DELL BOOK 808

He didn't want his killer caught!

25¢

# DEADLOCK

By RUTH FENISONG

*"This guy had the dames so groggy they walked away forgetting their possessions. I counted three feminine souvenirs in a drawer . . . And letters—wow!"*

This was a cop talking about Glen Williams, who had been murdered. He was right about the dames—some of them. Like the gorgeous chick who admitted, "*The hours in Glen's arms were the only hours that held purity.*"

But he was wrong about others . . . Like the one who had said, "*I wish he were dead.*" To some people, Glen Williams had been a saint, who even contrived to protect his own murderer from the gallows. To others he was a sinner, who probed the depths of evil. His secret is not revealed until "*a climax that has as novel a twist as ever upset the deductions of an armchair sleuth.*"

—Boston Traveler

A

DELL

MYSTERY

# DEADLOCK

BY

RUTH FENISONG

Published by
DELL PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
261 Fifth Avenue
New York 16, New York

Copyright, MCMLII
by Ruth Fenisong.

All rights reserved.

Reprinted by arrangement with
Doubleday & Company, Inc.
New York, New York

Designed and produced by
Western Printing & Lithographing Company

All of the characters in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cover painting by John McDermott

Printed in U. S. A.

## CHAPTER I

A CHAIR WAS OVERTURNED. A silver box had been swept from a low coffee table. Its content of cigarettes made angular patterns on the thick gray pile of the rug. Water from a broken vase trickled along the polished acre of the desk, overflowed a shallow indentation that had been cut in the thick surface, and dripped down into the half-opened drawers. The peonies that the vase had held died lingeringly upon the floor beneath.

But these indications of violence were isolated in the large room. The windows were open, but June was short of breath that year and could not even lift the raw-silk drapes. The gray walls, hung with vivid splashes of color, seemed remote from whatever it was that had taken place. So, at first glance, did the young man on the long, deep sofa. He was smiling broadly. He did not move when the outer door of the apartment opened.

The girl closed the door and padded across the square entrance foyer. She moved like an animal habitually on the alert. She was a small, meager girl. Too little food and too much experience had been her portion. But somewhere along her unpaved road she had acquired vanity. She slowed her steps to smooth the new silk dress which bagged pathetically because it had been designed for somewhat more of a figure, and raised her gloved hand to pat the brittle elegance of a recent permanent.

On the threshold of the room she came to a full stop. Like

an animal scenting danger she sniffed, and her bright knowing eyes, slanted in their bony sockets, went in turn to the upset chair, the fallen cigarette box, the vase, the dying flowers, the man.

She made neither sound nor gesture of surprise. She was so still that she might have been gathering for a spring. But after a moment the tension went out of her and she walked toward the couch.

"Hey," she said. Her voice had been hoarse since babyhood. The people of her slum had always to strain their vocal cords in order to be heard. "Hey—mister—"

His fair hair was rumpled, his blue eyes wide. He wore slacks and a fine white shirt opened at the throat, and there were soft leather slippers upon his narrow feet. She noted all this before her mind registered the peculiar glassiness of his stare, the rigid smile, the hole in the shirt outlined by a dark petallike design.

One of his hands dangled over the edge of the couch, and she was impelled to reach out and touch it. Then she recoiled, shaking her own hand, much as a cat shakes its paw after contact with something new and strange. Yet death was not strange to her. She knew death when she met it.

"Just my luck," she muttered. "Just my luck." And feeling, perhaps, that some expression of sympathy was required, she raised her voice a little. "I'm sorry it had to happen to you, mister, but I guess you were playing out of your league." *If it was my fellow,* she thought, *my dream boy, I'd turn on the floodworks.* She shook her head, attempting to clear it for more practical matters. This was no place to get mushy about her dream boy. The sooner she was out of it, the better. She was an hour late as it was, thanks to the old woman.

She stroked the red pocketbook under her arm. Her eyes narrowed. *He expected me, so he should have left the cash ready. Last time it was on the desk in an envelope.* She went over to the desk. "Holy smoke!" she muttered. "What a mess." Then she saw the envelope propped against a bonbon dish. She pounced. *Like a bonus,* she thought, *because I don't have to part with nothing in exchange. Yep,*

*it's all here.* Her eyes returned to the bonbon dish. *Only a few left,* she thought. *Wonder if they're the same kind he gave me last time and laughed because I ate so many. Poor guy.* Almost sentimentally she unwrapped one of the silver-foiled confections and popped it into her mouth. A noise startled her and she swallowed the candy whole. She giggled nervously because it had been only her own pocketbook knocking against the desk. *Act your age,* she admonished herself. *Might as well see what else is kicking around. There won't be another chance, and it don't look like the cops have been wised yet.*

She pulled the half-open drawers out farther and rooted through them. *I seen him take dough out of the desk once when the cleaner's boy came, so you never can tell.* But the drawers were so untidy that her hopes fled quickly. *Jeez,* she thought, *that killer sure was looking for something. Funny he didn't spot my envelope.* Her mind continued with its commentary. *Will you look at all them pencils and paper—a regular store. And them letters! He must have saved every one he ever got—most of them from dames, too, I'll bet. Rich dames. He wouldn't be bothered with any other kind.*

In one of the drawers she found a flat cigarette case that looked like real gold. She was tempted to help herself to it, but she did not yield to the temptation. Sooner or later the cops would arrive and they might have some way of knowing what was missing. The cops were tricky bastards, and she was not looking for trouble. One racket was enough to handle at a time. But even the cops wouldn't stoop so low as to count candies. She emptied the dish into her bag.

Leaving the apartment was a wrench. Its luxury had captured her starved little soul. She regretted that now it would be closed to her forever. The low good-by she uttered was the good-by of a lover resigned to the end of love. She addressed it to the beauty of the room and not to the deep sleeper.

He climbed four flights of musty stairs. He unlocked the

door of the railroad flat and threw his hat on the hall table. He drew a few deep breaths and shouted, "Joss—are you home? Joss!"

"I'm here." Joss Woodruff came hurriedly from the kitchen. She laughed and struggled. "Unhand me. What would you do if we'd been separated for weeks instead of a few hours?"

"Dunno. Eat you, I guess." He kissed the fine smooth skin of her neck.

"Quit—you'll get flour all over you."

Morgan Woodruff released his wife. "Probably an improvement," he said. "It will take some of the shine off this suit."

"Oh, Morgan, maybe we can squeeze enough out of your next commission to—"

"It's your turn. We spent your dress money for my shirts."

"Well—we'll see. Sit down, darling. You look pale. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. It's those damn stairs."

"You take them too fast."

"Because I'm always in a hurry to get to you." He dropped into a chair and winced. "That no-good spring bit me again."

"We'll get it fixed soon. What did you do?"

"What would a rich guy like me do on his Monday off when his wife chucks him out of the house? I had lunch at the Gateau."

"No—seriously."

"Seriously. I set out for a walk, but I hadn't gone more than three blocks when I met Glen and he insisted that I join him for lunch."

"That was a nice break." But her face had clouded. "I'm baking a pie for dinner. I'd better get on with it."

"Joss—it's too hot to bake."

"But you like pie."

"Joss—"

She halted on her way to the kitchen. "Yes?"

"About that lunch with Glen—"

"You don't think I mind you swanking it once in a while without the old lady." She had a lovely smile, but now it seemed forced.

"You mind something."

She hesitated. "Not really—only it would be nice if you could go to places like the Gateau on your own, and not just when—when someone else chooses to take you."

He looked at her curiously. "You don't like Glen much, do you?"

"I did at first, but—"

"But what?"

"But I don't like him as much now as I did at first. That's all."

"No reason?"

"No reason."

"That would do for most women, but not for my straightforward, intelligent Joss."

"Your Joss has her moments. We're going to see him tonight, Aren't we?"

"No—I called it off. I had a suspicion you wouldn't mind."

"Swell. We'll get to bed early."

"Have you been out at all, Joss?"

"Only to the hardware store. The bulb in the bathroom burned out. See—" She glanced at the desk. "I left the note in the typewriter in case you got back before I did."

They were both trying to keep their voices light, but neither of them succeeded. She saw with concern that the stairs alone could not be held responsible for his pallor or for the fatigue lines on his thin, bitter face. She said, "That super-deluxe lunch didn't put any weight on you. Come into the kitchen and drink some milk while I get on with my baking."

In the tiny kitchen Morgan leaned against the refrigerator, sipped milk, and watched Joss wield the rolling-pin. Love for her welled up and almost choked him. She had, he thought, a glow that rubbed off on everything she touched, so that even the drab, ugly apartment responded and became a wholesome, cheerful dwelling. The play of

her strong body engaged in the simplest of household tasks was enough to make a man weep for joy, and whoever believed that beauty of face depended upon features should observe her when she smiled, or looked interested, or thoughtful, or tender. Brown-eyed Joss of the blunt nose, the generous mouth—

"What did you do after lunch?" she asked. "Did you go home with—"

"No." He answered before she could pronounce Glen's name. "I took my walk. I got as far as Central Park and sat down until the sun disappeared."

"I'm glad you had sense enough to sit down. You do enough walking in the normal course of things."

"The abnormal course of things," he said. "But I get too wound up to stop on my day off. I don't suppose I'll ever get used to having Monday off—instead of Sunday like everybody else. But my outfit only recognizes Sunday as the one sure day the prospect will be at home."

Morgan Woodruff had come out of the army an old young man, too old, he felt, to continue his interrupted formal education. Joss was waiting as she had promised she would wait, and his one full-fledged desire among a swarming of inchoate longings had been to embrace her and hold her forever. What was to follow after seemed unimportant at the time. So they had married. His mustering-out pay looked larger than it was, and on the deceptive strength of it he had insisted that Joss quit her own job.

He was talented. He could draw, write verse, play the piano, sing, and compose songs that compared favorably with many of those that came over the air waves to tickle the national ear. But he had soon become aware that without contacts it was impossible to buck the closed shop where such commodities were launched. Discouraged, he had walked the streets in search of a desk job. But he had little more to offer than charm and a quick wit, insufficient equipment in a world that demanded specialists for the most trivial work. When he had exhausted every lead, someone suggested that he was a born salesman and introduced him to an organization that sold encyclopedias.

Because the organization had nothing to lose, it employed almost everybody who applied. Beginners were subjected to a period of schooling in which they memorized yards of sales patter. During this period they received no remuneration. In the final week of preparation they accompanied an expert into the field in order that they might profit by his performance. For this and for all subsequent solo ventures they were required to pay their own carfare, an outlay which few could afford, else they would not be there. And if any of them fell by the wayside, the organization could take it philosophically.

Morgan did not fall by the wayside, but his physical and mental expenditures were large. He was not a born salesman. He was constitutionally unable to assume the "iron vest" which salesmen wore to protect their egos. He hated everything about the work—the ringing of strange doorbells in order to achieve entry into buildings that did not run to doormen, the dodging of doormen who barred his way, the endless stairs to be climbed, the furtive insertion of come-on cards into mailboxes. But most of all he hated the intrusion into apartments where innocents, lured by the tricky wording of the cards, had written for information and received, instead of the printed material they expected, a flesh-and-blood representative who would not leave until he either had been tossed out or had bludgeoned his prospect to weakness by means of the organization's prescribed tactics.

It was two months before Morgan made his first sale and received his first commission. Meanwhile he wore out two pairs of shoes and spent about a dollar a day for transportation. Therefore he felt committed to remain until he broke even. When presently he did break even, he could not bring himself to quit. He wanted to take care of Joss, and no other way presented itself.

His morale had been at its lowest ebb the day Glen Williams answered the door, listened courteously to his preliminary spiel, and asked him to come in. Glen had offered him a chair and a drink. Glen had suffered the spate of double-talk so timed that one sentence flowed into

another, leaving no gap between for interruption. But before the spiel was completed, Morgan sensed an odd quality in Glen's attentiveness, a kind of tolerant amusement. Most of the people whose gates he stormed showed restlessness or irritation, frequently anger. He had learned how to deal with their ineffectual essays to shut him off or to interject questions. To be met with amusement was something new. It distracted him, made him stumble and repeat.

"Our encyclopedia is a 'must' in every home that aspires to culture," he said desperately. He had made the same nauseating statement in dreary cold-water flats, in stodgy remodeled tenements, and in upper-middle-class apartments throughout Manhattan, the Bronx, and Brooklyn. It had always sounded false and insulting, but never so false or insulting as it sounded here in Glen Williams's living-room where culture had not only been aspired to but plainly won.

Glen Williams broadened his subtle smile. "How much—or is that a secret?"

It *was* a secret. The rules commanded that the price be broken gently and never until the "fish" was well hooked. Morgan reddened and went on quickly with the several hundred stock words that remained to be delivered. If the "fish" kept on about the price he was to be staved off with: "Can you afford to pay seventy-five cents a day? Fifty cents?" It went even lower than that if the nod was not forthcoming. The "Powers" considered it poor psychology to mention the fat sum total until the contract was signed.

Glen Williams did not permit Morgan to progress as far as the "Can you afford" routine. He said abruptly, "Very well—I'll buy it."

Cut off in midsentence, Morgan had difficulty with his hanging jaw. "I—I beg your pardon?" He thought that the unaccustomed drink had affected his hearing.

"I said I'll buy it."

Morgan lost the next line of his interrupted spiel. He felt foolishly that he could recall it only by reciting the

whole thing over again. But he had enough presence of mind to pull out a contract from his briefcase. He saw the cursory glance it received, and held his breath as the bold signature took shape. Sales were not made this way, the rules said. He shook himself and rattled something about a down payment.

Glen raised an arched eyebrow. He said gently, "Down payment? If you'll trust me far enough to divulge the full amount, I'll give you a check for it."

Morgan divulged the full amount. He looked around the room while the check was being written. *It won't bounce,* he told himself, his eyes resting briefly upon the grand piano, the pictures, the radio-phonograph-television combination. *The odds are all in favor of its being good. It can't bounce, not issuing from a place like this. I'm in. I've made a sale. My first!*

"Now, then," Glen said, handing him the check. "That's over with." Morgan, about to rise, was waved back into his chair. "Don't go. Do you mind my asking how you happen to be pursuing a—a career like this?"

Morgan felt the way he imagined a prostitute must feel when questioned as to how she happened to stray off the straight and narrow. Lightheaded, he simpered, "Oh, sir, you see I never meant to go wrong. I was raised strict but—" He was checked by Glen's laughter.

"Well done," Glen said. "And much more effective than 'Mind your own business.' "

"Sorry." Morgan meant it. He was grateful to this polished, insulated article who could not be expected to know that any job was preferable to a roofless, foodless existence. He said, "I just fell into it, I guess."

Glen Williams nodded. "It's a manhole, all right. I'll bet they don't even give you a drawing-account."

Again Morgan had to remind himself that his host, well made, well fed, whose cashmere jacket must have cost almost the price of the encyclopedia, was a paying customer. He said with considerable restraint, "Are you a writer?"

"You mean I should be to justify my prying into your affairs. No—I'm not in search of material. I've dallied with

writing, though. As a matter of fact, I've dallied with almost everything but never made the grade." He noted Morgan's skeptical smile, his reappraisal of the surroundings. "Don't let this grandeur fool you. I didn't lift a finger to earn it."

"Don't be bitter about it," Morgan said. "I could accept an inheritance with no guilt at all."

Glen Williams made no comment. He refilled Morgan's glass.

"Thanks—but I've taken up enough of your time." He was in a hurry to tell Joss the unbelievable news.

"I've time to spare—especially when I'm interested. Stay awhile."

"Well—" He thought uncomfortably, *Here's a switch—the angler hooked by the "fish."* He said, "Why should you be interested in a run-of-the-mill salesman?"

"You won't be a salesman long." The cashmere shoulders, broad by grace of padding or nature, rose in self-deprecation. "You're welcome to think me a screwball, but I do have hunches about people."

Morgan humored him. "What's your hunch about me?"

"Success."

"Fine. When does it start and where do I go to meet it?"

"That depends on where your talents lie." Glen Williams got up, crossed the room, and returned with a thick, leather-bound book. He placed it on Morgan's knee. "I interrupted my dallying once—for long enough to complete this."

The binding of the book was a mellow delight. Impressed, Morgan wondered if the contents measured up to it. He opened it to the title page and read JESTER IN HEAVEN, *by Glen Williams.* He could think of nothing to say, so he turned to the first chapter. "Is it fiction?" he asked.

"Yes—it comes under the heading of fiction. I don't expect you to read it now. Some other time, perhaps." Glen relieved him of the book, returning it with tender care to its place on the desk. He laughed. "I've a confession to make. Actually I'm a vain man. I showed you that merely

to undo the screwball impression."

"A lot of screwballs have written books," Morgan said. The second drink had been quite strong, or else scamping on lunches had given him a weak head. A short while later he found himself playing one of his songs on the grand piano.

"Bravo," Glen said. "My hunch paid off."

Morgan's hands crashed down on the keyboard. "Your hunch is all that ever will pay off as far as this or any other of my songs is concerned."

"Don't be too sure. Are there words to it?"

"Yes, but—"

"Let's hear them."

Morgan sang, self-consciously at first, and then Glen picked up the lyrics and joined him in the second chorus. Glen had a rather pleasing baritone, and he seemed disproportionately delighted when Morgan praised it. Morgan became expansive and invited him to come and meet Joss sometime. He thought that he was a modest, disarming sort of man and that Joss would like him.

That was the start of their friendship. Glen visited the Woodruffs' railroad apartment and was visited in return. He paid Joss extravagant compliments and told Morgan that he was a lucky guy. He took the Woodruffs under his wing. He had contacts. He had schemes for launching Morgan. Once they got under way, he said, there would be no more tramping from door to door. No more encyclopedias—

"Bravo," said Morgan. "Sure—bravo." The cold, disillusioned sound of his own voice catapulted him back to the kitchen, to Joss. It served him right, he thought, for pinning his hopes to anyone but himself, and especially to the man Glen Williams had revealed himself to be. He knew now that Glen Williams had never seriously intended to do anything for him, and never would do anything.

"Did you say something?" Joss asked.

"No." He walked over to her. He put his arms around her and pressed close, as though he were cold.

## CHAPTER II

BETTY CONWAY took the six-ten train out of Grand Central Station. In a little more than an hour she was in Howardsville, Connecticut. Howardsville was home.

She had left her car parked near the station. Mike Williams greeted her as she was about to step into it. "Hi, Betty."

Glen's brother was no one she wanted to see just then, but she said, "Hi," and waited for him to join her. He was a stocky, sunburned man, just under average height. He had a strong, plain face. If an artist had set out to draw Glen's physical opposite he would have drawn Mike.

Because his very white teeth flashed with the pleasure of seeing her, she tried to smile, too.

