DELL BOOK 877

MIGNON G. EBERHART

25¢

MAN MISSING

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. . . the killer struck again!

"The whirlwind finale is as breathless as any ending in some time."

New York Times


MAN
MISSING



by

MIGNON G. EBERHART

Author of

THE UNKNOWN QUANTITY

DEAD MEN'S PLANS

NEVER LOOK BACK, etc.

A DELL MYSTERY

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By Mignon G. Eberhart

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To a great newspaper woman
and a great lady
Mary King Patterson

All persons and events in this book are entirely imaginary. Nothing in it derives from anything that ever happened.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The background of this book may be traced in some degree to my experience on a naval base, where I spent some time while my husband was stationed there as an officer. But that experience did not include murder. Nothing like this ever happened on the Base and I think it extremely unlikely that it ever would!

In fact, all my memories of the Base, the Navy personnel and their families living there, and the many experiences we shared as one family, are very happy ones. A reward for writing this book has been the renewal of those memories and of warm and lasting friendships. None of the people on the Base, I'm sorry to say, appear in this story for the primary, writer's reason that real people simply do not fit a fictional plot. But I'd like to salute all of them, wherever they are. And I hope that I have not taken too many liberties with fact or fancy in trying to describe what *might* have happened—one hot summer's night, with sand blowing from the desert, the Base secured against intrusion, and tons and tons of ammunition lying out in the silent darkness of the hills.

M.G.E.

ONE

SOMETHING WAS WRONG and I didn't know what it was. But something, somewhere, was wrong.

I looked down the corridor ahead of me as I sat at the chart desk. All was quiet; there were no red gleams of signal lights anywhere. At the west end of the corridor an open door let in a night breeze which was gradually cooler, and refreshing after the heat and wind of the day. I couldn't see or hear anything to account for my feeling that something had not been done. So I examined the charts, taking them from the file one by one, making sure that no temperature, no pulse, no medication had been forgotten. While I was new to the ways of a naval hospital, still all hospitals are much alike, so I checked carefully, found nothing undone, and looked at my watch, which said 2 o'clock.

My name is Sarah Keate; I am a nurse, but it would require an Act of Congress to permit me to become a regular Navy nurse. A nurse cannot enlist in the Navy if she's past forty and I am that and then some. However, an emergency had arisen (the emergency being the fact that the lieutenant usually on night watch in that wing had broken her leg when getting out of a jeep after a dance at the officers' club the previous week), someone was needed at once to take her place, I happened to be visiting the naval base and was obliged to volunteer my services. So I was taken on, with status of temporary civilian employee, until another nurse could be transferred to the base and take the lieutenant's place. Naturally I knew nothing of the special rules and requirements of a naval hospital, but the basic requirements of all hospitals are very much the same and, so far, nothing had gone wrong.

But for the last hour or so I hadn't been easy in my mind. And I didn't know why, unless something I couldn't remember or analyze had touched the sixth sense of warning which an experienced nurse acquires. Of course, the watch had begun

rather badly with the lights going out unexpectedly while an electrician was repairing an electric grill in the diet kitchen, and just as, in the little drug room next to it; I was measuring a sedative. The result was I dropped a sufficient quantity of sedative into the glass to quiet permanently even Marine Sergeant Brown, for whom I was preparing it, and Sergeant Brown was a remarkably sturdy character. I had to empty the glass and find flashlights so the corpsman and I could patter ghostily upon our chores until the lights came on again. But that was for only a few moments and since then, except for the heat and the corpsman's headache, everything seemed to be in order. However, I went methodically through the charts again.

At the moment there were not many patients in the west wing, although there were some fifty-odd beds in the entire hospital—which, as a matter of fact, was called a dispensary but to me was and remained a hospital. The wards were in another section of the low, rambling building; the rooms in the wing I was temporarily in charge of were either single or double rooms. I was not alone. Navy nurses are of officer status and their duties are mainly administrative; corpsmen perform the usual nursing chores. Since there were so few patients in that wing I had to assist me during night watch only one corpsman, Jenson, who had a headache due to watching a heated baseball game between the sailors and marines under an even hotter sun. Consequently, after concluding his routine tasks he had retired to a small coat room beyond the drug room and diet kitchen, with some aspirin tablets. He was, however, within immediate call. Inasmuch as I had been Superintendent of Nurses in a large city hospital for more years than I care to admit, I daresay I felt that I was not likely to come upon an emergency I couldn't cope with—a mistaken idea on my part.

I put away the charts; clearly there was nothing wrong.

It was still too early for the 3-o'clock coffee I permit myself not only to keep me awake during the long hours of night watch, but also to relieve the tedium—which seems now an extraordinary word to describe the night then under way. I rose and walked the length of the corridor, passing the black spaces

that were doors to the sick rooms, most of them open to catch the night breeze. I reached the door at the west end of the corridor and looked out.

It was Saturday night, always hilarious, I had discovered, on the base. There were lights in the officers' club and a dance still in progress, for I could hear the music. There were scattered lights among the married officers' quarters—small brick houses set among grass and shrubbery and trees which provided a man-made oasis, quite literally, in the desert. I could see lights in Captain Somers's house, which was considerably larger than the others, since he was Commanding Officer of the base; I knew, for Kitty Somers, his wife, was my hostess, that there was a poker game in progress. For a moment I regretted my present task; during the weeks of my visit on the base I had taken rather a fancy to poker.

Nearer, lights outlined the long, low building which was quarters for bachelor officers, called the B.O.Q. Doubtless those who were not at the dance were listening to the radio, writing letters, or more probably engaging in a pastime which was referred to as shooting the breeze.

The silence in the sleeping hospital made it seem rather far away from the lights and the faint sounds of dance music. I was suddenly, strongly aware of the miles of desert that lay around us toward the north and east, and the lofty mountain ranges which hemmed us in at the south and west. And hemmed us in, as a matter of fact, with an immense powder magazine. The naval base was a Naval Ammunition Depot—NAD. Wanaha, to be precise—and I had not yet grown accustomed to the unnerving proximity of quantities of explosives, all stored away in what were called igloos (bunkered and spaced at strategic intervals to prevent chain detonations), and loading plants, out in the surrounding desert. This section was, of course, the most important section of the base, its reason for being; it was called simply "the Area," off limits for many of us, and guarded night and day by marines with remarkably agile trigger fingers, and (at night) Doberman pinschers, trained for attack.

But everyone else on the base was quite accustomed to life on top of a powder magazine. They assured me nonchalantly

that they had never had a blow, which seemed a casual way to speak of such a contingency. And I knew that the most elaborate and careful precautions were taken to prevent its occurrence.

"Black powder," the Safety Officer had told me once cheerfully, over a poker hand, "has ten times the volatile power of TNT." He looked at his cards. "It's sensitive. I'll take two cards."

Sensitive, I thought; wasn't that just fine! I swallowed rather hard and failed to see a potential flush, an oversight which cost me 36 cents. The stakes were small in our little games, but they were fought for violently.

I turned abruptly as if someone had nudged me and looked along the corridor again, and again there was nothing but an empty, white-walled corridor and black spaces that were doors. Nothing wrong.

So while I have no nerves, little imagination, and far too many years' experience as a nurse, I put my uneasiness down to nerves. The three preceding days had been extremely hot, with a wind off the desert which blew sand everywhere and never stopped. Sand in our teeth, sand in our hair, little drifts of fine sand along doorways and window sills. So tempers were a little frayed and nerves were pulled fine—mine, I decided, too.

Besides, what could happen?—barring an attack of temperament on the part of the black powder, an eventuality which I devoutly hoped would not occur. Obviously nothing. In my mind I ran over the sick patients; not one of them was then on what could possibly be regarded as the danger list. The nearest thing to it was Lieutenant Parly, alone in one of the rooms along the north side of the corridor; he was a young one-and-a-half-striper who had got a concussion and some broken ribs when his car, going at high speed from Wanaha City back to the base, had turned over in the sand. He was off the danger list and had been improving steadily, almost too rapidly and fretfully, indeed, for the night before he'd worn out Jenson's feet and my patience. Of course, adhesive straps and body casts do have a tendency to itch, especially in hot weather, but I'd have felt more sympathy for Lieutenant Parly's demands if

he'd been wounded in battle, or injured in the normal course of duty. An accident incurred while racing back to the base from Wanaha City with his pockets full of gambling money (and himself rather too full of alcohol) was different.

He was an extremely handsome young man, too handsome, in a dark, romantic way, with wavy hair, overfull and rather shallow blue eyes, a black toothbrush mustache, and a smile that revealed flashing white teeth. But the flashing teeth didn't make up for his nagging complaints; Lieutenant Parly had not endeared himself to me.

Wanaha City, I should explain, is not a city at all but a one-time mining town, which had experienced numerous ups and downs. Once a prosperous and booming gathering place for miners, fantastic in its robust life, it had lapsed into a deserted and forgotten street of dilapidated frame buildings with the closing of the once busy and prosperous silver mines in the mountains and valleys beyond it. At the time of the selection of the site for a naval base and its subsequent building, Wanaha City had again taken on life; during the years of World War Two, when the base had a full and indeed crowded complement of staff, sailors, marines, Waves, and civilian employees (of whom there were many), Wanaha City had burst into frenetic activity itself. This died away again, gradually, at the end of World War Two, only to resume, although on a less crowded and vigorous scale, during the war in Korea. Wanaha City was the only town within easy driving distance of the base; its restaurants and stores provided objects unprocurable at Ship's Stores and Post Exchange, dinners out for officers' wives who were tired of cooking, and officers and personnel who were tired of mess-hall dining.

The fact that gambling was legal in Wanaha City did not detract from its popularity. Every restaurant had its roulette wheels and crap games, as well as a mysterious game which is played by the use of what look like bird cages. I had, of course, experimented in a minor but I must say very interested way with all of them, and once at the green-felted crap table had acquired a handful of silver dollars owing to sneezing as I was placing my small bet and getting it on a different space from that which I had intended. The next time I tried it, how-

ever, I regret to say a little rake came out and pulled every one of those shining big dollars away from me, which rather discouraged further experiment.

But the main reason for Wanaha City's attraction to all of us was a simple one: there was no other place to go. A leave to San Francisco or Los Angeles had to be, because of the distance, at least a two-day leave. Any evening we could drive the ten miles to Wanaha City, have a gay dinner, dance, chat, and gamble in a mild way, and return to the base.

The officers and, of course, their families were free to come and go as they wished; the enlisted men visited Wanaha City when they had liberty and referred to it as going ashore, which seemed peculiar. They also called it Wanaha Beach, although there was never anything less like a beach.

But then, many Navy ways were and remained abstruse to me. Even time. Twelve o'clock midnight is midnight to me, not 2400.

For the most part, naturally, social life was limited to the base. There were constant small cocktail parties and dinner parties, poker and bridge. Naturally, too, in so small and restricted a community as the officers and their families made, they saw much of each other—too much sometimes. But small feuds which arose died rapidly away; you can't refuse to speak to your next-door neighbor, or somebody who is certain to be your bridge partner any evening. In the main there was a kind of family loyalty among them; there might be private little quarrels, but they all stood together, nevertheless, and had and solved the same problems.

Because I was Kitty's guest, I had seen much of the officers and their families, but this was a small circle. The entire personnel of the base included a battalion of marines, several battalions of Navy enlisted men, Waves, a handful of nurses, and a very large group of civilian employees, who worked mainly at the loading plants.

A section of grass and trees surrounded the officers' quarters, the Waves' barracks, the administration buildings, church, school, and hospital. This entire section was called "the Row," although, in fact, it was roughly oval. The red brick houses, many of them alike, were set with nice regularity within the

oval and connected by paved streets winding over the grassy, parklike space. The whole of it was surrounded by a business-like wall. The Row was set off from the rest of the great sprawling base. There was a wide gate and sentries; even I, a visitor, had been given a pass which alone permitted my entrance to the base itself and to the Row.

The music from the officers' club came to a loud and gay climax and stopped. The abrupt silence aroused me. The lights in the Captain's house had gone out without my perceiving it, so the poker game there was breaking up, too. I shivered a little in my thin white uniform, for the night was turning cooler, and debated closing the door. Indeed I moved to put my hand on it, intending to do so, when a door somewhere behind me closed. It closed very softly, so softly that there was an effect of surreptitiousness. I whirled around.

No one was there. The corridor was rather shadowy, for the only light was the green-shaded lamp at the chart desk at the very end of the long hallway. But certainly no one moved along it anywhere.

It was odd, for none of the patients was likely to be moving about at that hour, opening and shutting the sickroom doors.

It was not that there had been a rash of broken legs; indeed, most of my patients were ambulatory. But the fact was that every single one of them (except my little pet Lieutenant Parly) slept long and heartily. Once they got past the initial discomfort of removed appendices, sunburns, or strapped-up ankles or casts, everybody in the west wing seemed to have a positive gift for zestful, heavy slumber. It was only with considerable effort on the part of Jenson, who was ruthless in that respect, that we managed to get them awake in time for morning temperatures and breakfast trays. I didn't then think of Jenson and the possibility that he might be moving about the corridor; I was still unaccustomed to the constant presence of a corpsman.

However, since the patient, whoever it was, could scarcely have failed to see me (for I am, to say the least, no shadow, especially in my white uniform, which does nothing to minimize a somewhat substantial figure) and since, if he wanted anything, there was always a signal light attached to his bed

which could be snapped on in the fraction of a second, I thought no more about it. I closed the door—bolting it merely because I was trained long ago to bolt any door which had a bolt.

Then I strolled back along the corridor and decided to indulge myself and have my coffee ahead of time. There was no sound at all from the rooms on either side of the corridor except an occasional peaceful snore.

The small diet kitchen for the west wing is not far from the chart desk, running south, parallel to the rooms on that side and to the drug room. There is also a coat and storage room and then I remembered Jenson in the storage room, and glanced into it. He was there, stretched out in two chairs, his head at a neck-breaking angle, sound asleep. He was a tubby little man with pink cheeks and a bald and just then sunburned head despite his youth. He was almost as new to the Navy as I was in the point of experience; indeed, he had been a corpsman for only a matter of weeks; but he was conscientious, good-natured, and, as a rule, untiring.

I went on into the diet kitchen, a narrow room, white and shining with its enameled cupboards. I put a saucepan of water on the grill and reached for powdered coffee. The window reflected me, with my abundant red hair—streaked with white, to be honest—my white cap, the shining walls of the tiny room. Everything done and checked off, nothing forgotten—

Wait a minute! I *had* forgotten something, and that was a visitor.

She was one of the Waves, Ensign Sally Wilson. She had come in just before 10 and the day nurse had mentioned her when she turned over the wing and the orders for the night to me. Visiting hours were over, she had said apologetically, but Sally would be leaving in a minute or two; she'd gone on then with the orders. I hadn't seen Sally or any visitor leave, but obviously she had gone long ago.

So that was the forgotten detail that had been bothering me and it was really nothing at all! Perhaps, I thought morosely, the Navy was right in refusing to accept nurses over forty. Certainly I was showing signs of decay. I straightened my cap irritably, stuck my finger with a pin, and discovered that the electric grill still wasn't working and no amount of turning

switches would make it work. There was going to be no coffee that night—and no hot milk, beef tea, or other solace with which to placate pretty Lieutenant Parly. I put the coffee away again and started back to the chart desk, and as I entered the corridor someone went out the door at the end of it.

I saw the moving reflection of the green-shaded desk lamp, as if it were very far away, flashing once as the glass-paned door closed. I had a glimpse of a khaki-colored sleeve and the clear flash of gold braid on a shoulder board.

That was all. The door closed and the small green dot that was the lamp reflection steadied itself.

Clearly one of the boys had got bored with the hospital and taken himself quietly out of it for a few hours, intending to return before he was missed. Since this wouldn't do at all, I went down the corridor in hot pursuit. By the time I reached the door and pulled it open, however, he was gone. There is a small entrance there, a kind of porch, only a step up from the path and banked with shrubbery. I went out onto it and peered in every direction for a fleeing figure and there was none. By now the base was quiet. The houses were dark; the only lights were the small street lights at intervals along the winding roads, and a dim area of light from around the corner of the wing, coming, I knew, from the lights above the gate and sentry. My gallivanting patient wouldn't go that way, for the sentry would stop him and demand his pass.

But he had vanished, very swiftly, into the night and there was no use trying to find him. I'd have to make a check of the patients, and then watch for his return. I closed and bolted the door, which the A.W.O.L. patient had, of course, been obliged to leave unbolted, and then I saw the small red gleam of a signal light over one of the doors.

It was Jenson's duty to answer it, but I've done too much nursing to stand on ceremony. I went to attend it. As I approached the door I saw that it was the room occupied by Buffalo Bill.

I need not say that this was not his real name; he was Sergeant Bill Brown, top sergeant in the marines. From one or two allusions I had at first believed that he was called Buffalo Bill in recognition of a certain talent with firearms, but it later

developed that the name referred to some incident, long in the past, in connection with a thing like a tractor which, however, goes over water and is called a buffalo. What the incident was I never knew; but Buffalo Bill was an apt nickname for Sergeant Brown either as a human tractor or as a fighter. He was all of twenty-two, big, tough, and never left you in doubt for one instant as to what he thought of anything.

I opened the door quietly as one does in a hospital. Then I gulped, slid into the room, and closed the door behind me. The light was on, Buffalo Bill was sitting on the bed, looking vast in pajamas, his legs dangling. And a .45 revolver lay beside him.

"*What are you doing with that?*"

He eyed me. His broad face was flushed, sleepy, and angry. Even his light hair, which would curl in spite of the shortest marine haircut on record, I'm sure, looked porcupinish and angry.

"What are *you* doing running up and down the corridor?" he said, instantly turning defense to attack. "You woke me up."

"Put that gun away."

"Why did you come into my room?"

"Your signal light is on, of course. What do you want?"

"No, I mean before that. Before I turned on the light—"

"I wasn't—I didn't—"

"A few minutes ago. You woke me up—"

"I did no such thing. Give me that revolver—"

He put a hand like a ham down on the gun. "*Somebody* was here."

"Nonsense. You had a nightmare."

"Listen, sister—" he lifted the gun and waved it, in an absent but impressive way. "I hear anything close to me at night. I've got ears like a cat's. I woke up. Somebody was here in my room."

"Well, I wasn't," I snapped. "You imagined it—unless the corpsman—but he's asleep."

He blinked at me, and accepted my denial. "Okay, then who was it? I don't like people creeping around at night."

I saw his point. Neither did I. I said, "There's nobody here now. Either put that gun away or give it to me, or—besides

you've got no business having a gun here—"

He put the gun down and patted it. "Where I go, this gun goes," he said simply. "Naturally, I like my rifle better. But this is okay."

I eyed the gun; he eyed me. Then he said unexpectedly, "There's something wrong here tonight."

It rather took my breath. "W-What! I mean—where? What do you mean?"

He rubbed the other hand over his hair. "I don't know. Something—"

The troublesome fact was, of course, that men who have seen heavy combat duty do develop an even more acute sixth sense of danger than that of a nurse. This boy had returned from Korea only a few months ago. I took a hard grip on common sense. "There's nothing wrong," I said crisply.

"There was a hell of a row in the next room," he said slowly. "I heard it through the window. But that was before—" He rubbed his curls in a perplexed way, eyed me, and said, "There's a funny smell coming in that window. Anybody been operated on around here today?"

"Funny—" I went to the open window at the head of his bed and sniffed. And there was a slight but pungent, sweetish odor of ether drifting in through the night.

Ether, of course, is more or less an accustomed odor in a hospital, along with soup and antiseptics. But ether coming in out of the night is a different thing. The surgery was in a remote wing. Nobody in the west wing had been operated on that day. That, of course, was the odd thing about it. I sniffed and it was ether, no mistake about it; faint, but definite. Then I knew that Buffalo had got out of bed as he wasn't supposed to do and was limping across the room. I whirled around to stop him and he was bending over near the door. He picked up something from the floor, looked at it, his vast shoulders quite still and rigid, then turned to me. He had a knife in one hand, and his revolver in the other. The knife was an enormous and wicked-looking clasp knife. The blade was open. He dangled it by a chain fastened to a ring on the handle. He said, "Guess I'd better take a look—" and opened the door and limped out into the corridor.

My starched skirt swished across the room after him; by the time I reached the door he had disappeared into the next room. Light came on as he touched a switch and I ran into the room in time to see him pull down a sheet which covered the humped-up figure of the man on the bed. Then I was at his side. The smell of ether was strong, almost overpowering, so the room seemed to waver dizzily around me.

But the figure on the bed would never move again. He wouldn't smile or flash his teeth. He was no longer handsome. It was Lieutenant Parly and his throat had been cut.

"Sure got clomped, didn't he?" observed Sergeant Brown.

At that instant a soaring, wailing sound shattered the night silence, rocked the hospital and the base, wailed and soared deafeningly all around us. It was the disaster whistle.

TWO

ONCE OR TWICE before that I had heard the disaster whistle, so I knew that when it blew things happened, very rapidly and according to plan. A man on duty in the administration building signaled the O.D. (which means Officer of the Day and, so far as I could see, of the night, too,) and the fire department, manned by sailors. The O.D. then reported to the C.O. (Commanding Officer, this time, who was Harry Somers,) the nature of the disaster—accident, fire, or—heaven forbid—a blow. And meanwhile, everybody waited, their faces very still, listening. If there was no sound of detonations—and if the earth didn't rock and windows come crashing in upon them, the chances were that the whistle meant an accident or a fire alarm, also likely to be disastrous in their way, but not on so catastrophic a scale as a blow might be.

So even then, Buffalo and I listened rigidly while the disaster whistle stunned our ears. But the walls didn't really shake; the windows didn't crash. And the knife, dangling from Buffalo's vast hand, glittered in the light. There was a red stain, still wet-looking, along the blade and around the handle.

I thought, *But that's murder. He's been murdered.*

Buffalo, listening, said, "Must be only a fire."

And abruptly the disaster whistle stopped. There was for an instant almost a painful silence. Then the sergeant pulled the sheet up again, shielding the tragic and horrible thing on the bed. He put his arm around me and, limping, propelled me into the corridor. "Take it easy. Only a fire or something. Some Wave left her electric iron turned on. Here—"

Jenson bounced out of the storeroom, rubbing his eyes. Without knowing it, wafted along by Buffalo's great arm, I had reached the chart desk. I was sitting back in my chair feeling very odd. The telephone was there, Buffalo had it pressed against his ear and was saying something into it that I couldn't hear, and the ambulatory patients were popping curious heads

out of doors. Several red signal lights went on. In fact, for a moment or two there was a certain amount of confusion, and I'll not pretend that I so much as tried to control it. It was all I could do to control myself.

Buffalo said, "Okay—okay—" And put down the telephone. "Okay, fellows," he snapped in his best drill-sergeant voice, which was almost as loud as the whistle. "False alarm. No fire, no blow, nothing. G'wan back to your bunks. Loot—" He fastened on a young two-striper, very sleepy and disheveled. "Get those fellows back to bed. Snap into it." His eyes flicked Jenson. "What are you goggling about? Get busy." Jenson opened his mouth, shut it, and flapped at the patients like a nervous hen.

The young lieutenant gasped, overlooked rank, and his pajamas twinkled along the corridor to Jenson's assistance. The other patients hesitated, however, alert and instantly aware of something unusual going on, resisting both Jenson and the lieutenant, watching Buffalo, watching me. I think it only chance that Buffalo gave his revolver a twirl. "You deaf? Get back to your bunks." He chose to explain. "Somebody touched off the whistle by mistake. Accident. No fire, nothing. Now, then—back to bed."

It was a tribute to Buffalo Bill rather than to Jenson or the young lieutenant that they obeyed, although in a leisurely and grumbling way. But they did drift slowly back to their rooms. Buffalo Bill nudged me—with the revolver, as a matter of fact, but I don't think intentionally. "Better keep quiet for a minute, sister."

He went to speak to the young lieutenant, who apparently as ranking officer in the wing was the voice of authority, and then brought him back to the chart desk. "Okay now, sister," Buffalo said to me. "You'll want to report to the O.D." He took up the telephone again. Apparently the girl at the switchboard demurred. "Sure, I know—but you ring the O.D., sweetheart, or I'll cut your th—" He stopped, nearly strangling himself with the effort, and said, "Get him!" The parade-ground snap was like a whip in his voice and in a second or two he handed the telephone to me.

"*What—*" began the young lieutenant. The sergeant's eyes

had a slaty gleam. "Quiet," he said. "Go ahead, sister. Tell him—"

I did.

The O.D. didn't believe me. "Murder! That's impossible! Are you sure?"

I was sure. I must have convinced him. "I'll report to Captain Somers. Keep things under control—"

My hand was shaking so I had difficulty replacing the telephone until Buffalo took it out of my hand and clicked it into place.

The young lieutenant turned a glazed regard to Buffalo. *"She said murder—"*

Buffalo, a man of few words, replied. "Lieutenant Parly. Throat cut."

"Th—throat—"

I didn't know that Jenson had floated back to the chart desk until he gave forth his first utterance, which was, "Ye-owww," right in my ear and not helpful.

"Did it with this." Buffalo dangled the bloodstained knife before the lieutenant (his name was Graves) and the young lieutenant grasped the edge of the desk and stared at the red, shining wetness of the knife blade. Jenson, his sunburn standing out now in scarlet patches, said, "Ye-owww," again.

"Brace yourself, Loot," Buffalo said. "The girl at the switchboard listened in. There's going to be hell to pay—"

Young Graves braced himself with an obvious effort, looked at me, looked up and down the corridor, and said, "Who did it?"

Neither of us replied, for obvious reasons, and the sergeant's prophecy was almost certainly the fastest one on record to be fulfilled, for Lieutenant Edith Pillsbury, her cap over one ear, came running from the passage that led from the west wing to the main corridor and office. "The girl at the switchboard says—" she began, and saw the knife.

I think it was Jenson who caught her and lowered her, since there was nowhere else and I couldn't move out of my chair, to the floor, where she gave a low moan. There's no keeping a secret in a hospital where every word re-echoes and multiplies itself against bare walls. Heads were popping out doors again.

Jenson sketched a frantic gesture with his hands and ran to shoo them back, a futile procedure, for they popped right out again and Buffalo and the young lieutenant exchanged a few words and the young lieutenant went down the corridor, extracted a couple of men from the avid observers, and took them into the room where Lieutenant Parly lay. Murdered.

Edith Pillsbury scrambled to her feet. "Something—happened to me," she said in a queer voice. She took a gulp of air. "We've got to do something."

"Okay, sister," Buffalo said over his shoulder. He was standing with his back to us watching the corridor, the gun still in his hand at what I understand is called the ready. "Okay, sister. Everything's under control." He was this time addressing Edith Pillsbury, who moistened her lips and turned to me. I said, "I've reported it. I've reported it—"

Jenson ran to open the west door and Harry himself arrived and not the O.D., for which I was grateful, although I restrained myself from running to meet him. He flung back the west door (he was fully dressed, probably owing to the disaster whistle) and ran, followed at ten feet or so by the Exec, Jim Warring. Their appearance silenced the entire wing. Heads popping out of doors became rigid and still. The Captain paid no attention to them but hurried toward me. I tried to rise and my knees wouldn't hold me.

Harry Somers is a small, slim man, with a thin, weathered face, very bright, observant eyes and an air of command, and I was never so glad to see anybody in my life. The sergeant moved his gun toward his forehead in an odd kind of salute; Edith Pillsbury stiffened to attention; Jenson stopped flapping and, I think, wrung his hands. The Exec caught up with the Captain and checked himself, and Edith said, "Sir, we have to report—"

There'll be hell to pay, the sergeant had said, and he was right.

The Captain's presence, however, had a salutary effect upon all of us, which says much for Harry Somers. He snapped a few questions at me and at Buffalo— Who? Where? When had we discovered the murder? He took the knife from Buffalo's

great fingers, examined it in one swift glance, and wrapped it cautiously in a handkerchief. "No idea who did it?"

We hadn't. The Captain turned around to face the corridor with its staring faces. "All right, men. Keep to the rooms assigned to you till further notice. Jenson, enforce that. Lieutenant Pillsbury, don't let the rest of the patients hear of this tonight. Lie to them, do anything, but keep 'em quiet. Sarah, stay right here. Sergeant, show me the room. Jim"—he looked at the Exec, young Commander Warring—"you'd better come along."

A gleam of respect came into the sergeant's slaty eyes. "Yes, sir." He started off down the corridor.

Jim Warring snapped to attention, too, but gave me an anxious look. "See here, you look—there must be some whisky around."

"I'll get it, sir," Edith Pillsbury said instantly, and contrived, even then, to smile at him, Jim being rather an objective in a quiet but resolute way among the nurses and Waves. She adjusted her cap to a fetching angle. "I'll see to Miss Keate."

"Right. Thanks." Jim Warring followed the Captain. Buffalo and all of them disappeared into the room where Lieutenant Parly lay dead.

Jenson said, "My golly, every damn signal light!" and bounced to answer them.

Edith found the whisky; it was in the diet kitchen. She poured a generous drink, looked rather wistfully at it as she gave it to me, cast a more wistful glance at the door where Jim Warring had disappeared, said, "Never a dull moment. I'd better get on the job," and flashed away.

I sipped at the whisky, choked, and sipped again. I have been a rampant teetotaler all my life, but it seemed to be the thing to do at the time. For the fact was that not only was I suffering, perhaps not unreasonably, from a sense of shock, but I knew something of what lay ahead of us. It was not the first time I had made the acquaintance of murder.

I do not mean that I move in murder circles. Nor do I seek out crime. I do my best to avoid it. But a trained nurse, so to speak, gets around. In the course of her profession she dips into wide and varied waters, and sometimes for me this has in-

cluded very muddy pools indeed. Consequently, while murder was certainly not an old friend, it was, in a way, a rather familiar acquaintance. However, if I have ever been of any slight assistance in solving the puzzle of a crime, I fear this is due as much to curiosity (and a more or less observant eye) as to the strict sense of justice which has most charitably been attributed to me.

It has also been said, again very kindly, that I have a certain small deductive ability; this is not true. I wouldn't know what to do with a mysterious poison except throw it down the drain very promptly and I would turn over a suspicious fingerprint at once to the nearest policeman. I have only nursed for many years; I have seen people at close and sometimes critical range. I'll not say that I cannot add two and two with a fair degree of accuracy, but I make my mistakes, too.

So the only thing I saw just then was a rather appalling view of the investigation—the grim apprehension, the inevitable tragedy, the latent dangers ahead of us—and it was no pleasant view.

Someone said quite clearly into the abrupt silence, "Down the hatch with it, old girl." I didn't know who said it; faces were still in the doorways with—at the moment—a certain longing expression in all of them. But I thought it excellent advice and sipped again, with such immediate results that I retrieved my cap from the back of my head and rose, deeming this an emergency if there ever was an emergency, and intending to go to Jenson's assistance. However, as I did so, Jim Warring came out of the closed room and came to the desk.

"Feeling better?" he said to me, and picked up the telephone. I listened while he called Commander Roslin, the head doctor; Commander Nagel, the Security Officer, and several others whose particular duties I didn't know, and also telephoned to somebody else and directed him to call a staff meeting at 6 that morning. Then he telephoned to the administration building, where I knew there was a twenty-four-hour duty. "How's Smith?" he said. "Okay. Captain says bring him to the hospital. Right. The doctor will be here." He cut off the connection, thought for a second, and then lifted the telephone again. This time instead of calling a number he asked for Lieutenant Pills-

bury. "Edith, you've got a new patient coming in. Ensign Smith. No, he's got a bump on the head. I don't think it's serious—Rosy's on his way here. In this wing? Okay, I'll tell Miss Keate."

He put down the telephone. "Edith says to put Smith in one of the vacant rooms. He'll be here in a few minutes." He thought for a moment, frowning at the glass surface of the desk.

Commander Jim Warring was an attractive young fellow, in his thirties perhaps, but young for his job as Executive Officer of the base, and young to have experienced combat in two wars. He was unmarried and lived in the B.O.Q. and was so frequently in and out of the Somers house that he seemed like one of their family. I liked him. He was sensible, kind, said very little, and was a good bridge partner. He looked now, though, very worried—as indeed he had every right to be.

But I didn't expect him to say what he then abruptly said. "Look here, Miss Keate. They're bringing Ensign Smith here—you heard me. He was on duty at the office tonight and got a—well, a bump on the head. It knocked him out. The Captain and I were there with the O.D. when they got us on the telephone and you told the O.D. about—" he jerked his head back toward Lieutenant Parly's room. "The fact is—well, whoever got into the office and knocked out the ensign was the guy that touched off the disaster whistle." He stopped and looked at me and said, "And now Parly's murdered. Funny, isn't it?"

It wasn't the right word for it. Still, it was as good as any. "Do you mean that—that whoever murdered Lieutenant Parly—"

"I don't know. Nobody knows who knocked out Smith or what happened to him. It was easy enough to get into the office; all he had to do was walk in. Smith apparently was in a chair beside the switchboard, dozing maybe. Smith came to while the disaster whistle was blowing, stopped the whistle, got the O.D., sent back the fire trucks. They were waiting to find out what had happened and where to go. Captain ordered a relief for Smith but he—" he paused—"the Captain thinks it a good idea to put Smith somewhere where he can't talk. Think you can see to that? I mean while you're on duty. I'll warn the day

nurse, too. And Jenson."

I nodded. Jim looked rather doubtfully at me. "Sure you don't want a relief right now? We can get one of the nurses out—" But the shortage of nurses being what it was, the day staff needed rest. And would get, during the coming day all too little; no doubt about that.

I said no, I'd finish the night watch. Jenson trotted past with a thermometer and a frantic glance at us. And suddenly I realized that nobody was watching from the doorways; Jim's presence had sent them hurriedly to cover. Probably they couldn't hear. And I was afraid I had something which might be important to tell him. Or to tell the Captain. He moved and the light flashed on the three gold stripes on his shoulder boards and something tightened somewhere in whatever it is that we call instinct. After a moment I said cautiously, "Jim, do they know who killed him?"

He shook his head and stared at my now empty whisky glass. All the men on the base were deeply tanned by the blazing, unremitting sun, but he was rather gray below the tan and certainly tense. "No way of knowing so far. Captain will want to talk to you, get all the details. He'll have to set up a Board of Inquiry, question everybody." He sighed. "It's my job, too. I—" He was sitting on the edge of the desk; he got up, frowned, and suddenly said in a low voice, "Look here, Miss Keate. Have you—that is—well, you haven't seen Sally Wilson here tonight, have you?"

"Sally!"

He nodded.

"Sally—" I tried to collect extremely scattered wits. "No. But—that is, I think she was here. The day nurse said so when she went off duty. But Sally must have left—oh, almost as soon as I came on duty."

"That would be at twenty-two hundred?"

"If you mean ten o'clock, yes. Jim, I'm sure she left right away—"

"Didn't you see her?"

"I was busy. I didn't notice. Why—" I began, and stopped, for I knew why Jim was interested in Sally's whereabouts. I had seen them together riding in Jim's little car, Sally's light

hair blowing, or sitting rather close to each other at the movies, or dancing at the Saturday-night parties in the club.

Jim said, "So the day nurse knew she was here. I suppose she'll tell it; they'll have to question her about Parly."

"Sally didn't have anything to do with Parly. She didn't even know him, did she? Besides—*murder*—"

Anger flashed into his eyes. "I didn't mean Sally—"

"I know," I said hurriedly. "I didn't, either. That's the point."

The flare of anger died away, but he looked very sober. After a second he appeared to have come to a decision. "Look, Miss Keate—I'm about to ask you to do something that—that isn't— But I'm going to ask it anyway. If the day nurse doesn't remember Sally coming here—forget it yourself, will you?"

"But—but Sally—"

"Will you?" Jim Warring asked.

So I had to settle an inner debate. It has always seemed to me that the least an innocent bystander can do when he finds himself in any sense a witness is to tell the truth, and the whole truth. Concealment or evasion is not only unfair and contrary to civic duty, but it is also very likely to boomerang. I didn't for a second question Sally Wilson's innocence; it was preposterous even to speculate as to whether or not she could have been, in any possible way, a part of murder. But at the same time, it is my nature to cling to principles. Besides, the truth couldn't hurt her. I looked into Jim's young—and very dark and troubled—eyes and finally said, "Why?"

"Because I don't want them to question her," he said promptly. "She had nothing to do with this and I'm not going to have her dragged into it."

Prompt. Too prompt? I said uneasily, "Did she know Parly?"

Somehow I didn't think Jim Warring would find it easy to lie, so I couldn't be sure whether or not there was a kind of flicker in the very intent eyes holding mine. In any event, he said with a shrug which looked easier than it may have been, "Everybody knows everybody here on the base. But you know as well as I do that Sally Wilson wouldn't—" He stopped and for an instant a picture of murder seemed to rise between us. The room, too near us; murder, too recent. Lieutenant Parly.

I didn't want to look at it; neither, I think, did Jim.

He leaned over the desk toward me. "There's a reason, Sarah."

Of course. Otherwise he wouldn't ask it and ask me at the same time to trust him and trust Sally. So I promised, conscience scarcely giving a dying flutter as I remembered the way Sally looked, dancing with him—her face all alight and glowing and very, very young.

And at that point there was a sound down the corridor, the west door opened and two sailors trudged in carrying a litter with Ensign Smith sitting bolt upright in the middle of it, clutching his cap to his chest and looking extremely indignant.

There occurred, in fact, as apparently he found himself in the hospital willy-nilly, a slight ruckus, with Ensign Smith trying to get out of the litter and the sailors forcibly and, indeed, rather enthusiastically restraining him. One of them gave a slight howl as if a shoe had encountered some portion of his anatomy. Jim Warring went to quell the commotion, and the heads that had popped out of the doorways at the sound jerked back again when they observed that Jim was still on deck. (An apt phrase in this instance; I daresay there is a contagion about Navy vocabulary.) There was a vacant room in the corner, near the door. Jenson bounced to meet the little cavalcade and he and Jim and I got Ensign Smith settled, on the bed if not in it.

Commander Roslin, who must have run all the way from his house to the hospital, came in the corridor door, panting, and promptly took over. He looked at Smith's head, which had indeed quite obviously suffered a heavy blow, examined it, and told Ensign Smith he was lucky he had a hard skull. "Unusually hard skull," said the doctor with professional interest, upon which the sailors grinned at Ensign Smith, who glared back at them, and trudged away. Jim said to the doctor, "The Captain's waiting for you, but better get Smith fixed up first—" and the doctor sent Jenson for a razor and dressing tray.

I went to close the corridor door after the sailors, who were exchanging quiet but pungent remarks as to the thickness of Ensign Smith's skull which it appeared they had always suspected. The two slim young figures in white, their gob caps slanted jauntily at the same angle, disappeared around the

corner of the hospital and I lingered for a moment in the doorway.

From there the oval looked like a Christmas tree; there were lights everywhere and cars speeding along the roads. Certainly the news of the murder had gone like wildfire over the entire Row, if not yet the entire base. I remembered Kitty saying once, rather wryly, that if she turned off the lights at midnight, locked the door, pulled down the curtain and sneezed, the next morning everybody on the base would ask her how her cold was. Even the Waves' barracks were lighted from stem to stern and a little group of officers, one of them tastefully attired in what looked at that distance like a towel, was standing out in front of the B.O.Q. talking excitedly.

I thought of young Sally Wilson, over in the Waves' barracks (and the flicker in Jim's eyes when he had evaded my question as to whether or not she knew Lieutenant Parly). And I thought of the arm in khaki uniform with the gleam of gold braid on the shoulder board which I had seen, closing that door.

That was, just then, my problem. In that hurried instant I had quite naturally believed him to be a wandering patient, but on second thought I knew he wasn't. He had had, I was sure of it, three stripes on his shoulder board, and none of my patients was of the rank of commander.

Indeed the only man of the rank of commander who was at all likely to visit the hospital at night was the doctor, Commander Roslin, and I had reason to believe it was not the doctor.

THREE

MY HEART WAS THUMPING very uncomfortably. *I must be sensible,* I told myself. I would have to tell the Captain, of course. But first I must check the patients, make sure that they were all present and accounted for.

The door to Lieutenant Parly's room was still closed. I glanced in the room beside me where, now, Jenson was shaving a spot on Ensign Smith's scalp and Ensign Smith was telling him to take it easy with the razor or he'd break his neck. Jim and the doctor were in one corner having a low-voiced and a very serious conversation, if the doctor's shocked face was any indication of its nature. Faces were watching again from almost every doorway and as I passed a little murmur of question went with me to the chart desk where again I sat down.

I must get my thoughts in order; I must have all pertinent facts ready for Harry Somers. So exactly what were the pertinent facts?

Or more accurately, were they pertinent?

I had felt uneasy and troubled, but I discounted that. First because I had put it down to nerves, second because if it was due to my subconscious, endeavoring to remind me of Sally Wilson whose presence I had forgotten, then I had promised Jim Warring I'd continue to forget it.

There was the soft opening and closing of a door. That could have some possible connection with the murder, I didn't know what—certainly the murderer would try to escape from Parly's room as stealthily as it was possible to do. Still it might conceivably be a clue of sorts. I'd tell Harry Somers that.

And what else? The odor of ether—odd. Drifting in through Buffalo's window. From Parly's window? It was stronger in Parly's room. Had it been used to silence him before the murder? Prevent his outcry? If so, that was odder still. In fact I didn't then want to explore its implications. I went on.

There was the knife, of course. The Captain already had

that and knew what Buffalo could tell him about it, which was little enough.

But the important fact was the man who had walked out the door at the end of the corridor. And that could be all too significant. My knees began to shake and I had to wipe my forehead with the back of a suddenly cold and unsteady hand. It is not, I may say, a pleasant experience to be within hailing distance of a remarkably brutal and stealthy murderer—especially at the moment when he is escaping the scene of the murder, probably, indeed almost certainly and literally, redhanded. And I knew every man of the rank of commander on the base—knew him and liked him.

Well, those were the facts and the only ones. Otherwise there was simply nothing that anybody could call a clue.

So I sat there staring down the corridor, and eventually the faces in the doorways grew bored with looking at me and listening for the door to Lieutenant Parly's room to open, and withdrew. Commander Nagel and several other officers arrived, all of them looking rather white and excited, and I directed them to Parly's room. The doctor finished with Ensign Smith's dressing, and Jenson came trotting out with the debris, which undoubtedly included some of young Smith's red locks, and went to the washroom. Jim Warring and the doctor lingered in Smith's room for a moment in order, I suppose, to have a stern word with him as to the advisability of keeping his mouth shut until the Captain questioned him. Then they came out and went to Lieutenant Parly's room, where again the door closed. Jenson came back into the corridor and I sent him to check the patients in the wing and make sure they were all present and accounted for. "The Captain wants to know," I told him, somewhat anticipating the truth, but it would be Harry's first inquiry.

Jenson gave a resigned sigh and disappeared into the nearest room. Young Lieutenant Graves and the two men he had taken into Parly's room appeared, all rather pale and meek-looking and went into their respective rooms. Buffalo Bill limped out of Parly's room, gave me a look, jerked his thumb upward in an encouraging way, and went to his room. I was interested to note that he had no gun; probably the Captain

or Jim had relieved him of it. I had an impression, too, that he and the others had been told not to talk. And then as Jenson returned Harry came out of Parly's room and came to me.

"All present, sir," Jenson said snappily. The Captain gave him a blank look and took up the telephone. "Tell Lieutenant Pillsbury to take over here," Harry said to the girl at the switchboard. He turned to me. "I want to talk to you, Sarah. Jenson—"

"Yes, sir."

"Lieutenant Pillsbury will take over here for the rest of the night. She'll be here in a minute or two. All right, Sarah—"

So I went with him, past the closed, blank door of Lieutenant Parly's room and out the west door at the end of the corridor. Lights were everywhere. The cool night air struck our faces. Harry gave a tired sigh. "This is going to be the very devil," he said. "We'll go home. Kitty's up, waiting. I've ordered a staff meeting at six. I want to be able to report all of the facts I can get. Now then—"

We started along the paved street toward the lights in the Somers quarters. As we passed the B.O.Q. there was a sudden silence among the group of officers. One of them, Commander Gary, an ordnance officer who headed the department of manufacturing and packing of ammunition, came to meet him. "Yes, Commander?" Harry said.

"We were wondering—that is, if it's true, sir—"

"Lieutenant Parly was murdered. There's a staff meeting at six."

"Yes, sir."

We walked on, taking the branching lane toward the Somers house. When we were out of earshot of the group in front of the B.O.Q., Harry said, "All right, Sarah, begin at the beginning—"

I told him quickly everything there was to tell. Our footsteps were quiet on the paved lane. Dawn was not far away; distant mountain peaks were barely touched with light.

The sound of a door opening and then closing very softly. Buffalo's signal light; his insistence that someone had been in his room, waking him. The scent of ether—here Harry gave a brief nod—then the knife on the floor in Buffalo's room, and

our really horrible discovery. "But, someone," I said, "left the west wing; he went out the west door. That was before I went to Buffalo Bill's room—"

Harry stopped short. *"What? Who was it?"*

"I don't know. I thought it was a patient. I went after him, but he'd already disappeared. It was just after that that I saw Bill's signal light."

"But it wasn't a patient? That's why you had Jenson check—"

I took a long breath. "He was wearing an officer's uniform. I saw gold braid, just a glimpse of it on his shoulder board."

