he had made.

He talked rapidly, telling the county detective that Mrs. Ellery had been a patient of his since the early years of her marriage, that she suffered from high blood pressure, followed carefully the diet and medication he prescribed, and came to his office several times a year for checkups.

Jim inserted a question. "When did you see her last?"

"Yesterday afternoon. Her granddaughter Joan called me in the morning and asked me to stop by. She said her grandmother hadn't slept well the night before and she'd like me to look in on her. Mrs. Ellery lost her husband two weeks ago, and I'd been afraid of the effect his death might have on her condition, so I——"

"What was her blood pressure yesterday?"

"Not alarming—185. But when I left I asked her to come to my office next week and I cautioned her again on long rest periods and no sudden exertions."

"You attended her husband too?"

"Well, I was the family doctor. I took care of Mrs. Ellery and the four granddaughters. Lucas Ellery, though, enjoyed excellent health; I hadn't seen him professionally for three years or more before he died. I was, of course, called in the night he had the coronary attack."

Jim nodded. They would go back to details on Lucas Ellery's death later.

"Then this afternoon Norman Delmaine telephoned. He's married to——"

"I know."

"Well, he sounded pretty excited. He said Mrs. Ellery had fainted at the Chesery funeral, he'd got her home and her pulse was very weak. He asked me to come at once. I got there as fast as I could, but she was dead when I arrived."

"What examination did you make of the body?"

"Well——" Dr. Crusely shifted his position and looked unhappy. "I suppose that, subconsciously, I was more or less prepared for her death. The shock of losing her husband so unexpectedly, her age—she was seventy—her general medical history——"

"What examination did you make of the body?"

"Just the usual procedure; there was no question but

what she was dead. I listened for a heartbeat and applied the stethoscope to her larynx, where I'd have heard it if there'd been the faintest respiration."

"You didn't unfasten her clothing or make any further examination at all?"

"Mr. O'Neill, I must make it clear that under the circumstances I thought prevailed there was no need of it. She showed marked cyanosis, her whole appearance and the nature of her collapse indicated a coronary accident."

"Dr. Wright was here," Jim observed without emphasis. "He thinks the bullet pierced the spleen or perhaps the heart wall and that Mrs. Ellery died of internal hemorrhage."

Dr. Crusely nodded. "The lack of external bleeding, yes." He unfolded an immaculate white handkerchief and wiped his forehead. "Put yourself in my position, Mr. O'Neill. I've seen her within the twenty-four hours the law allows a doctor for certifying a death without calling in the medical examiner. And who would expect a woman like her to die of a bullet wound? Nothing like that even entered my mind. Good lord, if it had, why would I release her body to Sturges knowing that he was bound to discover the true facts? What point would there have been to any concealment?"

Jim was silent. He thought, "Time. You gained an hour or two of it; perhaps that was the point."

The doctor, not a mind reader, was gaining more confidence. He went on, "No, it wasn't intentional, Mr. O'Neill, I assure you. It was a mistake. A most unlucky one but no more than that."

He paused, eying the county detective earnestly. "They're saying around town that her death was an accident, a live bullet that somehow got mixed in with the blanks the firing squad used. I'd have no reason to cover up a thing like that."

"No, not a thing like that," Jim said, his face revealing none of the irritation he felt over what was being charged against the firing squad by Warrenton. He took the other man back to Lucas Ellery's death. "How old was her husband?"

Dr. Crusely showed relief at the abrupt change of subject. He lit another cigarette and settled himself more comfortably in the chair.

"He died on his seventy-fifth birthday, two weeks ago last Wednesday."

"A coronary attack, you said?"

"Yes. In the evening after dinner. They called me at once. He was in a coma when I reached the house. I gave him hypodermic injections of digitalis, shock treatment, then coramine and finally adrenalin. But he died before midnight."

"And yet there hadn't been any previous indications of a heart condition?"

"No, there hadn't. But the man was seventy-five that day, he led an active life and probably overexerted himself consistently. Even though the attack came without warning, it wasn't a particularly unusual case. I phoned Wright, he examined the body and was in complete accord with me that Mr. Ellery's death was due to a sudden coronary thrombosis."

"There was no autopsy?"

Dr. Crusely stiffened. "Neither Wright nor I saw the slightest need for one."

After that Jim let him go.

Dr. Wright returned to the funeral home. He bore out his colleague's assurances that Lucas Ellery had died a natural death, but Jim detected a degree of thoughtfulness and doubt in what the medical examiner said. Anna Ellery's death had put it there.

When her body had been placed in an ambulance for removal to the Hampton General Hospital where the autopsy would be performed, the county detective sought out the chief of police.

"Let's adjourn to the police station," he said. "There's nothing more for us to do here, and I'm sure Mr. Sturges would like to have his place back to himself."

The undertaker protested politely that he and his establishment were entirely at their disposal, but nevertheless Jim was very soon in his car driving behind the police chief to the station.

The members of the firing squad were waiting there for them. Jake Fleetwood was no longer the bawdy

companion at arms he had been during the funeral. He glowered at Jim while he and the others all talked at once about the service they had seen in the war. They knew a blank cartridge from a real one, they said again and again. They'd never in the world have mixed up the two kinds!

Inwardly the county detective was agreeing with them. No live bullet had, in error, been substituted for a blank. He looked them over, a group of ordinary men displaying righteous indignation. It seemed unlikely that one of them, unnoticed by the rest, had contrived a switch in cartridges and aimed and fired at Anna Ellery.

They would have to be investigated thoroughly just the same.

He sighed in exasperation when they were gone and gazed morosely at Strader. "If I'd only caught the thing when it happened," he said. "If everyone there had been held and searched right on the spot. God damn the luck, anyway!"

"No one would have caught it," Strader observed. "No one would have looked for it."

"I should have." Jim described the shot that noticeably lagged behind the firing of the second volley over the grave. "My God, I was getting a kick out of it, thinking how lousy and unmilitary we sounded."

"I'd have thought that too."

The county detective lit a cigarette. "Spilled milk," he said flatly. "Let's get on with it. Tell me a little about the Ellerys before I go over to see them."

"Well, in my time there was Lucas and Anna. They were married back in the late nineties. She was one of the Warrens."

The note of respect in his voice brought from Jim, "Who were they?"

"Warren, Warrenton," Strader amplified. "They settled the town in the sixteen seventies. They were big shots around here and then they kind of petered out. When Mrs. Ellery was married her parents were dead, she lived with an elderly aunt, and there wasn't any Warren money left. Lucas's father had died, leaving the Ellery carriage company to him and his brother Edward. Edward got out, though, and into the investment business where he made a lot of money. He died ten or eleven years ago. Lucas hung

on too long after automobiles came in and when he finally switched to car bodies he was too late in the field. God knows how he's got by with that big house on his hands and the four granddaughters to raise. Of course he still owned a little property around town and had a couple of rents coming in, but even so——"

"Before we get on to the granddaughters," Jim interrupted, "what about his own children?"

"There were twin sons, Warren and Will. Warren was killed in World War I. He'd have been about twenty-one when he died. He was the go-getter of the family, the one who was going to make them all rich again."

Strader shook his head. "Funny, isn't it, how different people in one family can be? Warren and Will Ellery, for instance. Warren had a lot on the ball. After he enlisted in '17 he had a commission in no time and was sent overseas, whereas Will—he was a nice fellow but didn't have any go to him. He enlisted, too, but he never got beyond being a private and he never got sent across."

"But he was alive when the war ended and Warren was pushing up daisies," said the county detective.

"Yeah. Will was alive and about a year after he got out of the Army he married a Polish girl from Waterbury. Her name was Rita Kubiak. His family raised quite a stink about it, I recall. Wouldn't let him in the house at first—said he'd disgraced them. But after a little while they let Will bring her home. That's another thing about him: he brought her home. Didn't strike out on his own, y'see, and try to provide his wife with her own place. He brought her home to the old folks and went along with the business—they were manufacturing some kind of bicycle parts then—trying to make a go of it."

He saw Jim glance at his watch, was reminded of the pressure of time and capsuled the rest of the Ellery story. "Will and Rita had four daughters, first twins, then Blanche, then Joan. When Joan was a little thing Will got killed by a car, and about a year and a half afterward Rita ran off with Tony Greene who worked for the light company. What a scandal that was in Warrenton!" He grinned reminiscently. "But the old folks held their heads up, went on taking care of their grandchildren, and gradually the talk died down."

Jim was on his feet. "I'll give Goodrich a ring and then we'll get started. . . . What became of Rita Kubiak?"

"They never heard from her from that day to this."

When he had finished his call to the state's attorney and they were in his car driving to Anna Ellery's home Jim asked, "Aren't there more of the family than the granddaughters?"

"There's Edward Ellery's widow and his son Harry. They say Edward left Laura Ellery pretty well fixed when he died."

The two branches of the Ellery family lived next door to each other in the older residential section of the town where the late nineteenth-century houses were chiefly distinguished for their size and the ugliness of their architecture. Both men were silent during the rest of the short ride to Anna Ellery's, Jim digesting the information he already had about the family, Strader thinking about other incidents in their lives.

"Turn left here into North Street," the latter said finally.

The county detective made the turn into the wide, tree-shaded street on which, farther along, the cemetery stood.

"Fourth house on the right from the next corner."

Several cars were already parked in the Ellery driveway. Jim swung in behind them, shut off the motor, and looked around him.

The house was big, rambling, drab, run-down. The grass was mowed on the front lawn, but the gravel driveway, full of holes and ruts, was badly in need of repair. Behind the house a barn was visible through the trees, and a small, open-sided building with a pagoda-shaped roof that was, he thought, called a summerhouse.

He got out of the car and moved toward the house, the police chief behind him. Paint was peeling on the front porch, he noted, and the railing sagged. Over the whole place hung a look of creeping ruin.

Strader said, "I didn't tell you about Maggie Ellery."

Jim stopped and turned around. "Who is she?"

"She was Edward and Lucas's sister. Their father, old Howard Ellery, doted on her and left her a nice bundle of cash when he died. The sons got the carriage business but she got cash, nearly a hundred thousand, it was said. She

drowned herself years ago before the other war. She'd been engaged and it went sour and she got queer after that. Her mother before her had drowned herself in the same place in the river after Maggie was born."

"My God," Jim muttered. "What a family!" He walked on. "Who got the nice bundle of cash?"

"Nobody. And that's a story in itself. There's one more thing——"

"Well?"

They halted at the foot of the porch steps. His voice carefully without expression, the police chief said, "The man Maggie Ellery was engaged to was Dr. Crusely."

"Oh." Jim climbed the steps. "Lots of high spots." He pressed the bell beside the screen door.

He was looking into a hall paneled in dark wood. Cobb, getting up from a bench midway down its length, was merely a bulky outline in the dim light around him until he drew near the door. He opened it, let them in, and said with a backward jerk of his head, "They're back there in the liberry."

Footsteps sounded behind him and a tall young woman with dark eyes and hair appeared. Her glance went from Jim to the chief of police. She said hesitantly, "Hello, Mr. Strader."

"How are you?" He removed the cap that matched his uniform. "This is County Detective O'Neill. Mrs. Delmaine. . . . Before she was married, Mr. O'Neill, Mrs. Delmaine was Elinor Ellery."

Jim bowed. "How do you do?"

"We've been very anxious for you to come. This man here"—she gestured toward Cobb—"wouldn't tell us anything except that there was some question about how Gran died. Everyone's waiting for you in the library."

She turned to lead the way down the hall.

The library was a large room with bookshelves built into two walls, a fireplace in a third wall, and a desk and old-fashioned couch dominating the fourth one. Seated around the room were six people; three girls whom he assumed to be the other Ellery granddaughters, two men, and a thin, prim-faced woman of sixty or so.

Elinor Delmaine said, "This is Mr. O'Neill, the county detective." She spoke rapidly. "My aunt, Mrs. Laura

Ellery; my sisters, Mrs. Martin, Blanche and Joan Ellery; my husband and my brother-in-law."

Jim sorted them out. Mrs. Martin must be Elinor's twin, the same age, the same dark eyes and hair. Blanche was exquisitely blond, her eyes gray-blue, by far the prettiest of the sisters. Joan was certainly the youngest, her hair a darker blond, light brown really, her eyes deep blue, her complexion fresh and rosy. She looked wholesome, the detective thought. Norman Delmaine was dark to the point of swarthinness; Martin, married to the second of the twins, appeared colorless beside him.

When they finished murmuring acknowledgments Laura Ellery said, "Won't you sit down, Mr. O'Neill? And Mr. Strader, too, of course." She waved a diamond-studded hand toward two chairs that flanked the fireplace.

"Thank you." Jim turned his chair around to face the group and seated himself. He began, "I'm sorry to have to come here at a time like this, but, as Detective Cobb told you, a question has come up about Mrs. Ellery's death——"

"We can't imagine what it could be," Laura Ellery broke in. "She died of a heart attack. Dr. Crusely said so."

Jim, not liking either the interruption or the crisp, positive tone in which it was made, answered her with equal crispness. "It wasn't a heart attack. Some one shot Mrs. Ellery at the Chesery funeral."

His gaze went around the family circle. Bewilderment, shock, disbelief—every face displayed these emotions. A chorus of horrified exclamations burst from every pair of lips.

The county detective waited. Laura Ellery closed her eyes "I feel faint——"

Norman Delmaine rushed to the kitchen for a glass of water. She drank from it and looked at Jim. "There must be some mistake."

"No."

"It was a military funeral," Norman Delmaine said, apparently not recognizing Jim as a member of the firing squad. "One of the rounds they fired over the grave——"

"Mr. Delmaine"—Jim was curt—"those were blank cartridges and they were fired into the air. And, for your further information, blanks have wadding at the tip end to

hold in the powder, whereas the bullet protrudes from the real thing. The firing squad was made up of ex-servicemen perfectly competent to tell one kind from the other."

Roy Martin nodded. "He's right, Norm."

Color reddened the other man's swarthy face. Later Jim was to learn that Norman Delmaine had not seen service in the war, that he had been making money at home while it lasted and was known around town as "Quick-buck Delmaine."

"Then how did it happen?" Teresa Martin, Elinor's twin, asked.

Before the county detective could frame a reply Roy Martin said. "Someone must have been in the woods next to the cemetery with a gun. Shooting rats in the ravine, perhaps, or looking for rabbits."

"Oh dear," Laura Ellery cried, "that was it, of course. What criminal carelessness!" She appealed to Jim. "What will you be able to do about it, Mr. O'Neill?"

"Mrs. Ellery." He looked at her patiently. "Your sister-in-law wasn't killed that way. She was shot after the second volley of blanks had been fired over the grave. No rat hunter or rabbit hunter could have missed hearing the first volley, and he certainly wouldn't have trained his gun on the cemetery after he heard it. He'd have walked over first to see what was going on."

All eyes were on him, but no one was in a hurry to speak when he finished. It was Joan who broke the heavy silence, asking, "How was she shot, Mr. O'Neill?"

"I'm afraid we'll have to consider the possibility that the bullet was meant for your grandmother," he said.

This time the horrified exclamations that swept the group were minutes in subsiding.

Chapter 3

He talked with them one by one in a small room they called Grandfather's office that opened off the hall at the front of the house. It was furnished with a big square safe that must be a relic of the mid-nineteenth century, a roll-top desk, shelves holding ledgers, manuals and old volumes that dealt with the carriage industry. Labeled pictures of Ellery carriages hung on the wall: the landau, the brougham, the dogcart, the phaeton, and many more. In one corner was a duplicate in black leather of the couch in the library, this one much more worn. Here, Jim deduced, Grandfather Ellery had found far too much time on his hands in late years for taking naps.

There had been some discussion among them as to who should talk with him first. The county detective had settled it by saying, "Mrs. Ellery, I'll begin with you, if you please."

They sat facing each other, he sidewise at the roll-top desk, she in an armchair a few feet away. With Cobb taking notes, he established her background quickly. She had been born in Litchfield, had married Edward Ellery in 1913, and was the mother of a son, Harry, born in 1918. Her husband . . .

"Yes, I know. He was a pretty prominent man."

She smiled faintly and tried not to look complacent.

"Where is your son today?"

"He went to the park this afternoon to play tennis with Wilbur Loman. He ought to be home any minute now."

Jim's eyes went to Cobb, asking the question: "Has someone been sent to look for the son?"

At Cobb's nod he resumed, "Now, about your sister-in-law . . ."

She told him that Anna Ellery and she had always got on well together; that Harry was devoted to Blanche, but she, Laura, wasn't sure a marriage between them would have her approval.

"After all, Will Ellery, Blanche's father, and Harry were first cousins, and one hears such disturbing things about inter-marrying . . ."

Even though Harry insisted the things she heard were old wives' tales, she just couldn't make up her mind that he was right, Laura Ellery continued plaintively. One day she thought yes, the next day she thought no.

"And what about Harry and Blanche?" Jim interposed. "Have they made up their minds to get married?"

She looked vague. "Well, nothing's really been decided yet. Of course, financially it would be to Blanche's advantage. Poor Lucas and Anna were practically penniless, you see, whereas my husband . . ."

He edged her along to the events of the present day. She had meant to attend the Chesery funeral herself. But then she hadn't felt up to it, a slight headache . . . No, she hadn't seen her sister-in-law or any of the girls that day. None of them had dropped in at her house nor had she visited them.

"Just before lunch I phoned Anna and told her I wouldn't be going to the Chesery funeral. She said it was all right, she'd have Norman with her."

"What else did she say?"

"Why, that was all. Except that she hoped my headache would go away. We didn't talk over a minute and——"

"Did her voice sound the way it always did?"

"Oh yes."

After lunch, Laura Ellery went on, she'd gone upstairs to her room to lie down. She must have dozed off, because the next thing she knew Etta was knocking on her door.

"Who is Etta?"

"My maid. She said Blanche had telephoned to have me go over at once, her grandmother had been brought home unconscious. But Anna died before I got here. Right after that Dr. Crusely came, and we never dreamed——" She looked at the county detective with a sudden resurgence of hope. "He's a very good doctor. You have no idea how I depend on him, my health not being what it was before Edward died. Don't you think there must be some mistake? Mr. Sturges, I mean——"

"No. A bullet wound and a heart attack are not, as a rule, readily confused."

"I suppose not." She sighed deeply and shook her head. "I don't know what to make of it. Except that I'm sure of

one thing: no one shot poor Anna deliberately. Why, think of it, Mr. O'Neill! She was seventy years old, a grandmother, just widowed herself. She never did anyone any harm in her life. No matter what you say, I keep thinking of the firing squad——"

"That, Mrs. Ellery, is your privilege." There was an acid note in Jim's voice and he glanced at Cobb. The big detective looked back at him solemnly.

He was brief with her after that. He established the time she lay down, one-thirty, and the time Etta knocked on her door, a few minutes after four.

His final question was: "How did your sister-in-law get on with the rest of the family?"

Laura Ellery assured him that the girls were devoted to their grandmother, they appreciated the many sacrifices she had made for them. Indeed, the whole family got on beautifully together——

Jim cut short the idyllic domestic picture she would have painted, thanking her for the information she had given him and telling her he would see Mrs. Delmaine next.

She was waiting with the others in the library. Since the Warrenton chief of police waited with them, no one asked Laura Ellery what was going on. In silence they watched Elinor leave the room.

The county detective's first questions established her background, her marriage, her relationship with the family.

She said, "Something out of the ordinary, Mr. O'Neill? Oh no. I'm in and out—more than ever, of course, since Grandfather died—and there hasn't been a thing."

"I've been told his death was very sudden."

"It was. He died on his seventy-fifth birthday. We rather blamed ourselves, you know. There was too much excitement, the house full of people congratulating him, then a family dinner. Afterward we sat around and we had drinks and then Grandfather began to get a peculiar look, his face went blue, sort of, and he seemed to be in great pain and to have trouble breathing. Someone—Blanche, I think it was—telephoned Dr. Crusely. Norman and Roy, my sister's husband, helped him to the library and he lay down. But by the time the doctor got here Grandfather

was unconscious. It was awful!"

Elinor clasped her hands and rolled up her eyes to signify how awful it had been. At Jim's nod of understanding she continued, "He'd always been so well, so active. It seemed as if he would live forever."

"How long did he live after the attack began?"

"Between three and four hours. He died around midnight. Dr. Crusely did everything he could. He called it a coronary thrombosis. He said that even though Grandfather had never complained of any heart condition it wasn't uncommon for men of his age to go like that, especially considering the strenuous day he'd had."

Further questions brought out the fact that Elinor had known yesterday Anna Ellery was planning to attend the Chesery funeral. "Blanche and Joan didn't think she should try to go, but once Gran made up her mind to do something, you couldn't change it. She knows I loathe funerals and that it was no use asking me to drive her. But Norman has his own business—the Delmaine Motor Sales—and he arranged to be free this afternoon to take her. He's always obliging about things like that."

She, too, went on to assure the county detective that all was serene among the Ellerys, that there was never any reluctance to do favors for one another. "Of course," she added modifyingly, "we've had our little differences now and then like most people do. But nothing serious."

Jim didn't return her bright smile and it vanished swiftly. With Anna Ellery shot to death he was finding repetition of the harmony note excessive.

He said, "You didn't go to the Chesery funeral, Mrs. Delmaine. How did you spend the day? Did you see your grandmother?"

Her dark eyes widened. "No, I didn't see her. This morning I was busy around the house. This afternoon I didn't do anything special. Went downtown, stopped at Larned's bakery for a loaf of nut bread—it's their Monday special—and stopped at the five-and-ten to see if they had a card of blue mending yarn that would match a sweater of mine. They didn't have the shade that I wanted, though. . . . I guess that's about all."

"What time did you go downtown?"

"I'm not sure. Naturally, when I went, I didn't expect the time to matter."

"You must have some idea of it."

She shrugged doubtfully. "Sometime after two, say, and before two-thirty——Oh, I had a coke at the drugstore too. I talked with Ham Lathrop in there!" She looked triumphant.

Jim observed deflatingly, "Your errands took about half an hour, I should judge."

"Longer than that. I had a cigarette with the coke. I dawdled over it."

"Still, three-quarters of an hour at most—unless you talked with someone else."

"No, I didn't."

"Then you were home soon after three."

"About then." She stared at him, half frightened, half defiant. "Surely you can't think I had anything to do with Gran's death?"

"Mrs. Delmaine, at this stage I don't think anything. I'm just collecting a few facts, getting you people placed. For example, I have to find out if any of you are familiar with guns."

She replied coldly, "Well, we are. A little. My cousin Harry set up a target range at the edge of the ravine a few years back and we did some shooting with his rifle. My sisters and I, that is. I don't recall Norman or Roy ever being out there."

"I see." He stood up in dismissal. "Thank you, Mrs. Delmaine. Will you please ask Mrs. Martin to come in next?"

Teresa spoke in a low, rapid voice. She had an alibi. Her grandmother had been shot, as closely as Jim could place the time, a few minutes before four o'clock. Teresa had been home then. Friends of hers—she supplied their names and addresses—had come in about four, and she had been serving them a drink when Blanche telephoned. No, she hadn't driven over, her husband used their car during the day. Elinor had stopped by for her, but Anna Ellery was already dead when they reached the house.

Jim drew a mental map of Warrenton, placing the Martin home within a five-minute fast walk of the cemetery.

He led her through questions about her grandmother, possible reasons for someone wanting to end the latter's life, family relationships.

She was restless, the kind of person who was all nerves in crisis, he saw. She told him how well they all got on together, that no one would have had the least reason for killing Gran . . .

He let her go, asking her to send in Blanche. During the interval that they were alone he looked at Cobb and shook his head. "It's hard to see her shooting her grandmother and haring off home to serve up drinks to unexpected callers the minute she got there. She seems pretty high-strung. I'd expect——"

He broke off tapping the desk in disgruntlement. "I'd better get all their stories before I start forming opinions."

Blanche entered the room and sat down. The western sun was behind her slanting off her hair, and again Jim was struck with the fairness and fine texture of it. He didn't realize it was happening, but his tone softened a little in tribute to her.

She was the one who took care of the house, she said. She had been taking care of it since she was graduated from high school in 1943. At that time Anna Ellery's blood pressure had gone so high that bed rest was necessary. After she was better Dr. Crusely still hadn't wanted her to assume her old responsibilities. Blanche remained at home to help her.

She gave Jim her account of the day. She hadn't left the house all morning, she said; there was always lots to be done in a big place like this. Lunch dishes washed, she had made a gelatin salad for dinner and gone outside to work in her rock garden.

"I just started it this year," she explained. Her voice lacked depth, he thought. But the flat tonelessness of it might be shyness. She rarely met his eyes as she talked. "There's lots of work to be done in it and I'm doing every bit of it myself."

"You must like gardening."

"Very much." A fleeting smile warmed the still look her

face had. "I'm lost in the winter without it."

"Well, it's a nice hobby, I guess." Jim was visualizing his own yard and the amount of work he left undone in it. But, generously enough, he conceded to the girl her right to the peculiar habit of voluntarily grubbing in the soil.

"Were you alone the whole time?" he asked next.

"No. First Gran was around. I saw her off to the funeral about quarter to three. And my sister Joan was home. She had a late lunch when she got back from the library and then she came outside."

"What did she do?"

"She sat under the big maple and read."

"Which maple? Will you show me?"

They went to a window together. The office jutted out beyond the library and had a window that overlooked a good section of the grounds. Blanche pointed to the barn.

"My rock garden's on the far side of it . . . and there's the tree, the one with the beach chair under it."

"You were in sight of each other, then?"

"Yes."

"The whole time your grandmother was gone?"

"Yes. It was starting to rain and we were just going inside when my brother-in-law brought Gran home."

At his next question Blanche shook her head and smoothed the skirt of her green dress. "No, she didn't seem at all upset. It was just like any day . . ."

The questions and answers went on. No, they had no car, hadn't had one for eight years. No, she and Joan hadn't had any visitors that afternoon. Yes, there was a gun in the house, her grandfather's old revolver. It was there in the bottom drawer of his desk.

Jim opened the drawer. Behind a pile of yellowing business stationery lay a .45 revolver. He took it out, sniffed it, spun the empty cylinders. The gun was unloaded and obviously hadn't been fired in years. He laid it aside.

"Your sister says you've all done some target shooting, Miss Ellery."

She looked at him quickly and then away. "Yes. Some."

He asked her about the night Lucas Ellery died. Her account of it didn't vary from Elinor's.

"What did you have to drink?"

"What did we—— Oh, bourbon and coke."

"How many did your grandfather have?"

"I'm not sure. One or two."

She didn't recall who mixed and served them. Norman or Roy, perhaps . . .

Their family life was pleasant, yes, except—a faint note of bitterness came into her flat voice—that they'd always been poor and had to skimp on things as far back as she could remember. "But there wasn't any real friction," she added. "We were all fond of Gran."

Jim was silent. The girl fixed her gaze on her interlaced fingers. "Her death was an accident. The firing squad——"

His mouth tightened. "I thought we'd ruled them out, Miss Ellery."

This time it was she who was silent.

When Joan Ellery came into the room he watched her walk across it and sit down. Along with her fresh, wholesome face she had a sturdily built body, a solidness of frame that reminded him of European peasant women he had seen. Rita Kubiak had set her stamp on this daughter, too, the county detective reflected.

Following high school, Joan said, she had taken a year's library course and was now assistant librarian at the Warrenton library. Her hours were ten to six three days a week, and ten to two and seven to nine the other three days. Today was one of the divided days; she had come home at two o'clock, got herself a late lunch, and, after her grandmother left for the funeral, sat outside reading.

"Where was your sister Blanche?" Jim asked.

"Didn't she tell you? She was outside, too, working in her rock garden. We were together all afternoon."

"Together?"

"Well, we were where we could see each other."

He asked her about her grandparents and the years when she was growing up. She, too, said there hadn't ever been enough money. She smiled as she told him that Blanche and she had had a standing grievance over wearing the twins' out-grown clothes. "I was the youngest, so I fared worst of all. Nothing but hand-me-downs. I scarcely had a new stitch except for Christmas and birthday presents. But Gran sewed nicely. She made things over for Blanche and me."

Her grandparents had been too strict, she had thought, and her sisters and she had chafed under the surveillance to which they were subjected. "For instance, if Gran didn't know the family tree of any boy in high school who asked me for a date, she didn't let me go." Joan smiled again briefly. "It made me so mad. As I look back on it now, though, I can see that it was because she was brought up in such a strait-laced era, and she couldn't change."

She made a small gesture that expressed tolerance. "I got used to it."

Presently she was telling Jim that all had been confusion that day after her grandmother died. They were all crying with Norman Delmaine rushing around in circles, and Dr. Crusely giving her aunt Laura a sedative, and Blanche, white as a ghost, making telephone calls. Elinor and Tess had reached the house together, then Roy after Tess called him. None of them could realize that Gran was dead.

"She'd always taken charge of things. Even when Grandfather died she didn't lose her self-control. Today, without her, we were like lost sheep. Norman made it worse, insisting she couldn't be dead, he didn't believe it was possible. Norman is—excitable. Then someone called the undertaker and Dr. Crusely arranged for Gran's body to be removed, and when they came and took her away—that part was dreadful"—the girl's voice shook—"that brought it home to us."

"Yes, it would. But none of you questioned the cause of death?"

"I'm sure I didn't, and no one else said anything. There was Grandfather, you know. I suppose, when he went like that, we became somewhat conditioned to sudden death."

When Jim finished questioning her Detective Bailo reported to him. "Hodgkins of the state police is outside. He says they've combed the cemetery around the grave. They haven't found anything yet and they're spreading out. They've got men in the woods searching for the gun. He doesn't see how they can ever hope to find the bullet, though. It's looking for a needle in a haystack and then some, he says."

Jim frowned. "It's not up to him to pass on that. Tell

him they're to keep on looking. I want every inch of the woods, the ravine, and the cemetery searched for the gun, the bullet and, in case it was an automatic, the cartridge case. And what about the lists of the members of the family and the firing squad? I don't want any time lost in starting investigations of every one of them."

Bailo went out of the room and Detective Rafferty entered. He was carrying a rifle and three pistols. He laid them on the desk.

"I got them next door," he said. "Two Lugers, one Beretta. The maid says they belong to Harry Ellery. The rifle's for target shooting and the others are souvenir guns he brought back from Italy."

"Get them in to the lab right away," Jim told him.

When Rafferty was gone Cobb ventured, "About that firing squad. You going to put a man on investigating you, Jim?"

His superior's grin was a little forced. "After I've got this case cleared up maybe that crack will sound funnier."

"Okay." Cobb got to his feet and headed for the door. "Who'll I bring in now?"

"Either of the husbands will do."

It was Roy Martin who came in. Middle-sized, neither dark nor fair, there was nothing about him to catch the eye. He was precise in speech. He worked for his father in the Martin real-estate company, he said, and he'd been at his desk at the time Anna Ellery was shot.

A telephone call to the company's stenographer bore out his statement. Mr. Martin, she said, had been at the office working on the details of a G.I. loan from approximately three o'clock until his wife summoned him at about four-thirty.

"That seems to cover me," Roy Martin observed, openly gratified.

Jim found himself not liking the man. He was too self-satisfied, too bloodless, for the detective's taste. If a survey of the company's premises showed a way for Roy Martin to have got in and out unseen, it would be a pleasure to wipe that smirk off his face, Jim told himself.

He didn't like Norman Delmaine any better, he discovered a few minutes later. Dark, ebullient, fast-talking, dramatic, he was, by his very nature, bound to

arouse distaste in the county detective. He gestured, he clutched his head, his eyes flashed about him.

He had married Elinor Ellery nine years ago, no children, he hadn't been in service—he flung a hand against his heart eloquently. “It's never been right. One of these days I'll go out like this.” He snapped his fingers. “A short life and a merry one. Make the most of it, I tell myself. That,” he assured Jim, “is what I try to do. And if I can work in a few favors for the other fellow along the way, they don't hurt me either. Like the funeral today. My wife hates funerals, they get her all worked up. So when she asked me yesterday if I could arrange to take the old lady to this one, I said sure, why not? I knew damn well Roy wouldn't do it.”

“Why wouldn't he?”

Norman spread out his hands. “You've met him. You know the kind he is. Wouldn't give you the time of day. A piece of dry wood counting profits.”

The virtuous disgust in his tone implied that profits were a thing unknown to him. Not until he found time to extract details about the people involved from the police chief was Jim to learn that Norman “Quick-buck Delmaine” was suspected of selling black-market gasoline during the war years, and was positively known to have been making handsome profits on the sale of mysteriously acquired new cars in the tight postwar days when the first ones were on the market. He was a slippery customer, Warrenton opined.

He described the afternoon: driving Mrs. Ellery to the Sturges funeral home, staying for the service, driving her to the cemetery. At the latter place he was with her the entire time.

“Right beside her, you mean?”

“Well, not quite that. There were quite a few people and they were pressing forward to see the grave and all. But I was near her.” He pointed to Cobb. “Say as near as from him to me.”

Jim measured the distance with his eye. About four feet.

He didn't see her fall, Norman resumed. The first thing he noticed was the little disturbance her fall created—she crumpled on the grass, some people bending over her. He

picked her up himself—she was nothing to lift, just skin and bone—and carried her to the car. Mrs. Rankin, one of her neighbors, offered to go with him and sat in the back seat holding Mrs. Ellery's head in her lap.

"Who is Mrs. Rankin?"

"She lives two houses below here in the old Lackley place. She bought it right after the war. She's a widow and lives alone. Very nice woman. Very helpful. She gave her car keys to one of Sturges's assistants so he could move it out of the line. She said she'd walk over and get it later."

"I see. Then you got Mrs. Ellery home . . ."

The rest was brief. Anna Ellery was still breathing when he carried her into the house and laid her down on the library couch. But before the doctor got there—"Her arm twitched and her mouth opened and she was gone."

Mrs. Rankin left soon after Laura Ellery arrived. There was no love lost between them, he explained, although why Laura Ellery snubbed her neighbor he didn't know. All she would say was that Mrs. Rankin was too good to be true. . . .

When Jim dismissed him, Cobb followed him out of the room and returned to announce that Harry Ellery was present at last.

A moment later the young man appeared in the doorway. The county detective regarded him with a fresh stir of interest. He was tall and lanky. He slid into the chair opposite Jim and looked back at him with studied blankness out of dark eyes set in a thin dark face that revealed his blood relationship to Elinor and Teresa. He was dressed in khaki shorts and a white T shirt.

"You've been quite awhile getting here," Jim said.

"I was at the park all afternoon. I played tennis with Webb—Wilbur Loman—and we went for a swim in the pool. I got home just a few minutes ago and walked in on this."

"You have a car of your own?"

"Yes."

"You drove yourself to the park?"

"Yes. I picked up Loman on the way and drove him home just now."

"Are you on vacation, Mr. Ellery, or aren't you working?"

"I'm on vacation. I teach physical ed at the high school. Now, of course, school is closed."

"No summer job?"

"No. My financial responsibilities are small. I'm unmarried, I live home with my mother, and I see no point in working in the summer when I don't have to—do you? I mean, d'you believe in work for work's nobility's sake?"

"No."

"Well, there you are. Before the Fourth we'll go to the beach and stay through August, although I'll probably be coming back here now and then."