"You look so elegant," he said, "that I'd have known you'd been to New York even if I hadn't seen you get off the train."

Mike's sincerity was unquestionable, yet she knew that she never achieved elegance. She had no instinct for clothes. Jeans and tweeds suited her, but in more formal dress she lacked that which distinguished the city girl from her country cousin. She said, "I don't feel elegant. I feel as though half of New York's grime has settled on me."

"It doesn't show. You're a princess for my money—right out of a fairy tale."

"Coming from you, that's practically a sonnet."

His smile became sheepish. "Anyway, it's not a line."

She knew that. Glen's compliments had ranged from "My awkward young colt" to "My blue-eyed, golden-haired Amazon," and it had always been a "line." She bit her mouth in her fight for self-control. She opened the door of her car and managed to say lightly enough, "See you around, Mike."

His eyes held her. "Were you in for some shopping? No—that's a foolish question, considering you're not weighed down with bundles."

"There is such a thing as a delivery service," she said. "But I didn't shop. I went in for a checkup."

He frowned. "Nothing wrong?"

"Not a thing. Just the annual visit. I'm so healthy I bore my doctor stiff."

His brow cleared. "You always were as strong as a horse, Betty."

"How alluring. I prefer the fairy-tale-princess description."

He said soberly, "I'm no Don Juan at that." He hesitated a moment. "You didn't run into that brother of mine in—"

"I didn't run into him or see him by appointment." Her voice had flattened.

"Excuse it. I suppose I'll never get it into my head that you and Glen— Well, when you were kids it seemed like a sure thing. I—if you'd quarreled seriously with him or anything, I'd know where—I mean I could understand—but your quarrels never seemed to amount to much—just—"

She said icily, "If you don't understand now, you'll never understand—and what difference does it make?" His expression made her repent the outburst. "Sorry, Mike. I'm tired and cross. I don't want to be rude, but I do want to get home and bathe."

"It makes a mighty big difference," he said, "because if you and Glen—" He stopped short.

"Well?"

"Never mind. I guess you're right. You're in a hurry and I'm not one of those glib fellows who can talk with a stop

watch held on them."

She gave him a brief, forlorn stare. Then she got into the car. "Good-by, Mike." She drove off, knowing without needing to verify it that he was standing where she had left him, gazing after her.

*The fool,* she thought. *The stubborn, generous, bewildered fool. How could two men, so different in every way, be born of the same parents? Glen never deserved his loyalty—never. Glen's spoiled my life because Mike would sooner die than— Die. Be dead. Oh, no. Impossible.* She began to cry. When she reached the dirt road that led to her house she had to stop the car until she could see to drive again.

Hugging the brown paper bag to his chest, the big man stumbled past his own basement apartment and went into the furnace room. He closed the fire door behind him. His knees shook and he could feel the sweat trickling down the backs of his legs. He switched on the overhead light and prowled the cement floor. His thick lips moved silently in time to his slow-working brain. *If I take too long I'll be in the soup. Dora could've heard me go by. I can't tell her I had to fix something down here. She knows I got nothing to fix. I got to think fast.*

The brain's sudden click was all but audible. He wheeled and went to the room's far wall. He stepped into a large partitioned space that served the tenants as a storage place for the overflow from their apartments. In physical strength he lacked nothing. With no great effort he shifted a few trunks, came upon the one he sought, and tested its spring lock. Then he drew a hammer from the pocket of his overalls and struck a few expert blows. The lock sprung open. He lifted the lid and stooped. When he straightened his body the trunk was closed, the lock in place, and he was rid of the brown paper bag. He heaved the trunk to its former position, watching as it teetered and came to rest atop two of its fellows. He grunted with relief.

As he returned to the furnace room he heard loud guttural sounds coming from his apartment. He muttered,

"Now! He has to pick now." But the sounds had tapered into silence before he reached the door of his apartment.

His wife was in the kitchen. She stood at the tub washing some of Billy's things. She turned at his entrance, wiping her hands on a dish towel. "Don't make no noise. I just got him to sleep. I had to run out for a minute and he fell down."

"Is he okay?"

"Yes—he didn't hurt himself."

She had scarcely enough flesh to cover her large bones. Fred Storch seldom remembered that once she had been handsome. He existed only in a present made horrible by Billy. It seemed to him that Billy had been with them always, Billy, who was responsible for nothing and who had so irresponsibly altered their lives.

Coffee bubbled on the stove. He got a cup and filled it, adding sugar and condensed milk. He stirred the mixture, blew upon it, and gulped it down.

She said irritably, "What are you drinking coffee for? It's suppertime. I'll fix something for you as soon as I hang up these clothes."

"I don't want no supper."

"You sick?"

He shook his head dumbly.

Her harsh voice softened a little, became the voice she used for their son. "What's the matter, Fred? You don't look good. You didn't have another run-in with that skunk on the second floor?"

"It ain't the second floor," he said, "it's the top floor. It's Mr. Williams."

"Mr. Williams? You never had no trouble with him, Fred. If you went and got fresh to Mr. Williams after all he done for us, I—"

"Nobody's going to have trouble with Mr. Williams," he said heavily. "He's dead. Someone went and shot him."

She was wringing out a pair of shorts. She dropped them back into the rinse water. Her hand flew to her mouth.

"So that's why I don't want no supper," he said.

Her eyes were big in her pinched face. "Mr. Williams

dead—shot—I can't believe it. Why, only this morning he—"

"You can believe it, all right, Dora. It's the truth—I seen it for myself."

"You seen somebody shoot him?"

"I didn't say I seen somebody shoot him. I wouldn't have let nobody shoot him if I seen them, would I? When I opened the door there was only him—dead—"

She was a woman accustomed to shocks. She came out of this one and took command. "Did you call the police?"

"I only just come from his apartment. I'm going to call them—right now. I didn't want to use his phone. They always tell you not to touch nothing."

"You call them, then—this minute—or they're going to think you had something to do with it. Go on—get to that phone. You should have done it as soon as you found him—before you told me."

He grumbled, "How are they going to know when I found him?"

"Fred—if you start off by lying to them, they'll get you so mixed up you'll wish you hadn't."

"Who's lying?" He went to the telephone in the hall.

When he came back she said, "What was you doing up there? What time did you get back from fixing that garbage violation? I come in at five-twenty from running to the store and I looked for you in the lobby because I thought you might be fixing the leg of that chair up there—you said you would when you got around to it—"

"I didn't get around to it."

"Fred—the police will be asking the same questions I'm asking, so you better tell me the whole business to get it clear in your mind."

He sat down at the round table in the center of the kitchen. He clutched his head. "I got it clear in my mind. You're the one who'll get me mixed up if you don't leave me alone."

"Fred."

When she used that tone she had to be answered. He fumbled for words. "There ain't much to it. Mr. Williams asked me to come up. This morning he asked me. He said

he wanted the bookshelves in the bedroom pickled because he liked the job I done on that chest of his—and he'd pay me good on account of I wasn't supposed to do stuff like that on the landlord's time. So I said I'd be glad to oblige but I couldn't make it until about four-thirty—and he says not to make it no later than a quarter to five because he wanted to talk to me about something important and he might be busy after that—"

She interrupted him. "What did he want to talk about?"

"How do I know?"

"You was up there at a quarter to five? It's a couple of minutes to six now. The police could get pretty sore—you taking all that time before you—"

"Quit jumping on me. You're acting like I done it or something. I wasn't up there at a quarter to five. I tried, because I always liked to keep my promise to Mr. Williams and he—he'd got so he counted on me. But you know today was the day I had to go square that garbage violation—" He paused, reminded of a grievance that blotted out his more recent experience. "If I told that skinflint landlord once about needing new covers for the cans on account of the old ones wouldn't fit no more the way them sanitation workers bang them down, I told him a million times. But he sure hates to part. I just wish it was him who had to stand around waiting for some little squirt who didn't have nothing to do but collect fines—"

"Never mind that," she said. "They kept you waiting and you didn't get back till—"

"I got my tools and went straight up to Mr. Williams's apartment. It could have been maybe ten after five. I looked because I was worried about being late—but I can tell the police it was even later if they start squawking—"

"Did you unlock the door or was it open?"

"It was open. I called out who I was, but he didn't answer, so I thought he was in the bathroom and I walked in." He ran rough hands over his cropped head. "He was laying there—"

"You're sure he wasn't breathing? He could be just hurt—"

"Well, he ain't just hurt. I know a deader from a live one. The minute I got in the room I seen something was wrong. There was things knocked over and drawers opened—"

"A burglar? We never had burglars in this house. I wonder if they broke into anybody else's apartment."

"We'd've heard."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Them tenants don't keep nothing from us, so it ain't likely they'd keep burglars dark." Her voice became mournful. "Poor Mr. Williams—I guess some crook could've got wind of the expensive things he has up there. Fred—maybe you should've stayed with him. It don't seem right to think of him laying there—"

"He ain't worrying." He added stubbornly, "And like I said, I had to leave him to phone the police. Remember that movie we seen where the killer used the phone and the police found his fingerprints on it?"

"If it was a burglar and he didn't wear gloves and the drawers was pulled out and stuff knocked over, then they'll find plenty of fingerprints without any that was left on the phone. You sure you didn't see nobody on the floor?"

"Nobody—except a blond young lady coming out of the Delaney apartment."

She said, "Maybe you better make out to the police it was later than ten after five when you got up there. They don't know how slow you move sometimes when you're thinking about something."

He nodded. He scratched at his head.

Her hand descended upon his shoulder. It was a caress, rough and unaccustomed. "Fred—you ain't worried the landlord will blame it on you? He couldn't—"

"That don't bother me." For a moment he was tempted to tell her what did bother him, to unburden himself completely. The bell, sounding loudly through the small apartment, stopped him. It also woke the unfortunate child in the next room, and the child made its peculiar guttural demand for attention.

"Billy's hungry," she said. "I'll feed him. If that's the police, don't let them get you excited. Except for making

out you came home a little later, all you got to do is tell them the truth."

"Yeah," he said.

Sarah Thrace pulled off her clothes, stretched, fitted a rubber cap over her hair, and got under the shower. She scrubbed herself meticulously, dried with large sweeping motions, and was putting on a shabby silk robe when the telephone rang. She went into the bedroom to answer it, moving with somewhat more speed than was usual to her.

She was a woman past middle age, but splendid still, her opulent body firm, her blue eyes unexpectedly clear and guileless. In a soft light the wrinkles that rayed out from them were almost imperceptible, and even the brassy quality of her dyed hair lent them no hardness.

The telephone stood on a table near her bed. Before she reached for it she settled herself upon a mass of pillows.

"Hello," she said. Alcohol and tobacco had added a not unpleasant huskiness to her voice. "Oh—it *is* you, Tom. That's a relief. I couldn't talk to a stranger the way I'm dressed." She laughed lustily at the outmoded joke.

The man at the other end of the wire said, "Turn it off, Sarah. I've been trying to get you for the last hour. Where were you?"

"Having a shower, old boy." She used her best stage diction. "I can't hear the phone when I'm in the bathroom."

He said petulantly, "It must have been the longest shower on record."

"You sound almost thrillingly possessive. And I was beginning to think that you didn't care even a little bit."

"Sarah—were you going to Glen's later?"

"I've been asked—but I wasn't sure of an escort."

"I'm coming over now."

"Masterful brute," she said. "It's not seven yet, is it? I'd been counting on a beauty nap, but who am I to—"

The telephone clicked in her ear. She looked at it reflectively before she set it back in its cradle. She got up and went to the dressing-table. She eyed her face in the mirror and started with great industry to remodel it. She

practiced a variety of expressions as she worked.

She had arranged her hair and progressed as far as girdle and stockings when her visitor arrived. She stepped into her mules, reassumed the silk robe, and went to the door.

Tom Gaudio barely greeted her. He stumbled into the living-room. He was a slight young man with large dark eyes, all pupil. His nose was straight, his full lips well shaped, but he needed more chin. This evening he needed a shave, too, and a fresh shirt, and a crease to his trousers. And he needed something to steady his shaking hands.

"Give me a drink," he said without preliminary. "You'll want one, too."

"I always do," she said. "Scotch?"

"Anything." He stood fidgeting with his buttons, his collar, his tie. "Straight."

"In that case, rye. It's a bit cheaper. Sit down. If I were a nervous woman I couldn't bear you."

He jammed his hands into his pockets. He sat down on the couch. She brought him a generous drink of rye. She could hear the hard, tight sound of his swallowing as she tilted the bottle over her own glass. When she turned she watched his face for a moment. It wore a look of eagerness, as though he might be waiting for the whisky to take effect. Then as she watched the look faded and his full lips drooped with frustration.

She sat next to him, took a few deep swigs, and said briskly, "Your impatience to see me is very touching, old boy, but I shouldn't have minded if you'd taken time out to shave and change."

"Drop the British act, Sarah."

"You *are* in a state." But she dropped it. "Nothing can be as bad as you look, Tom. What's happened—lost your best friend?"

He nodded wordlessly. He finished his drink and said, "Yes—I've lost my best friend—and so have you. Glen is dead."

She stifled a nervous giggle. His tone had reminded her of a childhood game where everyone stood in a circle and took chances at intoning, "King Dido is dead." She was

afraid to say, "How did he die?" because that was part of the game, too, and the answer was, "He died doing this way," whereupon the player who had answered would perform some ridiculous distracting gesture and keep repeating it while each of the players had a turn. And the game ended with each of them trying madly to concentrate upon the performance of his chosen idiocy.

After a moment she arose, slow motion, poured more whisky, and drank hers on the way back to him. She set the glasses down carefully. She said, "It always gives me the shivers to hear of anybody dying—but I wouldn't say that Glen Williams was my best friend—or yours, either."

"Women," he said bitterly, "a race apart. Glen is dead" —anger released his taut nerves—"and you don't even ask how—or when—or—"

"Calm down." She went on in the manner of one who is always ready to oblige. "How did he die?" and watched half fearfully for the expected gesture. "He wasn't sick that I know of. An accident?"

"Murder—shot through the chest—right in his own apartment—" Tom Gaudio's dark eyes filled, spilled over. He made a boy's gesture of shielding them with a crooked arm.

She got up and poured herself a third drink. She said in a kindly tone, "You're just feeling sorry for yourself, Tommy—not for Glen. Another drink? No—better not. You might wind up with a real crying-jag. Take it from me, you haven't lost much. I shouldn't wonder if I hadn't made a mistake—introducing you to Glen in the first place. And that's an understatement, but we've been over the ground before. Aside from everything else, he made a lot of promises, but even with the best of intentions I doubt if he could have fulfilled them. You'll get along. You've got a lot of what's needed—and I'll try to help you to—"

He turned toward her. He flung himself upon her breast. Sobs shook him. She gave his straight black hair a few perfunctory strokes, her expression completely detached. She said, "That's right—get it out of your system." When he was a little calmer, she said, "How did you hear the news, Tom?"

He took out a soiled handkerchief and blew his nose. "I was supposed to drop in to see him at five—to talk to him about—about a project we had. But I was developing some pictures and I got interested and didn't arrive until—well—just before I called you."

"Couldn't you have saved what you had to say to him until tonight?"

"No—because he'd invited the Woodruffs, too—and I knew there'd be no chance for a private talk."

"I see."

Something in her voice startled him. He stared at her.

"Well," she said, "you didn't get there until sixish. Go on."

"I told you I'd been working. When I came to and realized the time, I didn't stop to shave or change my clothes. I rushed over and saw the police just getting into the elevator. I didn't dream it had anything to do with Glen. I had to wait because they were taking the elevator to the basement. Some man had been nosing around the lobby and I asked him what it was all about. He said a Mr. Glen Williams on the top floor had been shot and killed—so I—I knew the police wouldn't let me in—"

"And there would have been no sense in your getting mixed up in it, since it was too late to do any good," she said. "Very sensible of you to come away. I wonder if there's anything on the radio about it." She reached out and turned the knobs of a battered console set. But the news broadcasts had come and gone. She tried the different stations. Scratchy fragments of song filled the room. When she gave up, the silence was not the relief it should have been.

Tom Gaudio had lit a cigarette. His face was almost obscured by smoke. He said, "Sarah—what did you do with yourself today?" He was trying to sound quite casual. But he was overdoing it.

She stared at him. She said, "Now, really!"

"Don't say you didn't resent Glen for taking up so much of my time—because you did."

"Would you like to search the premises for my

smoking gun?"

"Maybe you think it's funny now, but—"

She said, "Tommy, I'm very fond of you—but really you *are* a little fool."

## CHAPTER III

LIEUTENANT GRIDLEY NELSON, acting captain of Homicide in the absence of his chief, Waldo Furniss, studied without pleasure what had once been the living-room of Glen Williams. Nelson's pointed, olive-skinned face wore the listening look of deep absorption.

The medical examiner had come and gone. The inelegant wicker basket was conveying Glen Williams morgueward. The laboratory squad had repacked its equipment and departed.

A small man, lost in a baggy suit, came out of the bedroom. Nelson's eyes questioned him.

The small man shrugged and turned up empty palms. "I combed every spot in the joint, likely and otherwise, Lieutenant. The marksman must've taken his gun with him. Should I have another go, just to make sure he didn't ditch it somewhere in here?"

Nelson shook his prematurely white head. "Never mind, Clevis. The boys took care of this room thoroughly, upholstery included." He stood at the desk, regarding the still-damp traces left by the broken vase. The long, strong fingers of his right hand dabbled in the oblong depression cut into the wood's thick surface. A little pool of water had formed there.

Clevis, at his elbow, said, "The late Mr. Williams must've had the literature bug bad. He cuts a piece of his good, expensive desk out just to make a bed for that num-

ber." He pointed to the book at the far corner of the desk. "What is it—a Bible or something?"

Nelson dried his fingers on a handkerchief before he picked up the book. "You have a good eye," he said. "Yes—it does look as though it would fit. But apparently the late Mr. Williams didn't always remember to put it to bed. Or else our marksman was thoughtful enough to move it out of the wet." Delicately, he ran his hands over the spotless leather binding. "Yes—it's suffered two small water blisters. So perhaps he's got the literature bug, too."

Clevis's button eyes watched Nelson's way with the book. "You kinda like literature yourself—don't you, Lieutenant?"

"Hmmm." He had turned to the title page. "I wonder if this is literature. It was written by the deceased—and privately printed."

"Say—that was real foresighted of him. Could it help?"

Nelson consulted the date. "Published six months ago. A lot could have happened to him since the time he wrote it—new interests—new contacts. But we'll look into it."