Harry's face was a sharp, pale outline. *"What rank?"*

"It was only an instant—I saw the door move, the glass reflected the green light on the chart desk. I saw his sleeve, khaki-colored, and—and there were three stripes on his shoulder board."

"Three—"

I nodded, miserably.

"But that—"

"Yes, I know."

He stared at me for a moment, his face drawn and stern in the dim, cold light before the dawn. "Are you sure?"

"Yes—"

"Rosy! Commander Roslin—"

"No. He was too tall. His shoulder was too high against the wall. The doctor is short and tubby—"

"Then—who was it? Could you recognize anything—"

"He must have been about six feet tall. But I didn't see anything else."

"But—a commander—" He stopped. We walked on, both silent.

It would limit the suspects in a frightening way. An officer, a commander, one of the small group, all known so well and familiarly among themselves. Harry said suddenly, "I can't think of one of them I don't trust. I can't think of one of them who would—" He didn't finish.

I said unhappily, "He might have been in the hospital on some—some errand. He may have known nothing of the murder. He—"

Harry said, "I'll have to question them. I—but I can't be-

lieve—" He stopped again as we turned into the path that went through shrubbery borders toward the big brick house, with its gabled windows and vines, that loomed up against the sky ahead of us. There were lights in the windows and Kitty was waiting on the porch. She came to the steps as she heard our footsteps crunch on the gravel. "Harry—oh, you've brought Sarah! It's true, then?"

Harry nodded. "How about some coffee, Kitty? I've got a staff meeting at six."

Kitty, her dark short curls disheveled, her pretty face white, put her hand on his arm. "And it was Parly!"

Light fell from the door directly upon them. I saw the look they exchanged, an anxious look, certainly, troubled and incredulous, but also significant somehow, as if a mutual knowledge flashed between them. Kitty took a sharp breath. "Parly!"

Harry put his hand upon hers. "All right, Kitty," he said gently. "We don't know who did it, yet. We'll find out. Now, then—"

"Of course," Kitty said and put her head up. "Come in, Sarah. The servants are up. I'll tell Suli." She hurried down the hall toward the kitchen, and Harry led the way to his study.

Kitty Somers was a true Navy wife and the study gave mute evidence of it, for she had early developed the gift for making any quarters where they found themselves homelike and comfortable. There were bright Indian rugs on the floor and gay slip covers on the deep lounge chairs. There were photographs everywhere. There always are photographs in a Navy home; they are tangible links with others of the great Navy family. Harry sat down at his desk and put his hands over his face so the light shone on his dark hair and touched the gray.

Harry Somers had had long and fine years of service in the Navy; indeed, he had a Navy Cross. I had known him since he and Kitty were married, the year after he graduated from Annapolis. I had known Kitty since she was scarcely a gleam in her father's eye and despite the difference in age between us, and the many years during which Kitty had followed Harry over the world and Kitty and I had kept in touch only with letters, still we had kept in touch.

So when she invited me to come to her at Wanaha Base for

a long visit I had come at once. And found both of them very little changed—Harry a little older, a little graver with the years of increasing responsibility. Kitty a little plumper, a little more sober when she thought of their son (now graduated from Annapolis in his turn and serving a tour of sea duty), but the same Kitty, pretty, gay, adept and by now well trained in her position of Commanding Officer's wife. She had a quick temper which she had learned to control, occasionally a sharp and impulsive tongue. But I think she was popular and well liked wherever they were sent and I knew that she was liked and respected on the base.

I heard her little heels clicking along the hall, and Harry took his hands away from his face and sat up straighter as she came into the room. She had a tray in her hands, which she put down on the desk. "I told Suli to bring breakfast for us here," she said, and poured coffee for us. She took her own cup and sat down on the sofa. Her dark eyes were fixed on Harry, waiting. He lifted the coffee cup to his lips. None of us spoke until Kitty could wait no longer. She said unevenly, "It would be Parly—"

"Kitty—" Harry began.

"—of all the people on the base!" She had a red silk dressing gown pulled around her; the white lace on her nightgown showed at the front. She pulled the dressing gown closer around her with a kind of shiver and put out an unsteady hand for a cigarette. "At least," she cried, "he deserved it!" There were tears in her voice and in her eyes, but there was anger, too. Harry saw it and got up. "Now, Kitty—"

"All right. I'll stop. But he was a rat and you know it."

"He was one of my officers, Kitty. And he was murdered—"

"He was—" Kitty burst out, met Harry's eyes, and checked herself. "What happened?"

"Sarah will tell you all there is to tell."

"Sarah—" With one of her quick and disarming changes of mood Kitty cried anxiously, "Oh, Sarah, I'm so sorry. It must have been horrible for you."

Harry said to me, "Tell me again, Sarah—everything. Don't ask her questions, Kitty, until she's finished."

So, sipping hot coffee and grateful for it—and for the house

and the comfortable, pleasant study, grateful for the presence of Kitty and Harry—I told them again. It still seemed, as the O.D. had said, impossible; it couldn't have happened. But it had happened.

"Ether—" Kitty cried and turned to Harry. He said, "There was an empty can which had held ether on the floor under the bed. A towel in the washroom adjoining the room had been soaked in it. Probably knocked Parly out. Gave whoever murdered him a chance to do so—well, quietly. No struggle. No call for help."

Again there was something about that I didn't want to pursue.

Kitty's face was suddenly stiff and white. She reached with a queer, blind motion for her coffee cup, lifted it, put it down. "Go on."

She didn't say anything when I got to the knife, but Harry interrupted then. "Clasp knife. Regular issue. No identifying marks so far, unless there are fingerprints. Anybody could have had one—almost everybody does have one."

But when I told of the man who had left the wing, the man in khaki-colored uniform with three gold stripes on his shoulder board, Kitty gave a kind of moan. "Oh, Harry— There's only—well, Commander Gary, Rosy, Commander Nagel—"

"He was fairly tall. About six feet, Sarah thinks. That lets out Nagel and Roslin."

Kitty blinked. "There's Baker. He's about six feet. And Cranshaw. Or—"

Harry turned to me. "How about lieutenant commanders? Could it have been two and a half stripes?"

"N-No." I thought back to that instant's flash of braid. "No. Three."

They eyed me, however, rather dubiously, so I began to question it myself. Three stripes or two wide stripes and one narrow stripe? "I think—I'm sure it was three."

Harry said slowly, "And Jim, of course. He's six feet. But—is that all, Sarah? Everything?"

It was all, except the fact that at some time the previous evening little Sally Wilson had visited someone in the wing— *Who?* I thought suddenly. *Who?*—and I hadn't seen her leave.

I ought to tell them, of course. Not only was Harry the Commanding Officer; he and Kitty were my friends, and I owed them loyalty in all things. Why had I let Jim Warring extract a promise from me? Yet Sally Wilson could have had nothing to do with murder; it wasn't really important. All that went through my mind as Kitty turned to Harry. "What are you going to do?"

"It's the very devil," Harry said again. "We'll investigate. Try to settle it. Find out who murdered him and—" He paused, looking very bleak. It diverted me from Sally Wilson.

"What happens?" I asked them. "Is it a matter for civil authorities, the police, or—or what?"

"It's up to me," Harry said shortly. "It's like a ship. I'm Commanding Officer."

"But the—the investigation?"

"First I appoint a Board of Inquiry. They investigate and try to find the cause of death. Like an inquest in civilian life. I report to the District Office. It goes to Naval Intelligence and the F.B.I. If we can't settle the thing ourselves, fix the blame, they send officers here. Usually it doesn't come to that. Trouble, I mean. But murder—" he rubbed his forehead. "I can't say I've ever had murder in my command. However, usually evidence comes out pretty quickly. Someone will know something."

"This isn't like a—a brawl," Kitty said sharply.

Harry rubbed his forehead again. "No," he said, bleakly. "In fact in my experience it's unprecedented—" The telephone at Harry's elbow rang. He answered it. "Captain Somers. . . . Oh, Jim." He listened, his brown face showing tired, fine wrinkles. "I see. Well, that's bad. . . . All right."

He put down the telephone. Kitty, leaning forward with her pretty white arms clasped around her knees hard as if to prevent their shaking, said, "What—"

"Edith Pillsbury says the ether was probably taken from the drug supply in the west wing. Checked it just now."

My own cup clattered on the table as I put it down. "*Who*—"

Harry shook his head. Kitty cried, "Ether! But why would they have a can of ether in the west wing? The operating rooms are in the east end—"

"Removes adhesive," I told her. "Harry, nobody went into the drug room. I'd have seen—"

"Edith says it's gone. Jim talked to the day nurse; she says it was there yesterday. Says she used it for something about nine last night."

One hour before I went on duty. Not much leeway. I said slowly, "I suppose someone could have gone into the drug room while I was busy—just at first when I came on duty. Or even later—I stood at the door for a while, looking out. That was when I heard a door open and close."

"The drug-room door?" Kitty asked.

"I don't know. No, it seemed nearer."

Harry said, "We'll have to question the men in the west wing—Jenson—"

"He was asleep," I told him. "In the storeroom. He had a headache." There was still something in my mind which I wouldn't permit statement, either in spoken or unspoken words. Evading it, I said, "Someone might have entered the wing from the main corridor, tiptoed across past the chart desk to the drug room and out again. But it doesn't seem likely. I think I'd have heard or seen—"

Harry said, "No. There's a girl on the switchboard just beside the main door all night. As you know. She says nobody came in after she went on duty at ten. Nobody went into the west wing from the main corridor. She's sure of that. Jim talked to her, too."

So that settled that. I said, "Maybe Jenson saw somebody—" But I doubted it; he'd have said so. Besides he was sleeping savagely during the time preceding the murder, or at least preceding the time when a man had quietly walked out the west door of the corridor and I had seen him leave.

"Jim's questioned Jenson," Harry said, tapping his fingers absently on the desk. "Jenson didn't know a thing."

"I could have told him that!" Kitty snapped, reviving for an instant. "Jenson's never known anything!"

I was rather pleased at her natural tone, but at the same time I was inclined to think that Jenson knew almost everything that went on anywhere. Harry said, "Look here, Sarah, this goes against the grain, but we've got to question everybody.

What about the sergeant? The one they call Buffalo?"

"What about him?"

"I mean—" Harry's mouth was a tight white line. He thought for a moment and then said bluntly, "He had a gun with him. Had no business having it."

"I know. I was trying to make him give it to me."

"Yes. We had a little difficulty persuading him to give it up. Not much; he knows orders are orders. But still— Sarah, would you have any reason to think he might have quarreled with Parly?"

I stared at him. "No!"

"You see, there are only two likely motives, a quarrel or," Harry said rather sadly, "a case of battle fatigue. Something the doctors haven't so far noted."

"Buffalo?"

"Sometimes it doesn't show up at once, you know. But once in a while a genuine psychiatric case gets on the loose, runs amuck. Unexpectedly. Breaks out like this or other ways."

Kitty took a quick breath that was like a muted scream. "Harry! Not here—"

"It's possible anywhere. Does happen. Not often, but sometimes."

"Not Buffalo!" I said.

Kitty's dark eyes shot to me. Harry said, "What's wrong with Buffalo?"

"He's got a bad knee. Kneecap shattered in Korea. Operated and fixed up with plastic. He's been having trouble with it."

"No signs of nerves?"

"None. Oh, he's impatient. Sedatives are ordered for him when the pain gets bad. That's all."

Harry looked at me. Kitty said, "But—but most of the men in that wing have been in combat, haven't they? It could—" she swallowed hard—"it could be anybody!"

Harry rose. "We'll have to question them all." He glanced at his watch. "I've got to be going."

"Harry!" Kitty cried. "Breakfast—"

"It'll wait, honey." He was at the door, and Kitty sprang up and ran after him, her arm sliding around his waist. I heard them murmuring together as they went to the door. Then Kitty

came back.

She stood for a moment in the doorway, a really lovely figure in her red dressing gown, very young looking with her black curls and pretty face. Suli, one of the two Filipino houseboys, came pattering down the hall in the soft slippers he always wore, and she stood aside to let him carry a tray into the study and put it on the table. He was very small, clad in spotless white duck; he had a smooth, young brown face. "Breakfast, missy," he said to Kitty, gave me an alert, curious look, and pattered away again.

Kitty came into the room, stopped at the tray, looked down at it as if she didn't see it, and then with a sweep of red silk closed the door to the study.

"Suli hears everything," she said. "Sarah, you don't know—we didn't tell you. It didn't seem important. Just one of those things. But now—" She came close to me, tears welling into her eyes. "Sarah, Parly *was* a rat. He had a bad record. Everybody's had trouble with him. But this—" She swallowed and a tear ran down her pretty cheek. "He's been a devil. You see, with a record like his, he's been passed over for promotion. Harry couldn't recommend him for another half-stripe. A full lieutenant. He told him why; his fitness report was barely satisfactory. In fact Parly's whole attitude was so bad, let alone his performance of duty, that Harry had to tell him finally he'd either have to straighten himself out or get out of the Navy. That is, it's automatic, the next time he's passed over. And—and Parly—he's been saying that Harry didn't deserve his decoration. His Navy Cross. Parly said that he knew somebody on Harry's ship during the war, I mean World War Two, and that it was another man that ought to have got the Cross. Nobody believed him, of course. Except—well, you know, things do get whispered around. Jim Warring got wind of it, talked to Harry, and had Parly on the carpet. And he—oh, Sarah, he was a worm. He said, yes, sir, and no, sir, and that whoever told Jim was lying. He denied it all. Harry told Jim not to make too much fuss about it, but to stop it; tell Parly it was his last chance. So Jim did. But Parly— The rumor didn't die down. Harry was going to have to take steps. And Parly—"

The tear dripped dismally down on her red dressing gown.

"He's got a relative, an uncle, in the Navy Department; he's top brass. And Harry's in line for rear admiral."

"Oh—"

"Yes. Parly was always—well, bragging about his uncle and, of course, that didn't go down very well with any of us here, but at the same time, just because of his uncle, there was a kind of spurious authority about it. I mean nobody believed him and yet—"

The telephone rang again. Kitty wiped her eyes with the back of her plump white hand and went to answer it. Her voice, to my admiring surprise, became at once polite and cool. She talked and listened and talked and I didn't hear a word of it, for I was thinking of Lieutenant Parly.

There'll be hell to pay, the marine sergeant had said. And Kitty had said, *It* would *have to be Parly. Of all the people on the base.*

She put down the telephone. I said, "Kitty, how many people know about this lying rumor?"

"Everybody, I should think. At least, they'll know about it now. You can't keep anything like that quiet. Murder—"

FOUR

I SPRANG UP and took her shoulders in my hands. "Kitty! Nobody could say Harry did it! The Commanding Officer! Harry—with a record like his!"

She looked at me; I could feel her try to steady herself. "No. Except— Oh, Sarah, people will say anything! If there's even talk—question, suspicion, don't you see what it might do to Harry? He said somebody must have quarreled with Parly. Well—if that isn't a quarrel—"

"Kitty, you mustn't think—you mustn't talk like that—"

"I know." She wiped her eyes again. "That's right. I've got to control myself." She took a long breath. "That was one of the Waves on the phone. She wants to see me. She wouldn't say why, except it was urgent. I had to let her come. Will you talk to her while I go and wash my face? I mustn't let anybody see me like this. Now, then, eat some breakfast, Sarah."

I patted her arm. "Good girl." She gave me a wavering smile and whisked away.

I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all. It seemed to me that it would certainly be quite simple to prove young Parly's malicious whispering to be a lie. The Navy does not present a high decoration for nothing and certainly whatever deed of courage and valor for which it is presented is a fact, substantiated and established. Why had young Parly so maliciously but so obviously lied? That answer, from even my slight acquaintance with Parly, was easy; he was, as Kitty had said, a rat. And he hated Harry Somers, simply because he demanded performance of duty as an officer.

While there are many—heartbreakingly many—heroes in uniform, a uniform does not automatically make a hero. That requires something else. And something which, in my opinion, Parly was notably lacking.

I wished angrily that I could see Parly's top-brass relative myself; I'd soon put him straight if he had any delusions about

young Parly. Blood may be thicker than water, but if the relative were the man he ought to be, he'd be ashamed of his nephew. And automatically on Harry's side.

It was, as a matter of fact, a sensible conclusion. Perhaps I've always been in love with the Navy, but certainly I had every reason to respect the service and the men who make it what it is. So if young Parly's relative was top brass, then he was also a man of proved honor. That went without saying and it comforted me.

Besides, I thought, in all probability he and any other relatives of young Parly had had their private troubles with him; even a very young man doesn't turn into a shirker and a liar overnight. He doesn't develop into a whiner and a trouble-maker in a minute. It takes some time.

I had had myself with Parly only petty and rude complaints and general whining. But Harry Somers was an experienced commander—experienced, reasonable, one who demanded that duties be well and promptly performed, but a man who was willing to take time, trouble, and patience with any of his men—in this instance, Parly.

And certainly the revengeful lies of a young j.g. who already had a doubtful record were not likely to weigh much against a man of Harry Somers's integrity and record. It was a lie which automatically showed itself as a lie. I would say all that to Kitty.

Suli knocked, opened the door, said something, and Sally Wilson came into the room.

It brought me back with a jolt to my own problem of conscience. "Sally!"

"Oh—Miss Keate! I came to see Mrs. Somers."

She had run all the way apparently, was breathing hard and there were two bright spots of color in her cheeks. She was an exceptionally attractive girl, not far from being beautiful, with smooth light hair, a nice mouth and chin and very direct, dark-blue eyes. Her summer uniform, seersucker so finely striped that it looked a clear cool gray, was crisp and neat. Her hat with its seersucker cover, her black Oxfords and black handbag were spotless and trim. She was so pretty and slim that the crisp uniform set off her sweetness, like a frame for a picture.

I couldn't blame Jim Warring for trying to keep her out of a murder investigation. On the other hand—well, on the other hand, I was afraid I was going to have to drag her into it. I didn't want to.

"There's a reason," Jim had said, and for the first time it struck me that it might be a reason which would not reflect favorably upon Sally. I didn't like that, either. I said hurriedly, with a kind of compunction, "Mrs. Somers is upstairs. She'll be right down. Have you had breakfast?"

She glanced at the tray and gave a little shiver. "No. No, thank you, Miss Keate. I'll—I'll wait—"

Kitty opened the door. Again I felt a wave of pride and admiration, for she had changed swiftly into a yellow linen dress; she had brushed her hair and put on powder and lipstick and a string of small pearls; she looked composed, friendly—and capable of consulting with anyone with kindliness and wisdom. She smiled and said, "Good morning, Sally."

Reveille sounded just then, clear and sweet through the morning air. It was light outside. Sunshine streaked in bright shafts into the room where the curtains did not quite meet, and paled the lamp on the desk. Sally, in that mingled light, looked extraordinarily pallid. I went to the curtains and pulled them apart so the clear, bright morning sunlight filled the room. I turned out the desk lamp, and Sally said, "Mrs. Somers, I've got to tell the Captain something. And I—I thought—if you don't mind, it would be easier to tell you first."

Her young hands were clenched together behind her. Her chin was high. Kitty said, "Why of course, Sally. Sit down."

But Sally wouldn't. "It's about Lieutenant Parly."

"Oh," Kitty said. "Oh."

"You see," Sally's mouth was unsteady but her words were clear and rapid. "You see, I—I knew him."

"But everyone—" Kitty began, and then said sharply, "What are you trying to tell me?"

"I was at the hospital last night," Sally said with that forced rapidity, like a child confessing. "I talked to him."

There was a sharp little silence. Then Kitty took a breath. "Sit down, Sally, and tell me—"

"Yes, I want to. It—" Sally sat down as Kitty did and

linked her hands hard together in her lap. She moistened her lips. "You see, Mrs. Somers, he told me—he said that he—he said that he had something to tell me about my husband."

I sat up abruptly. Kitty said, "Husband! I didn't know you had a husband. I didn't know you were married—"

"I—" Sally's eyes wavered for a second; she looked down at her hands, bare, I saw then, with no wedding ring. "Yes. He was—there was an accident. He was in Naval Aviation. He was a pilot. It was a small plane and he—it burned."

"Sally! I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"Nobody knew," Sally said. "I mean it's on my record, of course. But—I haven't been here long, you know. I was transferred from Washington. And nobody here seemed to think of it or to—to know about it, so I didn't say anything. Except—I told Jim—I mean Commander Warring. I told him. But—" she looked up at Kitty. "Somehow the girls, the Waves and everybody got the idea I was Miss Wilson, not Mrs., and they—I didn't want to talk about it. It seemed, I don't know how to explain it, but it seemed to—make it unreal. Far away. It was easier to forget." She paused and added simply, "Johnny's accident, I mean."

She looked down at the bright Indian rug. Yet it seemed to me that there had been a flash of something like shock, remembered or brought to life again, in her dark-blue eyes.

Kitty said slowly, "My dear—I'm sorry."

Sally looked at the rug. "I didn't think it mattered. I didn't think I was doing anything I ought not to do. I was so grateful, you see. It was different in Washington. All the girls there, everybody I worked with knew about it and—I don't know how to explain. They were so kind, and so careful not to say anything that would hurt me or remind me that sometimes it did remind me. I couldn't forget and—and so when I got here and nobody seemed to think about it I—I let it go. I didn't say anything. And then after a few weeks I—well, I didn't do anything. I'd thought at first that somebody would notice it, in my record you know and—but nobody did. So I just—" she swallowed—"I just didn't speak of it."

But she had told Jim Warring, I thought; the reason for that was clear.

"Well," Kitty said, "I shouldn't think that's a crime. You must have joined the Waves later. After your husband's death—"

"Yes. But here at the base—I didn't mean to—to go under false colors. It just happened," Sally said again, stiffly.

"You didn't intend to," Kitty said pleasantly. "So long as your records are clear, I don't see how it could matter." But she was waiting for more; she bit her lip as if she wanted to say, "What about Parly?"

Sally said, "And then—well, it was this way. Lieutenant Parly—I knew him a little, of course. And he—he had known Johnny. That was at San Diego."

"Yes?" Kitty's plump hands were tight on the arms of her chair.

"And—" Somehow I felt then that Sally was arranging her words with care, as if she'd thought them out, rehearsed them, and was now afraid she'd forget the lines she had rehearsed. She said, "Lieutenant Parly sent word to me that he'd like to see me about Johnny. He said there was something he thought I would like to know."

She stopped. And again I thought there was a curious stillness in her face. Like the incredulous stillness of shock.

Kitty said, "So you went to the hospital to see him?"

"Yes. Yes, last night."

This, I thought, was the crux of it, the reason for Sally's story. Sally looked straight at Kitty. "I—I don't— When I got there he was tired and a little—not very agreeable. He—" She stopped. Kitty said, "Go on, Sally."

Sally said slowly, carefully somehow, "He said he'd seen Johnny just before he left. That was at San Diego. Johnny's plane was found in the mountains—burned. Lieutenant Parly said he'd talked to Johnny and that—" her voice lowered—"that he thought I ought to know Johnny's last words. He—but then he didn't tell me. He was—in a sort of mood. It was as if he meant to—to tease me."

There was another pause. Then Kitty said, "That was very cruel."

"He—" Sally looked at her hands. "But he talked about Johnny and the morning Johnny left. He said that Johnny

might have picked up somebody to go with him on the flight. A hitchhiker. I—I hadn't known that. When they told me, I mean when I got the official notification, they said nothing of anybody else in the plane. It was only Johnny I knew about." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "They sent me his things then, later."

There was another silence. I knew Kitty was thinking hard, questioning, arranging in her mind, the few and sadly simple facts. "When did this happen, Sally?"

Sally's voice was low but clear. "Three years ago. We hadn't been married long, you know. Only a few months. I'd known Johnny since I was a little girl. We lived in Virginia, not far from Washington. We were married and then in just a few days, really, Johnny was sent to San Diego. We hadn't even had time to find an apartment or anything like that. I lived at home and Johnny lived there, too, when he could. But I was going to San Diego to join him. I didn't go with him. My father is alone and he wasn't well. I was to wait for a few weeks before I went to San Diego. But then—it—they told me what had happened. So I—I didn't know—it was so terribly sudden and final and—but anyway, then when Father was better, I got into the Waves. I was stationed in Washington. I kept thinking about Johnny and—I wanted to come west, I don't know why. Perhaps because that was what we had planned, Johnny and I. And besides there in Washington everyone knew about it. I couldn't—I don't mean I wanted to forget it or to forget Johnny. I couldn't forget Johnny. They lived near us, Johnny's people, I mean. Johnny and I—ever since we were children we'd known each other. I couldn't ever forget Johnny." She paused. Her young mouth set itself almost as if she were taking some inner but resolute vow. "I can never forget Johnny—" she said, half-whispering.

"Of course not," Kitty said.

Sally's eyes lifted to Kitty's. "I wanted to get away, somewhere where everybody didn't know about it and—so I asked for a transfer west, in this country if possible, and they sent me here."

Kitty said slowly, "You want me to tell the Captain this?"

"Oh, would you? I ought to have told everyone, right away.

But—and then Lieutenant Parly last night—I did go to the hospital."

I said, "When did you leave, Sally? I didn't see you."

She gave me a rather bewildered look. "I—I don't know. Not exactly. I was—I didn't want anyone to see me. Lieutenant Parly had— I was upset. I think I left a little after ten. I'm not sure." She paused as if trying to remember the time more exactly. Then she gave her head a little shake and pushed back a wisp of fine light hair with a disarmingly childish gesture. "But just as I went into the corridor the lights went out."

"Lights!" Kitty looked at me, and I nodded. "The electric grill in the diet kitchen was being repaired. The lights were out—oh, several minutes." So that was why I hadn't seen Sally.

Sally said, "I went out the west door. I—hurried. I went to my room. I was—crying, I guess. I didn't go back to the dance. Then this morning I heard about it."

I said slowly, "Did Parly say anything about—say, a quarrel with somebody? Was anybody else in the room? Did anyone come in while you were talking to him?"

"No."

I made another try. "Was there anything at all, Sally, that might suggest— You see, they don't know who murdered him and they've got to find out. Anything, no matter how small, that seemed unusual to you or—"

Sally got up with the swift, frightened movement of a bird. "There wasn't anything!"

She had told Jim Warring that she'd been married and that her young husband was dead; naturally she would have done so the moment Jim began to show any special liking for her company. And Jim had said, there's a reason. I had believed him. I said, cautiously, "Did you tell Jim Warring that Lieutenant Parly had sent for you and why?"

"Yes. He said of course I must see him." A faint flush crept up into her cheeks, but then as suddenly it drained away, so her face with that resolute, lifted chin was startlingly white.

And that, too, was what Jim ought to have said. If he was falling in love with Sally and knew it, then he'd do exactly that, for Sally's sake and for his own. And for, if it came to that, the clear understanding and happiness of another mar-

riage. He'd have to make sure that Johnny was in the past for Sally, and that everything was done that ought to be done.

Then I saw that Kitty was watching her intently, still waiting. She said, "Is there anything more, Sally?"

Sally turned to her. Again her words seemed to fall into a rehearsed and not too well remembered pattern. "When I heard of the murder, I knew I had to tell the Captain that I had seen Lieutenant Parly. In the hospital, I mean. And—and why."

"I'll tell him," Kitty said.

"Thank you." Sally gave a quick little sigh, like a child who has confessed all. (Or had she confessed all?) She said swiftly, as if eager, now, to escape, "I'm on duty. I've got to go. I expect the Captain will—will talk to me about it?"

"I think he'll have to talk to everyone who saw Lieutenant Parly yesterday," Kitty said evenly. Sally turned to the door, and Kitty rose to go with her. "If you remember anything—anything at all that might give the Captain information of any kind—"

Their voices died away in the hall. In a moment I heard Kitty's high heels tapping back to the study. She came in, gave me a long look, and said, "That girl's not telling everything."

The trouble was, it was in my mind, too. Yet I had an obscure desire to defend Sally. "She was frightened."

"Yes."

"She felt as if she'd been passing herself off as an unmarried girl. In effect lying."

"Well," Kitty said, "she was."

"But you can see how it happened. In Washington, near her home, she must have been constantly reminded of Johnny. People can suffer through kindness as well as anything else. Every time any of her friends started to speak of—oh, a dozen things, they must have remembered Sally and tried to turn the conversation to something else. All that. And here there was nothing like that. It was a new life to her. As if the past and Johnny had been put away and she could go on and make another life for herself."

Kitty went to the window and looked out. Her neat yellow dress outlined her pretty figure. The sun made a nimbus of

light around her dark hair.

I said after a moment, uneasily, "What will Harry do when you tell him?"

"He'll talk to her. Question her. He'll have to."

"Of course. But—"

"I suppose," Kitty said, "we'll have to check on her story."

"It's in her record. I mean that she was married and—"

"I mean about Parly. Whether or not he really knew Johnny."

"Oh. She couldn't have made it up, Kitty. Why should she?"

"She was there," Kitty said over her shoulder. "She was in his room last night. Nobody saw her leave. The lights—that doesn't really fix the time and she knows it. She could have left much later."

"She didn't murder him."

"She'd have to give some account for being there. She must have come while the day nurse was still on duty. The day nurse would remember and tell it. Even if you didn't see her."

Compunction twitched at me again; I hadn't seen her, but I'd known she was there. However, now that Sally herself had told her story, it didn't matter. I said again, "She wouldn't have murdered him. You didn't see him, Kitty. A woman couldn't have—" Something stopped me.

"Anybody could have killed him," Kitty said. Her face being turned away from me, her voice sounded hard. "Harry said they thought someone had used ether to make him unconscious and then murdered him. A woman could have done that."

And that, of course, was what I had refused to put into words. My heart sank. Kitty was too smart for me.

I tried to rally. "But—but, Kitty, there'd have been no reason for Sally to murder—"

Kitty turned around so swiftly that there was a force, something resolute and almost threatening, about her plump body. "There could have been any number of reasons. Suppose she isn't telling the truth. Suppose she *had* to get rid of Parly!"

I stared at Kitty. "Why?"

"Reasons—I don't know! She's been seeing Jim Warring." Her dark eyes were bright and cold. "Suppose Parly—"

"Suppose what?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

"You can't mean that she might have been somehow involved with Parly!"

"How do I know she wasn't? Or—well, maybe he could have stopped her marriage to Jim—it's easy to see she likes Jim."

"Johnny—"

"Johnny's been dead for three years. She knew him since she was a child. Perhaps she was fond of him, certainly she was—but it could have been a boy-and-girl affair. She's older now, more matured. Suppose she's fallen in love with Jim and it's really love for the first time. And Parly—" She eyed me again with that implacable cold look. "Suppose she had to get rid of him!" She said again.

"Kitty!"

"Don't look at me like that. The girl wasn't telling all the truth. You can't deny that. There are too many loopholes. She says Parly sent for her, said he wanted to tell her something about her husband and then didn't. Does that sound likely?"

"Well—" I said slowly. "Parly was a liar and a troublemaker. He was petty and mean; I know that myself. Sadistic perhaps in a petty way. Yes—I think it could have happened like that."

"So Sally Wilson went home and cried all night!" Kitty said scornfully.

"Yes, I think that could have happened. If for no other reason because she may be in love with Jim and talking to Parly brought Johnny back and reminded her so she felt disloyal to Johnny and—"

Kitty interrupted. "You're making a case for her. You've always got a soft spot in your heart for somebody you like. And you're a sucker for young love."

Kitty, normally, was a sentimentalist and matchmaker, bar none. I said tartly, "What about yourself?"

"If you think I'd let anything or anybody hurt Harry, I won't!"

"But *Sally*—"

"She was there. She was with Parly. He was murdered. And she's scared! You can see that."

I could. Murder is shocking, yes; even the murder of someone known as slightly as, by her account, Sally knew Parly. It

had been painful and difficult for Sally to talk of Johnny, stirring up again the memories and grief that Parly had recalled to her the previous night. Yet did any of it quite add up to the odd effect about Sally—of some deep and secret shock, some inner, desperate resolve?

Kitty took a sharp breath, "Between Sally Wilson and Harry —I don't care about Sally Wilson." And Harry—Harry's everything to me; her lifted head, her eyes, the firm line of her pretty mouth said it so emphatically it was like a shout. She went to the tray and began to gather up the breakfast things. "You didn't eat anything, Sarah."

"I wasn't hungry."

"No—what a night you had! You must sleep now. I'll keep the house quiet. It's Sunday so the marine band doesn't practice today."

FIVE

As I drew the curtains in Kitty's pleasant, orderly guest room to shut out the dazzling sunshine, the nervous tension which had kept me going suddenly let me down. I was so numb with weariness I could scarcely get out of my white uniform. Even the marine band, which had an unnerving habit of practicing furiously on the green outside the B.O.Q., couldn't have kept me awake.

But then, trying to sleep and thinking instead, a curious and indeed very terrible thing occurred to me. The cold fact was that the only people who, so far, might conceivably have had a motive for killing Lieutenant Parly, were Harry Somers, Sally Wilson—and Kitty herself. Kitty with her utter devotion to Harry, her quick anger, her sometimes wildly reckless nature! Parly had lied about Harry; could Kitty have believed that he could have succeeded in spotting Harry's fine and unblemished record? Could Kitty, wild with anger— No! I rejected it, shocked by the process of my own mind. It was an outrageous question.

And I couldn't believe that young Sally Wilson could have taken a knife— No. That wasn't possible, either.

Outside I could hear the usual morning sounds of the base, late because it was Sunday. A light thud on the porch below my windows told me that the day's newspapers had arrived, tossed neatly onto the porch by a nonchalant sailor making his rounds. I might say that I could never accustom myself to sailors delivering the newspapers. I wondered what was going on in the hospital.

By then they must have removed Lieutenant Parly, notified the powerful relative. At that moment in staff meeting they were deciding the course of investigation.

How many of the officers present, listening to Harry, offering suggestions, knew of the lying, whispered rumor Parly had started? All of them probably by now. But they knew Harry,

too; none of them would suspect that Harry Somers, Commanding Officer of the base, would have stooped to connive at murder.

Of course, any commander, especially one like Harry, inevitably makes enemies—not many, and only among the few, the very few, whom his duties require him to admonish, reprove, and keep in line.

I hadn't told Kitty the comforting and certainly logical conclusion I had reached as to the unlikelihood that Parly's spiteful little story would be credited by his august relative, whoever he was, or indeed by anybody in Navy circles. That morning she was shocked, her quick nerves on edge. Once her emotions were under control, she'd see it clearly. Probably Harry had pointed out the fact to her many times.

And I wanted to talk to Jim Warring about Sally. Or was I, I thought morosely, a meddling busybody? And then I remembered Lieutenant Parly as I had seen him last, and tried not to—and faces and words, the long, night-lighted corridor, the sound of the disaster whistle, Ensign Smith's red hair and the sailors, and Jenson paddling up and down the corridor, and Harry's face with the fine lines around his mouth and Kitty's tears all blended together in circles. I didn't wake until midafternoon.

Consequently I missed a day of swift and decisive activity on the base—as well as a day during which excitement ran high. Rumors, of course, had sprung up like the gusty desert wind, and ranged from suicide to an attempted enemy attack.

The staff meeting, however, resulted in prompt measures which stopped the more dramatic rumors. Although all during those hot and uneasy days and nights, a multitude of other rumors sprang into life, were whispered over the base, and then most of them died away again. The most stubborn of these was a recurrent story of a homicidal maniac at large—which resulted in, I must say, a certain amount of justifiable apprehension. It is not really very pleasant to feel that any unexpected step on a porch might be that of a stealthy and random murderer. Or that any face, even a face which is familiar and known, may shield the disordered intent of murder.

However, that morning steps were taken. A bulletin was issued, saying briefly what had occurred. A Board of Inquiry

was appointed—the Security Officer (Commander Nagel), the Legal Officer, Colonel Sinclair of the marines, Jim himself, and one or two others. Security measures throughout were tightened. Investigation was begun. All the men in the wing were questioned; Lieutenant Parly's known acquaintances were questioned. He was quartered in the B.O.Q.; the officers living in the B.O.Q. were questioned. His belongings were searched. A longer task was the sifting of records of base personnel for some clue, some faint evidence that might conceivably bear upon Lieutenant Parly or the murder. This included, of course, Lieutenant Parly's record, both at the base and at former assignments. It also included, I later learned, Sally Wilson's record, Jenson's and, of course, Buffalo Bill's.

Sentries of the previous night were questioned. Ensign Smith was questioned as to his unknown assailant—who, however, so far as Ensign Smith told them, remained unknown. In brief, the questioning was so wide that it included in the end almost every one of the officers and their families, Waves, nurses, and all those quartered in what was called the Row. It was probably an impossibility (certainly it was not possible within the space of one day) to question every person in the restricted area of the Row; it was not possible to question individually all the enlisted men, the marines and the many civilian employees. But that day there was a general order to the effect that anybody who might have seen or heard anything during the night which could conceivably bear upon the murder, or even which was out of the ordinary, unusual in any way, should report it at once. Sentries everywhere were doubled.

The fact that there were sentries on guard at every minute of the day and night simplified the problem in a rather unpleasant way. The base itself was not only well guarded; there was only one road into it. This road wound for miles through mountains and then between desert and mountains; it entered the base directly, went straight between the cluster of houses (administration buildings, hospital, church, school, and Waves' barracks, which was set off from the rest and called the Row), on one side and the barracks for enlisted men and marines (and Ship's Stores, moving-picture theater, commissary, recreation hall) on the other side, to Wanaha City. This road was always

under heavy guard. No one could have entered the base at night without being stopped by a sentry. No one could have left it.

And within this guard, the Row itself was set off by another guard at the gates.

Thus there were only two alternatives. Whoever had murdered Parly was passed by the gate sentry, or he already lived within the Row. And consequently was one of that relatively small and extremely close little community—all known well and familiar to one another. Every officer, including all commanders, lived in the Row. I wondered how Harry would approach that short roll call of commanders. I wondered when he would question them, what they would say. And when—or if—Harry would tell me the results of that inquiry.

This was just then the most urgent and ugly point of inquiry, but there was much more than that to be undertaken, and all of it entailed an enormous amount of questioning, checking, sifting which would take days to accomplish.

The shorter route of investigation, at least what they obviously hoped would prove to be a shorter route, lay in investigating the circumstances of the murder and Lieutenant Parly's acquaintances, seeking a motive.

Unluckily, it developed all too soon that most of those with whom Lieutenant Parly had come in contact at one time or another had had what could be called a quarrel—which was not so much a reflection upon our tempers on the base as it was evidence of Parly's far from charming character and activities. It was no easy task that had been placed upon Harry and the other officers.

The house was quiet when I awoke and instantly remembered, too well and fully, the previous night. Suli, as was his custom while I had been working at the hospital, had placed a lunch tray outside my door. From the silence in the house I took it that Kitty was out, but when I emerged from the shower I heard the murmur of voices on the porch below my window and, after I had lunched and dressed, I went downstairs.

It was by then getting toward late afternoon with the sun still pouring goldenly upon the base but the shadowy eastern slopes of the mountains were already blue and purple. I heard

Harry's voice at the telephone in the study but Kitty was on the porch, in the long porch swing. Jim Warring sat beside her. Colonel Sinclair, the Commanding Officer of the marine battalion, was sitting morosely near the cocktail table.

Jim was talking. ". . . windows are out. All the screens in the wing were closed and locked on the inside. Nobody went past the main entrance, and the desk and switchboard there. No—if it was somebody outside the hospital he had to come and go by way of the west door of the corridor." He saw me and sprang up. "Hello, Miss Keate."

Colonel Sinclair gave me a disgruntled and troubled nod. Kitty said, "There you are, Sarah. Have a drink."

Jim poured me a Coca-Cola and at my questioning look Kitty shook her head. "Nothing! Nobody saw anything! Nobody knows anything! Except that Parly was murdered." She looked and undoubtedly was tired and, as always with Kitty when she was anxious, quick and sharp in speech. I took the glass Jim handed me. Colonel Sinclair, nursing a highball and eyeing the blue slopes of the mountains, said, "I tell you there's nothing—nothing at all in Buffalo Bill's record to suggest a brainstorm. He's a steady guy. Fine sergeant. Magnificent record. I think Harry can believe every word he says. No question of it." He sipped his drink, nodded his massive gray head, and said, "Buffalo didn't do it."

"Well," said Jim, "I don't think so myself." He turned to me. "It's been a busy day," he said, and outlined the various measures they had taken, but did not mention any special inquiry among those officers of the rank of commander.

Kitty swung her little foot and stared at the tip of her slipper, and Colonel Sinclair drank and eyed the mountains. The sky was a clear, enormous blue; from where we sat we could see the base flag, red, white, and blue, floating high and beautiful against the sky. "The upshot of it is," Jim said finally, "we're just about where we started. Parly could have been murdered by one of the men in the west wing; some of them have alibis after a fashion—Buffalo and Parly were the only patients who had private rooms. The other rooms, as you know, were occupied by two or four men—but, of course, we don't know exactly when Parly was killed. The doctor thought from a half

hour to—say, two hours before he saw him. He couldn't pin it down—Parly was etherized, by the way, as we thought. They did a post-mortem. But while several of the men report being awake, talking, seeing each other at various intervals during the night, still it's perfectly possible that the murderer could have been one of those men, who could have been up and about while his roommate was asleep. So far, though, we've found no motive among them. Jenson saw nothing out of the way. The girls at the switchboard and main desk, there at the main entrance, are sure no one went into the corridor leading to the west wing. So—" He sighed. "So there we are."

"What about the sentries?" I asked.

"Drew a blank there, too. There were the usual little parties returning from a drive or Wanaha City. None of them after about one. Nobody without a pass. Everybody accounted for. Most of the people in the Row were at the club dance."

He stopped abruptly and there was a curious, sharp silence which for a moment I didn't understand and then I understood too well. Everybody in the Row was suspect. So, already, they were trying to establish alibis. It gave me an odd sensation of unsteadiness, as if the earth had given itself a sudden shake under my feet. Or as if I had inadvertently stepped on quicksand.

And also, in the same moment, I was appalled by a sense of the quantity of detail the investigation into murder must involve. There were too many people to be sifted down, questioned, their stories to be compared. Yet in another and even more appalling sense, there were too few. If they limited the suspects to the people living in the Row, that meant—well, it meant Kitty and Harry and Jim and the Colonel—and the men in the B.O.Q. and all the officers and their wives living in the small clusters of red brick houses, with the neat little porches hung with green vines. It meant the Waves in the long barracks across the green, visible through gaps in the trees, with lights beginning to twinkle from behind the windows. Sally Wilson was there.

My thought seemed to have wings which touched Kitty. She leaned forward, her hand clasped around her pretty ankle, an odd look, part defiance, part something angry and cold in her

dark eyes. She said to Jim, "Sally Wilson left the dance to go to the hospital, to see Parly—"

It was news to the Colonel, who jerked his massive head and sharp gray eyes toward Kitty. It wasn't news to Jim. He took a moment to put his glass very carefully upon the table. Then he rose. "I've got to go," he said politely to Kitty. "Thank you for the drink. Tell Harry I'll be at the B.O.Q."

His eyes were angry, too, and likewise defiant, so they seemed to meet Kitty's gaze with a spark. Before she could speak he turned to me. "How about walking over with me, Miss Keate?"

I rose hurriedly. "I need exercise. Yes, yes, of course—"

Kitty, with a baffled and still angry look, watched us go. As we walked down the graveled path I could hear the Colonel's voice in what seemed to be a question. We got out onto the paved, winding road. The sun was sinking lower, swiftly as it always did toward the high, sharp rim of mountains. Across the valley we could see its light still upon a distant rim of hills, touching them to rose and purple and blue. The sky was blue, too, edged with a clear lemon color. All around us the Row was taking on its twilight quiet. Father Andrew came out of the church, last to leave after evening service—which, I learned later, was remarkably well attended that day. The sunlight, striking across in horizontal beams, made a halo of the fluff of hair around his bald head, a chance illusion which modest and gentle (but firm) Father Andrew would himself have been shocked to observe. He wedged the door open, saw us, waved his hands in a friendly and apologetic way, as if he'd like to talk to us but hadn't time then, tucked up his black cassock and set off at a jog trot toward the gates and another service in the motion-picture theater.

Instead of crossing toward the B.O.Q. Jim directed our steps toward the church. Its old bricks were a gentle, faded crimson in that remarkably clear yet soft light. Its steeple pointed to the sky where all at once an evening star shone out. Jim said abruptly, "I phoned to Sally. She— Of course it's a horrible sort of thing. She's upset. She didn't seem to want to talk. But she said she had gone to see Kitty."

"Yes. I was there."

"Well," Jim said, "I'd have stopped her, I suppose. Not very smart of me. I was wrong to ask you to keep it quiet. It would have come out anyway. Besides, I couldn't have stopped Sally. What did she tell you?"

We sat down on the steps of the church and something of the evening serenity and the beneficence of the church touched us. I told him Sally's story, briefly, while he stared at the path, his tanned profile without expression. "I see," he said. "Did Kitty believe her?"

I hesitated; that was wrong, too. When you have something to say, it's better to say it. "Kitty didn't think she was telling all the truth."

SIX

THERE WAS a little pause. Then Jim said obliquely, "You've heard about Parly and the Captain?"

"Kitty told me. It's all nonsense, Jim. Nobody's going to take the word of a boy like Parly. Besides, don't they get all the facts nailed down before they give a decoration?"