He gave Jim Wilbur Loman's home address, said he had been at the park from two o'clock until after five, and that he and his companion had then adjourned to a nearby bar where they had spent an hour talking over a couple of drinks. He proclaimed a complete lack of knowledge of anything in Anna Ellery's life that might have led to someone shooting her. He watched Jim out of narrowed eyes as he asked, "Do you really think she was murdered?"

"I don't know yet. I'm trying to find out."

The county detective, whose business it was to look for shadings of reserve in tone or manner, found them in the young man. Harry was a trifle too blank, too uninformed. When the interview progressed to a question about guns at his house his negligent attitude became even more pronounced. Yes, he had a rifle for target shooting. And three souvenir guns from Italy: two Lugers, a Beretta.

"Did you bring back any cartridges for them?"

"Yes, a clip for each."

"Did you report your souvenirs to the police here in Warrenton?"

"I never got around to it."

"You should have."

"Yes, but it wasn't compulsory. And I never do get around to things that aren't."

When Jim let this go by without comment Harry lit a cigarette and said, "It's the weirdest business. Aunt Anna of all people! It can't be anything more than an accident."

"How would you account for it that way?"

The younger man replied that he didn't know; that the

Ellerys were an everyday family, you didn't expect to have to figure out shootings among people like them.

"I'm told that all of you get on well together, Mr. Ellery—particularly you and your cousin Blanche."

Anger flashed across Harry's face. "That's something outside the scope of your inquiry—but I have no objection to anyone knowing that Blanche is very important to me."

"And how does the rest of the family feel about that?"

"You mean Aunt Anna, don't you? She would have liked us to marry. She didn't," he went on levelly, "raise any objections that would lead to either Blanche or me shooting her. For your further information, Mr. O'Neill, I don't matter enough to Blanche for her to shoot anyone on account of me."

"Why? Because you're cousins?"

"Perhaps."

"First cousins once removed—or is it called second cousins?"

"I don't know."

It was plain that whatever the young man did or didn't know, he was telling none of it. Jim ended the interview and sat thinking about it, dwelling longest on the questions about the guns. Harry Ellery had been relieved when he found an opportunity to change the subject.

Chapter 4

The county detective was nearly at the end of his preliminary inquiry; only two people, Mrs. Rankin and Etta Mosely, Laura Ellery's maid, hadn't yet been questioned.

The two women were both in their early fifties, but there resemblance between them ended. Mrs. Rankin tempered her age with good clothes and grooming. Etta Mosely—Miss Mosely, she said—accepted hers unresistingly. The one was talkative and friendly, the other quiet and constrained.

Mrs. Rankin told Jim she had bought her present home and moved into it two years ago. She knew both Ellery families in a neighborly way. She had no occupation.

"My dear husband saw to it that I was well provided for when he died," she explained. Her blue eyes had the ingenuousness of a child's. Her head was bent slightly so that Jim had a view of the gray streaks in her light brown hair. "He was so thoughtful."

"Were you recently widowed?"

"Five years ago. We had no children and I moved about a good deal before I came to Warrenton."

Jim linked his hands before him on Lucas Ellery's desk and contemplated the slim, still attractive widow. "You have friends here, Mrs. Rankin? Old associations with the town?"

"Well—not really. Ages ago Jonathan and I once visited the Elkinsons. It was just a short visit. But Jonathan used to visit them as a child—they were distant cousins of his—and often spoke of Warrenton."

"Was it on their suggestion that you moved here two years ago?"

"No. They're dead." Her smile was faintly embarrassed. "It sounds silly, I know, but actually there was no reason for my coming to Warrenton. Except that I was driving through on my way to New York and remembered the Elkinsons and stopped to look them up in the phone book. It was just one of those impulses we all have . . ." Her glance sought understanding.

Jim nodded and didn't say that impulse would never sway his life in any such momentous affair as buying a house and becoming part of a community. He had a swift vision of all the towns in Hampton County Margaret and he had visited before they settled on Warrenton. They had been months making the choice.

It was, therefore, a mark against Mrs. Rankin that she had selected a place to live haphazardly. She would bear investigation.

She continued, "I found out that the Elkinsons were dead. But then I walked around and came across a nice-looking, clean house that took in tourists and I stayed the night. The next day—well, I don't know what struck me." She laughed a little. "I guess I was tired of apartment hotels. Anyway, I went to Martin's the real-estate man, and my present home was for sale and I bought it. Within a month I was living in it."

"You like it? You like Warrenton?"

"Yes indeed. I feel as if I'm creating my own particular niche in the town. I've joined the Women's League—I believe your wife is a member?"

"Yes." His tone didn't encourage digressions into his personal life, and Mrs. Rankin went on hurriedly, "—and a church and a bridge club. For the first time since I was a child, I really have the feeling that I belong somewhere."

At this point Jim asked questions: where she was born, where she'd lived during her marriage. She gave a Pennsylvania town as her birthplace and named a dozen cities she'd lived in at one time or another. The late Jonathan Rankin had traveled considerably in his business.

They reached the events of the afternoon. Mrs. Rankin said, "I didn't see what happened, you know. I heard the woman next to me say 'oh!' and I looked and Mrs. Ellery was on her knees, slumped forward. Then Mr. Delmaine rushed up to her—he must have been a bit behind her—and I offered to help him get her home."

"Were you standing a little in front of the firing squad too?"

"Yes. It was rather far back, wasn't it? Usually they're right at the grave."

She looked at him without a trace of malice. Apparently

she didn't know Jim had been one of the squad.

"You were watching them when they fired?"

"Yes. People do, I think."

That was true. Everyone's attention would have been centered on the firing squad as soon as the men began loading their rifles for the first volley. Jim told himself with renewed certainty that it would have been impossible for one of them to have got away with aiming and firing at Anna Ellery instead of into the air. But it was the ideal moment for someone else to shoot her.

Mrs. Rankin told him she knew nothing about guns herself; that she had never heard of any discord in the Ellery family. When he took her back to the events of the afternoon she said that she had left the house right after Anna died and Laura Ellery arrived. She could give him no information about what had happened later. She did add three new names to his list of those who had been present at the funeral.

Etta Mosely, wearing a plain dark gray uniform, was ushered in by Cobb. She had gray hair and many fine lines in her face. She sat down on the edge of the chair and looked at Jim apprehensively.

He got her background. She came from Philadelphia, where she had always done domestic work. Late years the hot summers there hadn't been agreeing with her. She was unmarried, had no close family ties, she could work wherever she pleased. She had decided to come to New England. Mrs. Ellery had hired her at an employment agency in Hampton three years ago . . .

She didn't look at the county detective as she talked.

That afternoon, she said, Mrs. Ellery had gone to her room after lunch; she, Etta, hadn't seen her again until she knocked on her door to tell her about Blanche's telephone call.

"How did you spend the afternoon?" Jim asked.

She replied that when the lunch dishes were done she had gone to her own third-floor room and taken a nap. She was downstairs again at about quarter to four and had been making dessert for dinner that night when the telephone rang.

"What time did Mr. Ellery leave for the park?"

"The minute he finished his lunch."

Jim sat back and took his time lighting a cigarette. His eyes rested on Etta encouragingly. "Let's see . . . he has some guns he brought back from Italy. Exactly how many are there?"

She drew back. "I never touched them, never so much as looked at them! Why should I? All I know is, he kept them in the desk in——"

"Of course you didn't touch them. No one thinks you did." Jim loaded his voice with reassurance. "I'm only trying to establish how many he has."

She sent him a doubtful glance from under lowered lids. "But one of your men was at the house. He took them; he can tell you how many there were. I'm afraid of guns. And when Mr. Harry first came home from the war and put them in the drawer he said they weren't to be disturbed. So I never even opened it." She ran out of words as the urgency of self-defense lessened in her.

"I can see he wouldn't want everyone handling them. He kept the drawer locked, didn't he?"

"No, not lately, I mean——" Her washed-out eyes looked helplessly at Jim and moved away. "I don't know. I guess he locked them up sometimes. There was a key to the desk . . ."

The county detective left the subject of guns to ask if she was happy in her present job.

"Yes, I am. I do my work and Mrs. Ellery lets me alone. That's the way I like it."

Prompting her with questions, he learned that the members of the two households were back and forth, running in on each other without formality; that they seemed to get on all right together; that she'd never heard any of them say anything against the dead woman that would indicate hatred or fear or other strong emotion toward her.

He switched back to the guns. "When Mr. Ellery got home this afternoon did you tell him we'd taken them? Before he came over here, I mean?"

"Yes, I did, and gave him the receipt for them. I didn't want to be responsible for it a minute longer than I had to." Anxiety flickered in her eyes. "I hope I did the right thing."

Jim didn't tell her how wrong it was from his point of

view for any exchange of information to take place between people he hadn't yet questioned. Someone had slipped up through not being there to prevent it. Whoever it was would hear from him about it.

He didn't keep her much longer after that. When she was gone he sat with an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips, thinking about the disquiet, controlled but all-pervasive, that had marked Etta Mosely's behavior while she was in the room.

"What would you say was eating her?" he asked Cobb.

The big detective shrugged. "You can't never tell what women got eating them. Maybe she killed the old lady. Maybe, on the other hand, it's got nothing to do with us. With women, you can't never tell."

"That's a fact," said Jim recalling occasions when he had offended Margaret for reasons that were to remain, to him, forever inexplicable. "We'll have to try to tell, though. It looks like a hell of a case."

"A stinker," Cobb agreed cheerfully. "A son of a bitch. They all could of done it; you take your choice. Only thing is, most cases, there's a reason for the killing that hits you a mile away. But this old girl didn't have enough money to put in your eye, and she was too old for a—crime of passion." He paused and glanced obliquely at his superior to see how he reacted to the tabloid phrase. But Jim wasn't paying attention; he was lighting his cigarette.

Detective Bailo came in. "Here's the Chesery list of the people they noticed at the cemetery; and on this sheet are the makes and numbers of young Ellery's guns."

Jim looked at the Chesery list and scowled over its length. He handed it back to Bailo, adding to it his own list that lay on the desk in front of him. "Take them to Strader. He knows these people. Tell him to knock out the impossibles, check on where the others were standing, and so forth, and when he's cut it down to size we'll start on it."

After Bailo withdrew the county detective picked up a pencil and drew a diagram of the Chesery burial lot in North Cemetery. He put a row of *xs* for the firing squad, a rectangle for the grave, a dot for the minister, another dot with an *s* above it for the undertaker. They had been right beside the grave.

All around was the white blank of the rest of the sheet. He shaded it lightly over to the left and slightly in front of the firing squad. Anna Ellery had been about in the shaded area when the subdued little commotion attendant on her apparent fainting spell took place.

"Get Delmaine and Mrs. Rankin back in," he said to Cobb.

They came in, studied the diagram and agreed that the county detective's placement of those present was substantially correct.

"Put yourselves in when she fell," he said, handing the pencil first to Mrs. Rankin.

She put in a dot and initialed it; Delmaine put in another.

"How many people standing between each of you and Mrs. Ellery?"

He put in zs for the three or possibly four people, let the two of them go and sat looking at the sketch from beneath drawn brows. He outlined trees just beyond the Chesery lot, quite a thick growth of them, he remembered. The pathologist's report would tell him if the bullet could have been fired from the wood. The report couldn't be more definite than that, he thought, getting to his feet, because he couldn't be definite himself about which way Anna Ellery faced at the moment she was shot. All eyes had been on the firing squad; no one seemed to know if the dead woman had been facing the grave squarely or turned a little away from it.

It was long past the dinner hour. The family was allowed to go to Laura Ellery's to eat. First, however, they were searched—the men by Bailo, the women by a state policewoman. Laura Ellery was the only one who objected, and she was told that if she preferred being taken to Hampton, they would do it that way. After that she was silent. When the search was over a detective shepherded the group to the house next door.

In the search that followed the family's departure Jim reserved for personal inspection Anna Ellery's bedroom and Lucas Ellery's office. In a matter of minutes a state police technician had the office safe open.

He shook his head over it. "You wouldn't think people

would trust their valuables to an old ark like this, would you?"

There were no valuables in the safe, Jim discovered. He ruffled through old deeds and records and set them aside for someone else to examine in detail. A smudged outline in the dust on an empty shelf caught his attention. Something had been removed or else shifted to another shelf fairly recently.

He was thinking about Lucas Ellery as he went on to Anna Ellery's bedroom. Coronary thrombosis, they said, and no one had seen the need of an autopsy. . . .

Anna Ellery's closet and bureau held only her clothes and personal belongings. Her desk yielded letters that weren't of any interest to him, receipted bills, unpaid bills, lengths of yarn, knitting needles, crochet work, a pot of paste, and scissors—nothing of consequence until he reached the bottom drawer and came upon a scrapbook bound in blue leather. Turning its pages, he saw that it was a record of the dead woman's married life, a bulky book, bulging with mementos of the past.

Her name, Anna Warren Ellery, was on the first page. On the next, a pressed flower tied with yellow silk. Beneath it was lettered neatly, "From my bridal bouquet, June 16, 1897." One of the wedding invitations was pasted in below the flower. "Miss Louella Warren requests the honour of your presence at the marriage of her niece . . ."

The third page was filled by a picture of a regal, dark-haired young woman, her hair worn high, a veil flowing about her. Under it was printed, "Myself as a bride."

There was pathos in these relics of a long-gone June wedding. It held Jim for a moment before he turned the page to a picture of the house he was in showing Anna Ellery on the front steps holding the arm of a dark, mustached man. "Lucas and I on our return from our honeymoon, August 1, 1897."

He turned more pages. There was the birth announcement of twin sons, Warren and William, born July 8, 1898, and their baby pictures. There were family snapshots, newspaper clippings: the Lucas Ellerys entertained for this house guest and that one; they gave a

beach party at Idle Hours, their summer residence in Madison; and so forth. There was a snapshot of the twins on ponies and, between them, smiling confidently, a young girl, a handsome girl when her outmoded clothes and hair arrangement were discounted. Beneath that: "Maggie with the twins on their first ponies, April 28, 1904."

He was past the snapshot when the name caught him belatedly. He turned back to it. Maggie Ellery, the sister who was engaged to Dr. Crusely; her father's favorite child to whom he left a large sum of money. Nobody got the money when she drowned herself. That was before the first war. And here she was almost half a century ago, a young, handsome girl carrying herself proudly. . . .

He skimmed past the children's first school papers, their first straggling signatures in Mama's book, and all the rest. He put the scrapbook aside to take with him. It deserved closer study than he could give it now.

He had telephoned Goodrich, the state's attorney, again, and the latter had said that he would try to take a run out for himself later. But he didn't come, and as the evening wore on Jim reported to him by telephone for the third time.

He had nothing vital to tell his superior, nothing that incriminated anyone or pointed toward motive. A few scraps of unfinished poems written by Blanche, Joan's schoolgirl diary—they didn't push the investigation forward.

The family Bible in the library listed Ellery births, marriages, deaths. Lucas, born in 1874, and the date of his death in 1949 set down in Anna's handwriting, the ink fresh in contrast to the other entries. Edward, born 1881, died 1937. Maggie, July 9, 1885, died September 12, 1911. Her mother, Jim noted, had drowned herself on August 14, 1885, a month after Maggie was born.

Jim turned away from the Bible and went outside through a door that brought him out in back of the house. He walked past the barn, making a tour of the grounds. It was a fragrant summer night, the air heavy with the scent of white blossoms on tall shrubs that grew along the rear boundary line by the ravine. He couldn't identify the flowers but he went close to them, broke off a spray and stood sniffing it.

The quiet interval was good after the bustle within the house. He looked back at its lighted windows and spreading lines. He needed time to think. He felt uneasy about the case. They were doing the usual things, following the usual routine, but he had a presentiment that it wouldn't get them very far. The past seemed to live on in old houses. This one held something of Maggie Ellery, Warren and Will, many years dead, and Rita Kubiak, long ago eloped from it.

Anna Ellery's life had been part of theirs, first as a bride, then as a young sister-in-law and mother, then as a middle-aged mother-in-law. Now she was dead at seventy, and what in the present life of a woman that age could have brought on her violent end?

It was after midnight when Jim arrived home. Lights burned on the lower floor: Margaret was waiting up for him. He garaged the car and crossed the yard to the back door. He was tired and hungry. He looked forward to seeing his wife and having the tranquility of his own house around him.

Margaret hurried to meet him saying eagerly, "Darling, I thought you'd never get here. You must be dead!"

"Not quite." His arms closed around her fondly. "But I'm glad to get home."

She kissed him and after a moment slipped out of his embrace. "Have you had anything to eat?"

"Sandwiches. Coffee." Just mentioning the skimpiness of the fare sharpened his appetite. "I'm starved," he announced.

"How about a couple of minute steaks?"

"Swell. And coffee."

"You've probably had a gallon of it already tonight. You won't sleep."

"I will," he said firmly. "I want coffee."

"All right, all right." She went to a cupboard and took out the coffeepot.

"Steaks in the freezer?" he inquired.

"Yes."

"I'll get them while you're starting the coffee."

The freezer was in what once had been a back kitchen and was now a combination laundry, playroom, sewing room and catchall. It was three steps below the main

house level and Jim, not bothering to reach for the switch, depending on the light in the kitchen behind him, started down them.

The crash of his fall was appallingly loud. Margaret screamed "Jim!" As she ran to him there was time to note thankfully that he wasn't dead of a broken neck. At least not that; the volume of his profanity threatened to shatter the walls.

She switched on the light beside the door. Her husband was sprawled at the foot of the steps, one leg bent under him. Near him, twisted and broken, lay a toy automobile.

...

Chapter 5

"No, thank you, Sarah," Jim said. "I don't want another glass of water."

He shifted his broken ankle cautiously on the cushioned footstool and muttered under his breath with the pain of it.

"You want milk?" Sarah asked, her eyes fastened on him solicitously.

"No, thank you." If his tongue had been hanging out for milk, he reflected, his answer would have been the same. There had been some disastrous episodes in the O'Neill kitchen with Sarah uncapping milk bottles and pouring the stuff. "Tell you what, you sit down here beside me and color me a nice picture."

They were in the living room, Jim's ankle in a cast, a folding tray across his lap with a file on the Ellery case spread out on it. Beside the chair was a pair of crutches that he hadn't yet learned to manipulate with ease. Overhead sounded the whir of the vacuum cleaner as Margaret went about her morning chores.

It was some thirty-four hours after he had slipped on Sarah's toy and crashed to the floor of the back kitchen. In the interim he had been in the hospital, had his ankle, fractured in two places, X-rayed and put in a cast. Late yesterday Margaret and Cobb had brought him home, and George Oldfield had brought over a large folding bed that was set up in the dining room, the stairs to the second floor being too much for him at present. Mrs. Hawkes, who lived on the other side of the O'Neills, had come in before Jim was settled in a chair. She brought two cup custards—a form of nourishment he might possibly have swallowed at the point of a gun—and in exchange carried away every detail of his injury that she could extract from him, plus some meager general information on the Ellery case that was now openly called murder.

Cobb and Rafferty had already been in that morning. Jim was trying to reconcile himself to conducting his investigation from an armchair.

Sarah, coloring a tiger green, looked up to ask, "What

would you do if a tiger came? You couldn't run away on your bad foot."

He was studying reports on the members of the firing squad. He said, "Uh-huh."

"Not uh-huh, Daddy! What would you do if a tiger came?"

"There aren't any tigers around here . . ." None of the firing squad had had any contact of importance with Anna Ellery. It was what he expected. Her murder lay closer to her home than that . . .

"But s'pose there was one?"

"One what?" They had eliminated all but six or seven people of those present at the Chesery funeral. The six or seven needed a little more checking before they could be cleared . . .

"A tiger, Daddy!" With due cause, Sarah's voice rose impatiently.

"Oh. Well, I guess I'd lock all the doors and windows."

"But s'pose the tiger came down the chimley like Santa Claus?"

"Then I'd get a gun and shoot it."

"But s'pose you didn't have a gun?"

"Then I'd have to shoot him with your water pistol, I guess."

"Oh, Daddy!" Sarah hugged herself with delight. "You couldn't! It only squirts water."

He didn't have much of a report yet on Dr. Crusely. He'd have to light a fire under Bailo, who was handling it.

"Daddy, how would you kill the tiger?"

"Hit him with a club."

"But s'pose you didn't have a club?"

They were still searching the wood and the cemetery for the gun and bullet . . .

Sarah pulled at his sleeve. "What would you do if you didn't have a club?"

The pathologist's preliminary report hadn't broadened his knowledge of who could have done the shooting, except to say that if she had been facing the grave Anna Ellery had been shot from the wood; and he had been giving thought to the wood from the beginning. She was killed by a copper-jacketed bullet, fired from a small caliber automatic at a distance greater than five feet. If he

could pin some witness down on exactly how far away from Anna Ellery Mrs. Rankin and Delmaine had been standing when the woman fell, he'd be that much ahead. But the people nearest her told conflicting stories . . .

"Daddy, if you didn't have a club?"

He'd get nowhere on that angle.

The vacuum cleaner was silent. Margaret's footsteps could be heard in the upper hall.

"Daddy!" Sarah edged her footstool nearer and suddenly leaned forward, planting both elbows on his knee and most of the weight of her chubby body behind them. Rockets of pain shot through Jim's leg.

"Sarah, for Christ's sake get off me!" His roar frightened her. She jerked away and went over backward off the stool, her own roar of surprise and injured feelings blending with his.

"What happened?" Margaret raced down the stairs, picked up her wailing daughter, and confronted Jim accusingly.

He eyed the child with mingled anger and remorse. "She put all her weight on my bad leg. I yelled, it scared her and she fell backward."

Margaret made soothing sounds until Sarah's cries subsided into snuffles. Then she set her on her feet, saying, "There, pudding, that's enough. You're not really hurt at all."

Jim looked at his wife and asked coldly, "What would she be doing other days at this hour if I weren't home? Wouldn't she be out in her play yard?"

"I suppose so."

"Well, put her out there."

"I thought she'd be company for you."

"Look, I have a murder case on my hands. I have to solve it sitting in this room because you've neither trained Sarah to pick up her toys nor are you careful about picking them up yourself. Anyone going down those steps was bound to fall over that car of hers."

"I've told you, Jim, I didn't know it was there. I've told you at least twenty times I didn't know it was there. And I've told you how sorry I am about it. You make it sound as if I left it there deliberately!"

"No, but I still say——"

He was talking to himself. His wife had scooped up Sarah and whisked her away. When she returned she said with careful reasonableness, "Will you please not go on like that, Jim in front of our daughter? She just asked me if she made you hurt yourself. It's not good for her to feel guilt. And it's not good for her to hear you talking to me the way you did, either."

"It would be good for her to learn that she's got to pick up her toys when she's through playing with them," Jim pointed out, but there was no fire in the retort. He was already ashamed of his outburst.

Margaret was quick to accept his olive branch of mildness. She looked at his leg swathed in a cast. Her face softened. She went to him and ruffled his hair gently. "Let's not fight," she said.

He drew her hand down against his face. "Okay." He grinned up at her. "And now, how about the peace and quiet I need for doing some work?"

As if his words had been a signal, fourteen-year-old Burton Hawkes in the house next door blew a wavering note on his saxophone. It was eleven o'clock. Since school had closed he practiced every day from eleven to twelve.

They looked at each other and laughed.

"Sweet Jesus," said Jim.

"Could you pin the murder on him?"

"I'd be delighted to, but I doubt it."

Margaret went back upstairs. Jim reached for the telephone and called the Warrenton police chief. When they had got through the business of sympathy over his accident and how did he feel, the county detective asked, "Can you spare a few minutes to run out to the house?"

"Sure I can. I'll be with you right away, Mr. O'Neill."

While he waited Jim pored over the pathologist's report. The forty-five degree angle of the entrance wound could mean that the shot had been fired from the wood. It sloped down from the cemetery so that whoever did the shooting would be firing uphill. Or Anna Ellery could have bent over just as it happened, which would mean that someone in the cemetery had done it.

He turned the pages of the report. Wound of entrance, three and a half inches to the left of the first lumbar vertebra . . . the track of the bullet passed through the

spleen, the diaphragm, lower lobe of right lung, struck the fifth right rib in the mid-axillary line . . .

He was only glancing through the medical terms used in the report. The evident ricocheting of the bullet as it passed upward . . . the chest cage . . . the outer third of the right clavicle. Death was due to splenic hemorrhage. . . .

He laid down the report. "We ought to have some chance of finding the bullet," he said to himself. "A .25 or a .32 deflected by a rib must have been pretty well slowed down when it went out through her shoulder. It might have dropped within twenty or thirty feet from where she stood. Hell, I have no business saying that. You can't tell what a bullet will do."

The telephone rang. It was Detective Bailo calling.

"No luck yet," he announced. "We practically got the place taken apart and no sign of the gun or the empty cartridge case or the bullet."

"I was just thinking about that bullet," the county detective informed him. "It's got to be somewhere near where she stood." He reviewed his thoughts for the benefit of the other man, making them more positive in the process. "So it stands to reason," he concluded.

"Yeah," Bailo said noncommittally. "But bullets do funny things."

"Well, keep at it," Jim said.

He hung up and reached for Anna Ellery's scrapbook. The doorbell rang. Margaret, answering it, brought in the Warrenton police chief.

When the latter was seated and had his pipe lit the younger man said, "I've had Maggie Ellery on my mind. Tell me about her and that money of hers, will you?"

"Maggie Ellery? Why, yes. Let's see . . ."

"Start with her engagement to Dr. Crusely. When was that?"

"About 1905 that would have been. I was in high school myself at the time. I remember when Crusely came to Warrenton fresh out of medical school to start a practice. It was slow going for him, though. There was old Dr. Downes and young Dr. Downes and they about had the town sewed up. But Crusely came and opened an office and waited for patients. He couldn't have been here very long when he met Maggie. He kept company with her

awhile, then their engagement was announced.

"She broke it off about a week before the wedding. She had her trousseau bought, they had tickets for a wedding trip to Bermuda, they'd taken an option on a house—her money, of course—and then she broke it off."

The police chief grinned. "Boy, did the tongues wag! It was all over town like wildfire how Maggie threw Crusely's ring in his face and shut herself in her room and wouldn't see him or anybody else and was carrying on like she was crazy."

He fell silent remembering the drama of the occasion, the excitement it had stirred up.

"Why did she break the engagement?"

"The way the story went around town from one of the Ellery maids—they had maids in those days—she dropped in at his office unexpectedly. The door was open and she heard him talking to his sister—she was an old maid who kept house for him and died years ago—and whatever he said to the sister made it plain to Maggie that he was marrying her for her money."

The police chief shook his head. "She was nuts over him, y'see. With her it was all romance and stuff like that. She must have thought he felt the same and didn't give a thought to her bank account and how it would help a young doctor starting a practice."

"Then what happened?"

"She had some kind of nervous breakdown and Anna Ellery took her away on a trip. After they got back Maggie was never the same. She'd been a pleasant-natured, friendly girl before, but you wouldn't have known her afterward. She never went to any more parties or anything. She stayed in the house or else she went for long walks by herself. And if the Ellerys had company, she'd beat it upstairs to her room. She didn't speak, they said, unless someone spoke to her first. She got queerer and queerer. And then her money . . .

"It seems that she lost a few thousands during the panic of 1907. She began selling the stocks she had and putting that money and what she had in her bank account in a safe-deposit box. The bank president told her brothers what she was doing but they couldn't stop her, I guess. She was of age, it was her business."

"They could have had her certified as incompetent, couldn't they?"

"Well——" Strader spread out his hands. "Maybe they didn't want to do that after all the talk she'd caused already. Maybe they hoped she'd get over the shock Crusely gave her after a while. Or maybe they did have her examined by doctors and she wasn't that queer in the head that she couldn't manage her own affairs.

"Anyway, she converted everything she had into cash and put it in the safe-deposit box. Money was all she had, she said. Kind of pitiful, wasn't it, when you think of it?"

"Yes. Very."

"Then she got so she didn't trust the safe-deposit box. Only the family didn't know about that until later. She had a little jewelry, y'see, and when she wouldn't leave it in Lucas's safe——"

"She showed good sense there."

"——they humored her and let her buy a strongbox. What they didn't know was that she kept making trips to the bank, taking her money out of safe deposit and putting it in the strongbox.

"They didn't know that until after she was dead. They thought she just kept her jewelry in it. Then, when they opened the safe-deposit box, there was hardly any money in it. They remembered the way she'd been about the strongbox, the key around her neck, the box always right by the bed in her room. She hadn't spent the money certainly; they figured there must have been eighty thousand or more of it left, and the key was on a chain around her neck when they got her out of the river."

"Her body could be identified? No question ever came up about that?"

"No indeed. They got her the day after she drowned herself. It was Maggie Ellery all right. Any number of people saw her."

Jim abandoned the amorphous idea that had been seeking a place to put down roots in his mind. Maggie Ellery had most definitely been in her grave for nearly forty years.

"They called it an accidental death," the police chief resumed. "Her hat was on the river bank to show where she went in; the water was deep right off shore there, and

she couldn't swim. So, on account of the family, it went down on the record as an accidental death. But everyone knew better. Her mother before her had drowned herself right in that very spot after Maggie was born. She—the mother—hadn't really got her health back and was doing all kinds of peculiar things. The way it was told to me, there was some woman who was supposed to watch her every minute, but she got away from her and drowned herself. Maggie knew the story."

He made a gesture that expressed incomprehension. "Who knows? Maybe after she broke off with Crusely she got to brooding over her mother. Maybe she blamed herself for her mother's death."

Jim asked, "Could she have been pushed into the river? Was that angle looked into at the time?"

Strader, puffing on his pipe with audible sounds, said, "Yes, but there was nothing in it. A kid went by before it happened. Lanny Fontaine. He was seven or eight years old then, and his father had a farm near the river. He was going fishing and went right past Maggie. She was sitting on the grass, her hat and the strongbox beside her. She——"

"How'd he know it was the strongbox?"

"Why, I suppose he was able to measure off with his hands how long and how wide the box was; and the strongbox was gone from her room. It must have been pretty obvious that she took it with her."

"I see. Go ahead."

"She didn't speak to him and he, you'd expect, would have scooted right past her. With her reputation of not being all there, the kids either yelled at her when they were in a gang or, if they were alone, gave her a wide berth. Anyway, neither of them spoke, and Lanny went on up around the bend to fish. He was only a couple of hundred yards from her, but he was around the bend where he couldn't see her. As close as they could make it out, he stayed there fishing for about an hour. He didn't hear a sound or see anyone the whole time. When, on his way home, he went past the spot where she'd been her hat was there but she was gone and the box was gone. Later on, when the hunt for her started, someone inquired at the Fontaine farm and got Lanny's story. He took them to the

place where he'd seen her. They started dragging the river that night and the next morning they got her body. It was downstream a quarter of a mile or more from where she was assumed to have gone in. They didn't get the box. They dragged for it and dived for it and dredged for it and everything they could think of for half a mile down the river. Either it sank too deep in the mud—it was heavy, y'know—or they missed it, or maybe somebody else found it and kept it. To this day there's young boys who dive around there hoping to find Maggie Ellery's strongbox. The key was around her neck," he concluded thoughtfully. "I wonder what became of it?"

Jim didn't answer. He was thinking of Maggie Ellery. He heard the back screen door open and close and Sarah's shrill insistence on seeing him. He heard Margaret telling her Daddy was busy right now and they mustn't bother him.

Margaret—Maggie. They shared the same name. But his Margaret was a stable, happy woman, busy with her home and family. Hers wasn't the heritage of suicide, the dark frustrations, the river rising about her, the box of money slipping from her hands . . .

Money was all she had, Maggie Ellery said. When she died it went with her. . . .

The county detective shook off these thoughts, lit a cigarette and said, "What about Rita Kubiak?"

"She was the best-looking woman ever to hit this town." It was a flat statement. "None of her daughters can hold a candle to her—although Blanche comes the nearest to it. Rita was blond, too, but better looking, lots more expression, more pep—I guess you'd call it more personality. She lived in Waterbury. Will met her there and married her a month later. His mother was fit to be tied. But Will brought Rita home to her just the same. I dunno, he never did have much gumption. I don't believe he ever planned to set up a place of his own. They did take a furnished room for the first weeks after they were married, but then Mrs. Ellery gave in and they went home to live with Lucas and her. The two women never hit it off. Anyone except Will Ellery would have known they wouldn't. By that time they couldn't afford to keep a maid, but they had a cleaning woman coming in and she spread it

around that Rita was miserable living there. Then the twins were born, Blanche came along three years afterward and she was just plain stuck. After Joan was born I began hearing gossip about Rita and the new engineer at the light company. I was on the police force by that time and you know how it is with a cop. You hear a lot of things. She was meeting this Tony Greene over by the river, people said. They were taking walks together; then she was seen in his car. It didn't look so good right from the start. But you couldn't help feeling sorry for her, the kind of life she must have been having with the Ellerys."

"I should think four children would have kept her too busy to worry about what kind of life she was having," observed Jim.

"In a way they did and in another way they didn't. She was very fond of them, you understand, but she couldn't really call them hers. Mrs. Ellery more or less pushed her to one side. She was the one who decided what they'd wear and what they'd eat and how they'd dress and everything else."

He was frankly partisan. "What kind of a life was that for a young woman like Rita? She had plenty of spirit, and Will——You never knew Will Ellery. He was a good honest man, but I don't suppose he ever in his life stood up on his hind legs and called his soul his own. He was quiet, he was under his mother's thumb and——" The police chief hesitated, searching for words that would bring Will Ellery before the county detective and help the latter to understand the actions of Will's young wife.

"He was a dull tool. That what you mean?"

"Yes, that's it. And Mrs. Ellery was always finding fault with Rita and looking down on her. And Lucas was as stiff as a board. The girl couldn't take it, I guess, after she met Tony Greene.

"He was nothing like Will. He was a fine-looking fellow, always ready for a joke, enjoying himself wherever he went. Not much character, though, running around with another man's wife."

Jim, who had long ago given up pronouncing judgment on people, was silent, and Strader continued, "She did stick it out until Will was killed by a car on his way home from work. She got a couple of thousand of her own out

of the settlement from the insurance company and the daughters got the rest. So one night she made a date with Greene and didn't come back from it. She left a note in her room, and he resigned his job that day. They simply got in his car and beat it. It was in all the papers and made quite a stink. The Ellerys clammed up, and from that day to this, no one, as far as I know, has heard them mention Rita's name. It was some time in 1930 that she left, and she never came back."

The county detective considered the story, lighting a fresh cigarette and looking out the window. "They must have been hearing from her though. She left four children with them. She'd hardly go along for years not knowing how they were getting on."

The police chief grinned widely. "Old Ed Denby who died three years ago was postmaster in those days. I'd bet a year's salary that not a piece of mail went to the Ellerys but what he saw it, looking for Rita's handwriting or studying the postmarks. If she'd written, I'd have known about it."

"Yes, at first. But he wouldn't keep looking year after year."

"Maybe not." Strader sounded doubtful. "You didn't know Ed."

"And there's the telephone—or was that tapped?"