"We?" Clevis sounded horrified. "I'm no reader." He changed the subject hurriedly. "Doc said if the murderer had been a patient man and waited awhile he could have saved himself the exertion. Doc liked that bullet wound a hell of a lot better than the others he found. By the way, I didn't spot no junk, but there was a hypo syringe stuck in back of a bureau drawer. Speaking of drawers—all right for me to go through the desk now? I'll be looking for out-of-keeping stuff—plus personal correspondence and an address book. He didn't have one on him. But his wallet was on him. One thing's for sure—this wasn't no small-time robbery. His wallet had better than forty bucks in it."

Nelson nodded. He was looking down at the book.

Clevis chuckled. "Funny thing about that towel in the bathroom. I could've sworn the brown smear on it was blood—and then one of the lab boys tells me it's nothing but chocolate."

"Yes—funny," Nelson said absently. He walked away from the desk. "Don't leave here until the policeman as-

signed to the apartment arrives. I'm going down to talk to the superintendent again."

"Right. If I get through in time I'll stop in for you." Methodically, Clevis tackled the desk.

Before he reached the door Nelson was arrested by his whistle.

Clevis said, "I'll bet it was a dame. I'll bet my bottom dollar it was a dame." His eyes were glued to a letter written on pink stationery.

"I thought you weren't a reader."

"They don't put stuff like this in books, Lieutenant. Things couldn't have changed that much since my teacher booted me into the public library."

"Pick up almost any best seller in your spare time and be prepared for a shock." Nelson went his way smiling. He liked the little detective who concealed unexpected muscular power beneath his ill-fitting clothes and unexpected brain power behind his illiterate speech. He liked a great many people and wanted to keep them alive. Life was so dear to him that he resented even the deaths of those he did not like and of those he did not know. That was the key to his vocation, to his patient pursuit of murderers at large.

He took the self-service elevator to the basement, walked down a dingy passage, and knocked upon the superintendent's door. He smelled food, but it was not a very appetizing smell. He thought of the dinner that awaited him at home. He thought of his wife and of his new little son. But when the superintendent opened the door to him, he thought only of questions and answers.

The superintendent was a solid block barring entrance to his castle. Immovable, he stared at Nelson. "You back?"

Nelson said, "Aside from a few details, Mr. Storch, we're through upstairs. A policeman will be stationed in the apartment for a while, in case there are visitors who don't read the news and who might be able to supply leading information."

The block became more vocal. "You don't need no policeman for that. I'm around most of the time."

"You weren't around today."

"So it's my fault I had to waste time squaring a garbage violation?"

"Of course not. I'm sure your account of your day will be confirmed." Nelson sounded surprised. He was not surprised. In the Williams apartment and here, the man showed a suspicious reluctance to co-operate. Yet experience had taught Nelson that most people carried a burden of guilt which swelled to oversized proportions in the presence of the law. And he knew that this guilt could more often than not be traced to an exaggerated sense of sin, accumulated over the years and rarely pertinent to a case of murder. He said, "I'd like to go over your story again. I may have missed a few facts."

"You didn't miss nothing. I told it all. I can't tell no more than I know, can I?"

A voice behind him said, "Fred, let the officer come in if he wants. Maybe he could use a cup of coffee."

Nelson said, "Thank you," and saw the superintendent's bulk shift to give him clearance.

The white-shaded fixture that hung from the kitchen-living-room's cracked ceiling gave him opportunity for at least superficial study of the superintendent and his wife. He judged by their size and bone structure, and by the earth-bound look of their stoic faces, that their ancestors had lived in a kitchen, too. But probably it had been a rural kitchen, he thought, open to green fields and filled with the odor of baking bread. It had in no way resembled this basement trap where daylight was cut off by close high buildings and rancid air received no benefit of disinfectant sun to kill the stink of coal gas and laundry and human exudations, and coffee boiling endlessly upon the stove. The walls were broken on three sides by doors, the door through which he had entered, a door to what he supposed was a bedroom, and an open door through which he could see a toilet, a basin, and the front legs of a high, old-fashioned bathtub.

"Pull up a chair for the officer," Dora Storch said. And her husband obeyed sullenly, adding a third place to the

round table where two chairs stood at ready. "Excuse us," she said, her hard, thin arms reaching to set aside the last meal's litter. "I didn't clear away the dishes yet. We was late eating tonight." She rinsed out a cup at the sink, filled it, and brought it to Nelson. The room's predominant smell steamed out of it, hurting his nose. Nevertheless he sipped.

"Nothing like a good cup of coffee," he said.

"Yeah. Some people go for tea, but give me coffee every time. Take some milk and sugar."

"Thanks—I like it black."

"Well, you do get the full flavor that way."

He was getting the full flavor. He went on sipping bravely.

Her eyes moved anxiously from his face to the hostile face of her husband. She said, "How about you, Fred? You want some coffee?"

"I had coffee. What I want is sleep."

"Fred's tired," she said defensively. "He works hard—and he was up most of last night—"

"He don't want to hear our troubles," Fred said. "Look, mister, whatever you do want—get it over with."

Nelson's eyes were on the clothesline stretched across the kitchen. It told him nothing except that the pair of overalls and the several pairs of shorts hung up to dry were too small to fit his reluctant host. "Do you live here alone?" he asked.

"We don't take in no boarders," Fred Storch said. "The view ain't good enough."

His wife seemed bent on covering his rudeness. She said quickly, "There's just us—and our boy."

Nelson's attractive face showed genuine interest. "You have a son? So do I—but I'm a Johnny-come-lately to parenthood."

A wrinkle joined the set ones on her broad forehead. "A what, officer?"

He smiled. "I mean my son is two months old. From the size of those overalls on the line, yours must be a big fellow."

She said flatly, "Sure—a big fellow—he—"

Fred Storch groaned. Nelson was startled by the sudden blaze in his dull eyes. He said tentatively, "I suppose that when they get older they can cause quite a bit of trouble. Mine hasn't reached that stage yet."

"Poor Billy don't mean to make me no—"

"Shut up, will you?" Fred's shorn head crouched low between his shoulders. His chair scraped as he shifted toward Nelson. "Mister—get this. No matter how long you sit here making company noises, we know you ain't no friend of this family. Someone give you a badge once which says you got a right to pester people—but not the way you're doing. You keep your kid to yourself and we'll keep ours."

Distress was a familiar to the woman's face. She said, "You got to excuse him, officer. He works hard and he ain't used to policemen butting—I mean—" She tried again. "The both of us liked Mr. Williams, and the whole business was kind of—kind of unexpected. Listen—if it's all right with you, Fred could go to bed and you and me could talk. He told me just how it was he went up there and—"

"I told the world." Fred looked at neither of them. He spoke to the peeling wall. "The whole world knows as much about it as I do. One of the cops upstairs even wrote it down in a book—about the way I'd pickled a chest of drawers for Mr. Williams and he liked it and asked me to come up and pickle—"

"All right." Nelson managed to catch and hold his eyes. "I won't ask you to repeat it again. But I want you to tell me anything you might have learned about Mr. Williams before his death."

"He was a swell gentleman," Dora Storch said. "A swell gentleman," she repeated with conviction.

"Yeah," said Fred. He had relaxed a little. He looked less hostile.

A hoarse cry came from the next room. Its quality was disturbing. Nelson's skin prickled in response to it. He saw Dora Storch rise and hesitate, as if torn between two powerful responsibilities.

"Sit down," Fred said roughly. "You sit down, Dora. I'll see to him." He heaved himself out of his chair, lumbered to the closed bedroom door. The walls shook as he pulled it tight behind him.

Nelson had started to his feet, impelled by that disturbing cry. Dora Storch waved him back. "Billy ain't good with strangers," she said absently. He could almost hear her listening to whatever might be taking place in the next room. "See—he's good with Fred. He's stopped already. Fred wouldn't hurt a fly. I guess even Billy knows that."

Nelson drank the rest of the coffee without tasting it. "Is Billy sick?"

"He fell down on the stairs—it didn't hurt him none—but I guess maybe it scared him and he was dreaming about it." Then she said, "Otherwise he's like he's always been," and somehow her voice projected a picture of what Billy had always been.

"I'm sorry," Nelson said.

She looked at him. Her lips moved silently. She nodded as though she had weighed and accepted his sympathy.

His ears still cringed from that thick-tongued cry which now his mind associated with the broad, short skull and the slanting eyes of Mongolism. "What age is he?"

"Going on thirteen." Then she said proudly, "Big for his age, too. Real well built," and in the next moment her face crumpled. "Mister," she said, "officer, excuse me—" She dropped her head to the table. She made no sound, but her large bony frame shook.

She wept as a strong man weeps when life has become too terrible to bear. After a while Nelson got up and brought her a cup of coffee. He had mislaid his reason for being in that room. He took her hand and brought it to the cup. "You'll feel better soon," he said, and heard a muffled, "Thanks, mister," before she raised her head.

He realized with something of a shock that her eyes, cleansed by tears, were dark and lustrous, that the mold of her features spoke of forgotten beauty. He pictured her with the color flooding her broad, high-boned cheeks and

with the taut mouth loosened to a mobile curve. But the cellar had muddied her skin, and her mouth was set with cumulative anxieties, and she was scrubbing at her face as though she hated it, and she was saying in strident shame, "Good thing I don't do this in front of Fred. He's got enough."

Nelson, thinking of the healthy little scrap of humanity who was his own son, agreed with her and wished fervently that he could be God for a while. He said, "Being up all night is apt to strain anyone's nerves. Was it yesterday that Billy fell?"

"No—he was just restless—he don't seem to thrive in this hot weather. It was this afternoon he fell. When I ain't watching he gets into things. He'll start going up the stairs or hide some place—"

"Oh. Then he can help himself to some extent. He can get out—"

She said hopelessly, "I don't let him out alone. I have to be with him. I tried sitting him in a chair in front of the house, but the other kids they don't know no better than to tease him—and with not having much time to spare, I can't be around to chase them. We got a yard—ain't no more than an areaway—really—but when he was smaller it was okay. Not now, though. He can get over the fence now—so most always I got to keep him indoors."

"There are institutions," Nelson said carefully. "Schools where he could be taught within his limits to cope—"

She said, "No."

"But it would be better for him—and for you and your husband."

"Maybe," she said. "I don't know. It ain't me that's against it. The doctor told us that if we ever had another child the chances were a hundred to one it would be—it would be like other children." Her eyes yearned. "He also said it wasn't no fault of ours about Billy—that it could happen to anybody. But Fred don't want to believe him. Fred acted from the start like he was disgraced—like the blame was all on him—and he won't hear of no institutions. It's his business, he says, and he'll take care of it. Me—I

love Billy. He's mine and I want what's best for him. But I can't tell what's best. I ain't educated enough to figure such things out. Once I almost had Fred with me that an institution was the answer. But then Mr. Williams happened in and took Fred's side. Not that he meant any harm. He was real nice to us. He didn't seem to mind about Billy and he used to go out of his way to visit with him. But he said he'd heard some bad stories about what they did to the poor kids in institutions and that if Billy was his he'd find some other way. So that was that, and Fred wouldn't let me bring it up no more. Fred can be stubborn like a mule—"

Nelson said dryly, "Did Mr. Williams suggest any alternative to an institution?" He had been propelled back to the case by the mention of Williams's name. "I mean other than going on as you're doing?"

"No—he promised he'd think about it and let us know if he got some idea—like a small private place where Billy could get the right care."

"Small private places are apt to cost a great deal. Was it his intention to pay the bills?"

"He never came right out and said so, but I—well—I guess that's what he meant. We weren't asking no favors," she added defensively. "Fred would've done everything he could—odd jobs and carpentry and the like—for the rest of his life to pay him back. Tell you the truth, neither of us cottoned to being beholden at first—except that Mr. Williams kept on about what was money for but to help others."

"Did he have a lot of money?"

"He must have had plenty. Seems like a dollar to us was what a penny would be to him. That's why it wouldn't have meant nothing to him to help us with Billy. You seen his apartment, didn't you?" Her voice grew hushed. "Ain't it beautiful? Them rich rugs and things—and the way he always bought fresh flowers—and the television. Sometimes when he wasn't busy he'd have me bring Billy up to look at the television and I'd leave him there awhile so's I could get out. But I don't think it was good for Billy. It

got him kind of excited and funny-acting, and anyways he can't never keep at anything for very long."

"Did Williams have a regular job—or a business?"

"No—he was one of them authors. When he first moved in he was always writing that book of his—and I almost felt sorry for him because he seemed kind of lonesome. But then when he finished the book he began having people in. I don't know if he got his money from writing books or not. They say authors make an awful lot—but I think maybe his family was rich and left him a fortune. He said once his mother and father died when he was small."

"Any brothers or sisters?"

"He never said. He had a lot of company in the last six months or so, though, and I was real glad he wasn't lonesome no more. They was nice people. I was finishing up once in the bedroom and when I come out they all gave me the time of day."

"Could you describe any of them?"

"No—I didn't like to stand gawping—besides, on the days I cleaned for him my cousin would sit with Billy and I was always in a hurry because she didn't like to stay no longer than she had to."

"Didn't Williams employ a maid?"

"Not regular. Once a week some agency would send a girl to do a thorough cleaning. He didn't like anyone around all the time fiddling with his things and disturbing him. If he was having company, I'd go up and give things a lick and a promise. He had the food and drinks sent from Neuilly's." She struggled with the pronunciation.

Nelson had been employing a conversational tone throughout. He used it now. "You'd probably know if he kept a gun in the apartment."

"A gun?" She shook her head slowly. Affronted dignity stiffened her voice. "I said I gave things a lick and a promise—like dusting and going over the rugs. I didn't pry or open no drawers—"

Nelson said pacifically, "People are often careless with guns. I thought that you or Billy might have seen one lying

about."

"Billy? He don't know from guns—he—" Plainly she was disappointed in him. "I guess I didn't explain good about Billy, but you seemed to catch on without me drawing no pictures." She labored to put it into words. "Billy never grew up in his mind. He's like a baby inside—he—"

Nelson said, "I do understand," and tore his eyes from the overalls on the line. "Sometimes when I'm asking questions," he lied, "I get a bit absent-minded. Are the apartments in this house expensive, Mrs. Storch?"

Her face had cleared. "Well, it's an old house and it wasn't nothing fancy till they remodeled it. The rents depend on when the tenants moved in and if the ceilings could be lifted at the time. Mr. Williams paid a lot, on account of he wanted so many alterations. He said he hated them big snooty buildings on Park Avenue and give him a place like this any time." She sighed. "Poor man—"

There was a knocking at the door and she went to open it, returning to the kitchen with Clevis. "Somebody for you, officer," she said. "Will he want coffee? It ain't no trouble. It's always ready."

Nelson sent Clevis an almost imperceptible warning. Clevis caught it and said, "No, thanks. I got to go easy on the stimulants. I finished up there, Lieutenant. Sergeant Baldwin just arrived to take over until further notice. You set?"

"Yes." He turned back to Dora Storch. "You've been very patient."

"That's all right. I guess I didn't tell you much, though. From what Fred said, it must have been burglars. You got any notion—"

He shook his head. He had a notion which he hoped to keep from her forever. "There's a bit to be done before I can expect to get notions. One more thing, Mrs. Storch. You didn't happen to see any unlikely visitors entering the building this afternoon?"

"No—I was here most of the time—like always. I only went out for bread, and that was when Billy fell down. It was about twenty past five when I got back. I went in the

front way to see if Fred was in the lobby. I thought he'd be there fixing something if he'd got back from that garbage business. The only person I saw was a girl all dressed up in black. She was at the bells and she didn't look like the type we get here, so I asked her who she wanted. It wasn't Mr. Williams, though—it was Mr. Smith on third. I showed her what bell to ring and she didn't even say thanks. Kind of fresh she was—tough. It takes all kinds. Skinny as a toothpick and kind of Italian-looking. If I had a kid that age she wouldn't be wearing no fancy black dress. Fred didn't see nobody either when he went up later—only a blond lady coming out of the Delaneys', which is across from Mr. Williams. Mr. Delaney is an artist. He has models going in and out—but very respectable. Officer—will you have to talk to Fred again?"

"Not tonight anyway. I hope you both get a good sleep."

"Well—thanks." She saw them to the door.

Out on the sidewalk, Clevis filled his lungs. "A man has to work yet," he said, "to enjoy the luxury of a setup like that. Me, I'd rather be a bum on a park bench."

"You can't support responsibilities on a park bench."

"Oh. Kids, huh?"

"One." Nelson told him briefly about that one.

"Tough," Clevis said. "Maybe the toughest thing that could happen to people. Did you see him, Lieutenant?"

"No—not yet."

His tone made Clevis scrutinize him sharply. Clevis opened his deceptively slack lips to say something and then thought better of it. What he did say was obviously a substitution. "I got a line-up of real good suspects—and since it ain't an open-and-shut case of burglary, I'm still betting it was a dame. This Williams had the dames so groggy they generally walked away forgetting to gather up their possessions. I counted three feminine souvenirs in a desk drawer that weren't bought in no five-and-dime store. And letters—wow! By comparison, that first one I read was only a 'nice Nellie' introduction."

They had reached Nelson's car. Nelson said, "Where do you want me to drop you?"

"Ain't we going to headquarters?"

"No—you put in a full day—and I'll want you on the job early tomorrow."

Clevis grinned. "I'd argue, but my wife's got a funny idea she'd like to see me once in a while." He took a bulky package from under his arm. "Here are my findings—correspondence—addresses—souvenirs—and the famous book." He got into the car beside Nelson. "Any B.M.T. will do."

After Nelson had dropped him off he carried on a half-hearted debate with himself. His day had been fuller than Clevis's, and his wife, too, was possessed of a "funny idea" that she would like to see him once in a while. He never had any difficulty conjuring up the image of Kyrie, no matter how much physical distance lay between them. And now was no different from any other time. He could see her plainly against the setting of their pleasant living-room. She was a slim ash blonde with a dark strength contradicted by her lovely fragile appearance. He glanced at the clock on the dashboard. It was a quarter to nine. She would probably be asking Sammy, the cook, to hold dinner for a little while longer. Or she might be in the domain of Grid Nelson, Jr., rechristened Junie by Sammy. And Junie, just beginning to acknowledge his parents with a bona fide smile not to be confused with the gastric spasm of ordinary babies, would be—

Nelson grinned and put an end to his inner debate. The laboratory reports on the Williams murder would not be in before noon of the following day. Clevis's findings could be studied at home as well as at headquarters. Kyrie had never been a hindrance to work. He turned the car east in the Fifties and headed toward Lexington Avenue.

Tall Sammy opened the door to him. Her dignified apricot-colored face broke into a slow smile. "Mr. Grid-dely—we about to give you up."

Kyrie, close behind her, said, "Grid," and took both his hands and pulled him into the fragrant atmosphere of home.