Jim laughed. "Oh, Lord, yes! There's no question of Harry's decoration not being earned." He sobered. "The problem is a different one."

"You can't mean this relative of Parly's would make trouble! A man like that!"

Jim eyed me, half smiling again, probably both at my ignorance and my earnestness. "It's his uncle. No, he's all right. Nobody in the Navy more respected. He's on the board for promotions. Harry talked to him this morning."

"What did he say?"

"Well," Jim said slowly, eyeing the lofty peaks of the mountains which were by then outlined as sharply as if they'd been cut from paper against the last of the sunlight. "It wasn't easy for Harry. He had to tell him what happened. Then he had to tell him—uncle asked—what kind of record Parly had made."

"Bad."

"Yes. The boy was a problem. Harry told him the truth—had to; it shows anyway. Uncle didn't seem surprised. Told Harry Parly's mother was his sister. Said as a matter of fact that they'd always had a spot of trouble with the boy. Said, quote, his fool of a sister, unquote, didn't bring him up right. Indulged him too much—all that. Said he'd tried to do everything he could with the boy. Said he was sure Harry had. Oh, he was decent as all get out."

"Did Harry tell him about Parly and the decoration?"

"No. I urged him not to. Harry agreed—at least he didn't say anything, but probably he'd already decided not to."

"But he'll hear it and—"

"I don't know. Seems to me that there are some things it's better to let die of their own lack of substance. I had Parly on the carpet, you know, as soon as I got wind of his dirty little tricks. I told him we wouldn't have it. Reprimanded him. He denied it. Harry said not to make an issue of it. Beneath Harry's dignity as a matter of fact. Not that Harry stands on dignity; he's got too much sense. However, there wasn't much I could do beyond giving Parly a good stiff talking to and warning. You can't go too far with something like that; you've got to stop it, of course, but it's bad psychology to give it too much importance. I'd have had to bring somebody in who'd face Parly with the story, who'd heard it from Parly—all that. First thing you know the whole base would ring with it. I put the fear of God into Parly—or hoped I had. Harry said to leave it at that."

It made sense, of course. But I said indignantly, "The old days of the Navy had something to recommend them."

Jim smiled briefly. "Discipline, you mean? Bread and water and the hold. I must say it would have been easier. But you've got to give a man a chance. I told him he'd have to straighten himself out or get out of the Navy. We can't let that kind of thing go on. We don't want bad Navy material and won't have it," Jim said simply and with finality.

"But uncle— Did he think uncle's rank would protect him?"

"Oh, Parly, the little—well, he's dead now. Anyway, he made a reference to uncle. I told him he'd be the first to kick him out. I told him that uncle wouldn't have made any allowance for relationship, in fact he'd have to bend over backward to show impartiality. He couldn't have permitted himself the patience Harry had shown. That was all. Parly went away—sullen and furious. That night was the night he had the car accident. Harry said to let the thing ride, give Parly a chance."

I thought for a moment. "What did his uncle say about the murder?"

"Seemed to think Parly had quarreled with somebody. Oh, he was shocked, of course, but decent—very. Didn't want to interfere—said it was in Harry's command. Didn't know of any special fact about Parly—I mean nothing that would suggest a motive. Said he heard from Parly only through his sister. Said he'd talk to her, tell her."

My fool of a sister, he had said. But I was sorry for her just the same. The clear sweet notes of the bugler sounded over the base and I turned as I always did to watch colors, red, white, and blue against the lofty sky, float slowly downward. Peaceful, serene, so the moment was like a blessing and a prayer. The bugle stopped and it was as if something had said the week's work was over; tomorrow's work will begin; be at peace.

There was a kind of lump in my throat. I thought of all the men on the base devoting their lives to keeping that flag afloat. As Harry had done and only wanted to continue to do all the days of his life. Harry—and the colonel of marines, and all the tough, fighting leathernecks. The sailors. The officers in those lighted small houses, all of them experienced, all of them fired into a hard and resolute pattern by combat and years of service.

It wasn't fair for one bad apple in a barrel of fine ones to threaten the fine ones. Yet someone had murdered young Parly.

The sun dropped down behind the mountains, swiftly and finally. At once the blue slopes of the mountains seemed to move upon the base, so the soft twilight spread over the trees, the lights in the houses were brighter, the shadows were deep and blue. I could see lights twinkling, too, from the long, rambling hospital—from the west wing.

"I'll have to get back to Kitty's. You said the problem was different."

Jim roused from deep thought. "Oh, that. Yes. You see—it's not easy to explain. I'll try to make it clear, but it's one of those things—well, in short, you know that Harry's in line for a rear admiralship."

I nodded. He went on. "Parly's lying little nonsense wouldn't touch that. Nobody would believe it. Anyway it's proved a lie before he uttered it. Uncle—if or when he hears of it—will feel like the devil, horribly ashamed, all that. But, at the same time, we've had trouble. Administrative trouble with an officer, one of our men. And murder. The board that decides important promotions has got a job on their hands. They've got to be right in their estimate of men. They've got to weigh and consider every scrap of knowledge of those men that they can sift out and analyze. They've got to stick to the men who

can command other men and have proved it. Harry's got a magnificent record. But this—well, it's true that it's one of those things that couldn't have been prevented. Happened in spite of us. Nothing Harry or I could have stopped. But it happened. There was trouble," Jim said with a kind of sigh. "Why? What was it? Circumstances all reported in detail, yes. But there was trouble. And very serious trouble. Maybe," Jim said as if he were quoting, "maybe we'd better pass over Somers. At least this time." He turned to me. "Two times and he's retired."

"You mean if he's passed for promotion two times?"

He nodded. "It's automatic. Used to be three times; now it's two. It would kill Harry."

It seemed chilly suddenly, darker. I said after a moment, "No, it wouldn't kill him. He's tough. It would only break his heart."

"Same thing," Jim said shortly. "And the fact is the board would only be doing their duty. So it's got to be cleared up. And fast."

"Jim, how many people know about this story of Parly's attacking Harry?"

"Too many."

My heart was thudding. "But they can't—they *couldn't*—" I didn't want to say it.

Jim gave me a quick, hard glance. "Accuse Harry of murder? Certainly not. What could he gain?"

Nothing, of course. But Jim's denial was so swift and hard that it sounded defiant.

I rose. I could see flickering lights springing up in the dining-room of the Captain's quarters. Suli was lighting the candles.

Jim rose, too, and faced me. "Did *you* think Sally wasn't telling all the truth?"

"I—well, no, Jim," I said miserably. "You see—as Kitty said, there was a sort of—of gap in the story. Sally said that Parly had sent for her; he told her he wanted to tell her something about her husband. And then he wouldn't say anything, yet she went to her room and cried all night and—she looked more deeply shocked and troubled than she ought to have looked, even at murder." If it was the murder of a man who

meant nothing to her, I didn't tell Jim that.

He said, "That's what she told me. I knew she was going to see Parly—she told you that. I had taken her to the club dance; she left just before ten to go to see Parly. It seemed to me right that she should. I want her to be—" He took a breath and seemed to square his shoulders. "I want her to be sure."

Sure that Johnny Wilson might stay in her memory but not usurp her heart, not any more, not for the rest of her life? Sure that the past was the past? A heart divided: he didn't want and wouldn't take that from Sally. Yet how was Sally, how was anyone to learn that reconcilement? *I can't forget Johnny,* Sally had said, half whispering, as if making a promise, a decision, within herself.

But I didn't, quite obviously, know enough about love. Jim said, "I think she'll love me if she lets herself. I think she loves me now. So that's all that matters." I put my hand on his arm. He said, "She was so young when she married Johnny. They'd known each other all their lives. I think perhaps it was that. I think that in fact Sally, as a woman, still has to learn about love. And as for me," he said, suddenly boyish, "she's my girl. I've had it. She's my girl for the rest of my life."

We walked slowly along the path in the twilight; my hand was still on Jim's arm and he seemed to like it there. As we came to the curve that led to Kitty's, he put his hand over mine. "Thanks. I'll get Sally to talk to me. I promise you. But whatever she tells me—or doesn't tell me—well, I'm for Sally. You do understand that?"

I understood, all too well. I walked back to the Captain's quarters slowly and deeply troubled. Kitty had said I was a sucker for young love; perhaps I am. But I liked Sally with her square little chin, her loyalty, her direct blue eyes. And if I'd ever had a son I'd have wanted him to be like Jim Warring.

I knew that he was not only for Sally; the Navy was his love and his life, too. What would he do if he had to decide between them?

I pulled myself up, at that, with a jerk. For Sally hadn't killed Parly; she couldn't murder—murder I thought incredulously—anybody!

Jim had not mentioned the three gold stripes I had seen. So either Harry had told him in confidence or he had not told him at all. That, too, stirred something apprehensive deep down in my consciousness. I knew that Harry trusted Jim with many of his administrative problems; had he decided not to trust him with this? Why?

I avoided any mental speculation as to an answer.

Colonel Sinclair, his wife Marie, and Commander Gary and his wife Ruth were on the porch with Harry and Kitty; Suli was bringing out cocktails. I remembered only then that Kitty had said something about asking them to Sunday supper. Clearly she'd decided to go on with it, not put them off; carry on as if nothing had happened. Or, more exactly, as if what had happened could not concern Harry in any personal way.

I knew, of course, both the Sinclairs and the Garys fairly well. Colonel Sinclair was older than many of the officers on the base; solid, hard-driving, passionately devoted to his men. Marie was a large woman, with a long, rangy face, short, reddish-gray hair, and pale-green eyes that saw everything. She was, however, kind and sensible with a forthright if rather sharp tongue.

The Garys were younger; if we'd had a siren on the base, it would have been pretty Ruth Gary with her smooth dark hair, sleeked back to a knot on her white neck, and long-lashed dark eyes. Ruth said darling and dear indiscriminately and had a way of patting uniformed arms softly and giving languorous glances from her dark eyes which exasperated some of the other wives, but made the Gary quarters extremely popular among the junior officers. There was no harm in Ruth; she merely had a flair for charm in capital letters as she had a flair for style, so she always looked as if she'd spent far more on clothes than a commander's pay could be expected to provide. She wore that night a sleek black linen dress, with bangles at her wrists and ears, which made Marie's inevitable flowered-print silk look dowdy and overfancy.

Commander Gary, tall, dark, and rather taciturn, was obviously proud of Ruth's charm and indeed almost painfully devoted to her. That night, however, his devotion appeared to wear a little thin, for once or twice he frowned and all but

snapped at her.

It wasn't a pleasant meal. We couldn't ignore the murder, yet the men were so tight-lipped and silent that we couldn't talk about it, either. The candles wavered in the night breeze, and I tried not to think of the dull gold stripes on Commander Gary's shoulders. Suli slippered around the table with the vast tray of condiments. We had Rijsttafel that night, a real challenge to anybody's digestive talents, and I was helping myself recklessly to coconut, chutney, shredded almonds, and a few other of the eighteen—I counted them—equally daring trimmings, when Ruth said she intended to lock all the doors that night.

"Darling, if it's somebody gone berserk—"

Commander Gary interrupted. "Stop that, Ruth."

"But it's possible, sweetie-pie," she said, with a kind of shiver. "It does happen—"

Harry said to me, "Oh, by the way, Sarah, the new nurse arrives tomorrow. She'll go on duty at once."

"So you've got only one more night at the hospital." Ruth eyed me blankly. "Well, that's too much. I wouldn't go near the place."

"Ruth," her husband said warningly.

Kitty said Sarah had been the greatest possible help. Harry said something, too. We went out on the porch for coffee, with the deep black desert night all around us now. And all too soon it was time for me to get into uniform and go to the hospital. The Garys were leaving at the same time and we went together, trudging along the winding road. They left me at the west door and Ruth looked at the door and at me, and Commander Gary took her arm as if to check anything she might say and said shortly that all of them appreciated my help, and good night.

So I went into the corridor of the west wing to take night watch for the last time, and I was thankful—but I was sorry, too, which was odd, and not only because nursing is my job, not only because I'd felt an odd sort of satisfaction in being permitted to do it. The fact was, I had an urgent sense of something unfinished. A chore not completed.

And something that had to be completed, because Harry

had to be cleared. And there was Sally Wilson. And Jim.

The corridor was already quiet; the day nurse waited for me at the desk to give me orders for the night. She did so quickly and left; she didn't mention the previous night. But before she left she took up the telephone and gave the number for the B.O.Q. "Lieutenant James said he'd take me home," she told me rather apologetically. And whisked away.

So it was going to be like that. Afraid to cross the lighted, grassy space to the Waves' barracks. *I'm going to lock the doors tonight,* Ruth had said. The night before someone had crept stealthily into the wing, furtively along the bare, quiet corridor.

I wouldn't think of that. I busied myself with orders; Jenson bounced past and stopped to talk and I cut him off shortly. In another hour or so the entire wing had sunk into its usual heavy sleep, at least I sincerely hoped so.

All was quiet, yet in spite of myself I kept feeling that I was being watched and once or twice felt sure that there was some movement, somewhere near. When I looked, however, there was never anyone but Jenson, and after a while he disappeared, and the night hours settled into their long, quiet course.

I couldn't settle down myself, however, and after I was so sure that I'd heard a kind of rustle somewhere in the corridor that I let my coffee (early that night, indulging my own nerves), boil over while I poked my head out of the diet kitchen to look and listen—and saw nothing and heard nothing—I drank what was left of the coffee and went to Buffalo Bill's room. I had an extraordinary reason. I am not forgetful; indeed, it has been hinted that my eyes and ears are too sharp ("Old Eagle Eyes," was, in fact, one comment—made, however, by a little student nurse when she thought mistakenly that I was out of earshot). And, to quote the same generic source, I have a memory like glue. But Buffalo Bill had said something to me, there in his room the night before, which I could remember without, so to speak, remembering. Something noted at the time, forgotten, blotted out by the fact of murder. But something—wasn't it?—that might be important.

It was an elusive, but a tantalizing half-memory. So I finally went down the corridor to Buffalo's door. Jenson, his immediate duties accomplished, had long ago disappeared in the diet

kitchen, there I suspected to smoke a cigarette with the door closed.

I knocked softly on the door to Buffalo's room, avoiding the sight of the closed and undoubtedly secured and locked door to Parly's now empty room. If Buffalo were asleep, I'd tiptoe away again. I opened the door a crack and listened.

There was no gentle snoring, no relaxed sound of breathing. I pushed the door a little wider. The room was dark but a faint streak of light from the corridor fell directly across Buffalo's bed, which was empty.

I went into the room. No one spoke, no one moved. But as my eyes grew more accustomed to the darkness I saw Buffalo kneeling at the window, his great shoulders almost blocking it off. His rigid attitude struck me with a queer stab of something like terror. I crossed the room and put my hand on his shoulder.

Without a word, without a sound, with a lightning movement so it was all in one he shot upward. And bells rang; birds sang; whistles blew. I saw as brilliant a collection of stars as was ever seen by mortal eyes as I swooped away into utter blackness. In a word, I was knocked out.

SEVEN

OUT OF A KIND of ringing blackness there came first, perhaps not unreasonably, a certain surprise. Then I began to be conscious of other things. Lights pressing against my eyelids. A voice saying something I couldn't understand. Cold water splashed wildly on my face so my collar was drenched and cold. I opened my eyes. Buffalo Bill, huge and clumsy in his pajamas, was bending over me. He had a glass of water in his hand and was about to splash that over me, too. I said somewhat hurriedly, "Don't," and sat up against the bed.

"I didn't mean to! Oh, I *didn't* mean— I'm sorry! I don't know what— I didn't mean to, Miss Keate."

He waved the glass of water and thereby drenched my ankles. He looked as if he was going to cry. I took the glass with some energy and put it down on the floor and both his great hands shot to his head where he pulled and tugged at his hair. "I don't know why—I didn't realize it was you. I just— Oh, *gosh*—" he cried and pulled his hair and groaned.

I struggled upright, reached for my cap on the floor, and then stood, leaning, however, against the bed and feeling rather peculiar and dizzy. Buffalo remained in a tragic huddle, crouched on the floor, beating his head now quite literally. "It was your hand on my shoulder. I didn't hear you come in. I didn't know anybody was here. I just—I just slugged. I didn't know I was going to."

"Well, I'm all right," I snapped, although rather feebly. "Get up and stop that nonsense." I tested my nose and cheekbone; nothing was broken, although it felt like it. He gave me one shrinking, all but tearful glance, and thumped his head and groaned again.

"Get up!" I said. "You didn't kill me. But why on earth—"

He got to his feet slowly and indeed very awkwardly compared with the lightning-swift speed with which he had swung at me. As he rose, the door opened and Jenson stuck his face

in. His eyes were bright and curious. "Anything wrong?"

The marine sergeant muttered something I really can't bring myself to repeat. I said, "No, it's all right. I had a little accident."

I just ran into a truck, I thought bitterly. *I just tangled with a concrete mixer.*

"I thought I heard somebody groan," Jenson said. His eyes quickened and he stepped into the room to peer at me with a fascination which I do not usually attract. "Golly, Miss Keate, what's the matter with your eye?"

I could feel it puffing. I snapped, "I ran into a door."

He peered closer. "You're sure going to have one hell of a shiner," he said in an interested way.

A growl came from Buffalo Bill, and Jenson looked startled. I said, "Get me some—"

"Whisky?" Jenson said brightly.

"Certainly not!" I snapped. "I'm in charge of the wing. I'm responsible for it." But I wanted to get rid of Jenson; there was no sense in the story going all over the base. I said, "Spirits of ammonia. Put it on the chart desk."

Buffalo rumbled again in an indescribably menacing manner, and Jenson backed away. "All right. All right. I only wanted to—"

"Get out," Buffalo said succinctly.

Jenson did so hurriedly. And then Buffalo collapsed on the bed and looked at his great hands angrily. "How could I! I didn't mean to—I didn't—" He took a long breath that threatened to burst his pajama jacket and then said simply, like a rather sad child, "I've got to learn to stop fighting."

Well, of course, it was what he had been trained to do. You can't train boys for fighting, you can't teach them to protect themselves, instantly and swiftly in combat, and then expect those hard young bodies and lightning-swift nerves to forget all their lessons.

I tested my nose again, it being rather prominent and what might be called an exposed target. Buffalo sat in dejected silence and stared unbelievingly at his hands. "I felt your hand on my shoulder and I—I just swung. I wouldn't have hit you for anything—"

"Oh, shut up!" I said crossly, and then as his blue, bewildered eyes met mine I said, "Sheer reflex. I shouldn't have approached you like that." And I wouldn't do it again, I resolved grimly. Never monkey with a buzz saw. Don't pull the pin of a hand grenade.

He gave me such a miserable look that I couldn't bear it. "It was my fault," I told him. "See here, son, if you hadn't been trained to do just that you'd probably not be alive today. It was sheer muscular reflex, the kind you ought to have." He just looked at me with miserable, young blue eyes and I sat down somewhat weakly. Upon which Buffalo jumped up, all swift co-ordination now. "Spirits of ammonia," he cried, and limped out the door so quickly that I didn't stop him.

He was back in a moment with a glass in his hand and holding it for me to drink, his hamlike hands now as gentle as a kitten's paws. Jenson, or Buffalo himself, hadn't stinted me on the spirits of ammonia. I gulped as the pungent draft struck my throat. Buffalo Bill fussed over me like a mother hen. I wiped my eyes cautiously, got the glass tactfully from his hand and told him I felt better and to get off his leg.

He sat down again on the bed, a huge hulk of sorrow; I said, "What were you looking at? At the window, I mean."

"What?" he said, and seemed to travel back a long way. "Oh, that."

It was not enlightening. Neither was the suddenly rather guarded look in his eyes. "You were kneeling there at the window. So intent that—what were you watching out there?"

Buffalo's hands were suddenly very steady and hard on the bed. "Nothing."

"But—" His sudden wariness was like invisible barbed wire projected between us. "Was somebody out there?"

"No," he said quickly. "Not a soul. Nothing."

I looked at him. But there couldn't be anybody—well, prowling around the hospital. Could there be? Not with sentries doubled. Not with everybody on the alert, watchful. Not after last night.

Besides, if he'd seen anybody, or heard anything, he'd tell it. Wouldn't he?

He said with unexpected adroitness, "I was—I don't know—

thinking about last night. Wondering why I hadn't heard it. The windows are so close—I mean mine and the one in Parly's room. Seems funny I didn't hear anything."

"But you did," I reminded him.

"No. No, I didn't."

"You said that something was going on. You said—" And then the fugitive and tantalizing memory chose to leap out of obscurity. I leaned forward. *"That* was why I came to talk to you! I couldn't remember, but now I do. You said there'd been a row next door. In Parly's room! What was it? What did you mean?"

His eyes were candid, but he didn't want to look at me. He got up, limped to the window, and stared at the black screen. "I don't remember saying that. I don't remember hearing anything."

But he had said it. I was now sure of that. I waited a moment. Then I said cautiously, "He had visitors yesterday, didn't he?"

"Oh—yes, I guess so. Seems to me I remember voices." He turned back, picked up a package of cigarettes and folded it neatly and carefully.

"Whose?"

"Well, of course, Jenson; he's got kind of a squeaky voice. And the day nurse—"

"Did you know Sally Wilson was there?"

He didn't look up from the cigarette package. "Sally? Was she there?" He paused, slightly embarrassed, and said, "I should say Ensign Wilson. I guess I always think of her as Sally. Yes, she was there, and there was an electrician fixing Parly's fan. Parly gave him hell about it. That was in the afternoon. I don't remember Sally. I mean Ensign Wilson."

I don't know why I thought he remembered perfectly, but I did. "Sally wasn't here in the afternoon. She came at night, that is, before ten. But she left right away. If you heard her leave, it would be a good idea to tell the Captain. Merely as a formality; you see, nobody happened to see her leave and—"

His eyes were wide now with an angry light in them. "Do you mean they think *Sally*—"

"No. It's only because they are questioning everybody and—and trying to get alibis for the people who were known to have

seen Parly yesterday or people he knew and—and all that." It was rather lame.

But Buffalo's broad face flushed. "Oh, sure I heard her leave," he said promptly. "Must have been just after you came on duty. Yes, I'm sure of it. I heard your voice in the corridor. You were telling Jenson to do something or other. Yes. Sally left and—and I'm sure somebody came into his room after that. I didn't notice much. A man's voice. Maybe one of the fellows in the hospital. But that was early. I went to sleep and—what time was he killed? Can the doctor tell?"

"Within a couple of hours, I believe."

"Then Parly was killed between about midnight and about two-thirty, when we found him?"

"That's what they think."

"Sally was gone long before that," he said flatly, and sat down on the bed again, with all the yielding and communicative grace of a stone wall. It occurred to me that he might be able to substantiate Sally's explanation of the reason for her visit to Parly. "Did you hear anything of their conversation—I mean Sally's and Parly's? It would help Sally. She's told them about it and—"

"No," Buffalo said.

"Look here, son"—unconsciously I quoted Jim—"I'm for Sally."

He studied me for a moment, his eyes bleak and watchful. He said then, slowly, "She's a nice kid."

Doubtless it was unintentional, but his fist doubled up.

I gave it, I daresay, a rather nervous look. But I had to go on. "Buffalo, I don't want Sally involved in this thing, not in any way. She's explained her reason for coming to see Parly. If you heard anything, any scrap of talk that would substantiate—"

"Oh, I see!" But he stared at the bare and polished floor for a moment before he said, reluctantly and indeed rather carefully, "I could hear a few words."

"What?"

"Well, once I think she said she—she didn't believe something. And there was something or other about a letter. Nothing much but—" His blue eyes, wary now and cold, lifted to

mine again. "What's Sally's explanation?"

"That squares with it," I told him quickly. "It seems Parly knew her husband, Johnny Wilson. He was killed in an accident. Parly wanted to talk to her about him."

"I see," he said again, eyed me and then nodded briskly. "Okay. You can tell the Captain that I heard that. And I heard Sally leave."

And that's all I'm going to get out of you, I thought tersely. And at that instant, Edith Pillsbury knocked lightly and opened the door. "Jenson told me you'd had an acci— Goodness! What an eye!"

"I ran into a door. In the dark." I rose. "You'd better have a sedative, Sergeant. I'll send Jenson with it."

Edith looked slightly baffled but also fascinated. Like Jenson. "It's swelling like everything."

I went into the corridor. She followed me to the chart desk. "Don't you want to put something on it?"

"No," I said, perhaps forcibly, for she said, all right, it was my eye, and glanced along the corridor.

"Is everything going all right tonight?"

"Oh, dear me, yes! Splendid. Couldn't be better."

She ignored my feeble irony. "That's good. I was thinking of last night. Captain says not to talk about it. But how can we stop it? Well, I'll get back to duty. All my wing is as bright and lively as a Saturday-night dance. But I suppose the men here didn't get any sleep last night." She yawned. "You're lucky," she said, and swished away, her uniform rattling crisply, along the narrow corridor which led from the west wing to the main entrance and desk.

Lucky. The men, I regret to say, called her the Pill, which was inevitable, but I felt just then that there was also a certain appropriateness.

Jenson came out of the kitchen and asked me if I wanted coffee and I said no, I'd had some. "Can you see out of it?" he asked with interest.

"I can see you'd better get busy," I said tartly. "It's time for Graves's medication."

I followed him into the drug room and, after he'd gone, measured a sedative for Buffalo, resisting a mean impulse to

retaliate by doubling the dose and thus give him in effect what I understand is called in certain circles a Mickey Finn. I sent it to him by Jenson and sat down at the desk and studied the charts as minutely as I could with one eye.

But Edith had put a curse on us. Just as I was trying to sort out in my mind the little, the very little Buffalo had told me of Sally's talk with Parly, the whole wing seemed to wake and turn restless. Red signal lights popped on with a frequency and persistence that kept Jenson and me busy for the rest of the night. Along toward dawn Ensign Smith developed an unexpected temperature. Indeed, I thought dismally, the entire situation was rapidly deteriorating and I was very likely to deteriorate right along with it, only faster. My cheekbone ached all the way to my back hair.

There wasn't any reason that I could see for Ensign Smith's temperature. He thrashed around nervously, his cheeks were red and hot and he wouldn't sleep; yet it wasn't enough rise in temperature to justify calling the doctor. However, when I went to his room again, about dawn, he had gone to sleep and roused fretfully when I advanced the thermometer. "If you'd just let me alone," he mumbled, half asleep and blinking at me. "I don't know anything about it. I didn't kill him for a—" His eyes focused on me. "Where'd you get that eye!" He sat up, staring at it, and his mouth being open I shoved the thermometer in it and pushed him flat again.

The temperature had dropped back to normal. So that was all right. And then with Jenson beginning to rouse the patients who had eventually drifted off to sleep again, and enduring their customary and freely expressed disapproval, and me getting the charts in order for the day nurse, it was all at once morning.

And the end of my last watch in the hospital. I would have felt a keener regret if the day nurse hadn't arrived, fresh and revoltingly cheerful. "Good morning," she caroled, "good morning—" and stopped. "Gosh! Whose fist did you run into?"

"Here," I said tersely, "are the charts. Smith's had a temperature—"

I departed promptly, without even a backward look at the familiar hospital corridor. I let myself out the west door. The

sun was streaking across the grass and reveille sounded as I opened the door to Kitty's house—quietly so as not to wake anybody.

They were downstairs, however, early as it was, in the dining-room, with coffee already on the table. Kitty heard me. "Come in, Sarah. Coffee's ready for you—*good gracious!*"

She stared, her eyes wide and horrified. Harry got up from the table dropping his napkin. *"What happened?"*

"If you've got a good battle going on anywhere," I said crossly, "just send in the marines."

"Well," Harry said judiciously, "that's what we do sometimes."

"What do you mean?" Kitty cried sharply.

"Oh, I brought it on myself. But he'd heard Sally—some of it anyway—" I poured coffee for myself and told them while I drank it. It seemed to me that it went a little but a valuable way toward substantiating Sally's story.

What I didn't anticipate—and ought to have done—was the long, queer look Kitty gave Harry when I'd finished. And the way Harry's face tightened and his eyes grew worried.

Kitty leaned over the table toward him. "Harry, if that's battle fatigue, if that boy's as nervous as that—"

Harry got up. "I'll talk to him," he said quietly. "I think he's all right. Seems sound enough to me. As Sarah says, sheer reflex. Don't worry, Kitty." He started for the door, neat and erect in his uniform, turned back to say, "Steak," clearly not as a dietary suggestion, and went away.

Kitty was biting her lips, kneading a bit of toast, her eyes wide and speculative. Suddenly she cried, "But—but if he's like that—why, *he* could have killed Parly. The knife was in his room. He was next door to—"

The telephone rang and terror, nothing else, licked across Kitty's face. But Suli, in the kitchen, answered it and came to say it was for me. I took it in the study, my hand on Harry's desk, which was fortunate because it was the day nurse and she wanted to know why I had unlocked the window and the screen in Parly's room during the night.

"I didn't. I didn't go into the room! It was locked—I mean," I corrected myself, "secured."

"Well," she said after a moment. "Somebody unlocked it and got into the room, too. Last night. You ought to see the room. It looks like a hurricane had struck it. Rosy's fit to be tied—" she cut herself off. Somehow I felt that Dr. Roslin was standing at her elbow. My impression was confirmed when she spoke again, more formally. "Commander Roslin wants to know if anybody went into the room last night."

"No. That is, I didn't see anybody. Not anybody at all. I don't see how—"

She cut me off. "Thank you." The telephone clicked briskly in my ear. I put my own down slowly and hung on to Harry's desk. If anybody had got into Parly's room—by way of locked door, locked window, locked screen—then he was invisible. And so silent that in that quiet, night-lighted wing, I had not heard him.

But the door had been locked. The window and screen had been latched on the inside. He'd have had to have the key.

And Buffalo Bill had seen him! That was why he had been at the window! Kitty was standing in the doorway, clutching her red dressing gown around her, watching me and waiting.

EIGHT

WHEN I TOLD HER she said, "Buffalo Bill!"

Buffalo Bill, who had been kneeling at the window, looking at nothing, he had said. Listening to nothing. Yet so rigidly concentrated on watching and listening to nothing that he had not heard my approach.

"It was Buffalo Bill," Kitty said again. "He was nearest Parly's room. He could have unlocked the door. Or got out of the window and into the next room and— Did you ask him why he was at the window?"

"Oh, yes. He said there wasn't anything." But he had closed up like a clam, too.

Kitty, eyeing me, said, "You like Buffalo! How can you defend him after he gave you that eye? It shows he's not stable, not—"

"I don't think he got into that room last night. I don't think he killed Parly."

Her eyes flashed. "But you think he knows something. Don't you? You think he's in on it—"

"In on what, Kitty? A conspiracy to do away with Parly?"

"N-No. I didn't mean exactly that. Oh, I don't know what I mean. Except Buffalo had the opportunity. He's proved what a nervous state he's in. He—" She stopped, thought, and said sharply, *"Why* would anybody get into that room last night? What did he want?"

That, of course, was the point. She went on swiftly: "There must have been something Buffalo—or somebody"—she interpolated hastily as I opened my mouth to say it wasn't Buffalo—"or somebody wanted. What was it? Harry and all of them examined the room. They went through it and all of Parly's belongings. Everything he had in the hospital. Everything he had in his room at the B.O.Q. What would anybody want out of that room?"

There was no answer to that. And I thought again, how

could anybody have got into that room during the quiet night just past? So I didn't hear it, didn't see it, knew nothing of that visit. I had imagined, at times, certain stealthy movements in the corridor, but it had been sheer imagination. Hadn't it? There was never anything or anybody there when I looked.

But Buffalo Bill had seen something. I'd have to tell Harry that I was all but sure of it; Harry would question him. However, I very much doubted whether Harry would get any more out of Buffalo than I had. I didn't even explore the problem of why Buffalo had refused to talk of it. I said wearily, "Well, there's nothing we can do. I'm going to get some sleep."

At once Kitty was all concern. She made me swallow some breakfast; she got me off to my room; she pulled the shades and went away.

That was Monday, another hot, windy day with the sky like a brass bowl above us and fine drifts of sand everywhere. I couldn't compose myself to sleep at once; indeed I was only catching the very skirt of sleep when the marine band started up on the green outside the B.O.Q., tootling away with "The Halls of Montezuma," with which they always began and ended. It is a noble hymn; indeed it increases the pulse and brings a kind of lump in your throat and you think of Guadalcanal and Tarawa and Iwo Jima—and Belleau Wood, if you are as old as I am. It is not, however, conducive to slumber. They followed it magnanimously although not so spiritedly with "Anchors Aweigh." Somewhere in the middle of "The Wide Blue Yonder" I did go to sleep.

The base hummed around me on its usual busy routine. Ammunition was detonated out in the desert and I didn't hear it, which was unusual. It was the nerve-shattering custom on the base to detonate damaged ammunition. During the first week of my visit the thunderous boom and crash had sent me under the bed, waiting for the house to fall in on me, but when I discovered that there was a specific rhythm, a count (for the purpose of allaying any such alarm as mine), I learned to count but I held my breath while counting, too. But that morning I was only dimly aware of the windows rattling and fell into exhausted sleep again.

That day, of course, as during the previous day, specula-

tion and excitement ran high, with little groups of women gathering on the porches of the red brick houses, to be driven inside by the sand and heat and to talk endlessly of the murder while the men were not present to put a brake on such chatter. Certainly there was a kind of unspoken order which had gone out, suggesting such a brake, but human nature is human nature; it couldn't have been stopped short of individual gags for every person on the base.

And again that day Harry, Jim, and the Board of Inquiry carried on that meticulous, patient job of investigation.

The sun was lowering when I awoke and the wind had gone down, which was a mercy. Sand lay in fine drifts everywhere, on the window sills, on the pillow, and even my nose and teeth felt gritty and I was sure that I brushed it out of my hair. When I looked at myself in the mirror I had a shock; it had never occurred to me before exactly why a black eye is called a shiner. I had some sunburn lotion with a powdery white base and did my best with it, achieving a ghastly effect which, however, was a shade less ghastly than the truth. When I went downstairs to the porch, Suli was sweeping carefully with a dampened broom. Kitty was on the porch; there was the usual sunset cocktail tray and Harry had got back from the office and was sitting beside Kitty—his face gray from sand as much as fatigue. Kitty gave a gasp when she saw me and Harry said, "How is your eye?"

"Better," I said, lying.

"What *did* you put on it?" Kitty asked.

"Calomine lotion. Is there any news?"

There was.

The new nurse had arrived, Harry told me, and was to go on duty at 10. And there had been developments.

"About your little Wave," Kitty said and poured me some ginger ale. She glanced at Suli. "That's all, Suli," she said, and the alert little Filipino gave me a bright glance and gathered up his broom and slippered into the house. Kitty was looking both sulky and eager. She said, "It's a queer story—"

"Wait, Kitty. First—" Harry fished a neatly typed memorandum from his pocket. "We've been trying to make a sort of timetable, trying to fix the time of the murder as exactly as

we can. Will you listen, Sarah, and see if this checks with what you remember?"

I was seething with impatience to hear about Sally, but when there's a certain steely look in Harry's eyes somehow one remembers that he is the Commanding Officer. I nodded and he read, "Oh-two-hundred: about then you felt that something wasn't quite right, you didn't know what, but you felt uneasy and checked all the charts to be sure that nothing had been omitted. Right?"

"Y-Yes. If you mean about two o'clock. That is, I'd been feeling uneasy for some time. No real reason for it."

He made no comment as to that, but went on. "Then you went down the corridor and stood for a while at the west door. The officers' club dance was still going on."

"That's right."

"While you were standing there the dance stopped. And about then you thought that you heard a door somewhere along the corridor open and close."

"Yes. I had just made a motion to turn, and was about to close the door."

"So someone in the corridor behind you might have seen your movement and ducked out of sight to avoid being seen by you?"

"Yes. Yes, I suppose into Buffalo's room—"

He interrupted. "The club dance ended a few minutes after two—they meant to stop at two but went on for a few minutes. But lights were out within ten minutes. So it was about, say, twenty minutes or so after two when you went back to the diet kitchen. How long were you there?"

I thought back. "Five minutes, perhaps. I can't say exactly. When I came out I saw the man in uniform leaving—"

"We'll put that at about oh-two twenty-five. You followed him to the door, then Buffalo's light went on. You went to his room and talked to him—how long?"

"Three minutes at the most. Harry, if it was the murderer in Buffalo's room—"

"I'm coming to that." I'd forgotten that one did not interrupt or question the Commanding Officer. Harry's crisp yet absent tone reminded me; clearly he spoke in just that tone

merely from habit, but I had a wicked impulse to salute and say, "Aye, aye sir!" I thought it healthy to restrain it. Harry said, "The disaster whistle blew at exactly oh-two thirty-three. So that works out. You discovered Parly seconds before the disaster whistle. Consequently the murderer had time to escape the hospital, make his way to the administration building, and knock out Smith and touch the whistle."

I risked a question. "And after that?"

Harry sighed and put away the slip of paper and became an old friend, not the Commanding Officer. "That nobody knows. It's likely Parly was killed some time before you found him; the doctor says certainly a half hour but possibly as long as two hours. They talked to Buffalo Bill today. They questioned the patients in the west wing. The person who admits to having talked last to Parly—aside from the murderer—is Jenson. But you'd expect that. He went into his room about eleven. Usual night care; says nobody but Parly was in the room. So he thinks the lights went out for those few minutes about ten-thirty. Does that check with your own memory of it, Sarah?"

I thought back and after a moment said it did. "It was only a little while after I came on duty. I didn't look at the time, but I was measuring a sedative that Jenson was to give Buffalo Bill. It was his night medication. So it must have been about that time."

"How long were the lights out?"

"Not long," I said slowly. "It seemed longer, I expect, than it really was because we had to hunt out flashlights and all that. At the most, though, I'd say five minutes."

"Then that checks with Sally's story," he said. "She says she left while the lights were out. So that was about ten-thirty, and Jenson went to Parly's room at about eleven, after the lights had come on again; he says only Parly was in the room."

So he had questioned Sally; I wanted to hear more of that, but Kitty said, "There's the bathroom. There's that little closet. Somebody could have hidden there—"

"Parly would have told Jenson if it was somebody he didn't want to see—say, the murderer. And Jenson went into the bathroom once or twice. Jenson was sure that nobody was in

Parly's room then."

It still didn't narrow the time during which the murder had been done. Harry said, "None of the boys in the wing admits to having visited Parly or spoken to him from the corridor during that evening. Somehow I think they're telling the truth. I don't know. We tried to work out alibis for as many as we could but it wasn't very satisfactory. Most of them were asleep. Wouldn't have known it if a roommate got up and killed Parly. Of course, some of them obviously couldn't have done it; we limited the inquiry to the ambulatory patients. But we got nowhere really, nothing conclusive; the only evidence was a negative sort of thing—that is, nothing developed in the way of any close association of any kind with Parly—no quarrel or anything like that. No motive." He sighed. "It's not conclusive; still, those things do leak out, and I'm inclined to think that we can eliminate the patients. Not only because of a lack of evidence suggesting one of them but because Sarah—well, you've nursed so long, Sarah. You've got a kind of sixth sense about your patients. I think that you'd have known it if one of them had done anything at all that was unusual. I think that trained sense of yours would have roused the instant one of them so much as sneezed." He was smiling a little, watching me.

I said tartly that they snored plenty, but in a way he was right. It's something that comes with nursing. You may not hear a fire engine on the street, in the night; you may not know there's been a thunderstorm. But if a patient starts to twist and turn in his bed, or murmur in his sleep—or even if all at once he gets a temperature, somehow you know it.

At the same time, I had let a murderer walk into that wing—somehow, sometime—and then walk out again. I said, "You can't count on that, Harry. Somebody murdered Parly and he was one of my patients—"

Harry said, "And you knew it. Oh, I don't mean that you knew he was murdered, or that there was somebody in that wing who ought not to have been there; not with your mind. Not anything precise or factual. But your instinct told you something was wrong. And somebody was watching you, trying not to let you see him. You knew it without knowing it. So you tried to find out exactly what it was. I'm a believer in in-

stinct," he said simply. "I've seen it operate in battle."

It was, of course, an explanation for the nagging uneasiness which I had tried to rationalize away, blaming Sally's unseen departure, blaming the weather, anything. Perhaps Harry was right. But if so, I had signally failed to heed its warning. I said tartly, "Instinct didn't operate very successfully for me! I never thought of murder!"

Harry didn't reply to that. He went on. "Buffalo's theory is that whoever murdered Parly had come out of Parly's room—cautiously, first looking along the corridor—intending to leave by way of the west door. He saw you standing in the doorway and dodged into Buffalo's room. He waited there—probably for some time before Buffalo in fact roused—until he thought the coast was clear, when you came back and went into the diet kitchen. The murderer left the knife in Buffalo's room, first wiping off his fingerprints and with the intention not only of getting rid of the knife, but involving whoever was in the room in the murder. False evidence, so to speak. He waited and you didn't come out of the diet kitchen so he took the chance and hurried along the corridor and almost made it. If you hadn't come out of the kitchen just when you did, he'd have got away without being seen."

"Oh, yes, I think that's likely. I heard the door open and close. Buffalo Bill was certain that someone had been in his room. But I suppose he didn't thoroughly wake up until he heard the door close and whoever was there had gone—"

"In a commander's uniform," Kitty said from the dusk.

"Yes," Harry said after a moment, "yes. There's no news on that yet, either."

I moved uneasily and my chair creaked. "Did you tell the others—I mean the Board of Inquiry—about that?"

"Certainly."

"What did—" I swallowed rather hard. "What did they say?"

He shrugged. "Checked it, of course. No results."

"I did see him."

"I know. By the way, I've given them your account, but they may want to get it direct from you."

Like an inquest, he had said, in civilian life. I sighed. "All

right. What about the disaster whistle?"

His shoulders moved in a kind of weary shrug. "Cover, again. The murderer had to get away. Confusion would help—bring out the fire department, curious people, everything. Give him a chance to mingle with them and get away. He went from the hospital, I think, to the administration building; door was open, all he had to do was walk in. Obviously he knew the layout; knew exactly where Smith was and that he was in the room alone. Waited his chance to get up behind Smith, hit him over the head—we don't know with what—but anyway hit him, touch the whistle, and then get away."

Kitty stirred impatiently in the shadow. "Tell her about Sally."

Harry sighed. "We've been looking into the records all day, checking—" He got out his handkerchief and wiped sand from around his nose. "Checking everything we can. It's a long job. But as to Sally Wilson, she was married to this young Johnny Wilson. He was a Navy flyer. He was killed in an accident. Young Parly was at San Diego and may have known him slightly, probably did know him. That much checks, all right, but—"

Kitty said, "Tell her about the money."

"Money!" I said, startled.

"Well," Harry said, "yes, I'm going to, although there's nothing there, Kitty—"

"Tell her," Kitty said, lifting her glass and fixing a long and enigmatic look on the purpling eastern slope of the mountains.

"Well, Johnny was carrying a large sum of money for the paymaster. Ninety-three thousand dollars to be precise. It—when the plane was burned the money was burned, too, of course—"

Kitty interrupted again. "They couldn't find it."

"They couldn't find anything that looked like the burned remains of it," Harry said. "It was a bad job, the accident I mean. They only identified Johnny Wilson because it was his plane, his assignment. They couldn't even find his dog tag; maybe he wasn't wearing it. By the time they'd located the plane it had been burned and everything in it beyond recog-

nizable stage. Oh, of course, there are always ways of identifying a plane, metal parts may be twisted and smashed but they are identifiable. Nothing else was."

There was a long silence. Poor Johnny Wilson, and poor little Sally. Nothing identifiable; nothing left at all of that youthful brief marriage. Harry said presently, "Sally's got a good record. Works in Commander Gary's office; he says she's excellent. Parly was at San Diego. It's not only possible, it's very likely that he knew Johnny and talked with him just before Johnny took off—"

"Wait a minute," I said slowly. "She said something about a hitchhiker. She said that Parly said that somebody may have got a ride with Johnny."

Kitty hadn't overlooked that and neither had Harry. "Yes. So Kitty told me. So Sally told me." There was a kind of defiance in his glance at Kitty. "She impressed me as a straightforward girl. I think she told the truth."

"Not all of it," Kitty muttered, watching the hills.

Harry went on. "She was upset, naturally. Sat there like a little girl and looked scared. That was natural, too. But honestly, I don't think she cut Parly's throat. It wasn't a—a woman's crime." A kind of bleak shadow settled over his face.

"Sally couldn't have killed him," I said. It had become a formula: Kitty paid no attention to it. She crossed one pretty ankle over the other and swung her little foot.

"Ether," she said in a kind of murmur, eyes on the hills. "He was unconscious. The doctor said he was full of ether. So anybody could have done it. Sally—"

Harry put his hand gently on her knee. "Kitty, why? There's no reason. He told her he'd seen Johnny. That was all. Why should she kill him?"

"Jim," Kitty said flatly. "She's in love with Jim and if Parly could have stopped it, if he—"

"Nonsense, Kitty." His voice was gentle as always with Kitty but there was again a note of something steely below it. Kitty closed her lips tightly and swung her foot faster. I said, "*Was* there a hitchhiker?"

Harry shook his head. "If so, he wasn't deposited anywhere; Johnny Wilson hadn't made a stop; he was flying direct from

San Diego here as a matter of fact, bringing the money. Paymaster here has to have a lot of cash. Then Johnny was to go on to Elwell Naval Base."