"Not quite. But Lucy Wallace has been chief operator in Warrenton for better than twenty-five years, and not much gets past her."

Jim started to suggest secret visits made at night and checked himself. They had too melodramatic a flavor. Probably the Ellerys wouldn't have let their daughter-in-law inside the house; and, if they had, someone would have known about it eventually. He had lived in Warrenton long enough to grasp that fact. Someone would have known and talked. For the moment, then, and with a mental reservation about letters, he accepted the police chief's statement that Rita Kubiak had walked out of the Ellery house nearly twenty years ago leaving four small daughters behind her, and since that time had not taken any interest in their welfare.

His next question was about Dr. Crusely.

The doctor, Strader informed him, had married

someone else while Maggie Ellery was still alive. He had married a nurse from Hampton, the marriage taking place four or five years after Maggie broke their engagement. His wife had died fifteen years ago; he had one son who was married and living in California. The older women in town thought the doctor was wonderful, and there were plenty more young enough to be his daughters who thought the same thing. But he stayed a widower, went to lots of parties, played a lot of golf and had a pretty nice life for himself, impervious to the blandishments of such assorted ladies as Laura Ellery and Madge Rankin. . . .

When the police chief was gone Sarah rushed in, her mouth ringed with milk and crumbs which she wiped off on Jim's neck in the course of hugging him. Margaret took her upstairs for her nap, saying over her shoulder, "Are you starving? I thought I'd wait until I was finished with her and then get our lunch."

"I may live until then," he told her. "But not much longer."

When she was back downstairs she inquired from the hall, "How about a drink first? Think it would hurt you?"

"They've never hurt me so far."

Presently she brought in two tall glasses. "Tom Collinses," she said, and sat on the arm of his chair while she drank hers.

It was safe now to open the window beside it; Burton Hawkes's saxophone exercises were over for the day. The sun was gone from that side of the house and cooler air blew in on them. They had a second drink.

While Margaret prepared lunch the county detective sat turning at random the pages of Anna Ellery's scrapbook, glancing at the many snapshots of Warren and Will, the newspaper clippings of social events they attended and of Warren's sports activities that were scattered through the first half of the book. Lucas Ellery's start in making automobile bodies had received considerable newspaper space. Maggie's death was there, the clipping telling him nothing Strader hadn't already told him. He turned back and came upon a snapshot of an older-looking Maggie Ellery in a long dress. She stood beside shrubbery that grew high as her shoulders. Under it Anna had written

"June, 1911. Maggie with her mock orange shrubs. They're growing fast this year."

Jim opened his file. Bairo, going through the business papers in Lucas Ellery's safe one by one, had come upon a sheet of notepaper on which was written in faded ink in a hand that trailed across the page, "How sweet the mock oranges smell tonight. Too sweet. Like funeral flowers. Dear funeral flowers."

He went back to the snapshot in the scrapbook. They were Maggie's mock orange shrubs; she had written the lines found in the safe. For all he knew, what she had written was her own erratic form of farewell to a world that had become too much for her.

Margaret brought in their lunch on trays. While they ate he told her about Maggie and Rita, everything he had learned that morning.

They had finished eating before he came to the end of it. He lit two cigarettes, handed one to her and asked, "Well, who killed Mrs. Ellery?"

The question wasn't altogether in jest; he respected his wife's judgment.

Margaret replied in the same tone, frowning a little in thought, her dark blue eyes on the window which offered a view of the lawn and the Hawkes's red house next door. "You're absolutely sure Maggie Ellery is dead? She couldn't be someone else? Not possibly?"

"Not possibly."

"The trouble is, you can't see the wood for the trees. Too many people. Look at how many." She counted them off on her fingers. "Four granddaughters, the husbands of two of them, Laura and Harry Ellery, Dr. Crusely—and even Mrs. Rankin has to be considered a little. Then there's Rita Kubiak. You'll have to find her, probably."

"I'll have to try," he corrected her. "It wasn't yesterday that she went away."

"I don't believe she never came back or never even got in touch with them. Think of Sarah. I couldn't leave her for years and years. I don't believe Rita did."

"Neither do I," said Jim.

Chapter 6

While the county detective was discussing the various principals in the case with Margaret they, in turn, were giving some thought to him.

Madge Rankin sat in Dr. Crusely's office. When they had covered the state of her health with more haste than she would ordinarily allow, and the doctor had written a new prescription for nervous indigestion, she said with a sigh, "Of course, it's this frightful Ellery affair that has me upset, Doctor. I didn't close an eye last night. I kept going over the same ground, wondering if Mr. O'Neill was anywhere near a solution, and if he'd be arresting someone I knew, and who really did shoot poor Mrs. Ellery. It got so I was hearing noises in the house. And when you live alone, as I do, you can't let yourself get like that."

"No, indeed not," he agreed. She waited hopefully but he didn't add, "An attractive woman like you, Madge, shouldn't be living alone. I can't think why you don't marry again; you must have chances enough."

Often and often she had given him a lead to say something like that and he hadn't taken it up. For that matter, he didn't even call her by her first name. It was always Mrs. Rankin, and although they met socially now and then he didn't let down the barrier of doctor-patient relationship.

Looking at him across the desk, his manner politely attentive, Mrs. Rankin admitted to herself that she wasn't going to be able to break through the guard he put between himself and his women patients. It was there, he meant to keep it there, and it was no use wondering why. Perhaps he was still cherishing the memory of his dead wife; perhaps it was just that he enjoyed his bachelor state and didn't want to marry again. But, even so, surely now and then he required the warmth of an intimate association with some understanding woman? Not the kind of hussy from whom a man got only physical satisfaction, but someone gentle, cultured, mentally his equal and free to fill the blank hours of a busy doctor's life. In short, someone like herself.

She looked at him once more and became a little breathless with daring. He was a distinguished figure with that white hair of his, his sparseness and height, his aquiline profile. Right now he seemed tired, with lines of strain around his eyes and mouth. What if she told him the truth about herself? Would she finally break through his reserve if she did?

While recklessness was surging higher in her until she hovered on the edge of revelation, Dr. Crusely said, "Mrs. Rankin, you must remember that you're just an innocent bystander in the Ellery affair. You haven't known the family very well or very long; there's nothing for you to worry about. Naturally you can't help wondering what did happen to Mrs. Ellery, but beyond that you should try to put it out of your mind. You mustn't let it keep you awake nights."

His words were meant to be reassuring. She thought they were meant to shut her out of the inner circle of Warrenton's elect; to remind her that she was an outsider, that what went on in one of the old families was no concern of hers. Stung, she retorted quickly, "Why don't you take your own advice, Doctor? You look as if you weren't sleeping well yourself. Is Mrs. Ellery's death keeping you awake too?"

At once she was appalled at her own boldness. She couldn't meet his eyes; hers traveled no farther than his hand, resting on an inkwell. She saw his fingers grip it hard as if he wanted to pick it up and throw it at her. He started to speak but she was ahead of him, rushing on in the hope of improving the situation.

"That bullet wound, Doctor. It's on your mind. I know. But you couldn't have been expected to look for a thing like that! No one would have *dreamed* . . . I'm sure I didn't and I was right there when she fell. Mr. O'Neill, I understand, was on the firing squad—though I didn't recognize him at the time—and he didn't suspect anything either, so you really don't have a thing to worry about!"

She injected brightness into her tone at the end and ventured a glance at his face. It was flushed with anger and his fingers still kept their grip on the inkwell.

"Is there anything else, Mrs. Rankin?" he asked icily and, without waiting for a reply, stood up in dismissal. "If

you'll just take one of those tablets after meals for the next few days, I'm sure they'll help you."

Going out of his office, confused, humiliated, despairing, Mrs. Rankin knew he would not forgive her for what she had said. Why, oh, why, she demanded of herself when she was out of the building looking blindly at her car, had she spoken like that? She, who prided herself on her tactfulness, who had actually depended on it for her bread and butter, had blundered irretrievably with the one man in Warrenton on whom she had set her heart.

She got into the car and stared out at the sun-drenched street. Gone beyond reclamation were the little air castles she had built: Dr. Crusely in front of her fireplace accepting a drink from her, looking around her softly lighted living room appreciatively and saying, "This is exactly what I need, Madge; I've had a horrible day." Looking at her in the emerald green hostess gown she'd just bought and adding, "You're lovelier than ever tonight. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Fool!" she said to herself fiercely. "You utter fool!"

She referred not only to what had just occurred in the doctor's office but to the whole thing, all the air castles she had built around him. "He's never given you a second look. He never would have anyhow. If any woman gets him, it will be someone like Laura Ellery with loads more money than you'll ever have, with social position and family and everything else. He's seen through you from the start. He's a doctor, he knows human nature. He's guessed your story and he doesn't want you. He never did."

She was crying as she started the motor. Tears ran down her face all the way home. But when she reached it and had garaged the car she stopped crying. She had the resiliency of the born optimist. Going into the house, she said to herself, "Perhaps it's not as bad as I thought. He can't really know one thing about me. How could he? Perhaps if I stay away from him for a little while, if I'm patient . . ."

Without hope one cannot live.

After lunch that day Laura Ellery, on her way upstairs to lie down, said to Etta, "Will you call Dr. Crusely, please? Tell him I'd like to have him stop in to see me

when his office hours are over this afternoon."

She watched Etta Mosely's slight straight figure move along the hall to the telephone. It was a pity the woman had been a stickler for accuracy talking with County Detective O'Neill. She could have been more definite about her, Laura, having been in her room at the time Anna was shot. She knew perfectly well that her mistress was there even though she herself hadn't been standing right at the door. As it was, Laura thought, the detective had her name down on his list of those who had had the opportunity to kill Anna. It was preposterous, but her name was there.

At least Harry was well out of it, she was thinking as she climbed the stairs. He had spent the afternoon at the park; he had Wilbur Loman to back him up on it. Whatever Anna had done to get herself shot, at least Harry was out of it.

She removed her shoes and dress and turned back the bedspread. She had hardly settled herself for a nap when the reason why her sister-in-law was shot and the identity of her murderer sprang into Laura Ellery's mind and brought her upright on the bed.

"It was Norman," she said aloud. "He's crude, hotheaded, stubborn—just the type to do it. It was over the quarrel he had with Lucas and Anna about digging up their lawn to look for Maggie's strongbox. With Lucas dead only Anna stood in his way. He knows Elinor will agree to anything he suggests; he knows she'll get her sisters to agree too. He shot Anna. And if he gets away with it—as he probably will, having got away with a great many shady doings already—when the talk about her death dies down he'll have a bulldozer next door plowing up that beautiful lawn. And all for nothing; the box isn't there. It's the most harebrained idea I ever heard of. But he'll do it and the old story about Maggie will be out in the open again . . . Oh dear, he'll have to be stopped. Even if I have to go to Mr. O'Neill myself."

She lay back on the pillow, her heart beating fast. She pressed her hands against it. Excitement wasn't good for her, she thought, frightened and resentful over what had happened to her comfortable way of life. She'd been awake half the night thinking about Anna; and now she

was stirred up again, she wasn't going to be able to take a nap. Dr. Crusely would have to give her something to quiet her nerves. . . .

Her gaze fixed on the slivers of sunshine that came through the closed venetian blinds, Laura Ellery lay thinking of her husband's family. There had been scandals enough in it: Edward's mother drowning herself, then Maggie's irresponsible behavior and suicide, Will's unfortunate marriage, his wife's elopement with that man from the light company—and now this about Anna. And Norman. But she wouldn't let herself think about Norman. Not yet. Not until she was rested.

Instead, she thought about the beautiful, amiable young Polish-American girl Will Ellery had brought home as his wife. She'd had only her looks, of course; no social or cultural advantages at all. How could it have been otherwise with Polish peasants for parents? She hadn't even known how to acknowledge an introduction, Laura recalled. She'd gone over to the house next door and when Anna said, "Laura, this is Rita, Will's wife," the girl had said, "Pleased to meet you, I'm sure."

She had learned, though, under Anna's unceasing tutelage. She'd been quick and eager to please, one had to grant her that. Two or three years after the marriage anyone who saw her pouring tea at one of Anna's afternoon bridge parties wouldn't have guessed at her antecedents. But then they had betrayed her in the end. She had run away with that young engineer and sloughed off her four children, her most sacred responsibility, as lightly as if they didn't exist. No properly reared girl would have done what Rita Kubiak did.

An hour later Laura was still awake in the quiet of the darkened room. She had tried not to think about Norman, but he filled her mind. She was no longer sure he had killed Anna; people didn't kill for a motive as slight as the one she was ascribing to him.

She turned her pillow over and sank back on it with a heavy sigh. Of course she was wrong about Norman. She wouldn't have to tell the county detective about him. But she certainly would tell the latter that he was wrong about the entire affair. No one had shot Anna intentionally. It was a dreadful mistake, an accident. . . .

Harry and Blanche sat in the old summerhouse. "You should have told Mr. O'Neill," she said. "I can't imagine why you didn't."

He looked at her without answering. Blue eyes, blue dress, faintly tanned arms and legs and face, fair hair, soft, small, perfectly shaped mouth. The ache of loving her caught at him. He swallowed hard. If he leaned forward to kiss that perfect mouth her hands would fly up to hold him off. "Harry, please don't," she would say. If he told her how much she meant to him, she would say, "But, Harry, you mustn't love me. We're cousins."

Not every time, though. Now and then she let him kiss her and not until he had held her lips with his for a dizzying interval would she break away and say, "Oh, Harry, it's not right. We're cousins."

He didn't think of her as a cousin. He was a man and she was the woman he loved. He tried to make her understand how much more important than the blood relationship that was, and sometimes it seemed to him that he would.

Today wasn't one of the times. She was withdrawn in manner, her eyes on her folded hands. When she lifted their gaze to his she repeated, "I can't imagine why you didn't tell Mr. O'Neill—why you said there were three."

"I didn't know who had taken the other one," he replied abruptly. "That's why I kept my mouth shut."

"But other people know. When they stop to think about it, I mean. The girls. Your mother. Perhaps Norman and Roy too. Mr. O'Neill may find out. And it's obstructing him or becoming an accessory after the fact or something like that, isn't it?"

"Yes." His tone was even more abrupt in contrast to the slow, tentative way in which she spoke.

"Do you think you really will get away with it?—Mr. O'Neill won't find out?" she asked next.

"My dear, I hope so. You've taken more interest in my souvenirs than the others have. They looked at them when I first brought them home; but that's three years ago, and they haven't been keeping track of them since." His eyes rested on her bleakly. "You don't plan to go to Mr. O'Neill, do you?"

"Of course not." She gave him a troubled little smile. "That makes me an accessory, too, doesn't it?"

"I suppose so. In a way."

"You still haven't told me why you did it," she reminded him out of a brief silence.

Harry's legs were crossed, the right over the left. He reversed their order before he said deliberately, "Don't you know, Blanche? Who else would I cover for except you?"

"What?" Color flooded her face under its delicate tan. "What do you mean?"

"That you were at the house the day Aunt Anna died. You were in the library that morning. From the hall I saw you at the desk; and you knew I kept my guns there. You were gone through the french door before I had a chance to speak to you. It didn't occur to me to open the drawer and count the guns. I didn't give your being there a second thought until I got home from the park that afternoon and found out one of them was missing. I kept quiet about it. Then, when O'Neill began throwing questions at me, I said there were three. I've been waiting ever since for you to bring up the subject."

"But Harry!" she laid her hand on his arm. "I didn't know it was because of me you left yourself open to suspicion. I've been worrying about you and——"

She broke off. He was watching her closely. "What were you doing at the library desk that morning?"

Her answer came unhesitatingly. "I'd written to Grace Deering telling her I wouldn't be able to get down to Saybrook this week end, and I wanted to catch the mail. I didn't have a stamp and I ran over to your house for one. Etta was in the hall and I told her what I'd come for." There had been time for resentment to build and her tone reflected it. "Any time you asked me about it I would have told you. You needn't have lied to Mr. O'Neill on my account. It wasn't I who took your gun."

For once Harry didn't melt at the first sign of her displeasure. He said, "When I saw you at the desk you were in a great hurry—as if you didn't want to be seen."

"You're right. I didn't want to be seen—by your mother. She'd have given me the stamp, yes, but she'd have given me a lecture with it on how well-organized

households never run out of stamps."

"So that was it!" Harry laughed and the hard lines in which his face was set vanished. "You were ducking Mother and swiping a stamp, and I——"

When he stopped short Blanche, her voice at its flattest said, "Why don't you finish? You thought I stole one of your guns and killed Gran with it."

"No! Not that. Just that you'd been there and——" He reached for her hands.

She pulled them free and turned away. Tears choked her. "You thought I did it? Why? You must have invented some reason. What was it?"

"Darling—please!" This time he captured both her hands and held them tight in spite of her efforts to evade his touch. "Blanche, look at me." His voice vibrated with pleading. "I didn't try to think of reasons. I felt as if I were going nuts. I was scared as hell that O'Neill would be on your trail, and I——"

Her face still turned away from him, she said, "Ever since you came home from the war you've been telling me you love me. What kind of love is it?"

"Blanche, will you please listen?"

"What kind of love is it?" she repeated. "Nothing but suspicion . . ."

Harry dropped her hands. He got to his feet and walked to the far side of the summerhouse. He leaned on the railing and looked out over the lawn. "It's a lot of love," he told her without turning around. "In my book it's more love than believing you couldn't have shot Aunt Anna. I saw a lot of killing, you know. I came to the conclusion that anyone is capable of it in peacetime as well as in war. So, if I was afraid you'd shot her and I lied to cover for you and meant to go on lying and trying to keep you from being found out, that's more love than the kind that takes you on trust, isn't it?"

She was silent for so long a period that he turned toward her. Her eyes were shining; her face, normally still and expressionless, looked soft and warm. She stood up in one quick motion, went to him and put her head on his shoulder, her arms around his neck.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "Very sorry. What you did was wonderful. I never realized before what it meant to

have someone I could depend on, no matter what. But you don't have to lie for me. Now you can tell Mr. O'Neill that one of your guns is missing."

"No, I can't. It's too late. I'm stuck with the story I already told him." He held her close, stroking her hair. Over the top of her head his eyes looked into space. "Somebody took it. Since I last opened that drawer a couple of months ago. Somebody——"

She leaned back to gaze up at him. "But you know it wasn't I, don't you? You just ask Etta about the stamp and she'll tell you——"

"Shut up," he interrupted tenderly. "I don't have to ask Etta anything. Your word's enough for me. I love you."

It was, after all, he discovered, one of the days when she would forget about their cousinship and let him kiss her.

Elinor Delmaine had no doubts about her husband's innocence. Norman's business practices were at times too sharp for her Ellery ethics, but otherwise he could do no wrong. When she was eighteen she had thought him as nearly perfect as a man could be; at twenty-seven she still felt much the same about him. She quelled her scruples over some of his transactions by reminding herself that even if Grandfather didn't approve, Norman made money—more money than Grandfather had seen in years. He had built her a handsome new house last year, she had her own car, everything she wanted.

After lunch that day Norman didn't hurry back to work. He sat in the breakfast room, his elbows on the table, his hair rumpled with the uneasy sweep of his fingers through it. His dark virile face wore an abstracted expression as he looked at his wife. While they were eating they had covered every ramification of Anna Ellery's death; now they were going through all of it for the second time.

Elinor said, "I still wish you hadn't had that row with them, Norm. The whole family knows Gran was just as adamant as Grandfather about letting you tear up the lawn. They could say——"

Impatience replaced abstraction in his expression. "For God's sake, are we going to hash that over again? O'Neill

must have some sense. He acts as if he did."

"Just the same," she persisted, "he might say to himself that with them both gone you'll be able to hunt for the strongbox as much as you like."

"I don't know it's there, do I? It's a hunch worth working on, yes, but it's not worth killing anyone for!"

His voice had risen. It was almost a shout. Elinor said soothingly, "Well, later on you'll be able to hire a bulldozer and see what you can find."

"Will I?" He regarded her gloomily. "Joan and Blanche don't think much of my idea. They'd have to agree. Tess too."

"Tess will say yes. Roy will be all for it as long as it doesn't cost him a cent. But we'll have to wait until Gran's death is cleared up. Then we'll talk Blanche and Joan around."

"It may never be cleared up," Norman stated. "It's crazy. Who'd murder an old lady like your grandmother? That firing squad——"

"They say not. I don't think you should keep going back to those men. If you do, first thing you know someone will be saying you're too anxious to blame it on them."

"What in the name of——" He half rose in indignation, but his wife's gesture sent him back to his chair. She said patiently, "Norman, if you'd just learn to be a little calmer about things. It's other people I'm talking about, not what I think myself."

"For Christ's sake," he muttered sullenly. "I didn't care much for your grandmother. I admit that. But I wouldn't have harmed a hair of her head. You know that as well as I do."

"Yes, I know it. I want everyone else to be sure of it too. I wish——" She moved restlessly, playing with her dessert spoon. "If only they'd find out and end this suspense!"

"It's crazy," Norman reiterated. "Craziest thing I ever heard of. It isn't as if she had money. All she had was that old ark of a house, and who'd want it?"

He was again objective, his eyes half closed in thought. He waved a hand uncertainly. "I can't figure out what the deal is. That's what's got me down. I like things lined up

where I can see them, no gimmicks." He paused and added with a sudden grin, "No gimmicks, that is, unless I put them there myself."

He looked at his wife and asked jokingly, "You didn't have some secret grudge against the old lady, did you? You or your sisters?"

"That's not very funny," Elinor told him.

Roy Martin was home for lunch that day. He said over his coffee, "I wonder if it isn't about time one of us remembered the argument Norman had with your grandfather, Tess? O'Neill will find out about it sooner or later."

"Not from us." She glanced across the table at him with a glint of disdain in her eyes. "It has nothing to do with the case. And it would make trouble. Norman wouldn't forgive us for it."

"He wouldn't have to know who told about it."

"And suspect us all?"

"Well, when O'Neill finds out on his own, it won't look good that we kept it back."

"Let's cross that bridge when we come to it," Teresa said dryly.

Roy looked at her and pursed his lips. She lacked practicality. It irritated him that he found it difficult to stand up against her lack of it.

He frowned as he lit a cigarette. Nowhere within his mind was there recognition of the fact that what he proposed wasn't entirely dictated by prudent regard for his own standing in the case. He wouldn't have admitted dislike of his brother-in-law, whose aggressive maleness, whose dash and fire, made him, Roy, seem, by comparison, more colorless and dull than he really was.

It was two o'clock when Ap Wetherell, the *Warrenton Weekly Courier's* one full-time reporter, entered the Warrenton library.

He was a stockily built young man, his breadth making him appear shorter than he was. He had dark auburn hair and red-brown eyes. A mouth that curled up at the corners and pointed ears gave a faunlike touch to his face that saved it from heaviness.

He found Joan in the librarian's private office. She was standing by the desk when he went into the room.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "You're surely not working today?"

"No. Gran's body will be brought home tonight. I just walked over to get some personal things I wanted."

"Oh, I see. Is there anything I can do?"

"No, thank you."

Trying to find something to say, he strolled over to the desk and picked up the top book from a stack of new ones. "What's Warrenton reading to improve its mind?"

"That wasn't written to improve the mind," she told him.

"*The Ax and the Rope*," he read aloud. "Hmmm—no." It seemed tactful not to add, "Another murder story, eh?" but Joan said it for him, and went on with a wry smile, "They're different when they're between book covers, aren't they?"

He sat down on the corner of the desk. If she needed someone with whom she could talk over her grandmother's death, he had advice ready for her. "In these," he began tapping the book he held, "the characters keep things to themselves. That's okay for stories, but in real life, if they've got a brain in their heads, people spill everything they know to the detective. Like O'Neill, for instance. Remember how I dragged an interview out of him when he moved to Warrenton? I told myself then that he was one guy who knew his—uh—elbow from third base. He won't go haywire over any stray fact he picks up from his witnesses."

She stared at him. "What makes you think I'm keeping anything to myself?"

"Intuition," he replied briskly. "Knowing you, knowing your family, observing the way your wheels go around, I'd stake a week's pay on it that all of you are very cautious, very discreet talking to the law."

Joan said, "We don't have a thing to hide. None of us killed Gran. No one else did either. I don't care what Mr. O'Neill says, it was an accident. Some one in the woods with a gun who——"

"Hunting, perhaps, in June?" His tone was gentle, lacking the sarcasm the words implied. He had met Joan a

year ago. Lately he had been seeing her often; there were more and more moments when he asked himself, half dismayed, half-pleased, if he was becoming seriously interested in her.

She pushed back the square-cut bang of brown hair that made her look even younger than she was. "No, of course not," she replied. "But there are rats in the ravine near the pond. It could be something like that."

He shook his head. "At the police station the word's going around that the pathologist says it was a small caliber automatic. You'd have to be near enough to aim at your target with one of them."

"Yes." She drew in breath and exhaled it in a long hopeless sigh.

After a moment he said, "I'm glad you were home with Blanche all that afternoon. I'm glad O'Neill won't be on your trail every minute."

"It doesn't help to be free from suspicion myself if I have to worry about someone in my—someone I know having done it. Oh, Ap!" She flung out her hands. "It just can't be true. Not murder! She died some other way."

He said nothing. His glance rested on her troubled face. He decided against mentioning her mother. She had enough on her mind without being told that the men from the state's attorney's office were displaying much interest in the present whereabouts of Rita Kubiak.

Chapter 7

That night, quite as if Ap Wetherell's thoughts had been at work on her, Joan dreamed of her mother, the old dream she first had when she was about four.

It had begun that first time with the impression that she was awake. She heard voices downstairs and saw the light that shone through the register cut in the floor to admit heat from the room below. One of the voices sounded like her mother's, but she knew in the dream that it wasn't, that her mother had been away a long time, so long that Joan could barely remember what she looked like. Then the voices fell away and presently there were footsteps outside the door. It was opened and light shone in from the hall. Her mother came swiftly into the room and knelt beside the bed and said, "My baby, my baby."

It was an extraordinarily vivid dream. Joan was sure she was awake and that her grandmother followed her mother into the room, caught the latter by her arm and drew her to her feet, saying, "Rita, you mustn't. You'll wake her. She needs her rest."

Her mother began to cry. It was a low, heartbroken sound. The light from the hall shone on her fair hair. She stood looking down at Joan and then she let Joan's grandmother pull her away. The door closed, the footsteps died out. . . .

It had seemed real at the time. But the next day when she told the others their mother had come in the night Anna Ellery said, "No, Joan, she didn't. You must have dreamed it."

She refused to listen to her grandmother. All day she told everyone that her mother had come to see her, until Elinor and Tess, years older than she, already aware of their mother having done something shameful that couldn't be talked about, something that set her apart from other mothers, hushed her. "Stop it," they said. "You're not supposed to talk about Mother. Nobody talks about her. Keep your old dream to yourself."

Through the years the dream had repeated itself five times. The details might vary but not the essentials. Her

mother came. Always she said, "My baby, my baby," and knelt by the bed. Always the hall light shone on her hair. Once it was Joan's grandfather who pulled her away. Another time it was Joan's seventh-grade teacher. Once her mother's hair, instead of being short, hung to her knees. Once she was wearing white instead of the flowered dress she wore in the first dream.

Tonight the dream varied more than it ever had before. Her mother had on the black dress Anna Ellery was wearing when she died. Her hair was so bright that it looked as if it were on fire. Studying it closely, the girl saw that she wore a tight-fitting little cap covered with glittering stones. She stood by the bed, and instead of Anna Ellery many people crowded around her to take her away. One of them was Jim O'Neill, saying, "You must come, you must, you must."

Another of the figures resolved itself into her father of whom she had no memory at all. His face didn't take on shape and feature, but in the dream she knew it was her father. He said, "Come, Rita, come. You heard Mr. O'Neill. You must come, you must come, you must come."

Tonight was the first time her mother had ever resisted. She fought against the figures around her. Joan wanted to help her, but she couldn't move. She lay seemingly stuck fast to the bed, crying, "Mother, I won't let them take you!"

But they did take her mother. She was lost to view among the circling, milling figures, and the frightfulness of it awakened Joan.

Her face was wet with tears. She had been crying in her sleep and sobs still shook her in the first moments of being awake.

When she was quiet she looked into the darkness about her. The old sad feeling of loss tied her throat in a knot. Rita Kubiak had left them; she had gone away with the man whom she preferred to them and hadn't come back.

Nevertheless, "I wonder where she is tonight. If she thinks of us. If she wishes she could see us."

What would a meeting with her mother be like? Joan asked herself presently. Building images of it had once been a favorite daydream of hers. But she had given it up;

she was a grown woman now and knew that the dramatic little scenes she used to visualize would never happen. Too much time had passed, her mother was a middle-aged woman. Perhaps she had married the man named Greene—or another man. Perhaps she had had a second family of children. Perhaps her four daughters were all but forgotten, dim figures from another world and time.

"I hope it's like that," Joan thought, watching the familiar outlines of the furniture emerge as her eyes grew used to the dark. "I hope that man didn't desert her. It would be awful if he did, and she's alone somewhere, working for a living, going home at night to some furnished room with nothing to look forward to but getting older still all by herself . . ."

So her thoughts went, but they had no reality; the count of the years had no meaning. Her mother couldn't be a middle-aged woman. She was forever young, forever fair kneeling beside Joan's bed or standing where the light from the hall shone on her hair. Growing old could happen to everyone else but not to her.

That same night Jim O'Neill set in motion the hunt for Rita Kubiak.

While he was telephoning instructions to the state police Margaret was opening the folding bed in the dining room and making it up for him. He was slow in getting undressed. His lean face looked drawn, the lines around his mouth were deep. She didn't need to ask if his ankle pained him. His face supplied the answer. It was emphasized by the virulency with which he cursed his crutches. She brought one of the pills the doctor had given him to take at bedtime and drew the sheet up over him carefully, solicitous of the ankle.

He swallowed the pill and said, "Christ, what luck! Of all the times to have something like this! Light me a cigarette, will you? And have one with me."

She lit cigarettes for both of them and sat down on the edge of the bed, her free hand smoothing back his thick black hair. "Gray streaks," she commented.

"You're not getting any younger yourself," he reminded her ungallantly.

"Got years and years on you though."

"So you have. And the truth is, if you don't hurry up

and start looking like a woman of thirty-two people will be giving me the once-over and saying, 'He your pa?' "

She laughed. "It's not that bad."

"Yes it is." He inhaled smoke and blew it out with a contented sigh. "This bed feels good."

"Of course it does. You should have been in it hours ago." Margaret eyed him reprovingly. "You're not quite the indispensable man you'd like to think you are. You could have had Cobb take those reports that were coming in tonight. But no. The O'Neill touch is the only one there is."

He grinned. "That's right. Not a murder committed in Hampton County was solved before I got to be county detective."

She rumbled his hair, conveying scorn through her finger tips. Not since she met her husband when he was investigating a murder at the social agency where she worked had Margaret come this close to one of his cases. Before she left him to get his sleep she couldn't resist asking, "How's it going?"

"It isn't," he told her. "Zero, zero, that's what today adds up to. No shady episodes in anyone's past, no gun, no bullet, nothing from the lab that draws us a picture of the murderer."

He gave her a résumé of the pathologist's report. Margaret said, "Well, then, with internal hemorrhage Dr. Crusely could, in all innocence, have missed the cause of death."

"Yes."

"Mrs. Hawkes and I were talking about him; lots of people around town, including her, think he did it."

"That so? Why?"

"Maggie Ellery. They've decided Mrs. Ellery must have blocked his attempts at a reconciliation after Maggie broke the engagement. He's been brooding over it for years and finally revenged himself."

"My God!" exclaimed Jim in profound disgust.

"You asked me," his wife pointed out.

"Yes—but——"

"Even if he didn't do it, it's a bad break for Dr. Crusely," Margaret observed. "His practice will suffer

from it. . . . You get to sleep now." She crushed out her cigarette and started to rise.

He held her back. "No. I'm wide awake. Stay and talk a few minutes more."

"Well . . . Let me put out some of the lights. Perhaps you'll get drowsy then."

She rose and turned out the lights in the living and dining rooms. A lamp still lit in the hall sent a faint glow into the room.

"Bullets are a nuisance," he stated when she was sitting beside him again. "If, for example, the one that killed Mrs. Ellery had made a larger exit wound and she'd bled heavily, we'd have known at once what happened. We'd have closed off the cemetery and the wood, searched them immediately, held everyone who was at the funeral to be searched, run down the members of the family right away. It might have made a difference. Or even if Mrs. Ellery had fallen backward instead of forward it might have helped. She'd have bled more then, the lab tells me. The way it is, I feel like a fool having her shot under my nose. And we're not making much headway on the case—as Goodrich took pains to remind me tonight."

"I don't really care much for the man," Margaret informed him.

"Hell, we've all got a job to do."

"Yes, but he might give you credit for some progress. In a negative way, that is. You've about ruled out the firing squad and all the people who were at the Chesery funeral. You've cut it down considerably. There's only the family left and Dr. Crusely."

"Or someone shooting from the wood who hasn't entered the picture yet. That gives us the whole world to pick from."

"You are down in the dumps," she told him. "You know very well people aren't murdered at random."

"People like Mrs. Ellery aren't murdered at all—generally." He lay looking at the ceiling, his fingers turning the wedding ring on Margaret's hand. "It's too loose," he said. "You ought to take it to a jeweler and have it cut down. You'll lose it one of these days and I'll be good and sore. I paid sixty smackers for that ring."

"It's been loose the whole five years I've worn it and I haven't lost it yet. Besides, it shouldn't be the cost you worry about. It's the sentiment."

"Sixty smackers is sixty smackers." Jim continued to seek aid from the ceiling, his eyes searching it as though he might find important information written across it. "A woman like Anna Ellery, seventy years old—no money, nothing in her present life—I have to go back, Margaret. And I run into Rita Kubiak."

"What about Maggie Ellery?"

"She's been dead since 1911. I'll stick with Rita awhile yet."

Margaret lit fresh cigarettes for them. "She's got a long start on you."

The county detective tucked one arm under his head and drew in on the cigarette. "There's a pattern in disappearances," he said. "A man lives out on the Coast, let's say, and decides to run away from his wife. His instinct is to put distance between them, so he heads East. Or, a man lives in New York. He's skipping out. He puts the continent between him and his past by heading west for the Coast. Sometimes he varies it by going only the length of the country, New York to Florida."

"What's the matter with the Midwest? Or the Southwest?" Margaret asked. "Don't runaways like them?"

"Sure they do. Every day, I suppose, guys from New York or San Francisco are shedding their old identities in Chicago or Houston. But considering the amateur wrongdoer's instinct to get as far away from home as possible, I'm having the bigger cities in Florida and California checked first. They'll go back through their directories and real-estate records and so forth for some trace of Anothony Greene or Mrs. William Ellery or Rita Kubiak."

"Surely they'd change their names," Margaret objected.

"I'm out of luck if they did. But I don't think so. Rita would know the Ellerys wouldn't bring a charge against her for deserting her children; she'd know they'd want to bury all the talk about her as quickly as they could. And Greene had to get a job. He was an engineer. He had to refer to his college record and his work record if he

wanted anything worth while. No, I'm counting on it that they went along as Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Greene."