## CHAPTER IV

MORGAN WOODRUFF had worked the bedclothes into lumpy pleats. When Joss got up she straightened them without waking him. She kissed his forehead lightly and it was moist to her lips. He had been restless most of the night and she wished that he could make up for the lost sleep. But he had an early appointment and she knew he would not thank her if she allowed him to miss it. She decided to give him another half hour, which was the time it took to get breakfast on the table. He could eat in his robe and dress later.

She went to the bathroom. She brushed her teeth, washed her face, combed her hair, and reddened her lips. She buttoned on a fresh cotton housedress and opened the door to take in the milk and the morning paper.

After she had put the coffee and the water for the boiled eggs on the stove, her own forehead was moist. It was going to be another hot day. The curtain on the open kitchen window was as immobile as a wood carving.

Joss was a country girl. She thought longingly of her origin, of a mountain stream known intimately in childhood, and of how much Morgan would profit by a few weeks spent away from the city pavements. He was so white and thin, and one day off a week did little to replenish his depleted physical reserve. But a vacation was out of the question, even a stay-at-home vacation. As matters stood, they would skimp on necessities to afford

the occasional relief of an air-conditioned moving-picture theater. And it was only June. And the two summer months that could be so beautiful or so ugly, depending upon personal circumstances, stretched menacingly and endlessly before her. Her sigh contained no pity for herself.

She sat down at the kitchen table and quickly scanned the news. This had become part of her routine, because at her insistence Morgan took the paper with him to read on his subway journeys.

She wasted no time on the headlines, which scarcely varied from those of yesterday or from those of a month ago yesterday or for as long as the world had teetered precariously between war and peace. She was turning to the second page when the item she had missed arrested her. The familiar name danced before her eyes, and she brushed her little finger across the printed letters as though to erase them. But they remained. And for proof that he was not just any Glen Williams there was a cut of his face centering the item, and the caption beneath it said, *Shot to Death in West Side Apartment.*

The egg water boiled unheeded as she read and reread. It was a struggle to return to the simple chores of morning. She looked fearfully at the clock. Five minutes remained of the stipulated half hour. She turned out the light under the coffee, put the eggs into the water, and went back to the bedroom.

She looked down at Morgan, his sprawled bones covered by a sheet, his dark head pressed, as though for solace, upon the pillow where her head had lain. She would not tell him until after breakfast, she thought. She would see to it that he ate first. For Glen Williams had been no more than a stranger met by chance. He had forcibly inserted himself into their lives even though Morgan insisted that it was the other way around. But Morgan was as innocent as a child in his relationships. He liked and accepted or he disliked and renounced. And in his innocence he had liked and accepted Glen Williams.

Joss, warm, sympathetic, always quick to assume a share

of suffering and pain that was not her own, wondered because she felt no regret in that a young man's life had so summarily ended. Nor would she put a name to what she did feel, nor would she dwell upon a recent day when Glen Williams had managed to burden her with a weight of distaste which might now be shed for all time. She compressed her full, generous lips. He was dead. According to the newspaper item, he had been shot through the chest by a burglar or burglars whose design he had apparently interrupted. Her sole concern was for the way in which his death would affect Morgan.

She knew well, although he tried to hide it from her, the depth and breadth of Morgan's discouragement. She had witnessed many times his angry focus upon some small, comparatively minor worry, utilizing it as a receptacle for all of his pent frustrations. How, then, would he react to tragedy visited upon a man he had called his friend?

"Morgan," she said softly. "Morgan—"

He turned over on his back. His eyes, screwed tight in sleep, opened with reluctant effort. "Wicked," he muttered. "Wicked—murder—"

"I know," she said soothingly, so concentrated upon him that the word "murder" had only one association for her, and that the murder of his sleep. "I hate waking you, but it's seven-fifteen and you told me—"

He shot upright. Groaning, he swung his legs over the bed. His feet explored the floor for his slippers.

"A little to the right," she said. "There—you've made it. Breakfast is ready. You can shower and dress after you've eaten."

"All right. I'll just stick my head under the cold-water tap."

She hurried to rescue the eggs and to make toast. She took his fruit juice from the refrigerator as soon as he appeared at the kitchen door.

He drank the chilled drink gratefully, but broke open an egg without enthusiasm. "None for you?" he said.

She sat opposite him and poured coffee. "I get hungry after you've gone. That's when I have my real breakfast."

He grumbled, "Well, you might have had the decency to give me only one egg. This isn't a day for food."

"You eat."

He smiled crookedly. "Yes, Mamma." Then he said, "So it's getting to be that kind of relationship, is it? I'll bet it would be a nice change for you if I could be more of a man and less of a problem child."

"Morgan Woodruff, if I weren't resigned to your pre-coffee moods I could get very angry with you."

"If you turned into the angriest shrew in the world I wouldn't blame you a bit."

"Yes you would. In your present state you'd blame me or anyone else for everything from a mosquito bite to an—an earthquake."

"Hey—you *are* angry." He looked at her in surprise. "Or —or something." He took a deep swallow of coffee, set the cup down, and smiled resolutely. "Now it's post-coffee and I'm feeling fine. So let's start again. Anything in the paper?"

"Quite a bit." She had folded it and laid it aside. He seldom read at breakfast, preferring, he said, to make the most of her companionship before his grind started.

"Good, bad, or indifferent?"

"Finish your second egg. They don't grow on trees."

"I know. I learned the facts of life when I was very young. What's the matter? I thought that was pretty funny. You haven't gone and caught my morning dumps at long last?"

"No, darling," she said, and started to refill his cup.

"Hold it. I'll have it when I'm dressed, if there's time."

"Morgan—"

He paused in the doorway.

She said, "I—I sewed the missing button on your blue shirt. It's in the drawer with the others."

"Thanks—I'll wear it. It's my lucky shirt." He headed for the bedroom.

She put a clean coffee cup at his place and cleared the rest of the table. She set the dishes in the sink and began to wash them. She wished that she had told him. She

wished that she did not have to tell him. She wished absurdly that the news could have been broken to him yesterday, on his day off. Then at least he would not have had to try to sell encyclopedias. Yesterday. But it had happened yesterday. He had lunched with Glen Williams—and later —Later he had gone to the park to sun himself—and Glen—and it had happened.

She toyed with the idea of not telling him, and dropped it. He might miss the item. She herself had almost missed it. She, with Glen Williams as her mind's ubiquitous and unwelcome guest. She shook her head. She pictured Morgan wedged into a subway seat, hot, miserable, trying to lose himself in the news, combing the pages, recoiling, his face stark with horror in that surrounding sea of rigid masks habitually assumed by subway riders.

He came up behind her, encircling her waist with his arms. She jumped.

He said penitently, "That was a dumb trick. I didn't mean to startle you. Turn around, Joss, and take a look. Any difference between me and the Lord Calvert gents is purely a matter of shiny pants and a buck cravat."

She turned, and her heart turned. Posing self-consciously, he appeared to her more like a sleeked-up schoolboy well washed behind the ears than a Man of Distinction. She wondered if his remark about their relationship had been true, if she was overcompensating because they could not afford a child. Then he pulled her to him and gave her a man's kiss.

She released herself. "You'll do," she said. "That tie's becoming—and the shine isn't noticeable—except on your shoes."

He spoke out of the side of his mouth. "Stick with me, baby, and you'll be wearing jools." He shed the parody. "Know what? I saw a dress in a Madison Avenue window—a real Joss dress. If this client I've got lined up bites, it will be on your back. The dress will, I mean."

She hated to disturb his determined cheerfulness. "Meanwhile will you have another cup of coffee?"

"Sure—if you join me. I'm still ten minutes ahead of

schedule." He looked around for the paper and dropped it on the floor next to his briefcase. He sat down. "No—don't bother to heat it. It couldn't have cooled off much in this temperature. Where's your cup?"

She got one and he filled it. She took a sip.

"Joss—I wish I could pack you off to the country."

"You can't pack me off anywhere. I'm sticking with you whether you like it or not."

"I banged around a lot last night, didn't I? I bet you didn't get any rest at all."

"I slept like a log."

"Liar—beautiful, gallant liar. You look like hell."

"Make up your mind."

His eyes clouded. "Sometimes I wish we could fool each other—but we can't, no matter how hard we try. Maybe it would be better if you let down your hair once in a while and staged a real honest-to-goodness tantrum. I wouldn't mind—"

"Why should I stage a tantrum? I've got you—and you're everything I want—and you know it."

"I know that you're feeling rotten. I knew it the moment I sat down to breakfast."

That was her cue and she grasped it hardly. "You don't know much if you think my feeling rotten has anything to do with our financial state. There are carloads of young couples who start off poorer than we are and with far less in the way of prospects. And they manage to make the grade. It's not that at all. It's something in the paper. It shocked me and it will shock you, and I've been trying to think of a way to tell you without—without—"

He left his chair and swooped to pick up the paper.

She said to his back, "It's about Glen. It's on the second page—the left-hand side under—"

"Oh," he said. She could not see his face. She heard the paper rustle. She waited for a few minutes, giving him time to read. Then she said, "Morgan, if you—if you don't want to keep your appointment, I could phone the—"

"Not keep my appointment?" His tone was that of a man who has just heard a most unreasonable suggestion.

When he turned to her there was nothing on his face that she could read, but the paper was a tight roll in his hands and he seemed intent upon rolling it tighter.

He said aloofly, "My first thought was that you'd seen something about the encyclopedia firm going into bankruptcy." And in the same aloof voice he said, "I meant to bring my hat in with me, but I guess I left it in the bedroom."

"Morgan—I'm sorry—"

"Yes," he said, "that about expresses it. Anything else either of us could say would be redundant." He went into the bedroom.

She hesitated. Then she followed him. She found him staring at himself in the mirror over the bureau.

"Morgan—perhaps you'd better stay home—"

He backed away from the mirror. He said savagely, "For pity's sake, will you stop trying to treat me like an infant? Death is no news to me. I've met it over and over again—caused it, too. Me—the returned warrior—not Joss's little boy. Not so long ago I held a gun in my own little hand, and you'd be surprised at the number of times I made it go boom—all without benefit of a skirt to hide behind—" He stopped. He shook himself and the anger fell away. He saw her eyes go dark with pain. He took a step toward her. "Joss—I—"

"It's all right."

He held out his arms, dropped them as the doorbell rang. They stared at each other. He said, "Who—"

In almost her natural voice she said, "Probably Mrs. Jorgensen. I promised she could leave her little girl here this morning while she shopped."

"Well—I'll let her in on my way out." Then he said, "Are you close to me again?"

It was an old formula, used at the end of every small quarrel. There had never been any large ones. She achieved the right response. "Very close. I'll go to the door with you. Mrs. Jorgensen likes to talk to handsome men. She might make you late."

"Then I'd better duck into the kitchen to get my brief-

case. You steer her into the front room and I'll sneak out quietly. Good-by, my Joss."

"Good luck, darling."

The doorbell rang once more, but she waited to answer it until he had reached the kitchen. She was thankful that she had promised to look after Mrs. Jorgensen's little girl. It would be a distraction. Added now to what she wanted to forget was Morgan's closed, cold face as he contemplated himself in the mirror, the fury of his outburst.

People, her mind told her, reacted in different ways to bad tidings. But she was not comforted. Morgan was not "people." He was a part of her, and for him to lash out at her was comparable to having her hand rise up to strike her cheek without a given signal from her brain. Or so she felt. Only feeling was not thinking, her mind told her. And even if countless themes had not been written upon the subject, surely she was intelligent enough to have discovered the dreadful separateness of every member of the human race, the loneliness born of a tragic inability to establish full communication. For no matter how great the effort to interpret another or to translate oneself by means of word and gesture, only at rare moments was unity achieved. A shared laugh might work the miracle, or the brief sharing of physical fulfillment, or a joint sorrow. But anyone, her mind told her, who assumed that such moments could be sustained, that loving was a kind of magic exposing all facets of the beloved, must be a stupid, arrogant fool. And she, Jocelyn Woodruff, her mind insisted, was neither stupid nor arrogant. And instead of seeking the impossible, she should be grateful for those rare moments of being at one with Morgan.

She opened the door, ready to gather in Mrs. Jorgensen's two-year-old daughter. She was not at all prepared to welcome Tom Gaudio. He said breathlessly, "Mrs. Woodruff, thank heaven you're home."

She caught the smell of sweat and alcohol as he stepped over the threshold, but was too preoccupied to express either surprise or resentment at his intrusion. She was thinking that Morgan's day had begun inauspiciously

enough and that nothing must be added to his troubles. Determinedly, she led the way to the front room. She did not ask Gaudio to sit down. It was obviously at the insistence of his legs that he folded himself into a chair.

His hands behaved like the shaky hands of the aged. They made fumbling work of extracting a cigarette from a crumpled package, of conveying it to his mouth. He used three matches before he lit it. "Is Morgan in?" he asked.

She had been listening for the click of the latch. She heard it and expelled a breath of relief. "No. He had an early appointment."

"That's good. It was you I wanted to see."

"You're out pretty early, too—aren't you?" Delayed annoyance overtook her now that Morgan had been granted safe exit. Then, for the first time, she noted Gaudio's appearance, his homeless, unwashed look. He seemed very far removed from the neat young man who had been a stock fixture at Glen Williams's parties. She said in kindness, "Have you had breakfast?"

"Breakfast?" He shook his head.

"I'll get you some."

"No—no, thanks. I guess—I guess you haven't heard—"

"You mean about Glen Williams?"

"You know? But you seem so calm. I thought—" The ashes from his cigarette dropped to the carpet. His inadequate chin trembled. "I'll never—as long as I live I'll never understand women."

She thought again that people reacted in different ways to bad news. And Tom Gaudio was definitely "people." She wished him well, but that did not prevent her from wishing that he had chosen elsewhere to react. It was odd, under the circumstances, for him to have sought her out. If he wanted a close link with his dead friend, a companion in sorrow, why not Sarah Thrace, with whom he seemed to be on terms of intimacy? Why Jocelyn Woodruff, whom he scarcely knew? She said formally, "I'll make some fresh coffee, and then you should go home and sleep. You—your eyes look as though you need it."

"Sleep," he said bitterly. "I've been walking the pave-

ments all night—I—"

"The news has been a shock to you, but it won't do any good to—"

He was not listening. "I didn't know which way to turn until I thought of you."

He stared at her so expectantly that she was puzzled. She said falsely, "I'm glad you regard me as a friend, but I'm afraid—" She paused to find the words. "I hadn't known Glen Williams very long or—"

"As if that matters. You loved him. You'll want to—"

"I what?" Her own knees gave way. She sat down suddenly.

"It's all right. Glen told me. That's why I came. Together we can get to the bottom of this. Don't you see?"

She did not see. Her blank face showed it. "Glen Williams told you that I loved him!"

"Yes—but you mustn't mind. He wasn't being a cad. He trusted me. He knew I wouldn't—that I could keep a secret. We were like brothers—the way brothers should be. I never had one—and Glen didn't either—not in the true sense—because his own flesh-and-blood brother treated him like a dog—"

"Wait," she said, "I don't—"

But he went on, unheeding. "So you can be sure I'll respect Glen's wishes. He was fine—wasn't he—not wanting to hurt poor Morgan—protecting him even though it meant his own happiness. You're fine, too. It must have been even harder for you, because Glen had so many interests to divert him, while you—"

"Be still," she said, "you don't know what you're talking about. You misunderstood something that Glen Williams said—or else you're drunk—that's it, of course—you're drunk—"

He was trembling. He said reproachfully, "I'm sober—I had a few drinks, but they—they didn't help. Please—you needn't pretend with me. This is no time to be conventional. Glen was your lover and my closest friend—and he was murdered—and I know who murdered him—"

"You—you know?"

"Yes—I know. And between us we must decide what steps to take." He fingered the edge of a newspaper protruding from his pocket. "Burglars!" He expelled the word as though it were a bone that had caught in his throat. "Yes—I know—and Glen knew. He saw it coming months ago. I begged him to go to the police, but he wouldn't. He had nothing to offer in proof, he said. But that wasn't his real reason. His real reason was his loyalty—he was loyal even to—to vipers."

Her lips were dry. "He told you that someone was going to murder him?"

"He didn't mention any names. He didn't have to—"

"You're confused," she said. "You're confused about everything—you've got everything wrong. You've imagined all this. You're sick. Your eyes look—"

The quality of his stare altered. Scorn made a hard frame for his words. "So you're going to play it that way? Now that he's gone, you're going to cling for dear life to what's left because you're frightened that Morgan will somehow discover what you probably consider a lapse from virtue—"

Her vital body inclined toward him and straightened again in victory over the urge to pick him up by his neck's scruff and throw him away. "Go home," she said softly. "I want to make allowances for you, but—"

"Allowances for me? That's a hot one. What Glen saw in you—" He wavered under her steady gaze. "Well, I'm not here to question that. Glen was a saint. He found only the reflection of his own good in others—you—Sarah Thrace—" Then he repeated the name of Sarah Thrace with such venomous force that it brought an echo from her.

"Sarah?"

"Of course."

"Of course what?"

"You're not even intelligent," he said wonderingly. "Just the usual snare of a beautiful body. Who would believe that nothing more than that could make a man of Glen's caliber fall—"

Her control broke its cage. "I don't want to hear any

more. You'd better go." She was breathing fast.

He said, "That's more what I expected—you do care—you're not really cold." He jumped out of his chair and seized her arm. "You *will* help me. Listen—Sarah Thrace murdered Glen—"

"You're insane." She shook free of him. She said desperately, "*You* listen. You and Sarah Thrace are practically strangers to me—but from what I've seen and heard, she's been very kind to you. Why you should be trying to involve her in a—in a murder doesn't even incite my curiosity. She probably got tired of you and you're using Glen Williams's death as a means of taking revenge." She ended lamely, "All I can say is that you ought to be ashamed of yourself," and closed her mouth, finding that it was indeed all that she could say to this wretched young man who was swimming so far out of his depth. She tried again. "Don't—just don't spread anything like that around or you'll find yourself in real trouble."

"Trouble? What do you think I'm in now? Glen was going to help me—as he helped everybody—he was going to set me up in— Oh, skip it." He collapsed into the chair again without taking his dilated eyes from her face. He seemed to be deliberating something. After a moment he said in a peculiar tone, "You don't believe Sarah killed Glen?"

"Of course not. Why should she kill him? You go home and get a wash and some rest and you won't believe it, either."

"She had motive enough—if that's all that's bothering you."