"There wasn't—" I began, fumbling for something, I didn't know just what; it lay too far below my outward consciousness—"there wasn't—well, another body in the burned plane. Besides Johnny?"

Kitty's foot stilled. Harry said, "No. Only Johnny."

So then there could have been in fact no hitchhiker. But it bothered me, oddly, just the same. I said, "And that was all Sally said."

Harry nodded. "She said that Parly had said something of seeing a hitchhiker, somebody wanting to hop a ride with Johnny. That was all she knew—"

"All she admitted—" Kitty murmured, and stopped as Harry's hand pressed her knee. But then she took a quick breath and flashed around.

"Don't try to stop me, Harry! I've been thinking of it and thinking and—suppose Parly was the hitchhiker and he got away with the money and—"

"Kitty! He couldn't—"

"And then—and then—" Kitty took a quick breath; her eyes leaped to me and to Harry; she cried, "Suppose Sally knew it! And she—"

"Stop that, Kitty," Harry said sternly.

I said, "Kitty, it was Parly who was murdered! Even if there was a hitchhiker and even if it was Parly and he got away with the money, Sally wouldn't have had a reason to kill Parly. If anything like that could have happened, it's Parly who would have had a motive for killing Sally. But Sally—" Then I saw what had flashed into her mind. And what she didn't really accept for an instant.

Harry saw it, too. Savingly, he laughed. "Kitty, Kitty! Would you make Sally and Parly in a conspiracy? Sally sharing money with Parly; Sally covering up Parly's theft, Sally murdering Parly to—I suppose to keep it quiet. I can't think of anything else. Would you accept all that to protect me?" He laughed. But he took her little hand just the same. "Kitty, look at me. First, I don't need such a drastic theory for protection.

Believe me. Second, that's as farfetched a notion as any beautiful and altogether lovely wife ever thought up in her loyal little heart, because third, it isn't true—"

Kitty wouldn't be won over. She looked angrily at Harry. "You let yourself go overboard about Sally. Because a pretty girl looks at you with big blue eyes and says she doesn't know anything at all about the murder of a man she's just visited and that she—"

"And I'll tell you why it isn't true," Harry said, as if Kitty had not spoken. "Parly was not on the plane with Johnny. I asked. They checked back. Date, duties, everything. Parly was not in Johnny's plane."

"Oh," Kitty said finally, staring at him. "Oh."

I took a long breath. The trouble was that while I wouldn't have put it past young Parly to have got himself involved in something unpleasant in the extreme, yet he couldn't have had a hold of any sort over Sally. And Sally couldn't have killed him. I always came back to that. I said to Harry, "You said there wasn't any news about any commander at the hospital."

Harry released Kitty's hand. "They checked with every commander on the base. It was the only thing to do. Not one of them admits having visited the hospital for any reason at all that night. And," he said slowly, "I have to believe them. Yet you did see that uniform, Sarah. We'll have to go on with lieutenant commanders, even lieutenants, in the event you didn't see the stripes clearly. And it may have been a perfectly innocent errand. But we've got to get to the bottom of it."

There was another silence. Then I said, "What about last night? Who got into Parly's room?"

"There's a dead end there, too. Jenson knew nothing about it. I questioned Buffalo Bill about that, too. Told him I thought he might have seen whoever it was who got into Parly's empty room. He was at the window, you said. But he said he hadn't heard anything out of the way, hadn't seen anything, and stuck to it." He lifted his glass, eyed me, and said, "Was that your impression?"

"Not—exactly," I had to tell him. "He seemed to close up when I asked him about it."

"Well—" Harry sipped his drink thoughtfully and then

said, directly, "Is there anybody he'd want to protect?"

There was. It leaped into my mind and almost to my lips. Sally. Sally, again. She's a nice kid, he'd said, and there was something about it that seemed to me now like a declaration. And a defense. Sally.

I wasn't going to tell Harry that. Besides, I told myself quickly, it was only an impression. I shook my head. Kitty said, "What would anybody want in that room, Harry? You went all over it, didn't you? You and Jim and everybody? Why would anybody get into it and search it? The nurse said it looked as if a hurricane had struck it. Whoever got into the room must have wanted either to find something or to destroy something. What?"

Kitty, I thought crossly again, was too smart.

Harry replied wearily, "Oh, the room was searched. But nothing was taken. Nothing was any different, nothing missing that was there before. And nobody," he said with a sigh, "seems to know anything at all about it."

I decided, without any clear reason, to steer away from that subject. "How about Ensign Smith and the disaster whistle? Does he know who hit him?"

"No." Harry frowned a little as if in indecision. Then he said abruptly, "A rather odd thing has come up. That is, it was no secret, but it didn't come to my attention until today. Smith was with Parly when he was injured."

"Smith!" Kitty cried.

"They were coming home from Wanaha City. Smith says Parly picked him up on the main street, gave him a lift home. Car turned over. Smith hailed another car and reported it. Smith wasn't hurt."

There was another long and thoughtful pause. I said finally, "Was that all he told you?"

Harry shrugged. "That was all. Said Parly was driving too fast. He'd been drinking. Said he didn't know anything about what Parly had been doing that night. Smith saw him as he came out of El Rico's. Said he was talking to some girl, Smith didn't know who, he didn't pay much attention, on the sidewalk. Parly came toward his car, saw Smith and offered the lift back to the base. That was all."

Some girl. "A girl in uniform? I mean one of the girls on the base?"

Harry shook his head. "Smith didn't think she was in uniform. Says he didn't really notice. But he'd have recognized—" his eyes twinkled slightly as he glanced at Kitty—"he'd have recognized Sally," he said gently.

Kitty looked sulky and wouldn't smile. I said slowly, "Was that all Ensign Smith told you?"

Harry's eyes sharpened. "Yes. Why?"

"I was only thinking. He had a temperature that night. No reason for it unless he was—well, excited. Worried. And once when I took his temperature he said something about—he was half-awake, I'm sure, though—he said he didn't murder Parly, he wouldn't have murdered him for a—"

"For a what? What was he talking about?"

"He woke up then. He didn't say any more."

"I see," Harry said. "I see. Well, we'll question him again."

"He could have knocked himself out," I said slowly, digging back into such criminal lore as had come my way. "It has been done. So nobody would suspect him, I mean."

Kitty and Harry both gave me rather shocked and horrified looks, as if I had plumbed the depths of human perfidy. But after a moment Harry said bleakly that he supposed it was possible and they'd talk to Smith again.

Suli came out of the house.

The little figure in white, his slippers flapping softly on the floor, came toward us. I don't know why there was an effect of slow motion, so we were transfixed, watching him as if Nemesis in white duck and slippers was approaching us, but there was.

And we were right. Suli stopped in front of Harry. "Captain, sir—a man. The dry-cleaner. He wants to see Captain, sir, pliz."

Harry said shortly, "All right, bring him out."

The man was in the hall, just inside the door, waiting, and came at once. He was tall and thin and worried-looking; his shirt had damp patches over his shoulders. But we didn't really look at him, for he carried a uniform coat, a khaki-colored jacket, over his arm. He spread it out on the porch swing be-

side Harry. "I'm sorry, sir. But I think you ought to see this."

Kitty gave a queer kind of scream. Harry took up the sleeve of the coat and across the wrist there was a dark, rusty stain, stiff and dry.

I know a bloodstain when I see it. So did Harry. So, I suppose, did all of us. Suli sucked in his breath. Harry said, in a hard, somehow painful voice, "Whose blouse is this?"

The thin, worried man made a motion to turn it over, but Harry forestalled him and moved the jacket so we could all see the three gold stripes on the shoulder board. The dry-cleaner said with a kind of apologetic gulp, "It belongs to Commander Warring, sir."

NINE

KITTY WHISPERED, "That's blood—"

Harry said sternly, "How did you get hold of this? Tell me everything you know about it."

I never knew his name, this worried man; he ran the dry-cleaning establishment, outside the busy little Row and across the highway, a small shack wedged in between the PX and the motion-picture theater. He was a civilian employee, I knew that; he was not in uniform; but when there were deliveries to make sailors made them. Usually all of us took articles, dresses, coats, uniforms to his place, and called for them hurriedly ourselves. He carried on a brisk business in uniform cleaning. He cleared his throat now, anxiously. "It was your order, sir. You said if anybody knew or heard of anything unusual, and *that*—" his faded-blue eyes shifted to the uniform and he didn't need to say that blood on a coat sleeve was unusual indeed.

"Go on," Harry said.

But it was a short and inconclusive tale. The coat had been simply left on the doorstep, certainly an undesirable ward, sometime Saturday night or Sunday night; the shop was closed after 9 on Saturday until 7 o'clock Monday morning. The coat had been gathered up and he had not seen it himself until late Monday afternoon when he had been sorting out cleaning for the next morning. "It was blood, you see. So I—I didn't know what to do. Commander Warring's name is on the blouse here—" He put out bony hands but Harry had found the name on a tape neatly stitched inside. "It was Commander Warring, so I was in two minds as to what to do. But then—well, it was blood."

"Yes, yes, I see," Harry said. Kitty was very white, her eyes fixed on the dry, stiff rim of rusty brown. Suli, waiting curiously near the door, sucked in his breath in a whistle. Harry said, "Yes, that was right. I'll take care of the blouse. I am sure that

Commander Warring will know exactly how it got there, some accident and— Yes, that was right to bring it to me." His look said, *You can go now.*

The dry-cleaner backed away. "I don't want to get Commander Warring into any trouble, sir, but—"

Harry rose. "No, no. I'll see to it. I don't want to hear about this from anybody else. Understand me? You've told me and that was right. Now keep quiet. I mean that."

"Oh, yes, yes, sir." He backed toward the door and Suli opened it. Harry said to Suli, "That goes for you too, Suli. Understand?"

"Oh, yes, Captain, sir. . . . This way."

The dry-cleaning man and Suli's white-clad figure disappeared into the house, toward the kitchen. Harry folded up the coat and Kitty watched him. He rose. "I'll just talk to Jim," he said, and went into the house, carrying what he called a blouse, but was a coat to me.

"*Jim*—" Kitty said then, in a frozen way. "*Jim*—" Her eyes gave me one flicking glance. She picked up her highball glass. And both of us waited until we heard Harry in the hall again.

He came out on the porch. "Jim's coming over here."

"What did you do with the blouse?"

"Locked it in my filing cabinet."

"Harry—" Kitty began and stopped.

"There'll be some explanation," Harry said evenly. "Sarah—" he stopped, too, and I knew why. He didn't want to say, *Could it have been Jim you saw?* Suddenly I saw myself in court—or in court-martial, whatever it would be—star witness against Jim.

I had to wait a second or two while Harry's eyes waited, too, watching me. Then I said, "I don't know, Harry. I couldn't swear to anything—except a man in uniform."

"And the height," Kitty said with a catch in her voice. "Jim is close to six feet. And the shoulder boards. Oh, Sarah—"

Loyal Kitty. She'd throw anybody to the wolves to protect Harry, but not Jim. Not somebody who was so close a part not only of Harry's official family, but in another and deeper way a part of their own family life. She cried, "Sarah, you *can't* give evidence against Jim. Isn't there something—I mean

you *can't* be sure of the height! You *can't* be sure it was really three full stripes! Two and a half—"

"Now, Kitty," Harry said, "let's wait till we talk to Jim. Don't jump to conclusions. Besides," he sighed, "we've only begun the inquiry. All sorts of things can come to light. At any minute, any second—"

Kitty's back stiffened. "Of course. Yes, of course. Yes, of course—"

But then we waited while the bugler sounded taps, clear and sweet through the desert evening. We watched the flag flutter down the pole. Then we saw Jim, hurrying across the green from the B.O.Q. and along the road. He turned, running into the path, disappeared behind shrubbery, and then came at a leap upon the porch. He gave us one swift glance. "What's wrong, Harry?"

Harry rose. "We'd better go to my study," he said.

They went into the house.

It was rather a disappointment; I wanted to hear the conversation.

Kitty was disappointed, too. "Might as well talk to him here," she said angrily. "Jim didn't murder anybody. No need to be so formal and official about it."

"I expect he wants to show him the coat."

"Blouse!" Kitty snapped, and seethed with impatience while we waited. I seethed, too. Lights were beginning to show here and there over the base. The sun dropped down with its usual abrupt finality behind the mountains, and the curtain of twilight descended promptly as if to mark its exit. Kitty replenished her highball with a nervous and rather lavish hand and then didn't drink it, but suddenly rose, avoiding my eyes, and went into the house, closing the door rather quietly. It was a long while before she returned, looking irritated.

"Not a thing," she said in a frustrated way and sat down.

"Did you listen at the door?"

"Certainly. But I couldn't hear a word."

"Really, Kitty—"

"Nonsense!"

So we waited and it grew darker. Kitty's pink cotton dress and white sandals and white face became light blurs in the dusk.

At last Harry and Jim came out again and somehow their relationship had changed.

There was nothing visible, nothing tangible, but a difference. A difference which Harry seemed to try to bridge, for he told Jim to pour himself a drink; he went to sit beside Kitty on the porch swing. Jim appeared to try to meet Harry's effort; he poured a drink for himself and sat down in one of the wicker lounge chairs. All was as it usually was, friendly, informal—and yet it was not the same at all. Harry said, "Jim says it's his blouse, all right, but he doesn't know how it got there. Last time he saw it, it was hanging in the closet of his room at the B.O.Q. That was a couple of days ago."

"You didn't take it to the cleaner's at all?" Kitty burst out.

Jim shook his head. "No. It's a fairly new uniform. Palm Beach cloth. More expensive than I usually blow myself to. Thought I'd save it for dress-up occasions when whites were not in order." Jim's face was rather stiff and, I suspected, white under his tan. His eyes were fixed on his glass.

Harry looked at him. "Jim, I had to ask you about it."

"Yes, sir."

The sir was proper, of course; but as a rule, when it was not a question of orders, they called each other Jim and Harry.

Harry said, "I needn't say that I believe you, Jim. So, therefore, somebody took that blouse out of the B.O.Q."

Jim said nothing.

Harry said, "The question is who?"

"Anybody could have done it," Kitty cried. "Anybody in the world can walk into the B.O.Q. and help himself—"

Jim turned his highball glass carefully. "Impersonating an officer is a serious misdemeanor."

"So is murder," I said shortly. "I don't think anybody who is going to murder somebody would stick at stealing a uniform."

Jim glanced at me briefly and I thought with a flash of gratitude. Kitty cried, "That's right. Why, a woman could have taken it and worn it! A woman—"

"Six feet tall?" Jim asked.

"Well, it would have made a disguise. And Sarah could have made a mistake about the height—" But her voice trailed away doubtfully, and there was a little silence. I wished miserably

that I had never seen that door open and flashing of light on shoulder boards. But I didn't think I'd made a mistake and obviously nobody else thought so, for presently Harry said, "It's the very devil. Think hard, Jim; somebody at the B.O.Q. must have seen you or known you were there—"

"Sorry," Jim said. "I'd like an alibi myself, but it's as I told you. I took Sally to the club about nine-thirty. She told me Parly wanted to see her; we talked it over and she went to the hospital. I stayed at the dance awhile; she didn't come back. I strolled over past the hospital and then around past the Waves' barracks. I didn't see Sally, so I went on to the B.O.Q. Nobody in the lounge saw me; my room's the first door on the left, before you pass the door to the lounge. Then the disaster whistle blew. Cranshaw was O.D. I was curious, tried to get Cranshaw and Smith and couldn't. So I got up and dressed and met you outside the B.O.Q."

Harry said after a moment, "Well, we'll work on it, Jim. Somebody got that blouse. Meantime—"

"Meantime you'll have to report it to the Board."

"I'm afraid so."

"Right." Jim put down his glass. "Is that all, sir?"

But Harry rose and walked with Jim down the steps and along the driveway. And when he came back Suli was in the doorway saying that dinner was served.

"It's late," Kitty said regretfully. "You were up so early. Harry. You've got to get a long night's sleep—"

Harry put his arm around Kitty and smiled. But as we went into the house he paused to speak to Suli in a curt, stern voice I had never heard him use. "Suli, remember, you're to keep quiet about that blouse. If a word about it gets out—"

"Oh, yes, sir," Suli said, bowing.

After dinner we had coffee on the porch, and then Kitty made Harry go to bed. "You've got to get some rest. I'm going to turn off the telephone and tell the man at the office that he can't wake you unless the—the whole place goes up!"

"In that case," Harry said dryly, "it would be too late." He paused to kiss Kitty unexpectedly and she clung to him a little. His light, quick footsteps went along the hall to the stairs.

And with Harry out of the way I felt the opportunity had

come for a little errand of my own. It was not a promising errand; I think I undertook it only because of the ugly business of Jim's coat—I should say blouse. I had to do something. I paved the way cautiously. "Kitty, I'd like to get a breath of fresh air. I've slept all day and—"

"I wouldn't take a walk," Kitty said curtly. She had gone back to the porch swing, out of the little path of light from the doorway, so I couldn't see anything but her light dress, but I didn't like the strained note in the voice that came to me from the shadow. Indeed, I wouldn't have cared to take a walk either, not through the deep blackness of the night, past shrubbery, along the winding roads.

"I thought of a drive—"

She sounded surprised. "A drive! Why, of course, Sarah! If you—that is, certainly." The prompt and kindly hostess in Kitty emerged. "I'll phone for the car. I'll go with you."

I didn't want that. "Oh, don't bother. I'll just ride out toward Wanaha City and back. Clear out the cobwebs—"

"All right, if you don't mind. I'd really like to stay here and see that nobody bothers Harry. I'll phone for the car. You'd better take a wrap. It'll be cooler driving. And don't forget your pass."

So in perhaps ten minutes I was on my way, in Harry's official car with a jaunty young sailor for a chauffeur, to Wanaha City and a most nebulous sort of undertaking, for I wanted to find the girl who had been with Parly when he picked up Ensign Smith.

All I knew was that there was a girl and that she wasn't one of the girls on the base. Not a Wave, not a nurse, not one of the few civilian employees in the offices. Smith would have recognized her at once. But there was a girl. And I suppose instinctively I had been waiting for a girl to turn up; Parly had struck me as a lad who would have girls. And since he was talkative and boastful, that girl might—just *might* know something. It was a tenuous lead, so exceedingly unlikely to produce results that I hadn't even wanted to tell Kitty my purpose; if I failed to find the girl, as in all probability I would, nothing was lost.

We passed the B.O.Q., lights spreading out from its low windows and open door. It would have been so easy, I thought,

so simple, for someone to enter that low, rambling building at a time when all the men living there were out, and take Jim's coat. Yet, as he had said, it would be a serious offense to impersonate an officer.

I wondered what Jim was doing. I thought of Kitty's quick remark to the effect that a man's uniform would have been a simple and effectual disguise for a woman; Kitty had a faculty for hitting the nail squarely on the head. A disguise, yes, which a woman could have adopted. However, it would have been an extremely dangerous disguise; one quickly apparent, instantly attracting suspicion, failing in its own purpose by drawing attention to itself. Only in a very dim light, only at a distance, only at the briefest possible glimpse could it have deceived anybody. Certainly I didn't know any woman on the base who was six feet tall or anywhere near it. Little Sally Wilson was at the most five feet three or so.

I wouldn't think about Sally just then and I wouldn't think about Jim and the blood on his coat—and the way he looked and tried, obviously, not to.

We passed the hospital. Lights were shining there, too, through the thickly planted shrubbery and above the west door. Tonight the new nurse would take my place. I had an impulse to tell the sailor to stop, and to go into the west wing and question Ensign Smith myself. Was he sure he didn't know the girl? What did she look like? Was there any possible bit of description he could give me? And what exactly had those rambling, half-conscious expostulations meant? If anything. But that was Harry's province.

We stopped for the sentry who scrutinized my pass and peered into the car to satisfy himself as to my identity, which as a rule they did not do. Once beyond the gate, we turned to the right onto the winding highway toward a dim radiance, visible even at that distance through the remarkably clear air of the desert night, which marked Wanaha City.

I had a plan, of course, but it was almost as nebulous as the task I had launched myself upon. Since the girl was not one of the girls on the base, she had to live in Wanaha City. Barring a wigwam in the desert, which seemed unlikely, there was simply no other place to live.

She had been in Parly's company, and again since there was simply no other place to go, it was likely that they had been together at dinner in one of the restaurant-cum-gambling places. Since Parly had been seen by Ensign Smith outside El Rico's, I would start there.

When we reached Wanaha City and the increasing radiance turned into a dozen brilliant neon signs along its short main street and I told the sailor to let me off at El Rico's, he gave a slight start. The car swerved toward an approaching car; he retrieved it in a split second, but said, "Yes'm," over his shoulder. He stopped the car outside the great neon sign which practically blotted out the sky, and sprang out to open the door for me. "Wait for me," I told him.

"Yes'm." He hesitated. "Are you sure you wouldn't like me to go in with you?"

"No. That is—no, thank you."

"Yes'm." His eyes were bright and curious. "I'll be right out here if you want me."

I was rather touched. He was absurdly young, with his gob cap jaunty over one ear.

A burst of sound fell upon me; the juke box was going loudly, the place was full, the gaming tables were all crowded. It being Monday night there were not so many uniforms as toward the end of the week; still there were numerous sailors and marines enjoying liberty, beer, steaks, roulette, and dice. There were some booths along the restaurant side of the big room, shielded by partitions between them; I went to one of them, which commanded a wide view of the room, sat down, and when an ancient waiter, his brown face shriveled by sun wrinkles, came to my table, I ordered ginger ale. He nodded, swiped at the table with a napkin, and rocked away at a bow-legged gait which suggested a youth spent on horseback. Noise and voices, laughter and the click of the roulette wheel swam about me confusingly. When the waiter returned I had a five-dollar bill in my hand. His sun-faded eyes sharpened.

"I wonder if you could tell me—" I couldn't lower my voice; the noise in the room was too loud; I had almost to shout it. "Do you remember seeing a young man, a lieutenant in the Navy—his name was Parly—"

The brown face shriveled until it was a mask. "Guy that was killed? Sure. Used to come in here."

"Yes. Well, I wanted to speak to his—his girl friend."

The shriveled face and the faded-blue eyes were suddenly chilly. "Oh," he said.

"Yes. Can you tell me who she is?"

He didn't say anything for a moment. The music stopped and a sailor near by got up and went to put another coin in the juke box. Music burst upon us again and I released the bill and shoved it toward the waiter. He swiped it up with another nonchalant dash of his napkin. "She's not far away," he said enigmatically. "But you'd better talk to the manager. You pay your check at the cashier's desk." He rolled swiftly toward another table.

Not far away. I looked all around. There was a girl in a booth opposite, with a young sailor patting her hand in what I can only call a persuasive manner. At another booth I saw one of the lieutenant commanders with his wife, both busy with steak and fried potatoes. Then the group around the roulette table shifted and I could see the dealer, who was a girl.

This was nothing unusual at Wanaha City; many of the resturant and gambling places employed girl dealers. This one was fair, with her hair drawn back tightly to a kind of pony tail and tied with a black ribbon. Her pretty face was rather pale; she bent over the table, watched the bets, and then spun the wheel again. The group closed up around her.

And then I saw Sally Wilson, sitting alone at a small table.

TEN

SALLY WAS in her uniform, very sleek and trim. She had a glass before her to which she was not paying much attention, for she was watching the room. Scrutinizing it indeed and everybody in it, her pretty face as rigid with concentration as that of the girl at the roulette table. A party of sailors burst in the door and she turned to look closely at each one. She was waiting for somebody, I thought. Who? Jim?

I glanced around the room again and I couldn't see Jim anywhere. Sally sipped at her drink and rose, carrying the drink in her hand, and wandered slowly out of sight behind the noisy groups around the gambling tables.

The waiter had said, *You'd better ask the manager.* Had he said it in the usual laconic but significant Western way, which means so much more than it says? Who was the manager?

There was a cashier behind a counter and huge cash register; there was a sort of cage with grilled windows where chips were turned into cash. Behind this cage a door appeared to lead to an office of sorts; I could see a calendar on the wall and one corner of a large safe.

Sally had completely disappeared; I couldn't see so much as the top of her smooth blond head. After a moment I, too, wandered across the room, threading through groups of sailors, marines, and some scattered ranchers and cowboys in blue jeans and high-heeled boots. When the cashier in the cage was involved with some marines who wanted and, needless to say, got silver dollars, I walked around the end of the counter and into the office. A man with his feet on the desk and a battered Stetson hat on his head looked up and said, "Sorry, lady, I can't give credit."

He was a young man, very lithe and brown, with extremely sharp blue eyes.

"Are you the manager?"

He nodded once. Without so much as a flicker his gaze took

in my glass of ginger ale and, as it soon developed, my black eye. "Listen, lady. You'd better give it up and go home. There's nothing to it, you know. Gambling. You're sure to lose in the end."

"Young man, I assure you—"

"I'm telling you. How do you think I'd run a place like this if it wasn't for suckers? The house always wins in the end. Now you take my advice. A woman of your age—" He shook his head, his blue gaze fixed itself on my eye, and he said in a fatherly and reproving manner, "Besides, I don't like fights. Especially women—"

Something didn't exactly snap within me, but my hand twitched to come into smart contact with his ear. Instead, I thrust my glass under his nose. "That's ginger ale. I want to ask you about a girl. That is—Lieutenant Parly on the base must have brought her here and I—"

I didn't finish, for his eyes turned suddenly iceberg-cold. He rose with one lithe motion and closed the door. "What do you want to know?"

"I want to talk to the girl."

He eyed me. Beyond the thin pine door we could hear the hum of voices, the surge of music from the juke box. Suddenly I was aware of what I understand is called a six-shooter, lying in a careless way on top of the desk. I said, "That's all I want. Will you tell me who the girl is? I know she's here somewhere and—"

"Who are you?"

"I'm a nurse. Sarah Keate. I was on duty when Parly was murdered. He was with a girl here the night he was in a car accident and I thought she might be able to tell me something about him."

He waited a moment. Then he said in a soft yet really deadly voice, "I can tell you all you want to know about him. He was a—" Well, a so-and-so, and a this-and-that. I listened, rather approving it, as a matter of fact, until all at once he stopped, and said, "I beg your pardon, lady," and removed his hat. "What I mean is, Parly was no good. You can't talk to the girl. She's my sister."

"Your—"

"That's all." He opened the door.

"Why can't I talk to her? I only want to—to ask her about him. Nothing that—" He looked at me and I looked at him. The juke box paused for an instant and then began to roar out "The Caissons Are Rolling Along."

He closed the door again. "Sit down," he said politely, but still in that remarkably soft, gentle—and deadly voice.

I sat down. He leaned against the door, very lean and thin, but tough-looking in his blue jeans and white shirt. His hair was startlingly blond above his tanned face and his eyelashes and eyebrows were very light, too, as if bleached by the sun. But there was nothing sunny in his blue eyes. "Look here, lady. I'm going to tell you a thing or three. Parly was a—" He swallowed hard and said with obvious restraint, "A no good son-of-a-gun. He got around my sister with his flashy looks and a lot of highfalutin talk about himself and his family and all that. She wouldn't believe me when I told her he was no good. I run a nice place. Anybody will tell you Dave Winters is okay. So's my sister and anybody will tell you that, too. I didn't like the way Parly was acting. I've seen something of guys like that. So I don't mind telling you that I—" He checked himself and seemed to substitute other words. "I told him to leave her alone. She thought he was serious. She began to talk about marrying him and going east with him and—" He rested one lean hip on the desk. "She wouldn't listen to me. She liked him and when she heard he was killed—no, you can't talk to her, lady. She's got to forget about him. I'm not going to have her questioned. I'm not going to have a word said against her. That clear?"

It was clear. No question of that. I said, "But see here, Dave. I mean Mr. Winters—"

He said, with no flicker of a smile, "Dave will do."

"They don't know who killed him. They've got to find out—"

"Bonny doesn't know a thing about it."

"Bonny—"

He looked annoyed. He said tersely, "My sister. Name's Wanaha Bonanza Winters. Named for a silver mine my grandfather had; it petered out." He watched me as if expecting me to smile and ready to give me another black eye if I did. Need-

less to say I didn't. He added, "We call her Bonny. I didn't mean to let it slip out. And I'm not going to let you or any of those boys in blue at the base put her through the works."

We eyed each other again, while all I had ever heard of Western tempers, swift and final acts of justice, even vigilantes and bloody feuds about claims flashed through my mind.

But there was only one thing I could see to do. "You see, Dave, it's my duty to tell the Captain that your sister knew Parly. Probably she doesn't know a thing about him that would give the Captain any information about his murder—"

"She doesn't," he said shortly, but his eyes had narrowed.

"But he'd have to question her. He and the—the Board of Inquiry. Wouldn't it be as well to let me talk to her first? I'll tell him anything she tells me—"

"There's nothing she knows about his murder."

"All right. But she just might know something about—say somebody he had quarreled with. Something he—oh, something he was going to do. I don't know what. Except she'll have to be questioned, so why not let me talk to her—"

My voice petered out like the Wanaha Bonanza mine. If a rattlesnake had blue eyes and Levi's he would have undoubtedly looked exactly as Dave Winters looked at me just before he struck. "Getting tough, aren't you?"

"Even if it wasn't my duty to tell the Captain that Bonny knew Parly, he'd find out sooner or later. Somebody will tell him. I promise you, if I talk to her, to make it as easy for her as I can."

Dave waited a moment; then he hitched to the other hip and said absently, yet as if it bore upon the conversation, "I was in the Army myself."

I thought it over, allowing for the laconic significances of Western turns of speech. Finally I saw. "Parly wasn't typical of the Navy. In fact he'd got into some trouble. He was told he had to behave or get out of the Navy."

He made no comment about that; if there was approval it was unspoken. But he said, "You've got me, nurse, and you know it. Okay. I'll think it over. I'll let you know."

There was, of course, no reason why I could not simply go to the girl myself and talk to her. Yet in another way I couldn't.

I said, "All right. You can phone to me. I'm staying at Captain Somers's quarters."

"Okay." He slid off the desk, opened the door, and I went out. So that was that. If I hadn't talked to the girl, I had found her, in a way, at the first shot, which was lucky. Wasn't it?

I didn't feel too sure of that. I looked around for Sally.

Someone had taken the booth I had left but the little table where Sally had sat was vacant, so I sat down there. Sally's fair head wasn't anywhere to be seen through the shifting groups of people. My eyes fixed idly upon the roulette table nearest me and the girl dealer—as they call the croupiers at the roulette tables. And as I watched an odd little incident occurred. A jovial young sailor cocked his hat over his ear, bent over the girl dealer, put his arm on her shoulder, and in the flicker of a second simply disappeared below the roulette table. A waiter stood nonchalantly dusting off his hands beside the girl dealer. She gave the barest glance downward, looked back at the table, and said, "Number eighteen. Red."

So that was Bonny. I was sure of it. Brother might let little sister work in his business establishment, but nobody was going to take any liberties with her.

It was all swift and matter of fact. The waiter idly watched the game. A wave of laughter broke out around the table to which Bonny paid no attention at all. A hand or two went down to help the young sailor to his feet. Some shouted, laughing remarks followed him as he took his way rather sheepishly to the dice table. And the girl dealer was Bonny.

She was a very pretty girl in spite of the strained tightness of her light hair and the absurd pony tail; she wore a white shirt, like her brother, and blue jeans. Her small face was rigidly concentrated on the game; she had sun-bleached eyelashes and eyebrows, a drift of freckles over high cheekbones, and a wide mouth which looked as if a smile suited it better and more habitually than its present tightness.

Someone moved between us shutting off my view; I looked around the room. There were many vaguely familiar faces, once or twice someone recognized me and spoke to me—the young lieutenant commander and his wife, whose names I couldn't remember, a boy with one stripe on his shoulder.

None of them showed any surprise to find me sitting alone, which was not the custom in Wanaha City; I suppose they thought I was with a party who were trying their luck at the tables. Shore patrol, two sailors with SP arm bands and guns at their hips, stalked sternly around in a circuit of the place and out again. Sally followed them out.

I saw her, making steadily and somehow very quietly, sliding between groups, toward the door and away.

I followed her. There was no use trying to talk to Bonny that night; I'd wait for Dave to speak to her. It seemed very odd that Sally was alone.

As I say, it was not the custom for any of the women on the base to visit Wanaha City, let alone sit around tables alone. Part of it was base custom, and part of it was a bow to an even stronger Western etiquette; women did not visit gambling places alone. When I got out onto the street, brightly lighted from the competing neon signs of the other restaurants and gambling rooms, Sally's slender figure in its crisp gray uniform was entering El Capitan's—as big, as flourishing, as noisy, as El Rico's. So I went into El Capitan's and there she sat at a near-by table, watching the door.

She saw me. For the barest fraction of a second I thought she was going to jump to her feet and run away. But then she said quickly, with a kind of catch in her voice, "Why, Miss Keate! I didn't see you—" She glanced past me. "Are the—the Captain and Mrs. Somers with you?"

"No, I'm alone." There was no point in beating around the bush. "I saw you in El Rico's and followed you over here. Are you waiting for Jim?"

"N-No. I'm alone, too." She made, somewhat belatedly, a little gesture toward the chair opposite her. As I sat down, her blue eyes traveled to the door again. The shore patrol marched in and again sternly made their way around the room. Sally's eyes traveled around the room, too, but not after them. She was looking for somebody, no question of that.

Naturally I looked, too. But while, as in El Rico's, there were faces which seemed familiar, still there was nobody I could name.

I said, "I'm about to go home. I have the Captain's car. Can

I give you a lift?"

Her blue eyes came back to me with a little jerk. She hesitated. Then she gave an oddly weary sigh. "Yes, thanks, I may as well go."

"Who brought you?" I asked, suddenly curious.

She rose. Her face was tired-looking under the bright lights and drained of color. "I took the bus. There at the gate."

That struck me as rather odd, too, in that it implied a definite purpose in coming to Wanaha City. I didn't think she had been suddenly overwhelmed with an urge to watch the gambling. If someone had happened to say to her, "We're going over to Wanaha, come along for the ride," it would have been a more usual proceeding. But to go out to the gate, wait for the bus which trundled back and forth between the base and Wanaha City at thirty-minute intervals all day and up to midnight, all that implied purpose.

Perhaps she saw the question in my face; at any rate she said rather quickly that she was ready to go if I was and we left.

My sailor chauffeur seemed relieved when he saw me approaching the car and pleased when he saw Sally. He saluted smartly and flung open the door with a flourish. Neither of us spoke all the way back to the base, with the rosy radiance above Wanaha City fading away behind us, and the black desert night all around, our headlights cutting a bright path through it. We met and passed a few cars, not many. Off at our right lay the Area, distant, black, and mysterious—and packed with latent and powerful explosives. It occurred to me that the Area was scarcely less packed with explosive and dangerous power than were the unfathomable emotions of human beings. Who had murdered Parly? To what particular explosion was murder due?

I was tired and I had accomplished exactly nothing. My small wave of self-congratulation as to the identity of Bonny Winters had vanished completely. I kept seeing the blood-stained cuff of Jim's coat and wondering what the Board of Inquiry—to say nothing of the District Office, F.B.I., and Naval Intelligence, if it came to that—would make of it. And the girl beside me, as still as if every nerve within her counseled caution, hadn't told all the truth. She hadn't told all the

truth of her interview with Parly before his murder. And she hadn't made any explanation at all to account for her visit to Wanaha City, wandering from one gambling place to another—quite as if there was somebody, somewhere, she was trying to find.

I told myself I could be wrong about that. I told myself that I was having an attack of the vapors—not, however, a customary affliction with me. We reached the lights around the base, stopped at the gate to show our passes, and in a moment we drew up with a sweeping curve before the Waves' barracks. The sailor swerved the car around, and the lights flashed brightly across the banked shrubbery around the door, and a man moved swiftly back into the shadows of the shrubbery, out of the light.

ELEVEN

THE SAILOR brought the car to a halt with a jam of brakes. Sally scrambled out the door. I cried, "Wait, Sally. Somebody is there—back in the shrubbery—"

Sally was out of the car, "No, no! There isn't anybody—"

The sailor jumped out of the car, started toward the lighted doorway, paused to stare, and came back. "I didn't see anybody, Miss Keate."

"But I saw him! I saw his legs—"

"Thanks for the lift," Sally said swiftly. "Nobody's there, Miss Keate. It's all right—"

I put out my hand to stop her, but she was running along the lighted path. She flashed between the thick clumps of shrubbery and through the doorway. I could see her in the lighted hall.

The sailor said, "Honestly, Miss Keate, there isn't anybody. The murder's got the women sort of nervous. It was the lights flashing across. You thought some shadow—"

I thought I had seen legs and a furtive shadow slide back into the masses of shrubbery, which not only surrounded the entrance but encircled the whole long building. Yet it could have been an illusion of swiftly moving lights and shadows. The sailor's hand was on the door. "Want me to take another look?"

"N-No. I must have been mistaken."

He got back behind the wheel; we circled and came out on the lighted, winding road. Nothing moved anywhere. Certainly there was no point in reporting something I hadn't really seen—rousing the base, stirring up the exact kind of hysteria which Harry Somers was trying to prevent. If every woman on the base let her imagination run riot we would live in a constant state of alarm.

Our lights caught no moving, furtive figure anywhere. We

arrived at the Somers house. I said good night to the sailor and thanked him, and went quietly into the house, so as not to wake Harry or Kitty. Kitty, however, was in the study waiting for me. And there was no use trying to telephone to Sally because the Waves' barracks don't run to the luxury of room telephones. Besides, what did I want to say? *I only wanted to be sure you were in your room?* Nonsense. I had seen her safe within the hall. And I hadn't really seen anybody waiting there in the shrubbery.

Kitty unsnarled herself from the sofa. "Where *have* you been? I thought you'd be back long before this."

"I stopped in at El Rico's, watched the gambling awhile." If I so much as mentioned Bonny, Kitty wouldn't wait for Dave, she wouldn't wait for anything; she'd be very likely to set out for Wanaha City and Bonny that instant.

Kitty's eyes narrowed. "That's an odd thing for you to do."

"It's late. I'm going to bed." I gave what must have been an unconvincing yawn, for Kitty snapped, "If you won't tell me, you won't! But I'd like to know what you've been up to." She turned out the desk light with an exasperated click and I started up the stairs where, of course, we both had to tiptoe and say nothing for fear of waking Harry.

I went quickly into my room and shut the door almost in Kitty's pretty but suspicious face.

But then hours passed and more hours and I still couldn't sleep.

Yet it was a quiet night on the base—almost too quiet. The wind had gone down, and once as the hours crept along I heard the eerie, jackal cry of coyotes away off somewhere in the desert.

I wondered how the new nurse was making out in the hospital. I thought about Jim. I thought about Sally—and wished she had told me why she had chosen to prowl through the gambling places at Wanaha City. I thought of the shadow I had seen, there in the shrubbery, and in the silence and darkness began to feel that I was right and Sally and the sailor wrong and a man really had slid swiftly out of sight.

But if so why was he there? What was he waiting for? Rather, who was it he waited for? Sally?

But she'd hurried into the barracks; she hadn't stopped an instant.

If I *had* seen a man there in the glancing light, then it was someone the sentry had passed. Someone who lived in the Row.

I didn't know whether that made me feel better or worse. Except I wished Sally hadn't put it aside quite so—well, so quickly. As if she didn't want me or the sailor or anyone to make a search through the shrubbery. On the other hand, if she thought I was nervous, mistaken, too quick to see something that wasn't there at all, wouldn't she do just that—tell me I was wrong and hurry into the barracks?

The sailor had been positive. His eyes were younger and sharper than mine. *Oh, forget it,* I told myself. There was nothing to be seen.

Probably Dave would let me talk to Bonny; there wasn't much else he could do. But suppose Bonny knew nothing at all that could possibly suggest a reason for Parly's death. And it was no business of mine to try to see her. I was a meddlesome busybody. No other word for it. The thing for me to do was pack up and leave before I managed to do something that couldn't be undone. Murder wasn't anything to meddle with. Certainly I had no right or authority to take to myself the role of investigator.

Suppose Dave Winters had decided to take things into his own hands and execute a rather summary justice. He had made no secret of his feelings about Parly; suppose he had decided to get rid of Parly before he broke Bonny's heart or wrecked her life as Dave Winters clearly felt he would do. But if—put it plainly, I told myself—if Dave Winters had murdered Parly he wouldn't have admitted his feelings so frankly. From prudence he'd have concealed them.

And then my thoughts leaped to Jim again and his blood-stained coat. He, at least, had no possible motive for killing Parly.

The coyotes wailed again off in the night and sounded like lost souls jeering revengefully at the night and the stars and everything in the world. I rose and put cotton in my ears.

Morning was brilliantly sunny and extremely hot. There was no wind, which was a mercy, but the sun beat down; there

was not one cloud in the sky and everything below it seemed to bake in a dry and exhausting heat. That morning there were services in the little church for Lieutenant Parly, after which his body was to be taken away and loaded, as a matter of fact, on one of the long ammunition trains which wound in and out, every day, across the desert to the base and back again to ships waiting to receive more ammunition.

The little church was packed.

There was a certain protocol in the seating. Harry and Kitty had their usual front and prominent pew and I sat with them with a white veil of Kitty's draped over my white hat and, I hoped, somewhat concealing an eye which had turned a not at all tasteful plaid in green and yellow. Jim sat beyond Harry. Owing to the prominence of my position as well as to the occasion, I couldn't turn to look at others in the church, although I longed to do so.

Father Andrew conducted the services and in view not only of the circumstances, but of young Parly's by then rather widely known characteristics, was obliged to stick sadly to generalities. He was unwontedly solemn and troubled, consequently; his kind voice pleaded as sorrowfully as if he himself were responsible for the whole thing. It was a short service.

Opinion was that the padre had preached a good sermon. Everyone called him the padre—as unself-consciously as they said, "Glad to have you aboard," when guests entered a house, which was certainly a house and not a ship. Or topside when they meant upstairs. Or bulkhead when they meant a wall, or chow instead of food, or ladder instead of stairway, or deck instead of floor, or snafu or scuttlebutt—of which latter there was just then a considerable supply; particularly, I might say, snafu.

We trailed out of the cool dimness of the church into the blazing heat of the sun. The men went back to office and loading plant. Kitty and I walked slowly back to the Somers porch and took off our hats. Suli brought us iced tea. And Bonny Winters came to see me.

I didn't recognize her when she came up the path and emerged at the steps of the porch. She was wearing a thin blue cotton dress instead of shirt and Levi's; she had done

up her preposterous pony tail of hair into a neat little bun; she was carrying gloves and a little blue hat in her hand and looked altogether decorous, serious, and a little shy. Not at all what you would expect of a lady dealer in a gambling house.

She also looked very young and the freckles stood out across her pale face. Her eyes were smudged as if she'd been crying. It was when I saw that, and while she was hesitating shyly on the step, that I recognized her.

Kitty rose to the occasion. "I am Mrs. Somers. Are you looking for me?"

I said, "Miss Winters! I am Sarah Keate. This is Mrs. Somers—"

Kitty said how do you do, pleasant but puzzled, and asked her to sit down and have some iced tea. Bonny sat down as if she didn't know what else to do, locked brown, sturdy hands together, and looked at me. "Dave told me about you. Last night. So I—I came to the funeral, you see, and I—I wanted to see you."

Kitty gave me a swift and penetrating glance. "Last night! Dave—"

"Dave Winters," I said shortly. "Bonny's brother."

Kitty's dark eyes shifted to Bonny. "Why, you're the girl at El Rico's! At the roulette table!"

"Yes," Bonny said. "Dave owns El Rico's."

"Do you want to talk to me alone?" I asked Bonny.

But Kitty forestalled that. "Never mind me," she said flatly and poured iced tea for Bonny, put it into the girl's hand, settled herself on the porch swing, and folded her arms with obviously every intention of staying there.

Bonny said, "It's about Lieutenant Parly. Dave said—you were his nurse, I—I wanted—"

She stopped. Tears were filling her eyes and she was trying to hold them back. But if I had any idea that she was going to tell me anything the shoe was, so to speak, on quite the other foot. She said, "I wanted to ask you about him. I mean about—it. Nobody seems to know and I—I had to come to you."

There was nothing to do but answer the child as kindly as I could, with Kitty sitting there, watching and listening so hard that she didn't move so much as an eyelash and Bonny's tragic,

bleak blue eyes fastened on me. It was a painful five minutes. I told her as little as I could. And then when she put up her hand and wiped her eyes with her little white cotton gloves, I said, "You see, it struck me that he might have told you something that would give the Captain some—some clue. I mean, suppose Lieutenant Parly had quarreled with somebody or—"

She was her brother's sister; she swallowed hard and said politely, "Thank you. I had to know. You see—I liked him and—"

Kitty leaned forward, "Were you engaged to him?"

"N-No. That is—" A flush crept up over her high cheekbones. "It was sort of—of understood. I mean, he hadn't exactly asked me but I knew he—he would. And he meant it. Dave says he didn't but he did. I know he did. He told me about—about his mother and his uncle—"

"Yes," Kitty said rather dryly, "his uncle."

"He's somebody big in the Navy. And he asked me how I'd like living in the East and—he was going to resign from the Navy and—"

"You don't resign from—" Kitty began sharply and caught herself. "What was he going to do?"