"Maybe she did become Mrs. Greene. He may have married her."

Jim shook his head. "If he'd intended to marry her, there was no need to leave Warrenton. Men seldom marry the women they run off with like that."

"Dear heaven," said Margaret. "She must have been desperate to do what she did."

"She must have hated the Ellerys," Jim remarked. He propped himself up on an elbow to put out his cigarette in the ash tray on Margaret's lap. "The kind of hatred that lasts too." He yawned. "That pill's beginning to hit me. Let's call it a night."

She bent down and kissed him. "Regardless of the pill, I don't see how you can do it. I'll bet I'll be awake for another hour thinking about it."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Look, honey, this is just my way of earning a living. If I kept taking my cases to bed with me, I'd be heading for relief rolls. Tomorrow's another day. We'll see what it brings."

It brought a series of visitors of whom the first was Mrs. Hawkes. She came in the back door at nine o'clock carrying a freshly baked strawberry pie and calling out cheerfully, "Good morning! Isn't it a beautiful day?"

She had on a clean, crisp housedress, her hair was neatly combed in the arrangement of coils and rolls she favored, and she looked as if she had been up for hours. She had been. She rose at six and, when talking with Margaret, who regularly stayed in bed until the last possible moment, she liked to enlarge upon the advantages of an early start in the morning.

The O'Neill house and its occupants were anything but neat. Jim, not yet shaved, was in his bathrobe and reading the front half of the newspaper over the untidy remnants of his breakfast tray. Sarah, still in her pajamas, uncombed hair hanging in her eyes, was on the floor beside him dressing a doll. Overflowing ash trays stood about the living room. The bed in the dining room had not been stripped of its tangle of sheets and folded away. The breakfast dishes hadn't been cleared from the table in the alcove off the kitchen. Margaret, barefoot and wearing a

brunch coat, was curled up on the living-room sofa having a second cup of coffee and a cigarette while she read the back half of the newspaper.

She exclaimed over the pie and carried it out to the pantry, deciding on the way not to offer apologies for the appearance of her house and her family. Mrs. Hawkes would have to make what she would of their way of life.

When Margaret returned to the living room the older woman was settling herself in a chair and saying to Jim in her bright, brisk fashion, "You're looking much better this morning, Mr. O'Neill. You must have had a good night, didn't you?"

The county detective who, on principle, disliked agreeing with his neighbor was obliged to admit that he had had a good night. "I slept right through," he said.

"That's right. When I broke my arm the year after Albert and I were married I made up my mind I wouldn't let it interfere with my routine in any way. Every night, going to bed, I said to myself, 'Just forget your arm and go to sleep. Don't pamper yourself with pills.' It worked. I got my rest and took care of my house and kept it nice and clean, the way I like to see a place kept. You'll find you can do the same, Mr. O'Neill, if you make up your mind to it. And no pills. Don't let them give you pills. You get to depend on them. I had an uncle who—— Yes, Sarah?"

The little girl was tugging at her skirt. "Oh, the doll? My, yes, she looks nice all dressed up that way. But you're her mommy, and she wants you to look just as nice. You shouldn't still be in your pajamas, dear, at this time of morning. A big girl like you should get herself dressed. You can do it, can't you? Why don't you run upstairs and try?"

Sarah replied politely, "No, thank you, I don't feel like it," and returned to her doll.

"I haven't laid out her sunsuit and panties and socks yet," Margaret explained, careful to keep an apologetic note out of her voice. "We'll go upstairs in a few minutes and get dressed together."

"My Burton started dressing himself when he was three," Mrs. Hawkes informed her. "I let him do it. It was good for him. Helped him to develop independence."

"He certainly has enough of that," Jim commented blandly. "I noticed it yesterday afternoon when you were trying to get him to mow the grass. He stuck right to it that it didn't need to be cut."

Mrs. Hawkes threw back her head. "It was a hot day. We parents have to know when to relax discipline a little, I always say."

"Yes, there's something in that." He had made his point and could afford to meet his wife's admonishing glance with one of innocent inquiry.

Mrs. Hawkes changed the subject. "Is there anything new about Anna Ellery?—or shouldn't I ask?"

"Oh, you can ask. There's nothing."

"Really? I thought there might be. They're saying around town that your detectives are asking questions about Will Ellery's wife, the one who ran away with the light company man."

"Are they? Did you know her, Mrs. Hawkes?"

"Some. She was a lot older, of course. I wasn't married until 1928, you see, and she'd been married a number of years then."

"What did you think of her?"

"Well . . ." Mrs. Hawkes pursed her lips in thought. "I didn't know her too well; she never had much to say the few times I was around her. But she was supposed to have a lot of fun in her and to know how to enjoy herself. The men all made eyes at her. They thought she was beautiful. I couldn't see it myself."

"Why not, Mrs. Hawkes?" Margaret put in interestedly.

"Oh, I don't know. It was hard to believe that blond hair was completely natural even though everyone said it was; and there was a little too much of everything about her. It's hard to say. She just wasn't my taste, I guess."

Margaret looked at the other woman's angular plain face and said, "I see."

Her husband returned to his inquiry. "Did you ever hear of her trying to get in touch with her children?"

"No, I don't think I did. But"—Mrs. Hawkes sniffed—"what can you expect from that kind of woman? When she ran off with the light company man she left a note asking her in-laws to take good care of her daughters and not to let them feel too harshly about her. She must

have figured that the note covered her responsibilities. She knew, of course, that Anna Ellery would do everything she could for the girls. Which she did. She was a fine woman. It's hard to believe anyone would want her dead."

"Margaret tells me you've heard it was Dr. Crusely."

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised. He's such a know-it-all that he'd be sure he could get away with it if he did have a grudge against Mrs. Ellery. I never call him in myself any more. He tried once too often to tell me what was best for Burton." She reddened with remembered indignation. "So I switched to Dr. Wright. He's a good sensible man. He doesn't look like one of these movie actors either. The women don't run around making fools of themselves over him the way they do over Dr. Crusely."

"Who, for instance?" asked Jim.

"That Mrs. Rankin for one. And Laura Ellery for another. They're at swords' points over him."

She was too malicious. The county detective had had enough of her. "That's hardly Crusely's fault," he observed. "He can't change his appearance."

The tone of his voice, something in the way his hazel eyes looked at her gave Mrs. Hawkes the uneasy suspicion that her society had suddenly palled on him. It couldn't be true; but the mere thought of it brought her to her feet, regretting the pie she had baked for this supercilious man and his slovenly wife.

She said frigidly, "I must get home. I have my dishes washed and the beds made and my baking done and the house picked up, but there's still plenty waiting for me to do. It's too bad, Mr. O'Neill, with you right there when Mrs. Ellery was shot, you didn't realize what had happened. You could perhaps have caught whoever did it on the spot and then we wouldn't all be around making wild guesses, would we?"

She swept out of the room, Margaret trailing after her repeating her thanks for the pie and being as charming as she knew how to be.

"The woman is sensitive," she said when she returned. "You put her back up. She has to be handled with care."

"With a club," Jim told her. "She's a bitch."

While he was shaving the telephone rang. It was the state's attorney announcing that he'd take a run out to

Warrenton in about an hour. Jim had just got into slacks and a sport shirt when Cobb put in an appearance. Then Bailo arrived. Their latest reports were negative: nothing pertinent had been uncovered about any of the people they were investigating.

"Get in to the county building," Jim said to Cobb. "They'll have the medical examiner's report on Maggie Ellery's death in the archives. Make a copy of it."

Cobb stared. "What's a woman that's been planted since 1911 got to do with the old girl that was killed Monday?"

"I don't know," Jim replied irritably. "I'm trying to find out. And go out to the Fontaine farm. Someone at the police station will tell you where it is. Talk to Lanny Fontaine. He's the last person known to have seen Maggie Ellery alive."

Detective Bailo was sent to Waterbury to delve into Rita Kubiak's family antecedents.

The telephone rang. Strader was on the wire to say that he had finished his hunt through the Warrenton records of gun permits. No gun that might have been used to shoot Anna Ellery was unaccounted for; nor did the state have a record of a gun purchased by anyone concerned too recently for it to have reached the Warrenton police.

While all this was going on Margaret, in a burst of energy, was getting herself and Sarah dressed, dusting and carpet sweeping the living room, making beds, washing dishes. The house was quite presentable when Goodrich, the state's attorney, rang the doorbell at eleven-thirty.

He sat opposite Jim, polishing his Oxford glasses and swinging them gently on their length of black ribbon as he listened to the county detective's detailed report on the case. He already knew everything the latter had to tell him, but Jim's broken ankle had kept him from giving his superior a firsthand, complete account of it until now.

Goodrich, studying the tip of his cigarette, said at the end, "We've got to get the gun."

"Too many people have them kicking around since the war," Jim stated. "Whoever killed Mrs. Ellery may have got hold of a souvenir gun belonging to a friend and slipped it back after the shooting. The field's wide open. We're trying, of course. We've already sent two .32s

belonging to veterans the family knows to firearms identification to find out if they've been fired lately. But"—he threw out a hand in bafflement—"we need the bullet."

"Even getting a line on a probable gun would help. You could begin to sort out who had access to it."

Jim was silent. Across the yard Burton Hawkes was practicing on his saxophone. When the strains of "*Ave Maria*," mournful, uncertain, but recognizable, hit the air the detective leaned over and shut the window.

"They're still hunting for both bullet and gun," he said. "It isn't very hopeful though. . . . How do you feel about Lucas Ellery's death?"

"I don't know. I haven't had much time to give to it."

"I have." Jim tore the cover off the book of paper matches he held. He shredded it and watched the shreds sift through his fingers into an ash tray. "I've got a lot of time sitting here by the window nursing this damn ankle to think of everything. Dr. Crusely said it was a heart attack; he also said Mrs. Ellery died of a heart attack. It makes you wonder."

Goodrich sat tapping his chin with his glasses. "We'd have to have more than that to go on before we asked for an exhumation order. And when you think of the circumstances, the drinks he——"

"He'd taken drinks before. He'd never had a sign of heart trouble."

"Still, men his age do drop dead of natural causes."

"Their wives aren't murdered two weeks later though." Jim surveyed the older man moodily. "I don't like the combination. I sit here telling myself they were both murdered. Over something that goes a long way back."

"What?"

"Well, the Maggie Ellery thing—and Rita Kubiak."

"One dead close to forty years, the other eloped for twenty." The state's attorney shook his head doubtfully. "How do you think they come into it?"

That was Jim's great problem; he had no solution.

That afternoon, at a private funeral service, Anna Ellery was buried.

Jim was alone in the house. Margaret went marketing and took Sarah with her. He hobbled painfully about,

trying out his crutches. He made a little progress before he had to give it up and sit down again by the window, cursing the accident that left him physically helpless. If he could get out, he thought; if he could move around among the people involved in the case as he usually did—but no, he had this goddamned ankle . . .

He glowered at it, propped up in front of him on a footstool, thick and misshapen with the bulk of the cast in which it was encased.

His frustrated mood passed. He sat looking out the window. He watched Burton Hawkes lackadaisically moving the lawn mower back and forth across the grass. He heard Mrs. Hawkes call "Bur-ton!" from the house and witnessed the unfilial glare her towheaded, runty offspring sent toward the window from which she called, moving his lips in what Jim hopefully surmised was the kind of language the young paragon wasn't even supposed to know.

Burton disappeared indoors and the county detective sat back with his hands linked behind his head. He concentrated on the two unrelated episodes in the Ellery family history that most engaged his attention. Presently his eyelids drooped. He fell asleep.

Chapter 8

In the evening when Sarah had been put to bed and Margaret was washing the dinner dishes Jim sat with a sheaf of notes on the day's activities before him. The pickings had been slim, he reflected.

He went through them again, turning on a lamp as the sunset colors faded and twilight came.

There was additional data on the Ellerys. Ten thousand dollars was the amount of the settlement made by the Houghton Insurance Company six months after Will Ellery had been struck and killed by a Houghton insured. The probate record showed that after expenses had been paid twelve hundred dollars had been banked for each of Will Ellery's four daughters and that Rita, his widow, had received twenty-four hundred dollars. The driver of the car that killed him had been Michael Dustin, age fifty, widower, of 14 Lewes Street, Hampton, deceased in 1943, no close survivors.

That was a dead end.

In 1942 Norman Delmaine had been sued in Superior Court for one thousand dollars by Samuel Johansen of 224 Pine Road, Warrenton, on grounds of misrepresentation of a car sold to him by the defendant, case settled out of court for a sum undisclosed.

On June 15, 1945, Elinor Delmaine had given birth to a stillborn child at St. Joseph's Hospital, Hampton.

During the spring of 1946, Blanche Ellery had reportedly been engaged to Leonard Hills, 219 Hitchcock Street, Warrenton, employed as meat cutter at Packard's Cash Market, 171 Main Street, Warrenton. No official announcement of the engagement was ever made. In October, 1948, Leonard Hills married Josephine Wasley of 387 Lyman Street, Warrenton. In July, 1946, having received his discharge from the Army, Harry Ellery returned to Warrenton. Since that time he had shown much interest in his cousin, but, so far as was known, they were not engaged. Blanche Ellery's name had never been linked with any man's except for the two cited above.

Joan Ellery was not a stay-at-home like her sister. She attended social affairs with various young men. For the past few months it had been Appleton Wetherell, *Courier* reporter, who was seen with her more often than anyone else.

The information given on the two girls meant that one more tenuous possibility had to be discarded, the county detective decided. No suitor for the hand of either granddaughter, thwarted by Anna Ellery, had shot the latter to smooth the path of romance. He had had such a case three years ago, where the girl's father had been the victim. But the Ellery case wasn't going to be that simple.

Jim turned to Bailo's report on the Kubiak family. It was headed with a list of the names and addresses of Rita's brothers and sisters, all married and living in or near Waterbury. Their parents were dead; the mother died in 1916, the father in 1927.

There were five brothers and three sisters. Rita, one of the younger children, had been born in Waterbury, her older brothers and sisters in Poland. The father had come to the United States in 1896 and settled in Waterbury where he had been employed as a day laborer. Rita had completed two years of high school before she started to work at the brass company during the World War I. She was still employed there when she married Will Ellery.

It was Mrs. Anastasia Kubiak Foley from whom Bailo had got most of the information contained in the report. She was the oldest of the family, she said, and had tried, after the mother's death, to guide and advise the others to some extent. Although Rita, after her marriage, wasn't encouraged to invite her family to visit her in Warrenton, she came occasionally to Waterbury. She told Anastasia how unhappy Anna Ellery's criticism and interference in her affairs was making her. Will had never stood up to his mother, leaving Rita to look after herself with the older woman. After his death Anastasia saw her sister only twice. The second time was when she went to Waterbury a month before she ran away with Anthony Greene.

Rita had seemed restless and despairing that day. She said she couldn't stand her life in Warrenton any longer; that things were much worse since her husband's death; that her mother-in-law had the whole say where the

children were concerned, and that she, Rita, couldn't call her soul her own. She said she had to make a change and asked Anastasia if she could bring her four daughters to her; she herself would get a job and try to support them.

Anastasia was obliged to refuse. She had three children of her own, her house was small, her husband wouldn't give his consent to the arrangement. She pointed out to Rita that however little money the Ellerys then had, they could still do more for her daughters than she could manage to do for them by herself.

Rita felt bitter over the refusal. She said her other brothers and sisters wouldn't help her either. Nobody would help her. Anastasia spoke of the money the insurance company had paid her. Rita said she had given five hundred dollars of it to Lucas Ellery to have a new roof put on the house and some essential repairs made. She had spent three hundred dollars more for a fur coat, something she had always wanted, and had also bought other clothing. She wouldn't listen to Anastasia's suggestion that she take the rest of it, get the court's permission to draw on her daughters' money, and buy a small house; she could then arrange to have someone care for the children during the day and get a job herself. It would be too hard a life, Rita objected. She would have to work all day in some factory—if she could get a job at all, this being 1930—and clean house, wash, iron and cook for her daughters at night. She wanted more for them and herself than that kind of a grindingly poor existence.

The visit ended in a quarrel. Rita went back to Warrenton that night and Anastasia heard no more from her until the day after she ran away with Anthony Greene. Then she telephoned from New York. She told her sister what she had done; she said, "If you or one of the others had taken us in, I wouldn't have done it." She cried over the telephone, explaining to Anastasia, "Tony wouldn't marry me and make a home for us in Warrenton. He said another man's kids were too big a responsibility for him."

Anastasia begged her to go back to her children. Rita said it was already too late for that. She wouldn't reveal whatever plans she and Anthony Greene were making.

"We're leaving New York this afternoon," she said at the end, "and no one will find us where we're going."

From that day onward Anastasia had never heard from her sister. . . .

There were several other reports; a copy of the one made out by the Warrenton medical examiner at the time of Maggie Ellery's death, which contained no facts new to Jim; a report from the firearms identification bureau on the five guns, three belonging to Harry Ellery, two belonging to family friends, that had been sent in for examination. All of them, the report said, had been cleaned and oiled since they were last used. The oil had dried sufficiently to show that none of them had been fired at a recent date, certainly not within the past week. A sketch from the state police officer in charge of the search of the cemetery area showed the ground around the Chesery grave sectioned off, half of it shaded to indicate that it had already been examined inch by inch and did not contain the bullet. A receipt from the laboratory listed Anna Ellery's wearing apparel at the time of her death: one black rayon dress, one black rayon slip, one white cotton brassière, one pair of white cotton drawers, one pink cotton brocade corset, one pair gun-metal lisle stockings, one pair black oxfords.

It was a lot of clothes to wear on a warm June afternoon, Jim thought, being accustomed to his wife's shorts and shirt or similar minimum attire.

No hat was listed, he noted. It hadn't been at the undertaker's and had been sent on to the laboratory later, along with the dead woman's handbag.

Margaret called from the kitchen, "Want some iced coffee?"

"Later," he said.

She came into the room drying her hands on a paper towel. A glance at her husband's face told her that he was deep in thought. She dropped the towel into a wastebasket, got an issue of *Life* out of the magazine rack, and sat down across the room.

She turned on a lamp. Jim was still looking out the window, reliving the moment after the third round of shots had been fired into the air over the Chesery grave, when

he had become aware of the little commotion off to his left and one of the squad had whispered to him, "Old lady Ellery. She fainted."

Then he had had a glimpse of Anna Ellery being carried away. . . .

His heavy dark brows drew together. Something about the scene eluded him. He went through it repeatedly: Anna Ellery in her black clothes, legs dangling over Delmaine's arm, one of her arms hanging straight down. Her hat had still been on, a small hat, tight over her hair. . . . What was he overlooking?

Whatever it was, he couldn't force it to the front of his mind. He had to leave the scene with a piece missing. He would return to it later.

He moved on to the murderer. Unless it was Delmaine or Mrs. Rankin, he was reasonably sure it was someone who had fired from the wood. Three days had been spent in sifting and resifting the people present at the funeral and no shadow of a motive for killing Anna Ellery could be attached to any of them. That took him, perforce, to the wood. There someone familiar with the terrain, aware of the good prospect it offered for shooting Anna Ellery while the other shots were being fired over the grave, had hidden. It was someone who knew how to use a gun and who was daring enough to take the risk of being caught.

He amended the thought. Someone desperate enough was a better way of putting it. It wasn't a long-premeditated affair. Whoever had done it couldn't have known for more than twenty-four hours ahead of time, or perhaps even less, that Anna Ellery would attend the Chesery funeral. The need to silence her had been urgent, then; the dead woman had declared her intention of acting upon some matter at once.

The rustle of a magazine page Margaret turned was the only sound in the room. Jim lit a cigarette and went on with his reconstruction of the case.

It was a highly fallible murder plan, he thought. The one who made it had been lucky. He or she—he for purposes of deduction—couldn't have been sure that Anna Ellery would stand at the edge of the wood, that he would be able to get near enough to her for a sure shot, that there wouldn't be an immediate uproar that would

lead to his being caught before he had an opportunity to fade away through the wood. None of these things had happened, but they must have loomed large in the murderer's thoughts.

Therefore, desperation had dictated the plan. There wasn't time to wait and kill Anna Ellery at leisure. The threat she embodied was so acute that it was worth any risk to get rid of her.

He examined his conclusion. It seemed sound enough to justify going ahead to the means, the gun. At short notice the murderer was able to secure one small enough to be slipped in a pocket yet large enough to be accurate at a distance of twenty feet or more. There was no record of a gun of that type being in the possession of anyone in the Ellery family, once Harry's souvenir Lugers and Beretta had been ruled out. Beyond the family circle, among the younger generation of returned veterans, friends of Harry or the Ellery granddaughters, young men like Wilbur Loman who had cheerfully turned over his Beretta to the police to be tested, there was no way to draw a definite line.

Jim put out his cigarette and stared discontentedly into the twilight. He had hold of the wrong end of the stick. The means and method would get him nowhere without the motive.

After a moment he consoled himself with the thought that even if he had a hatful of motives he still had to have his means and method too.

He looked at his wife who sat with the lamplight shining on her brown hair, the magazine spread out on her lap. Once he had worked at his job for its sake alone; now Margaret and Sarah added their own emphasis to the solid sense of achievement that a solved case brought to him.

His dark face softened while his eyes rested on her bent head. Then they went to Anna Ellery's scrapbook on the table beside him. He had been through it page by page, but Margaret hadn't. He asked, "You reading something important?"

She glanced up and smiled. "I'm just looking over the summer fashions in play clothes and thinking of all the raised eyebrows there'd be if I wore some of them in Warrenton."

He picked up the scrapbook. "Take a look at this, will you?"

"Oh yes." She got to her feet and crossed the room to take the scrapbook from him, enormously flattered, as she always was, whenever he consulted her on one of his cases.

Before she was settled under the lamp again the county detective's thoughts were back to the means and method of Anna Ellery's death. He dismissed the source of the gun for the moment and considered the cemetery.

"I wish I'd paid more attention to the wood," he said to himself. "I'll have to get over there as soon as I can manage it."

Cobb and Strader said the trees grew thick right to the edge of the cemetery. There was a lot of small growth among the bigger trees, they said. Perhaps, after all, the murderer hadn't been taking too great a risk; not with plenty of cover, plenty of time to take aim between the volleys fired by the squad. His shot had come on the heels of the second volley. Then . . .

He'd run into superlative luck. But he couldn't have known at the time that he had over an hour's leeway before it was discovered that Anna Ellery had been shot. Once he fired he'd turn and run like hell through the wood. Assuming that he was someone so close to the woman that he knew he'd be questioned immediately, he had two things to do: get rid of the gun and get an alibi established as fast as he could.

Jim pictured him running through the wood. He'd have stopped once or twice, trying to quiet his own panting breath while he listened for sounds of pursuit. The wood had remained still—no shouts. No rush of feet. He had the gun and he had to dispose of it—on a temporary basis, at least—in some simple, quick way. He couldn't spare the time for anything as involved as burying it.

Jim opened his file and took out the sketch of the murder setting Strader had drawn for him. It showed the wood fronting on North Street with two houses opposite it. On one side of the wood lay the cemetery; on the other, a row of houses. They faced a short street that ended at the ravine. The ravine itself ran behind the cemetery, the wood in back of a number of streets for about half a mile, losing

its depth gradually and at last merging into a field.

So much for the setting, he thought. It offered but one safe line of approach and retreat and that was through the ravine. Three streets away, their land bordering on the ravine, the two Ellery houses stood; farther along, on a street that ran left from the ravine, lived the Delmaines; and one street beyond them were the Martins.

How was the inquiry progressing in the neighborhood of the ravine? He had left it to the Warrenton police on the theory that the assortment of householders would talk more freely to local officers than to outsiders. He picked up the telephone to ask the Warrenton police chief how the theory was working out in this instance.

Strader said, "There's nothing. If there had been, I would have called you."

Jim cradled the receiver and resumed his deliberations. He thought about the people involved—Harry, who was at the park when Anna Ellery died; his mother, who said she was asleep in her room; the two younger Ellery sisters within sight and sound of each other, one of them reading, the other working in her rock garden; the two older sisters, each of them home alone at the moment their grandmother was shot; their husbands neither of whom he liked; and the people less closely involved: the maid, Etta Mosely, whose fright under questioning could be important or meaningless; Dr. Crusely, who had known the dead woman so many years; and Mrs. Rankin, who had made a random choice of a place to live.

Of the men, Harry Ellery was most likely to have ready access to a gun; of the women, Laura Ellery, through her son. But that kind of conjecture had no value. . . .

Now it was the rustle of the scrapbook pages that made the only sound in the room until the county detective struck a match to light another cigarette.

Margaret glanced up when she heard the rasp of the match. "Throw them to me."

"There's a lighter right in front of you on the table."

"No fluid in it."

"There never is," he commented resignedly and skimmed the matchbook across the room into her lap.

"Thank you." She lit a cigarette and said, "Poor Maggie had a screw loose, of course."

"Yes."

"And her mother too. It says in the newspaper clipping that her mother drowned herself in the very same place."

"Yes."

She blew out smoke and asked thoughtfully, "What about genes?"

"Loose screws running through the family?"

"That's the general idea."

"Well, not necessarily. There's nothing conclusive in the family history. The mother drowned herself after childbirth, and Maggie never got over the jolt Crusely gave her."

"Exactly. They didn't get over what happened to them because they had loose screws. Lots of women have babies, lots more fall in love with men who don't love them. But they don't kill themselves. I wonder," she added after a pause, "what would be uncovered farther back in the family history."

"I don't want to know," Jim protested strongly. "I've got enough to worry about as it is."

"That's true." She spoke absently, her gaze back on a page of the scrapbook. "The snapshot of Maggie taken after the debacle of her broken engagement—the one in front of the mock-orange bushes she planted; her pose is abnormal. She looks frightened, ready to run away. It shows in every line of her."

"You sure that's not hindsight?"

"No. Look at her. You can't miss it." Margaret rose and brought the open scrapbook to him. Together they studied the picture of Maggie, half turned from the camera. It did indeed convey a suggestion of shrinking away from the lens, of an urge to escape.

"Abnormal," Margaret repeated.

"All right, it is."

She went back to the sofa and sat down under the lamp. Her wide forehead became creased in thought as she looked at the picture.

Jim smiled as he watched her. "Well, what else?"

"I don't know . . . something——"

The telephone rang. He picked up the receiver and said, "Hello? O'Neill speaking."

After that he said, "Uh-huh" and "I see" at intervals.

At the end he said, "I'd like a copy of it. Will you shoot it over right away, please? . . . Thanks a lot."

He hung up and looked pleased as he met his wife's eyes. "Message from the police in Bonham, California. They——"

"Rita Kubiak!" she broke in excitedly. "They've found her!"

"No, but they have located Anthony Greene. He's in Bonham."

"And Rita?"

"He told the Bonham police she left him years ago."

"How'd they find him so quickly?"

"He was listed in the city directory, his occupation of electrical engineer was given, his home address, wife's name and all."

"But——"

"My dearest wife, there's a copy of the Bonham police report on its way to me now. That will give us the details. Greene says Rita left him a year and a half after their elopement. That would be, say, around May 1932. He professes to have no knowledge of her whereabouts since then. It seems the Bonham police question his story."

"So do I," declared Margaret. "It's hard to believe any man would be low enough to take a woman to a strange city thousands of miles away from her home and children and then, eighteen months later, let her go off to shift for herself."

"Not a nice character," Jim agreed. "But still, when he didn't offer her marriage at the start, she should have stayed home where she belonged." He shook his head. "A woman can make an awful fool of herself over a man."

Margaret opened her lips to fling an indignant retort at him, thought better of it, and closed them tight. Pointedly she returned her attention to the scrapbook.

Her husband grinned. "Is it any consolation to figure that it's quite possible Greene's wife is raising holy hell with him tonight now that his past has been exposed?"

"I hope she takes the carving knife to him," Margaret said.

Half an hour later a copy of the report was delivered to Jim. It revealed that Anthony Greene might have more to contend with than Mrs. Greene's jealousy.

Jim read it aloud:

"State's Attorney's Office

Hampton County

Hampton, Connecticut

Attention County Detective James O'Neill—reply to
June 22 inquiry.

Anthony Greene listed city directory. Electrical engineer employed Bamforth Electric Company. Home address 884 Sterling Street Bonham. Married wife's Christian name Jeanette. Greene interviewed this date June 23 at Bamforth. Stated he was man who eloped with Mrs. Rita Kubiak Ellery Warrenton Connecticut October 1930. Stated they drove to California he started work at Bamforth January 1931. Lived in housekeeping rooms Barkley Street Bonham as Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Greene. Remained at above address until April 1932 when Mrs. Ellery left while he was at office. Stated relations with her not friendly at time. Quarrels over his refusal to marry her. Landlady informed him Mrs. Ellery called cab left rooms A.M. Not at hotels or rooming houses Bonham. No further attempts to locate her. Stated he had no interest maintaining relationship. Stated Mrs. Ellery had several hundred dollars own money. Greene uncertain name of landlady Miller or Milton. Moved to hotel. Married present wife 1934. Two sons. Couldn't remember Barkley Street number. Search of district disclosed place torn down 1939. Owner Mrs. Bertha Mills died 1939. Unable locate anyone who recalled Mrs. Ellery under real name or as Mrs. Greene. Files show never reported missing. Check of directories 1931 1932 for someone living Barkley Street address now in progress. Further report will follow. Any evidence your office foul play in Mrs. Ellery's disappearance.

Domenic Valeggia

Chief of Police

Bonham, California"

Jim emitted a soundless whistle and laid the report on the table. "Valeggia," he said, "is way ahead of me."

Presently he added, "Too far ahead. I'm nursing along a different idea about Rita. Dim, so far, but different."

"What?"

"Oh, I'm seeing her as the Avenger. Coming back full of hatred of her mother-in-law, some kind of a big fight between them, Rita following Mrs. Ellery to the funeral and shooting her from the wood." He quirked an eyebrow. "How's that hit you?"

"I don't know—there's this thing from California——"

"A rooming house," he reminded her, "isn't the ideal spot for staging a murder. Greene would have to kill her without her having a chance to utter a sound, get her body out of the house unseen, get her clothes out ditto, cook up a remarkably plausible tale for the landlady and Rita's acquaintances—she must have made some around there—and then dispose of her body so that it was never found. It would take a lot of doing."

Margaret nodded in agreement. "And why should he? She had no legal claim on him. If he was fed up, all he had to do was walk out on her."

"That's not always easy." Jim's ankle throbbed steadily. He leaned forward and shifted it. "But if he is telling the truth and she did leave him, if she's been on her own, ashamed to come back and face everyone, if she's been brooding over what happened all these years——"

"That's it. The mother-in-law she hated became the symbol of her ruined life, the one she blamed for everything. You've solved your case!"

He gave her a wry smile. "Don't go so fast, baby. When last heard of Rita Kubiak was in Bonham, California. That was seventeen years ago. But"—his tone became meditative—"it would answer a lot of things."

"And later on, when the investigation is dropped, with Lucas and Anna Ellery both dead, she's free to see her daughters."

"Yes," said Jim. He lacked Margaret's positiveness. The weak spots in his thesis took up too much space in his mind.

Chapter 9

Dr. Crusely looked at Jim's bare foot. He looked at his knee and upper leg above where the cast ended. He prodded them gently here and there. "Circulation's fine," he stated. He slid the slipper back on Jim's foot and got up out of the crouch he had been in. "It's coming along nicely. When does Dr. Melville want to see it again?"

"Next week. He's going to put something on it so I can start getting around better."

"That's fine. Is it paining you at night? Are you sleeping well?"

"Melville gave me some pills."

"Well, then, you're all taken care of."

The county detective opened the cigarette box on the table and held it out to the other man. "Sit down, Doctor, and have one with me. I'd like to talk to you if you can spare a few minutes."

Dr. Crusely accepted a cigarette, the light Jim offered, and sat down, eying the detective guardedly. "I was under the impression this was a professional call, Mr. O'Neill. When your wife phoned she said you wanted me to look at your ankle."

"So I did. And you have looked at it. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to ask you a few questions about Lucas Ellery's death."

"Why should I mind? But there's not much I can tell you except that he died of a coronary thrombosis."

"You said that Mrs. Ellery's death was from coronary causes too," Jim reminded him softly. "Naturally, the coincidence catches my attention."

The doctor reddened. "Lucas Ellery," he began evenly, "was seventy-five years old, the robust type of man who is never ill and won't make concessions to his age. He was on the go every minute the day he died, he ate a big dinner with his family that night and, on top of it, he had two or three drinks. He had the attack, and he was unconscious when I got to him. His temperature and blood pressure were low, his pulse weak, his whole appearance cyanotic. We put him to bed—you couldn't move him to a hospital

in his condition—I administered digitalis intravenously and followed the treatment for shock.”

“He died without regaining consciousness?”

“Yes. There wasn’t the least question of the cause of death in my mind, but I notified Dr. Wright, the medical examiner, at once, of course. He came over and was in full agreement with my diagnosis.” The doctor had been consuming his cigarette with quick, deep puffs. He leaned forward and stabbed it out in the ash tray, finding in the action some release for the anger he was holding in check.

“I see.” Jim took a last puff on his own cigarette and put it out. He held the butt in one hand, tore off the paper and watched the tobacco drop out of it. He rolled the paper into a ball and flicked it into the ash tray. He said, “Let’s go back to Mrs. Ellery, Doctor.”

They went through it again: Anna Ellery’s body on the couch in the library, her general medical history, the grief and strain of her husband’s death, her unwise exertion in attending the Chesery funeral with its reminders of her own recent loss . . .

“I took all that into consideration. Her death seemed natural, practically inevitable, one might say.” Dr. Crusely spoke rapidly, defensively. “Her age too . . . And why should I have looked for a bullet wound? There was no blood; she’d fainted, they said, and she was just lying there.” He hesitated, pinching his lower lip between thumb and forefinger, seeking words to explain the orderliness of the scene that carried no suggestion of violence.

“The family was around her, one of the girls was crying—but Anna looked as peaceful as anyone could, lying there. Her things were on a chair near the couch——”

“Her things? Oh, her hat and pocketbook.”

“Yes. And her coat folded over the back of the chair.”

“Her coat?” Jim’s hand tightened around the arm of the chair. That was it. That was what had been troubling him about the scene at the cemetery. Anna Ellery’s dangling arm as she was carried away again presented itself. The long black sleeve—a coat sleeve, of course!

“Good God,” he thought in chagrin. “I’m slipping.”

Keeping his voice matter-of-fact, he said, “She wore a coat to the funeral?”

"Why——" The doctor's gesture conveyed uncertainty. "I don't know if she wore it. But it was on the chair."

"One of the granddaughters—Mrs. Delmaine I believe it was—told us that what she had on at the undertaker's, plus her hat, gloves, and pocketbook, was what she wore. I'm afraid no one ever brought up the point of a coat. It was a warm day; it didn't even occur to anybody that she might have worn one."

Dr. Crusely shrugged. "There was a little shower though. And Mrs. Ellery was apt to fuss about drafts and catching cold and so on."

"Well, I don't know why I waste time talking about it. It's of no importance." Jim sounded as if he meant what he said. His next remark dismissed the lifeless body on the couch and the coat entirely. "You've known the family a long time, I understand."