Among other swarming thoughts was the thought that Mrs. Jorgensen would ring the bell at any moment, and that at some time or other she would make coy reference to Tom Gaudio's early visit, quite possibly in Morgan's presence. Joss's clear skin flushed guiltily. *But if I mention it to Morgan I'll be unable to withhold any of it and he'll—he'll—* She did not want to contemplate Morgan's possible reaction. She said truthfully, "That's not all that's bothering me," and added, "I've work to do—and I'm

expecting visitors—"

He cut in, his eyes hostile. "No—perhaps that's not all that's bothering you. Perhaps you have reason to know that Sarah didn't kill Glen—perhaps the best of reasons. A husband can't be expected to stay blind forever. Do you mind telling me where Morgan was yesterday afternoon?" He was sticking out his weak chin. He was making a brave effort to narrow his dark eyes. He was trying to look astute and cynical. And he was looking like nothing so much as an outrageous travesty of "the boy detective."

Only that ludicrous seeming saved her from committing violence upon him. She bit her lip hard. She could not have said whether she suppressed laughter or tears.

## CHAPTER V

DETECTIVE SERGEANT CLEVIS shuffled across the small anteroom. He seemed to be giving himself up fully to the pleasure of picking his teeth, but his expert eye registered bilaterally the solitary male figure who sat waiting outside the acting captain's door.

Clevis opened that door just enough to insert his thin frame. He stood before the laden desk, only the toothpick moving in his mouth, until Nelson looked up. Then he said, "You been to lunch, Lieutenant?"

"No—but I observe that you have. When did you last see your dentist?"

"It ain't cavities. It's I can't resist getting something for nothing—and toothpicks is about all they're handing out free these days."

Absently, Nelson rumpled his curly white hair. "What time is it?"

"There's a watch on your wrist and a clock on your desk—but you're far too classy an operator to use common clues like that. It's five minutes to two."

Nelson had withdrawn his attention. He was turning the pages of a typewritten report.

Clevis coughed. His deceptively vacuous face was suffused.

"Well?" Nelson said, still reading.

"Excuse it."

"Excuse what?"

"The way I keep forgetting you're the chief—and acting flip same as if we were arms-around-the-neck pals."

Nelson said gravely, "You should give up cafeterias—free toothpicks notwithstanding. They seem to make you self-conscious."

Clevis discarded the toothpick. He grinned. "Did you know there's a fellow waiting to see you? Strong build from shoulders to waist—couldn't guess his exact height on account of he's sitting. Rugged face—plenty brown hair—brown eyes—"

"I know. Mike Williams—the brother of yesterday's victim. I'll see him and go to lunch."

"Why don't you go first? You look hungry and he looks like a citizen who's used to waiting."

"Did you have a session with him?"

"Nah—just took a squint in passing—but I could tell he ain't one of them nail-biters."

"He's a farmer," Nelson said.

"Which don't surprise me. I can see him with a hoe easier than I can see him connected with the deceased gent. Ain't a scrap of resemblance."

"You've done well for just a passing squint." Nelson was making an orderly arrangement of the material on his desk.

"But I didn't do so good on this morning's assignment. The Gaudio guy wasn't home—and hadn't been all night, according to the landlady. I went to a couple of places where he might've been—but he wasn't."

"Does the landlady know what time he went out yesterday?"

"She seen the tail end of him scoot through the front door. Between five and six is the closest she'll hit the time, though."

"Is it a rooming-house?"

"Yeah—the kind of boxes that used to rent for maybe three or four bucks a week. Now most of the inmates are soaked from eight to ten, depending on how close they are to the bathroom. She gave me the usual landlady's earful, but it don't amount to much. He's a free-lance photographer and for two extra leaves per she's let him rig up a

darkroom in the basement. Wouldn't let me see it at first, and I didn't want to put the pressure on yet—being you told me to keep it chummy until further notice. But after a couple of pretty pleases she took me down and I had a look. Nothing out of the way—all fixed up real neat—and the pictures mostly modern shots of flowers and miscellaneous stuff arranged to make designs." He added regretfully, "I guess he couldn't afford to hire live models. She says he's a nice quiet boy with some tony friends—namely, a dressy female old enough to have diapered him and a guy who could be the late Mr. W. from the way Mrs. Landlady had him sized up."

"How did she have him sized up?"

Clevis started to spit, thought better of it, and wiped his mouth delicately with the back of his hand. "Well—you know—amateurs don't see nothing. But by poking hard I managed to pin her down to his hair was blond—his eyes blue—and his clothes expensive. Also she tags him as a polite, handsome, democratic gent who gave her a fat tip for showing him the way to Gaudio's room the first time he called."

"Was he a frequent visitor?"

"A couple or three times, to her knowledge—but, of course, she ain't always on the spot. Going to put out a call for Gaudio, Lieutenant?"

"I'll give him until evening to come home. According to these letters"—Nelson touched the pile on his desk—"he shares honors with a number of suspects. I don't want to deal out unfavorable publicity until I'm more or less sure it's been earned."

"But that note he wrote to the late Mr. W.—that don't sound too innocent to me. If I remember right, it hinted at secrets between them. Oh, it was double polite and affectionate and all that—but it could've been some kind of blackmail."

"I doubt it. Blackmailers don't usually kill the people they blackmail."

"That's so—it's generally the other way around. Still—" Clevis chewed on something. He said, "Lieutenant, maybe

I'm off base, but last night I made it you was stuck with some notion about the janitor's son. Take it from me, it was Gaudio or a dame—not that the janitor's boy wouldn't be more convenient all around. They'd only stick him in an institution—"

"Did you have time to visit Miss Thrace?"

"I had time—only she wasn't home also."

"Then there you are," Nelson said.

"No comparison," Clevis protested. "Miss Thrace ain't just a dame. She's big-time. I seen her once when she played a bit part in some movie. Reminded me of a neighbor who gave me handouts when I was a kid—a nice soft—"

Nelson's mouth twitched. "Don't let your sentiments get the upper hand."

Clevis shifted his stance. "Besides, she only wrote to turn down an invite to one of Mr. W.'s shindigs." Then he said hardly, "Yeah—well—the neighbor—name of Mrs. Dowse—was a slob anyway—cockroaches in and out of everything. If I hadn't been the hungriest little bastard in Brooklyn, I couldn't have ate a thing she—" He came back to the present. "Get a load of me slapping my dirty past in your face like you was one of them psychiatrists. I ought to write a book myself. Which reminds me—did you get anything out of Williams's book?"

Nelson had gone through the book the night before. And it had been a task to keep his attention from wandering. Glen Williams had wielded a heavy pen. The pronoun "I" lay thick as pepper over every paragraph. But Nelson had needed no corroboration of his egotism. It was enough to know that he had paid money out of his own pocket to present his masterpiece to the world. The book was written about a character named Glen Williams. But it was fiction, Nelson judged, because no real-life character he had ever met possessed all of the charm and all of the dynamic qualities ascribed to Glen Williams, hero, by Glen Williams, author. The writing was circuitous and inept, wandering into vast purple areas at the drop of a hat. Yet, perhaps because of this, because of what the writer chose to write about, because of the emphasis he

placed upon the most unimportant encounters, and the importance he attached to his own opinions on every theme from birth to any form of death, the true character of Glen Williams emerged. He had been a man who wanted desperately to stick his fingers in other people's pies, who interpreted a normal desire for privacy as base ingratitude, whose need was not for people but for puppets he could manipulate to his own greater glory. And because he had little use for people as people, he had little use for God. Not that he admitted this. Rather he placed God on a level with himself, a Being of perverted humor who laughed at all the ridiculous situations through which mortals struggled. Hence, Nelson supposed, the title, *Jester in Heaven.*

Some of this Nelson tried to convey to Clevis. But he did not succeed in holding the little man's interest.

Clevis said, "Sounds like most books—nothing but a lot of malarky. Do I go back to squat on Thrace's doorstep?"

"No—you go back to the rooming-house and wait for Gaudio. Get him to give an account of himself—and if he's reluctant bring him in."

"I'm on my way. Lab turn up anything?"

"Some fingerprints, including those of the corpse. The others we'll check with the suspects as we proceed. The corpse, by the way, had traces of chocolate on his fingers."

"So it was him who didn't wash his hands so good and smeared the bathroom towel. And me thinking it was blood."

"There were no traces of chocolate in the stomach."

"Well—he must've eaten it earlier. There was an empty candy dish on the desk. What about the bullet?"

"A thirty-two—deflected by the sternum, so they had a bit of difficulty in determining the angle from which it was fired. Powder burns indicating that he was shot at very close range by someone he obviously didn't expect to shoot him. Numerous hypodermic wounds—one administered shortly before death, which the M.E. sets somewhere between two and six."

"That's a big help. Was the junk heroin?"

"Yes."

"Maybe this Gaudio was the pusher."

"You find out," Nelson said, dismissing him. "And ask Mr. Michael Williams to come in."

"One thing, Lieutenant—who else you got on this, if I need to swap notes?"

"Baldwin on the Williams house—Broder, who's checking to see if any of the names have guns registered to them—and Judd, who took the early train to Howardsville."

"Why waste Judd? Howardsville's come to you."

"Glen Williams's fiancée or ex-fiancée lives there, too. She can't be neglected."

"That so?"

"One of the letters included in your sampling was signed by her—Betty Conway."

"Oh, sure." Clevis added apologetically, "Truth is I was more hit by the texts than by names and addresses—and from the texts, they all should've been fiancées. Come to think of it, hers sounded less so than the rest. You putting a man on Thrace?"

"We'll see what you turn up."

"Okay." Clevis shuffled out the door like a man going nowhere, but Nelson knew from past performance that his goal was firmly fixed and that he would reach it willy-nilly.

A few minutes later he said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Williams," and gestured the short, powerful man to a chair at the right of his desk. He saw, as his visitor sat down, that he was greatly disturbed, and that a yellow cast overlay what was obviously a healthy outdoor complexion. He sharpened a pencil that needed no sharpening, in order to give the roughly cut face time to relax. Nelson preferred people under questioning to be as relaxed as possible. Contrary to the theory that anger or hysteria engendered truths that would not otherwise see the light, he believed that it was easier to separate truth from fiction when the answers were thought out. Then evasions were apt to be more perceptible, lies easier to detect than they would have been in a state of excitation. Unless, of course, he dealt with con-

genital liars. But at first glance the man who had announced himself as Mike Williams did not appear to be a congenital liar. Nelson waited, his deep-set brown eyes seeming to hold no more than polite interest.

"Lieutenant Nelson?"

"Yes."

"You're the man in charge of investigating my brother's—"

"Yes."

"I went down to Centre Street first—but they sent me here. I—I'm not a New Yorker—I don't know the ropes or much about police procedure—" He rubbed his face with a strong, square-tipped hand. "This hits me hard—" He started again. "I'm ten years older than Glen. I brought him up. My mother died when he was seven—my father a couple of years before."

"Would you like to smoke, Mr. Williams?"

"No—thanks. I didn't bring my pipe—and cigarettes don't seem worth the trouble. I'm not much for the refinements, Lieutenant. I'm a farmer."

"There are some very refined farmers these days," Nelson said.

"Yes—well—"

"When did you learn of your brother's death?"

"Last night. I listened to the midnight news. I—I couldn't believe it."

"I thought farmers retired at sundown."

"They do as a rule, but—" The silence that followed was like a muffled explosion of words.

Nelson said, "I suppose there isn't an occupation in the world that doesn't call for an occasional departure from routine."

Mike Williams nodded. He spoke without hostility. "And you want to know the occasion for my departure. It wasn't a guilty one. I had certain things on my mind—things that had nothing to do with my brother—or at least not directly."

Nelson waited until it became patent that Mike Williams could not or would not continue. Then he said pleas-

antly, "Have you had lunch?"

The rugged face looked startled. "Lunch? No—I'm not hungry."

"I am—and it's long past my usual hour. Would you mind having coffee while I eat? There's a restaurant down the street where we can continue this talk." He got up and did a little jig step to flex his long legs. "Don't forget your hat—not that you need one in this weather. June's behaving like mid-August. Has there been a shortage of rain your way?"

"Yes—but we manage by irrigation." Williams's voice sounded less strained. He followed Nelson out of the office, standing apart while he paused to speak to a group of uniformed policemen in the corridor and to have a few words with the desk sergeant.

The restaurant, a small, rather shabby place modeled on an old English chophouse, featured cooking of the hearty variety. The luncheon crowd had deserted it more than an hour ago, but there was a party of stragglers talking loudly over wedges of apple pie. Nelson ordered lamb chops, his mind apparently elsewhere, so that the waiter misunderstood and brought lamb chops for Williams as well. Williams did not comment, but he looked surprised when his empty plate was removed. And in the same detached manner with which he had eaten, he downed two cups of strong black coffee. Rid of that drawn yellow look, he might have been any man enjoying a leisurely meal with a friend. He even made the required responses to Nelson's general observations.

Then Nelson, without changing his tone by so much as a shade, said, "Do you visit the city often, Mr. Williams?"

"No—once a month or so for supplies." A moment ago Nelson had seen his white teeth flash at something said at the other occupied table. Now he was grave again. "I came in yesterday. I took the six-ten train back to Howardsville. I didn't see Glen. I wish I had. I might have prevented—he might have been alive today."

"Do you usually see him when you come in?"

"If he's at home."

"But doesn't he expect you? Don't you have a regular schedule for your trips?" Nelson decided that the face was oddly sensitive for all its rough cut.

"Glen knows my schedule, all right. But I couldn't expect him to juggle his plans to fit in with it. His life is—was given over to new friends and new interests after he came to New York—and I guess he found me pretty dull company. He never considered our being brothers any reason for pulling his punches about what he thought of farms and farmers. And I don't blame him. Why should he?"

"Did you meet any of the new friends he had made?"

Mike Williams stared at him. He said simply, "You'll have to look somewhere else for the man who murdered Glen, Lieutenant."

"I'll have to look everywhere."

"Yes—I see that, of course. But these friends of his—they're famous—artists—actors—song writers and the like. They're not criminals. They'd have no reason to kill Glen. They thought the world of him."

Nelson repeated, "Did you ever meet any of them?"

"No—but I feel as though I did. Glen talked about them so much—their names and what they do and what they eat and what they talk like and look like. When Glen got started he could make people as real as if they were right in the room. He really liked people in a big way—and they him. Even when he was a sprout he'd wander off from his chores as soon as my back was turned and start up with strangers and have them eating right out of his hand. He'd come back and tell me about it so pleased and excited that even if I'd made up my mind to wallop him I didn't have the heart. I guess I was a fool to think he'd ever be satisfied to stay on the farm in Howardsville."

Nelson, remembering the minute, self-destructive wounds in the dead body, thought, *Perhaps you were a fool not to wallop him.* But he did not express the thought. "How big a town is Howardsville?" he said.

"About eight thousand."

"Big enough for Glen to have made quite a few friends

there—and probably enemies, too, since the more popular a man is the more people seem to hate him."

"Glen had no enemies that I ever heard of."

"Then we'll stick to friends. Did he keep in touch with the ones he'd made in Howardsville?"

"I don't believe so. You see, people change—and although Glen was born and bred in Howardsville, he was smarter than most of the boys and girls he went around with—and I guess he kind of outgrew them except for—" He shook his head. He said too firmly, "No— he didn't keep in touch."

Nelson said, "He outgrew them except for—"

"Nothing—no one. My mind was on something else."

He lied badly, Nelson was pleased to note. He said, "You came here of your own accord to further the investigation of your brother's murder. So I think if you can possibly help it you should try to keep your mind from wandering to other matters." He saw the tanned face redden. He persisted without enjoyment. "Is this person you're so reluctant to mention in need of your protection?"

"Protection—good God, no—she's always been quite self-sufficient." It sounded bitter.

"I mean do you suspect her of having a hand in the murder?"

"Betty—me suspect— Of course not. It's just—there's no reason for involving—"

"Betty Conway?"

"How did you know I meant—"

"The police looked through your brother's desk as a matter of routine. Her name appeared on a letter or two."

"Oh." Then he said with distaste, "It don't seem right to root through a man's private business."

"We have to use whatever tools are at hand for our work."

The doglike eyes were tormented. "No matter—Glen wouldn't have anything to hide. As for Betty—Betty isn't the kind to put anything on paper she'd be ashamed of—or to do anything she'd be ashamed of, either." Nelson could almost see himself fading out of the man's retina.

Mike Williams was alone, locked up inside himself, as he went on broodingly, "She was Glen's girl—at least that's what I'd always thought. I was as sure as anything Glen would settle down and they'd marry and raise fine kids." The cords of his strong throat stood out. "I wanted it that way. I—"

Nelson thought, *So that's it.*

Mike Williams was saying, "But they drifted apart. They couldn't seem to agree about anything—and from what Betty said yesterday, it's been over and done with for a long time."

"What did Betty say yesterday?"

"Nothing. At least not in words." He seemed to be mulling it over to himself rather than answering a question. "I asked her if she'd happened to run into Glen in New York—and she said something about she hadn't happened to—and that she didn't see him by appointment, either. It was as though she had no interest in ever seeing him. But I don't know. I just don't know. I can't believe—They always had spats. Maybe this is only another spat and they'll make it up again. You see, I can't be sure—and unless I'm sure I can't tell her how I—"

Nelson said gently, "They won't make this quarrel up again. Your brother is dead."

It caused Mike Williams to emerge from himself, the pupils of his eyes shrinking as though against a sudden light.

Nelson said, "At what time and where did you talk with Betty Conway yesterday?"

"At the Howardsville station. We must have taken the same train home—it arrived late—close to seven-thirty. I didn't see her until we got off, though. She was stepping into her car. She'd left it parked in the station lot—"

"She'd been in New York, too?"

"Yes—for a medical checkup—not that she needed it. Betty's the picture of health. I told her so and she made a joke. She said she bores her doctor—"

"Do you know the name of her doctor?"

"No, I don't. After Howardsville's old Doctor Henshaw

retired, a new man came in. But most people don't like him very much. Of course we've got a fine hospital, but still they—" Mike Williams was not a subtle man. He had been slow to realize where the conversation was leading. Now he sat up stiffly and said, "Don't waste your time on nonsense, Lieutenant Nelson. I want to help all I can. That's why I'm here. But Betty and what she did yesterday have nothing to do with the case—and I won't have her plagued—" He looked ready to do battle.

Nelson appeared quite willing to drop Betty Conway. "Are you a rich man, Mr. Williams?"

The broad, low brow wrinkled. "Not what you'd call rich. I make out. I can support a—" Again he had to stop because for him all roads veered toward Betty Conway.

"Your brother was rich, wasn't he?"

"Glen? No. He only had— He wasn't rich."

"But judging by the way he lived, he spent a great deal of money. He must have had a good income."

Mike Williams's firm, square jaw came into prominence. He said shortly, "He had no income at all."

"Then how did he manage?"