"Well, with all that money coming to him, he wouldn't really have to do anything. But I told him that was wrong. My grandpa used to say work was something everybody had to do. He said it was a sort of obligation." She dabbed at her cheek with a white cotton glove.

I said, "Drink your tea, Bonny."

"Yes'm," she said obediently, and touched the glass with her lips. The freckles were not standing out quite so sharply now and her lips, bare of lipstick, were taking on a little color.

Kitty said, "I expect you saw Lieutenant Parly frequently."

"Oh, yes." She nodded her head.

I didn't really want to question the child just then, but the words came out. "Did you say he was going to have some money?"

She nodded again. "Yes'm."

"You said—all that money."

"Oh, yes. He told me. Thirty thousand dollars now and—"

"Thirty—" Kitty began, and Bonny went on. "And more

later. He said—" Tears welled up again, "He said his wife would never have to worry about money. He was so pleased and—and sort of excited about it. You see, his mother had never had enough money and so much of the time, in school and everywhere with boys who were rich, he always felt outside of things, you know, and—" She stopped.

Kitty said, "Navy families aren't often rich, you know. Where was he going to get this money?"

Bonny drank tea, rather slowly and deliberately. When she put down her glass she looked exactly like Dave. "I'm afraid that's all I know about it." She rose with finality. "Thank you very much, Miss Keate. Thank you, Mrs. Somers. I'll be going now—"

"Bonny—"

She was already on the step and she didn't intend to remain another second. That was perfectly clear. I said hurriedly, "Bonny, when did he tell you all this? I mean about the money?"

"When I saw him that afternoon. The—the last time."

"Saturday?"

"Oh, yes," she said simply. "They said he was better. I phoned and they said he could have visitors. So I went to see him." Tears rolled down her cheeks all at once. Dabbing at them she ran down the porch and away.

"Well—" Kitty said. "Saturday!"

"In the afternoon."

"Yes, but she was there!" Kitty eyed me. "So you weren't going to tell me."

"There wasn't anything to tell."

But she had it out of me, of course, although it was true that there was little enough to tell. However, I didn't mention meeting Sally at El Rico's. Kitty needed no possible small fuel to add to the smoldering suspicion she had already built in her mind around Sally.

And after I had told her the little I knew of Bonny, she sat for a long time swinging her little foot in its neat white sandal and pushing one hand through her short dark curls. Finally she said, but tentatively, "Parly was giving Bonny a line, that's clear. She's an attractive girl. . . . I suppose Dave *could* have

killed him."

"He'd have had to get past the sentries, get hold of Jim's coat, get into the hospital, take some ether—get away again."

"Somebody did all that."

"I can't see Dave doing it. He might have shot it out with Parly—on the street or in El Rico's or—or anywhere. But—"

She gave me a shrewd glance. "There you go again. You like him. You like Sally. You like Buffalo Bill. You like—Sarah, there's a murderer here, on the base, somewhere. Somebody killed Parly."

TWELVE

SOMEBODY KILLED PARLY. It brought back Parly's room at the hospital, like a grisly picture superimposed against the brilliant sunlight, the green turf below the porch, the languid green shrubbery.

All about us the base went on with what seemed its normal routine. Baking under the hot sun. A power mower going somewhere. The red, white, and blue of the flag drooping without any motion at all against the brassy sky. The red brick houses around the Row seemed very small, with the mountains as a background; the green vines over their screened porches looked dusty and dry. Away off in the desert there was a long kind of boom and scrunch, followed by another, another, and then a long pause, while the glasses on the table stopped tinkling. I said at last, "It's queer about that money. *What* money?"

"We'll tell Harry," Kitty said. "But I don't think there was any money really. It sounds like more of Parly's line."

It could have been exactly that. Suli came to announce lunch, and Kitty sighed as she rose. "There's the Red Cross meeting here this afternoon. Don't forget you're to give them a talk about bandages."

Harry lunched as usual at the officers' mess, so Kitty and I had a quiet, indeed an extremely quiet lunch together, both of us thinking and one of us, me, thinking in circles that only turned upon themselves.

The Red Cross meeting started at two, and the officers' wives arrived promptly. They arrived indeed right on the dot and there was a stiffness and formality about them from the beginning which was not at all usual, our meetings being all too subject to breaking down into hilarity or gossip (I mean to say scuttlebutt) until Kitty or Marie brought them quickly back to order. I didn't myself notice the odd air of formality at first; it was Kitty, with her trained sense of social nuances,

who began to get small scarlet spots in her cheeks and brought the meeting to order with considerable dignity and formality herself. She then turned the meeting over to me, with yards of dressings, and Marie Sinclair for a model on the dining-room table. But even my demonstrations, which wrapped various portions of Marie's anatomy (and brought out prickly heat which Marie protested vehemently) were all accomplished in polite, dead silence. And when at the end of it Suli brought out cookies and fruit punch, nobody loitered over it, as was their custom, but instead, and with various excuses, took a rather prompt departure. Nobody loitered, that is, except Marie who resumed her flowered-print dress in the dining-room.

"Well!" Kitty turned from the step after the last little group had left, to face me with blazing eyes above those scarlet patches. "They've been talking!"

"Talking—"

"About Harry, of course. And Parly— Oh, Marie!"

Marie came out of the house and sat down. And if I'd known what she was going to say, I'd have put one of the bandages around her throat and tightened it, hard. "Somebody," Marie said, "has got to speak to that new Wave. The one with the light hair that Jim's been going around with. Sally Wilson. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

There was a quick flicker in Kitty's face. "What's Sally been doing?"

Marie got out a powder compact and dabbed at the prickly heat on her arm. "It was last night. The Colonel and I were playing bridge at the Gary house. We came home latish—about midnight. The Colonel was worrying about things, you know, they're all upset about it and doubling sentries and all that, so he thought he'd just take a swing around the Row before we went home. We drove past the Waves' barracks and just as you turn there onto the road again, the lights shone against the east side, there where there are all those trees and shrubbery, and I saw Sally. With a man. And both of them jumped back out of the lights." She closed the powder compact with a snap. Her large, light-green eyes went to Kitty and then to me.

Kitty said, "Who was the man?"

"We couldn't tell. But I saw Sally clear enough. She was facing me. You know as well as I do there's no excuse for that kind of thing. The girls have all kinds of liberty. And whenever there's a party they can check in at all hours. But Monday night! And ducking out of the lights like that! I thought I ought to report it to Lieutenant Hagshaw." She glanced at me. "That's the Waves' commanding officer. But the Colonel told me not to. He took a very lenient view— Well, you know how men are. A pretty face! He said let her see her boy friend if she wanted to. None of my business. But it wasn't Jim Warring. I'm sure of that. And I didn't like the way she jumped out of sight," Marie finished stubbornly.

The trouble was that there was a queer kind of uneasiness and sincerity in her face and in her voice. Gossip she might, and on occasion did. But here was something else.

Again like a hot little puff of wind where wind there was none, something seemed to come out of the still, sunny afternoon, out of the desert beyond, out of the mysterious reaches of the mountains and their now purple slopes and touch us, very lightly. *Somewhere on the base there is a murderer.*

Kitty's pretty face was as still as a candle and as pale. Marie took a sharp breath. "It's horrible, isn't it? It could be anybody."

She didn't need to say what could be anybody. Had I had, in fact, a shadowy glimpse of him, outside the Waves' barracks the night before? Had Sally talked to him—later, when she thought I had gone?

I tried to assemble some kind of coherent thought. "You said it wasn't Jim," I said to Marie. "How do you know? If you didn't see him—"

"Oh, I saw him," she said. "That is, I knew it wasn't Jim. But I don't know who it was. And I wouldn't recognize him again. I just knew it wasn't Jim. That's all."

And, of course, it made more sense than it may sound like; you recognize people you know without knowing exactly how you recognize them, certainly without consciously adding up all those hundreds of details which make for instantaneous recognition. A detective once told me that and it's true.

Marie got up. She patted her reddish-gray hair nervously. A

patch of prickly heat stood out on her face suddenly, rather as young Bonny's freckles had done. "The Colonel was right," she said abruptly. "I ought to have kept my mouth shut. It was one of the boys at the B.O.Q., of course. Couldn't be anybody else. I'm sorry I said anything, Kitty. Forget it. Well, I've got to see about dinner."

"Marie!" Kitty said. "Tell me the truth. Is there—talk?"

Marie gave Kitty a bright glance and looked quickly away. "About Sally? Oh, no, I haven't told anyone but you—"

"You know what I mean. About Parly and—and Harry?"

Marie brushed an invisible grain of powder off her rather massive bosom. "Nothing," she said slowly, "that amounts to anything. It will die out. Nobody really thinks Harry—" she bit her lip and left lipstick on her teeth. "I mean—really, Kitty. It's only because they have to talk about it and Parly—everybody knows Harry had some trouble with him—"

"If anybody dares to say Harry killed him, I'll— I'll—" Kitty's hands were doubled into fists.

Marie said quickly, "Nobody would say that! I'd stop it. So would the Colonel. Believe me, Kitty, I've really got to go home and get dinner."

She went quickly away. Her print dress disappeared down the path. After a long pause Kitty said in a queer, tired voice, "I knew it! The minute they began to arrive for Red Cross. But there's never anything you can put your finger on. Never really anything you can stop!"

"Nonsense!" I put more robust cheer in my voice than I felt. "As Marie says, it will die down."

"Maybe," Kitty said after a moment. "Maybe. But Marie tells the truth. Sarah, who do you suppose that man was—the one with Sally?"

There was no answer to that so I made none. And after another long silence, Kitty said slowly, still in that queer, brooding voice, "Marie was scared."

"Yes. Yes. Everybody's on edge."

"She's a gossip. Sometimes she adds a little to make a story more interesting. But she—when all at once she was sorry and wished she hadn't said anything I—then I believed every word of it. If it was one of the men in the B.O.Q., he wouldn't have

ducked out of the light. Not just like that. I could—" Kitty swallowed. "I could see it! Couldn't you?"

I could. Marie's story was curiously graphic, more frightening than she had intended it to be. "What are you going to do? Tell Harry?"

"Yes," Kitty said slowly. "Sally didn't tell us all the truth about Parly, and Harry can't make me think she did." She turned to me with a kind of burst. "Sarah, I don't want to see that girl accused of murder! I'm not after her scalp!"

I felt sorry for her. "I know, Kitty."

"It's—Harry," she said needlessly. "You saw. This afternoon. We've got to do *something!*"

After that we didn't talk much. The sun dropped lower toward the sharp edges of the mountains. But I didn't like the way Kitty sat, staring at nothing, swinging her foot nervously, her face implacable—a plump, pretty, and seething volcano. Yet I couldn't say, *Kitty, wait. Don't do anything. Wait.*

Harry came home, tired and gray. Kitty took one look at him and didn't mention the chilly and silent Red Cross meeting, the murder, Bonny Winters, or even Sally. We had cocktails; taps sounded clear and serene over the base; the flag fluttered slowly down. Lights came out among the cluster of houses, and we went in to dinner. But after dinner, out on the porch again where now that the blazing sun had gone it was cooler, we had coffee and Harry talked about the murder.

"It's been a hellish day. We've got all we can do on the base any day and this Parly affair—"

"Is there any news?" I asked.

There was, he said quietly, and there wasn't. But so far they had come to a dead end. He drank some coffee. "I had the corpsman at the hospital—you know, Jenson—in my office again. Questioned him; nothing. Had another long talk with Buffalo Bill; nothing new there. Checked up all his medical reports; no indication of nervous condition. No reports yet on fingerprints—"

"Fingerprints!" I said sharply.

"Oh, yes. The Security Officer, Nagel, knows how to take them; he did that Sunday. We sent them airmail, dispatched them to the F.B.I. and BuPers. The F.B.I. checks for certain

fingerprints. BuPers keeps the master jackets for Navy personnel."

"BuPers?" I said. "Jacket?"

"Bureau of Personnel. Individual records."

A jacket was a blouse, and a record was a jacket. Well, it was all right with me, but confusing.

"It'll take some time to try to weed out any fingerprints that ought not to be there," Harry said wearily.

"You'll find mine," I snapped.

"There you are," Harry said. "They can identify only the fingerprints there's a record of. Unless the F.B.I. has your fingerprints, Sarah—"

"As a matter of fact they have."

Kitty said, "Huh!" in a startled and inelegant way, and Harry grinned.

I explained haughtily. "I was sight-seeing one time. I visited the Bureau. I gave them my fingerprints. I thought it my civic duty. I think it's everybody's civic duty—"

"Okay," Harry said peaceably. "Okay."

I thought for a moment. "What about the can of ether?"

"The can of ether had been wiped off clean. There wasn't a print they could find on it. The knife—" Kitty stirred; I could hear the rustle of her dress. Harry said, "The knife had been wiped clean, too. Buffalo says he lifted it by the chain and didn't touch it. Jim took it and looked at it but he held it by the chain, too." He waited a moment; then he went on in a quiet and reasonable way. "It had to be done, of course. Nothing is easier than to check fingerprints among Navy personnel. But nothing at all conclusive may come from it."

"What about Jim's jacket?" I asked, meaning blouse.

"Nothing there, either. We've questioned the men at the B.O.Q.; nobody remembers seeing anybody go into Jim's room—but then they wouldn't have been likely to see anybody during the day, nobody's there except the men that clean the place and they were out by four o'clock on Saturday night."

"What did the other men feel about it? I mean the Board of Inquiry?"

There was a note of reservation in Harry's reply. "Much as I do, I think. Jim told them all he knew, which, of course, was

nothing. But it—well, there it is. The only point is Jim had no motive."

It was, however, an important point. I told myself that and believed it. Yet as Harry had implied it was a tangible, visible piece of evidence.

Harry said, "I told Jim, you heard me, to try to remember somebody, something that would give him an alibi—only because it would clarify the situation. Jim still says he can't. Says there were men in the lounge, he could hear them talking and playing the radio, but his room is the first one at the left, right beside the door. The door to the lounge is on the right farther down. So he didn't see anybody in the lounge and nobody saw him. I personally don't think there's much doubt that the murderer took Jim's blouse sometime during the day—or even the day before, Jim can't remember exactly when he last saw it—wore it when he went to Parly's room, and after he'd escaped he simply left it at the dry-cleaner's. To get rid of evidence or—like the knife—to involve somebody else."

But it was evidence. Oh, yes; concrete and damaging.

Harry lighted a cigarette. "They questioned Smith again and"—he glanced at me rather oddly, half-approving and half-puzzled—"you were right about him, Sarah. That is, he didn't say he knocked himself out. But he did borrow some money from Parly."

"Money!" Kitty said. I could feel her eyes flash to me.

"Seems he got in a game and was short, and Parly loaned him a hundred."

"Oh," Kitty said flatly, after a moment.

"But, I don't think he cut Parly's throat to keep the hundred."

Kitty said suddenly, "Parly was—at least he said he was going to have money. Harry, listen." Her dress rustled from the shadows as she leaned forward. "Parly had a girl. Sarah found her. Her name is Bonny Winters and—tell him, Sarah."

So I did in full detail, except again I didn't mention picking up Sally. Or the man I was sure now that I had in fact seen, a furtive shadow among other shadows outside the Waves' barracks. But when I stopped, Kitty said sharply, "And there's something else! Marie Sinclair told us. Tell him that, too,

Sarah! It's really important."

So I told him that, too, and I couldn't gloss over any word of it because Kitty was sitting there listening and would have nailed the slightest omission.

There was a long silence. Kitty shifted her position a little and her chair squeaked. Harry's face in the diffused light showed no expression at all. He said finally, "I'm sorry about that. We'll have to talk to the Winters girl and her brother. And Sally. In fact—I may as well tell you. Today Sally took a rather odd sort of telegram to the Western Union office here. The boy there sent it over to the O.D. He reported it to the Security Officer and to me."

Kitty's face came forward into the light, still and intent. "*What was it?*"

"I've got the copy. You can look at it. Come on, Sarah, you, too."

We followed him into his study. He jerked on the desk lamp and put a paper on the desk in the light. Kitty and I leaned over to read it.

Kitty caught her breath. It was indeed an odd telegram. It was addressed to C. L. Sawyer, Hilldale, Virginia. It read, in Harry's neatly printed characters: REQUIRE CASH. LEHCPUN-PACAM PETAIR EXPRESS. URGENT. SALLY WILSON.

Kitty's hands were spread outward on the desk; I saw them double up. "Code!"

I thought of all those vast stores of ammunition, of sabotage, of everything.

Then I went around the desk and began to rummage through a stack of newspapers and magazines.

THIRTEEN

HARRY WATCHED ME. Kitty stared at the telegram. I found a late newspaper, a Los Angeles paper, and searched through it till I found the page I wanted. I spread it on the desk and took Sally's telegram. Harry came to my side. Kitty said, "What are you doing?"

And then Harry, following my forefinger down the columns, gave a dry little laugh and sat down. "I ought to have seen it myself. Thanks, Sarah—"

"You ought to have seen what?" Kitty cried, and ran to my side and I pointed them out.

"Am Pet?" she cried.

"It's the abbreviation. American Petroleum." I ran on down the stock-market list. "Leh Cp—that's Lehman Corporation. And here—yes, Un Pac is Union Pacific. That's all. She wants somebody to sell stocks for her—"

"Oh," Kitty said. "Oh." She looked at the copy of the telegram, looked again at the abbreviated stock-market listings, and said tartly, "You wouldn't expect a Navy family to know much about the stock market!"

Well, a trained nurse doesn't as a rule know much about investing money, either, and for the same reason: she doesn't have much to invest. But I've had some patients who not only pored over the market prices themselves, but made me read them, at length, and translated the abbreviations for me. Harry chuckled. It was the first time in days I'd seen him laugh as if he meant it.

Kitty said crossly, "She must have a lot of money! Of course you can't tell in uniform. But—" She checked herself as if struck by a sudden surmise.

I knew exactly what it was and again Kitty was too smart and too quick for me. "What does she want that money for? She says urgent. She says require cash. What for? There's nothing to spend money on here at the base. There's nothing ex-

cept—" She leaped swift as lightning. "Blackmail! If she murdered Parly—if somebody saw her—that man she was with last night and she didn't want to be seen with him and—blackmail!"

"It may not represent much money," Harry said slowly. "She doesn't say how many shares."

Kitty's mouth was stubborn. "Look! It's addressed to Sawyer. Not to her father. She doesn't want her father to know about it!"

"Probably Sawyer's a broker. Family banker. Lawyer."

"You'll have to find out what it means!"

"Yes." Harry's eyes were deeply thoughtful. Suddenly, with an air of decision, he turned to me. "You've seen something of murder cases, Sarah. I'll tell you frankly that we're getting nowhere. Partly perhaps because it's too—well, official. They think of records, red tape—and I suppose court-martial—and shut up like clams. And perhaps it's all too cut and dried. Maybe we stick to the book too closely. Sarah, I'd like you to help me. Will you see what you can get out of Sally about this?"

I said I would. I didn't have the faith in my ability to help that Harry seemed to have. And while it was my duty, I can't say that I always approach duty as such with alacrity. The fact was I wanted to talk to Sally myself.

So I said there was no time like the present and I started immediately for the Waves' barracks before Harry could change his mind or Kitty offer to accompany me.

I might say here that I don't think Harry expected me to interpret his request for help with quite the latitude with which eventually I did see fit to interpret it. And I will not deny the fact that I set off along the winding, lighted road toward the Waves' barracks with something of the zest of a battle-scarred old hound dog let off the leash. I didn't, naturally, give jubilant tongue to my feelings, and as I glanced across toward the lighted west wing of the hospital, it occurred to me that there were far too many trails. It was a sobering reflection.

For Buffalo Bill was still, so to speak, in a covert of evasions, if not outright lies. And I wasn't really satisfied in my mind about Jenson. But first I'd see Sally.

My white pumps made little thuds along the paved roads.

The B.O.Q. was lighted as usual with a radio going full blast. As I passed the Sinclairs' house I saw Marie and the Colonel sitting on the lighted porch, holding newspapers, but Marie was talking and the Colonel was listening, I felt sure, to an account of the uncomfortable Red Cross meeting. At the Gary house four people sat around a bridge table, but they were talking hard, too, not playing; Commander Gary and Ruth, and Edith Pillsbury, not yet due at the hospital, and Dr. Roslin.

The Waves' barracks were set off at one end of the Row, a little isolated, so there was quite a long stretch of road, grassy spaces, and trees between them and the other houses. There were lights at intervals along the road, but I stuck to the middle of it, avoiding the occasional clumps of black shrubbery. The Waves' barracks were lighted and a radio was going there, too. The door was open and I walked back past a simple but formal sort of hall to a big and extremely informal lounge.

It was like walking into a nurses' dormitory. There were girls everywhere in all sorts of apparel; on the sofas, in the lounge chairs, on the floor; in uniform, pajamas, and very little at all; a buzz of conversation was going on, undeterred by the dance music. Somebody said loudly, ". . . if they don't get him soon I'm going to wire my congressman!"

There were some jeers and somebody else said, but seriously, "Oh, *do* shut up! I'm on night duty at the hospital—" It was the girl at the hospital switchboard, nights. She stopped as I paused in the doorway; in fact, everybody stopped and jerked around to look at me. I said, "Is Ensign Wilson here?"

They eyed me curiously and rather expectantly as if I might be the bearer of news. Then the switchboard girl said, "Hello, Miss Keate. Ensign Wilson—" she glanced around the room—"I guess she's in her room." She got up and went across to a girl who sat under a hair dryer and shouted at her above the hum of the dryer. "Ensign Wilson. Somebody wants her."

The girl poked her head out of the dryer. "Oh, hello, Miss Keate. I think Sally's upstairs. I'll get her—" She emerged wholly, indeed almost literally so as she wore a towel draped over a brassière and petticoat, her hair was done tightly in wet curls. "Want to come along?"

I followed her up some stairs and along a narrow hall. "I'm her roommate," she said and opened a door. "Oh—I guess she's gone out."

The room was small, with two beds, two chairs, and two chests of drawers. I didn't exactly intend to take a look at Sally's possessions; at the same time, I heard myself say, "Is it all right if I wait for her? She may be back in a few minutes."

"Oh, of course." She slid a heap of clothing off one of the chairs. "Do you mind if I get back under the dryer? My hair's wet—"

I didn't mind at all. She trotted away and I waited till I thought she had reached the stairs. Then I closed the door.

I didn't have much time, and contrary to Kitty's and Harry's faith in me, I really hadn't much experience in what the police can accomplish in a matter of seconds. But I glanced at one chest of drawers which was laden on top with cosmetics, a heap of stockings, and a dangling pink brassière and then at the other which was extremely neat, with silver-backed brushes and a tiny bottle of perfume and nothing else. Somehow that looked more like Sally, so I went to it. I was right, for there were two photographs, snapshots really, framed and hung above it. An elderly man in riding clothes, on horseback, with two setters and a glimpse of white fences and stables behind. Another showing the same man, this time beside a sundial with Sally a little in the shadow at his side. Between them there was a space which looked as if another and larger picture had hung there, for there was the small hole in the wall which had been made by a nail. I looked at the elderly man with interest; Sally's father probably, erect and smiling, with gray hair and a look of Sally around his chin and forehead.

Someone turned off the radio downstairs; I hadn't much time. So I opened the top drawer. I trust it is no reflection on my character to say that I did so without the slightest compunction and only that sense of the shortness of time—somebody, Sally herself, or one of the other girls might enter the room at any instant—restrained me from a methodical search of everything in the room. However, the top drawer held writing materials, and on top of a stack of envelopes there was a stock-market page, torn out and folded. I opened it and glanced

along the rows; there were penciled checks against several stocks and some bonds. I scanned the list rapidly; there were not many checks, but every single one of them indicated what sundry patients had taught me to call gilt-edged stocks. So whoever had invested for Sally had invested wisely. And then I discovered that Sally herself had had a certain amount of training about money, for below the page from the newspapers there was a piece of paper with neat sums of addition. Lehman Corporation, so many; American Petroleum, so many; Union Pacific, so many—and the added sum of their quoted prices came to almost thirty thousand dollars.

So Sally wanted thirty thousand dollars. Urgent, she had said in her telegram; by air express.

Thirty thousand dollars. The exact sum Parly expected and boasted about to Bonny. Thirty thousand now—and more later.

There was no getting around the ominous signature of blackmail.

Why?

Someone was coming along the hall. I replaced the papers and closed the drawer and took another quick look at the photographs. And as the steps reached the door, a very singular thought came out of nowhere and all but rocked me back on my heels.

Sally's roommate came in. "Oh, Miss Keate, Sally went out. I don't know where she went but she told Lieutenant Hagshaw she wouldn't be back till eleven. I thought I'd better tell you."

So I went to Wanaha City again that night.

I telephoned to Kitty from the little booth off the lounge and she sent the car and the same sailor driving it who had taken me to Wanaha City the night before. She also, thoughtfully, sent a coat and my handbag with my pass in it. "Mrs. Somers said you'd need it if you're going to Wanaha City," the sailor told me.

Inasmuch as I had not told Kitty my destination, this, although quite unreasonably, irritated me. So did the sailor, when we reached the red and green or orange lights of Wanaha's main street and he said brightly, "El Rico's, again?" as if I were a hardened gambler, a lost soul. I glanced back after I got out

of the car and he was standing on the sidewalk, watching me and shaking his head gloomily.

In El Rico's the first person I saw was Sally, sitting again at one of the small tables near the door. But this time Jim Warring was with her.

The noise was a little louder, the tables a little more tightly packed than the previous night; there was a kind of rhythm about that, beginning with less din and fewer people on Monday nights and working up through the week to a tumultuous crescendo on Saturday nights. Neither Sally nor Jim saw me nor did they seem to be enjoying themselves or El Rico's, but the contrary. Sally was staring down into a Coca-Cola and Jim pulling matches out of a little folder and breaking them with a steady application which the task really did not merit. He looked angry and Sally miserable; I wondered if they had quarreled and what about. I glanced past the cashier toward Dave Winters's little office but did not see him; Bonny was not at the roulette table.

I took a long breath and sailed toward their table. Sally looked up with a start, Jim said, "Sarah!" in a surprised way, and got to his feet and pulled out a chair for me. Sally smiled as if all at once she was very glad to see me and I sat down.

Jim said, "Are you out on the town, Sarah? What'll you have to drink?" He nodded at a waiter and ordered ginger ale, a drink of which my gambling-hall career was beginning to induce a certain satiety, and I had what I thought was a flash of inspiration. I dug into my handbag and got out a ten-dollar bill and put it on the table. "Gamble for me, Jim. I—" I glanced around the big room and chose a gaming table that was as far removed from where we sat as I could discover. "That one back there. With the bird cages."

Jim's eyebrows went up and then rather disconcertingly leveled off. "You mean you want to talk to Sally." He didn't look at Sally; I saw her hand close tightly around her glass. Jim said, "Okay. Delighted. And while you're talking to her you might ask her—"

"Jim—" Sally said softly.

"—what's wrong with me. She's just told me she's through with me. It's all right. That's the way she wants it. But she

won't tell me why."

"Jim," Sally said in a whisper. "Don't."

He scooped up the ten dollars with a brown hand and I watched his tall figure in its khaki-colored summer uniform—with the three gold stripes on the shoulder boards—his lifted and angry black head disappear among the circle around the roulette table. Angry and hurt and consequently very youthful. It wasn't like Jim to speak in just that way.

And then I knew that the surmise which had leaped at me out of nowhere was probably fact.

Sally's face was white and she wouldn't look at me. I said, "Sally, where is Johnny?"

She looked at me then; her eyes flashed up wide with something very like terror.

"Where is he, Sally? Is he here, on the base?"

She moistened her lips. The waiter put down a glass of ginger ale and darted away. I couldn't witness that look in Sally's face; I concentrated on the bubbles rising in the ginger ale and time went past and finally Sally said huskily, "What do you mean?"

I had to tell her, quickly and factually. "You've told Jim you were through with him. You wired home for money, a very large sum of money. Last night you were here and across the street, searching for somebody you thought might be in Wanaha City. Later on you met a man, outside the Waves' barracks and you didn't want anybody to see you talking to him. And you had a photograph of Johnny in your room at the barracks and you took it down so nobody would see it and recognize Johnny. So I think he's alive and here, somewhere on the base." I looked at her then and felt as if I had struck her across the face. I said gently, "Tell me about it, Sally."

The pupils in her eyes were as black and terrified as a bird's held by a snake, a comparison which is not very flattering to me, but that's the way she looked. Finally she said, "Johnny—was in an accident. You know all about it."

I didn't think that lying was easy for her. On the other hand, of course, she might not be lying. I've made my mistakes. However, I had to go on.

"I expect you don't know that your telegram went to the

Captain's desk. They thought it looked like a code—I mean, the list of stocks you wanted somebody to sell for you."

"My—" A wave of color came over her face. "That wasn't very bright of me, was it? I never thought of that. I thought that the abbreviations would—I mean it wouldn't sound like anything but—"

"It wouldn't sound like thirty thousand dollars."

"Thirty—how did you know that?"

I swallowed rather hard but told the truth. "I saw your notes. I looked in the top drawer there in your room. The Captain asked me to talk to you about the telegram. So I—that's when I saw that there was a photograph missing. It *was* Johnny's picture, wasn't it?"

She didn't reproach me even by a look. The child was quite literally stiff with terror. "That was Johnny. But I took it down because—well, I was seeing so much of Jim and—and—"

Not a good liar. I tried again. "Why do you want so much money?"

"Because I—" She took a quick breath. I saw her chin square itself. "I'd rather not talk about it."

"The Captain will ask you. The Board of Inquiry—"

"I'm sorry. I can't tell anyone."

"Why not, Sally?"

"Because," Sally said, her blue eyes like steel, "I won't. I can sell some of my own property if I want to. Nobody's going to stop me."

I waited, thinking hard and getting nowhere. Finally I said, "That's rather a lot of money."

"I—yes. It's almost all—I mean, my mother left me—" She floundered to a complete stop and bit her lip.

She'd been about to say it was almost all she had, which, of course, made it worse.

"You addressed it to somebody by the name of Sawyer. Why didn't you wire to your father?"

"Because I didn't want to. Carl Sawyer is a lawyer. He's got my power of attorney." She leaned toward me suddenly, catching her breath. "Did the Captain stop my wire? He couldn't have done that! It had to go. Did he stop it?"

"I don't know. He had a copy. I don't know—"

There was a still, white dismay in her face. "It's got to go! I'll send another! No, I'll phone—"

"Sally, why is it so urgent?"

She was eager now to be gone—to a telephone. She said quickly, "I don't want to talk about it, Miss Keate. Where is Jim? I must go—"

In other words, Miss Keate, mind your own business.

I said, "Sally, who brought you the message from Parly saying he wanted to see you?"

She replied to that quickly and rather absently, looking around the room for Jim, eager to get away to a telephone. I thought, *Now she's not hiding anything.* "I don't know. There was just a note in the mailbox in the hall, there at the Waves' barracks. It was there Saturday evening. I picked it up when I went to the dance. Jim was waiting for me and I didn't read it till we got to the club and—I don't know who brought it."

I considered that; a small problem but still it was troublesome. Her eyes met mine suddenly and with decision. "Miss Keate, Johnny was in the plane and he was— I told you—"

"Are you sure that it wasn't the hitchhiker who was found in the plane?"

"Hitchhiker—"

"Parly told you that he thought somebody might have gone on that flight with Johnny. Only one body was found. Was it Johnny—or was it the other man? If it was the other man whose body they found, where is Johnny? Why does he want so much money? Sally, I've got to ask you this. Did Johnny kill Parly?"

FOURTEEN

JIM SAID, "Who's talking about money?" and put down a clattering heap of silver dollars. "I did all right by you, Sarah." Without any change in tone or expression he said, "Did who kill Parly?"

Sally got up. "I'm going home."

Jim would know sooner or later. I said, "Sally, will you tell me the truth? Have you seen Johnny?"

Jim said, *"Johnny—"*

Sally's blue eyes flashed directly into mine. "No," she cried. "No! I'm going now."

"Johnny," Jim said again, in an odd, flat voice as if he were talking to himself. Then he touched Sally's arm. "All right. All right, we'll go. Coming with us, Sarah?" His words were polite, and he was barely aware of my existence. I rose and went along with them and I don't think either of them knew that I was there. At the door I remembered all those silver dollars and went back barely in time to foil a waiter who gave me a reproachful look as I scooped up all but two of them into my handbag. By the time I reached the street Sally and Jim had disappeared and my sailor chauffeur came to meet me. He saw the way my handbag sagged from my arm, and as he opened the door he gave me a glance of respect. We went back to the base. I saw nothing of Jim's car, nothing of Jim and Sally and I felt as if I had tossed a highly explosive bomb right at them.

Yet maybe—just maybe—Jim would get the truth out of her. If Johnny had killed Parly (if it was Johnny, not Sally, who was being blackmailed), then Sally must be protected from the consequences of her own loyal but mistaken fidelity to Johnny.

Sensible conclusions are rarely satisfying and almost never comforting. My heart was as low as my heels. And I felt rather like one.

Also, I had failed Harry; the only thing I could do was put the whole question back into his lap. It was with no feeling of self-congratulation, but decidedly the reverse, that I crept into the Somers house. I emptied my handbag on the table near the door, intending to turn over my ill-gotten gains to the Red Cross, and although I tried to be quiet, Harry heard the tinkle of the silver dollars and came to the door of the study. "How did you come out?"

So I told him everything, then and there, making no effort to shield Sally as to the facts—although naturally when I'd finished I added a word to the effect that Sally's sympathies, obviously, had been worked on by Johnny. "He's her husband. There's no way of guessing what he's told her. She's loyal to him—"

Harry's fingers were tapping at the desk. His strong, hooked nose seemed to come down lower over his thin-lipped mouth. "She said she hadn't seen him."

"I think he's here," I said stubbornly. "I think he's the man she saw last night."

His brown fingers moved nervously up and down, the Annapolis ring catching the light. "There's nothing easier than to find out whether or not he's on the base. He can't be one of the officers, of course. Or one of the enlisted men. I suppose he could be a civilian employee at the loading plants but it's unlikely. A union card or records just could be forged—but as I say it's not likely. You say you think that she went to Wanaha City to look for him. The answer probably is that he's living there somewhere, if he's alive. But I *can't* really believe that, Sarah! His body was found—"

"Suppose it was the hitchhiker's body."

"We have no reason to believe there was another man. He was alone."

I felt as if I were dropping another bomb, but I said, "They didn't find the money. They didn't find any trace of it. Wasn't that unusual? Don't they find traces—"

He got up. "Are you trying to say Johnny stole that money, and murdered Parly because he knew it?"

"That's going further than I—" I thought for a moment. "It's a motive for murder."

"Yes." Harry paced up and down. "Yes, it's a motive. But if Johnny did that he'd have had to—crash the plane. See that this very problematical hitchhiker, the plane, everything was burned." He frowned at me absently and then shook his head. "That's not feasible. Think of the bare mechanics of it. If Johnny deliberately crashed the plane, he'd be very likely to kill himself, too. And exactly how would he make sure that the passenger—if there was one—would be killed and the plane burned, but that he could save himself and the money?"

I didn't know. "Was the body they found injured? I mean, as if the plane had really crashed?"

"You mean he might have landed and then killed the hitchhiker, and burned the plane?" He shook his head again. "I don't know about the body; I didn't ask. They said it wasn't recognizable. But the plane crashed all right. No question of that."

"Well," I said slowly. "Johnny had a parachute."

He looked at me as if I'd taken leave of my senses. "Parachute!"

"They always have a parachute, don't they? Suppose he—he knocked the hitchhiker over the head, dropped himself and the money by way of a parachute and—and just let the plane crash. He'd have expected it to burn and it did and—"

It seemed to me a simple and indeed the only practicable solution, but Harry very quietly sat down and put his head in his hands. "Sarah," he said in a strangled way. "You'd better go to bed. I'll think this over. I'll—do something about it. I promise you. But just now—"

"You're not going to get much out of Sally," I said, "but perhaps Jim can." I didn't add that Jim might choose to keep any confidence Sally gave him. And it was exactly then that I made a very serious blunder. It is hard even now to be philosophic about it. It's true that I couldn't have stopped events that were already, at that moment, in train. I could no more have checked an already lighted fuse. But it was a blunder.

Without further talk I started toward the door and Harry said, "Kitty's gone to sleep."

So I tiptoed up the steps and into my room, where my spirits really struck a new low. I'd been a great help, hadn't I?

All the same, Johnny was alive, somewhere. And he wanted

money, so Sally tried to get it for him. She was in all probability telephoning for it at that moment. She'd see that Johnny got it, unless Jim took a hand in the business, and what could he do beyond extracting the truth from Sally, finding Johnny and—what?

It was about then, too, that I saw exactly what I had done in my little flurry of detectivism. I had provided Jim with a motive for killing Parly.

If Parly knew that Johnny was alive, if he knew or guessed that Johnny was guilty of murder and theft, then Jim had every reason for getting rid of Parly. Both to protect Sally and, they would say, to keep from Sally's ears the knowledge that Johnny Wilson was alive.

It wasn't a motive when you knew Jim Warring. It was nothing that he would have done. He'd have had it out in the open, come hell or high water. He wouldn't have crept stealthily into the hospital and killed a man. And even if he'd wanted to kill him, he wouldn't have killed him like that—not with ether. Not an unconscious, helpless man. Not with a knife. Not that way.

But I knew Jim or thought I did. All the officers on the Board of Inquiry knew him; they wouldn't—they couldn't accept such a theory as fact. But how about the District Office? How about the F.B.I. and Naval Intelligence?

Wouldn't such a motive weigh heavily against him with a jury, or whatever they call the men who act as a jury in a court-martial?

So everything was just too ducky for words and I'd been a great help to everybody concerned.

Had Jim been surprised when I asked Sally point-blank if she'd seen Johnny? But he hadn't murdered anybody. And I'd provided them with a motive for which (they might decide) he had murdered Parly.

I heard Harry come upstairs and go into his room, quietly so as not to wake Kitty. And I heard Kitty a little later coming very softly up the stairs.

At least I heard somebody, soft footsteps and the rustle of clothing, and opened the door just in time to catch Kitty at the top of the stairs. She had a coral pink sweater rolled up like a

bundle in one hand and she almost screamed when the light from my room fell upon her. Then she flung her other hand to her mouth, made some kind of gesture toward me with the coral bundle and without saying a word went on quickly to her room and into it.

I followed her. "Where have you been?" I whispered.

"Sh—sh— Out for a walk. Good night, Sarah." It was her turn to close the door in my face and she did. But her mouth was trembling.

I went, fuming with curiosity, back to my room.

It was some minutes later that I knew I was frightened. Where had Kitty gone, and why? She wouldn't have gone out just for a walk, not at night; not after a man had crept into the hospital and murdered Parly, and the murderer was still at large and might be anywhere. Not Kitty. And she was frightened.

I believe that I argued myself out of that. She wasn't frightened; she'd only gone out to see somebody, Marie Sinclair perhaps, to talk to her about the mute and guarded suspicion on the base which still made itself audible somehow, concerning Harry. She hadn't wanted to tell Harry where she was going or why. If she looked frightened, it was only because she had steeled herself to walk along those roads at night, where every shadow might conceal a murderer.

Besides, it wasn't late; I looked at the clock and it was only a little after 10.

I didn't have any imagination but I was certainly, I told myself, letting something very much like it run away with me. Kitty would explain in the morning. And in fact no explanation was needed. It was none of my business, either. Except Kitty was impulsive. Except I had only that evening hoped that the seething volcano within her wasn't going to burst into hasty and possibly ill-considered action.

But I was already wound up too tightly to compose myself; the incident of Kitty released the key to a driving restlessness. I had to ask Buffalo Bill and Jenson at least one question. I could wait till morning, but in another way I couldn't.

At a quarter after 10 I decided to stroll over to the hospital. It was past visiting hours, but perhaps the new nurse would let

me see Buffalo. He wouldn't be asleep yet. Jenson would tell her that I'd been the substitute nurse and I was a guest of the Somerses and I'd make up some excuse to see Buffalo. Perhaps I wouldn't even have to invent an excuse. Perhaps I'd see Jenson first and it wouldn't be necessary to see Buffalo. I was dressing by then, hurriedly, so my hands shook a little. At the last minute I, too, took a sweater and put it over my shoulders.

I turned off the light in my room, edged myself out the door, and, clutching the railing, down the stairs and along the hall. I opened the door, and the cool night air struck my face. I turned the night latch so I could return and tiptoed across the porch and down the steps, and hurried across the lawn so Harry, directly above, wouldn't hear my footsteps on the path. I must say I didn't care for the thickets of shrubbery and once when a branch touched my face softly I nearly screamed, as Kitty had done. But then I came out on the road and there were lights in the B.O.Q. and lights in some of the houses, and, of course, the street lights along the road.

I took a course past the B.O.Q. on the far side of the road. The radio wasn't going as usual and I missed its cheery assurance of people very near. Jim's car, a tan convertible with the top down, was parked in front of the B.O.Q. His talk with Sally, then, had lasted an ominously short time.

Oddly the place seemed larger at night than during the daytime when the brilliant light brought even quite distant objects into a sharp focus. The houses seemed farther apart. The areas of light beneath the street lamps seemed small and too infrequent amid the long empty spaces of velvet blackness. *Even if I screamed,* I thought suddenly, *nobody would hear me.* But nothing moved anywhere along those empty roads. No shadow detached itself from heavy, deeper shadows.

I reached the road which curved toward the hospital and didn't see a soul anywhere. The west door was lighted but the rooms in the west wing were dark.

I went up the step to the entrance and discovered that I hadn't been breathing very easily and took a long gulp of air. The door was open. I could see the long corridor and the chart desk at the end of it with the green-shaded lamp above. A young woman in white was sitting at the chart desk. I took an-

other uneasy gulp and opened the door. Her white cap jerked up at once.

She rose and came down the corridor to meet me. She was attractive, black hair and dark eyes, although on the plump side. We met and she said in a low voice, "Visiting hours are over."

"I know. I'm Sarah Keate—"

"Oh, yes. The substitute nurse. I'm Ensign Whitson." She eyed me curiously. "You were on duty when—"

"Yes. I—thought I'd like to see how Buffalo Bill is doing? I mean Marine Sergeant Brown."

"He's doing very well."

"I—that is—can I see him?"

"I'm sorry," she said implacably. "Visiting hours are over. You might come tomorrow."

The Navy is the Navy; no doubt of that. A brief impulse to walk coolly past her died at once; she'd have stopped me and made no bones about it. I said, "Well—I don't see Jenson."

Irritation flashed in her dark eyes. "You don't see him," she said crisply, "because he's not here yet. He's late. And if he thinks I won't report it because I'm new then he's quite mistaken. I'll tell Buffalo in the morning that you came to see him. Good night."

Somehow she had walked me back to the door which she now held open not only in a suggestive but a very commanding manner. She might have been an ensign, but she would undoubtedly add some stripes as rapidly as routine permitted.

I said, "Well, thank you," rather feebly and found myself out on the step again. And rightly. Oh, yes. But ruffled.

I daresay I had been Head Nurse in positions where my word was as good as law for far too long. The girl was right, but a spirit of rebellion was in my heart just the same. I went slowly back toward the B.O.Q. As I approached it the radio inside the lounge burst into a loud and raucous squawk and was turned down but kept on going in a cheerful way, dance music from some night club, for as I trudged along it broke off for an announcer's voice, "—comes to you from the something-or-other room at the Fairmont—" and then swung into dance music again. A man came out of the B.O.Q. with a little bag

such as mechanics carry in his hand and swung himself into a car. Somebody in the lighted doorway said, "Thanks, boy. It ought to be all right now."

The man getting into the car shouted back, "All you need is some new tubes once in a while," and started his car with a rattle. I peered at the uniformed figure in the doorway thinking he might be Jim. But the car backed around so the lights from it shone in my eyes and when it had rattled past me toward the gate, whoever was in the doorway had moved away.

Jim's room, I remembered, was the first on the left, the corner room. The windows showed no light, so I padded on. Indeed I had almost reached the path into the Somers house when a rebellious impulse struck me. If Jenson hadn't reached the hospital yet, I might intercept him on his way.

He was already late, of course. But quite obviously the new ensign had everything under perfect control. It wouldn't be a really heinous breach of discipline if I walked a few steps with him and asked one question.

Only one question, but it might be important. The Captain had asked me to help him, hadn't he?

I pushed away the disconcerting reflection that my efforts so far had had very unwelcome results. Yet it spurred me, too.

I could wait to see Jenson the next day; I had waited. But that was before I had known—or at least had had such strong reason to believe—that Johnny Wilson was still alive. It now seemed to me imperative to see Jenson.

But I didn't turn back. And in point of fact, it wouldn't have made any difference if I had. Perhaps my sense of hospital discipline was too strong for me; perhaps I didn't like the Row that night, with its long empty spaces, the deep black blotches around the clumps of shrubbery and under the trees. Instead, I trudged on to the Somers house and opened the door softly. And smelled a very odd sort of smell, odd and unpleasant. Like burning wool.

Harry had left a cigarette burning, had dropped it in a lounge chair. That was my first thought, so I tiptoed into the study to check an incipient conflagration. But even though I closed the door quietly and then turned on the light, I could find no burning cigarette anywhere. In fact the smell of burning wool was

less pungent. I went into the hall again. At the back of it a door led to the basement and it was an inch or two ajar. I went to it and opened it a little farther and the smell of burning wool was sickening. I went softly down the stairs.