"I came to Warrenton in 1904. I met the Ellerys soon afterward."

"And became engaged to Maggie Ellery?"

"Yes." A fresh surge of anger darkened the doctor's face. "But that was long ago. A private matter. It has nothing to do with your case, Mr. O'Neill."

"I don't know . . . I'm trying to find out. I've been told that it was quite near your wedding day when she broke the engagement. Is that correct?"

"Yes." Dr. Crusely spat the word out from between his teeth.

Jim raised his hands in a motion intended to soothe. "Believe me, Doctor, I don't like prying into people's private lives any more than they like having me do it. But I've got to get the Ellerys straightened out in my mind. I can't leave fenced-in areas in their affairs."

"You can leave a girl forty years in her grave alone," the older man snapped. He got to his feet. "I have patients to see, Mr. O'Neill. You'll have to excuse me."

"Just one more question: how did Mrs. Ellery react to the broken engagement?"

Dr. Crusely bent to pick up his bag, straightened himself, and glared down at the county detective. "Obviously, she tried to patch it up, she was on my side. I became her doctor, didn't I? I wouldn't have if she'd been against me."

"I suppose not. . . . She hadn't much influence with her sister-in-law?"

"No one did. Maggie was willful . . ." Momentarily forgetting Jim, the doctor looked past him at his own memories. He said, "I wish you'd try to leave her out of it."

He was gone swiftly without waiting for Jim's answer. As the front screen door closed after him the county detective heard a car stop outside. He sat back. That would be Cobb.

After a perfunctory rap on the door his subordinate entered the house and came on to the living room.

"Hello," he said. "How you feeling?"

"Okay. Hey, what d'you think you're doing?"

"Sitting down, of course." The big detective, lowering himself into a chair, looked at Jim in surprise. "What else would you call it?"

"You haven't got time for sitting down right now. Get over to the Ellery house. I want Mrs. Ellery's coat." He gave Cobb a terse account of what Dr. Crusely had told him about it.

Cobb whistled. "My God, we missed up good and proper. Goodrich, he won't like it."

"I don't like it myself," Jim pointed out. "But get the coat now and have someone take it to the lab right away. You come back here."

It was Joan Ellery who answered the door when the detective rang the bell. Her eyes widened over his errand. "Gran's coat? But she wasn't wearing it!"

"She was carrying it then."

"Just a moment." The girl turned toward the stairs and called, "Blanche!"

"What do you want?" Blanche came to the head of the stairs.

"There's a detective here for Gran's coat. He says she was wearing it that day."

"Or carrying it," put in Cobb, who had an exact, literal mind.

"I said she wasn't," Joan added.

"Why—yes, she had it with her. I'd forgotten. She sent me upstairs for it at the last minute."

"Where is it now?"

"I haven't seen it or thought of it since I gave it to her. I'll look in her closet . . ." Blanche's voice died away as she turned toward her grandmother's bedroom. She reappeared empty-handed and came quickly down the stairs. "It's not there. Joan, the hall closet . . ."

The two girls looked in the front hall closet, the back hall closet, the dining-room closet. They went upstairs and Cobb could follow the search being made overhead by the sound of their footsteps. The coat was becoming more and more important. He waited uneasily.

At last the two girls came back downstairs. "I can't understand it," Joan said in bewilderment. "It doesn't seem to be in the house."

It was Cobb who cleared up the mystery. He went to the telephone and called the people who had been present when Anna Ellery died. When he reached Mrs. Rankin she said, "Oh yes, it's here. It was raining for a few minutes just as I went home that day. The coat was lying over a chair and I picked it up and threw it across my shoulders. I've been meaning to return it, but I kept forgetting. I'm sorry, Sergeant. I hope it wasn't too serious."

Calling him sergeant didn't improve Cobb's humor. He said heavily, "It was serious. When someone dies like Mrs. Ellery did you don't remove evidence."

She gave a cry of dismay. "Oh dear! I'll bring it right over."

"All right. One of the girls can identify it."

The three of them waited in the hall. Blanche said, "We haven't allowed Mrs. Rankin the freedom of our house. She had no right to take Gran's coat without asking."

"I don't suppose she thought anything of it," Joan observed.

Cobb was in agreement with Blanche. He looked on her more kindly than on her younger sister.

A minute later they saw Mrs. Rankin hurrying past the house next door and rushing up the drive. She was breathless when she arrived.

"I'm so sorry," she panted. "I never dreamed——" Her glance went from Cobb to the two girls. "I don't know

what you think of me—making off with your grandmother's coat——”

“It's all right,” Joan assured her. “Really it is.”

Blanche was silent on that point and so was Cobb. He was spreading out the black broadcloth coat for their inspection. “This the one she took that day?”

“Yes.”

He folded it over his arm and let his hard, thick-lidded eyes rest on Mrs. Rankin. “You see her wearing it?”

“She put it on when the storm started to blow up. I remember wondering how she could want it and——”

“Okay. Thanks.” He departed bearing his prize and didn't examine it until he was in his car.

There was no break in the outer seam of the right shoulder. Excitement mounted in him while he fumbled with the shoulder pad. His big spatulate fingers enlarged the tear in it until they brushed against the small, hard object lodged in the cotton padding. They had the bullet at last.

He left it where it was and drove to the cemetery. There he told a grateful state police officer and a Warrenton supernumerary digging in the ground in the prescribed area around the Chesery grave that the search for the bullet was over. “All you gotta do now is look for the gun,” he added.

The state police officer set off with the coat for the laboratory in Hampton; the supernumerary joined the men still hunting for the gun in the wood; Cobb went back to Jim.

He found him in his back yard, crutches beside his chair. When Cobb appeared his superior was engaged in an argument with Sarah, who was in her play yard.

“You can't come out while Mommy's at the store,” he was saying. “You can't come out until she gets home.”

The little girl pounded on the gate and wailed, “I wanna sit with you, Daddy. I wanna!”

“What's the matter?” Cobb inquired. “You afraid she'll get away from you if you let her out?”

“Sure she will. And I can't chase her all over the place. She's got to stay there until Margaret gets back.” He scowled at his wailing daughter. “Damn it all, anyway! She

plays there every morning of her life and not a peep out of her. Just because I'm home she raises all this stink."

"Should I let her out?"

"No. She's got to learn to mind. And my wife's got to learn that I can't baby-sit and work on a murder case at the same time."

Cobb's face remained impassive. Only a hint of a twinkle showed in his eyes as he drew a chair up beside Jim's. He sat down and to the accompaniment of Sarah's gradually weakening protests he told his superior about finding the bullet.

"By God, we've finally got a break." The county detective was restored to good humor. "We've been running around in the dark and now we've got a starting point. We'll give the lab a couple of hours and then we'll call them. We'll keep after them until we get a report . . ." His voice trailed off into silence. After an interval he said, "I've been sitting here thinking about Harry Ellery and his guns. I tried to reach him, but he's not expected home until evening. Then I called the Veterans' Service Center to see if they knew what port he landed in when he came back from the war. He's never been near them, though, so they had no record. It will have to wait."

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because Customs will have on file a list of the guns he brought back, their make and serial number. He had two Lugers; he could have had two Berettas."

"Do you have to know what port he landed in? What about Washington?"

"I think I'll get it quicker from his port of debarkation. It'll keep. Did you finally see Fontaine?"

"Yeah. He got home late last night and I saw him this morning. That's what I was going to tell you about when you chased me off after the coat. He remembers that drowning like it happened yesterday. I guess it was the high spot in his life. He told me how she was sitting by the river and turned her head away when he went past her. And how her hat was beside her and the box. It was wrapped in brown paper, he said."

Cobb came to a full halt, letting his superior grasp the meaning of that for himself.

"Lord," said Jim. "Not necessarily the strongbox . . ."

The big detective nodded. "That's what I thought."

"Strader didn't mention the brown paper—neither did the newspaper stories——"

Cobb nodded again. "Mostly, it's forgotten. They figured it was the strongbox because that was gone and the one Lanny Fontaine saw was about the same size and shape. Hell, probably it was the strongbox—but still—— Then this past spring, Fontaine said, he was having his truck overhauled at Delmaine's place and him and Delmaine got to talking about it. Delmaine was all excited when he heard how the box was wrapped up. It could have been a box of old love letters or papers or anything, he said. So he went haring off to old man Ellery, bent on digging up the place with a bulldozer to see if maybe Maggie didn't take her money with her but buried it instead. Old Ellery wouldn't hear of it. He said they went into all that when she died. He said she didn't have any love letters and that she wrapped the strongbox up in case someone saw her. They had a big argument about it. Delmaine was having a fit just telling Fontaine what happened. The old man insisted he wasn't having the place torn up and the old story of his sister brought to life for the sake of a crazy idea like that. He said Maggie took the money with her and she was going to rest in peace, her name forgotten. And Mrs. Ellery backed him up. Delmaine's hipped on doing his bulldozing, but he told Fontaine you couldn't budge the old man once he made up his mind about something. Or his wife either. So he's been out of luck."

Jim was lying back, his eyes on Sarah, who was now playing in her sandbox. Without moving, he said, "Get Delmaine on the phone, will you? Ask him to come over."

Chapter 10

"Look here," Norman Delmaine said vehemently, "just because the old man up and died I didn't get any ideas about getting rid of her too. Sure they wouldn't let me dig up their lawn. But I'm like anybody else; all my life people have been stopping me from doing things I wanted to do. I haven't been getting a gun and shooting them, account of that."

"No one thinks you have," Jim told him. "What I want is to hear your ideas about the strongbox."

They were in a semicircle under the tree. Sarah had been studying Norman since his arrival. He seemed to fascinate her; her eyes followed the motions of his hands and shoulders, which he used to supplement the spoken word, and the flashing glances he divided between her father and Cobb. Hanging on the gate of her play yard, she regarded him fixedly.

"I suppose you think they're screwy the way the rest of them do!"

"Not at all. Who thinks they are?"

"The whole damn family. Except my wife and maybe Tess and Roy. They're ready to see me try it—Roy is, anyway, as long as it doesn't cost him a cent. The others don't want any part of it, though. Harry and the aunt Laura and the girls and, of course, the old people when they were alive. I told them the lawn would be put back as good as ever. But the old man wouldn't listen to me. He said his father had it set out close to eighty years ago when the house was built, and I wasn't going to tear it up. The old lady said the same thing."

Jim shook cigarettes loose in a pack and offered them. Norman pulled out his lighter and flourished the flame under each cigarette.

"You can probably talk them around eventually," the county detective commented.

The other man sent him a wary glance. "I don't know—it would be tough going," he said vaguely. "I haven't given it any thought."

"But you do feel Maggie Ellery may have buried her strongbox somewhere on the grounds; and the only thing you have to back it up is what Fontaine told you about the box she had with her being wrapped in paper."

Jim's voice was neutral. It merely stated facts. Norman, however, became even more animated in defense of his theory. He waved his arms. "My God, she set a lot of value on her money, didn't she? She told people it was all she had! When she felt that way about it, would she want it lost on the bottom of the river?"

"You can argue it both ways," Jim informed him. "The money was her dearest possession and, setting out to drown herself, she wanted to take it along."

"I figure it the other way," Delmaine replied stubbornly. "And if I'm right, she buried it on the grounds. It wasn't in the house or the barn, and she never went anywhere else except to the bank and for walks by the river. People who're off their rockers, what do they do with their valuables? They hide them! Sometimes they bury them. Like the old lady next door to us when I was a kid. She was nuts, and she buried all kinds of stuff: a silver thimble she thought a lot of, and insurance papers, and a purse with her pension in it, and God knows what all. I thought of her the minute Lanny Fontaine told me about the box. I told Ellery it could have been a box of love letters—anything."

"And he said he knew of none."

"Yes, but what did that mean? I think Maggie Ellery had a cardboard box with her and it fell apart when it got wet. They dragged the river, didn't they? They would have found a heavy thing like the strongbox."

"It could be that they didn't hit the right spot."

"Okay, okay!" Delmaine flung back his head. "So maybe I'm wrong! But it's worth a try, isn't it? She had around eighty thousand. You'd expect the old people to say go ahead, wouldn't you?"

Jim shook his head. "I don't know. Apparently they thought more of their lawn than your theory. Remember, they knew Maggie Ellery. She lived with them. They were convinced she took the money to the bottom of the river with her."

Norman cried angrily, "It's easy for you to be so

goddamn reasonable about it! The money doesn't mean a thing to you!"

"No. But it is my job to find out who killed Mrs. Ellery. If the money played a part in her death, it means plenty to me."

Jim's flat, emotionless tone quashed the younger man's sudden burst of temper. He ran an anxious eye over the two detectives and laughed uncertainly. "I'm a hothead," he declared. "Always have been. I blow off steam that way. The minute I've shot my mouth off I calm down."

"Do you?" said Jim, neither believing nor disbelieving him.

When Delmaine left Cobb's light, almost colorless eyes met his superior's. The latter answered the question in them without waiting to have it voiced.

"I don't think so," he said. "But, hell, I've been wrong more times than I can count." He looked at his wrist watch. "You'd better get started if you're going to make Boston early enough to see anyone at that outfit today."

"Yeah." Cobb pulled himself to his feet. "Industrial Sales Association. Jonathan Rankin, consultant." He stood looking down at Jim. "There's something about his widow I don't get."

"Mrs. Rankin? What?"

The detective shrugged. "I dunno. Maybe I'll find out from these people her husband worked for. But she's—well, you only saw her once. I saw her three or four times. She's always trying to please everybody. It seems like——"

The struggle to frame his thoughts into words was visible on his broad face. He wasn't used to it. It was facts with which he dealt superbly. "Maybe she ought to relax more," he brought out at last.

"She's on the make for Crusely. That could account for it."

"We'll see. When I get to Boston. And I'd better get going."

He moved off toward the drive, stopping at the play yard. He pulled a handful of change out of his pocket. Sarah eyed him solemnly while he was selecting a coin. "Here, kid," he said. "Here's a nickel for an ice-cream cone."

Her smile flashed and she reached out for it, but Jim halted the transaction. "Hey, don't give her money, Cobb. She'd put it in her mouth."

"Oh, I never thought of that." The detective turned a crestfallen face toward him. Sarah's lengthened, too, when she saw the coin being taken away. "Ice-cream cone!" she shouted imperiously.

"Look, hon, I'll give it to your daddy and he'll buy one for you. Okay?"

Tears sprang to her eyes. She was silent in her overwhelming sorrow.

"Sarah——" Jim began, and stopped as Margaret drove into the yard.

"Mommy!" The little girl rushed to the far side of the play yard. "Hello, Mommy. Hello, Mommy." The ice cream cone was forgotten.

Cobb sighed in relief and crossed the lawn to drop the nickel into Jim's hand. "You buy it for her."

"Thanks," said Jim. "Very nice."

When he was gone and Margaret had carried the groceries into the house she said, "Let's have lunch out here." To Sarah she added, "Picnic in the yard, darling. Won't that be fun?"

"Yes," replied her daughter. "Can I come out now?"

"You certainly can." Margaret unfastened the gate and Sarah raced away to the house next door. "Mrs. Oldfield!" she called from the back steps. "Mrs. Oldfield!"

Mrs. Oldfield opened the door. "Why, look who's here," she said. "Come right in."

"What does she do over there all the time?" Jim asked.

"She talks," Margaret informed him. "Martha Oldfield's a good listener. And she helps her. She dusts. She makes beds. She even dries the silver, Martha says, when she stays for lunch."

"She does? I don't see her helping you around here."

"No," said Margaret. "It's one of the great mysteries. They never want to do a damn thing in their own homes."

They had their picnic lunch in the yard. There were comings and goings through the afternoon while Sarah took her nap and Margaret, with a martyred air, applied herself to a vast accumulation of mending. The county detective had barely settled himself in his chair by the

window when the telephone rang. It was the first of a series of calls that went on for the next hour.

Ap Wetherell rang the doorbell. Margaret let him in. "I'm the one from the *Warrenton Courier*," he reminded Jim.

"I remember." Jim, who found newspaper reporters a nuisance, spoke without notable enthusiasm.

"Tonight's our deadline. I dropped by to see if you couldn't give me something new on the Ellery case. The Buy British idea, you know: local weekly steals march on big town dailies."

"Sit down," Jim said, making an effort to be cordial. "Won't do you much good though. There isn't anything new."

"No," Ap sat down and lit a cigarette. "You've pulled off your gravediggers or whatever they were from the cemetery. They're still quartering the wood and the ravine, I noticed, but there's no one around the Chesery grave. You've found the bullet, haven't you?"

Jim drew in his lips in disgust. "We can't keep a thing to ourselves, can we? Yes, we have it. It's at the lab. No report yet."

"Boy! Any of the other papers heard about it?"

"No. Not from me."

"Swell! Did they find it near the Chesery grave?"

The detective sighed. "No."

"Where, then?"

"Oh hell."

Ap grinned his pleasant, companionable grin. "Was it in Mrs. Ellery's coat sleeve?" In answer to the other man's raised eyebrows he added, "I know you sent for the coat this morning."

"Do you? Let's see—which granddaughter is it you favor?"

"Joan. A little. Put it that way."

"Doesn't it interfere with reporting on the case?"

Ap looked less amiable. "No," he said. "I work at staying on the ethical side. Do you object to having me print what I've learned about the bullet?"

"I suppose not." Jim took a small, mean kind of satisfaction in appending, "By tomorrow, when your

paper comes out, one of the Hampton reporters will have it anyway."

For this he had to listen to a dissertation on the difference between a weekly and a daily newspaper, the shifts in emphasis and style. "—so you see," Ap concluded, "since we can't begin to compete with the dailies from the news angle we have to dream up special slants, be more detailed. Of course"—his grin reappeared—"we can always pray for a scoop on a thing like this bullet."

Margaret, engaged in putting, not too skillfully, a patch on a three-corned tear in a pair of Sarah's shorts, entered the conversation.

"What are you going to have in the *Courier* tomorrow about the town meeting?"

"More of what we ran last week. The town's got to face the need of a new school and so on."

"The Women's League is trying to get a very large membership attendance at the meeting," she told him.

"Good idea. But if you do, plenty of your older members will vote against it. Their children are past school age."

"They won't do that. We're a civic club."

Ap looked at her with the skepticism of experience. "Are you—when the pocketbook is hit? Wait and see. There'll be plenty of opposition. It'll be led by Ross Cready, who fancies himself as Warrenton's elder statesman. He'll say the schools are fine just as they are; that all the town needs to do is to cut out a few of the trimmings. And when the chips are down with a four-or five-mill increase in the tax rate staring everybody in the face, the meeting will vote to postpone action until next year when building costs might be down a bit."

"I'm going to bring along a copy of the state board's report on the undesirable effects of double sessions in the school," Margaret said. "That'll give them something to think about."

"Not Ross Cready and his kind," the reporter told her. "Taxes first is their motto."

Margaret shook her head hard. "Wait and see. We'll vote them down."

Ap looked at her with an amused twinkle in his eyes. "I hope you do. Right is on your side. But I'm afraid I don't believe it triumphs through its own invincible logic."

"After Monday you'll begin believing it," she assured him with tranquil certainty.

"The Ross Creadys are in for some rough going," Jim interposed. "I guess I'll put my money on the Women's League."

Ap laughed. "The organized minority, moving mountains." He turned back to Jim, asking questions about the Ellery case and making a few notes on the generalities he got in reply.

When he started to leave he lingered in the doorway, leaning against the doorframe, jingling coins in his pocket. His manner was indecisive.

"I hear you've been having inquiries made about Joan's mother, Mr. O'Neill. Oh, it's being done discreetly," he hurried on as Jim started to interrupt. "Point is, why do it at all?" He took a quarter out of his pocket, tossed it in the air and caught it on the back of his hand. "I'll make a deal with you. If you'll tell me why, I'll tell you something I heard about her from Joan. She doesn't think it means anything and said I could mention it to you if I wanted to. What you tell me will be off the record, of course."

The young man came to a full stop. He assumed a negligent air, his red-brown eyes moving lazily over the detective's face.

"I'll tell you all right. But you're making a poor bargain. I'm just fishing around where Rita Kubiak is concerned. So far as I know, there's nothing to tie her in with Mrs. Ellery's murder."

"Have you made any headway finding her?"

"We've traced her to California. She left the man she ran off with and we haven't picked up her trail from there."

"It was a good piece of work to trace her at all, considering how long she's been gone."

"It was routine," Jim told him dryly. "Police departments co-operate with each other." He lit a cigarette and asked, "What did the daughter tell you about her?"

Ap spun the quarter high in the air, missed catching it,

and bent to retrieve it from the floor. He said, "Years ago, before she was old enough to have started school, Joan dreamed her mother came back. It was a vivid dream, she said. She dreamed her mother came into her room one night and knelt by her bed. Her grandmother was there, too, and told Joan's mother she mustn't wake her up, she must come away. And the mother went. Joan told everyone about it the next day, saying her mother had come back to see her. Her grandmother said no, it was a dream. Joan says she's had the same dream a number of times down the years. But it was never as vivid as the first time and there were changes in it."

Jim studied him. "You think the first time it wasn't a dream. The mother did come back and was sent away by the Ellerys."

Ap shrugged. "I don't know." He tossed the quarter into the air and caught it.

"Would you mind putting that back in your pocket? It distracts me."

"Sorry." The young man returned the quarter to his pocket, started to jingle it against the other coins there, glanced at the detective and withdrew his hand hastily.

"Dreams," he murmured. "The whole subconscious. Fascinating."

"Fascinating is the word," Jim said. "But thanks, anyway."

"You're welcome. Thank you for the interview."

Ap said good-by to Margaret and left.

The county detective reached for the telephone directory, looked up the Ellery number and called it.

Joan Ellery answered. He told her he wanted to talk with her.

Chapter 11

At eight o'clock that evening an impromptu family conference was held at Laura Ellery's home. Half an hour earlier she had telephoned her nieces to tell them the county detective had asked Harry to come to see him. It was Blanche with whom she talked.

"I'm worried stiff," she said. "I can't imagine why he wants to see Harry. He doesn't know the first thing about your grandmother's death. He was at the park."

"I know. It can't be anything important. After all, he saw Joan this afternoon."

"He saw Joan? But he was away all day."

"I mean Mr. O'Neill, Aunt Laura. He asked Joan to come and see him."

"What did he want?"

"Well—I'd rather not tell you over the phone. You never know when the operator's listening."

"Come over then. I need to talk with someone. This house is so deathly quiet tonight that I'm walking the floor. I've even been out in the kitchen trying to carry on a conversation with Etta. But it's like talking to a wall. Do come over. Both you and Joan."

"Tess and Roy are here. And Norman and Elinor will be along. Mr. O'Neill sent for Norman this morning. So you see, he's talking with everyone. It isn't just Harry."

"I still don't understand it. Harry wasn't even around at the time. He was at the——"

"—park," Blanche supplied, a bored edge in her voice. "We'll all be over."

"Good. I'm anxious to know what's going on."

In the spacious, high-ceilinged living room at Laura Ellery's, Norman walked back and forth before the fireplace describing his interview with the county detective that morning and punctuating the account with expressive use of his hands, shoulders, and eyebrows.

Elinor, on the sofa near the fireplace, wasn't listening. She had heard it before. And Norman did get excited. Fond as she was of him, she wished he had a calmer

disposition. He got excited about everything. Years back, when they first met, Gran had said he wasn't a gentleman. Moderation and balance, she had said, were traits you found in men of breeding.

Joan and Tess, Elinor saw, looked amused. In a half-hidden, superior way. Blanche wasn't listening to Norman. She sat on the window seat, looking over the lawn with melancholy remoteness.

Joan said, "Mr. O'Neill doesn't seem to take your treasure hunt very seriously, Norm."

"He's as blind as the rest of you!"

"It's not blindness. It's common sense. The money's gone. We'd make ourselves ridiculous tearing that huge yard apart looking for it. And," Joan added a little bitterly, "we've had about as much publicity as I, for one, can stand. I don't want to see anything new started."

"Of course not," Roy Martin agreed. He cleared his throat. "Although I won't say that what Norman suggests isn't worth a try later on. Much later—when your grandmother's case is partly forgotten."

"I'm glad you didn't say solved, Roy," Blanche remarked from the window seat. "We don't want it solved, do we? It's queer to think that if it was, one of us might be tried and executed for killing her."

Her tone was reflective; it heightened the repellent effect of what she said. The others avoided looking at each other during the silence that ensued. Then Tess exclaimed sharply, "Do you have to say things like that? If Gran were here, she'd tell you it was in abominable taste."

"Yes." Blanche's eyes, still remote, rested on her sister. "I not only look like Mother, I behave like her, don't I? What she did was in abominable taste too."

Joan asked, "Blanche, what's got into you tonight? You know better than to talk that way."

Blanche looked at her younger sister and shook her head irresolutely. "I don't know . . . the awfulness of it. Gran trained us to be ladies, not to speak of unpleasant things that couldn't be helped . . . but now they're out in the open . . ." Her voice faded away.

"My dear child," Laura Ellery intervened. "You'll have to pull yourself together. We have enough to think of

without dwelling on your unfortunate mother, who has nothing to do with what's going on now."

"Oh, but Aunt Laura—" Joan turned her brown head to look at the older woman. "That may not be true. Mr. O'Neill wanted to see me about Mother this afternoon."

"Well! Of all things! What possible connection——"

"The dream I had about her long ago; the one where she came back and came into my room and knelt by my bed. When I was a little girl, Aunt Laura, and she hadn't been gone more than a year or so. I remember telling the rest of you that she came." The girl's eyes went from one face to another, stopping finally at her aunt's.

"Oh," said the latter. "Oh yes, that. I seem to remember it. You thought it was real and your poor grandmother——"

"You do remember," Joan cut in.

"How did Mr. O'Neill hear about it?" her aunt asked.

"I told Ap, and he told Mr. O'Neill."

Laura's pale blue eyes frosted with disapproval. "I'm disappointed in you, Joan. You oughtn't to talk over family matters with that newspaperman."

"But, Aunt Laura, we want to know the truth, don't we?" Blanche interjected.

"Yes, of course." But Laura Ellery's tone lacked conviction. Then it became complaining. "Telling old dreams, though. Really, it's too much!"

"O'Neill wouldn't be interested if he thought it was a dream," Norman said, his eyes narrowed in speculation. "He must think the girls' mother did come back and the old people wouldn't let her stay."

"Even so, what possible bearing——" Laura Ellery's thin figure stiffened as she perceived the direction the county detective's thoughts might be taking. "Why, he thinks Rita——"

"No!" Blanche cried strongly from the window seat. "That's not true! Mother was gentle, she was—kind—much kinder than Gran! She——" The girl buried her face in her hands and sobbed wildly.

Joan ran to her to offer comfort. She put her arms around her sister, saying, "Of course it's not true. It couldn't be true," while Elinor and Tess turned unfriendly

eyes on their aunt and Elinor told her it was wicked even to think such a thing.

"I didn't. It was that detective. . . . Oh, dear, let's not have a fuss. We'll have some coffee, perhaps a liqueur . . ." Laura Ellery stood up and pressed the buzzer beside the fireplace. "Blanche, please. This is so distressing."

Norman and Roy were silent, exchanging glances that said Jim O'Neill could be right.

Calm reigned again by the time Etta carried in the coffee service and set it on a table before Laura. She said "Good evening" to the others in her low toneless voice. Black was a bad color for her, Elinor thought. It gave a gray tinge to the woman's habitual pallor.

"There's cognac in the sideboard, Etta," Laura said. "Will you bring it in, please?"

"Aunt Laura, where does Etta come from?" Elinor asked after the coffee and brandy had been served and the maid had returned to the kitchen.

"She's from Philadelphia. What makes you ask?"

"Nothing. Except that it crossed my mind how little I know about her. She's not like Aggie Brenner who does my cleaning. I know Aggie's life story from the day she was born."

Tess, raising her cup to her lips, gave her twin sister a faint smile. "Etta's much too timid to turn criminal."

"I wasn't thinking of that!"

"She's too quiet," Laura observed. "It can be trying at times." She drank and set down her cup. "I do wish Harry would get back!"

"He's all right," Joan stated confidently. "Mr. O'Neill is really quite nice."

This brought a howl of derision from Norman. "Nice, she says! Use your head, Joan. He's out for blood."

"His wife is in the Women's League," Tess made comment. "She has a lot to say for a newcomer. She's always making motions that we take a stand on this issue or that one."

"She used to be a social worker," Elinor reminded her twin. "That's why she does it. Social worker and county detective—an odd combination."

"I like both of them," Joan announced.

Blanche left the window seat and crossed the room to drop down on a footstool near her sisters. "I didn't like him," she said. "He kept staring. His eyes went right through me. They gave me the shivers."

"What nonsense," Tess said.

Etta Mosely was not mentioned again.

In the kitchen she opened the refrigerator and took out a bottle of beer. On a warm summer night after her work was done it was her custom to drink one while she read the evening newspaper. There were always a few bottles kept on hand for her, although neither Laura nor Harry drank it.

Etta opened the bottle, sat down at the table, and poured it slowly into a glass. The beer was cold and bitter on her tongue. Almost too bitter, she thought.

It was dark when Harry's car swept up the drive past the living room. Laura got quickly to her feet. "Here he is at last!"

He came into the house through the door in the library. His mother hurried to meet him. "Are you all right, dear?"

"Naturally. Did you think O'Neill was going to use a truncheon on me?" He kissed her lightly on the top of the head while his eyes went around the group seeking Blanche. It was beside her that he sat down, moving the chair closer to the footstool she occupied.

She gave him a swift upward glance and a hesitant smile. His hand dropped over the side of the chair and his fingers closed around hers.

Laura returned to her chair. "Coffee, dear? What did that detective want?"

"No coffee, thanks. Brandy. He wanted to know what port I landed in coming back to the states."

"What port——" Her blank expression brought a sardonic smile to his lips.

He lit a cigarette and said, "That's how I felt when he asked me about it. Then he told me he was going to check with Customs on how many souvenir guns I brought into the country."

Blanche gave a startled gasp. His eyes met hers reassuringly. "It's okay. I'm not behind bars. But I never

thought of Customs, which was more than a little dumb of me."

"What in the world are you talking about?" Laura Ellery demanded.

"I had two Berettas and two Lugers, Mother." His glance went over them, settling on the men. "The girls might not have remembered that, but you fellows should have."

"For God's sake," said Norman. "You showed me your guns when you got home. But I don't know a thing about them and I didn't pay much attention."

"Neither did I," Roy Martin declared. "What are you getting at, anyway?"

"When I got back to the house the day Aunt Anna was shot," Harry began, speaking with deliberation, "Etta told me about it and that a detective had taken my guns. She gave me the receipt he made out for them—a receipt for two Lugers and one Beretta."

He paused. When he spoke again his tone had hardened. "It knocked me for a loop. I behaved like a damn fool. Instead of telling O'Neill that one of the Berettas was missing. I told him I only had one of them; two Lugers and one Beretta, I said. Then I was stuck with it. I've been waiting since Monday for one of you to produce the gun. I've been hoping there was some innocent reason for it to be missing. Well, there wasn't." His glance, as hard as his tone, raked them one by one. "O'Neill says the lab reported to him tonight that Aunt Anna was shot by a Beretta. My Beretta, of course. And I couldn't even tell him how long it had been gone. I don't know how many weeks it's been since I opened the drawer and looked at those guns."

In the silence that ensued Etta Mosely's tread sounded on the back stairs. Irrelevantly it crossed Laura Ellery's mind that the sound was heavier than it was usually. Etta was an unobtrusive woman; even her footfall was quiet.

Blanche's hand clung to Harry's. She looked up at him anxiously. "I hope you told Mr. O'Neill the truth tonight."

"My dear girl, I had no choice. It would have been pointless to deny the other Beretta and have him find out about it through Customs. I told him the whole story. For a while he was so burned up that I thought he'd arrest me

for withholding evidence. But then he calmed down. I told him I'd kept my mouth shut about the thing because I was afraid he'd think I did it. I told him I got panicky. Right now, I suppose, he has me down for all kinds of an ass, but that won't keep him from working like hell to get something on me."

"He can't!" Laura cried. "You were at the park."

"He'll go at it from the angle that there were a lot of people around and Webb Loman couldn't have kept his eyes on me every minute."

"Out of the question!" Laura was emphatic. "Webb would have missed you if you'd been away any length of time. But, oh dear, I wish you'd told about the gun right at the start. It isn't like you to lose your head that way."

Harry didn't answer. His glance went over the group again. "We're ignoring the main issue. All of you knew I had the guns, even though you say you didn't know how many there were."

Roy Martin's lips thinned in anger. "I don't like your tone, Harry. We weren't the only people who knew about your blasted guns and where you kept them. When you first got home you showed them to everyone who came into the house. The whole town knows you had them. I resent——"

"The whole town didn't have a motive for killing Aunt Anna," Harry interrupted.

"Harry," Blanche intervened. "Don't start an argument."

"None of us had a motive either," Norman declared hotly. "I'm going nuts trying to figure out who did."

"It was an accident," Laura said. "One of these days Mr. O'Neill will realize that he's making a big mistake."

"Oh, Mother," Harry protested.

"I keep wondering about Dr. Crusely saying it was her heart," Joan remarked. "It seems queer. A doctor should have known."

Her aunt sat up straighter, two spots of color flaring on her cheeks. "Joan, there isn't a finer man alive than Dr. Crusely! Your grandmother was his patient for years and they'd built up the pleasantest kind of relationship. It's utterly unfair to try to push this off on him. And there's no possible motive."

"Great-Aunt Maggie," Elinor suggested. "He was engaged to her. There might have been something——"

"That's too silly for words!" Laura Ellery, in love with her handsome doctor, flung tact to the winds in defense of him, adding sharply, "It's even sillier than bringing your mother into it. She's been gone only half as long as Maggie's been dead and she, as far as we know, is still alive."

This time it was Harry who restrained Blanche. His hand, closed around hers, felt the vibrance of her anger. "Aunt Laura," she began in a choked voice. "Aunt Laura, my mother didn't——"

"Of course she didn't," Harry said hastily. "Blanche, Mother didn't mean——"

"I should hope not," Tess chimed in. "Even to imply such a thing——"

"I'm not implying anything. You're the ones who are doing that." The older woman had regained command of herself. She continued in a milder tone, "I'm not accusing anyone in this sad affair. I say it was an accident. But if the rest of you want to make accusations against innocent people, please don't do it in my hearing. I always," she ended with much dignity and no truthfulness, "try to be fair in my judgments."

Norman smothered a disrespectful grin with his hand. Elinor said, "I'm glad you feel that way, Aunt Laura. After all the years that Mother's been gone the story about her is mostly forgotten. It would be too bad to revive it."

No one else spoke. Rita Kubiak, young and beautiful and desperate, hating her mother-in-law, running away from her home, abandoning her children, was uppermost in their thoughts.

Chapter 12

When Dr. Crusely rang the doorbell the next morning Margaret answered it. Jim was on the telephone talking with Cobb, who had called him from Boston. He nodded to the doctor and waved him to a chair.