"That can't be any business of—"

"Look here, I'm not the village gossip. I want only that information which I consider important to the investigation. How did your brother maintain himself if he had no income and no money?"

"I didn't say he had no money. He had some. Dad left the farm to me as oldest son—with the understanding, of course, that I'd look after my mother and Glen. And when Mother died she left Glen what money she had—about six thousand dollars. He came into it on his eighteenth birthday, and it was to be used for his education and whatever else he'd want at the time. It was only fair. My mother knew I'd be able to take care of myself and that the only education I wanted had to do with farming. But from the minute Glen learned to recognize his letters he was never without a piece of printed matter in his hand—even if it was no more than a drugstore pamphlet. So it stood to reason he'd be the scholar in the family."

"Was he?"

"Well, he didn't stick college very long—but he went on reading—and writing, too." His voice was proud. "He wrote a book."

"Did you read it?"

"Well—no. It was—it was kind of over my head. Glen said I shouldn't worry, because it was over the public's head, too. I guess he was fooling—but maybe not, because he didn't make any money on it."

"When did he take the New York apartment?"

"He— About eighteen months ago."

"And his sole capital was six thousand dollars?"

"No—I guess there couldn't have been much of that six thousand dollars left, although I—"

Nelson waited a few moments. Then he said, "Go on, please."

Williams obeyed reluctantly. "Well, the farm prospered—and so long as he stayed there he had no living-expenses. Under the circumstances, Dad would have expected me to furnish his board and lodging and clothes. As for that six thousand—Glen paid for his own car out of it—and he was always one to keep his end up, treating his friends and such—"

"Did he work on the place in return for his board and keep?"

Williams said defensively, "Farm work just wasn't his line—and I could afford experienced hired help." He seemed to sense Nelson's unspoken comment. "That's neither here nor there. I always felt the farm was half his, anyway. He was entitled to a share of the profits."

"So when he wanted to live in New York you advanced him his share of the profits?"

Mike Williams nodded.

"How much?"

"Eighteen thousand dollars." Nelson's expression forced him to elaborate. "You see, I'd just had an offer of thirty-six thousand for the whole place—but it's worth a lot more than that, what with the improvements I've— Well, I figured I was buying Glen out. That's the way he wanted it—

and it was fine with me, knowing as I did that he could never take any real pleasure in farming."

Nelson did some mental calculation. He calculated the price of the apartment's furnishings, and the clothes in Glen Williams's closets, and the entertainment catered by Neuilly, and when he had subtracted it from eighteen thousand dollars he found that there was very little left. It came to him, too, that the drug habit must have been recently acquired, since drugs devoured fortunes at a speed that seemed faster than light. He said, "Did he invest the money?"

"No—no, he didn't. Glen never had any notion of the value of money. Eighteen thousand seemed as much to him as maybe two hundred thousand—and both sums looked big enough to last forever, from the way he acted. He wasn't a businessman at all. I offered him a reasonable quarterly allowance for as long as he needed it—which would be until he settled down to something that suited him. It would have been better for me, because in farming you have to keep putting money back into— Well, aside from that, I'd have been much easier in my mind about him—but he wouldn't have it. He was anxious to cut loose completely, and I didn't feel I had the right to stand in his way."

Nelson managed to keep his sympathy from showing. He talked impersonally about farming in general, and discovered that by harnessing love and labor Mike Williams had converted a modest little home place into a prosperous modern enterprise. Then he reached for the luncheon check.

Mike Williams said, "I'll take that. There's no reason for you—"

Nelson ignored it. Deliberately and without zest he hit below the belt. He had no idea of what Betty Conway looked like, but he said, "A girl answering Betty Conway's description was seen on Glen's floor last night. The superintendent saw her just before he discovered the body."

Mike Williams, who had been more or less relaxed, made and shook a durable fist at Nelson. "That's a lie. Nobody

answers Betty's description except Betty herself. And she wasn't there." Nelson could see the collar tightening on his strong neck. "Do you think she could have talked to me as calm as you please and even made a joke if—"

"I didn't say she killed him."

Mike Williams took a deep breath. "Then what are you saying—and what are you making me say? I tell you she wasn't there. If she'd been there I'd have run into her, because the papers say the superintendent found my brother at half past five—and I was just entering the house at half past five, and if she'd been there I'd have run into her coming out." In the face of that statement he sounded astonishingly triumphant.

Nelson's "Oh?" did not sound triumphant. It sounded defeated.

## CHAPTER VI

IN THIS ONE INSTANCE Mike Williams produced without prompting. "I had some time to spare before the train left and I thought I'd take a chance and call on Glen. Generally I phone first. He liked it better that way—but it would have been foolish to waste the little while I had in a phone booth. So I went along to his place, thinking if he was in, all right and if he wasn't—all right, too. I rang the downstairs bell and there was no answer. Maybe if the girl who came rushing out right then hadn't let the downstairs door slam shut, I'd have gone up anyway to see if Glen was home and hadn't answered the bell because he wasn't expecting anyone. But she was in an almighty hurry. She saw me and could have held the door for a minute. I guess she was one of those city kids—raised wrong—"

"A kid?" Nelson said. It was an automatic question touched off by the fact that someone had rushed out of the house during the suspect period.

"Well—not much more. Spindly. I remember thinking she'd borrowed her mother's black clothes." He went on, impatient with his own digression. "Anyway, I began to think it was just as well. If Glen was home he might have had company or private business he didn't want me to horn in on. So I decided I shouldn't have come in the first place without phoning, and I took myself off to the station and read the paper until the train came in. But you do see, don't you, that Betty couldn't have been there when the

superintendent said—because I must have been downstairs at least five minutes and I'd have seen her come out."

Nelson made no comment, but he was not impressed. The superintendent's hesitancy about the time he had found the body could have meant that he had found it earlier and dawdled, for one reason or another, before he called the police. And if that were so, he would have seen his blond young lady earlier, too. But Judd, the operative sent to Connecticut, would take care of all that. Judd would not return without the name of Betty Conway's doctor or the time of her visit to his office, if she had been there at all, or any other facts that seemed pertinent. He said, "Why didn't you tell me at once that you'd called on your brother yesterday?"

"I didn't think I'd have to mention it. I didn't see him, and I thought it would only give you wrong ideas. You don't know me from a rotten potato—how I feel about Glen or—or anything else." He stared at Nelson, and the effort he was making to read Nelson's mind was all but palpable. He said doggedly, "Whatever you think—it had nothing to do with the case. Poor Glen must have been dead when I rang—"

Nelson said, "Did you know that he was a drug addict?"

"A drug addict—Glen!" There was a pause. He might have been waiting for Nelson to smile, to say it was a joke, to apologize for the tastelessness of it. Waiting, he suffered. He had taken a lot and he would probably take a lot more. But all of it would leave a carved record upon his open face. "Glen had no vices. He didn't even drink much. You must be mistaken."

"I'm not mistaken. Your brother's arms and thighs were plainly marked with needle punctures. I hoped you could tell us something about it—something that might connect with his murder."

"Maybe Glen was sick and didn't want to worry me. Maybe a doctor prescribed some of the injections they give people nowadays."

Nelson shook his head.

Mike Williams offered no other theory. He seemed

robbed of further speech until he was led back to headquarters. There he managed to dictate and sign a statement, and when he was made to understand that for the time being nothing further would be required of him, he went mutely on his way.

Nelson reread the statement several times, wondering bleakly if here was another case where love and loyalty had turned to hatred and destruction. He did not think that he had been wrong in his appraisal of Mike Williams's character, but he did not know. He called the apartment of Glen Williams, and to the man assigned to cover it he said, "Any visitors, Baldwin?"

"No, sir—well—that is—"

Nelson could have sworn he heard the man struggling with his conscience. "Well?"

"Well—a half hour ago I hear somebody fumbling with the lock and I sneak up and pull the door in as quiet and sudden as I can—which isn't quiet or sudden enough. I'm all set to grab, but when he sees me he squeaks and jumps back out of reach and turns and makes a beeline for the back stairs. I chase, but the door slams in my face and I can't open it. So I come back in here and try to raise the super, whose number I have handy by the phone—only he isn't there and his wife answers—taking her time about it—and then it's too late and the guy is long gone. I don't see how I could have done different, Lieutenant."

"You couldn't. Did you get any kind of a look?"

"A dark, thin guy—seemed about average height. I couldn't see his features clear, the way he jumped and scooted. I know that ain't any kind of a make. I wish I could have done better, but—" Baldwin was a newcomer to Homicide who had already earned the reputation for being the most apologetic cop extant. "I hope this won't be no black mark against me?"

"No black mark. I'm sending a relief over. When he arrives you're to go across the hall to an artist named Delaney. Get a description from him of the models who posed for him yesterday—the times of their arrivals and depar-

tures—and ditto for any other visitors he may have had."

"Yes, sir." Baldwin repeated the instructions.

"Good. After that go down to the third floor and see the tenants named Smith. Get a list of their visitors, too—with special attention to a thin young girl dressed in black. Report as soon as you have the information."

His phone rang as soon as he had replaced the receiver. The desk sergeant said, "A woman here—name of Thrace, Sarah. Wanted to see the commissioner but settled for you. Something to do with the Williams murder."

"Send her up—and hold any other calls until she's left."

Sarah Thrace made a musical-comedy entrance. Nelson, who had seen many startling sights, managed to keep his face impassive as he greeted her. He looked down, almost expecting to find the worn linoleum on his office floor obscured by the greensward.

Slowly she removed her white summer gloves. She touched a plump, manicured hand to a lock that peeped from under the wide brim of her picture hat. Then she rested upon her tall parasol. And when Nelson invited her to sit down she nodded graciously, lowered her opulence, and billowed her organdy ruffles over the uncompromising wooden chair that faced his desk.

The illusion of an English garden party was so strong that he wanted to say, "Tea will be along in a moment." He said, "If you can cast any light upon the death of Glen Williams, Miss Thrace, I shall be very glad you came to see me."

The coquettish toss of her head was the pattern of her life, of her dealings with men. He thought he might be in for something until she raised her eyes. They were very blue and very friendly eyes. And there was nothing of coquetry in their frank appraisal of him. And when she spoke, her whisky-flavored voice was earthy and matter-of-fact.

"Lieutenant Nelson, I was going to say that most men would be glad to see me anywhere, any time, with or without information. But I'll try to skip the badinage." She sighed and aged a little. "All I hope is that *I'll* be glad I

obeyed the impulse to come here."

"Impulse?"

"No—I'll skip that, too. This is no spur-of-the-moment business. I've been weighing the pros and cons of it since last evening."

"Since the murder of Glen Williams?"

She corrected him. "Since I *heard* of the murder of Glen Williams." She took her eyes from his face. She looked around the office. She sighed again.

"Will you have a cigarette, Miss Thrace?" He pushed the box toward her.

She brightened, but when he got to the word "cigarette" she shook her head in disappointment. She aged a little more and sank back heavily in the wooden chair with no thought to the arrangement of the organdy ruffles. He understood what she wanted even before he heard the small sound of her tongue patting the roof of her mouth. He opened the bottom drawer of his desk and took out a bottle of Scotch and two clean glasses.

"Well," she said, "that's real kind of you." The diction she employed for the cliché might have issued from Clevis's neighbor in Brooklyn. "I don't want you to think I make a habit of drinking in the afternoon." Then she laughed lustily. "Hell, I drink whenever I get the chance. You're a good fellow, so why should I lie to you, Lieutenant?" She tasted the drink he had poured, and eyed the token drops his own glass contained. "Your Scotch is good, too. You should try a bigger sample to get the full flavor. No—no more for me—at least not for the moment. This isn't the first I've had today, and I don't want to fall on my face until I've unloaded."

"I'm listening," Nelson said.

"Have you ever heard of me—or are you just naturally nice to everybody?"

"Of course I've heard of you. I've seen you on the stage, too."

"I wouldn't like to call a gallant gentleman a liar, but if you did see me it must have been when you were too young to appreciate my performance. That curly white

hair doesn't fool me for a moment. Nothing does, if you'll excuse me for boasting."

He said patiently, "I'm sure you're not easily fooled. That's why I'm sure you've brought me some information—"

"I'm leading up to it, Lieutenant. Don't rush me. Let me tell it in my own inimitable fashion. First it's required that I make a confession. No, not the sort of confession your sweet pointed ears are accustomed to hearing—I just want to confess that I'm a 'has been.' But believe it or not, I was and am a damn good actress—a character actress—not a star. At no time in the career of Sarah Thrace did she thirst for stardom. Juicy character parts were her meat and drink. That doesn't seem overambitious, does it? And yet wherever she seeks for roles the light brush is carefully applied. The field is overcrowded and nobody wants to make the teeniest entering wedge for dear old Sarah Thrace." She smiled suddenly and shed a few years. "You look worried, Lieutenant. I expect you've had more than a baker's dozen of women blubbering on your wide shoulders. You're the type to draw them. Well, ease your mind about me. I'm not building to the crying scene. I'm merely establishing myself as a 'has been.' " She was the English lady again. "And to have been a 'has been' in the court of Glen Williams is, I assure you, a rare distinction—because the people he associated with are "never wases,' and, with perhaps one exception, 'never will bes.' "

"Is a man called Gaudio the one exception?"

She showed no surprise. She said, "If you know Tom Gaudio, perhaps I'm bringing coals to Newcastle."

"I know his name."

"Good for you. Now I made the mistake of knowing more than his name, and I regret to inform you that the experience hasn't been entirely rewarding. Expansive, outgoing Sarah Thrace has made many mistakes in her dealings with the human race—" With complete detachment she lifted the bottle and poured Scotch into her glass. It might indeed have been tea she was pouring, for quantity and for her grand manner. "Shall I tell you about my

dealings with the human race?" She glanced at the scarred desk, the linoleum floor, the dingy walls. "This is a charming spot for it—eminently suitable to my tale, as a matter of fact." She took several deep swallows of whisky. "Your face wasn't designed for patience, Lieutenant, or for this setting. It's rather a beautiful face. It has a fawnlike quality. You'd be more at home in a woodland grove—"

Nelson said firmly, "We were speaking of Tom Gaudio. Did he bring you the news of the murder?" He returned the bottle to the bottom drawer.

"You hated to do that, didn't you, Lieutenant? Your mouth is a dead giveaway—much too generous to let you get any satisfaction out of being inhospitable or stingy. But I understand. I realize that the big wheel of the Homicide Squad can't really afford to hold drunken parties in his sanctum. Shall we adjourn to my house?" Her words were coming out slurred. She seemed to be listening to them, because a look of wonder crossed her broad, good-tempered face. "Sorry—perhaps that last drink was one too many," she said, giving precise attention to each syllable. "I *am* sorry. I didn't come here to make a nuisance of myself. I don't often overestimate my capacity, but I suppose that highballs for breakfast instead of coffee are unwise in the last analysis."

Nelson liked her. He found himself hoping that she would be all right, get a job, regain to that Sarah Thrace she spoke of with affection and respect. His absent chief, Inspector Waldo Furniss, had often accused him of having mush for a heart. He said, "Would some coffee help now?"

"No. I'll be all right. If you give me another moment I'll tell Sarah Thrace to sober up and deliver." Whatever it was she told herself worked. She readjusted the organdy ruffles, sat straight in the hard wooden chair, and began to talk sense. She appeared to take no notice when Nelson pressed a buzzer on his desk.

"Tom Gaudio came to my house at a bit after six last evening. He rang up first and made a point of saying that he'd been trying to get me for an hour. That was exaggeration—but whether deliberate or not I can't say, because

people do exaggerate about such matters. What I can say is that I came home before six and took a quick shower. These days theatrical agencies always down me—and showers are morale-lifting." She paused. "I'm telling you this so that you'll get the whole picture. I'm not trying to suggest that Tom killed Glen Williams. But he's more than trying to suggest that I did. And I've a feeling he can make himself believe anything he chooses—especially since—Never mind—he's a very intense young man—or maybe fanatic is the word. He rarely bothers to let his conscience know what his mind is up to."

"And you came here because you thought he might come here first to put us on your trail?"

She nodded. "An ignoble errand, isn't it? But I don't set myself up as a public-spirited citizen who co-operates with the police in order that justice be served. I never went in for abstract causes. I don't even like people en masse. Individuals—yes or no, as the case may be. And permit me to boast that I've brought quite a lot of sunshine to individuals from time to time." She added, "And one at a time—if you should be harboring the wrong impression. No—relax—I'm not going off at a tangent again. What I'm trying to indicate subtly is that I've brought quite a lot of sunshine to Tom Gaudio. I'm not ashamed of it, either. He's young enough to be my son—but then who isn't?"

Her back was to the door. She could not see the silent policeman who had answered Nelson's summons. He was writing busily, his notebook backed by the wall, his sharp features a study in discipline.

"I met Tom about a year ago," said Sarah Thrace, "and I felt sorry for the poor devil. At first my intentions toward him were strictly honorable. He looked all kinds of starved, and I thought I could attend to one phase of it by asking him to my apartment for a home-cooked meal. I'm rather an artist in that field, too. Well, he accepted my invitation with alacrity, as they say, and pretty soon it became a habit with him. He does—did love his food—and one habit led to another. Luckily I was working when he entered my life. I'd landed the part of dear old nauseous Aunt Flo in a soap

opera—so I could afford to nourish Tom and even buy him an occasional pair of socks or whatnots. He wasn't a costly item—not in the beginning—although I did feel the pinch a little when the sponsor's wife had the author of the soap opera kill off Aunt Flo because the characterization made her self-conscious. Tommy boy was a bit irritated. Perhaps he liked me better employed—or perhaps the novelty was wearing off. At any rate, his circle had widened some through his association with me and he had other places to go—so he wasn't quite the poor, friendless stray he'd been at first." She paused for a moment. "All in all," she said, "I didn't do so badly by Tom until I brought him to one of Glen's parties."

Nelson opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it.