Halfway down I stopped. Kitty was down there standing at the open door of the furnace. Light from inside it touched her face to a yellow glow. She wore her crimson silk dressing gown, its sleeves rolled up beyond her elbows, and she was poking at something in the furnace with jabbing, desperate motions.

I went on down. "Kitty—"

She jerked around to look at me.

"What are you doing?"

I felt she wanted to push me away, but I looked in the furnace. She had a poker in her hand and she gave the smoldering, bubbling thing in the furnace another wild jab. It was her coral sweater.

Long streaks of charred material made canals through the material. A knitted wrist had burned off completely. Kitty said, with a queer kind of sob, "It's so hard to burn. It won't burn. It just creeps like that in streaks—"

"It also smells to high heaven," I said crossly, and took the poker from her and poked at it myself. Then I said, "Why?"

She wiped dark curls back from her face. "Turn it the other way. Then hold it up so the flames catch."

"*Why*, Kitty?"

"Never mind—"

"You'd better tell me." I lifted some of the seething, curiously ugly mass. A delicate strip of the soft wool dropped away as if it resented the flaming attack upon its loveliness.

Kitty went to rummage somewhere and came back with some fire tongs. "Let me. I've got to get it all burned. They're coming—the men from the District Office and from the F.B.I."

"To investigate? *When?*"

"Harry talked to somebody tonight, after you'd gone. They're coming here—I don't know when—" She shoved back her hair with her arm and cried incoherently, "I've got to burn it! They'll see—"

Something caught my throat as if it had hands. "*They'd*

see what?"

"The blood on it," Kitty said. "It's Jenson—I found him."

"Found—"

She pushed the fire tongs against the sweater.

"He's out there! Near the hospital! He's dead! There was blood—I didn't know. I stumbled and then I looked and I got blood on my sweater. I can't tell Harry. I couldn't call anybody or tell them or— They'd say I did it or—because of Harry, you see. Oh, Sarah, help me. I've *got* to get it burned. Even if I washed it they'd find the bloodstains and—"

"What are you doing?" Harry said from the bottom of the steps.

FIFTEEN

HE LET US FINISH burning the sweater; there wasn't any way to drag it out of the flames then. He only gave it one strange look, after he made Kitty tell him what she was doing and why. Then he held Kitty for a moment, as if to assure himself of her safety. He touched her disheveled black curls and put his face down upon her tear-stained, plump cheek. He went up the stairs to the telephone in the study.

The buttons, of course, wouldn't burn. They could be raked out. "Why did you burn something in the furnace, Mrs. Somers? What was it?" I could hear the questions. I didn't tell Kitty.

When the thing was an unpleasantly liquid looking heap, which is the way wool burns, as if the animal elements within it fought to the last for life, Kitty and I went upstairs. By that time Harry was gone.

We opened all the doors and windows to air out the smell, and then, without exchanging so much as a word or a look, closed and locked them again. It was as if we had not learned, yet, the recognition of danger, but it tugged at us, all the same, forcing us to acknowledge its presence.

Lights were springing up all over the Row by then and cars already were shooting along the roads toward the administration building and the hospital. I could see the headlights converging like floodlights upon a clump of shrubbery at the curve of the road from the gate, several hundred yards from the other road which went toward the Somers house and other houses.

Kitty wouldn't look. She lay on the sofa in the study, her face in the pillows. "Harry will tell them. He'll tell everybody I found him! It happened just exactly the way I told him, Sarah." She twisted so I could see her teary, flushed face. "I went to meet Jenson on his way to the hospital. I wanted to ask him if he had seen something, anything, that could be evidence. I thought he might be afraid to tell Harry or the Board,

or anybody official. You remember what Harry said about that. But I thought I could worm it out of him." She took an uneven breath. "I wanted to ask him about Buffalo Bill, too. Jenson saw more of him than you did or the doctor, or anybody. He'd have known it if Buffalo is dangerous, likely to blow up and—I had to do something!" she said, defiance in the one eye that was visible.

Well, I had wanted to ask Jenson one question, too. But I thought then that my question was answered.

Kitty, fixing me with that one bright eye, said, "It was horrible, Sarah. I hated going out of the house and it was all so still and empty except the shadows around the shrubbery looked as if somebody might be hiding there. I tried to keep out of sight when I passed the B.O.Q. and then I thought that Jenson would come by the road from the gate, of course; he lives in the barracks. I didn't see anybody all the way. I went to that curve, where the road from the gate turns into the hospital and I waited and all at once—" her voice wavered—"all at once I was sure that somebody was there. Close to me. It was a—a terrible feeling. I looked around and moved and then stepped on—on something and I looked down and it was a hand and it was Jenson. I knelt down and there was just enough light. I could see the blood on him. It looked black. I nearly fainted, Sarah. Really I did. Everything whirled around me and then all I could think of was—was the way the women acted this afternoon. So different and—so I came home! He was dead. There wasn't anything I could do for him. I didn't know how long he'd been there. I—" She buried her face in the pillow again and wailed, "And now Harry's going to tell them that I found him. They won't say that I murdered him or that Harry had anything to do with it. They'll just *look* at each other—"

"Kitty, stop!" The black curls went deeper into the pillow. "Listen, Kitty—I'm afraid that Johnny Wilson killed him."

The black head was very still. Then it jerked around and Kitty sat up. "Johnny Wilson! He's dead. He was killed—"

"I think he's alive and here on the base. I'd better tell you the whole story."

She sat there, huddled, scarcely breathing while I told her. "I was going to see Jenson, too," I finished. "I went over to the

hospital and the new nurse wouldn't let me see Buffalo Bill, so I came back—I thought of going to meet Jenson, too! The nurse had said he hadn't got to the hospital yet. But I decided to wait till morning."

"What were you going to ask him?"

"Whether or not he had seen anybody at all around the hospital who could have been Johnny Wilson."

"Oh," Kitty said, staring blankly at me. "Oh."

"I think he had. Because if Johnny Wilson knew it, he had to get rid of Jenson."

"That answers your question," Kitty said after a moment. "You mean that Johnny must have seen Parly sometime here. Or that Parly saw Johnny. And so Parly sent for Sally to tell her. And that's what Sally refuses to explain."

"Something like that."

"But then—" Kitty said, thinking hard. "But then—" Her eyes snapped. "Did you say that the amount of stock she wants to sell comes to about thirty thousand dollars?"

"Yes. About the sum that Bonny said Parly was going to get."

Kitty took a long breath and rose and began to walk around the room pantherishly, her red silk skirt swishing like an angry tail. "Then Parly was blackmailing Sally. He knew Johnny was alive and—of course! He knew Johnny had in fact stolen that money!"

"But Sally still wants the thirty thousand and Parly is dead!"

"She could have murdered him to keep him quiet! She had a chance—"

"She left the hospital before Jenson saw Parly about eleven."

"How do we know? Maybe—maybe Jenson saw her and she promised him some money to keep his mouth shut. And then she got scared and Jenson—she intended it for Jenson. But now she knows that Harry would inquire and would find out if she gave it to Jenson so she—" she caught her breath and whispered—"killed him."

I remembered the white despair in Sally's face. But then I took a grip on common sense. "She couldn't just walk up to him and stab him. He wouldn't let her."

"Somebody did," Kitty said, with the horror of her discovery

in her voice.

I had to steady my own voice. "If Sally was going to hand over thirty thousand dollars to anybody, she'd give it to Parly as readily as to Jenson."

Kitty had an answer for that, too. "Unless at first she thought she could get rid of Parly, and then Jenson knew she did it and she got in a panic after you talked to her tonight and—"

"You've forgotten Johnny."

Kitty paused, her red silk skirt coming to a whispering stop around her. "Well. If she knows Johnny murdered Parly and now if *he's* murdered Jenson, she can't keep quiet about it. She'll have to tell. She'd be a—what do you call it?"

"Accessory after the fact."

"Yes. There are only two explanations, Sarah. You've got to admit that."

I didn't. "What are they?"

"It's obvious," Kitty snapped, having somewhat recovered her normal manner. "One is that Johnny Wilson murdered Parly. And Jenson knew something. That—or Sally murdered Parly, and now Jenson for the same reason. Women have done things like that. You can't say they haven't."

"I can't see Sally Wilson taking a knife in her hand and—"

"Parly couldn't have defended himself. He was under ether."

"Jenson wasn't. Do you think he'd stand still and let Sally put a knife in him? If that's the way he was killed."

"I don't know about that." Kitty looked sick and white again. "There was all that blood. He was lying on his face and it was all over his back. He had on whites and—I thought it was a knife because anybody would have heard a shot and—"

"Kitty, are you sure there wasn't anybody else around anywhere?"

"Not anybody." She shook her black curls definitely. "There wasn't a car or anybody, anywhere. It was as still as if it were in the middle of the night. A sort of—" she gave a little shiver—"queer stillness as if everything was waiting for something."

I knew what she meant. I'd felt it, too. We looked at each other for a moment and then Kitty, as if to break off the terror of that communication, went to the window. "They are still

there—at the curve of the road. Sarah, did Harry tell you that he's sent for help?"

"No. That is, he said he'd try to find out whether or not Johnny could be alive. He didn't say the District Officers were coming." (*Mrs. Somers,* I thought irresistibly, *why did you try to burn your sweater? So people wouldn't think you—or your husband—had anything to do with murder?*)

Kitty said, "Harry and the Board thought at first that they could deal with it. They expected something to come up, some quarrel Parly had had, something like that. It usually does. That is, when there's any sort of trouble. Murder is different, of course. Murder—doesn't happen."

Except it had happened. Twice.

Kitty took an unsteady breath. "Just the same, they expected the thing to break. Right away. But Parly was murdered Saturday night and this is Tuesday night—getting on to Wednesday morning now," she added with a glance at the clock on Harry's desk. "So this afternoon they talked it over and agreed to leave it to Harry and he phoned to the District Commandant tonight and they're sending some men from Naval Intelligence and from the F.B.I. And now—" She put her hand at her throat and stared at nothing. She was thinking, *Now it's Jenson.*

But I thought, *And they'll find Johnny Wilson.*

I wondered how long loyal little Sally would try to protect him, how long her fighting, stubborn strength would hold out.

Kitty thought of Johnny, too. She cried, "What do you suppose young Wilson did with all that money? I mean, if he really did steal it. If he wants more money from Sally—that is, if she really does want it for him and it wasn't to buy off Jenson—why does he need so much money?"

There wasn't any answer to that.

"I want to see what they're doing," she said. So we went out to the porch where Kitty, avoiding my eyes and with a defiant jerk of her hand, unlocked the front door and then quickly went to fasten the hook on the screened door. From the porch we could watch the lights around the hospital and in the administration building and the whole Row, lighted everywhere now. We talked, of course, but not much. Toward dawn Suli came out with coffee and a large carving knife stuffed into his belt.

Kitty looked at the carving knife. "What's that for?"

His eyes darted over us and then fixed themselves upon the tray. "Nothing, missy."

"Well, take it back where it belongs."

"Yes, missy." He might as well have said, no, I won't. He slid quickly back into the house. Just at that moment Suli was about the only person on the base (except Harry, of course, and Father Andrew, and Jim) whom I didn't suspect of being Johnny Wilson.

Yet that was patently absurd. Navy records were exact. But I wished I had had one glimpse of Johnny's photograph. I wondered if Sally still had the photograph or if she had destroyed it. But it didn't matter now, for she'd have to tell the whole truth. Harry and the Naval Intelligence officers—and perhaps Jim—would break through her wall of silence; she couldn't hold out against all of them. Besides, I told myself, they'd find Johnny.

It's curious how near Kitty and I came that night to the truth and yet how very far we were from it, too.

Harry came home just before reveille, shaved, snatched some breakfast and a fresh uniform, and left again. They didn't really know anything, he told us. They had secured the whole base; nobody was to leave it even so far as Wanaha City until further notice. He had telephoned again, urgently, reporting Jenson's murder; Naval Intelligence officers and the men from the F.B.I. would arrive the following day, Thursday. Jenson had been killed, Dr. Roslin thought, exactly the way Parly had been killed. He wasn't under ether, but he'd been stabbed through the back, again, probably with a government-issue clasp knife. The knife hadn't been found.

But he'd been killed, he told us, almost certainly only a short time before Kitty found him. He'd left the barracks, across the road from the Row, at about 9:30. The sentry had passed him; he'd walked on along the main road leading into the Row from the gate, and disappeared behind the administration building as he would have to do, approaching the road to the hospital. That was the last anyone had seen of him. The obvious conclusion was that someone had either met him, or had been waiting for him, just at the curve where the road branched

into the hospital, where, later, Kitty had found him. Harry had also, he said, gulping coffee, told Jim to check with the base at San Diego and try to find out whether or not, by any possible chance, the body of the man found in the wrecked plane could have been that of somebody else, not Johnny Wilson. That would take time.

"I've got to go back to the office. The whole place is in an uproar. We've got to keep the lid on."

"Harry," Kitty said, "did you tell them that I—I found him?"

"Of course," Harry said. "Don't be silly, dear. Nobody's going to accuse you or me or— Now get that out of your pretty head!"

But he looked very gray and drawn, just the same. And didn't say a word, only drank scalding coffee quickly, as if he didn't even know it was practically boiling, while Kitty told him, in rapid, breathless little jerks, our own speculations about Sally; about Parly and Jenson and Johnny Wilson and the thirty thousand dollars.

I waited till she'd finished; then I said, "Can you get hold of a photograph of Johnny Wilson?"

Harry shot me a quick glance. "Of course. I've already asked for a complete record."

"When will it arrive?"

"As soon as possible. His permanent jacket is at BuPers in Washington. The District Office has only the records of men on active duty. Wilson's jacket should arrive Thursday or Friday at the latest."

"They must have trusted Johnny," I said, "to send him off with all that money!"

Harry gave me a surprised glance. "It's all in a day's routine. Why not? Of course, he ought not to have picked up anybody else, even somebody he knew—"

"He had to. If he intended to take the money, that was part of his plan—"

There was a gray shadow on Harry's face. "Y-Yes. That's true enough. We'll know more when we get his photograph."

But meantime, I thought, *meantime.* I said slowly, "I asked Sally point-blank if Johnny was here and if she'd seen him.

She said no. If he stole that money and she knows it, she'd have to decide whether to shield him—or not. It wouldn't be an easy decision. So far she has protected him. Perhaps he's told her some story to account for being alive and—"

"You are so certain of that!" Kitty cried. "How *can* you be so sure!"

I said to Harry, "If we know something of Johnny Wilson—something beyond his record! Something about *him*. What was he *like?* What—" I was fumbling for words. "What would he do? What did he think? *Would* he—well, take the money after the plane crashed and leave it and the man in it and—"

"If he's alive," Kitty said, "and murdered two men, then he'd do anything."

Harry put down his cup and rose. "He had an excellent record. The Commanding Officer at San Diego told me he was young at the time of his death, but he had the makings of a good officer. He was liked and recommended for promotion. That was about all he could tell me. It happened three years ago. Wilson's jacket went to Washington for the permanent file. It's a big base; big officer personnel—"

"Harry," Kitty said, "will they question me?"

"Of course. You, too, Sarah. Don't worry—just tell them the truth." He went away, a slight, wiry figure, but that morning looking rather stooped and old.

It was really a quite horrible day, hot again, with no wind and a blazing sun which seemed to suck up all of the usual, friendly life of the base. Nobody telephoned, not even Marie. Nobody came. We might have been living on an island in the desert, entirely to ourselves. We could see little knots of women gathering on porches; I saw Marie Sinclair cross the green and disappear into the Gary house. None of them came our way. As the blazing morning wore on, Kitty began to get two scarlet spots in her cheeks again; her head was high and defiant but there was a kind of angry—and frightened—glitter in her dark eyes, too.

In the early afternoon I went to the hospital, and this time the day nurse let me visit Buffalo Bill. Merely because Ensign Smith's room lay at the right of the corridor immediately beside the west door, I glanced into the room as I passed it. It was

newly made up, fresh and sunny and obviously unoccupied. I said to the nurse, "Where is Ensign Smith?"

"Oh, he was discharged this morning. Nothing much the matter with him, you know. Except," she said reflectively, "a sore head. In more ways than one. Hated being kept in the hospital," she added. She was looking rather pale and nervous. "Horrible, last night! Jenson—" Her eyes flickered nervously along the corridor and back to me. "Makes you feel as if they can't stop it."

She had, of course, been on duty the day before Parly was murdered. I had relieved her at 10 and taken the orders for the night from her. I said, "Well, there's one thing Jenson's murder seems to prove. The patients are in the clear. If none of them left the hospital last night, then none of them murdered Jenson. Or Parly."

She looked at me dubiously, "I suppose so. If it's the same—murderer."

I didn't think murder had broken out in a contagion like measles. "There can't be much doubt of that. Murder is a very unusual act."

"Good heavens, I hope so!" She eyed me, startled. And I said on a sudden tangent, "You remember Saturday—"

"I do," she said crisply.

"I was thinking of—oh, Saturday afternoon and early in the evening. Parly had visitors—"

"Just before I went off duty. Sally Wilson. I told you then."

"Yes. But—then there was another girl in the afternoon."

Her eyebrows went up. "Another girl! I didn't know that. Well, I'm not surprised. He was quite a lad." She thought for a moment. "But I don't remember another girl. I suppose I was busy and didn't see her. Visiting hours are okay, you know. I don't pay much attention—unless the doctor has given orders not to let a patient have visitors. Then we put the little sign 'No Visitors.' We'd taken it off Parly's door that morning." Her eyes sharpened. "He was quite a lad," she said again. "But I've seen plenty of his type. Who was the girl?"

"Nobody on the base. Her name is Winters. I expect you wouldn't know her." She shook her head. I added, "I thought perhaps her brother might have visited Parly, too."

Her eyes were still curious but blank. I added, "Tall fellow, light hair and eyebrows. Tanned. He lives in Wanaha City—wouldn't be in uniform."

She shook her head. "I can't be sure about visiting hours. There's too many people in and out. But I don't remember anybody in civilian clothes. I'd have noticed that, I think. And from seven o'clock on there wasn't any visitor but Sally." She sighed. "And I wish to heavens she hadn't been here. The Exec questioned me, you know. But I must say"—she cheered a little—"he was very nice about it. I explained that I wouldn't have let Sally see Parly after visiting hours if she hadn't been so—so—well, so sort of upset. As if she'd had some kind of—maybe it sounds funny, but as if she'd had a shock of some kind."

It was, of course, my own impression that morning when Sally came to talk to Kitty. The shock of learning that Johnny was alive—the childhood friend she had married, the young husband she had mourned. And the man who, alive, stood between her and a later, certainly deeper and more matured love.

It had been a double shock, in fact. For wherever Johnny was, Sally was determined to keep it secret; whatever he had done, she had determined to shield and help him.

Not an easy decision, I thought again; loyalty to Johnny had been, in the end, the argument she couldn't find it in her heart to fight.

The nurse said, "I expected a reprimand from Commander Roslin, and got it, all right. Deserved it, I guess. But the Exec was nice about it. Said he understood how I'd felt. Of course," she added in a rather resigned way, "he's off his head about Sally. Everybody knows it. Too bad." She gave me a brief but twinkling grin. Jim, as an attractive and unattached bachelor (until Sally's arrival on the base), had been not unpopular among the nurses and Waves.

"Well," she said briskly, "if you want to see Buffalo, you know his room. But take it easy. He's in a fighting mood today."

She went cheerfully off down the corridor and I followed, toward Buffalo Bill's room. Dave Winters probably had not called on Parly. Certainly he wouldn't have made a friendly or sympathetic call. Yet, of course, if he *had* come to the hospital

that night Jim's blouse would have provided at least a confusing item. A rather convincing kind of disguise. Suppose Dave had discovered the fact that Bonny, stubbornly, unheeding Dave's opposition, had come to see Parly as soon as he was able to see anybody. Suppose Dave had thought that, maybe, just maybe, Parly was going to die and then when he'd learned that in fact Parly was going to get well, he'd decided to put a very final sort of stop to Bonny's affections. Or, more accurately, to Parly.

Suppose, even, he had somehow faked a pass—stolen somebody's pass, lifted it out of somebody's pocket, in El Rico's perhaps, among the crowded tables. It didn't seem likely. Yet Jim's blouse had some significance and whatever it was, it was important.

I paused at Buffalo's door, which was closed, and touched my eye rather gingerly. It was clearing up rapidly and I didn't want another one. I knocked loudly and as there was kind of a growl from the inside, I opened the door a somewhat cautious inch or two.

"Oh, it's you," Buffalo said. "Come in."

Lunch was over, but the trays hadn't been removed yet, for he sat in the armchair with a tray over his knees and a very glum expression on his face. He told me to sit down and asked me why they always sent around custard pudding at noon. "Slop," he said. "Baby food. Every damn noon. It's my knee that's bothering me, not my stomach. What's on your mind?"

"Is your knee any better?"

He moved it tentatively. "Oh, sure. Not well enough to take a stroll around the grounds and clobber Jenson."

"Nobody said you did." He gave me a bleak, blue look. "Somebody did," I said soberly.

He eyed the pudding, "Pink, too," he said in a tone of hatred, and very precisely and lingeringly turned it upside down on his empty plate, where it collapsed. "Jenson was a dumb little guy. But he was okay. He'd have made a good corpsman with a little more time." He looked at his knee thoughtfully. "I wouldn't be here now if it wasn't for a corpsman. Stuck with me, stuff whizzing around us. Fixed up my knee; got me back to the base hospital— Jenson was a good

little guy. But he shot off his mouth at the wrong time. And to the wrong person."

"Who—"

"That's the point." He glanced up at me. His jaw had a fighting line. "It's got to stop, sister. Somebody's going to get hurt."

I didn't point out that somebody—two people—had got hurt and it was nothing trivial. He said suddenly, "How's Sally?" He stopped, with an embarrassed cough. "I mean Ensign Wilson."

"Why do you want to know?" It was the wrong reply, but I hadn't yet realized that everybody in the hospital—indeed everybody on the base that day—was in an explosive and somewhat dangerous mood.

His tray heaved and dishes clattered, but then he calmed down. "Shut the door, will you?"

I did. Buffalo Bill said, "I want you to bring Sally here. I want to talk to her."

"Well. All right. I don't suppose you want to tell me what you want to talk to her about?"

There was a short pause and to my stunned surprise I saw something very like a blush rise into Buffalo's hard-jawed face. It seemed out of order, unconventional in its way, for a marine sergeant to blush like that. "Why, Bill," I said. "Why, Bill—you like Sally!"

"Sure I do!" He shouted and then lowered his voice. "Sure I do. She's a good kid. But don't get any ideas. She's the Exec's girl. And anyway she—oh, well, she's not my—" He glared at me defiantly. "Maybe I'd like a girl like that. Maybe—but she's—" he swallowed. "She's too good for me."

"Don't be a baby!" I snapped. If I told him what I thought, which was that no girl in the world was too good for him, he would undoubtedly give me another sock with his hamlike fist. I said angrily, "Any girl would be proud—" And that was wrong, too.

He growled at me. "Aw, shut up! I know what the score is. The point is she's the Exec's girl and she wouldn't look at another guy and—for gosh sake, stop looking like that! I'm not breaking my heart. What the hell! I just want to give her an

even break."

"Bill," I sat down beside him. "Was it Sally in Parly's room the night after he was killed? Did you help her?"

He moved his bad knee restlessly and gave me a bright-blue, very penetrating glance. "Sure."

There was a long pause. Trays rattled in the corridor. Finally I said, "Oh."

It was inadequate. Oddly though, it seemed to reassure him. "If I could get out of here, but—see here, sister. You've got to help. I don't know how you're going to do it. But I'll tell you what I want you to do and the way I want you to do it."

After a moment I said, "And you don't want me to tell the Captain or the Exec? Or anybody?" He didn't even reply to that, which in a curious way really bound me to silence.

"It's not very hard," he said, as if I hadn't spoken. "But you've got to take Sally over there to the Somers house and keep her there till this thing is—settled."

"Bill!"

His eyes were very bleak and direct. The steely, parade-ground tone was in his voice. "The guy that killed Parly—and Jenson—means business. Somebody's got to keep Sally out of his way."

My heart gave a kind of lurch. "I think you'd better tell me why."

"I guess I've got to. She came to see Parly the night he was killed. You know that. I heard a little of what they said. Couldn't help it—his window was open, I guess, and so was mine. Anyway she began to cry. Seems she was married to a fellow by the name of Johnny Wilson and he was supposed to have been killed in a plane he crashed, but he wasn't." His eyes fixed me for a second. "You already knew that."

"I thought so. I wasn't sure."

"Did Sally tell you?"

"No. She says she hasn't seen him. But she— Go on, Bill. What did Parly tell her?"

He waited for a second or two as if debating whether or not to question me further; then he said, "I couldn't hear everything they said. I just got a few words here and there. The gist of it was that Parly knew Johnny was alive, he'd had a letter

about it. He read it to Sally but wouldn't give it to her. I guess it was from Johnny. It was then she began to cry. She must have liked this guy, Wilson, or she wouldn't have married him. It was tough for her; his crash and everything. But then," Buffalo said simply, "she'd kind of got over it and met the Exec. So what's she going to do? Johnny's alive and she's glad. But he's her husband and she's in love with the Exec."

In a nutshell, there it was.

"So what's she going to do?" he repeated. "Kind of a spot. But that's not all. There's some money in it somewhere." His blue eyes were icy cold. "Parly was going to get it. There was some talk I couldn't hear and then Sally said, loud so I heard it, all right she'd get the money. I couldn't make out whether the money was for Johnny or not, but she said she'd bring it to Parly as soon as she could get it. And Parly was a guy I wouldn't trust with a—" He brooded. His angry yet troubled gaze fell on his knee and he said morosely, "With a beat-down plaster cast."

I agreed. "Go on, Bill."

"That's about all. She kept saying she had to see Johnny. So I guess Johnny's not far away."

"You mean you think Johnny murdered Parly—"

"Maybe," Bill said, his face like a rock. "My guess is from what I could hear of it that Parly had something on Johnny." He waited a moment and then said, "What was it?"

If Bill could trust me, I could trust him. "There was some money in the plane that crashed. They never found traces of the money. They found a body; they thought, of course, that it was Johnny's but they couldn't identify it—"

"So Johnny got away with the swag. Parly knew it. And Jenson knew something—"

"What? Do you think he could have heard Sally and Parly?"

He shook his head, picked up a teaspoon and shoved the pink custard into a sagging little hill. "I don't think it was that. I think Jenson had some idea about the murderer. Something—evidence. Maybe he didn't even realize it was evidence. I told you—he was a chatty little guy and he was dumb."

I thought in all probability he was right. Indeed, it was the only motive for Jenson's murder which, so far, seemed likely.

"Captain Somers questioned Jenson several times. Apparently Jenson was perfectly straightforward in answering. He stuck to his story. He said he didn't know a thing about Parly's murder. Do you think he was lying? And intended—or in fact tried to, say, blackmail whoever murdered Parly?"

Buffalo frowned at the custard. "N-No. No, I think he was just dumb. The guy that murdered Parly is nervous and don't you forget it. Maybe he questioned Jenson and Jenson—oh, remembered something or—I don't know. But it looks like that to me."

There was another long pause. Then I said, "Why did Sally come here the night after Parly was killed? What did she want?"

He glanced at me in surprise. "Why, the letter. The one from—or about—Johnny. I heard her at the window of Parly's room. It was bolted on the inside. You can't work these window bolts from the outside. I heard somebody sort of working at it and I looked and it was Sally. I spoke to her. She was scared and upset and said she had to get something out of his room so I helped her. That's all."

It took me a little aback. "H-How? I didn't see you—"

"Sister, do you think I'd let you see me? Anybody who's been trained to duck shells can duck a woman."

"But—but the door was locked. I was in the corridor. The window was bolted—" But I had felt that I was being watched, too; I had imagined movements in the corridor. It wasn't, then, entirely imagination.

He grinned fleetingly, dove into the pocket of the white, kimono-like garment he wore over his pajama trousers, and showed me a very small piece of wire. "More training," he said enigmatically. "The locks on these doors wouldn't keep anybody out if he really wanted to get in. I got into Parly's room, didn't take more than a few seconds—"

"Where was I?"

"In that little room where you keep medicine."

"The drug room?"

"I guess so. It wasn't late. Jenson was trying to get them to turn off the radio across the hall. I opened the screen for *Sally*. The window's low, I helped her over the sill. Then I helped her look for the letter."

"Did you find it?"

"Nope. It wasn't there." He eyed me truculently. "So I gave Sally a lift out the window again and latched the screen and locked the door and came back here."

"You didn't!"

"Oh, yes, I did, sister. You were putting away some charts then and the filing cabinet was between us. I don't know where Jenson was and I didn't wait to see."

I had to believe him; it was obviously fact. Yet I felt rather as if I'd been stalked by the Whitestone Bridge and hadn't known it. He said, "Don't give it a thought sister. We've had some training out in Korea. If you think somebody's going to take a pot shot at you, you move pretty easy."

I gulped. "And when I came into your room—"

"Sure. I was watching out the window. I just wanted to make sure Sally had gone back to the barracks okay. I told her it wasn't safe at night—" For the first time his blue gaze seemed to linger apologetically on my own eye, which was still slightly varicolored, but he didn't mention it.

"If there was a letter, it wasn't found. The Captain and Jim Warring and everybody searched the room after Parly was killed. If there was a letter—"

"There was," Buffalo said.

"Then they didn't find it. So whoever murdered Parly got the letter—"

"Because he knew what was in it," Buffalo said shortly.

"Then it was Johnny. It's got to be Johnny. But *who* is he? *Where* is he—"

"They'd better get busy finding out. And keep Sally out of his way till you do."

"Buffalo," I said, despairingly. "You think he's here somewhere on the base. So do I. Sally's trying to get some money. She's been meeting—at least once she met some man who didn't want to be seen. I mean, he jumped out of the way when Colonel Sinclair and his wife happened to drive past and—never mind all that. The problem is, who *is* Johnny Wilson? He can't be one of the officers, here in the Row. Yet whoever killed Parly—and Jenson, too—had to have a pass, had to be somebody they know—"

"Whoever he is, he's around. He's dangerous. Wait a minute. Has she got the money yet?"

Dangerous, I was thinking. *Sally.* "The boy at the Western Union office gave her telegram to the O.D." I explained it quickly, and absently, really, for I was still thinking, *Dangerous—Sally.* "That was yesterday. I think she phoned to Virginia last night. Even by air express the money couldn't reach her till tomorrow."

It didn't satisfy him.

"Johnny wants that money. She believes and trusts Johnny. If she thought he clomped Parly, she'd tell the Captain, she'd have to. So—right now—she doesn't think so. She's sure Johnny's in the clear about that—whatever he may have done about the money. But suppose she's beginning to question it? Suppose she questions Johnny? If he sees even a question in her eyes, when that guy's got his hands on the money, he's—got to get rid of her. That's the way I see it."

SIXTEEN

THERE WAS a grim and inescapable logic about it. "Let me tell the Captain, Bill. Let me tell Jim Warring—"

"Sister, I'd have told them right away, but it would only make it worse for Sally. They'd question her. If she's got it into her head that she's got to protect Johnny, she'd do it. She'd refuse to tell them one single thing. But then she'd think about it. And the minute she thinks— Did he kill Parly? Did he kill Jenson?—that guy's going to know it."

Grim logic again. I was cold, that hot bright day. So cold my hands shook and yet my mouth was dry. I said, "But— they'd help. We've got to have that kind of help—"

"*No*. No, I've thought it all over. You're elected, sister. That's the drill."

"I don't—" I swallowed hard because there was a sort of tight band around my throat. "I don't know how."

He eyed the pink hill on his plate.

"Besides, suppose Sally won't let me. I've tried to talk to her. She won't talk. She—"

He looked up. "You've got to do it. I don't know how. But—" He started to get up, and I took the tray and put it on a table. He heaved himself to his feet and wobbled his knee absently as if experimenting to see just how adequately it would carry him. He said, in a queer, rather hopeless voice, "Maybe if I could talk to her. No, it's better this way." His blue eyes met mine. He said in an odd, almost offhand way, "Thanks, sister."

So there it was. My responsibility. I went to the window and stared out across the stretch of bright, hot-looking lawn. Bill, behind me, waited. Finally I turned around. "All right. I'll do what I can. But you'll have to let me do it my own way. I'm going to tell Jim—"

"No. He's Exec. He'll have to report it—"

"I'm not so sure he'll report it," I said slowly.

"Oh." Bill eyed me for a long moment. "Oh."

Neither of us spoke, but communication was like a current between us. At last Bill said, "Okay. If you think he'll throw the book away and stick to Sally—"

Jim would stick to Sally. But I couldn't exactly see him, as Buffalo said, throw the book away. "I don't think anything!" I snapped miserably and with all too accurate truth.

But Buffalo's massive chest rose and fell in a long sigh. "I guess that's the best way to do it. Go ahead and give the word to the Exec."

"It's the only way. I'll go now, Bill."

He said again, in a very low voice, "Thanks, sister," as I went away.

The sun bore down upon me like a hot, dry blanket as I emerged from the west door and started along the road toward the Somers house. It was as a rule a time when all the men were in the office or loading plants, the children were in school, the women were seeking coolness behind drawn shades, so a kind of deserted and peaceful inertia seemed to fall upon the Row. That day it was different, although I couldn't have said exactly why except for a knot of men in uniform, talking absorbedly outside the long administration building, near the gate. The Waves' barracks looked empty beneath the broiling sun and I wondered where Sally was just then. Probably at her job in Commander Gary's office in the administration building; she was safe for the moment.

But the terrible logic of Buffalo Bill's reasoning walked along with me as if it had a frightening presence of its own. I must see Jim at the very first possible moment.

There was a cluster of light dresses and excited voices on Ruth Gary's porch. Marie Sinclair came out quickly and ran across the green space to meet me.

"You'll get a heat stroke," I said crossly.

"I know. Let's get over there in the shade. Sarah," she said, "things aren't going right."

That was fairly clear; even what you might call strikingly true, but I didn't say so. We had moved below a towering clump of trees but it was hot there, too. She wiped her forehead. "I mean—nobody *says* anything, you understand. Not right out. But they—well, Kitty found him. Jenson, I mean. They think

it's odd—I mean for Kitty to go out like that alone. At night. None of the rest of us would have dared to—"

"They can't be such fools as to think Kitty murdered him!"

Her pale-green eyes were bright and shallow in the reflected glare of the sun. "I told you. Nobody says anything right out. But all of them know about Parly and the Captain. And they're scared. So am I. It's—" she shivered, there in the heat. "But about Harry and Parly—that kind of thing can die down all right if there's no reason for it to flare up again. But sometimes—" She pressed her lips together for an instant and then said firmly, "Sometimes they can go on. It's been several days now since Parly was murdered. Everybody expected them to find out who did it and all about it right away."

"Some men are coming from the District Office to investigate. Harry sent for them."

"I know. But—Sarah, I've been in the service for a long time. It takes less than—" she made a curious kind of gesture, comprehensive as if murder and suspicion of murder had a presence, an invisible companionship, so it lay around us, as indeed in a very terrible sense it did. "It takes less than this," Marie said, "to break a man's service career."

I thought of the telephone that hadn't rung all that hot, long morning. I thought of the feverish spots of red in Kitty's cheeks, and her smoldering eyes. Marie said, with an odd, harsh intake of breath, "Besides there's the security angle. Sabotage. A blow. You're only a visitor. You don't realize that we're all sitting right on top of—"

"Oh, *don't* I!" I snapped rather bitterly. But it wasn't consistent to suspect Harry (even without putting it into words, only by the lifting of an eyebrow, a significant glance, a bare statement of fact which, yet, was horribly allusive), and at the same time to talk of spies and sabotage. However, terror is not necessarily consistent; it is something outside of human control. It may suggest anything. Marie said suddenly, "I'm going to see Kitty."

"Why don't you! Drop in for cocktails, you and the Colonel, the way you usually do. Show them you are backing them. Get the Garys and anybody else that feels as you do to come along."

Her eyes snapped. "All right." She sped away, back through

the blazing sun to the Garys' porch and the group of women who had stopped talking to watch us.

I went on to the Somers house. Kitty was nowhere to be seen. Suli came pattering out from the kitchen, still with the preposterous carving knife in his belt, to tell me that missy was asleep.

I doubted that, but I didn't go to her room. Instead I telephoned to Jim's office, and was told he wasn't in, but that I could find him in the Captain's office, where naturally I didn't call him to enter upon what had to be a more or less confidential conversation. I thought for a moment, but the specter Buffalo's words had conjured up wouldn't go away. I telephoned to Commander Gary's office and asked for Sally. And she, too, was in the Captain's office. I put down the telephone.

Later, I learned of that interview—with the whir of the electric fan, Harry sitting at his desk, unconsciously rather stiff and formal, Sally erect in a straight chair, white and drained and frightened, Jim listening and powerless to help, for Sally stubbornly refused to answer Harry's questions. She wanted money, yes. Yes, it was a substantial sum. Yes, she had said she needed it urgently. But the reason was a personal one.

When Harry asked her if Johnny was alive, she said he'd been reported killed three years ago. When he insisted, asking if she had any reason to believe that in fact the report was a mistake and that Johnny was alive, she pressed her soft lips together and wouldn't answer. And when he asked her at last for a photograph of Johnny she said she had none.

"It doesn't matter," Harry told her. "I've sent for a photograph. It should be here tomorrow."

She hadn't replied to that at all. Jim, staring at the sentries at the gate just below the window, his hands clenched together until they ached, had turned then to look at Sally and she wouldn't meet his eyes. Harry finally let her go and she still wouldn't look at Jim, but walked out of the office, her square little chin high but her face very white.

I didn't know about that interview at the time, but I didn't really hope for much from it. I went up through the curtained, silent house to my own room. I took a shower, which was a mistake, for it only seemed to increase the sticky, baking heat,

and then the sleepless, long hours of the past night fell upon me like a paralysis. Sally was safe for the time being. Jim would do something; I didn't know what, but something. I went to sleep, with the shades drawn against the sun, and didn't wake until there were voices downstairs on the porch.

Marie had arrived, and not only Marie. I dressed hurriedly and went down and the murmur of voices grew as I neared them and when I got out to the porch it seemed to me that everybody on the Row was there.

I didn't know how Marie had accomplished it, unless she had acquired by a kind of osmosis certain talents of command from the Colonel. And, of course, public sentiment is a variable and extremely sensitive thing. The pendulum can and does swing furiously back and forth. Kitty and Harry as objects of suspicion and Kitty and Harry as objects of sympathy were two different things.

More exactly, perhaps, the growing undercurrent of question had been only that, and it was mainly projected by something very like a hard-held threat of hysteria. In their hearts they respected Harry and they respected Kitty. In their hearts perhaps none of them could in cold fact accept the premise that anyone, not only their Commanding Officer whom they knew and liked, but any one of them, living together so closely and familiarly, could have become a murderer.

At any rate, for the moment, public opinion was with Harry and Kitty. The whole Row was determined to show its friendship and loyalty—for the moment. So—for the moment—it was like a testimonial dinner except, of course, it had developed into something very like a cocktail party and Suli was running back and forth between pantry and porch, frantically trying to provide enough sandwiches and hors d'oeuvres. He had discarded the knife, I was relieved to note.

But Marie had succeeded too well. Kitty seemed quite as usual, friendly and composed, but Harry knew that the sudden and concerted arrival of practically everybody who lived in the Row had a reason and, of course, he knew what that reason was. He also knew that voices were a little higher, laughter a little shriller, and conversation very much faster and forced than it ought to have been. He was pouring a highball for

somebody when I found my way through the eddies of uniforms and thin light dresses and brought up beside him, and my first glance at his face told me that. He gave me a queer, grave—and rather sad look. "Is this your doing, Sarah?" he said quietly. "Or Marie's? Or Jim's?"

"Where is Jim?"

"He's not here. Don't evade, Sarah. They've been talking, haven't they? And now they want to show that—"

"They're loyal to you, Harry."

"Yes," he said. His troubled eyes went across the porch, seeming to note each person there. "Yes— I hope so."

The eddies of people had swirled a little aside from us. I said in a low voice, "You talked to Sally?"

"She won't talk. I gave her a chance to think it over. There's something wrong there, Sarah. You're right about that. She's stubborn but she's scared."

"Johnny—"

He debated and then shook his head. "I talked to the Commanding Officer at the San Diego base again. They are sure it was Johnny who was killed. Except—" he added, with a far-away look in his eyes—"except, of course, nobody could positively identify the body. . . . Oh, Colonel?"

Colonel Sinclair had moved up beside us. "I'll have another, Harry, just a spot. We've got the sentries doubled out in the Area. I've detailed MP's for the Row tonight—"

I wandered back into the house and still didn't see Jim, so I telephoned to his office only to be told by the man at the switchboard that he'd left for the day. Then I telephoned to the B.O.Q. and one of the junior officers who apparently hadn't known of the volunteer cocktail party (or had thought himself of an insufficient rank to join it without invitation) told me that Jim had come home but then gone out again, he didn't know where, but his car was parked out in front.

Perhaps, I thought, putting down the telephone, Jim was on his way to the Somerses'. It seemed an opportunity to intercept him. I went out through the kitchen where the cook and Suli both gave me rather frenzied, stay-out-of-our-kitchen-we-have-a-crisis looks, and across the road toward the B.O.Q., keeping the screen of the hedge along the driveway between me and

the groups of people on the Somers porch. Halfway along, I met Father Andrew, looking hurried and hot, his collar wilted. He stopped to wipe his bald head and the halo of fringe around it. "I'm on my way to the Somerses'," he said. "I understand the entire Row has called on them this evening."

"It's proving to be a full-fledged cocktail party," I said. "I don't think anyone intended that." By anyone I meant myself and Marie.

But Father Andrew smiled gently. "I don't think that was the purpose. No, no. Quite a different motive, I should say. Very heart-warming. Yes, commendable."

He never saw harm until he had to, but then he would lash out with scorn and authority, his usually kind face unbelievably stern and wrathful. He wiped his head again, a troubled look suddenly in his eyes. "Miss Keate, I have a very serious responsibility. A very serious question in my mind. I feel that I'd like to talk to you about it. You know Captain Somers very well. You've known him, I understand, for a long time. And you know Jim Warring."

Every nerve in my body seemed to tighten. "Yes, Padre."

"I have been debating in my mind," he said slowly, "about my duty. You see I have every respect—yes, and admiration for Jim Warring. An able young fellow. A good commander. Yes. I cannot suspect him of complicity in these very terrible—" his eyes went to the mountains and he said slowly—"crimes. Blood guilt. No, I can't suspect him. Yet—Jenson, last night. We can't let these two terrible deeds go unpunished."

Little wires seemed to tighten around my throat. His troubled eyes came back to me. "I have told myself that I must have been mistaken. I have debated whether or not to approach Captain Somers. But the fact is—" he took a long breath. "The fact is I have reason to believe that Jim Warring knows something of Parly's murder."

SEVENTEEN

I SUPPOSE I SAID, "What? Why?" or something like that. I wasn't aware of saying anything, but Father Andrew replied as if I had spoken.

The sun was lowering toward the sharp, blue rim of mountains. Its rosy light fell full upon Father Andrew's face which was both sad and stern. "I saw Jenson yesterday. Rather he came to see me. It was in no sense a confessional. He was one of my parishioners. He was troubled. He asked me to advise him. He—in brief, he said that he had had a talk with Parly shortly before Parly was murdered. It was, he said, about eleven o'clock that night when he went to Parly's room to give him the usual night care. Parly was in a talkative mood and, Jenson said, seemed pleased because—" His clear, troubled eyes met mine. "Because, he told Jenson, he was going to get even with Jim Warring. To quote Jenson, Parly said that he hated the Exec and that he knew something that would fix him. Parly was talkative and boastful. He said the whole base would be laughing if he told it, and that the Exec would do anything he could to keep him quiet. Jenson asked him what it was and Parly wouldn't say. Jenson said that he thought Parly was lying. He knew—" Father Andrew paused and then said simply, "I expect the whole base knew that Jim had been obliged to take disciplinary measures with Parly and why. Jenson said he told Parly to quiet down and go to sleep."

Parly had known of Johnny Wilson, alive and demanding money from Sally—whom the whole base knew was Jim's girl. It was in Parly's unpleasant little mind an ugly joke, with Jim on the receiving end of it.

Father Andrew said, "Jenson didn't want to tell anybody of Parly's statements. He hadn't really believed him; he felt that Parly was angry and spiteful. So Jenson didn't, as he said, want to get the Exec in bad. Yet it worried him to the point where he came to ask my counsel. I told him that he'd better speak

to Jim about it. He is a fine officer; I was sure that he himself would tell the Captain. But—" he cleared his throat—"the fact is just then Jenson seemed to get a sort of—I don't know what. An idea of some kind. He stared at me as if he didn't see me and I waited and he said, 'I'd forgotten. *He* was there—I *saw* him!' Those very words."

"Saw *Jim?*"

Father Andrew nodded. "I'm afraid so, Miss Keate. He said—I think he said—'Maybe I'd better talk to him,' something like that. And then he left in a hurry. I never saw him alive again."