Cobb said, "I can't figure it out. If they were separated for fifteen years before he died, why's she putting on the act about Jonathan this and Jonathan that? I've seen the whole bunch at Industrial Sales right down to the office boy. And nobody could tell me a thing about Mrs. Rankin. Except when they lived together they used to own a home in Plymouth. I thought I'd drive there before I start back and see what I can find out."

"Yes, do that. This thing"—Jim glanced at the doctor—"has got a little fancier since yesterday. Etta Mosely was poisoned—or took poison herself—last night."

"Chrissake!"

"Yes indeed. Make it back here as soon as you can. So long."

"Good-by."

The county detective put the receiver back in its place. He looked at the other man and said, "Well, Doctor?"

"I've just come from the hospital. They're running tests now. She's had her stomach washed out and two transfusions."

"Is she going to live?"

The doctor's gesture disclaimed knowledge of that. "They're doing their best. And she has a strong constitution; that's in her favor."

"I talked to Rosenberg this morning. I couldn't get our man, Greer."

"He's working with Rosenberg in the laboratory. They've already ruled out a number of substances. That narrows it down. Just before I left the hospital Rosenberg telephoned the state lab. Lee suggested acetanilid. I don't know what made him hit on that, but they're going to test for it."

The county detective nodded. He said slowly, "It would

be out of the ordinary But getting back to last night Doctor—will you run through it again?"

"I got the call at ten minutes to eleven. Exactly." The doctor's smile was dry. "I'm being careful about anything that concerns the Ellerys. I looked at my watch. It was Harry who called me. He said Etta had had some kind of attack. The bathroom showed evidence that she had vomited. Apparently she was headed for it again when she dropped to the floor. Harry said—but you've seen him, you know what he said."

"I'd just as soon hear it again."

"Well, he said his mother and he had come upstairs and were talking for a minute in the doorway to his room. The maid's is right above it and they heard her fall. She was unconscious on the floor when they reached her. Harry picked her up and put her on the bed. Mrs. Ellery covered her with blankets while Harry called me."

"And when you saw her?"

"Her pulse and respirations were feeble, her temperature——"

"How about her color?"

All expression was erased from the doctor's face. "She was blue—cyanotic." He flung the words at the younger man.

Jim's gaze wandered away from him. "In fact, Doctor, if it had been the first sudden illness in the case, you might have thought the woman had suffered a heart attack?"

The doctor's silence answered for him. Then he said, "I might have."

"As it was, you called an ambulance and rushed her to a hospital. Lucas Ellery was too ill to be moved, though, you told me."

"Yes." Dr. Crusely's guard went down before the direct assault. He looked down, sighing heavily.

"You realize that we'll have to get an exhumation order for him, don't you—after this?"

"Oh yes." There was much bitterness in the doctor's voice. "Is it any use saying the average doctor, practicing in a place like Warrenton, doesn't run into murder more than two or three times in his life? And when he does, it's not apt to be a subtle affair. It's usually violent, bloody——"

He raised his head. "I shan't get over the mistake I made about Mrs. Ellery. But her husband's another matter. Even if your suspicion is correct, I'll still insist that any doctor, under similar circumstances, would have made the same diagnosis."

"Yes, I'll grant you that. . . . Do you think I am right about Lucus Ellery?"

The doctor looked at Jim unhappily. "I don't know. It could be." He stood up, anxious to leave, to get away from a setting that would convey humiliation to him whenever he remembered it.

After he had said good-by to the older man Jim put in a call to the hospital and this time reached Dr. Greer. "How's it going?" he asked.

"The woman's still alive. If her kidneys hold up and her blood count and so forth, she may pull through. We've isolated the poison. It was what Lee suggested: acetanilid."

"I don't believe I've ever had a case where it was used."

"Probably not. Arsenic's more popular. Better known."

"How would you get hold of acetanilid, and how would you give it to someone?"

"You'd buy it over the counter in a drugstore. It's used in headache remedies. It's soluble in water, alcohol, or what-have-you. Odorless but bitter as the devil. Alcohol, I guess, would be your best bet for disguising the taste. You'd serve it up to your victim in a drink. I've never," Dr. Greer added, "come across a homicidal acetanilid poisoning. A few suicides and a few accidental cases. That's all."

"How big a dose would kill? I mean, could you get enough into one drink to do it?"

"Good lord, man, I don't know. Five grains, ten grains—sometimes people have recovered from even larger doses. It depends on the individual. For instance, from what the Mosely woman threw up in her bathroom and what we've pumped out of her stomach here, we're estimating an ingestion of eight to ten grains. So far she's still alive. . . . See how it is?"

Jim said he did. He thanked the doctor, pressed down the telephone plunger to break the connection and, when he got the operator again, put in a call to the state's

attorney. He asked the latter to secure an exhumation order from the coroner for the body of Lucas Ellery.

Margaret served a family lunch early that day instead of feeding Sarah first and taking her upstairs for her nap.

"There's a wonderful sale going on in Hampton," she announced at the table. "Prince's is advertising a group of occasional chairs that were priced at eighty to a hundred dollars for fifty-five."

"Well, what about them? Sarah, eat with your spoon.

The little girl substituted a spoon for her fist in scooping up baked potato. She glanced at her father with conscious virtue and raised the spoon to her mouth.

"Daddy, are there really any giants?"

"No. What about Prince's, Margaret?"

"Helen Saunders called and said she's driving in this afternoon. I thought I'd go with her and at least look at the chairs. You told me last month that I could get one for the empty corner past the bookshelves, and they sound like good buys. I was wondering about colors though. Don't you think something bright would go all right there?"

"You know I'm not much on decorating. Whatever you like."

Sarah picked up her glass of milk, held it at an angle that ignored the law of gravity and said, "There are so giants, Daddy. Leila says there's one on the hill and he comes down at night and eats people up."

"There are no giants on the hill or anywhere," Jim informed his daughter flatly. He eyed his wife with suspicion. "If you're going to Hampton, what about Sarah?"

"Helen's picking me up at one. Pam will be here before three. I thought in the meantime Sarah could take her nap on the bed you're using in the dining room and then, if she should wake up before Pam gets here, you'd have no problem of her being upstairs and you down and," Margaret paused long enough to draw in a quick breath but not long enough for Jim to insert the indignant refusal that hung on his lips, "she probably won't wake up anyway. You won't have to think about her at all."

He got in his refusal, but it was overridden. Margaret was reasonable. It wasn't, she pointed out, as if she were

asking him to mind the child when he should be working on his case. Pam Oldfield was coming before three, Sarah would be asleep, it was simply a matter of someone in the house . . .

She opened up the folding bed and put Sarah into her pajamas. It was done quickly; she had her daughter settled with a doll, the dishes cleared from the table and was ready to leave the house while Jim was still saying that she'd have to make some other arrangement.

A horn outside cut short his protests. Margaret kissed Sarah and him good-by and hurried off.

He sat down by the window in the living room. Sarah's eyes were wide and alert, watching him through the open door between the two rooms. They looked as if sleep was something foreign to them.

"Daddy," the little girl called, "how do you know there aren't any giants?"

"I just know it. Be quiet now, and take your nap."

"I want my own pillow."

"You'll have to use mine. Take your nap, I said."

He opened his file on the Ellery case. But Sarah didn't go to sleep. She was thirsty, she didn't like the pillow, she wanted her rabbit in bed with her instead of the doll, she wanted Jim to read her a story.

He allowed her to go upstairs for her own pillow and the rabbit. He went out to the kitchen for the glass of water. When Sarah took only one small sip from it and said, "That's all," he controlled an impulse to throw the rest of it over her. He said, "Go to sleep," on a rising tide of exasperation.

There was too much light in the room, she told him, after he was back in his chair.

"Get up and draw the shades."

That was a mistake. One of them snapped up to the top of the window and light flooded the dining room. His face grim, Jim swung himself out to the window. He lowered the shade to the sill, turned to the bed and fixed a formidable scowl on his daughter. "If I hear one more word out of you, young lady—just one more, I'm going to tie a handkerchief around your mouth so you won't be able to talk."

Her giggle lacked certainty. "Oh, Daddy. You're teasing."

"Am I? I'm no surer of that than you are."

He was a big purposeful figure standing over her. Sarah measured him with the eye of experience. She said to herself, "Daddy's mad at me," and turned her back on him. Her thumb sought her mouth. In another minute while he still stood over her she was, unbelievably, asleep.

Jim went back to his chair, moving as silently as the crutches permitted and closing the door between the two rooms. He sat down. The house was blessedly quiet. His anger at Margaret for leaving him to cope with their child lessened to irritation and then was dismissed completely from his mind.

He thought about Etta Mosely, middle-aged, timid, keeping to herself, frightened of him or of something during his one interview with her. A bottle of beer, Laura Ellery said, was a nightly indulgence.

Laura Ellery bought the beer, ordering it by the case from her grocer. Unless there were guests who drank some of it, a case lasted two or three weeks. How long ago had she ordered the case now on hand? About two weeks ago. Where was it kept? It stood in the back hall closet and Etta put a few bottles at a time in the refrigerator. Had she drunk any last night? Yes. Bottle and glass had been rinsed out and left on the drainboard of the sink.

If Etta Mosely hadn't taken the poison herself, someone with ready access to the house, familiar with its arrangements, had used the beer to cover the taste of acetanilid.

An hour ago Detective Bailo had re-examined the medical supplies in the two Ellery households. He had found no drugs containing acetanilid in either place. But the search made in Etta Mosely's room had uncovered one noteworthy fact: the woman did not have letters or photographs or any other mementos of her past life.

Etta—Rita, Jim said to himself. If Etta were Rita Kubiak, returned to Warrenton to be near her daughters, she must have felt safe from recognition. He took out of the file the snapshot of Rita that Laura Ellery had turned

over to Cobb. Blanche was like her mother, who had the same wealth of fair hair, the same high cheekbones tapering down to a delicate chin, the same wide-spaced eyes. But Rita had a greater claim to beauty, and her expression was more animated, more self-confident.

Could she have become the drab, worn-looking woman who worked for Laura Ellery? Yes, she could. Life could knock the hell out of you. . . .

He put the snapshot back in the file. It was no use thinking about it until they heard from the Philadelphia police. A routine request for information on Etta Mosely's background had been sent to them two days ago; a follow-up marked urgent had gone out in the early hours of the morning after her removal to the hospital. Some information on her should come through soon. . . .

Jim leaned back and closed his eyes. The activities of the night had left him feeling tired and dull. He thought about Etta, setting aside the possibility that she was Rita Kubiak and had poisoned herself.

Was she a blackmailer trying to cash in on something she knew about Anna Ellery's murder? She seemed too self-effacing for the part. . . .

In the quiet of the room the county detective drifted into a state between waking and sleeping. His thoughts moved ahead to the small hours of the next morning when Lucas Ellery's grave would be opened. He had participated in similar scenes; he knew how they were enacted: the hooded lights, the low voices, the tension, the eeriness, the empty grave being filled in, the ambulance starting off for the laboratory, its motor sounding too loud in the hushed stillness.

Tomorrow, no one walking in North Cemetery would be able to tell that Lucas Ellery's grave, beside his wife's brand-new one, lacked its occupant.

Jim had no doubts concerning the need for the exhumation order. Lucas and Anna—both had been murdered, he with acetanilid. They were an elderly couple, ostensibly of blameless conduct, and living on the thin edge of nothing financially. Nevertheless, they had been murdered. . . .

In his drowsy state Jim's mind became removed from him. As if from a distance it speculated and pondered over

such unrelated circumstances as insuring safe concealment in the wood, the chronic lack of accuracy in witnesses who missed half that went on, the whereabouts of Harry Ellery's second Beretta, Joan Ellery's dream about her mother, the availability of acetanilid that foredoomed to failure the inquiries that would be made at Warrenton drugstores.

These were some of the thoughts that came and went through his mind while he half dozed in the chair. Another one, a thought that carried a clue to the identity of the murderer, slipped out from among the rest, gave him a glimpse of itself and was gone. It brought him upright in the chair, wide-awake, straining to recapture it and defeating his purpose by the very intensity of the effort he made.

He swore helplessly. This was on a par with his earlier effort to remember what he had overlooked when Anna Ellery was being carried from the cemetery. . . . No, it was worse. He couldn't even pin his vagrant clue down to a place or time or person. Wait a minute, though—wasn't it tied in with one of the statements taken the day of the murder?

He opened his file and began looking through it. By the time he had finished his fruitless study Sarah was awake and Pam Oldfield, breathless and apologetic over being late, arrived to take charge of her. For the next fifteen minutes until his daughter was dressed and taken out for a walk the detective found it impossible to concentrate. Then silence settled over the house again. He picked up Anna Ellery's scrapbook in the faint hope that it would help him to track down his clue. But it was no more useful than his file had been. He came to the last entry the dead woman had pasted in, a newspaper clipping on her husband's funeral, and turned past it to the half-dozen empty pages remaining in the book. His expression was sour. At his present rate of progress the empty pages would stay empty. None of the family, if so minded, would have the chance to paste in an account of the arrest of Anna Ellery's murderer.

The telephone rang. A state police officer was calling to report that a second teletype had been received from the chief of police of Bonham, California. He read it aloud to

Jim. It said that two women had been located who roomed in the house on Barkley Street when Anthony Greene was living there with Rita. They remembered her well. She left the house one morning carrying two suitcases and cried on the way downstairs to a taxi. That was the last time either of the women saw her. Anthony Greene had been questioned and continued to insist that he had had no contact with Rita since her departure from the Barkley Street address seventeen years ago. The Bonham police chief considered the possibility of foul play ruled out and was closing his investigation. If there were any further developments with which he could assist the county detective, he would be glad to do so.

"You'll want a copy, won't you?" the state police officer asked at the end.

"Yes. You can mail it to me. There's no rush about a copy of that." Jim hung up and slumped back disgustedly in the chair. The California lead had been promising. It had come to nothing.

He had just lit a cigarette when the telephone rang again. The man stationed outside Etta Mosely's hospital room was reporting in before he went off duty.

"She's conscious now," he informed his superior. "They say she's got a good chance to pull through. Her story is she didn't take the poison herself and she don't know how it was given to her. Except the beer she drank last night was bitter. That's when she told Doc Greer. He'll call you about it, I guess. But they won't let no one from our office question her yet."

"Anyone tried to see her?"

"No. I'm right outside the door to her room and there's a nurse with her all the time. The nurse and me are hitting it off fine. She says Mrs. Ellery's phoned three times today to ask how the woman's getting on. And Crusely stopped in half an hour ago. I kept an eye on him from the doorway but he just looked at her and talked to the nurse a minute and left."

"Who's guarding her now?"

"Barnaby came on to relieve me."

"Okay."

Dr. Greer was the next to telephone. He said Etta was showing some improvement. "If it keeps up," he went on

genially, "you fellows will have a chance to talk to her sooner than I thought. But it won't do you much good. She says she didn't take acetanilid herself. She thinks it was in the bottle of beer she drank. It tasted bitter and afterward, she told me, she began to have trouble breathing. She went to bed, couldn't sleep, became nauseated. She threw up in the bathroom and tried to make the hall to call Mrs. Ellery. Then she passed out."

"Did you ask her if she'd seen anyone handling the beer?"

"No. I'm here as a consultant. Remember? I'm trying to help pull her through, not to cross-examine her."

"All right, Hippocrates. Good-by."

Jim hung up and the telephone rang. The state police officer with whom he had talked earlier was on the wire. He read aloud a teletype that had come in from the Philadelphia police. It stated that no woman of the name given on Etta Mosely's reference lived or had lived during the past ten years at the address listed; no Etta Mosely was listed in the city directory during the same period or with any of the employment agencies specializing in domestic help.

The county detective called Laura Ellery. "Did you check Etta Mosely's reference when you hired her?" he asked.

"Why, no, I didn't. I went to Blumwald's to apply for someone. She was registering when I got there and I talked with her. She made a favorable impression on me and it is hard to get anyone nowadays, so I hired her on the spot. I did write once to the woman for whom she'd worked seven or eight years. When I didn't get a reply Etta said she was probably away, she traveled a good bit, and the letter hadn't been forwarded to her. Time went by and Etta was doing her work well and I just didn't write to the woman a second time."

That was that, Jim reflected, at the conclusion of the call. A tiny flame of excitement began to burn in him. Etta—Rita. Rita, who was the tantalizing, all-pervasive personality in the case. It could be that he'd found her. . . .

Margaret's return broke in on his reflections. The slam of a car door heralded it; he heard her crossing the porch and the screen door closing behind her.

"Hi there!" she sang out as soon as she was over the threshold, and advanced quickly to the living room, her arms full of packages.

He was glad to have her home. "Hello, baby," he said affectionately.

She dropped her packages on a table, sat down on the arm of his chair, and kissed him. "You're my darling," she told him. He returned the kiss and drew her closer, taking pleasure from the scent of her perfume and the softness of her hair against his cheek. He kissed her again with more warmth than he had put into the kiss of welcome, and frowned at his broken ankle. "One of these days"—his arms tightened around her—"something's got to be done about the platonic state of our marriage."

Margaret laughed. "You're feeling better, aren't you?"

"I damn well am. Like a wolf." He kissed her with still more ardor until at last she said, "Hey!" and broke away from him.

"Where's Sarah?" she inquired, smoothing her hair.

That reminded Jim of his grievance. He told his wife in detail about the difficult time he had had getting the child to take a nap, winding up the account with, "You can't do it again, Margaret. If I were at my office, you wouldn't expect me to mind Sarah. Right now this room is my office and you've got to cut it out."

"Yes," she said meekly. "I'm sorry and I won't let it happen again. But I thought she'd go right to sleep and you wouldn't even know she was there."

"Okay. As long as I've made myself clear we'll skip it. . . . Did you buy a chair?"

"No, I didn't see any I wanted. I got a bedspread, though, for the extra bedroom, and some linen place mats they were practically giving away, and an adorable pinafore for Sarah and—but wait, I'll show you."

She opened the packages and displayed what she had bought. Then she realized that he was giving her only surface attention. She said, "Jim, Helen Saunders was telling me that Blanche Ellery used to have a terrific crush on a Leonard Hills who works as a meat cutter at Packard's market. She did the family marketing and there was a lot of gossip about the way she was always in the store hanging over the meat counter talking to him."

"I've had a report on it. Did Helen tell you why it ended?"

"She didn't know. No one did. It just stopped. Blanche didn't buy stuff there any more and he got married to some other girl, Helen said, about a year ago."

"Oh. How about mixing us a drink?"

"Yes, but I want you to have it outdoors. You've been in the house all day."

"I couldn't leave the telephone. It's been ringing every minute."

"Well, I'll pull some chairs around under the window and we'll be able to hear it if it rings."

They sat under the window with tall glasses in their hands. Jim told Margaret about Etta. He expanded on the theme. "Perhaps it wasn't as much love for her children as hatred of the old people that brought her back. She'd had years to fix the blame on them for a ruined life. Or perhaps the love came first and the hatred grew after she'd got settled in her new identity next door."

"If you're right—if she's Rita and did kill Anna Ellery—she must, through fear or remorse, have taken poison herself last night."

His pause was long before he answered, "It would have to be that." His forehead wrinkled in doubt. "I can't see her doing any of it though. If she didn't, if she isn't Rita Kubiak, it's a question of what she knows that makes her dangerous."

"Have you tried to find out who left the room last night when they were all together?"

"Naturally. Nobody did."

"But the poison got into the beer somehow," Margaret reminded him.

He looked at her forbearingly. "Yes. It was put there ahead of time. Not after the Ellerys were assembled."

His wife was offended by his tone. "He's talking down to me," she thought. "I shan't try to help him. Let him solve his case himself."

She held to her resolve for all of three minutes. Finishing her drink, she said, "It brings the thing even closer to the Ellerys. An outsider wouldn't know about Etta's beer or be able to get at it."

"It's always been close to them," Jim stated. "I haven't

seriously considered an outsider being involved." He was silent, trying once more to remember what it was that had floated through his mind when he was half asleep in the living room. He burst out, "When you think of it! A woman shot under my nose——"

"You weren't being flaunted deliberately. No one knew ahead of time that you'd be on the firing squad."

"It happened while I was there just the same. And it could have made a lot of difference if I'd known on the spot she was murdered. We've had to waste too much time on the routine angles; and with the family mix-ups in the background, it never was a routine case. God, look at me! I sit worrying about a woman who drowned herself before you were born and another one who beat it out of Warrenton when you were in pigtails!"

"If Etta Mosely is able to talk tomorrow, it may turn out to be the moment you're waiting for," Margaret offered consolingly.

"The hell it will," Jim said and was certain, as he spoke, that he was right.

That evening Blanche and Joan had dinner with Elinor. Afterward Joan went for a drive with Ap Wetherell and Harry came from next door to see Blanche.

At her suggestion they played gin rummy. That is, Blanche played. She won steadily. Harry paid no attention to his cards. He watched his cousin.

The light drew shadows under her cheekbones, her face was eager in expression, her small perfect mouth an intent line. He sensed excitement in her beyond her light gloating because she was winning every game. She was charged with some knowledge that had her wound up tight. He wanted to know what it was and yet, inexplicably, he was afraid to know.

She looked up from adding the score and said triumphantly, "You owe me a dollar and six cents." She held out her hand. "Pay up, please. Then we'll have root beer and cookies."

He took out his wallet and a handful of change and counted out the correct amount on her outstretched palm. Her fingers closed over it too quickly. The effect was greedy, he thought, and pushed the thought away.

She stood up. "I'll get the root beer. . . . Gran ought to see us. She disliked any form of gambling, you know."

"Yes, I know."

She left the room, walking with easy, balanced step. She had much grace.

The room was still after she was gone. The house was still. Harry moved about restlessly, looking at the dark woodwork, the faded red-and-gilt Chinese paper, the heavy paintings that hung in a stiff row around the walls. Blanche and Joan shouldn't be here alone, he told himself. They were being obstinate, insisting that they wouldn't go to his mother's or stay with either of their sisters. Their grandmother had been shot and had died in the room across the hall, her murderer was still at large, but they remained on in the big, ugly house full of shadows and memories and creaks and echoes. Last night Etta had been poisoned; how or by whom the police wouldn't say, but still the girls stayed. . . .

Harry sighed. Blanche was difficult to handle, she wouldn't listen to reason. Joan followed her lead, although she had declared that after dark she was afraid to be left by herself. Blanche wasn't afraid. Blanche said, "I'm perfectly safe."

How could she be sure of it?

He halted his uneasy pacing in front of the tall windows that opened on the porch. Anyone could get in through them. They stood open night and day during the summer. Of course there was a detective on the grounds, and the Warrenton police cruiser came by frequently. Even so——

A car stopped outside. Harry went to the hall door. Joan was coming up the porch steps, Ap Wetherell in back of her. Blanche appeared, carrying a tray, and both men moved forward to take it from her.

"It's only root beer, Mr. Wetherell," she said as she poured it into glasses.

Harry looked at her and thought involuntarily of the bottle of beer Etta had poured herself last night . . .

"Joan, there's some of Grandfather's port in the dining room. Mr. Wetherell might prefer that. And Harry too."

Harry and Ap were equally quick to deny a desire for port. The cold root beer, they said, was more to their liking.

"Oh dear." Blanche's disappointment was out of all proportion to its cause. "We never have a thing to drink around here. We never, Mr. Wetherell, have anything like anyone else. Grandfather was the one man left in Warrenton—in the world—who still drank port regularly."

"Really, Miss Ellery, aren't you exaggerating a little?" That was Ap.

"No, I'm not." She was earnest, her eyes clouded with deep regret. "We were always different."

"We're not that different, Blanche." Joan's laughter held an undertone of tartness that was meant to remind her sister of her manners. "You'll have Ap thinking we're the weird sisters or something."

"Perhaps we are," said Blanche. "Perhaps we're even weirder than he thinks."

Joan, a glass of root beer raised to her lips, lowered it and said, "Blanche, stop it!"

His long body propped against the marble mantel shelf, Harry silently echoed the command. Blanche's only reply was to laugh lightly and offer the plate of cookies to Ap.

Harry studied her. Whatever her inner knowledge was, it was driving her hard, pitching her mood to extremes of gaiety and gloom. She wasn't in the least her normally quiet self.

Facing him across the room was a framed portrait of Maggie Ellery at seventeen, her hair in a pompadour with a flower pinned in it, her eyes seeming to meet his. Even then, before she had entered into her disastrous engagement, she looked fey . . .

Blanche was telling Ap about her rock garden, talking with uncharacteristic liveliness, laughing unnecessarily, looking fragile, desirable—and a little fey herself.

Pain caught at Harry as he gazed at her. His hands clenched spasmodically. He loved her very much. He mustn't lose her. He had to take care of her. She needed him. She was, somehow, defenseless, removed from reality in a way that required his care.

He saw that Ap Wetherell, too, was watching her.

When they were upstairs getting ready for bed, the door between their rooms left open each night now at Joan's request, the latter came in her nightgown, hairbrush in

hand, to stand in the doorway and look at her sister.

She brushed her hair and said soberly, "Ap asked all kinds of questions about Etta tonight; how well we knew her, did we talk with her often, did she come here, what did we know about her family. He tried to see Aunt Laura today, but she wouldn't talk to him. He's got to write about Etta for the *Courier*, of course."

Blanche in her nightgown was sitting on the edge of her bed, knees drawn up, hands clasped around them, her hair falling forward around her face as she rested her chin on her hands. Excitement gone, her pose was listless. She didn't look at the younger girl.

"Whatever he writes will be stale by next week," she said apathetically. In the same tone she added, "Etta's going to live. She'll be able to tell them things."

"I hope so. I hope we find out. We couldn't go on not knowing, having people look at us and wonder."

"People don't matter."

"They do."

"No, not to me. I'd just turn my back and let them wonder." Blanche lifted her head and spoke with a dignity that reminded Joan of their grandmother.

"Blanche, about Etta——"

"What?"

"Ap's found out that she lived in—well, a sort of a vacuum. No family. Things he asked me, I think he"—Joan hesitated, stared past her sister unhappily, and finished in an undertone—"I think he suspects she might be Mother."

"No!" Blanche sprang to her feet. She flung out her arms. The violence of her reaction was all the greater beside the other girl's stillness and hushed voice. "As if she could be! That gray, creeping, lifeless creature! How could he think of her as Mother?"

Startled, Joan said, "It's just that Ap——"

"Ap! And who is he? A small-town reporter trying to be clever. He has no right to say Etta is Mother. I don't want to hear another word about it." Blanche brushed past her sister to the light beside the dresser and pulled the chain on it. The room fell into darkness except for the doorway where Joan was silhouetted by the lamp behind her on her own dresser.

Blanche went on to the windows and raised the shades. She was calmer now. "Mother would never be like Etta no matter how old she was."

"Still . . ." Joan spoke wistfully. "It would be nice to know where she is and what she's doing."

"Maybe not. She's like a dream. The dream you had. Good night. Put out your light or else shut the door."

"Good night." Joan turned back into her room and put out the light. Blanche stood at the windows and listened to the sounds her sister made, kneeling to say her prayers, climbing into bed, the old wood creaking under her, the rustle of the sheet being drawn up.

Silence descended. Joan, no matter what her problems, went to sleep as soon as she closed her eyes.

Blanche remained at the windows looking out into the dark.

Hours after both sisters were asleep a number of men gathered in North Cemetery. Lucas Ellery's body was removed from its grave.

Chapter 13

Etta Mosely turned her head on the pillow to look directly at the county detective. He sat with his leg propped up on a footstool, his chair against the wall behind him. In the narrow hospital room his chair and outstretched leg took up most of the floor space. Cobb, back from Boston, was in a niche by the window with his notebook. A nurse waited in the corridor near the door.

"I thought maybe the beer tasted a little queer," Etta said. "But I still drank it. It didn't enter my head that anybody would try to poison me. Why should they? You say it's something about Mrs. Ellery's death. I can't understand it. I'd already told what little I knew . . ." Her voice faded out, but she went on looking at Jim and not a trace of evasiveness showed on her face.

He held back the impatience that grew in him. His ankle throbbed painfully from the great strain he had put upon it in coming to the hospital. He had been determined about making the trip. He didn't want a secondhand account of what Etta had to tell now that she was judged able to give a brief statement to the police.

For all that he had learned so far, he might as well have stayed at home. "There must be something else, something you've forgotten," he said. He sat looking at her. They wouldn't be allowed to remain much longer. The nurse had already been in once, the house doctor was somewhere near at hand.

Still—Etta, Rita. It had to be cleared up. He resumed, "The Philadelphia police haven't located the woman whose name you gave as a reference to Mrs. Ellery; and they can't find a listing for you in the city directory for ten years back."

Terror leaped into her eyes, her face went stiff with it, her hands gripped the sheet.

"Is your real name——" Jim stopped short as she began to cry soundlessly. He turned away from her naked distress, his glance going apprehensively to the door. The nurse wasn't going to like this. He began to make soothing noises.

There was no fight in Etta. She sobbed out brokenly, "I knew I'd—get found out. My husband——"

She wasn't Rita Kubiak; she wasn't capable of taking revenge on a mouse, he told himself, making more soothing noises. He said, "Unless your private life has some bearing on the case it will never be mentioned, Miss Mosely. In fact, we'll do all we can to keep it from being known."

He continued in that vein. The tone of his voice got through to her more than what he said. Her tears still flowed but she looked at him with the beginning of hope.

"You're quite safe," Jim repeated. "As long as you had nothing to do with Mrs. Ellery's murder you're all right."

"I didn't have."

"Well, then . . ."

Gradually her weeping stopped. She fumbled with a box of tissues on the bedside table, pulled out a handful and dried her eyes. She said unsteadily, "All I did was change my name. My real name is Etta Markel. Mrs. Stanley Markel. I left my husband. I had to. He's a man who drinks all the time. He was"—the quiver in her voice deepened—"dreadfully cruel to me. Hitting me—years of it. It got to where I couldn't stand it any more. So I packed my things and came to Hampton. My mother's sister used to live here, but I couldn't find her. We'd lost touch with each other years back. So I wrote the letter of reference and went to an employment agency. And Mrs. Ellery hired me. I've had peace since then. My husband don't know where I am. At least he didn't until this happened."

Her anxious gaze was fastened on the county detective. "You can't be sure he won't find out. He'll come up to Warrenton, he'll come to the house when he's drunk and make disturbances——"

"No, he won't." Jim reached for his crutches and got awkwardly out of the chair. "Not a word of what you've told us is going past this door."

"Mrs. Ellery?"

"No. Why should she know? It's none of her business. You're as safe as you were before anything happened." He stood beside the bed looking down at her, letting her look back at him and see from his face that he meant what he said.

Relief flooded hers. "Thank you. I feel much better. I've worried about it continually since Mrs. Ellery died. Thank you very much."

His dark face broke up in a grin. "For what? For not sending straight off for this husband of yours to come and make your life miserable again?"

She smiled faintly in return. "Well . . ."

Jim leaned forward and patted her on the shoulder. "Forget about him. Get your health back. Then we'll talk about Mrs. Ellery's death some more. In the meantime, we'll see that there's always someone here to keep an eye on you. And you try to remember whatever it is you've forgotten about the day she died."

She shook her head. "I'll try. But I don't think it'll do any good."

When they were moving slowly along the corridor toward the elevator, Cobb, adapting his pace to Jim's, said, "It was straight goods she gave us."

"Of course. We'll have it verified, but I don't question a word of it."

"And it's got nothing to do with the Ellerys," Cobb mused aloud. He turned to look after a pretty nurse who whisked past them. "Not bad. . . . And Mrs. Rankin—so called—she's got no connection with the Ellerys either."

They reached the elevator and he pressed the button. It was the self-service kind. They could hear its clanking, wheezing upward progress from the basement.

He leaned against the door. "Looks like we're getting nowhere fast."

"How right you are!" Jim's tone was savage. His ankle ached without respite, a constant, throbbing pain. Rita Kubiak had eluded him once more, retreating back seventeen years, walking down the steps of a rooming house in Bonham, California, into thin air. Etta Mosely had explained herself. Cobb's investigations had explained Madge Rankin, Mrs. Jonathan Rankin by courtesy only, the legal Mrs. Jonathan Rankin, long separated from her late husband, having been discovered by the detective living in solitary rectitude in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

Jim took his broken ankle home. He nursed it morosely by the window. On the table beside him was the sizable file that had been built up on the Ellery case. He ignored

it, reaching for a pencil and pad. On the pad he wrote:

Laura Ellery—good opportunity to shoot sister-in-law. No motive found so far. Best opportunity of all to poison Etta.

Harry Ellery—solid alibi for time of shooting, confirmed throughout by Loman and sketchily for various intervals by others at the park. In the clear except for lie about Beretta. Lie not well explained.

He sat looking at the last sentence. Lie not well explained. His mind went back to what Harry had said about the gun. Mentally he placed the young man, coolly defiant, in the chair opposite him. With the ear of memory he listened to him, his voice a monotone as he said, "It was stupid of me. I realize it now. I didn't think of your being able to check through Customs. I didn't think of a single thing beyond the fact that Aunt Anna had been shot and one of my Berettas was missing. When Etta said, 'Here's the receipt for your *three* souvenir guns and your rifle,' I got panicky."

No man could have looked more immune to panic than Harry Ellery as he talked. He had a good war record. He'd fought through North Africa, Sicily, Italy. He was self-reliant, resourceful, level-headed.

And yet, according to him, he'd panicked over the gun. He said he was afraid they'd accuse him of shooting his aunt with it. But he'd been at the park when she was shot, swimming and playing tennis with Wilbur Loman. Unless there was a hole in his alibi, what did he have to be afraid of?

There wasn't a hole in it; at least neither Cobb nor Bailo, experienced men, questioning and requesting Loman and three or four more young men who had seen Harry that afternoon, had been able to find it.

If, then, he was in the clear from the start, why the lie about the Beretta? Loyalty to the family? Doing his bit to keep suspicion away from them?

Jim shook his head. It couldn't be that. He'd know very well they'd all be under suspicion.

What he had done was to cover fast for one of them. It would have to be either his mother or Blanche. A man

would cover for his mother and the girl he was in love with. One of the pair, therefore, had—or Harry thought she had—some connection with the Beretta that led him to take the risk of trying to conceal its existence.

Jim lay back in the chair motionless. He pictured Laura Ellery, rigidly correct, a lifetime of orthodox behavior behind her. That wasn't, he knew well enough, a guarantee against her having committed murder. But she aroused no interest in him.

Blanche was a different story. Genes, Margaret had said. A great-aunt and a great-grandmother of the girl's had broken through the behavior pattern they were expected to follow. The girl's mother had abandoned her children.

Jim was only momentarily checked in his reasoning by the reflection that the same family history applied equally well to Blanche's sisters. Harry was in love with her, not one of the other three.

He himself had talked with her just the one time. From the reports gathered on her he knew she had been a good student in high school; no further education, no employment outside the home. The least social-minded of the four girls, she had few friends, few activities. Didn't belong to the Women's League or any other club. Attended church with fair regularity under the aegis of her grandmother. No known suitors except Harry Ellery. Chief hobby, gardening.