She went on. "He fell for Glen—fell hard. Nothing queer. Call it the birth of ambition. Glen's drawing-room manner, his assurance, his clothes, his furniture, his car. Duplicates of these could be Tom's—and Tom meant to get them. He would get them. Glen told him so. He had great talent, Glen said. If he went about it in the right way, there was no reason why he couldn't become the country's leading photographer—the *world's* leading photographer. Of course, it would take some doing—but that's why Glen was there. Glen meant to see that it was done, to provide the necessary advice and the very necessary capital. What was money for but to help others? Tom need have no false pride. And Tom didn't have any. He lapped up every morsel of it and drooled for more. And I listened, too—secondhand. But I wasn't so enthusiastic. When you have the same diet for breakfast, dinner, and supper, it gets to be something less than a treat. And I may have been influenced by the fact that in the early stages of my acquaintance with Glen he'd dished the same stuff out to me—and even then I couldn't swallow it for very long. So one morning I told Tom to put a little salt on it, and he walked out in a flap and went back to his furnished room. Our situation changed considerably after that, although he continued to honor me with his presence whenever he wanted a meal or had an idle moment. He'd even consent

to squire me places if it suited his schedule. And that's the story of Glen and Tom—or as much of it as I know up to last evening when he came riding hard to inform me that Glen was dead." Her broad nose crinkled. She gave a sudden throaty chuckle and clapped a hand over her highly painted mouth. She removed it and said, "Lieutenant, you looked shocked—or probably as nearly shocked as you can look. But believe me, I'm not hardhearted—just old enough to be glad that everything has its funny side. I wasn't laughing because a murder had been done. I was laughing at Tom's announcement of it." She told him about the children's game, about King Dido who had died doing this way. Then she said, "And I wouldn't be surprised if that's how Glen Williams died. He died doing this way."

Over her shoulder Nelson saw the expectant face of the writing policeman clouded by disgust. He had obviously believed that Sarah Thrace intended to reveal motive, method, and murderer then and there.

Nelson offered her a cigarette, and lit one for himself when she declined. She did not, however, repeat the motions of expressing thirst. She pressed her ample body as far back as the straight chair permitted, her eyes fixed upon his face.

He said, "Did Gaudio accuse you at once of being responsible for the death of his friend?"

"He didn't accuse me at all—not in so many words. He asked for a drink and I gave it to him—a stiff one. It didn't seem to steady his nerves—in fact, he stared at the glass as though it were a Judas. He— Well, that's extraneous. Finally he sniffled a bit and blew his little nose and gave an account of the business. It seemed he'd been working in his darkroom and came out of his absorption to remember that he had an appointment with Glen. We were all due at Glen's last night—but Tom's appointment was private." She grimaced. "Dealing, I imagine—and it doesn't take much imagination—with Glen's plans for his career. Anyway, he was late—he didn't even stop to change his shirt or wash—just rushed out the way he was, for fear he'd incur

the royal displeasure—and when he arrived he saw policemen in the lobby—and some man talked to him and explained what had happened."

"According to Gaudio, exactly what did the man say?"

"That Glen Williams had been shot and killed. At least that's all Tom repeated of it. He might have been going to say more—but I got a bit feline at that point and said something about how sensible he'd been to run away instead of staying to get involved with the police."

"Do you know of any reason why he'd be afraid of such an involvement?"

She lowered her blue eyes. "No—I told you I was just being feline."

"What made you feline, Miss Thrace?"

Her poise had returned. "That question's a compliment, Lieutenant. You wouldn't have asked it if you thought I was a chronic cat. You're right. I'm not. I expect I was fed up in general—and fed up specifically because Tom always took it for granted I'd be on tap when he telephoned and got ratty because he'd rung for a few minutes without an answer."

"Is that all?"

"Yes," she said, registering surprise. "That's all."

"Do you think Gaudio's accusal or hinted accusal was a reaction to your cattiness?"

"I guess so. It followed on the heels of it, anyway. He started to dig around in the most extraordinary way for an account of my activities yesterday afternoon. He acted just like Guido, the Gimlet of Ghent, if you know your Stephen Leacock, Lieutenant."

Nelson smiled. "If Gaudio is as unsubtle as Guido, it won't take us long to discover what really is on his mind. What time did he leave your apartment last night?"

"About an hour after he arrived. I wanted him to eat something, but he wasn't interested in food. As a matter of fact, he hasn't been for quite a while—" She bit her heavy lower lip.

"Miss Thrace—would you mind elaborating upon something you said—something about not having done badly by

Gaudio until you took him to one of Glen Williams's parties?"

"Did I say that? Yes, I could have said it." Her friendly eyes evaded Nelson. "But I have elaborated, haven't I, about Glen filling him up with hopes—promising him the earth—and as sure as I'm sitting here, never meaning to follow through."

"Does Gaudio have as much talent as Williams led him to believe?"

She shrugged. "He's not a bad photographer—some of his studies in design are rather interesting. He might do very well if he stopped trying for short cuts."

"Then encouragement and flattery wouldn't necessarily hurt him—even if it wasn't implemented. Glen Williams was guilty of a more tangible sin, wasn't he?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you know. You know that Tom Gaudio became a drug addict. Several things you've said and half said, coupled with odds and ends I've picked up from other sources, point to the fact that you know. You've indicated that he changed from a hearty eater to a man not interested in food. You mentioned that the stiff drink you gave him had no effect—that he can make himself believe whatever he—"

"I'm no match for you, am I, Lieutenant? Yes—Tom started taking dope after I introduced him to Glen. I've been around enough to detect the signs—and on him the signs were easy to read. You had only to look at his eyes—the pupils splashed all over the irises. At first he seemed to get a real charge out of whatever it was he took. He'd never been what you'd call the life of the party—more the other way—moody—shy. Hypochondriacal, too—always mewing about his little aches and pains. But after he'd been initiated his personality changed. He was riding the crest—whooping it up like a real outgoing, backslapping boaster from Butte—"

"You're describing the effects of heroin," Nelson said, "but that riding-the-crest phase doesn't last. Tolerance for the drug is acquired so fast that its pleasures are

short-lived."

"You can say that again. Heroin or whatever—his pleasures deserted him at the rate of knots. He developed a foul temper. And jumpy! He'd break into a cold sweat if you so much as touched his sleeve. Seemed scared to death half the time and kept complaining of a queasiness in his stomach. Once when I was out with him he disappeared into the bathroom and stayed there for years—very embarrassing."

"But he felt better when he emerged."

"Better? Remade—mentally and physically. You'd think he'd discovered a fortune in the plumbing fixtures."

"Did you ever discuss it with him?"

"I tried." She sounded weary.

"Addiction to drugs is one of the most expensive hobbies in the world. Do you think he was financed by Glen Williams?"

"He might have been. I know I didn't finance him—just a few dollars here and there when I could spare it and it seemed urgent. Of late it's seemed urgent in the extreme." She thought for a moment. "In fact, one day last week I confessed to being short of cash and I thought he was going to try to knock me down. I said *try* advisedly."

Nelson's pleasant voice was dry. "Addicts have been known to kill their own mothers to get the price of a 'fix.' "

She said as dryly, "Mother Thrace sees what you mean." But she looked sick. After a pause she said, "I'm beginning to be sorry I came—sorry I told you all this. It *was* an ignoble impulse. I have nothing against Tom, although I've taken an odd way of proving it. The truth is"—there was a slight break in her voice—"I'm still fond of him. I don't think he murdered Glen."

"If Glen had started him on the habit and was withholding his supply—"

She shook her head. The incongruous garden hat wobbled on its perch. She said miserably, "I'm not even sure he did start him. Perhaps I've cut it out of whole cloth. If I may descend to personalities again, you strike me as being rather wise, Lieutenant—not the type to go off half-cocked.

If I'd known there were men like you in the department I wouldn't have been so afraid of my own skin. I'd have sat it out at home."

"What about Williams himself? Did he evidence the same symptoms as Gaudio?"

"I've seen progressively less of Glen in the last few months. And you could never tell about him. He was something like what the analysts describe as manic—way up or way down." She paused again. "I don't want you to get the wrong impression from anything I may have said. Could be I *am* becoming just a spiteful, catty old woman. Glen wasn't a bad sort. Quite charming, actually. I got sore at him because he seemed to make a business of flattery—of leading people up alleys that any fool could tell were dead ends. But maybe his motives were innocent—maybe that was his way of making people happy."

"Did you, by any chance, read Glen's book?"

"Who—me?" Her reaction reminded him of Clevis. "He gave me a copy, and I honestly tried to read it, so that I could make the right responses when he sounded me out, but—" She raised her eyebrows. "Paper-backed, too, so that it didn't even gladden the eye. I believe that leather-bound copy he prays to is the only one in existence."

"Prays to?"

"Well, he's had a niche carved out for it, and there always seems to be a floral offering there."

Nelson did not comment. He said, "You still insist that no more than a veiled accusation made by a man you knew to be unstable brought you here?"

"Isn't that good enough? I—my reputation—I can't have stories like that spread." She drew herself up in the wooden chair. She seemed to be engrossed in some game with her ruffles. "In the theater the slightest hint of anything fishy would ruin what chances I—"

"Have you seen Gaudio since he left your apartment last night?"

"No—I haven't."

"Whom did you see?"

"Why—no one."

"But you talked to someone."

She raised her eyes to his face again. "Lieutenant, I brought all this on myself. I should be kicked around the block. I am being kicked around the block." For a large woman she looked astonishingly helpless.

He smiled. "You paid me a compliment before. You said I wasn't the type to go off half-cocked. Are you taking it back?"

"No—it's just that if through sheer stupidity I involve myself—that's one thing. But I don't want to involve some rather pleasant people who innocently and through no fault of their own wandered into the wrong pew." Then she said almost crossly, "Take that patient, waiting gaze away, will you? Oh—all right—it was Joss Woodruff. She phoned me. She said Tom had been to see her early this morning. She thought that I should be warned about the stories he was spreading about me—and she—she wanted my advice—about how to deal with him, I mean. He'd said a lot of irresponsible things that—"

"Irresponsible things—about you?"

"Yes—of course."

"No—not of course. Why would Miss Woodruff want your advice if he hadn't included her in the irresponsible things he said?"

"*Mrs.* Woodruff." The correction was mechanical, but she seized upon it as an excuse to change the subject. She said rapidly, almost gaily, "Joss is a wonderful girl. Morgan, her husband, is a darling, too. It wasn't Tom I meant when I said Glen's circle included an exception to the 'never wases.' It was Morgan Woodruff. That lad really has talent. Given the right break, he—"

Nelson said, "If necessary, we'll come back to Morgan Woodruff. First I'd like you to answer my question."

"What question?"

"Why did Mrs. Woodruff want your advice?"

"Hell—oh hell." Then her voice became defiant. "Why wouldn't she? She was worried about the way he acted, and she's seen me with him so often that she thought I was the logical person to call. After all, he was practically a

stranger to her, and it was obvious, I suppose, that he needed help. She didn't know he took dope—his calling so early and shooting off his mouth must have seemed like sheer insanity—"

"She thought he was insane because he accused you of murder?"

She tried to be flippant. "Now that you've met me, wouldn't you draw the same conclusion?"

"And he went to her with his suspicions even though she was a stranger to him? Why her? Are you and she close friends?"

"No, but— Dammit, I've told you why. He was unbalanced—doped—"

"I'm afraid you'll have to do better than that, Miss Thrace."

Reluctantly, she did better than that. She told him that Joss Woodruff had called her, not knowing where else to turn, because Tom had accused Joss of being Glen's mistress. And Joss was afraid he would take the story to Morgan, and Morgan wasn't too well and had enough to disturb him without that. "And if ever," Sarah Thrace concluded, "there was anything more absurd, I'll lose what little faith I have in human nature. Because Joss and Morgan—well, I wish you could see them together. It's beautiful. It's a modernized version of any pair of historically renowned lovers you care to mention."

## CHAPTER VII

NELSON COULD NOT ACCEPT the absurdity of Joss Woodruff's guilty relationship to Glen Williams. He did not say this to Sarah Thrace. He caught the writing policeman's eye and gave a slight nod. The policeman interpreted the signal correctly and went off to transcribe his notes. Then Nelson, his mind half occupied with other matters, put Sarah Thrace through a few more paces from which he drew no important conclusions. By the time the policeman returned to lay the typescript on his desk, she had openly asked for and been granted another drink. She was gratefully devoting herself to it.

Nelson pushed the typescript toward her. "Would you mind signing this?"

She looked at him in bewilderment. "Signing what?"

"Your statement."

She almost dropped her glass. Incredulously she scanned the thin sheaf of papers. "You took down everything I said? How—with mirrors?"

"You couldn't see the stenographer from where you're sitting."

"An accident, no doubt—carefully arranged to make me feel more at home."

"Do you find the statement in order?"

"I find it very much out of order. I find it a dirty trick. All that stuff about Joss—it makes me positively sick—and what it will make her—"

"We'd have got to her sooner or later," Nelson said, thinking of the cross-section of letters pre-empted by Clevis.

"How, may I ask?" Her voice was laden with sarcasm.

"We're making it our business to interview as many of Glen Williams's acquaintances as possible."

"Oh. Glommed on to his address book, I suppose. Well, if I ever get bumped off—and I feel like a candidate for it this minute—you can take it from me that I'll destroy every bit of paper in the house, so that my friends won't be annoyed by people like you."

"I wish I could make you understand that you haven't betrayed a confidence," Nelson said gently. "You may even have helped Mrs. Woodruff by the stand you've taken that she's not the type to indulge in extramarital affairs."

"Do I have a choice about signing this?"

"I shouldn't think so."

She signed with no further protest. But her hand shook a little. "Anything else I can do for you?" she said bitterly.

He said there was nothing else, thanked her for coming, and escorted her to the door. Before she billowed through it she drew herself up and cried in a ringing voice, "Keep your jails clean, Buster."

He returned to his desk grinning. But the grin faded as he found what he was searching for in the folder containing Clevis's haul.

The letter signed *Joss* seemed out of key among the feminine bits of stationery. But it was a love letter in spite of the fact that its format was unromantic. It had been typed single-spaced upon a battered machine with a worn ribbon, and the manuscript paper employed was of the kind used for second sheets. The text started high on the page and left a generous margin of white space beneath. Reading without pleasure, Nelson thought that either Joss Woodruff was an inferior typist or that the stress of her emotions was responsible for the number of Xed-out errors.

Glen Williams had been *My darling Glen* to Joss Woodruff. But notwithstanding her deep and indestructible love for him, she did not mean to sit back and let him have

things all his own way. She was, in many more words than seemed necessary to make her point, not going to permit him to renounce her out of his pity and loyalty for Morgan. She could not help but admire his nobility—his integrity. She herself had made countless sacrifices for Morgan, but what that poor soul did not know could not hurt him, and how could she force her love to go where it would not go? Clichés were almost as thick as the errors. *We only live once—and then too short a time—and the hours spent in the arms of my Glen are the only hours that hold purity or rightness in an evil, guilty world . . . so I'll be there tomorrow—and you'll be there—because something stronger than both of us—something that makes us as helpless as leaves in the wind . . .* That was the gist of the letter. Considering the purple tinge of its text, it ended rather suddenly in stark black and white. *I'm running down to the corner mailbox. Then I'll come back and cook dinner for my lawfully wedded husband. All my love, Joss.*

Nelson placed the letter in a separate folder, marked it *Lab,* and rang for a messenger. His mind etched a picture of one Joss Woodruff. In spite of Sarah Thrace's warm praise, he saw her as a hard-faced beauty with a second-rate intellect and third-rate morals, discontented with her lot and clutching at her sordid version of romance with both greedy hands. He saw, as well, the meek, struggling, lawfully wedded husband who had nothing and probably went about believing he had everything.

The desk sergeant had followed instructions, withholding telephone calls while Sarah Thrace was in the office, putting them through the moment she departed. Nelson gave the ringing instrument a cold stare that would have silenced a human being. Joss Woodruff's letter did not suggest that she was ready to divorce the poor husband and marry the lover. But perhaps, Nelson thought, she had acquainted the lover with such an intention and found no need to restate it. And perhaps it was not so much integrity as fear of a marriage trap that had caused Glen Williams to make his renouncement. And perhaps when she had gone "there" she had been faced with the true nature of

his "nobility" and killed him. Or perhaps her husband was not so unsuspecting after all, and had followed her "there," and harked to the voice of his outraged manhood which clamored for revenge. Nelson smiled crookedly. The purple prose must be catching, he thought. It seemed to be affecting his brain, lending it a new vocabulary. The letter bore no date. The envelope was missing. But the "tomorrow" might easily have referred to the day of the murder.

It seemed to Lieutenant Gridley Nelson, acting captain of Homicide, that a visit to the Woodruffs' was strongly indicated. The present time was twenty minutes after four, and there was no time like the present, or, failing that, a quarter of an hour later.

So for the next fifteen minutes he took the most urgent of the telephone calls, advising and instructing on matters departmental and listening to the report of the detective stationed in the Williams apartment.

Operation Delaney and Smith, Baldwin, the detective, assured Nelson, was completed. Delaney, the artist, residing opposite to Williams, had used only one model for the past three days and had received no visitors. The model was named Vita Suarez, and she was a Spanish-looking type, dark and "kind of pushed out above and below, if you get me, Lieutenant." Nelson could visualize the involuntary pantomime that accompanied the description. "And I asked to see his wife, Mrs. Delaney, and he called her and I put the question to her before they could cook up anything together, and she said the same, positively no other visitors. So I think they're on the level. They're both nice-spoken and wish they could move because they don't like murder except at a distance, only it's hard to get a suitable place for Mr. Delaney's work— Sure, Lieutenant, excuse me, I'll cut it short. I went down to the third floor and that was a different story. Mrs. Smith was home. Her husband's away on a business trip since last week. If I was him I'd stay away— Yes, sir, I'm sorry but— Yes, sir. She got real sore and said she had no visitors at all yesterday— especially no girl who was skinny and wore a black dress.

It was like she thought I was crazy to come and bother her with such foolishness. I guess none of this is what you wanted, Lieutenant, but—"

Nelson said it would do for a starter and broke the connection. He picked up a telephone directory. He recorded the address of the only Morgan Woodruff listed. He strode out of the office, out of the building, trying to concentrate on those members of the force who interrupted his swift passage, and exchanging surface pleasantries with a reporter who had a hang-over. He got into his car and drove to the Woodruff apartment house, wondering why Clevis had not checked back and whether the skinny young girl in black encountered by the superintendent's wife and by Mike Williams had said "Smith" for the obvious reason that it was the first name she could think of to account for her presence, which she dared not account for by uttering the name of the person she had really come to see. Williams, for example. For obviously, according to the adjectives "skinny" and "spindly," used by the superintendent's wife and by Mike Williams, she was not the Spanish-looking-type model "pushed out above and below."

The Woodruff street was mean, yet not too mean to display the American phenomena of the car-lined curbstone. Nelson had to park his Buick in a lot several blocks away.

The Woodruff house was mean, too, a dingy, soot-seasoned walk-up. The door clicked open in response to his ring and he made the steep climb. By the time he reached the hot, musty landing near the roof he was willing to concede that Joss Woodruff might have reason to be discontented with her lot. His own walk-up apartment near Lexington Avenue was a paradise by comparison, well kept and clean. He had rented it at the onset of the housing shortage and had been fortunate enough when he married Kyrie in the thick of the shortage to take over the adjoining apartment, too. So he and Kyrie, and now Junie, had plenty of space. And they had Sammy to add to their peace and comfort. And he was a lucky man, and let him not condemn others less lucky, sight unseen. He tried to strip

himself of bias as he pressed the bell on the Woodruffs' door.