Jenson—tubby, worried, trying to do what he thought was fair. *A good little guy,* Buffalo had said; *a little time and he'll be a good corpsman.*

Father Andrew and I looked at each other for a long moment. I could hear the voices from the Somers house. The sun dropped lower. Finally Father Andrew said, "I don't want to accuse Jim Warring. At the same time, I believe Harry Somers to be a just man. He'll not act without facts. Well, I can see that it is my duty to tell him. Thank you, Miss Keate."

I didn't know why he thanked me, unless for listening while he clarified to himself the anxious debate in his conscientious soul. He nodded at me and turned away, his shoulders sagging as if he carried upon them a very heavy load. He started on toward the Somers house.

What he had to tell Harry would be no news to Harry. Parly had been quite obviously, it seemed to me, gloating over the fact that Johnny Wilson was alive. Sally, Jim's girl, was still Johnny's wife.

The point was, what had Jenson remembered? Jenson had been asleep the hour or two during which Parly had been murdered. Hadn't he?

Or had he roused and stuck his head out of the storeroom door and seen—well, what? Whoever it was who crept out of Parly's room and then, as I made a motion to turn toward the corridor, into Buffalo Bill's room?

There was no way now to know that. But whatever it was Jenson knew, he had in some way admitted his knowledge. At the wrong time. To the wrong person.

I had by then strolled on past the B.O.Q., thinking so deeply that I hadn't noted the course of my steps. I had rounded the corner when I looked up and Jim sat on the little back steps of the B.O.Q. Sat there with his elbows on his knees, eyeing the Gary house.

He was looking so hard at the small brick house that he didn't hear me as I walked across the grass toward him, and sprang up only when I spoke.

"Oh. Sarah—"

It seemed a long time since he and Sally and I had sat at the little table in El Rico's and it was only the night before.

At that time—only the night before—Jenson had been going to the mess hall for dinner, listening to the news on the radio and the talk of the men around him, and all the time revolving in his mind whatever it was that his visit with the padre had brought (unexpectedly; to Jenson's own stunned surprise) to the surface. As if he'd gone fishing in obscured and confused waters and suddenly a fish had caught himself on Jenson's merely troubled and exploring line.

And then, after a while, close to 10, for Jenson was not one to go on duty a moment before he had to, he had left the lights and company, had crossed the highway, been passed by the sentries at the gate who knew him well, and then as he turned into the hospital road—then what?

He had met somebody. Who?

Perhaps they had talked. What had been said? Why and how had he incurred the swift suspicion of a ruthless murderer? Had he, uncertain of the accuracy of his own memory, innocently in a way, questioned the person he encountered there in the shadowy center of the road? Had he said, *were* you in the west wing the night Parly was murdered?

Had he, by any chance, said, "I *know* you were in the west wing that night; what will you give me to keep quiet about it?"

Or, had nothing been said in words? Had the flicker of fear in his round face, the look of suspicion in his eyes betrayed the knowledge that had leaped into his mind? Somehow, that seemed the more likely hypothesis. And hypothesis it would in all probability remain. We might never know exactly how it happened, only—if the staff on the base, the men coming from

the District Office to investigate were successful—why?

It wasn't, it couldn't be Jim he'd seen in the west wing. In Jim's presence I was sure of that.

I had sat down on the steps beside him. There wasn't anyone anywhere. The Row was like a deserted, forgotten town, still spruce with the lawns green and tended, curtains at the unlighted windows of the houses, chairs on the porches, all ready for reoccupation; yet, just then, completely empty as if a spell had been put on it. As if some invisible Pied Piper had induced every living soul in that wide and parklike area to follow in his train.

But if there was a Pied Piper, he had the face and name of murder.

Which was nonsense. The Row was deserted merely because so many of its occupants were at the Somers house. I said, "What did Sally tell you last night?"

He leaned his elbows on his knees so his brown face was in clear profile against the dying, rosy light in the sky. "Nothing. Exactly nothing."

"Did you ask her about Johnny Wilson?"

He nodded. "She wouldn't answer. I asked her if he was alive and that was the reason she didn't want to see me any more. She wouldn't answer. She said she wanted to get back to the barracks. I tried to explain to her why she had to tell Harry if there was anything she knew about Parly's murder. She just shrank back into the seat and—well, I took her home. There wasn't anything else to do. I told her that if Johnny was alive, we'd—we'd wait. Till she got her mind clear about what she wanted to do. About him, I mean, and me." Jim's jaw was a hard line. "I said whatever she decided was all right with me. I said—God knows what I said. None of it made any difference. She—then we got to the barracks and she got out of the car and went in."

I said after a moment, "It's you she loves, Jim. But she'd feel loyal to Johnny, and the more determined to stick to Johnny, to help him, if that's what she thinks she's doing, just *because* she's in love with you."

He didn't reply to that; instead he told me of Sally's interview with Harry during the afternoon, with Jim himself a

tense and anxious witness. "But the men from the District Office will make it tough for her. They'll have to. They'll make it," he said, "tough for everybody. It's their job to get at the facts. Besides there's the security angle. Half the base is sort of—listening."

"Listening?"

He said obliquely, "We don't have much secret stuff here. Once in a while we do a little testing, not much, nothing like—oh, Laressat, Caavisone. And, of course, Yucca Flat. All in this vicinity, but quite a distance from Wanaha."

This vicinity meant, of course, some thousands of miles. Suddenly the very immensity of the wide, spreading desert, the mountain ranges, the enormous distances of the West seemed to isolate the base and us in a curiously frightening way, as if we were alone and at the mercy of something we didn't understand. Which in its way was true.

Jim said, "But we could have a blow. The Safety Officers have done everything they can—tripled guards, set up new signals, everything. They've got so many marines out in the Area at night that they're practically falling over each other."

He eyed the Gary house, quiet and dark, off to the left.

I said slowly, "I had a talk with Buffalo Bill today. Parly told Sally that Johnny's alive. She promised to get money. Parly told her to give it to him. And Jim—Buffalo thinks Sally's—well, she's in danger."

He jerked around. *"Sally—"* He stopped and then said with a kind of steely quiet, "You'd better tell me everything."

So I did. I told him what I knew and what I only surmised. It was growing darker, the sun had plunged far down behind the mountains, but it seemed to me his face looked harder in that half-light. Yet he watched the Gary house, not me, all the time. "There's only one reason why she won't explain the money or anything, Jim. Johnny got away from that plane and he took the money. They could never find traces of it. And now he's trailed Sally here and told her something—any sort of story to account for it. She's trying to get money for him. I don't know why, but he's given her some reason for it. Parly knew about Johnny. If Johnny murdered Parly to keep him quiet, if then he—he had to murder Jenson—" Was it Johnny

Jenson saw at the hospital? It must have been Johnny! And Jenson hadn't known it until while talking to Father Andrew something clicked in his mind, something added to something else. And it was too late now to know what it was. But what mask, what identity Johnny had assumed?

I said, "Buffalo is right! He'll not hurt Sally till she gets him the money. But after that—she's the only one who knows who he is or where he is and—once she questions his good faith, once she thinks: Did *Johnny* kill Parsons, and Jenson—" I was all but quoting Buffalo.

Jim said, "What do you think I'm doing?"

"What—"

"The trouble is I've got to watch her without letting her know it."

There was a movement in the porch of the Gary house. Jim rose in one swift motion as if he'd been expecting just that. And Sally came out of the Gary house, closed the door very quietly behind her, and started off, somehow very swiftly so it gave an effect of surreptitiousness, toward the Waves' barracks.

"That's Sally!"

"She's been there for the last quarter of an hour. I phoned for her and she'd just left the barracks and I started out to meet her just in time to see her go to the Gary house—"

"But they are not there! They're at the Captain's—"

"Come on!" He hoisted me to my feet. We hurried after Sally. We passed the Gary house. There wasn't a sound inside. I knew that Ruth and Commander Gary were at the Somerses', yet I felt as we passed those blank, screened windows that somebody inside was watching us. Absurd, I told myself, hurrying to keep up with Jim's strides. But what was Sally doing in the Gary house?

Commander Gary was, of course, an Ordnance officer, head of the ammunition-manufacturing department. But he wouldn't have brought any records or notes that could be confidential to his house. Such records would have been kept at his office.

Sally worked in his office.

She was hurrying on ahead, a slender, swift figure in her neat seersucker uniform. We reached the road and Jim called, "Sally—"

She whirled around. She was perhaps thirty feet ahead of us and I could see her first look of shock and that she turned swiftly, as if trying to escape us. Jim ran toward her. "Sally—wait—"

She faced him. Her little chin went up and her whole slender body seemed to stiffen. Jim put out his hand and she shrank back from it and looked at him with eyes so wide and blank that she was like a sleepwalker, aroused in a strange and terrifying forest. I came up with them and Jim said very gently, "Sally—oh, darling, don't look like that. I won't hurt you."

Her lips looked dry and stiff. She only looked at him. He waited a moment and then took her hand. This time she didn't resist and he drew her arm through his. "Look here, darling. I know Johnny's alive. He's somewhere here on the base—"

Still she wouldn't speak.

Jim said very quietly, "Let me help you, Sally. It might be helping Johnny, too. Give me a chance."

"No! No—you can't!" She pulled her arm away from him and gave a desperate glance toward the Waves' barracks as if they were her only refuge.

"Sally, you've got to understand. You've got to realize that—God knows I don't want to accuse Johnny. But— Sally, it's murder—"

She had already questioned herself, and answered all those questions in her own way. *"Johnny wouldn't do that! Believe me! Not Johnny—"*

"All right," Jim said quietly, "all right. But listen to me, Sally. Whatever you are trying to do, you can't. I can't let you. You want money for Johnny. Why? Sally, let me give it to him. Let me—"

"I can't—I won't—" Her blue eyes flashed a look of sheer terror at Jim and she whirled around again as if to run from us.

Jim caught her by the arm. "You've got to listen. Can't you get it through your head that this is the Navy? This is murder! This is—for God's sake, Sally, the investigating officers will be here tomorrow. They'll question you. They'll question Buffalo Bill and—"

"Buffalo—" Sally said in a kind of whisper.

"He's told Sarah what he knows. He told her she could tell me. Parly knew that Johnny was alive somewhere. You promised Parly to get money—I suppose for Johnny. You're waiting for that money now. You're going to turn it over to Johnny. Where is he, Sally? Why are you doing it this way? Why won't you tell me?"

She said in a queer, chill voice, "Have you told the Captain about—about what Buffalo told you?"

"No," Jim said.

"Are you going to?"

"I—" The stern look left Jim's face. "I don't know."

I said suddenly, "What was it you wanted in Parly's room? A letter? From Johnny?"

And Jim said slowly, "Sally, I saw you go into the Gary house. I had phoned to you and—I understand, of course, that you must have had some errand for Gary, some memo he wanted or—or something," Jim said.

It was a question, but it also offered a very likely and reasonable answer. Except Sally didn't answer. She caught his arm with both hands. She cried, with a beseeching wildness which was like desperation, "Please, Jim. Give me a little time. Just a little more time and then it will be—" she swallowed convulsively and said as if she were trying to convince herself, "all right. Everything will be, but—only a little time, Jim. If you love me, you said you loved me, you said—please, Jim. I've got to do what's—what's right. It *is* right. It's the only way. Jim—"

He was going to take her into his arms then and there. I didn't see how he could stop himself.

But somehow he did. "I do love you," he said. "I'll always love you. That's why I've got to make you understand. Do you think I want to have you watched, followed, guarded so we'll find out when you give that money to Johnny? Where he's hiding? What name he's using?"

Sally didn't move, yet it seemed to me the slightest flicker of something— Was it relief? Was it something else?—crossed her face. Jim went on as if forcing out the words. "You don't realize. You *can't* defy authority. You *can't* ignore orders.

They are orders, Sally. You're an ensign. You've sworn to certain things—"

She cried, "I promise you that it's all right. I—it's nothing against anything I believe or I've sworn to or—there's nothing like that, Jim. It's—but I've got to do it this way. Only a little more time— Tomorrow—" She seemed to snatch wildly at something, hope, determination, I didn't know what. "Yes! Tomorrow. I promise you."

Jim said slowly, "I want you to go with Sarah to the Somers house. I want you to stay there. I'll fix it up with them and—"

"No!" Sally cried. "I can't. I've got to— I can't!" And with that she whirled around and ran toward the lighted barracks off ahead of us.

We didn't follow her. We watched her slim figure in gray going farther and farther from us, blending at last with the growing twilight until it disappeared within the lighted doorway of the Waves' barracks. Then Jim turned and started back along the road and I went with him, and he said, "I'd like to twist that guy's neck and I will if I get the chance."

There was at least one small but hopeful fact. "She doesn't think Johnny murdered Parly. She obviously is waiting for the money and he'll not do anything until he gets it from her and—she said tomorrow. You can't watch out for her yourself every minute. *Are* you going to have them—follow her? Trail her?" Such a course was sensible. In fact, it was the only thing to do. She'd lead them straight to Johnny. She'd try not to; she'd try to get to Johnny, somehow, so they wouldn't know it. But she wouldn't succeed. No, she'd lead them to Johnny; so the only sensible thing to do was watch her, follow her, keep her under the closest surveillance. And I hated it.

Jim said in a queer, tired voice, "I don't know. I don't know what to do. If she wants time— But that's what she wants time for. To get the money and give it to him."

We reached the driveway leading to the Somers house. Voices and lights came out toward us. I said at last, "What are you going to do?"

Jim put up his black head. "I'm going to find Wilson."

EIGHTEEN

JOHNNY WILSON. A boy Sally had known all her life, a boy who must have been like other boys. Young and happy and rather like Sally sometime, for otherwise surely she wouldn't have married him. And yet who somewhere along the road to maturity had taken a wrong turning.

People were leaving the Somers house. Marie Sinclair and the Colonel and Ruth Gary came along the path between the high shadowy hedges. Marie's voice floated toward us. ". . .Oh, nonsense! Come home with us and have a hot dinner . . ."

Commander Gary emerged from the gloom behind them. All of them stopped as they met us and I thought for a second that Jim was going to speak to Gary. Tell him that Sally Wilson had been in his house, for a good fifteen minutes during their absence?

He didn't. Marie said, "Oh, Sarah. I missed you."

Ruth put her hand on Jim's arm. "Darling, you weren't at the party. It really turned out to be a party! Seems odd just now but—"

Commander Gary said, "Come on, Ruth." And another group came along the path and we went on up to the lighted porch.

The queer, high-pitched and false gaiety had broken down. Perhaps everyone knew it. At last only Father Andrew and Jim and I were left with Kitty and Harry on the broad porch. Its grass rugs were a little askew. The gay cushions on the chairs needed to be plumped up. There were glasses everywhere. Kitty, her face enigmatic, went around emptying ash trays. Harry said, "Stay to dinner, Padre. You, too, Jim."

Father Andrew passed his hand over his bald spot. "I want to talk to you, Harry. I'd like Jim to hear it. The fact is I had a talk with Jenson—"

We sat there on the porch while he told them. Kitty sank

down to a footstool, an ash tray in her hands and her pretty face very still and very white. I remember Harry, leaning forward with his hands linked together between his knees. And Jim who listened, his face in the shadow, who didn't ask any questions, who waited as we all waited while Father Andrew's gentle but inflexible voice went on. Parly had boasted of now being able to get even with Jim; and then Jenson had said, "*He* was there—"

Harry said, "Jenson didn't say Jim."

"No. But he'd been talking about you, Jim. I'm sorry."

"It's all right, Padre. I wasn't there. Not until after they reported Parly's murder."

Father Andrew's gentle gaze was unexpectedly penetrating. Then he accepted Jim's denial. "I'm glad of that."

Harry said, "Thank you, Padre. Did Jenson say anything else?"

"No. I wish I had warned him. I—but I didn't think of—" He rose. "I thought I ought to tell you. I wanted Jim to hear it, too. It seemed fair." He put out his hand and Harry rose and took it. The little clergyman looked up at him and the light fell strongly on his earnest, troubled face. "It's a bad business, Harry. Blood—guilt—"

He went away then and, as he did so, Suli's little white figure came to the door. He said that dinner was served, and Kitty told him to put on a place for Commander Warring.

Jim went into the dining-room as he had always done, so frequent and usual a guest that it was as if he were at home. Somehow, somewhere, the little constraint between him and Harry had either dwindled away, or in the shock and horror of repeated murder they had drawn instinctively together again, to fight a common but an invisible and a terrible enemy.

I believe we talked some, not much. I do remember that there was still no fact that anybody had been able to dig up to explain Jim's blouse with its stained cuff, left at the dry-cleaner's. Harry said at last, "Anybody could have taken it out of your room! Nobody's around the B.O.Q. during the day."

Kitty dropped her fork with a silvery clatter. "Sally! She could have taken it—" She met Jim's eyes and bit her lip.

I said hurriedly, "It wasn't Sally I saw in that coat, I mean blouse!"

Kitty's eyes dropped, but she was still defiant. "Suppose she gave it to Johnny. You're so sure he's here—"

Jim had a white line around his mouth. "If Johnny's alive, if she's trying to shield him because he got away with that money, she still wouldn't connive at murder. She—" He shot a glance at me, hesitated for a second, and then turned to Harry. "I think he's alive, all right. And he's around here somewhere. And I—" He was trying to keep my faith with Buffalo; he was trying to keep his own faith with the girl he loved more than anything in his life—except his duty as an officer. It wasn't easy.

He faced Harry squarely. "Sir, there's something that has come to my knowledge. I'd like your permission to act on it myself."

Harry met Jim's eyes in a long, searching look.

Kitty caught her breath, stared at Jim and at Harry, and cried, "Harry, he's in love with her! *Don't* let him do anything that—"

Harry's hand made a quiet motion. Kitty stopped. Harry said, "All right, Jim. If you see it that way."

"Thanks, Harry. I— Thanks."

"I'll have to know sooner or later. The men from the District Office get here tomorrow."

Tomorrow, Sally had said.

Jim said, "Yes, sir." And thought, I was sure, as I did, *Tomorrow! Not much time.*

Kitty started to speak; her hard eyes were bright and sharp with demand. Then something in Harry's face seemed to check her.

But after a while, when Suli had padded around the table filling water goblets and passing rolls, and gone back to the kitchen, she said, staring at the candle flames, that of course there was the marine band. Some one of them, during practice, could easily have slipped into the B.O.Q., taken the blouse, hidden it.

"Where?" Jim said and Kitty said after a moment, "There are those cases they carry instruments in. A—A case for a

French horn, or a trombone—" Her voice died away indecisively.

It didn't seem likely. Yet it could have happened.

All of us heard the telephone ring, and Harry started to his feet. Suli came to the dining-room door. "Captain, please. Sentry at gate—"

Harry went to the telephone. In a moment he came back. "It's Dave Winters. The sentry stopped him. He wants to see me." He looked at Jim. "Let's hear what he's got to say."

They went out. Suli's alert, dark eyes went from Kitty to me and back again. He put down the salad and then, rather reluctantly, it seemed to me, pattered away. Both of us heard a car stop outside. We heard voices, but not distinctly. With a swish of her thin white dress, Kitty rose and went into the hall. I couldn't sit still. I followed her. So I heard, as she did, Dave Winters's voice, cold and very clear from the porch. "—so if you think Jenson was killed by the same man that murdered Parly, my sister has an alibi, and so do I. I had a fight with Parly. I suppose you knew about that."

"No," Harry said quietly. "I didn't. I knew that you—"

"I didn't want him hanging around my sister. He got sore once; so did I, and I knocked him down. I thought you'd heard about it."

"When was that?"

"A couple of weeks ago. He brought Bonny home one night and—" He shrugged. "That's all there was to it. But they said that you were trying to reach me. I thought that was why. Sure I had a fight with him. But I didn't kill him. It was a guy in the Navy that did that."

NINETEEN

I WOULDN'T HAVE SAID that I had moved or that Kitty had moved, yet somehow Kitty was pushing open the door and I was following her out onto the porch.

Someone had turned on the porch lamps, two of them on tables, which spread an amber glow against the deep blackness of the night beyond the screens. Dave Winters, easy and composed, yet hard and alert, too, was leaning against a pillar of the porch. He was wearing a white shirt and Levi's again; his sun-bleached hair, his tanned face loomed up sharply against the blackness behind him.

Harry said, "What do you mean?"

Dave didn't look at me or at Kitty, yet I knew that he had seen us both. "I'll tell you. I didn't want my sister dragged into this. I talked to her. I knew she'd tell me the truth, everything she knew about Parly. There wasn't anything that had anything to do with his murder. She went to the hospital Saturday afternoon, sure. He told her then that he was going to come into some money—"

Harry nodded and Dave saw that, too. "So you know about that?"

"Yes. She told Miss Keate."

Dave didn't look at me, but it seemed to me his eyes took on that extremely unpleasant rattlesnake expression. He said, "I decided I'd take Bonny somewhere—anywhere to get out of all this. We started out to go to San Francisco yesterday. We drove. You can't pin us down to an alibi for the time while we were driving. But we were at a filling station in Skagway Flat at exactly nine minutes after ten last night. There was a clock at the filling station. You may not know that that's two hundred and sixty-odd miles from the base. If this Jenson was killed between nine and ten o'clock last night, no power on earth—especially my old coupé—could have got us two hundred and sixty miles in an hour's time."

Nobody spoke for a moment. Then Jim said, "Why did you come back?"

Dave's rattlesnake gaze went to Jim. "I heard it on the radio. At Humboldt City this morning at the motel where we stopped. You can check that. You can check with the filling-station fellow if you want to. We had to have an oil refill; I think he'd remember."

Jim said again, "Why did you come back?"

They were not at all alike, Jim and Dave Winters. Dave was light, so his bleached eyebrows and hair stood out like trimming upon his tanned face with its blunt short nose and wide mouth, like Bonny's. Jim was tanned, too, but dark; taller and a little broader than Dave, and the few years' additional age and responsibility had given him something of Harry's ingrained habit of command. Yet just then there was a quality of something hard and young which communicated itself between them. Hard and alert and combative as if a spark or a word might set off a fight. Dave eyed Jim and replied almost lazily, "It stands to reason that the same guy that killed Parly killed Jenson. Murder's kind of an unusual thing. This—" he moved his head toward me but kept his eyes on Jim—"this nurse was around inquiring about Bonny. So I thought I'd come back and just point out the fact that neither Bonny nor I had anything to do with Jenson's murder. But while I'm here—" he turned to Harry and drawled—"while I'm here I'll tell you this. Parly hated—" again the sun-bleached hair and tanned face jerked, this time toward Jim— "he hated Warring's guts and he was going to get even with him. He told Bonny that."

It was, of course, only what Jenson had told the padre. All of us, I think, missed the one point of significance. Harry said equably, "Yes, I think he did hate Commander Warring. He had been obliged to take disciplinary measures with Parly."

Dave's chilly blue eyes didn't move, yet I thought a flicker of approval touched them. He shifted from one lean hip to the other, got out a battered package of cigarettes, took one out, put it back, and said, "Bonny didn't know how Parly was going to get the money. I asked her. But he talked to Bonny about money he was going to get somewhere. Talked as if he was about to get his hands on it. And he said that after he'd

got the money, he'd fix Warring."

Harry didn't look at Jim. "Where was he going to get the money?"

From Sally, of course; from Sally. And Harry knew it. So he knew, now, from Dave, the essential facts of Buffalo's story. I felt better about that; I think Jim did, too, only more so.

Dave eyed Harry. "Bonny thinks it was from his family. Seems he had talked a lot about his family and all that. But I think he'd fixed some kind of deal."

Jim said sharply, *"Deal!"*

"Because," Dave said, "he told Bonny—he was a boastful son of a gun—he told Bonny that if he played his cards right he'd keep all the money. Just like that. His words. *All* the money."

Jim took a quick step forward. He and Dave faced each other like two duelists, prepared and ready to fight and yet, oddly, exchanging a kind of grudging respect. "Who was going to share that money?"

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Dave said laconically. "Looked to me like he was cooking up some kind of deal with somebody. And he was going to double-cross the other guy."

There was a long pause. The other guy. Johnny Wilson.

Dave said, "But the other guy got there first."

Jim said, "Look here, Winters, does your sister know who this other man was?"

Dave shook his head once.

"Well, then—can you make a guess? You must have seen Parly around—people he was with, all that."

"Oh, sure I saw him around my place. Saw too much of him. But I don't know who was in the deal with him. Might have been anybody. But the fellows he went around with were in uniform. Whoever killed Parly had to get into this place somehow. So that's why I say somebody in the Navy killed him. No use questioning me. Or Bonny. That's all I came to say." He turned around and suddenly Western manners got the better of him. He gave me and Kitty a very polite bow. "Good night, ma'am," he said to Kitty. "Good night, ma'am," he said to me, and went down the steps.

His lean shoulders in their white shirt, his quick footsteps

on the path, both dwindled away rapidly. We heard him jump into his car, down beyond the hedge; we heard it start with a wheeze and rattle off.

Kitty said slowly, "So Parly and—and whoever murdered him, both wanted money from Sally. The other guy got there first. And she still wants the money. So she's going to give it to Johnny. He's the—the other guy." She sat down on the porch swing and shook her head when Suli came to the door. "We'll skip dessert, Suli. Bring coffee out here."

"Whoever killed Parly," Jim said, "had to have a pass."

"Maybe she—she got one for him. Used somebody's." Kitty's glance flashed at Jim. "Yes! Gave him your blouse and somebody's pass. The sentries—" She ran onto the obvious snag, blinked at Harry, and said, "Well—maybe they didn't look closely. Something—"

Jim said slowly, "Either he lives in the Row or he's got a pass. There's never been any question of that. If whoever murdered Parly had to get out of the Row, he had to get past the gate at a time when the sentry would remember him. He could have come into the Row through the gate at almost any time during the evening, or even during the afternoon. But if he left that late at night one of the sentries would remember him. So he gets into the administration building and knocks out Smith—"

Obviously they had been over it many times. Harry said, "Don't forget he'd have to know Smith was there. Smith or somebody. He'd have to know our setup. He'd have to be familiar with the whole organization, orders—"

Kitty flashed, "But he does, Harry! He's somebody who can come and go whenever he likes. He knows the hospital; he knows the base; he knows the Row—" She glanced out toward the blackness beyond the area of lamplight and gave a kind of shiver. "For all we know he's out there now, watching us."

"Kitty—" Harry went to sit beside her on the porch swing. Kitty said, "He was out there last night! Nobody knew it! But he was there!"

Jim said slowly, "Kitty, I don't want to make you talk about it if you don't want to. It was a horrible shock to you last night—"

"No, it's all right. We've got to talk about it." But there was again a kind of drawn, gray line around her mouth.

Jim said, "I know you've told Harry everything there was to tell about it. But—but did you see anybody at all? Anybody—"

"No." Kitty's voice was unsteady. She took Harry's hand hard and looked at Jim. "Nothing. Just the lights along the road and in the hospital and in some of the houses, and in the B.O.Q. Before I turned into the hospital, I could see the gate and there were two sentries there, just standing there. I could see them—not their faces, I was too far away, but there are the lights over the gate and I saw two men in uniform. Then I turned to walk along the road that goes into the hospital and—and then I waited and—and then," Kitty said, "I found him."

There was a long pause. All of us, I think, could see too plainly the half-obscured, half-lighted thing that Kitty had seen, there in the heavy shadows of the banked shrubbery. Her coral sweater touching it as Kitty in terror looked, and knelt there on the grass, and looked. And then in blind panic hurried home to burn the sweater, to yield to the frantic impulse of terror.

Harry said gently, "It's all right, Kitty. It's all right—"

It was very far from all right, but we knew what Harry meant.

Jim lighted a cigarette and walked up and down the porch, and I said, "Jenson knew something. That's clear enough. And I can't help thinking that—if Jenson knew something, then I know it, too. And I don't know what it is."

Jim's feet made quick, hard thuds along the grass rugs. Kitty put her curly head close to Harry's shoulder. Nobody seemed to be listening to me. I said, "When I got on duty that night, everything was all right. Sally was there, of course, but I didn't know it. The lights went out and—"

Jim stopped with a jerk beside me. "See here, could anybody have got into the west wing while the lights were out? Sally left then, and neither you nor Jenson saw her. If somebody came in at the same time and hid somewhere—"

It could—it just could have happened like that. I said, thinking back, "It was only for a few minutes. And he couldn't have

known that the lights would go out just then. That was an accident. The electrician was working on the electric grill, there in the diet kitchen—" I stopped. Jim said, "The electrician! Did you see him leave?"

Harry was rising, going to the door. I think I said no, and then I said, "He was here last night, too. I saw him. He was fixing the radio in the B.O.Q. He—"

Jim said, "You're right. We'd burned out some tubes—"

The door into the house slammed as Jim ran after Harry.

Kitty's eyes were bright black pools in her white face. "It's Johnny! Johnny Wilson—"

I tried to remember that shadowy figure, coming out of the lighted doorway at the B.O.Q., shouting back something about radio tubes as he got into his car. A car which had rattled away toward the gate, much as Dave Winters's car had rattled and wheezed.

We could hear Harry's voice, crisp and rapid at the telephone in the study. I suppose Kitty breathed and so did I, but I only remember her eyes on the door, waiting for Harry and Jim, and the way we both listened and the blackness of the night beyond the screens.

Harry and Jim came back. "Fellow by the name of Jack Lewis. Civilian employee," Harry said. "Does the repair work on the Row and in the barracks across the road. He'll be here."

"I didn't see him leave the hospital! I'm sure I didn't. The grill was still wrong when I went to make some coffee. And—" Another little scrap of fact which still *was* fact and might be important, floated back to me from the few moments in Buffalo Bill's room before we found Parly murdered. I cried, "He—the electrician—this Jack Lewis was in Parly's room that afternoon! He was fixing the electric fan. Buffalo said that—" I groped back for Buffalo Bill's exact words. "He said Parly gave him hell."

Nobody said anything, and all at once I felt deflated, for Parly would have given him hell, Lewis, or me, or anybody, if he'd felt like it. It didn't mean that—well, to put it in words, it didn't mean that Jack Lewis was Johnny Wilson.

Kitty, perhaps all three of them, had followed my thought. Kitty said, "Sally can identify him. If he's Johnny Wilson—"

But Sally wouldn't. It flashed like a current between Jim and me. Jim said, "The photograph of Wilson has arrived. It should be here tomorrow."

"And tomorrow," Kitty said, "the men from the District Office will be here. They're on their way now."

I thought of them—how many? What would they look like? Perhaps at that moment they were preparing to leave; trained, skilled men—yawning a little, preparing to sleep while they crossed mountains and desert. Talking among themselves, perhaps. Putting information together; planning. No, they wouldn't make plans; it wasn't necessary. Each knew exactly what his duties were; the grooves made by long training were already exact and inexorable.

There were too many—and too few suspects. Too many if they included the entire base personnel; far too many. Too few if it remained a question only of motive.

And that, of course, was what it was. The only possible method by which to eliminate anybody—or to convict him. Motive. As old as murder. Its stubborn, terrible seed. Motive and murder, an indissoluble secret twinship.

I said, "What will they do first, Harry?"

"We'll turn over things to them. We don't have many suspects. Dave Winters and his sister are out of it, if his alibi checks, and somehow I think it will. Besides, there's no evidence against Dave except his fight with Parsons—"

"Buffalo Bill!" Kitty cried. "Buffalo Bill! Or Smith! He *could* have knocked himself out; he ran around with Parly; he'd borrowed money from him. He says somebody hit him but—"

Harry said, "If Johnny Wilson's alive and on the base, they'll find him."

Kitty leaned forward. "They'll question Sally first! Sally—" Suddenly she put both hands on Harry's arm. "Harry, what do they do when they arrest somebody? I mean, if Sally still won't talk. If she—"

Jim said in a queer, harsh voice, "If they arrest anybody, Kitty, it's likely to be me. Don't forget the blood on my blouse. And Parly was going to get even with me!"

Perhaps the plane was lifting then, the lights of the airport

sinking away below it. I could almost hear the thud of the engines, as if they were the distant pulse of an approaching fate. I shifted uncomfortably and the wicker chair creaked.

Harry said mildly, "Don't forget, Jim, I didn't feel exactly friendly toward Parly myself."

Kitty took a sharp breath. And after that none of us said anything and a sense of time began to press upon me, as if there wasn't enough time. As if something urgently required to be done then, at that moment.

We heard the telephone in the study and Jim said, "That's Lewis," and went to answer it. He came back and none of us had moved. "He's at the gate. Told the sentry you sent for him."

So we waited and listened again and heard a car rattling along the road. It stopped. Harry rose, and Jim went to the top of the steps and called into the darkness, "Lewis? Captain Somers is here—"

Footsteps came long the driveway. *Johnny,* I thought. *Johnny Wilson.*

TWENTY

A CIVILIAN EMPLOYEE, lying about his name, forging what papers he had to have, following Sally to the base. Johnny, who had stolen money from the wrecked plane. Johnny, who had been for Sally the boy next door, the boy she'd known all her life and married. Johnny Wilson, who had had a good record until he'd taken the wrong turning. Johnny Wilson, who had made a deal with Parly so both of them would extract money from Sally. Only Parly had been double-crossed.

All that went through my mind as those footsteps drew nearer and, strangely, I wouldn't look. Even when the footsteps came up on the porch and Jim said, "Lewis? I'm Commander Warring. This is the Captain—"

"Want to see me?" said a flat, colorless voice.

I looked up.

It wasn't Johnny Wilson.

I was as sure of that as I have ever been sure of anything in my life. Later, if I questioned my own certainty, I could have said that perhaps he was older than I thought Johnny Wilson could have been. But mainly I only knew that this was not the boy next door who had grown up with Sally; this was not the man Sally could have married, or mourned, or fought authority, fought all of us, fought even Jim with all her loyal, stubborn strength, to shield.

There are things like that that you know without being able to say in so many words how you know it. But I think the others shared my instantaneous conviction, for there was an odd kind of silence that savored of both anticlimax and, which was rather dreadful but comprehensible, of disappointment.

Lewis's face was familiar to me although in a rather vague way; I knew that I had seen him from time to time going on his work about the Row. He was lanky, yet somehow flabby as if such muscles as he had hadn't known much in the way of exercise. He had reddish hair and the hazy reddish-brown

eyes that sometimes go with that coloring; he had a long, lantern face with deep creases down his cheeks and almost no eyelashes and eyebrows, so his face looked both strangely bare and open, and at the same time perfectly self-possessed. He was dressed in a khaki shirt, open at the throat, and khaki trousers, a universally adopted garb for the civilian employees, I suppose because it approximated a uniform and gave a kind of status to their military employment, and was also practical. He was perfectly at ease.

Indeed his ease and his self-possession, I think, rather disconcerted both Harry and Jim; they had been braced for something difficult and even dramatic and suddenly perceived that there was to be nothing of the kind.

Harry said, "Well, yes, I do want to talk to you. You were at the hospital the night Lieutenant Parly was murdered?"

"Sure. Repaired an electric grill."

"How long were you there?"

If the question surprised Lewis, there was no evidence of it. "I don't know. Maybe an hour. Had to give it up. It needed some new parts; came back the next day and fixed it."

There was a short pause. Kitty's pretty face was perfectly blank and flat with disappointment. Harry's fingers began to beat on the arm of his chair. Jim said, "When did you arrive and when did you leave?"

Everybody waited for the reply.

Lewis's composed gaze went to Jim. "I must have got there a little before ten; somebody had phoned to say the grill wasn't working. So it was probably a little before eleven when I went away." He paused and then added as if as an afterthought, "Had a little bad luck on the job. Blew a fuse. Took me a little while to get it fixed up, maybe a couple of minutes. The nurse and the corpsman—the one that was stabbed last night—got some flashlights. They didn't like it. But I got that fixed up, all right. Worked over the grill awhile and had to give it up for the night."

"Did you talk to Jenson?"

"Sure. Told him I couldn't repair the grill till I got a new part for it. He said it didn't matter, as nobody used it but the nurse—" His eyes drifted to me. "She liked to make coffee on

it. Then I went away."

"What door?"

If he had had eyebrows, I felt they would have lifted. "Nearest one. West door at the end of the corridor."

I said, "I didn't see you."

He looked at me incuriously. "Didn't you?"

"You were in Parly's room that afternoon, weren't you?" I asked.

"Sure." His reply was still completely devoid of interest. "Fixed his electric fan." He paused and then volunteered a scrap of comment. "He didn't like the way I did it. Thought he knew more about it than I did. I told him I knew my job and he could keep his mouth shut." His eyes went to Jim and the bare eyelids lowered a little. "No young one-and-a-half striper can pull any rank with me. I'm not in the Navy."

Harry said, "Let me see your union card."

"Sure." He dove into a pocket, pulled out a billfold, opened it, and gave it to Harry. Harry glanced at it and handed it back. "All in order. You've been on the base for about three months?"

"Nine weeks," Lewis said, "and three days."

Jim said, "Did you see anybody in the wing that night besides Miss Keate and Jenson? Any of the sick patients, I mean or—anyone else?"

"Saw the other nurse—the day nurse—when I came to the hospital. I don't know whether she saw me or not."

"What about last night? You must have come into the Row at about the time Jenson came to the hospital. You were at the B.O.Q."

"Sure. Fixing their radio. I didn't want to, either. It could have waited till morning. I don't mind coming out at night when it's like something at the hospital. But a radio—I work all day and I don't like to do any jobs at night, too."

"Why did you do it, then?" Jim asked shortly.

Again the invisible eyebrows seemed to lift. "Because one of the guys over there said he'd give me ten dollars. And he did. The radio only needed new tubes," Lewis interjected dispassionately. "They run the thing night and day." He looked at nothing and said to nobody, "You'd think they'd have some-

thing else to do."

Jim let that pass. "Did you see Jenson when you passed the gate or—anywhere?"

"No. I stopped for the sentries. Saw the men in the B.O.Q." He glanced covertly at me. "Saw her. She was walking along the road. Seemed to want to get out of the way of my car lights."

Harry said quickly, "Yes, I know about that. What time was it when you stopped at the gate and what time did you leave?"

He thought for a moment. "I don't know. I left around ten, a little after."

"Would you say then you passed the gate about—when? Nine-thirty? Quarter to ten?"

"Maybe. I checked the radio; it takes a beating over there. Didn't take long, though. Guys at the B.O.Q. can tell you."

"That was about the time Jenson was murdered."

"So I hear."

There was a pause. Then Jim said, "All right. You've seen the order requesting information. Is there anything at all that you saw or remember that the Captain ought to know?"

"About Jenson? Or Parly?"

"If you know anything about Parly," Jim snapped, "you'd better speak up."

Lewis eyed Jim for a moment. "If I'd known who murdered Parly, I'd have reported it. I follow orders. If I had seen Jenson or any sort of funny business, I'd have reported that. But—I'll tell you one thing. When I left the hospital the night Parly was murdered, somebody with three stripes on his shoulder was in the room with him. Maybe," Lewis said, his gaze upon Jim's left shoulder board, "the doctor."

Harry rose as if his wiry muscles had pulled him upward without his own will. Jim made a quick movement forward. Lewis seemed to back against the door. But he said, with something that wasn't quite a grin, "Wasn't the doctor supposed to be there?"

The doctor hadn't been there; he'd said he wasn't there; I hadn't seen him and neither had Jenson.

Jim said, "You'd better tell us how you happened to see that."

"Sure. I'll tell you." It was very simple and very definite.

He'd gone out the west door ("The nurse," he said with a glance at me, "was in that little room where they keep medicines. I don't know where Jenson was,") and walked across the lawn to his car, which was parked in the road leading into the hospital from the gate. The windows were low; Parly's room had been lighted. A man had been standing in Parly's room, apparently talking to Parly. "I couldn't see his face. He was about—" his eyes measured Jim—"about your height. Dark hair." He paused and added, "Only thing funny was his feet."

"Feet!" Harry cried.

"Sure. I could see the whole room. Coat was a uniform with three stripes. Hair was black. Man about—six feet maybe. Wearing sort of funny shoes. Not—" His gaze shifted to Harry's neatly polished black Oxfords and to Jim's. "You fellows wear black shoes. I guess it's some more of your regulations. He had on sort of—like tennis shoes." Again he didn't quite grin. "Maybe he was resting his feet."

There was a long silence. Somewhere off in the night two men were walking evenly, as if they were marching along the road. Lewis heard it, we all heard it, and after a moment as the marching feet came nearer and then turned into another road, Lewis said, "You've sure got patrols out tonight. Not expecting some more trouble, are you, Captain?"

Harry said, "What time was that?"

"I told you. Probably a little before eleven. I went on to my car and went home. There was a dance going on in your little—I should say the officers' club. I met some cars, people coming back to the Row." He waited a moment and said, "Anything else?"

Jim said, "Where were you before you came to the base?"

"Oh, here and there. It's on my application. I was in San Francisco when I heard there were some jobs going here."

There was another pause. Harry glanced at Jim, and said finally, "All right, Lewis, thanks for coming to see me. That's all."

"Okay. Sorry I can't help you."

His lanky figure vanished, once it got beyond the area of light from the porch, as suddenly as if he had exerted some

magic trick of dissolution.

I was both let down and irritated. "There's a man that needs a dressing down!"

"Oh, well," Harry said equably, "he's independent and knows it. Likes his job and the pay. Does his job all right or he wouldn't be here."

"Most of them," Jim said wryly, "are a little more co-operative."

"But he says he saw somebody in Parly's room before eleven. Jenson went to Parly's room at about eleven. There wasn't anybody there then. He talked to Parly—"

Kitty interrupted me. "There's that clothes closet! Somebody could have hidden there! The man that took Jim's blouse—"

There was an obvious flaw in that. "If it was anybody Parly was afraid of he'd have told Jenson. He'd have—"

"Maybe," Jim said, "he *wasn't* afraid of him. If he was in a deal with the man that murdered him and didn't have any reason to think he was going to be double-crossed—no, he wouldn't have told Jenson."

That was right, too. And I thought of the shoes—tennis shoes with rubber soles which would have made no sound along that corridor. No sound at all along the road the night before.

The marching, steady footsteps of the patrol came back again, growing gradually louder, passed the house, turned around with a brisk martial rhythm, and marched off again.

Jim said suddenly to Harry, "Harry, they did stop that telegram of Sally's, didn't they? It was never sent."

Harry looked surprised. "Why, yes. It had gone before I got a copy of it. The boy at the Western Union office sent it off right away. It was after he'd sent it that he got to thinking it was an odd sort of telegram and turned it over to the O.D. The Security Officers have drummed it into them, you know; anything that seems fishy ought to be reported and— What's wrong, Jim?"

Jim couldn't turn white; he was too deeply tanned, but his face was an ashy gray. "When was that? Day before yesterday—"

"Tuesday. Yes—"

Jim didn't say anything. He crossed the porch and took the

steps at one motion and vanished as Lewis had done into the blackness. We heard him running along the driveway, his feet pounding hard. I cried, "Harry, I thought— You said— But I thought they'd stopped it—*Harry!* There's been time—" It was incoherent; neither of them heard me. And I'd blundered; I knew it then, and how serious a blunder it was. I hadn't asked Harry whether or not the telegram had gone. I had assumed that it had been stopped. I had told Jim—yes, and Buffalo Bill—at least I had implied, that the telegram had never been sent and that consequently Sally hadn't yet received any money.

Kitty was at the steps. Harry called, *"Jim—"* His voice was blotted out by the black, heavy silence. Then a car door slammed. The car started up with a roar and shot away.

Kitty whirled around to Harry. "What's he going to do? If he knows anything about this he ought to tell you! Permission to act on it himself! How *could* you let him! It's only Sally Jim's thinking of—"

"Kitty—"

"I won't stop! Harry, you've *got* to make a stand! You've got to. He's in love with that girl! He doesn't know what he's doing. He—"

Harry caught her rebellious hands. "He knows what he's doing. Leave it to him. Besides," Harry said quietly, "Sally's in love with him. Remember that. He can get the truth out of her if anybody can."

"I think you're wrong," she said. "I think it's a mistake—"

But I knew where Jim was going and I knew why. If the telegram had gone Tuesday, then Sally could have received the money that day, by the afternoon mail. She could have already given it to Johnny.

If she had the money, if she'd handed it over to the murderer, then he had no more use for Sally.

She knew who he was and where he was. She was now a danger to him.

TWENTY-ONE

KITTY said sharply, *"Sarah!"*

I was at the door, yet I didn't know where I was going or what I intended to do.

Perhaps Harry, all along, had seen and understood more than I knew he had seen. Suddenly he was beside me, his thin face intent. He said quietly, "What do you want us to do?"

I didn't know. I sank down into a chair again. "Wait a minute—"

I had to find a way through wildly zigzagging paths of thought with not the faintest glimmer of light to show the right course to take. "Harry, can you find out whether or not Sally got that money today?"

"Why, yes, I think so." He went into the house.

Kitty said, "What is it, Sarah? What do you mean?"

The thing to do, first, was make sure that Sally was safely at home in the Waves' barracks and tell her to stay there. I followed Harry into the study and Kitty followed me.

Harry was holding the telephone at his ear. We could hear a repeated and unanswered buzz in the receiver. He looked at us. "I'm calling Commander Gary. Sally's mail would be delivered at his office and—" He spoke into the telephone: "Yes, keep on ringing."