Strader, the police chief, had said of her, "She's the quiet type. Doesn't mix with people the way her sisters do. Take boys, for instance. She's a looker, they're attracted to her. But they don't get any encouragement, and the word goes around that she freezes up on them. So they drop her right away. Except Harry, of course. He's been camped on her trail ever since he got out of the Army and came home to find her all grown-up. She can't freeze him off. But she's funny about men. Always has been, they say."

Funny about men, thought Jim. The Ellerys rated in Warrenton; there must have been eligible young men among the ones who showed interest in her. But Blanche had frozen them off. Then the meat cutter, the man whose background was entirely different from hers. Hanging over

the counter talking to him. And it hadn't come to anything. He'd married someone else last year. . . .

Jim heard his wife moving around upstairs getting Sarah dressed after her nap. He shouted, "Margaret!"

"Yes?" she called down from the head of the stairs.

"You going downtown?"

"I wasn't planning to. I've got everything in for the week end. Why?"

"Come on down. I don't want to sit here by the window and tell the whole neighborhood."

"Be right with you—as soon as I comb Sarah's hair."

The two of them came downstairs a few minutes later, both wearing blue, Margaret's a sun dress with a bolero, Sarah's a starched, ruffled pinafore.

Jim surveyed them proudly as they entered the room. "I've got good-looking women," he declared. "And blue's my favorite color."

"Thank you," said Margaret. "Say thank you, Sarah."

"Thank you."

Margaret took a cigarette from a box. When she had lit it she asked, "What do you want downtown?"

"I want you to go to Packard's and see Leonard Hills, Blanche Ellery's former flame. Get him to wait on you and talk to him. Try to get him talking about the Ellery case. You know who he is, don't you? You buy there?"

"Hardly ever. But I know him—vaguely—by sight. I don't see how I can get cozy with him just while I'm buying—well, I don't know what. I've got a chicken and lamb chops and some boiled ham in case we want sandwiches, and stewing beef. There's nothing I really need."

"Bacon?"

"I have plenty of it."

"We can always use another pound. Get that."

"All right." Anticipation drove doubt from Margaret's face. "Me, picking up clues over a pound of bacon. You'll have to take care of Sarah though. I can't keep my mind on detecting and watch her at the same time."

"Neither can I." Jim leaped delightedly into the opening she gave him. "That's what I've been trying to tell you all week."

Margaret made a face at him. "I walked right into that one, didn't I? Sarah, go get one of your books and Daddy will read to you."

"Will he? My whoo-whooh book?" Sarah raced for the stairs.

"What's that?" asked her father.

"The one about the rabbit. There's an owl in it who goes 'whoo-whooh.' "

"Oh. Isn't she too big for that kind of baby talk?"

"It's a free country; and she's only two months past three." Margaret got her handbag out of a drawer of the desk and was gone.

Sarah brought downstairs not one book but three. She gave them to her father and drew her rocker up close to his chair. "There," she said.

Jim began, "Way back in the woods there lived a lively little rabbit . . ."

He read the book twice before he was allowed to proceed to *The Three Little Pigs*. He went on to *Mother Goose*. He was going through that not inconsiderable volume for the third time when Margaret returned.

She looked pleased with herself. Since she was trailed by a little girl who lived two houses away and had come to play with Sarah he had to wait to find out what she had learned downtown. She took the children outdoors to the play yard, supplied them with spoons for the sandbox, came back to him and sat down. She said smugly, "Any day now, my dear sir, I'll take your job away from you. I had no trouble with Leonard. I was the only customer at the meat counter, seeing that most housewives don't buy their meat late on Saturday afternoon. He had plenty of time to——"

"Look here," Jim interrupted. "I spend my life listening to people traveling to hell and gone around a subject before they come to the point. I won't put up with it in my own house. Just tell me in plain words what he had to say."

"In plain words, he told me Blanche was out of his class; and he doesn't believe anyone should marry out of his class. And, furthermore, he believes that a man who doesn't earn big wages needs a wife who has her feet on

the ground." Margaret paused. "He's a talker. Heaven knows what he'd have told me if I'd been buying a roast of beef."

"All right," said her husband. "Now you can give me the details."

She settled back and lit a cigarette. She was enjoying herself. "I had no trouble at all. He knew who I was and he asked about your ankle right off. I told him it was coming along fine——"

"It isn't. It aches like the devil."

"No wonder, after going to the hospital this morning. Shall I get you one of your pills?"

"No. Go ahead."

"Well, I bought the pound of bacon. Then I looked at chickens and said you'd never expected to have a murder case so close to home. After that I asked him right out if he hadn't dated one of the Ellery girls awhile back. That did it. He leaned on the counter on his side, I leaned on the counter on my side, and he talked. He's terribly good looking, by the way. Much more so than I'd realized. Melting dark eyes, wavy dark hair, handsome features, well built and nobody home upstairs."

"As dumb as all that?"

She nodded. "It's too bad when he has that handsome face. But he's terrifically dumb, with a pitiful little collection of maxims to take the place of ideas. Like: honesty is the best policy. That one came out about Blanche being ready to lie to her grandparents and meet him outside because he got the cold shoulder at the house. He wouldn't have it. He told her no good comes of lying, honesty is the best policy."

"The Ellerys really put the clamps on it, he said?"

"They did. Leonard thinks it was because he's just a poor but honest workingman. Maybe he doesn't give the Ellerys enough credit. They wouldn't have been dazzled by his face. They'd have listened to his conversation and known that in no time at all any woman of even average intelligence who married him would be climbing the walls. . . . I wonder what kind of a girl he did marry. I'd like to meet her."

"What I wonder is exactly how big a stink there was

over it between Blanche and the grandparents," Jim ruminated.

"Plenty, I gathered. Reading between the lines—which was easy with him—Blanche seems to have urged an elopement. Leonard wouldn't agree. What a maddeningly tepid suitor he must have been. Not for him the heights

...

"Do you think he was ever really interested in her?"

"Well, at first, I guess, the poor man did have some idea of courting her in his own way. Sunday-night supper at her house and the movies and things. Saving his money meanwhile. He said he looked at marriage sensibly. He wouldn't go into it until he had at least a thousand dollars in the bank. All that business of supper and parlor sitting was out, of course, with the Ellerys. And he wouldn't meet Blanche on street corners. You have to admire his nice, sturdy self-respect. If he wasn't good enough for her folks, he told me, he wasn't good enough for Blanche. So they quarreled. And broke off."

"Then what?"

She spread out her hands. "That's all. Period. Blanche did go to the store a few times after that and try to make it up, but Leonard gave her the brush-off."

"She was too eager," Jim stated. "She scared him off."

"I don't believe it was that by itself. I don't know . . ." Margaret frowned thoughtfully. "What he said about needing a wife with her feet on the ground; and that romance was all right in its place, but——" Her frown deepened. "Maybe I'm doing too much reading between the lines but I think she frightened Leonard in other ways. She was too changeable, he said. Up in the clouds one minute and down in the dumps the next. A little too rarefied for him, you see. And he was born here in Warrenton. He knows the old stories about the family."

"The other sisters got husbands," Jim reminded her.

"Oh well. Elinor and Teresa are down-to-earth enough for anyone. I don't know Blanche. She must be different . . . Quite different," she added after a moment.

"When did the romance—if you can call it that—end?"

"Two years ago this summer. Leonard got married last

October. If Blanche was going to kill her grandmother because of thwarted love, it seems she'd have done it sooner than this."

"Yes. Unless it was something cumulative. . . ."

That evening while Margaret was poring over the scrapbook and Jim was studying his file, the telephone rang.

It was the call he had been waiting for from the pathologist. It gave him the information he expected to receive. Lucas Ellery had not died of a coronary thrombosis. He had been poisoned with acetanilid, a dose of at least ten grains.

After he finished talking with the pathologist Jim telephoned Strader. He asked the latter to come over to confer with him before he, Jim, saw the Ellerys.

Chapter 14

Blanche lingered behind the others leaving the house. On the porch she turned to Harry and caught his arm. "I'm afraid," she whispered. "Will you watch out for me, Harry? Please do."

He drew her to him. "That's what I want to do—for the rest of my life."

She welcomed his kisses, her hands behind his head bringing his lips down to hers. "It's too horrible to bear," she whispered. "Promise to keep it away from me." She tipped her head back, straining her eyes to read his expression in the dark. "You will, won't you?"

"Yes," he answered with sudden harshness. "You know very well I'd do anything for you."

"Would you?" She moved out of his embrace. Her voice flat, she said, "But you can't keep me from having to see Mr. O'Neill right now. You don't even know why he wants to see all of us."

"Of course I don't." He walked beside her down the steps. The others were getting into Roy's car; Detective Bailo was standing in front of it.

"Miss Ellery and I will go in my car," Harry said to the detective.

"Okay. I'll come along in back of you in mine."

Elinor and Norman were not present. They were, with permission from Jim, making a business trip to New York and wouldn't return until late that night.

At the O'Neills', going up the front walk, Harry drew Blanche's arm through his and pressed it reassuringly. He looked at her with a passion of protective tenderness in his eyes. She was small and slight and childlike, lost in this affair.

"I wish to God I could keep her out of it completely," he thought as Margaret opened the door. "She can't take it. She can't take anything."

Margaret had drawn the sofa forward and ranged chairs in a semicircle near her husband. Cobb and Dr. Crusely already occupied two of them, and they got to their feet when the Ellerys came into the room.

With her ill-defined, rather embarrassing duties as hostess discharged, Margaret retreated to the kitchen. It was in darkness. The dining-room door left open, she sat down in the breakfast alcove to listen.

The group settled itself ready for questions about Anna Ellery. Instead, Jim said, "I had you come here so that we could go back farther in the case—back before the day Mrs. Ellery was shot."

He gestured aside the surprise their faces revealed. "We need more information from you; about acetanilid, for one thing. Someone tried to kill Etta Mosely with it two nights ago. How many of you have used headache remedies that contain it?"

Harry was the first to speak. "Never heard of it."

"No? It's in a number of preparations." The county detective named several of the better-known ones, his glance going from one face to another while he was naming them, resting longest on Blanche, who looked back at him composedly. He missed the grimace of dismay that Joan made at one of the names.

"It would require special knowledge—medical knowledge—wouldn't it, to administer the stuff?" Roy Martin inquired, gazing pointedly at Dr. Crusely.

"Not at all. The warnings on the labels state what is a safe amount to take. You'd only have to double or triple it."

Laura Ellery sighed deeply. "I don't pretend to grasp what this is all about. And it does us such injustice. None of us had anything to do with it, but if it keeps on, we'll get so we won't dare look at each other." She paused. "You must put a stop to it, Mr. O'Neill."

"That," he informed her, "is what I'm trying to do. Now, the acetanilid . . ."

They avowed total unfamiliarity with it. Mr. Ellery said she had occasionally, in the past, taken one of the preparations Jim had mentioned. But not for at least two years. Now that she knew what was in it she never would again. "Dangerous," she said. "Very."

"An overdose, yes," the county detective agreed. He went on, "The night Mr. Ellery died . . ."

Dr. Crusely leaned forward trying to catch Jim's eye and seek in it confirmation of what he feared. But the

county detective looked away from him.

That was confirmation enough. He had certified two murders as natural deaths.

"At least," the doctor thought, sitting back in his chair, "Wright backed me up on Lucas's. He's the medical examiner. He'll have to share the responsibility with me."

He didn't listen while Jim was taking the Ellerys through the events of Lucas Ellery's seventy-fifth birthday: the gifts, the people who had telephoned or called in person to offer congratulations, the dinner in his honor, what they had eaten, what was said and done. Dr. Crusely was again despondently reviewing his own part in what had followed.

All the symptoms had pointed to a coronary thrombosis. "Who would have thought of murder?" he asked himself for what was surely the hundredth time since yesterday. "An old man like Lucas. Whatever doctor had been called would have made the same diagnosis. Wright didn't question it. He's known the family even longer than I have and he didn't suspect anything either."

Thus Dr. Crusely's thoughts ran. Then they swept back to his first acquaintance with Lucas and Anna Ellery. Maggie had invited him to call. He was the new doctor in Warrenton; none of the family was yet a patient of his. The boys were there, Warren and Will, little fellows brought into the parlor. "My nephews," Maggie had said. "Will's the sedate one, Warren's the rascal."

Odd thing to remember from so long ago. And Maggie's dark eyes looking at him eagerly. Unpredictable, difficult Maggie. Poor Maggie. Demanding, impetuous, artless Maggie, who had let him see that she loved him before he had spent a dozen hours in her company. Moderation wasn't in her; she had both attracted and repelled him, and neither emotion had ever begun to match the depth of her feeling for him. Was it his fault that she had overheard him talking with his sister about the material advantages their marriage would bring him? She shouldn't have eavesdropped. And, since she had, she should have accepted what she learned from it in a reasonable way. She should have known that a young doctor trying to work up a practice was bound to examine every side of a venture into matrimony.

Maggie hadn't been reasonable; that was the last term to be applied to her. She had let the reasonable, the obvious destroy her. Poor, high-flown, romantic Maggie.

...

The county detective had got as far as the drinks that were served when Dr. Crusely brought himself back to the present. Jim was asking, "Who suggested them?"

"I probably did," Harry volunteered. "I'm not sure about it, but I think it was I."

"Who mixed them?"

"Norman did," Tess said, "I distinctly recall that."

"And everyone had them?"

"Not Gran." This was Joan. "She had just one plain coke."

"And the rest of you had bourbon and coke? It hardly sounds like the kind of a drink your grandfather would favor."

"He didn't," Joan said. "Blanche forgot to order soda. So he said he'd try the mixture."

"I see. Can you remember where your grandfather was sitting? And the rest of you?"

It was Blanche who answered. "No one sat in any particular place. Joan and I brought in salted nuts and passed them around with the drinks. Tess played the piano for a while, then she sat by Gran. We were all here and there."

"Wait a minute." Harry fixed a hard stare on the detective. "None of this has a thing to do with Aunt Anna, Mr. O'Neill. Do you think Uncle Lucas was poisoned like Etta?"

"Let's put it that I'm interested in everything that went on within the past month. Your uncle died only two weeks before your aunt."

"Oh no," Laura Ellery said. "Not Lucas too!"

"You people do leap to conclusions," Jim remarked patiently. "Shall we get on with it?"

"But——" began Roy.

"Mr. Martin, I'm just casting around, trying to get a picture of what went on. Let it go at that, will you?"

His cold voice gave them no choice. After an interval he asked, "How long after the first drink was the second served?"

No one offered a reply. They were still avoiding his eyes and each other's. Finally Joan said, "Tess was back at the piano. I remember bringing her drink over to her. She was playing 'Rhapsody in Blue.' "

"Mr. Delmaine mixed the second round too?"

"He and Roy and Harry—they were all out in the kitchen."

"And then?"

"Well, we all drank, I guess. No, Grandfather didn't at first. He said——" she broke off, her eyes round and frightened.

"Yes, he said?"

"It didn't mean anything, Mr. O'Neill. It was just that he didn't care much for the first drink either. He said that people put fearful brews in their stomachs nowadays." Joan was running the words together in her haste to be done with them. "He said there were no palates left."

"But he did finish his second drink?"

"I don't know." Joan's voice sank to a whisper. "I don't remember."

"Yes, he did." Harry took over, his tone easy and open. "Norman and I kidded him a little. It was the coke he objected to. He said he'd have his next one with plain water."

"Did he have a third drink, or did the attack occur first?"

"The attack occurred first."

"How soon after he finished the second drink?"

There was general discussion on that. Jim watched Blanche. Her face was empty, her eyes downcast.

When he let them go home he held Joan back for a moment. "Do you do a lot of reading, Miss Ellery?"

"Why—yes, I do."

"I thought you did, seeing you're a librarian. Good night."

Dr. Crusely didn't leave with the others. He had lost his youthful, jaunty air. All of his sixty-eight years showed on his face. He said, "You've had Lucas up and found acetanilid in him?"

"Yes."

"Then you were always right." He turned to go, walking slowly and heavily across the floor.

Unexpectedly, Jim found himself feeling sorry for the doctor. "You know, of course, that the state's attorney's office works pretty quietly on exhumation cases, Doctor. There won't be headlines in tomorrow's papers."

The older man halted. "No, but they're in my mind. It's not pleasant to learn that I missed up not once but twice."

At the threshold of the hall he halted again. "You named Kiley's Pain Reliever among the preparations containing acetanilid. It brought back to me something I'd forgotten. Three or four years ago Anna Ellery was taking Kiley's tablets, quite a few of them. She had nervous headaches, she said. I put a stop to it, of course, as soon as I discovered it. With her blood pressure I couldn't have her dosing herself at random."

"Are you sure she didn't keep on with them?"

"Indeed I am. I told her what was in them and substituted a prescription for the headaches she thought she had. She understood that I wouldn't have her taking the things while she was under my care. I suppose some of the family knew about the tablets at the time. But it was years back"—his gesture deprecated the importance of what he revealed—"and they've probably forgotten all about it. Still, I thought I should tell you."

"You were quite right. Thanks, Doctor." Jim spoke heartily. "Good night. You don't mind showing yourself out, do you? I don't do any unnecessary moving around on this ankle of mine."

"Of course not. Good night."

The two detectives remained silent until they heard the doctor's car door slam and the start of the motor. Then Cobb said, "That's a neat little story about acetanilid. True, maybe."

"Yeah." Jim lit a cigarette and rubbed his head. "God, I'm dead. It's been a long day."

Margaret came in through the dining room. "It certainly has. You've got to go to bed."

Her husband twisted himself around to look at her over the back of the chair. "You been sitting out in the kitchen all this time? I'd forgotten about you. Shall we let Cobb have a night-cap with us before we throw him out?"

Margaret mixed drinks and brought them in on a tray

accompanied by crackers and cheese.

Cobb took a swallow from his glass and smacked his lips. "That hits the spot. . . . Jim, the way they were all back and forth when the old man got his. Any of them could of slipped the stuff in his drinks."

His eyes closed, the county detective nodded. So far he hadn't discussed with his subordinate his thoughts about Blanche. There was too little to substantiate them.

"What's Goodrich saying about our extra murder?"

"He's coming out tomorrow." Jim opened his eyes and added acridly, "He wants to know who killed the Ellerys."

When Cobb's chuckle subsided the only sound in the room was the crunch of crackers until Margaret asked, "What did the Ellerys live on, Jim? You talk about how poor they were, but, Lord, they had to live. Food, taxes, heat, clothing. They must have had some money."

"A couple of rents from mortgaged property in the downtown section. And there's a mortgage on that barracks they lived in. The land's valuable, of course, but who'd want the house? We've gone into all that. Delmaine helped out a little. And old Ellery was clerk of the town court. He got a salary from that. But they weren't killed for their money. You can forget that."

Cobb, swirling ice in his glass, observed ponderously, "When we find out why they were killed maybe we'll get somewheres."

"You're a big help," Jim told him.

In spite of his tiredness, his professed ability to dismiss a case from his mind when he went to bed, the county detective was awake a long time that night. He lay on his back on the bed in the dining room, one hand under his head, the other holding a succession of cigarettes. The mound of butts in the ash tray beside him mounted steadily.

He went over what he knew about Lucas Ellery. A stiff, proud, reserved man, Strader had declared. Through the reverses of his life, his sister's drowning, the deaths of his sons, the scandal over Rita Kubiak, the gradual but complete loss of his business and money, he had showed the world the same aloof face.

"So," the police chief had concluded, "no matter what

was on his mind the night he died, no one would hear a word of it from him. Except his wife. I suppose she'd know."

"She did know; she was killed too," Jim had reminded him.

"Yes. . . . There's no chance that we're dealing with two separate cases, is there? I mean, we've got no proof Lucas didn't take the acetanilid himself."

"We've got proof that his wife was shot in the back two weeks later, and that his sister-in-law's maid was given acetanilid. That's proof enough for me."

"Yes, yes," Strader had said hastily. "I only mentioned it to be sure we took a look at every angle."

Well, he was taking a look at a lot of angles, Jim reflected, moving about the bed to find a more comfortable position; and the longest look of all at the dearth of motives for two murders and an attempt at a third one.

Etta Mosely would have to be questioned again intensively as soon as she was well enough. But he couldn't count on her remembering what it was she had seen or heard. It wasn't outstanding enough.

His thoughts shifted to Blanche. She had spent the afternoon of the murder working in her rock garden within sight and sound of her sister Joan. The latter was reading.

. . .

Blanche had told him about the afternoon and the morning too. She said she hadn't been out of the yard that day. She was sitting across the desk from him in her grandfather's office. . . . She was wearing a green dress.

A green dress—that was what had eluded him the other afternoon: the color of the dress. Whatever it was called by the fashion experts, he called it leaf green, a soft medium shade that would blend into the thick foliage of the wood.

He smiled with satisfaction. It was one more arrows—small, but definite—pointing the way.

A moment later satisfaction evaporated. He needed evidence that would stand on its own feet.

"Tomorrow night," he thought, "I'll have a couple of men tackle the rock garden. Not Cobb or Bailo—Rafferty, maybe. He's always talking about the gardening he does, so he ought to be able to handle the plants and put them

back the way they were. It's worth a try. The Beretta might be buried there."

In order to fit Blanche Ellery into his case the county detective had to assume that Joan read like his wife. When Margaret became interested in a book she was lost to the world. A parade of Blanche Ellerys could slip behind the barn, run along the ravine to the wood, commit a murder and get back to the rock garden without Margaret having known they were gone.

Joan would have to be the same kind of reader for him to be on the right track. Then, even if her attention had strayed momentarily from her book, Blanche's absence wouldn't have registered on her. The older sister had only to make a couple of earlier trips back and forth to the house before she left for the wood and thus feel sure that her longer absence would be meaningless.

But why? Why Blanche? Why any of them?

Jim put out his cigarette and folded both arms under his head. Love, hate, revenge, fear, money—the principal motives for murder.

He considered them one by one. Blanche had been in love with handsome Leonard Hills of Packard's market. But that had ended two years ago. If the girl blamed her grandparents for breaking up her love affair, if she hated them for it and wanted revenge on them, would she have waited this long?

He didn't think she would. She might have let it ride for a while hoping to get Hills back. But last October, when he married someone else, was the time when grief and despair should have led her to take revenge on them.

But what if another reason had been added since then? What if, somehow, she had established a contact with her mother? What if Rita Kubiak had piled hatred on hatred of the grandparents with a tale of wrongs suffered at their hands that had driven her away from her children and kept her from them ever since?

Jim sighed impatiently. He had no candidate for the role of missing mother. Madge Rankin and Etta Mosely had both failed to qualify for it.

All right, there was money for a motive. The only evidence of it in the case leaped to the eye. It was Maggie Ellery's; and when she stepped into the river to drown

herself she was supposed to have carried her most precious possession with her in a strongbox under her arm.

Norman Delmaine was the one member of the family who questioned the story.

Jim thought, "What if Delmaine is right? And Blanche, starting a rock garden this spring, dug up the strongbox? She planned to keep the money, let's say, but the grandparents found out about it. Not a penny of it was legally hers. Half of Maggie's estate went to Lucas, half to her brother Edward, whose share would now go to Laura and Harry Ellery. But Blanche made up her mind that the money belonged to her because she was the one who found it. She killed her grandparents so she could keep it . . ."

The county detective smiled wryly. He was worse than Delmaine, who merely thought the money was buried in the yard. He was having two people murdered for possession of it. And even a child could spot the hole in his theory: the Ellerys, with their reputation for honesty, wouldn't have given Blanche time to silence them; they would have announced that the strongbox was found as soon as they knew about it.

Still, tomorrow night when the rock garden was dug up, ostensibly for the Beretta, it would be interesting to see what, if anything was found. . . .

Chapter 15

At eight o'clock Monday evening the town meeting opened in the auditorium of the Warrenton high school. The call of the meeting, as duly set forth in newspaper notices over the signatures of the Board of Selectmen, was to vote on an appropriation of \$19,834 to draw up plans for a new grade school to be located on town-owned land midway between the two existing schools.

It was a burning subject in the community. Out of six thousand registered voters in Warrenton about eight hundred had turned out for the meeting. Every seat was taken and the back of the auditorium was jammed with standees.

The first selectman and the town clerk came out on the stage from the wings. A table and chairs were arranged in the center of the stage. The town clerk, elderly, wise, a veteran of hundreds of such meetings, glanced at the rows of people, picking out many who were belligerently pro or con the issue. He sent a sly grin to the selectman who was serving his first two-year term and who was earnest, conscientious and extremely nervous.

"There'll be a hot time in the old town tonight," the town clerk murmured.

The buzz of talk died away as the first selectman picked up a wooden mallet and rapped for order. He cleared his throat. "Nominations are now open for a moderator to conduct the meeting."

A man in the second row stood up. "I nominate Charlie Granby to be moderator of this meeting."

"Second the nomination," called a voice from farther back.

"The nomination of Mr. Charles Granby has been made and seconded. Are there any other nominations?"

There were none. Charlie Granby, affable, easy-mannered, was the dean of moderators in Warrenton. He was voted in, climbed the steps to the stage, and sat down at the table.

He said to the town clerk, "Mr. Howlett, will you please read the call of the meeting?"

The town clerk stood up and read the call of the meeting.

"Well," said Charlie, smiling out over the audience, "is there any discussion?"

He was launching a tidal wave of it. The first two speakers, parents of grade-school children, successively decried the crowded conditions in the two existing schools. The townspeople had no choice, they said. A new school had to be built.

"Mr. Chairman——" It was a middle-aged member of the Women's Civic Improvement League who was the next one on her feet. "There's no doubt but what our schools are crowded and that we need a new one. I myself am very much in favor of one because we all know our children are the citizens of tomorrow and deserve the best we can give them. The very best. But——"

Hearing the "but," Margaret, attending the meeting with Helen Saunders, vice-president of the Women's League, turned around in her third-row seat to stare indignantly at her fellow club member.

"—what I question," the woman continued, "is whether we should go ahead with our plans at the present time. Building costs are so high—and we've got to be practical, haven't we?" She smiled with charming diffidence at the upturned faces around her. "I'm sure I want to see a new school built as much as any of you, but I do wonder if we couldn't wait another year or two. I know at home we've been thinking of remodeling our house and we've decided to hold off a little longer now that prices have begun to drop slightly. And what's sensible for the individual is sensible for the community, too, isn't it?"

The glares she was getting outnumbered the nods of approval. She was sitting among the younger residents who had school-age children. Unnerved by the display, she ended hurriedly, "So I would like to suggest that we postpone action on the school for a least another year."

When she sat down there were a dozen claimants for the floor, including Margaret. But she wasn't quick

enough in catching Charlie Granby's eye. A man two rows in back of her stood up to dispute the good sense, either as an individual or a community, of waiting for building costs to drop. "That's the attitude that'll send this country into a depression quicker than anything else," he declared. "As far as costs are concerned, nobody knows if they'll be down or up next year. And what's most important is that we need the new school now, not next year or the year after that. We're putting two more grades on double sessions this fall, aren't we, because we're so crowded? If a couple of third or fourth graders get killed by cars coming home from school this winter when it's dark early, nobody that's opposing the school will feel very good about it. I agree with only one thing the lady that spoke before me said: our children deserve the best we can give them. We've got to take care of their needs ahead of everything else."

A babble of assent and dissent rose as he sat down. Another man was on his feet, addressing not the chair but the previous speaker. "Look here, Jesse, there's going to be some kind of state aid to education, isn't there? What's wrong with waiting to see what we can get from that?"

There were cries of "Yes, yes!" and "No, no!" From the viewpoint of order the meeting was out of control, with people loudly expressing opinions from their seats, arguing back and forth across the auditorium without troubling to gain the recognition of the moderator. Repeatedly he rapped for order and finally cried, "Quiet, folks! You'll all get a chance to express your opinions. We won't get anywhere, though, shouting at each other."

His voice cut through the commotion. He pointed his mallet at a tall, stoop-shoulder man with a bald head who was on his feet ten rows back from the stage. "All right, Ross, you've got the floor."

"That's Ross Cready," Helen Saunders whispered to Margaret. "He's a widower, no children, assessed for seventy-eight thousand on the grand list."

Margaret turned and looked interestedly at the man Ap Wetherell had dubbed Warrenton's elder statesman. At the same time she saw the *Courier* reporter in the rear of

the auditorium and she thought he winked at her before he returned to his note taking.

"I just want to say a few words," Ross Cready began. "I figure I'm qualified to say them. I was born in Warrenton and I've lived here all my life. I won't say how long that is——"

"I'll say it for you, Ross," someone called out. "Seventy-one years!"

There was laughter. When it died down Mr. Cready said, "Thanks, Sam," and went on. "I've watched this town grow from one thousand population when I was a little shaver to the fourteen thousand of today. And I've watched the way the tax rate has gone up too. In 1914 it was ten mills——"

"This is 1970," a voice reminded him.

Warrenton's elder statesman swung around toward the heckler. "I know what year it is; I can count as well as you can! But I also know the thirty-three mills we pay today is too high! And what's put it up that high?" His voice rose with his temper. "Adding this and adding that. In the schools we've got gymnasiums and playgrounds full of expensive equipment, and we've got handicrafts and arts and music appreciation and all these extra frills that have no more to do with the children in this town growing up to be responsible citizens and earning a decent living for themselves than the man in the moon! When I was a boy I went to the one-room schoolhouse on the green with outdoor toilets and a well to drink from and a stove to heat the place in the winter and not so much as a swing in the schoolyard. But we made out fine. We had a little spunk and initiative. We invented our own games and we had more fun than the kids today will ever have no matter how much high-priced equipment we buy them. We had——"

He paused, heeding at last the restless murmurs of protest that eddied around him. His jaw shot out combatively. "All right, I guess no one wants to hear my life story. But the point is that in my day we weren't coddled. We grew up learning to depend on ourselves. The children today aren't learning to. And now you want to coddle them some more. Well, I'm here to say that we

don't need a new school! What we——”

Murmurs swelled into roars of disagreement. Mr. Cready raised a hand to check the tumult and bellowed above it, “Let me finish!”

The moderator pounded the table with his mallet. “Order, please! Order, please!”

Presently Mr. Cready was able to resume. He glowered at the assembly. “What we can do to settle this school business without saddling ourselves with a half-million bond issue is to cut the auditorium at West End School up into classrooms. I was over there last week taking a look around. You'd get two good-sized classrooms out of it; and then at South School they've got that big gymnasium. If they don't want to cut it up permanently they could store the equipment and put in movable partitions and when——”

He got no farther. This time Charlie Granby banged on the table for several minutes before a semblance of order was restored. An old lady whose face was almost as red as her hat, so angry was she, was on her feet shrieking across the hall, “Ross, I went to that school on the green same time you did and I wouldn't send a cat there today! If you've come down here with the idea that you can turn back the clock and have my grandchildren going to one-room schoolhouses you're——”

“Lucy! I never said a word about bringing back one-room schoolhouses. What I said was——”

“I heard you, Ross Cready. If you had things your way, this town wouldn't have a sewer or a park or a water main or a street light. And the tax rate would still be ten mills. That's what you——”

Bang! Bang! Bang! went the mallet. “Order!” Charlie Granby shouted. “Sit down, Lucy! Sit down, Ross!”

The old lady paid no attention to the chair. Her hat was askew. She set it straight without missing a syllable of her denunciation. “——want! I've been listening to you at town meetings for years and years and I never heard you agree on spending one cent to improve this town except the time it was having your own street paved! And, furthermore——”

It was eleven-fifteen when Charlie Granby wearily brought his mallet down on the table for the last time. The meeting was over, ending in victory for the forces of progress. Margaret, Helen Saunders, many other younger members of the Women's League, the parents whose children were affected, had all had their say. Warrenton's citizens then voted approval of the appropriation to draw up plans for a new grade school.

When Margaret arrived home, jubilant with success, proud of the respectful attention her reading of the report from the state board of education had received, she found the state's attorney still at the house. He rose to go, explaining with an apologetic laugh, "I had no idea it was so late. I didn't intend to keep your invalid out of bed like this, Mrs. O'Neill."

Jim said he felt fine. But he looked tired. He had spent most of the day either on the telephone or in conferences with his subordinates.

When the state's attorney was gone Margaret began at once to make up her husband's bed. She was full of the meeting, giving him a lively account of all that had taken place.

He got into bed. She sat down on the side of it. "What did Goodrich say?"

Jim shrugged. "What could he say? We're doing our best."

"You're sure they were thorough going through the rock garden last night?"

"They took it apart plant by plant, starting half an hour after the lights went out in the house and working on it until daybreak this morning. The Beretta wasn't there. Neither was——" He hesitated, then told her what had been in his mind about Maggie Ellery's strongbox. "Cockeyed, you see . . . Any port in a storm." After a moment he resumed, "I'll talk to young Ellery again tomorrow; and Cobb's going to the hospital to see if he can make any headway with Etta Mosely."

Margaret said, "You know how much the town is talking about the Ellerys right now; tonight, before the meeting, Helen told me she and her mother had been

discussing them. Her mother knew Rita Kubiak quite well. She said Rita was very fond of her daughters. She just can't believe Rita's never tried to get in touch with them. She thinks they have heard from her. Of course, she said, the grandparents would never forgive her or allow her in the house; but she could be in some town near by, Helen's mother thinks, with the girls slipping off to visit her in secret."

"These theories . . ." Jim shrugged.

"Well, she knew Rita quite well at one time. She could be right." Margaret couldn't resist adding, "It's a less melodramatic theory than having Rita masquerading as Mrs. Rankin or the other Mrs. Ellery's maid."

"Yes," Jim agreed in a preoccupied voice. "Maybe she's partly right." His eyes, narrowed in thought, looked past Margaret. "Maybe I need to get even more melodrama into it than I've got already."

"Sit down," the county detective said.

"Thanks." Harry dropped into a chair, rested his elbows on the arms of it and tried to look more at ease than he felt.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning. Margaret and Mrs. Hawkes, talking in the yard, could be heard through the open window. The pounding of a roofer's hammer reached them faintly from a house across the street. Sunlight filled the home-like room. A pull toy of Sarah's lay on its side under the front windows. It wasn't the kind of setting he would have visualized for being questioned about a murder, Harry Ellery thought. Nor did Jim, leaning forward to offer him a cigarette, fit, at the moment, his notion of an inquisitor.

"How's your ankle?" he was moved to ask.

"Coming along." The county detective had traveled no farther than from his bed to the chair that morning, but he added, "I'm beginning to get around on it. I'm just back from the hospital. I saw Etta."

"Yes? How is she?"

"Much better. I was able to have quite a long talk with her this morning."

"Zatso?" Harry's tone indicated that he had only a polite interest in the matter.

Jim smoked his cigarette and let the silence prolong itself. But Harry outwaited him, motionless in the chair.

This was the man, Jim reflected, who had told him he became panicky over his missing Beretta.

His coolness fortified the detective's shot in the dark. He said at last, "Etta told me your cousin Blanche was at your house, in the library, the day Mrs. Ellery was murdered."

Harry's head was slightly lowered. He threw it back to look at Jim with open defiance. "Was she? What of it?"

Jim felt the first stirring of elation. He had expected an instant denial of the charge. Instead of replying directly he opened his file and took out Blanche's original statement. "I was home all day," he read aloud. "I didn't leave the yard."

"She's so used to being back and forth at our place she forgot about it."

"Within a few hours after it happened?" Jim shook his head. "No, Mr. Ellery, I think not. She intentionally concealed the fact that she was at your house. Afterward she began to worry about it. She knew Etta saw her in the library at the desk—where you kept your guns, Mr. Ellery. That's why Etta was given——"

"No!" Harry's protesting cry was so loud it startled both of them. He sat forward, drew in a deep breath and asked, "What are you getting at, anyway? If Etta told you that much she must also have said that Blanche was there to get a stamp from the desk. She told Etta in the hall that she'd come over to get one. She had a letter to get off in a hurry to a friend at Saybrook."

"She didn't mention the letter to us. Doesn't that make it plain, Mr. Ellery, that concealing her visit to your house that day was intentional? If she were there on such an innocent errand, she'd have no reason to keep it to herself."

"She had every reason," Harry asserted violently. "She knew what interpretation you'd put on it. That's why she did it."

"Is it? She told you about it? Volunteered the information?"

"I——" The young man caught himself. "Yes! he declared with unabated violence.

His dark eyes were still fired with defiance; behind it, though—behind the anger he seemed to be making an effort to arouse in himself—there was something more, Jim thought, studying him. Some shade of uneasiness, of doubt, that pulled at him, deadening the feeling he wanted to display.

"She didn't volunteer the information, Mr. Ellery. It was you who saw her in the library. You wouldn't think anything of it at the time; but after Mrs. Ellery was shot and you found out one of your Berettas was missing, you remembered your cousin being at the desk. That's why you lied to me about the second gun. When you asked your cousin about it she handed you that tale about the stamp."

"No! You've got it all wrong, I tell you. I didn't even lay eyes on her that day until after Aunt Anna was dead."

Jim shook his head slowly. "I'm afraid I don't believe you. You're making a grave mistake. You love your cousin. You want to believe the best of her but——"

"Mr. O'Neill, I don't know what you think you're——"

Jim's upraised hand cut him short. "Etta didn't see Blanche Ellery at your house that day. She told me none of them was there. None of them." With repetition he drove the point home. "Not Blanche or her sisters or her grandmother. Etta said she neither saw nor spoke to a single one of them until after Mrs. Ellery was dead."

"Then what—— Then——" Harry looked at him, mouth agape. Bewilderment was supplanted by fear in his eyes. He sprang to his feet and rage washed away all other emotion. "You think you're goddamned smart, don't you, pulling your fast ones? You think——" He stopped short, his hands opening and closing at his sides. "What are you trying to prove, Mr. O'Neill?"

The county detective looked up at him. He said soberly, "Perhaps you can answer that as well as I can. At least I've given you something to think about, haven't I? Etta

Mosely said she had no idea why anyone would try to kill her. I don't imagine it will take you as long as it did me to figure out the reason. There are degrees of folly in letting yourself be used, Mr. Ellery, that not even the blindest love will excuse."

"For Christ's sake," Harry Ellery exclaimed. "I don't know what you're talking about! But I've listened to enough of it. I'm getting out of here."

He swung around on his heel and headed for the door. His going was more of a rout than a departure. Jim called after him, "What about Rita Kubiak? What did your cousin tell you about her?"

Harry halted with a jerk. "Rita Kubiak? What are you talking about now?" Without waiting for an answer he rushed out of the room, out of the house.

Five minutes after he had let the tortured young man escape, Jim learned from Strader that Blanche knew a girl named Grace Deering who was spending the summer at a beach in Saybrook. Her family had a telephone there; he put in a call to the girl and asked her when she had last had a letter from Blanche Ellery.

"I haven't heard from her since we came down here two weeks ago. Before we left Warrenton I did say something to her about spending a week end with us. But she didn't seem too eager about it and no definite date was set. I haven't really been expecting a letter from her and she hasn't written to me so far."

"I see. Thanks very much, Miss Deering."

"Oh, please wait a minute. I can't imagine what a letter to me——"

"Neither can I," Jim told her pleasantly and hung up.

He had much to think about during lunch and through the afternoon. What he had pried out of Harry was added to the scraps of knowledge he already had and to his larger store of surmises. Painstakingly, they were all fitted together until there was only one blank space left.

Dinner was over, Sarah in bed, and Margaret reading on the other side of the living room. From time to time she glanced at her husband, who was sitting with his chin in his hand, his eyes closed in intense concentration. All at

once he sat up straight and reached for Anna Ellery's scrapbook.

"Margaret, come here!" He had it open at the snapshot of Maggie Ellery in which she was half turned from the camera.

Chapter 16

All day, after he left the county detective, Harry Ellery kept saying to himself, "I'll go and see her. I'll tell her what O'Neill said. We'll get the whole thing straightened out."

He didn't go. He spent the afternoon in the barn supposedly painting a boat he planned to take to the shore. Most of the time he sat on a stool looking into space. He became flaccid with fear of what lay ahead. He could take no action.

His mother and he went to a restaurant for dinner as they had been doing every night since Etta was taken to the hospital. Laura talked matter-of-factly about closing the house and leaving for their cottage at the shore by the end of the week. It wasn't until she said during dessert, "I must get Greta Hanson in to clean and help with the packing," that Harry roused himself from his somber reverie.

"Have you spoken to O'Neill about going away?"

"Why, no. What does he have to do with it?"

"A good deal, perhaps. He might say we couldn't leave town."

Laura made an impatient little sound with her tongue against her teeth. A spark of anger lit her pale eyes. "I never heard of such a thing. Anna was accidentally shot and they're cooking up wilder and wilder ideas about it because they won't admit they were wrong from the start. And if that man tries to stop me from going to my own cottage, I'll most certainly put him in his place. There are laws against persecuting people unjustly!"

"Mother . . ." He pushed aside his dessert plate to make room for his elbows on the table. As familiar as he was with the workings of her mind he still eyed her with some incredulity. "Aunt Anna was shot with my Beretta and it wasn't an accident."

"Well, you didn't shoot her. You were at the park, I was home, they've nothing against us and no right to interfere with our plans."

"Etta was poisoned with acetanilid in our house."

"Pills she was dosing herself with. She's afraid to admit it."

"What about Uncle Lucas? We were there when he died. We could have given him acetanilid as well as the next one."

Laura wouldn't hear of it. Her brother-in-law had died of a coronary thrombosis, the county detective had just been fishing around, he was up against a dead end when he questioned them Saturday night. "I can't see why," she finished plaintively, "you want to make everything worse than it is, Harry. Must you look for a murder under every bush where there's only a series of coincidences?"

He didn't answer. His mother, he was thinking, was hopeless. It had been years since he had tried to talk over anything of consequence with her. A moment ago, desperately in need of someone with whom he could discuss his problem, he had been on the edge of asking her to help him solve it. He was glad now that he hadn't.

He watched her drink coffee and thought, "It's the kind of life she's led. Money enough to insulate her completely from the rugged side of things. She's had her clubs, her bridge parties, her teas, her church work. She's lived in a walled garden."

When they went home from the restaurant Harry wandered gloomily around the grounds and walked through the ravine and wood until he stood at the edge of the cemetery. He didn't know why he had come. There was nothing to see.

He turned to go back. "The king's horses, the king's men marched up the street and marched back again," he said aloud.

Twilight was falling when he began his return journey through the thickly wooded ravine. It held many memories of his childhood. Here he had played with his cousins and the other children in the neighborhood. They had been Indians, pioneers, explorers, warriors, patriots.

Here was the very tree around which they had centered their enactment of the drama of the royal governor who came to Hartford to take away the colony's charter. Harry stopped to look at it and smiled for the first time since the morning. He had been Captain Wadsworth snatching the charter away, and the tree had been their charter oak.

A thick mat of ivy had grown over its massive trunk, but the crevice in which he had hidden the piece of paper that represented the charter must still be there. He bent over and pulled the vine away to find it. When he had played Captain Wadsworth the crevice in the tree had been as high as his shoulder. Now it was at thigh level. He got the vine free and thrust a hand inside.

Joan and Blanche ate a late dinner alone. Daylight was leaving the big dark kitchen before they were finished with the dishes. Dusk was settling over the rest of the house too when Blanche went to the hall chest for her gardening gloves. The oak paneling, the dull browns and greens and maroons of the various wallpapers drank up light. Joan was already outside on the back porch with the evening newspaper. Blanche located her gloves and shut the chest. She hurried past the library, turning her head the other way. Her grandmother had died in the room.

It was still full daylight out-of-doors. The sun had set, but the sky was magnificent with streamers of flaming color flung across it. Joan was gazing dreamily at the stark silhouette of a tall pine tree on the bank of the ravine.

"Look," she said. "It's like something from another world—the colors, the tree."

Blanche looked at the pine tree, gaunt, solitary, towering over everything around it, black against the blood-red sky. "Yes, another world. Like a guard at the gateway of hell."

She shuddered and clasped her hands together. "Why did Grandfather leave it there all these years? It's got to be cut down. It's a hideous tree!"

Joan glanced up at her sister, first with casual surprise at her vehemence, then searchingly. Blanche was pressed against the screen door. She stared in fright at the tree. "It's hideous," she repeated.

The younger girl's scrutiny drew her attention. She brought a wavering smile to her pinched lips, and pulled on her gloves. "I'd better get to work before it's too dark to do anything."

Joan's eyes followed her until she disappeared from view around the barn. Even then the newspaper continued

to lie unread on the younger girl's lap. Presently her gaze went to the pine tree that had evoked her sister's outburst. Behind it the sky had faded from red to salmon pink. "How upset Blanche was about it," she said to herself. "It was peculiar."

There had been many exhibitions of peculiar behavior from the older sister lately. Her moods had been exaggerated: silences so deep and lasting that they put her far out of reach; excitement that rose to a feverish pitch over trifles. She had been quite unlike herself.

"I don't know how she feels about all this," Joan meditated aloud. "I don't know what's going on in her mind."

Her thoughts groped along that path, hesitant over what they explored but held to it by a cold little vein of doubt. Accompanying them was the word acetanilid. Kiley's Pain Reliever. The forgotten name of a forgotten drug until Jim O'Neill brought it back to her. Afterward details were remembered: Dr. Crusely's serious tone. "It's dangerous if it's used indiscriminately," he had said. "Too much of it could kill anyone." Blanche and she had been in the room.

... But it was a bullet, not acetanilid, that had killed Gran.

Unbidden, the night of her grandfather's birthday dinner sprang into her mind. Would Mr. O'Neill have asked so many questions about it if he thought Grandfather's death was from natural causes? Harry said not. Harry said acetanilid. Sunday he had taken her, but not Blanche, to the cemetery to see if Grandfather's grave had been disturbed. It looked the same. Grandfather was in it, dead from a coronary thrombosis.

Still . . . Gran had bought acetanilid. Anyone could buy it.

Joan sighed and looked up. The sky had faded to faint pink while she was letting herself be claimed by doubt. "I've got to stop," she thought. "No, that isn't the right way. I have to decide why I feel like this about Blanche."

The acetanilid wasn't enough by itself. She added Blanche's behavior to it. And—"Do you do a lot of reading?" the county detective had asked her.

Well, she did. She had been reading *No Highway* when

Gran was shot. What Mr. O'Neill wanted to know was how much of her attention had been taken up by her reading that afternoon.

"All of it," Joan said aloud. "It's a wonderful book. Now and then, I suppose, I did look up from it. . . . Was Blanche there every time?"

She shook her head slowly. "I expected her to be in her garden. I might not have noticed if she wasn't." Her glance traveled to the ravine that marked the rear boundary of the Ellery property. If Blanche had slipped behind the barn . . .

Her sister came in view from the far side of it. She was angry. She was more than that. She was in a fury. Even at a distance as she advanced fury was in the lift of her head, the set of her shoulders. Half walking, half running, she cried, "Joan, what were you doing in my rock garden?"

"Your rock garden? I haven't been near it."

"Oh, yes, you have! Don't sit there looking innocent. You've mixed up the plants. You mixed the delphiniums in with the anemone bulbs." She flung the charge at Joan from the foot of the back steps, her eyes blazing up at her sister. "What were you doing there?"

"Blanche, I haven't been near it, I tell you!" Joan stood up, eying the older girl in bewilderment. "What's so important about it, anyway? What difference does it make?"

"Then you did do it. You admit you did!" Blanche's face was rigid and white. In spite of her smallness she was a threatening figure with her head thrown back, her eyes wild and crackling with anger.

"I don't admit anything of the kind. All I asked was——"

"What were you after? What did you think you'd find?"

"This is ridiculous. I won't even talk about it." Joan turned her back on her sister and went into the house.

Blanche followed her, exclaiming, "You've got to talk about it, you've got to answer me!" but the younger girl didn't stop or look around. She crossed the kitchen and moved on hurriedly toward the front of the house.

At the foot of the stairs she halted and faced her sister. The light was dim. In Blanche's white face only her eyes were burningly alive.

"What's the matter with you?" Joan demanded, trying to give her voice an exasperated inflection.

"What were you looking for in my rock garden?"

"I told you I wasn't near it."

"You were! You're the only one who could have dug it up. This morning while I was doing the marketing. Or yesterday when I was at Aunt Laura's. You've had plenty of chances. What were you looking for? What did you think I buried there?"

Joan saw that her sister was trembling. She was trembling herself and swallowed convulsively before she could command her voice. She said steadily, "No, Blanche. It wasn't I."

"You're lying! You sneaked home and listened the day Gran died! You heard what she said." The older girl's voice dropped suddenly to a monotone. "You can look all you please, but you'll never find it. It's mine. Gran said it wasn't. But now it is. Mother told me——"

"Mother?"

"In a dream I had. You dreamed she came to see you, didn't you? Why shouldn't I?"

"What did she tell you—in the dream?"

"To take what was mine."

"Blanche, what is it that's yours? What do you think I'm trying to take away from you?"

"As if you don't know! As if you haven't been creeping around looking for it! But you won't find it." Her voice rose again accusingly. "You're like Gran! You're trying to spoil everything for me the way she did. She hated me because I was like Mother."

"She didn't, Blanche. She was strict with all of us."

"No, she hated me. Just me. Because I looked like Mother. She didn't want me to be happy. She drove Len away from me, didn't she? Because she hated me."

"Oh, Blanche, it wasn't that. Don't you see . . ." Joan took a step forward. She reached out a hand toward her sister and let it drop when the latter drew back. "Len wasn't the person for you. He was awfully good looking, yes, but he was—well, different. You became interested in him because you got to know him at the store. And you've never found it easy to get on with boys. You stayed home too much. When you got to know Leonard Hills you felt

comfortable with him. You thought that was love. But Gran was older, she knew better. She knew you'd had more home advantages than he, you were more sensitive, more intelligent. She was sure he wasn't the right person for you to marry."

"That isn't true. I loved him. Just him. No one else."

"You saw him mostly at the store. You went out with him only a few times. How can you be sure? There's Harry—he idolizes you. He'd be much better for you."

"I don't want him." Blanche was sobbing now. "It was Len I wanted. As long as I can't have him I want to go away. I want to take what's mine and go away and never come back." Her body stiffened with resolution. "That's what I'm going to do: take it and go away. And you can go on looking for it in the rock garden as much as you please."

"Blanche, someone really did dig the garden up?"

"Yes."

Joan drew her hands up under her chin in balled fists. Fear shook her voice. "I didn't do it. It must have been the police."

"No, no, not the police!"

"Yes, it was. Mr. O'Neill knows more than you think. If you had something buried there—— Blanche, what was it?"

Blanche moved back against the opposite wall. Her rapid breathing was loud in the silence that settled between them. She stretched out her arms on either side of her. There was infinite despair in her attitude; she looked as if she were pinned against the dark wood.

"Blanche, you've got to tell me," Joan said urgently. "How can I help you if you leave me in the dark? It's no secret any longer. The police wouldn't have dug up your rock garden if they didn't know about it. You realize that, don't you?"

"Yes, I do—now." Her eyes searched her sister's face. "You're telling the truth after all. They know. They'll stop me. They're worse than Gran." She sucked in air in a great gasp. "The police . . . *what else will they do to me?*"

"Blanche——"

She screamed, "The police! No, no, no!"

There were no more distinguishable words. She went on screaming, the piercing, shocking sound of it rising higher and higher until the house rang with its dissonance.

Joan caught at her. Blanche beat at her sister's hands frantically, broke free, turned and fled through the back of the house.

The younger girl stumbled to the hall chest and sank down on it, burying her face in her hands.

Harry, coming out of the ravine, was too far away to hear the screaming. But he saw the two detectives, the one stationed outside his mother's house and the one stationed outside his cousins', running toward the latter place. He ran too.

The front screen door was locked. While one of the men flung himself at it the other vaulted over the porch railing and raced to the rear of the house. The back door was unlocked. He threw it wide and plunged over the threshold, his gun in his hand.

In the hall Joan was still huddled on the chest. Minutes went by before she could give a coherent account of what had happened.

They started after Blanche. By the time they had searched the grounds and the barn she was well on her way to the river.

Chapter 17

Jim said into the telephone, "I want you to send your equipment over to the river to help our emergency squad if they need it. They're on their way now. I'd like you to be there. You know where Maggie Ellery and her mother drowned themselves."

There was a moment's silence before Strader said, "You don't think she's tried to get out of town?"

"No, but we have all that covered. Just in case."

"All right, I'll get going."

As Jim put the receiver back in place the doorbell rang. Margaret answered it and came back to the living room followed by Ap Wetherell.

"Well?" The county detective gave him an unwelcoming stare.

"Look, Mr. O'Neill," Ap began. "A few minutes ago I was just a guy who went calling on Joan Ellery. Every light in the house was on, there was much rushing hither and thither. I got the brush-off from one of your men. They're all over the place; I couldn't even get near it. So now I'm worried about Joan; and I've got my job to do too. What's going on? And is Joan okay?"

Jim found Ap's reasonable tone disarming. "She's okay," he replied, and added, "I'm busy as hell right now and I will be for the next couple of hours. If you want to drop back after that I'll give you whatever I have."

"Well . . ." Ap ran his fingers through his stiff brush of red hair and shook his head. "That's better than nothing, I suppose. In the meantime, I'll go back there and hang around." His eyes were shrewd and probing. "Any chance I'll run into Joan's mother?"

"See you in a couple of hours."

"I'll be here. So long." Ap left him. At the door he met Cobb, who was coming in.

"Any statement, Mr. Cobb?" he asked, playing it straight, quite as if he might get one.

"What are you, nuts?" the big detective muttered and strode past him.

Joan, in a state of near collapse, was put to bed by her

sisters. Dr. Crusely was summoned and gave her a sedative. When he was gone Tess and Elinor, dazed and unbelieving, sat by the younger girl's bed.

"Where's Harry?" she asked presently.

"He's out looking for her," Elinor answered. "So are Norman and Roy, the police—everyone."

Joan closed her eyes. She lay quiet. Tess whispered, "Running and hiding. I can't bear to think of it. She couldn't have killed Gran."

"Shh-h!" Elinor raised a finger to her lips.

Without opening her eyes Joan said, "She did it, Tess. You didn't see her or hear her." She shuddered. "I did. Accusing me of digging for something in her rock garden . . ."

"Don't talk about it. Try not to think about it." Tess reached for her sister's hand. "Go to sleep. Let those pills do their work."

A few minutes later Joan drifted off to sleep.

Elinor said under her breath, "Norm was right. Aunt Maggie buried her money and Blanche found it."

They sat listening to sounds of activity below. When lights flared outside they tiptoed into Blanche's room and knelt at the double windows that overlooked the rear of the grounds.

Several men were gathered under the mock-orange trees. The trees were shedding their blossoms and spotlights shone on the drift of white petals around them.

Two more lights on stands were put in position, a photographer set up a tripod with a camera on it and stood by waiting, his hands in his pockets.

A big man whom they recognized as Cobb ranged back and forth directing the work. Four men began to dig.

"Aunt Maggie's money," Elinor said, clutching her sister's hand nervously.

Half an hour passed. The men dug in a widening circle around the roots of the trees where no grass grew. Tess and Elinor were too far way to hear one of the men say to Cobb at last, "I think we got it." But they saw the men stop digging while the lights were moved up closer and focused on one spot.

Cobb said, "Go ahead." He squatted on his haunches to watch the work go on.

A minute later there was another halt in the digging. One of the men lifted something from the hole. It was laid on the grass. Tess and Elinor saw that it was a square box.

They gripped each other's hands tighter. "There it is," Elinor whispered shakily. "Aunt Maggie's money."

"Yes—but look, Elinor! They've started digging again."

The men were back in the hole. Spadefuls of dirt were thrown up methodically on each side. The men were standing knee-deep in a hole that was about thirty feet in diameter when they stopped once more.

Cobb crouched forward. What they had uncovered was a collection of bones, a few rags of clothing wrapped in a blanket too clean and new-looking to have been the original shroud.

"That's her," Cobb grunted.

It was midnight when Margaret served coffee and sandwiches to her husband, a state police lieutenant, Strader, Cobb, and Ap Wetherell. The telephone rang while she was pouring the coffee.

Jim picked it up, listened for a space, said, "Yes . . . Right away." He broke the connection, signaled the operator, and gave her the state's attorney's number in Hampton.

Goodrich answered immediately. Jim said, "They just took Blanche Ellery's body from the river. They'll get it to the lab right away . . . Yes, right where Maggie Ellery and her mother both drowned themselves. That closes the books, I guess."

He listened, said, "Yes, I will. I'm almost through for the night." The county detective's glance went to Ap Wetherell. "Only one. He's from the local paper. Case broke too fast out here for the rest of them . . . You've had a houseful of them? I'm glad you kept them away from me. Shall I call you in the morning or will you drive out? . . . Okay. I'll see you then. Good night."

Jim hung up. He looked from one person to another in the silent group. Strader was the first to speak. "The poor girl," he said. "She wasn't in her right mind."

"I don't know. I've heard it argued in court too many times. One doctor says one thing, another doctor says something else." Jim paused to take a bite out of a

sandwich and pick up his cup of coffee.

Ap Wetherell asked, "Will you take the case from the beginning and tell us how you solved it?"

"Oh, Jesus," said the county detective. But Strader announced, "I'd like to hear all of it too," and the rest, except Cobb, who was reaching for a second sandwich, nodded agreement.

"Wait a minute." Jim finished his sandwich and held out his coffee cup to Margaret to be refilled. He began by telling them the direction his thoughts had taken over Harry's silence about his missing gun, and glanced at Cobb, who was eating steadily. "What did he say when he turned the Beretta over to you tonight?"

"He admitted he saw the girl in the liberry that day. After the grandmother was killed he asked her about it and she gave him the story about how she saw Etta Mosely and told her she'd come to get a stamp."

"You see?" Jim waved one hand expressively while the other raised his cup to his lips. He drank, set the cup down and went on, "That's why, the night I talked to young Ellery about Customs having a record of his guns, she tried to poison Etta. She figured she couldn't afford to have the woman telling Harry Ellery or anyone else that the tale about the stamp wasn't true. Things were closing in on her a bit——"

The telephone interrupted him. He lifted the receiver, said "Hello?" and, after a moment, "On her key ring? What do you know! How about acetanilid? . . . No? Well, keep looking. If she had any more of it around, I'd like to have it found."

He cradled the receiver. "The key to the strongbox was on Blanche Ellery's key ring—a good place for it as long as she didn't try to hide her keys."

The county detective told them next that the green dress Blanche had worn had been one more point against her. He continued, "The thing went about like this: there was some kind of a showdown with her grandmother not long before the Chesery funeral; Mrs. Ellery represented some kind of threat. Either she was suspicious about Lucas Ellery's death or determined to tell the rest of the family the strongbox was found. Or maybe it was both. Anyway, Blanche decided to kill her at once and got hold of her

cousin's gun. She worked for a while in her rock garden that afternoon and kept track of the time. From going to her grandfather's funeral so recently, she must have had a pretty good idea of how long the Chesery service would take. Her sister was deep in a book; if she did notice Blanche was gone, Blanche would have had a story ready to account for it. She got to the wood, fired at her grandmother, and must have been away like a flash. She hid the gun in a knothole in a tree in the ravine——"

Jim's face took on a brooding expression. "The ravine was searched thoroughly, but no one turned up the gun."

Cobb aroused himself from contemplation of the last sandwich left on the plate. He said stolidly, "The tree was grown over so thick with ivy that anyone who didn't know it was there would miss the knothole."

"Still . . ." His superior's brooding expression remained.

Ap, busy with notebook and pencil, intervened tactfully, "After you began to suspect her—what then?"

"I had to figure out why she did it," Jim replied. "The only smell of money in the case came from Delmaine's theory that Maggie Ellery had buried her strongbox on the grounds of the house. I thought about Blanche being the gardener in the family, the rock garden she'd started; that if she had found the money she might have tried to keep it herself. I thought about the marks in the dust in her grandfather's safe; that perhaps the strongbox was there and Blanche removed it after her grandfather's death and before her grandmother's, because she never had a chance to do it afterward."

Jim shifted his leg on the footstool and resumed, "That brought me to Rita Kubiak. I'd been wasting a lot of time trying to decide who she was and where she was nowadays. The other night when my wife was telling me about someone here in town who'd known Rita and how devoted she was to her children, and who couldn't believe she'd kept away from them for seventeen years I started thinking about her a little more intelligently. I had been assuming that after she arrived in Warrenton one night, saw Joan and was taken out of the room by the grandmother, that the Ellerys ordered her out of the house. But it never seemed logical to me that she'd have left meekly and made no further effort to see her children.

If I hadn't, from the beginning, been wrapped up in the idea that she was on the scene, masquerading under another identity, I'd have realized a lot quicker that she was dead; that, once she left the man she ran away with, there couldn't be any other answer to her nonappearance.

"I began to tie it in with Blanche's finding the strongbox. Before I hadn't been able to understand why the grandparents hadn't announced it was found as soon as they knew about it."

He paused. "Sitting here with this ankle, I had plenty of time to worry about it. First I thought that when Blanche was starting the rock garden and dug up the strongbox one of the grandparents was with her. Or came across it in whatever hiding place she arranged for it. But that wasn't any good. I still had to clear up why upright people like the Ellerys had told no one the strongbox was found."

Jim sighed. "All this stuff kept going around in my head. In Blanche's first statement she said she'd done every bit of work on the rock garden herself. If she'd found the strongbox there and decided to keep the money, all she had to do was leave it where it was and the grandparents wouldn't have known a thing about it.

"Once and for all I made up my mind the box had never been buried on the site of the rock garden. I mulled over Lucas Ellery's refusal to let Delmaine dig up the place looking for it. He said the whole idea was nonsense. But, on the other hand, it wasn't utter nonsense, and replacing the lawn wasn't, Delmaine promised, going to cost him a cent. It should have been worth a try, at least, to a man as poor as Ellery. But he flatly refused. That raised the question of something else besides the strongbox buried on the grounds, something he couldn't afford to have turned up to the light of day. It brought me back to Joan's dream about her mother."

He leaned forward. "The night Rita Kubiak returned there was, let's say, a big argument between her and the Ellerys. We'll never know just how she died, but we can guess at some kind of a struggle. Perhaps she rushed upstairs a second time to see her children and Lucas tried to hold her back and she fell downstairs and broke her neck. Or perhaps it was one of the brick fireplace hearths. When the pathologist examines her bones he may be able

to tell us something about the cause of her death, but we'll never know any of the details. We do know what kind of people the Ellerys were, however, and we can assume it was an accident. But the night she died they were up against the question of whether that would be believed, considering the enmity between them and their daughter-in-law; and even if it were, it was a tragedy that would darken the lives of the children asleep upstairs. It was night; she must have told them that she hadn't let anyone know she was coming to Warrenton or met anyone who recognized her. They decided to conceal what had happened. They took her outside and buried her . . ."

Jim's voice trailed off into silence as he thought about the secret, hurried, nighttime burial scene that represented the one great irregularity of the Ellerys' lives.

"Blanche found her?" Strader prompted him.

The county detective said, "No, I don't think so. If she had, there wouldn't have been any reason for digging a new grave under the mock-orange trees. What I do think occurred is that she selected the spot right over her mother's grave for building a rock garden. You can imagine how upset the Ellerys must have been. They'd say no, and try to talk her into some other location. That aroused her suspicions—or at least her curiosity. And since they'd already refused to let Delmaine dig up the place, they knew they'd given her cause enough to wonder what was up. If I'd been in their fix, I'd have moved Rita's body that very night. They probably did. And Blanche stole out after them to see what they were doing. She couldn't have confronted them and demanded an explanation until they had the body over under the mock-orange trees and the new grave pretty well dug. Otherwise they'd have put it back where it was. Then she showed herself and insisted on seeing what they were burying. And"—he shook his head—"what a shock that must have been to her!"

The state police lieutenant asked, "How could she have known a bunch of bones was her mother? You'd think they'd have told the girl it was a total stranger, a servant, someone who was dead before she was born."

Cobb answered the question. "There was a fancy pin and some odd-shaped buttons mixed in with the bones. She

could have recognized them for things that belonged to her mother."

"Well, there you are," Jim said. "She knew it was her mother. At that point we have to fit in the finding of the strongbox. Lucas Ellery dug it up. Whether it was before or after Blanche showed herself is immaterial. If the girl meant to denounce them, it changed her mind. She was ready to take the cash and let revenge go. But there she hit a snag."

He eyed his listeners thoughtfully. "It was in the character of the Ellerys. I don't think we can afford to lose sight of that. When they had Rita Kubiak dead on their hands I'm quite sure that their main purpose in concealing her death was to protect their grandchildren. But they wouldn't be prepared to add theft to their original crime. They'd tell Blanche that half the money in the box belonged to Edward Ellery's heirs. Maybe they offered to buy her silence with their own half. Maybe they didn't. They had her sisters to consider. They were getting on in years; maybe, with their granddaughters grown up, they no longer cared so much if the truth about Rita came out. Whatever happened that night, it seems they refused to be blackmailed by Blanche. And Lucas Ellery probably locked the strongbox up in his safe. We'll have to check back on when she started the rock garden to find out how long he had it before she poisoned him. During that interval she kept quiet about her mother. She must have been putting pressure on them to give her the money and they delayed announcing it was found and tried to change her mind. It was a stalemate. She broke it up by poisoning Lucas with acetanilid, got possession of the strongbox—whether it was in or out of the safe—and buried it again under the mock oranges where Maggie Ellery had put it originally. Perhaps that was the move she made that precipitated the showdown with her grandmother."

Jim came to a full stop before he added, "I guess what I've told you is as close as we'll come to piecing out the story."

Cobb said, "There's one thing I don't get, Jim. How'd you know where to have us dig?"

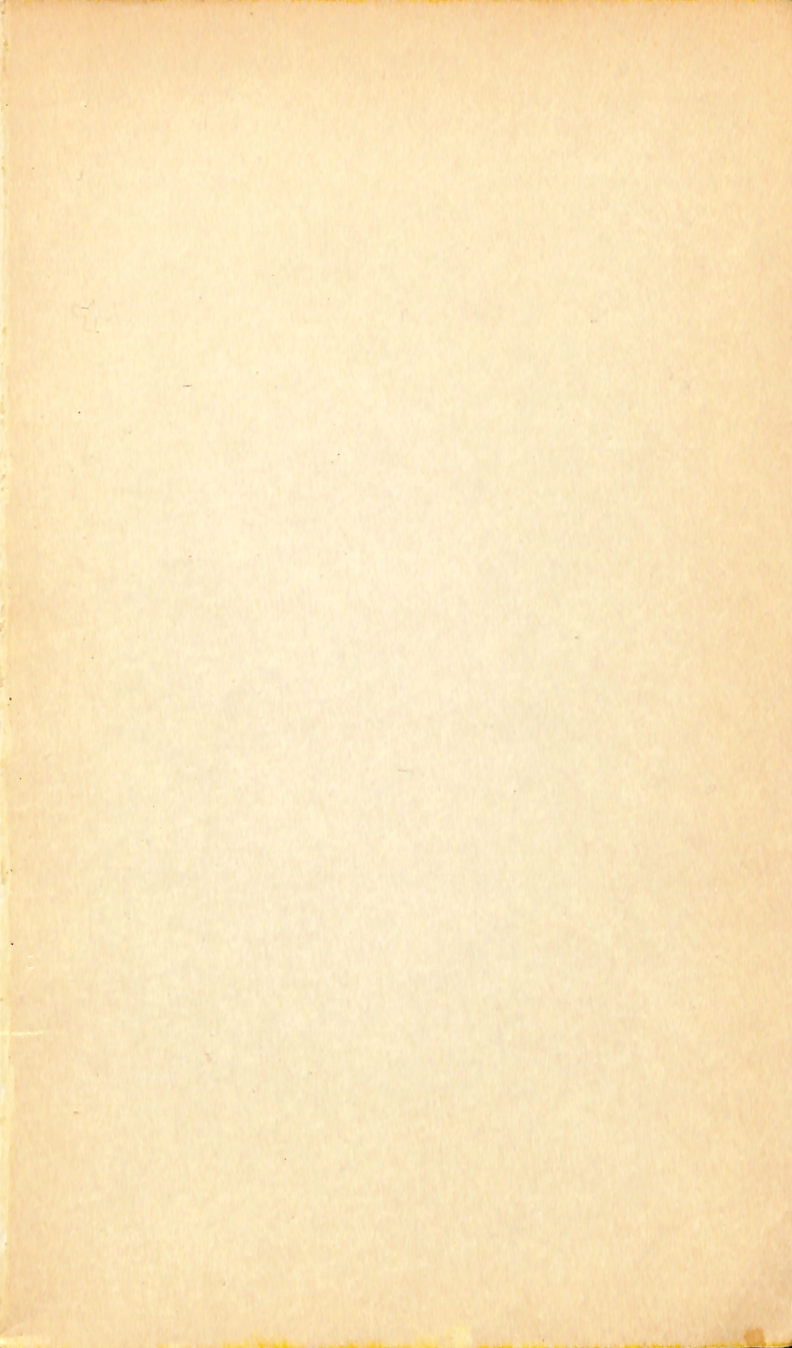
"Oh, that?" Because he was proud of that bit of deduction the county detective's tone was exceedingly

casual. "It was staring me in the face all the time." He picked up the scrapbook. "There's a snapshot of Maggie Ellery here that shows her in front of the mock-orange shrubs—her mock-orange shrubs, it says. She planted them. Orange blossoms go with weddings and mock orange must have fitted in with her feelings about her wedding that didn't come off. It was some kind of symbolism to bury her money under them."

The county detective had to answer a few more questions. Then, the sandwiches gone, Cobb stood up and said, "We better let you get some sleep." The others said good night and followed him out of the house.

Margaret sat down on the arm of her husband's chair. She said, "Poor girl. No matter what she did she paid for it tonight. There in the dark, throwing herself in the river."

"The older I grow the more I keep changing my mind about murder," Jim told her. He pulled himself up out of the chair wearily. "Let's call it a night."



CHOOSE YOUR POISON

and the murderer had. There was a corpse or two to prove it. But when a bullet, fired by a hand in the crowd, had met its mark, Detective O'Neill was certain this was no "ordinary" madness.

It was madness and murder gone wild—
with the next victim already marked for death.

But who?

And when?

And how?

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