I'd forgotten, if I ever knew, the fact that mail was delivered directly at the various offices. And then as the buzz repeated and repeated itself and was still unanswered, I remembered the scrap of conversation between Marie and Ruth Gary that had floated toward me as they were leaving the Somers house, and Jim and I met them in the path. "Harry, try the Sinclairs. I think they're there at dinner—"

"Give me Colonel Sinclair."

This time the buzz was answered; we could hear the Colonel's booming voice and we listened while Harry asked for Com-

mander Gary. When he put down the telephone we already knew the answer. "She got it this afternoon. She was in my office, so Gary signed for it himself. Says it was a sort of package; remembers it was from Virginia. Put it on Sally's desk. It must have been the money, Sarah." Harry got up.

"Where are you going?" Kitty demanded. *"Harry—"*

He looked at me. "Shall I leave it to Jim?"

He knew—or what he didn't know he guessed in a general but accurate way. And I didn't answer because a new and appalling conjecture really stifled me. If it had dimly crossed my mind that perhaps—just perhaps—Johnny had demanded certain information from Sally (information from Gary's records or papers that he might have in his house), then I had automatically rejected it. That was shocking enough. But the ugly juxtaposition of certain facts that struck me then was even more appalling. Sally had received the money. Gary had known it, and Sally had gone to the Gary house while Ruth and Commander Gary were out of it. Could she—*could* she have left the money there? Secretly, in some hiding place which Commander Gary would know? Which had been arranged between them?

Commander Gary—besides Harry himself—would know any secret undertakings, any important and classified information, any telling and significant results of testing or proving, that might be under way on the base.

And men have been bought.

Indeed it had always seemed to me that secret enemy activities played more upon venal and self-seeking motives on the part of their instruments than upon anything like personal conviction. Somewhere, somehow, money slides from one furtive hand to another. And Commander Gary had a charming and attractive wife—who liked smart clothes and might have wanted money, and he adored her.

The study seemed to waver around me. It was as if a black abyss had opened at my feet and it was one that I couldn't just then warn Kitty and Harry against, because I must be wrong—I had to be wrong.

Yet why had Sally gone so secretly to the Gary house? Why had she left it with that air of furtive haste? In spite of myself,

with a hideous swiftness, other facts began to array themselves together. A man who could come and go at will on the base, a man who lived in the Row itself. A man who knew the ins and outs of routine. A man who was trusted by other men.

A man who could have taken Jim's blouse and yet, if anyone saw him, he would be wearing the insignia of his own rank. Six feet or thereabouts, the electrician had said; dark hair. It all fitted Commander Gary.

Kitty and Harry both were looking at me queerly, rather as if I'd taken leave of my senses, and perhaps for a moment or two I had.

I must say something. I had to think of Sally. Jim had gone to her. I knew that. But suppose he didn't find her. Suppose it was too late. No, Commander Gary was still at the Sinclairs'; there was time.

But I had to be wrong about that; I must be wrong. I said as if the words had weights on them, too heavy for my pulling them into intelligible sounds, "Sally had the money. If she gave it to Johnny, then she's in danger."

"Danger—" Harry said. Kitty put her hand on the telephone and took it away.

"She's of no use to him now. He's got the money. But she knows who he is, where he is—" It was Buffalo Bill's argument and mine; it was Jim's argument and he'd seen it before I pointed it out to him. He'd been guarding Sally, trying to protect her from a distance since she wouldn't let him help her. She tried to evade him, she'd refused even to see him.

But if it was Commander Gary she'd got that money for, then, of course, it wasn't Johnny. Johnny wasn't alive; he wasn't anywhere. Parly—well, Parly had invented his story; he'd only tried to get money from Sally for himself. No! No, that wasn't logical. Nothing was clear except that I had to make sure that Sally was safe. Then, that moment.

Harry said, "Do you want to bring Sally here—" Kitty cried, "Bring her here?"

Harry gave Kitty an odd, half-stern, half-loving look, lifted the telephone, and called the Waves' barracks, which was, of course, the obvious and sensible thing to do.

"This is Captain Somers. Is Ensign Wilson there?—Oh, Oh,

I see. When was that? . . . Right . . . Thanks." He put down the telephone. "She's all right, Sarah. She's gone out with Jim. That was Lieutenant Hagshaw."

My knees quite oddly dissolved, fortunately beside the sofa.

"Well, then she's all right," Kitty said. "The question is whether Jim's all right or not." All at once she pounded her little fist on the desk. "Don't you see it all comes back to Sally! It was *Sally* Parly threatened! *Sally* who promised him money! *Sally* who won't tell the truth! *Sally*—"

The telephone rang. I jumped. Harry reached it first. I could hear a man's voice, rapid and excited. The muscles tightened around Harry's mouth. "All right. I'll be there—"

"What?" Kitty cried, leaning over the desk. Harry was opening a drawer. A revolver lay there.

"Harry—"

He closed the drawer, leaving the gun inside it. "It's loaded," he told Kitty. "Better lock the doors."

"Harry—"

"It was the O.D. Buffalo Bill's got out of the hospital. He's got away—"

I ran after him. "Buffalo Bill is as sane as I am! He didn't murder anybody!"

"They've alerted the MP's. They'll find him—"

Military police, marines with agile trigger fingers! I cried, "Harry, they mustn't shoot him! Tell them—"

He gave me a hurried—yet a queerly forbearing glance, as he did sometimes when I displayed my ignorance of service custom. "Good God, no marine's going to shoot another marine. They won't hurt a hair of his head. It's the Row—the base—hysteria—"

But he'd made sure Kitty knew where the revolver was, all the same; he'd told her it was loaded.

The porch door banged after him. By the time we reached the porch he had disappeared into the darkness. We could hear only his running feet along the driveway and then nothing.

Kitty whirled around to me. Her eyes were glassy in her white face. I don't think she saw me. "He could be anywhere. Anywhere at all—" Her eyes focused on me. "He's so strong.

Look what he did to you! Lock the doors! Lock the doors!"

She turned the little latch on the porch door. She snatched my wrist and pulled me after her into the house and bolted that door. She ran toward the kitchen and I could hear her back there closing windows, slamming doors. *We ought to warn Suli and the cook;* they had rooms in a kind of ell back of the kitchen, shut off from the house by a breezeway. I thought that. But then I thought, *No; that's wrong. It can't be Buffalo Bill. Besides, there's the money. Commander Gary. Johnny.* Somewhere, Johnny was in it.

My pulses were making a kind of beat in my ears like warning drums saying, *Hurry. Hurry. Hurry.*

Kitty was moving about in the back of the house. The telephone stood on the desk. I called the Waves' barracks, and Lieutenant Hagshaw answered again. "Miss Hagshaw, this is Sarah Keate."

"Yes, yes—"

"Did Commander Warring come for Sally? Did you see him?"

"Sally— Oh, Sally Wilson! Yes, yes, Miss Keate, I can't talk now. He's escaped—they say he's a homicidal maniac. I've got to see to—"

"Are you sure? Did you talk to Commander Warring?"

"Miss Keate, I can't talk now. All these girls. They say he's the murderer. I've got to check in—"

"Miss Hagshaw, please answer me. Did you see Commander Warring?"

"Yes, yes. I—that is, no, of course I didn't! I think he phoned. Yes, yes, he phoned but then Sally went right out to meet him. I saw her. I've got to go—"

"He phoned!"

"I tell you it's that marine sergeant. The one that attacked you. The one that—" She banged down the receiver.

But Jim hadn't telephoned. There hadn't been time. We'd heard him, running toward the B.O.Q.; we'd heard the car door slam; we'd heard him start away at top speed, grinding the gears. He hadn't stopped to telephone.

The telephone was making metallic and irritable sounds. I still had it in my hand. I said into it, not knowing I was going

to say it, really, "Send Captain Somers's car. Send it here, to the house. Hurry—" Somebody said something which sounded affirmative and I put down the telephone.

It was Johnny who had telephoned for Sally. Johnny, saying, meet me. I'm here. Tell them it's somebody else. But come to meet me.

My handbag was on the table and I snatched it up automatically. I must remember to see that the door was locked. Kitty would be safe. Buffalo wouldn't hurt anybody. But I made sure the night lock was turned so as to lock the door when I closed it after me. My hands were clumsy, fumbling at the little button. I tried the door once I was out on the porch and it wouldn't open. Then I waited on the porch. There was a kind of remote hum, like the mingled faraway voices of men, yet nothing clear and distinct. I could see the lights of the hospitals. I couldn't hear anything of the measured, comforting tread of the marine patrols. I hoped Kitty wouldn't realize that I had left the house; that was all I could think of while I listened and little drums beat all through me. Hurry, hurry, hurry.

The car came; I heard it hurtling along. I waited till a sailor in white emerged running from the darkness and then I unlocked the porch door and ran to meet him.

"The car's here for Captain Somers—"

"It's for me. I've got to—I'm going to Wanaha City."

In the glow from the headlights I saw that it was the same young sailor who had taken me twice to Wanaha City—where Sally had gone, searching for somebody. Searching, searching for Johnny. It was my only clue to their possible meeting place.

I got into the car, and the sailor said doubtfully, "You sure you want to go there tonight, Miss Keate? I mean, they say it was this marine sergeant. The one they call Buffalo Bill. He's a homicidal maniac, and he's got away and—"

"Hurry! It's—it's the Captain's orders." It wasn't, but I didn't care.

His white shoulders lifted. "Okay. Okay, I guess you know what you're doing."

We shot away, leaving the lighted Somers house where Kitty still was locking up doors, bolting windows.

How would Sally go to meet him? Would she take the bus?

How long ago had she left? Why hadn't I asked that?

Well, I hadn't. The B.O.Q. was lighted but empty-looking. There were lights all over the hospital, running figures crossing the lawns, clustering around the shrubbery. All the houses were lighted, too, except the Gary house as we passed it. A marine snapped out under a street lamp and stopped the car. "It's the nurse," the sailor said. "She's got a pass—"

"Have you seen Sergeant Brown?" snapped the marine.

Sergeant Brown? I thought. *Oh, yes, Buffalo Bill!*

"Haven't seen anybody—" the sailor replied.

"Okay. Go ahead. Except—" The marine looked at me through the dim light. "You ought to stay home, lady. Till we get this poor guy—"

We left him standing there. The administration building was lighted, too, and a couple of marines came running down the steps and around toward the road leading to the hospital. We reached the gate and one of the sentries stopped us. He had a gun in his hand. The sailor leaned out. "It's okay, buddy. Captain's orders—" He added under his breath, "I hope."

I fumbled in my handbag. "Here's my pass."

Another sentry opened the door and looked into the car as if he expected to find Buffalo there. "It's the lady that stays at the Captain's house," the sailor said.

The sentries looked at me, looked at each other, and finally one of them shrugged. "I guess it's all right—"

"Hurry," I said to the sailor. We shot out of the gate and turned into the long highway leading to Wanaha City. Across the road the barracks were lighted. A squad of marines jogged swiftly toward the gate, at what I believe is called the double.

The sailor speeded on, but said over his shoulder, "It's none of my business, Nurse, but the base is secured, you know. Nobody can leave it except under orders."

I didn't say shut up—stop—I've got to think. I said, "Go on." The car leaped ahead as if it had been shot out of a gun.

The lights around the base dropped away behind us. Away ahead there was the faintest rosy glow in the sky above the lights of Wanaha City. The road was deserted. Hadn't they said that the entire base personnel were confined to quarters that night; the entire base secured, no leaves or passes granted?

I remember thinking, oddly, that it would be a dull night at El Rico's.

The lights of the car sped ahead of us, spreading out across the pavement, touching the clumps of sagebrush and spiky yucca at each side to bright, sharp outlines and then leaving them in obscurity again.

We passed the road that turned into the Area, with its brightly lettered sign: *Restricted Area. Keep Out. Naval Reservation.* I had a glimpse of the road, paved and wide enough for heavy trucks and traffic, winding off into the sandy, hummocky desert.

From there I couldn't see the first guarded barrier; it lay perhaps half a mile beyond the entrance from the highway. Two miles on into that darkness the great loading plants stood, guarded night and day; igloos humped themselves up like sleeping prehistoric monsters, dangerous, not to be disturbed. The marine guard in the Area and trained and savage dogs were waiting somewhere off in that darkness.

We turned into the brilliantly lighted street at Wanaha City; it was strangely empty as if a blight had fallen upon the little town. As if it had received some lightning stroke which at one blow sent it on its way to join that ghostly parade of forgotten towns. I felt as if dust would gather, the lights would slowly burn out, sometimes a straggling figure might pass along its crumbling walks, striking long-dead echoes.

Yet, of course, there were a few stragglers, here and there. One lonely figure, walking in a rather disconsolate way along the street, paused, seeing us, and jerked a tentative thumb at us as if asking for a lift, a barely sketched gesture, withdrawn as if he sensed its futility.

The sailor said, "Where do you want to stop, Miss Keate?"

And it was exactly then that I knew who had murdered Parly. I knew who had murdered Jenson. I knew why Sally had gone to the Gary house. I even knew that the description of the man in Parly's room which the electrician had given us was in its essentials all too accurate. And I knew why.

I said, "El Rico's."

So I went into El Rico's again. It seems odd in a way that it should have been El Rico's. But I didn't look for Dave Winters; I didn't look for Bonny. There was a pay telephone booth near

the door. I closed the little door of the booth and the nickels I dropped into the telephone sounded like a knell. I got the Gary house, and Ruth, out of breath, answered. "Oh, Sarah! I've just got back from the Sinclairs' and heard the phone ringing—"

I asked her one question. When she'd answered that I hung up.

Then I gave the number of the base again and asked for the sentry box at the gate. I knew there was a telephone there, but it rang and rang and nobody answered. There were people at the tables outside the booth, not many, and a complete absence of uniforms. Somebody put a coin in the juke box and it roared out dance music. The air in the little booth was suffocating and the thud of the drums in the orchestra—and the warning drums in my ears—were so loud that I could barely hear the sentry's faraway voice when, at last, he spoke into the telephone. I asked him one question, too, and then had to wait while he consulted the other sentry and at last came back. "No—" he said. "No. Who is this?" I hung up again.

When I came out of the booth I don't remember moving or walking. I don't remember approaching the car, or the sailor standing beside it. I don't even remember telling him where I wanted to go, but I was in the car, he was turning at the intersection and we were shooting back toward the base. Brilliant orange and red and green neon lights made a moving, checkered pattern across my light skirt and upon the sailor's white-clad shoulders. It was like a fair, some gay and lighted celebration, except it was played silently for all but empty grandstands. We turned and the road stretched ahead of us, with again the spiky shadows of the tall yuccas, the bitter, acrid scent of sagebrush, the rolling shadow of a tumbleweed taking on for an instant an eerie semblance of life.

But I knew who had murdered Parly and who had murdered Jenson. And I knew that Sally was in the most frightful danger. She had to be put out of the way; she had to be silenced. There was no other way of escape.

What I didn't think, what never entered that strangely clear and urgent process that had been thrust (but so clearly, so convincingly) into my mind, was that I might be in danger, too.

TWENTY-TWO

THERE WAS only one road which turned off from the highway and that was the road to the Area and the ammunition plants and igloos. It marked a kind of halfway point, so I was looking for it and thankful when we passed. I knew exactly what I would do. I'd stop at the gate. I'd have the sentry get Harry. The Row was alive by now with marines, with officers, all of them searching. In seconds after I reached the gate they'd know what to look for. I might—I might not be too late. I leaned forward. "Oh, hurry—"

"Going as fast as I can, miss. This road's—"

The car slithered off to one side, rocked perilously in the sand, righted itself.

The headlights of an approaching car from the base shot into view ahead of us, racing toward us. We shot past each other.

I ought to have told the sentry! I ought to have told him to get Harry, told him what to do. Well, I hadn't. But in a matter of moments we'd reach the gate. I thought that and then only the car that had flashed past us made its picture on my mind.

"Stop! Stop! Turn around—"

The sailor jerked his face toward me and the car swerved off into the sandy edge again; he jerked it back and slid to a stop. "What do you mean, for gosh sake?"

"Turn around. Hurry. Follow that car—"

"But, miss—"

"It's the Captain's orders! Hurry—"

Undoubtedly this time he questioned my authority, and rightly. "Okay," he said, "but I don't like it." He backed and turned and backed again. By the time we had reversed ourselves the speeding car was so far ahead that we could see only its red rear lights and the fanlike glow of its headlights across the road. The sailor, muttering, put on more speed.

The driver of the car ahead was aware of our pursuit. The distance between us increased. Then the lights ahead swerved

suddenly, shot off the road and across sandy hummocks, and went out.

"Where is he?" I shouted. "Where did he go?" Why hadn't I told the sentry what car to stop? I'd only made certain that it hadn't passed the gates, that it was in the Row. I'd only made sure, or thought I'd made sure that Sally was in the Row.

Why hadn't I told the sentry to stop that car no matter whose pass was presented at the gate!

The sailor yelled, *"He's turned into the Area. It's one of the officers!"*

"Where's the road into the Area?"

"Damn near," the sailor flung back at me, but he had his foot on the gas, too. "We can't enter it. I'm not going to take this car—"

"Go on! No, wait, there's the sign. Turn into the road."

The sailor said something extremely emphatic but also rather scared about orders, but he did swerve into the road leading straight into the Area, past the sign forbidding it. There was no car ahead of us, no car lights, nothing but a winding road and night-dark desert, hummocky and uneven and black, stretching out on both sides of us into nothing. Away off ahead there was a barely visible glow which I knew marked the lights around the loading plants. But they were nearly two miles from the entrance.

Where were the guards? Where was the barrier? I had never visited the Area before; visitors were not encouraged; it was off limits. But I knew that there was a kind of buffer of space, a long strip of land which provided a safety factor, between the ammunition storage igloos and the manufacturing and loading plants, and the highway. Suddenly the sailor braked to a stop. "He's gone out there—" he pointed. "See the tracks. He's left the road."

I could see heavy tracks in the sand, leading away from the road. Deep tracks, as if the car we were following had swerved wildly as it plunged off the road and into the sand. We could follow the marks to the rim of the light from our headlights; beyond that they vanished into the hummocky, uneven black space.

The sailor turned off the engine. There wasn't a sound any-

where; there is no silence like that of night in the desert.

The car somewhere off there in the darkness couldn't have gone far; it would have bogged down in sand and brush.

The sailor said, "What do we do now?"

There was only one thing to do. I got out of the car and plunged into the deep, freshly made tracks of the other car. The sailor ran after me and caught my arm. "We've got to get out of this. My God, there's marines on guard. They'll shoot—"

I jerked my arm away from him. Sand was clogging my feet, dragging at me when I tried to run. A tall yucca plant loomed up ahead of me and tore at my skirt as if to stop me. Suddenly a solid object was beside me. Solid, dimly lighter, than the surrounding darkness, and it was the car. The driver's seat was empty.

If only Sally would cry out, scream, anything!

Suppose she couldn't. Suppose there was a quiet, huddled bundle, covered over with something, in the car. I stumbled and went to my knees and then dragged myself up again, holding to the door of the car which was open. I remember my fingers scrabbling frantically over the seat and the floor. There was nothing there.

I groped my way past the car and up a little rise which the car had failed to climb. It was rough going, sand and tough, spiky growth. I struggled to the top of the hillock and plunged down into the shadow on the other side, down and down and stumbled again and fell. The sailor had followed me.

I hadn't known that he was there. In my plunging rush I hadn't heard him. But I felt his presence then and heard his heavy breathing near me. I cried, "She's here—somewhere. She's here—"

Somewhere behind me, away off toward the highway, I heard another car.

The sailor didn't move. I could feel him, standing there behind me, but he didn't speak or move. I thrust at the sand and sagebrush and got myself to my knees and turned. "Hurry! Stop that car out there on the highway! We've got to have help—"

I stopped, because the sailor looked different. There was the

dim outline of his figure—but it was dark. No white uniform. No white gob cap. Different—then I saw an arm rise, savagely, against the black sky.

I didn't see the savage downward thrust, half begun.

An animal moves swiftly and instinctively from danger and so did I. Without plan or purpose I simply rolled down that little incline, rolled and squirmed and rolled again. Brush caught at me and I squirmed away and at the same time, somewhere, the thud of that approaching car was louder, roaring into the Area road, covering the sound of my escape—covering the sound of pursuit and the sound of flight, covering everything.

The car stopped. I came up against a great growth of yucca which sent swordlike thrusts at me. I crawled on my hands and knees around it and I couldn't go any farther. My heart was pounding in my throat. I couldn't breathe; I couldn't hear.

But I did hear Jim, back toward the road. "Sarah—Sarah—"

I couldn't believe it. It couldn't be Jim. It was somebody else.

"Sarah—"

My light dress loomed up in the darkness so he found me huddled behind the yucca. I felt his hands on my shoulders.

"Jim!" I made a desperate move and caught his hands. "Sally's here. I don't know where. He was here too—he tried to kill me—he got away and Sally—"

A car started with a roar on the Area road. Jim plunged away from me toward it, shouted something and stopped as the thuds of the racing engine dwindled rapidly away.

He plunged back toward me. "He's got your car. He's headed straight for the barrier. They'll get him—" He was helping me to my feet.

"Sally," I gasped and spit sand.

"Sally's all right. She's okay. She's all right—"

There were shots off in the black desert night.

Loud, sharp, quick. There was a pause and I think I heard voices, shouting. And then there was a rapid volley of shots and all at once a heavy, smashing crash.

Jim flung me back down into the sand. He flung himself down beside me, his arms over my head, holding me down, my face in the sand. And the sand simply heaved itself all

around us and a kind of shudder passed over the night and then I heard the blast.

The sand under my face quivered. The earth seemed to unbalance in its steady course, shake itself, rock around us.

Jim pressed me down so I couldn't breathe but I rather fancied I wasn't going to do much in the way of breathing ever again, in any case. "Wait," he shouted hoarsely, "wait—"

I waited, needless to say.

The night seemed to shudder back into quiet.

If the blast set off what they called a chain detonation, the whole base would go up. But we'd go up first and more energetically. I tried to burrow into the sand.

Then through the shocked and shuddering stillness I heard a long terrible wail, off in the distance. It was the disaster whistle.

Jim's hold of me relaxed but I only dug deeper into the sand, or tried to—not very successfully. But after a long time I raised my head cautiously like an ostrich out of the sand. Jim was on his feet, staring into the darkness. He turned and gave me his hands and pulled me to my feet. "I think it's all right. God knows what happened but—come on. We'll get back to the road."

We struggled up the sliding, humpy rise and down again. We passed the empty car, which curiously had slewed around and was tilted over drunkenly. "Blast," Jim said. "Come on."

We got to the road. I felt its hard surface under my feet. My car—or rather Harry's—was still there. No; it wasn't. It was Jim's car he helped me into. A white figure staggered, running, into the glow of the headlights. It was the sailor and he looked as if he'd been through the wars. Not exactly shredded but with that effect. His eyes were wild, his gob cap was gone, and there were sandy smudges on his white uniform. "He got the Captain's car!" he shouted. "He got past me and into the car and shot away. I couldn't stop him. I ran after him and—" he skidded to a halt beside Jim. "My God, did you hear that, sir?"

We'd heard it, all right. The sailor shouted above the din of sirens, "I hit the deck. I thought the whole works was going up. My God, what happened? What did he hit?"

"I've got to find out. Get in this car and take Miss Keate back to the Row. Snap into it."

The sailor gulped, leaped into the car beside me, and began a frenzy of reversing and turning. Then we left Jim behind us and were shooting toward the highway again and all I wanted was to get out of there.

The sailor was most heartily in sympathy with me. We were emphatically two minds of a single thought. Cars from the highway swerved into the Area road and shot past us. We gave a wild swerve ourselves and got onto the highway and met a wild array of headlights and passed them, too.

Nobody stopped us although there were shouted, indeed violent, imprecations hurled at us as we missed the fire department by inches. But the sailor bent over the wheel and drove as if the devil were in him. But he was listening, too, so hard that his young ears seemed to flap backward. I wiped sand and listened, too. But aside from the racing cars, there wasn't anything.

The sailor began to sit more easily when we reached the gate; we stopped and both sentries jumped at us and the sailor then wiped his own face with his once-white sleeve, and I think got more sand in his mouth for he sputtered and coughed. The sentry shouted, "The ambulance went out. How many hurt?"

"Don't know—" the sailor shouted back at them. "Don't stop me—"

We shot along the road toward the Somers house. The Row was alive with lights and clusters of people on the lighted porches. The squad of marines was drawn up in front of the hospital and looked remarkably belligerent, as if ready to fight the world, the flesh, the devil, and the tons of ammunition out there in the Area. All of it, it seemed to me just then, to be brooding over whether or not it was satisfied with one explosion, but just might, if the fit took it, give itself another heave and shoot the whole base and everything around it into the sky and have done with it.

We whirled to a stop in the Somers driveway. The sailor helped me out, dislodging sand over both of us.

Then he took a long breath. "Miss, I'm not going to drive for you again. Not anywhere. Not—" he said passionately, "if they put me in irons."

With that he got back into the car and the door slammed;

he didn't waste any time in leaving.

The porch was dark except for lights streaming out from the windows. My eyes felt as if I had scooped up most of the desert in them. The house door flung open and Kitty stood there. She gave me a blank look, said, "Oh, it's you," and went straight back along the hall, and she had a revolver in her hand. I started after her, a little taken aback by the coolness of her reception considering the recent, I might even say shaking, events. And Sally said, *"Miss Keate—"*

She was on the porch, in the porch swing, for it was still moving. She ran toward me. "There's been a blow. Out in the Area—"

I told her that I knew it.

"Where's Jim? He went to find you! He—"

"Jim's all right. Unless the place blows up," I said crossly and sank into the nearest chair and wiped sand out of my eyes. There was no sound at all from the Area. The porch didn't rock, the house remained quite steady on its foundations, so I didn't run upstairs and dig in under my bed and pull pillows around me as had been my intention.

Sally said something, turned on a lamp, and gave me a horrified look. "Miss Keate! Where have you been! Mrs. Somers said you'd gone for a drive."

"Oh, yes, certainly," I said bitterly. "A nice, quiet little drive."

"Your hands!" Sally squealed. "Your stockings!"

Well, there wasn't anything left that could be called stockings. Sally gave another squeal and flashed into the house.

I wiped away at sand and then Sally was flying out the door again, her arms full of bottles and bandages.

The Navy missed acquiring an excellent nurse when they made Sally an ensign in the Waves; she went straight to work and she didn't ask me a thing. It was while I was holding the little blue eyecup to one eye and Sally was rolling off what was left of my stockings that I became aware of a subdued but determined pounding inside the house. It sounded as if somebody had a chair and was quite simply and resolutely battering in a door. I jerked the eyecup from my eye and the liquid ran down my face. *"What is that?"*

"Oh, that," Sally tipped alcohol on some cotton and swabbed a scratch with it and I resisted an impulse to utter a sharp howl. "That's Buffalo Bill. He's locked in the study. Mrs. Somers is sitting in the hall with a gun in her hand, keeping him there till the Captain gets back."

TWENTY-THREE

THE POUNDING reached a wild crescendo and I was sure I heard the door splinter, and then it stopped, doubtless to permit Buffalo to take a breath, and I heard Kitty from the hall. "Stop that or I'll shoot straight through the door."

There was a reply, somewhat breathless and muffled; I couldn't hear the words.

But I thought things could remain, so to speak, *in status quo;* Kitty wouldn't really shoot. At least I didn't think so. And I had to talk to Sally.

I also felt a rather urgent need for getting myself abreast of recent events on the Row. Sally's little hands were working methodically, her bent face serious.

"Sally," I said, "somebody phoned and said you could see Johnny, didn't he? He said he'd arrange it so you could meet Johnny. So you told Miss Hagshaw you were going to meet Jim—"

I waited. She ripped off the cellophane covering for a bandage. I went on. "But you were really going to see Johnny. You were going to tell him he must give himself up tomorrow. And then—"

She said, "Buffalo Bill was waiting for me. Outside the Waves' barracks. He said I must come with him."

"What did you do? Where did you go?"

"Buffalo wanted me to come here. He said you and Mrs. Somers would let me stay. But I couldn't. I had to—" she stopped. I said gently, "You had to see Johnny. Of course. Then what—"

"Well—Buffalo said that—" She kept right on working at my scratches, but her voice was unsteady. "He said that I—that Parly and Jenson had been murdered and that the murderer—" she stopped.

"He said you were in danger. He said the murderer had to—"

She still didn't, wouldn't believe it. "Johnny wouldn't hurt

me. He *wouldn't—"*

Buffalo had not resumed his battering of the door. I said slowly, "Then what happened?"

"Buffalo said that the whole base would be looking for him. He'd got out of the hospital and he was limping so and I could see it hurt him to walk so I—I said we'd come here. There were some patrols so it took us a long time because we had to hide and wait. But finally we got here and Buffalo knocked and knocked and Mrs. Somers opened the door and she had a gun and she made Buffalo go into the study and she locked him in there and said I was to wait till the Captain got back. She wanted to phone for him but of course Buffalo was in the study where there's the telephone and she wouldn't open the door. She wouldn't let me phone from the extension upstairs. She said I had to stay out here. She—I think she's a little upset. I don't think she'd really shoot anybody but I—I wasn't sure."

I wasn't sure, either. But Buffalo had dodged guns before then and he had good sense. "And then what?"

"Well, then Jim came. He came running up to the porch. He saw me." A little pink came into her cheeks. She bent her head over the bandages. "He'd been looking for me. He—he was glad to see me," she said. Which I felt was a truly remarkable understatement. "And then Mrs. Somers heard him and came to the door and he asked where you were and she told him you'd gone for a ride and she had Buffalo in the study and he was to get the Captain. But Jim just shouted at me to stay here, not to go any place or see anybody, and then he ran for his car and—and since then," Sally said with a kind of gulp, "I've been waiting here. Jim—the way he shouted at me—I decided to wait until— I decided to stay here."

So Jim (and Buffalo) had put the fear of something or someone into her. And saved her life. She said, "Then there was the explosion and the whistle blew. I ran into the house and Buffalo was shouting through the door and Mrs. Somers waved her gun, so I came back here to wait for Jim."

Buffalo began to batter at the door again and the revolver went off. I ran into the hall, knocking over various bottles, and Sally ran after me and Kitty was standing in the middle of the hall, just outside the study door, firing straight into the floor.

She said coolly, "Get to the telephone upstairs, Sarah. Tell them I've got him here—don't let Sally get away—" and fired again.

I took her revolver. I don't really know how I did it, having a firm conviction that firearms are highly dangerous and mysterious in their mechanics. I suppose I didn't stop to think. And just then somebody came running across the porch, several people, and I whirled around and in spite of what I knew—or had rather conclusive reason for thinking I knew—I whirled around and leveled the gun at the doorway.

Straight at Jim. Harry was behind him. And at that instant Buffalo launched a furious attack at the door—made, we found later, with the end of the sofa employed for a battering ram.

It was Jim who took the gun from me. "For gosh sake, Sarah," he snapped, "always point a gun downward." He put his hand over his stomach in an odd, exploring gesture as if to make sure it was still complete. Kitty ran to Harry, flung herself into his arms, and burst into tears. Buffalo rammed at the door, which gave a quivering groan. And since it had to be said, I said it—not the right moment, perhaps, but there's never a right moment.

"Sally, it's no use trying to protect Johnny, dear, Johnny's dead."

She moved back a little, her eyes wide and darkly blue.

Kitty sobbed, "Harry, I heard the explosion. I was afraid you—"

Harry was patting her heaving shoulders. "It's all right, Kitty. It's all right. There was a truck loaded with some dynamite and some caps. A car swerved into it, past the flares, and it went up."

"I was afraid," Kitty sobbed and cried. "A car ran into it! Who?"

"Man was trying to get away. Marines tried to stop him; he wouldn't stop; they shot at him. May have been wounded. Anyway the car got out of control apparently and shot straight into the truck at top speed."

Kitty cried again, wildly, "Who?"

Jim went to Sally and put his arm around her. Buffalo yelled, "Let me out of here." I went to Kitty, undid one of her

hands, which was clenched together, and took the key and unlocked the study door.

Buffalo edged his way around the sofa.

"Miss Keate," Sally said, "tell me—" But she couldn't ask the anguished question in her eyes. I said gently, "Johnny didn't murder Parly. Or Jenson. It wasn't Johnny who wanted the money. It was Parly—"

"Parly was killed!" Jim said.

"He was double-crossed. He had a deal. They knew Sa had some money or could get it. Johnny's been dead all t time, Sally. It *was* his body in the plane."

Sally turned blindly, as if she didn't know what she was doing, and put her head against Jim's shoulder as if it were a wall of refuge. Buffalo shifted his leg a little, and I said, "You'd better get back to the hospital."

"Oh, they know where I am," he said. "I telephoned as soon as Mrs. Somers locked me in there. Told 'em where I was. Then I tried to get hold of the Captain but the blow came and I couldn't get the switchboard. It went wild." He was looking at Sally with a wistful expression in his blue eyes.

Sally lifted her head. "Oh, Jim, he said Johnny was alive! He said Johnny had stolen the money from the plane. He said it was somebody else they found in the wreckage. He said Johnny was sorry, he'd used up the money or most of it so he couldn't replace it, but he said that if I'd send Johnny some money, he'd give it to him. Then Johnny could give himself up and give them the money for—for restitution. He said Johnny sent him to me. I didn't have enough to pay it all back but he said thirty thousand would make it easier for Johnny."

"*Who* said that?" Harry demanded.

"Parly first," I began, but Sally swept on as if, now, she couldn't stop. "I couldn't give Johnny away! I had to give him a chance to give himself up. I could see that it would be better that way. I was sure Johnny must be here somewhere and I tried to find him but I couldn't. Parly had sent for me and told me Johnny was alive and had to have money, but then he was killed and I knew Johnny hadn't killed him. Not Johnny! So I thought it was somebody else, somebody Parly had quarreled with. It had nothing to do with Johnny. I was sure of that. I

only knew I had to get the money and find Johnny. And that night—I'd tried to find him in Wanaha City and when I got home a man was outside the Waves' barracks. So I went out, I thought it was Johnny but it wasn't, only he said that Johnny had sent him, and I was to give him the money instead of Parly. He said that Johnny had heard that Parly was dead. So—I—*I had to,"* Sally said. "I couldn't understand Johnny—taking money and letting me think he was dead and—Johnny wasn't like that. But Parly had a letter; he said Johnny had written about he wouldn't let me see it. I had to believe him. I had to help Johnny if he needed me."

"Who—" Harry tried to ask again, but Sally went on swiftly. "I tried to get the letter after Parly was killed. You'd have found out about Johnny and arrested him and if he was sorry and wanted to give himself up—I had to help him."

"Who came to you after Parly's murder?" Harry said tersely. *"Who* told you all that? Did you give him the money? *Who was it?"*

Somebody was running up onto the porch; several people. The door banged, and Commander Gary cried, "Harry! Are you here? Everything's under control. Nobody hurt but the guy in the car and there's not much left of him—"

I started for the porch along with the others and once there sank down into a chair. I heard Kitty cry, *"Who?"* in a voice like tearing silk.

Nobody answered so I snapped, "You know as well as I do. It couldn't be anybody else."

Harry said into a rather frozen stillness, in a voice that was cold as ice, too, but very slow and distinct, "What in hell do you mean?"

I reached for the bottle of alcohol. "The hitchhiker. The electrician. Jack Lewis."

I dabbed at a scratch on my ankle. Nobody spoke. So I said, "It had to be somebody who could come and go on the Row—somebody nobody would notice. Like the—the postman. Lewis was in the west wing, that night. The lights went out; I think he turned them out and it was during that time, while Jenson and I were rummaging in the storage room for flashlights, that he took the ether from the drug room. The lights were out for

three or four minutes. I think Lewis ran down to Parly's room, and in the dark, so Parly didn't know what he was doing, he unlatched the screen at the window and left the ether somewhere in the room, the closet maybe. Then (Jenson and I were busy and had only flashlights, so Lewis didn't run much risk) Lewis went back to the diet kitchen, turned on the lights again, took his bag, and left. Simply walked out the west door as he said he did, and I was busy somewhere and didn't see him. Then Lewis waited outside until things were quiet, and he was su Parly was asleep, got back into Parly's room by the window, pressed a towel or something over Parly's face—and kille him."

Somebody said, "Go on," and, nothing loath, I did.

"Lewis locked the screen, then, from the inside. That was dangerous, because he then had to leave by way of the corridor but in another way it might serve to divert suspicion from himself. Two other ways, in fact; first it would seem to show that somebody in the west wing, and he'd been gone for some time, had killed Parly. Second, if anybody did get a glimpse of him leaving, he was wearing Jim's blouse. It was easy enough for him to steal that; he came and went everywhere in the Row. So if anybody did get a glimpse of him, they'd think it was an officer. Which, of course, is what happened. He even described himself to us, in case he had been seen or to divert suspicion. It was accurate, too, except he said the man he saw in Parly's room had black hair."

I think Jim said, "Then Lewis took the money from the plane and—"

I interrupted, "Yes. Lewis followed Sally here. He'd run out of money and thought up this scheme to get money out of her. He got himself taken on as an employee, probably he used a name that didn't belong to him and forged his union card, but he knew enough about electrical repairs to get by. But I don't think he knew Parly had been transferred from San Diego here until he went to Parly's room that afternoon to fix the electric fan and Parly recognized him. Buffalo heard them talking—"

"Parly was giving him hell about something, I couldn't hear what," Buffalo said. "But then their voices quieted down—"

"Parly knew that he was the man who had wanted Johnny to give him a lift in the plane. Parly must have jumped to the conclusion that Lewis had gone with Johnny and that Lewis knew something about the missing money. Lewis had to keep Parly's mouth shut, so he told him his plan to get money out of Sally and said he'd take Parly in on it. Parly, obviously, agreed and sent for Sally. Bonny saw Parly late in the afternoon; he was then boastful about the money and he was going to get even with Jim. So, I—yes, I think it happened that way."

Somebody said, "Uhh," in a rather startled manner. I went on. "But in fact Lewis didn't intend to share the money with Parly. He let Parly write a note to Sally, asking her to come to see him and I imagine left it at the Waves' barracks himself. Sometime that evening Parly composed the letter he read to Sally and wouldn't let her see. Later, of course, after he'd killed Parly, Lewis took the letter."

"That was why I believed him," Sally said slowly. "He knew about the letter and Parly said that Johnny had written it."

Jim said, "Then Lewis made his plans, then and there. Probably jammed the electric grill so someone would be sure to call him to the hospital that night. Took my blouse—"

I said, "He carried a little bag for his tools. The blouse was in it. Then he left the note for Sally at the barracks and—and came back to the hospital when the day nurse reported the electric grill."

That was all, wasn't it? Oh, yes. "But then he had to get out of the gate if possible without being seen or remembered. It was late by then, so he knocked out Smith and touched off the disaster whistle and in the rush of people coming and going managed it so the sentries passed him along with the others. He dropped the blouse at the dry-cleaner's; he had to get rid of it somehow and when it was found it would undoubtedly arouse suspicion. As it did. But Jenson—we'll never know what it was he remembered or was curious about, but I think he may have seen Lewis in the corridor while the lights were out. And of course Lewis ought to have been trying to fix the fuse, not wandering around the corridor. I don't think Jenson suspected him, not really; he'd have reported it. He was only curious. When Lewis came to the Row to fix the radio at B.O.Q. Jenson

must have stopped him only to ask what seemed to Jenson a safe question—"

"A dumb little guy," Buffalo said, softly.

Commander Gary got up and sat down again and said, "Oh, my God. He was in our house this afternoon! While we were here. Fixing the electric stove—"

"Yes," I said. "I telephoned to Ruth and asked her why she'd gone to the Sinclairs' for dinner. I'd heard Marie tell you and Ruth to come there and have a hot dinner. So naturally I wondered why Ruth had expected to have a cold dinner. So—but then I knew it was the hitchhiker. You see—" It was so clear that I couldn't understand why we hadn't seen it from the beginning. "You see, none of us had ever said, well, if it *was* Johnny's body they found, as they believed it to be, and if there *was* a hitchhiker, then what became of the hitchhiker? And there was a man, just strolling along the street there in Wanaha City and he put up his thumb to get a ride and—well, there it was. The hitchhiker. Lewis. Sally gave him the money this afternoon, there in the Gary house. He phoned to you, didn't he, Sally, and told you to meet him there and bring the money?"

Her eyes were blue and shining with tears. "Yes. I had to trust him. There wasn't anything else I could do. He promised to arrange it so I could meet Johnny."

I said, "And after that, of course, he had to murder Sally." Buffalo had stopped that. Jim had stopped that. But he'd almost murdered me. Because he was in mortal terror. Because I was following him and he knew it and he knew why.

It was then only that they began to talk. In fact, as I remember it, they all talked at once. Much of it was, of course, sheer surmise. As Commander Gary said tersely, "It's too late to question Lewis. Your car's gone to blazes, too, Harry."

"He couldn't get his own car out of the sand," Jim said. "The sailor had lost Sarah in the darkness and didn't know what to do. Then I came up and stopped and he told me you'd been with him and—I got there."

And saved my life. I thought that and he went on quickly. "Lewis must have heard my car stop and seen me running toward you both. He ducked me, got to Harry's car, and

jumped in it. The sailor tried to stop him but he drove as fast as he could toward the Area—I suppose he intended to stop the car before he reached the marine guard. Leave it and make a run for it back to the highway and get away. But the marines got him. Probably he was already hit when he swerved into the truck."

Harry came to me. "Look here, Sarah. That plane with Johnny in it did crash—"

"It did," I said, "and it crashed because Lewis—" It had to be said sometime. Jim knew it was coming, for he took Sally's hand, hard. I said, "I think that when they investigate they'll find that Lewis, in San Diego, maybe under another name, knew Johnny. And found out somehow that Johnny was carrying money."

Everybody knew what was coming. Sally put her white little face against Jim's shoulder again. And, still, it had to be said. "Lewis induced Johnny to take him along. Then he—hit him, knocked him out, and—there was a parachute in the plane and Lewis got it and jumped." I looked at Harry with perhaps a certain defiance. "And you can't say he didn't."

"No," Harry said after a moment. "No. I can't say he didn't. In fact I don't see any other way it could have happened."

Commander Gary was the first to leave and I remember shaking hands with him so fervently that he gave me a surprised look, but he didn't know that I was apologizing to him even more fervently for something I would never tell him or anybody. We got Buffalo back to the hospital after Kitty put her hands on his great shoulders and cried a little and said she wouldn't—she really wouldn't have shot him.

Harry disappeared into the study to get on the telephone. When I limped into the house and turned at the door to say good night to Sally and Jim neither of them heard me because Jim had Sally in his arms so tight and close that I could barely see the top of her head and they were kissing as if the earth had stopped whirling and the stars had checked themselves in their courses and the whole universe held its breath. I must say I held my breath a little, too, and then I tottered upstairs, shedding sand at every step.

I don't mind admitting that I spent the next day in bed and

thus missed most of the commotion on the base, with men in uniform coming and going, telephones humming, and some of the quite remarkable yardage of reports already getting under way. I only knew that in a remarkably short time they traced Lewis through several different names and a rather ugly career of money-spending and money-losing which included some underworld connections, back to San Diego and an acquaintance with young Johnny Wilson. Who, like Sally, had never before in his young life had occasion not to trust anybody.

I might add that before I concluded my visit on the bas I arranged for Buffalo to visit El Rico's with me. I introduced him to Bonny and I was rather pleased to note, when we left that a certain gleam had replaced the wistfulness in his blue eyes.

I might add, too, that when I returned in the fall to attend a quiet little wedding there in the ivy-covered church, with the padre performing it in a beaming way which all but undid its solemnity because he would keep smiling even while uttering the sternest admonitions, I also attended the subsequent party at the officers' club. I watched Sally, now Mrs. Jim Warring, waltzing in white chiffon and her husband's arms. And then I went to speak to Buffalo, brave in marine blues and white gloves, with Bonny sitting beside him and both of them smiling at each other. Sally cut the wedding cake with Harry's dress sword.

The first toast, however, wasn't to the bride. Indeed I wouldn't have had the sense to get to my feet, if Buffalo hadn't pushed me and Bonny put out her sturdy little hand. "Get up, Miss Keate! It's you he means!"

I couldn't say anything so somebody kindly made a signal toward the marine band and they burst at once into the Marine Hymn, "From the Halls of Montezuma to the Shores of Tripoli." It was like a decoration.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ALTHOUGH Mignon G. Eberhart is now comfortably settled in Chicago, she has lived in many out-of-the-way places and has written in almost every conceivable kind of situation—on trains, steamships, airplanes. She has accompanied her husband, Alan C. Eberhart, a civil engineer, to many sites where dams, bridges and tunnels were being built. Before the war Mrs. Eberhart lived in New York, and had a beautiful country home in Connecticut, which she gave up when her husband joined the Navy. After he was demobilized, his engineering career took them to Chicago.

Mrs. Eberhart had always wanted to write, and after doing a couple of novelettes and an article about the life of a civil engineer, she wrote a long story which was immediately accepted for publication, and which was published under the title of *The Patient in Room 18*. This first mystery introduced the intrepid Nurse Keate. Her next, another mystery story, won a $5,000 prize. She has published thirty books which have been translated into a dozen languages and many of which have been produced as motion pictures.

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