It opened at once. The woman standing there was no one he expected to see. He said, "Is Mrs. Woodruff at home?"

"I'm Mrs. Woodruff," Joss said. She added a polite "Good afternoon," because it occurred to her that this caller might be a salesman like Morgan and that she had nothing to give him but courtesy. "Perhaps I ought to tell you," she said, "that I'm—we're not in the market for anything. I'm sorry, but—" She lost the rest of the sentence. It was not that she found his scrutiny offensive, but that its steadiness was unnerving. It went on even while he took a leather folder from his pocket and opened it in a manner that must have been perfected by practice.

"My name is Nelson," he said. "Lieutenant Nelson, Homicide." He extended the folder. "Perhaps you'd like verification."

She did no more than glance at the credentials. She said, "Come in," and when they reached the living-room she said, "Sit down."

He sat down. She resented the relaxed attitude he managed to achieve even though he had chosen the chair with the treacherous springs. She resented his well-tailored summer worsted and the youth implicit in his olive-skinned face under its contradictory shock of curly white hair. She herself sat tense and waiting in the opposite chair.

He said with no more than passing interest, "Is your husband at home?"

"No—he's not." She hated herself for being unable to let it go at that. "You see, my husband sells encyclopedias—I thought you might be a salesman, too, and—" She bit her lip. She was Joss Woodruff, among whose attributes Morgan had listed serenity and unshakable poise. But things had happened to her that—

Nelson said, "It doesn't matter. It's you I want to talk with at the moment."

"About what?" The words were quiet, but her face

showed that she wanted to scream them, wanted to know why she was being harassed by a man from Homicide.

He made a show of surprise. "Glen Williams's death. Sorry—I didn't mean to be so abrupt about it. I thought you'd have heard by this time."

She said, "I have heard—or read. It was in the morning paper. Burglars broke into his apartment—didn't they?"

"It looks that way."

She repeated, "Looks that way?"

Nelson's voice was rueful. "It's not unusual for newspapers to cavil at the slow methods of the police and to try to jump the gun. Actually we have no means of knowing why or by whom Glen Williams was killed. We haven't had time to check thoroughly—but we have observed that a number of small valuables which should have tempted a burglar were left untouched in the apartment. Of course, that could mean that the burglar was intercepted before he had time to complete the job."

She said nothing.

"However, there are a few other factors which war with the burglary theory—"

She said, "Other factors?" and then imposed a stricture upon herself to speak only when a direct question was put to her. In that way no inadvertent light could disclose her secret thoughts about Glen Williams. She lowered her eyelids. She looked through her fair, stubby lashes at the man from Homicide and hoped that he was unaware of her constraint, or that he accepted it as born of the natural distress of one unaccustomed to even slight contact with murder.

His voice, at least, was sympathetic. "You and Mr. Williams were close friends."

It was a statement, not a question. It took her off guard. "No—we were not close friends. My husband—it was through my husband's job that we met." Again she was unable to check herself. "Mr. Williams had been kind to my husband and naturally we wanted to make some return—so we invited him here and he seemed to enjoy coming—"

"I don't wonder," Nelson said. His eyes traveled the

simple little room. "You've made this extremely attractive."

Joss was momentarily diverted. "I hadn't much to work with," she said without bitterness. "If you look closely you'll realize that everything's a bit seedy—but having a home is very important to my husband and to me—" Her brown eyes met Nelson's and she tensed again at the expression she surprised in them. She could not know that it was induced by the remarkable fact that each time she said "My husband," she seemed to wave a bright banner symbolizing her reason for being, and that the man from Homicide was trying to reconcile this with the typewritten letter he had marked *Lab*.

He said abruptly, "You corresponded with Williams."

"Corresponded?"

His pleasant voice sharpened. "Mrs. Woodruff, you look as though you're trying to determine just what foreign language I'm speaking."

"I am. Why should I correspond with a man who lives in the same city? I have a telephone and so has—had he."

She saw that he was angry. She did not know what had provoked his anger.

He had expected and rather enjoyed the histrionics of Sarah Thrace. But somehow histrionics coming from this girl were an insult. Everything about her looked honest, her strong, free body, her face. And yet she had written a letter proving dishonesty. He said, "We'll use no more words than are necessary. You and Glen Williams were lovers."

Her heart was thudding, interfering with the honest volume of her voice. "You've been listening to Tom Gaudio. He sent you here."

"A letter sent me here—a statement of your relationship to Glen Williams—signed with your name."

Her face was pale. She stood up, gripping the arms of the chair. Beneath her the room rocked like a ship. That letter—the only letter she had sent to Glen was—

"Can I get you some water?" he said.

She did not hear. She was thinking, *If it could be a very*

*bad dream—if I could wake up some morning last week with Morgan there sleeping beside me—*

Nelson said, "Are you all right?" and to her his voice had become ice and he loomed before her clouded eyes as a machine which could produce nothing but ice. She said, "Yes—excuse me—I felt strange for a moment. I'm all right now. That letter—the letter I wrote to Glen Williams—was a statement of the way I felt about him. You seem to be reproaching me for it—I can't imagine why. And knowing him—having known him—I can't imagine why he didn't destroy the letter—but, of course, he didn't if you found it—and you wouldn't—there'd be no sense in your lying." She was sitting down again, glad of the supporting chair since there was no other support. "But I don't see why the letter should interest you unless—"

"Unless?"

Her color was returning, and with it some of her poise. "Unless you think that in a fit of outraged virtue I killed him."

"Did you?"

"No." This time she felt no inclination to elaborate. She looked down at her left wrist, at the little disk that had been Morgan's mustering-out gift to her, that on several grim occasions she had needed to pawn, and had not, because Morgan saw the transaction as a knuckling to defeat. The little disk said a quarter to six. For once she hoped that Morgan would be late, late enough to miss the Homicide man.

"Your husband might have killed him," Nelson said. "Other men have been made desperate by the same goad."

The sickness was returning. She fought it. "My husband isn't other men," she said. And then: "He didn't know—I didn't tell him."

Nelson said tonelessly, "I'm sure you didn't. But sooner or later rumors have a way of reaching the concerned party."

"No—I'd have realized if he knew. He can't hide his feelings from me."

"But you can hide yours from him."

"If necessary."

"That must be quite a comfort to you." His hostility surprised himself. He had met quite a few women who for one reason or another ignored convention, and he had not thought of judging them for their sins. But they had not been like this woman, this girl who was anybody's clean, wide-eyed sister to be protected against—

She stared at him. She said evenly, "Why are you talking to me this way? I'm aware that the police have to question the innocent and guilty alike in a murder case—I'm not objecting to that—but I see no reason for your antagonism—and you're being extremely antagonistic."

He said, "Then I apologize. It's bad practice for a detective to show antagonism—or anything else, for that matter."

She did not analyze the apology. She saw with relief that he had risen from Morgan's chair. *He will be gone before Morgan gets home,* she thought.

He said, "I wonder if you have a typewriter? It would save us both a bit of trouble if I could write something before I return to headquarters."

She bit her lip at the prospect of further delay. "I have one, but it isn't much good."

"No matter—as long as it works at all."

"Well—over there—under the desk. We bought it second-hand, and I'm about the only one who can manage it—"

"Thank you." He strode over to the desk, stooped, and lifted the heavy old Remington as though it were a light toy. He set it upon the desk.

"You'll find paper in the top drawer," she said. She watched him take a sheet from the stack of cheap paper, insert it, and start to type.

He said over his shoulder, "Two-finger system. You're probably an expert."

"I'm quite good." He had finished. She sighed as he took the paper out. Then she saw that he was offering it to her along with a fountain pen.

"Will you read this and sign it, please? It's the gist of our conversation, and I've left space for you to fill in a brief

account of the way you spent yesterday."

"I spent yesterday at home—except for the few moments I was out shopping."

"Well, please write it in—it may save you from having to make a formal statement later."

She did what he asked. He folded the paper neatly and put it in his pocket. "What time does your husband get home?" he said casually.

"His hours are irregular—depending on his appointments."

"Then will you ask him to come to headquarters—at his convenience? I'll leave the address."

"Do you have to see him?"

"Yes."

There seemed no more to be said. She felt his measuring stare and met it helplessly. She imagined that the expression in his deep-set eyes was kinder, and suddenly she wanted to pour out all that troubled her, all that she had been unable to say on the phone to Sarah Thrace, all that she could not say to Morgan. She held her arms stiffly at her sides, her fine capable hands clenched. She shook her head to dislodge the idiocy that had crept in to possess it. To want to weep on the shoulder of a cold, strange man because she had surprised kindness in his eyes—

He had turned from her. He was looking at the bookshelves. He said, "I see you have a copy of Glen Williams's memoirs. It has a different binding—a bit less elaborate than the one in his apartment."

She nodded.

"Have you read it?"

"Yes." She wished he would stop making conversation. Or was it just conversation?

"What did you think of it?"

She said tiredly, "This seems an odd time to give literary criticism. However, the book didn't interest me very much. It was pure Glen Williams all the way through—" She shrugged.

"And you'd had enough of Glen Williams?"

She did not answer at once. She took time to dam her

first spontaneous rush of words. "I'd had enough of the details of Glen Williams's life. I'd heard them repeated and repeated—and what a man eats for breakfast on certain mornings or how many miles he drives and what he says to some chance acquaintance and how popular he is with women are neither matters of universal importance nor exciting reading unless they're handled by a professional with a special touch."

"Was that your husband's opinion, too?"

"My husband didn't read it. He hasn't any patience with that sort of thing. He wouldn't even pretend he'd read it when Glen asked him. He's too honest. He—he even joked about it to Glen—said he didn't believe Glen had read it himself, because that beautiful leather binding was much too new looking and that something ought to be spilled on it to give it a used look."

"I see," Nelson said.

It seemed to her that he really did see something. But she was too preoccupied to speculate. Her next words were involuntary. "You didn't have a hat, did you?"

"No hat—but I do have one more question before I leave. What made you type a letter of that nature?"

Her face was blank. "That nature?"

He said, "The letter we were discussing—the one I found—"

"Oh." Now she had the look of one who is forced to discuss private affairs with a tradesman. But she showed no evidence of guilt, only the normal distaste of a reticent person. "I don't type personal letters—I—"

"Surely your point of view is unique—I'd be interested to know what you call personal—"

She interrupted hotly. "Glen's point of view was unique. I can't help what he thought—or wanted to think—and I can't help or even understand what you're— Oh—please go. I'm expecting someone. I—"

"Whoever you're expecting is here," Nelson said as a key turned unmistakably in the lock. "Your husband?"

Her clear skin flushed. She said passionately, "Of course not. It's my custom to make wholesale distribution of keys

to my apartment." Then she turned and walked swiftly to the door.

Nelson stood listening. A man's voice said, "Joss!" and it was the voice of a man who had everything. And the silence that followed was the silence of a man who holds everything he has in the tight circle of his arms.

## CHAPTER VIII

TOM GAUDIO WALKED LIGHTLY down the dark, creaking stairs. Compared to this house, the one that the Woodruffs lived in was a mansion. But Gaudio, for the time being, was giving the Woodruffs no thought. Nothing troubled Gaudio. Even the aggressive hall toilets he passed, one to every five families, did not affect his sudden rise of spirits. He reached the street and breathed its used and tepid air as though it had been compounded on a high mountain for his special intake.

Aloof, yet kind, he moved aside to allow an old gnarled female to enter the house, ignoring her sharp, hostile glance, waiting until she was out of sight to flick his coat free of imaginary contact with her greasy brown paper bundles. With magnificent tolerance he eyed the little people who filled the sidewalks, wheeling or lugging or chastising their progeny, chattering about their petty concerns. Unhurried, he lingered on the Acevedo stoop, head up, hands nonchalantly in the pockets of his shabby trousers. There was no hurry about anything now. Everything that had been important several hours ago could wait upon the god who was Tom Gaudio.

Godlike, he smiled as he thought of the inspiration that had led him to the Acevedos, of the treasure he had uncovered in their sordid quarters, of what he had left behind him on the rumpled bed. The humor of it struck him so forcibly that he opened his mouth to let the smile mature

into a strapping laugh. Then he choked the laugh to stare reprovingly at a rubbernecking monkey who had stopped to stare. "Who are you looking at?" he said, and was answered with a barrage of Spanish, and would have returned it in the good Bleecker Street Italian of his childhood except that good Bleecker Street Italian would be wasted on this monkey, and anyway, a commotion had broken loose behind him.

He did not like noise of any kind. It made him jump. It penetrated his supreme well-being. It made him feel that after all there might be a need to hurry. He was not afraid of what the little people could do to him, but he did not want his dignity impaired by contact with them. So he muttered, "When in Rome do as the Romans," and floated off the Acevedo stoop in the general direction of the subway. Subways were not for gods. Low cream-colored cars such as the one poor old Glen had driven were for gods. Taxis might substitute, but even he, the great Gaudio, could not conjure a taxi from the welter of this slum.

He did not float for long. A hard hand reached up to stay him. Hard fingers made a clamp around his arm. And from his height he looked down upon a specimen in baggy clothes. He jerked his head around to see what lay behind him, as had become his habit in time of stress. Swarthy, foreshortened figures were racing out of the Acevedo house. By twos and threes they came, by threes and fours, by— The old woman led them, her knotted arms empty of bundles, her face full of sorrow and hate. She pointed at him. She shrieked. She closed in and spattered him with boiling words. Other hands reached out to clutch, to hurt, to violate his person. Then the thin, piercing blade of a whistle severed his nerve ends and he toppled.

Morgan Woodruff walked into his own tidy living-room. He had no eyes for the personable figure of Gridley Nelson. He saw only the invader of his privacy, and to that invader his words were addressed. "It's my turn now. You've finished with my wife."

"Not quite," Nelson said.

"Yes you have—and managed to upset her thoroughly."

"Mrs. Woodruff does not appear to be a woman easily upset," Nelson said. What Mr. Woodruff appeared to be, he thought, was a man making a valiant attempt to swim to shore through a heavy sea of fatigue, and he thought further that in spite of this and in spite of the sensitive quality of his mouth and eyes, Woodruff managed to convey an impression of gristly toughness.

"Mrs. Woodruff is not easily upset," Morgan said. "So you must have really put your shoulder to it. I suppose policemen are the same the world over. I noticed that during the war, with few exceptions, men who put in for M.P. jobs were too cowardly to become honest criminals. They had to satisfy their sadistic urges under a blanket stamped 'legal.' "

Nelson's tone expressed polite interest. "Did you have many encounters with M.P.'s during the war?"

"If your curiosity outlasts this session, I doubt you'll have difficulty in checking my war record."

Joss said proudly, "His war record was wonderful." She had reentered the room quietly. She had taken time to comb her hair and wash her face. Moisture still clung to her eyelashes.

Morgan said, "You needn't have come back, darling. He's through with you. And don't bother to defend us, because he's not out to believe anything we say."

Unexpectedly, she supported Nelson. "I don't think that's true. I think he's only trying to do his work."

"I wouldn't call it a very good try," Morgan said.

They might have been discussing an absentee. It was a new experience for Nelson, accustomed in similar circumstances to painful awareness of his presence. Morgan ended the brief exchange with a yawn. "That's not to express nonchalance," he said. "Annoyance, probably—or maybe hunger. It's dinnertime, isn't it, Joss? Hadn't you better start preparations?"

"Dinner's ready to serve. We'll have it as soon as the lieutenant leaves." She had obviously caught the pleading note in his voice, but was as obviously determined to re-

main in the room.

Nelson said, "I don't want to prolong this. Mr. Woodruff, where—"

Morgan cut him off. "If you really don't want to prolong it," he said, "I know a short cut." As though he were engaging in a one-man vaudeville act, he assumed the dual role of detective and suspect. "Woodruff, where were you at the time of the murder? Who—me? Yes—you. Well—it was my day of rest, so I went for a walk. Who did I bump into but Glen Williams. He invited me to lunch and I accepted." He thrust his hand out to grip the lapel of the unseen suspect who was himself. "You had lunch with the victim? Now we're getting somewhere. Sure—don't hit me, officer. We're getting to the Gateau and the hour is one-ten. How did you know the exact hour, Woodruff? I'm glad you asked that. It's like this—I don't wear a watch—put it down to eccentricity, which it isn't—but my host took a squint at his and announced the time as we were tying our napkins around our little necks. Well, sir—"

Joss said, "Morgan!"

He looked at her, at Nelson. He seemed more nonplused by Nelson's grave, attentive air than by her exclamation of his name. He frowned and said in his normal voice, "Maybe I haven't laid you in the aisles, but I can't help it if the script was dull to start with." He sat down wearily.

Nelson said, "Did you go home with Williams after lunch?"

"No. We parted outside the restaurant."

"Was he going home?"

"I didn't ask him."

"And he didn't mention any appointment he might have had?"

"No—and thank you kindly. But if that's an out for me, I can't take it."

"How long did you spend at lunch?"

"An hour or so."

"Did you go straight home after that?"

"I went to Central Park." He made a return to his attempt at flippancy. "I'm in arrears on sun—see? Me not

getting my usual trip to the Riviera last winter."

"Did you meet any acquaintance in or on the way to the Park?"

"You can walk for days in New York without meeting a familiar soul. I know because I'm always walking for days. Wait a minute. Come to think of it, there was another bum sharing the bench with me—a sociable gent with whiskers and plain and fancy patches. He's my alibi from about two-thirty onward—and a smart operator like you should dig him up easy—even if all the best bums are wearing whiskers and patches this year." Joss sat down on the arm of his chair. His hand went out to hers. There was no change in his facial expression to show that the gesture was a conscious one.

"What time did you reach home?"

Joss said quickly, "Four-fifteen. I looked at the kitchen clock when he came in."

Morgan turned his head toward her. Consciously or unconsciously, he withdrew his hand. She said, "Sorry. I didn't mean to answer for you, Morgan."

"You can answer for me any old time you like—except that right now it might seem too eager-beaver to the lieutenant here. It might give him the idea we've something to hide or that you're afraid I'll pull a boner."

"Afraid you'll— Why should I be?" But her eyes were afraid.

"Never mind. You only read the morning paper. But one of the later editions I picked up gratis in the subway said the medical examiner's best guess was somewhere between two and six. It was after two when I left him, but you still haven't managed to clear me—"

"Clear you? Morgan—please don't joke about—"

"Joke? If I'm joking, our constant visitor here has no sense of humor. Look at him. He hasn't even tittered."

Nelson said, "Mrs. Woodruff, I think you can start getting that dinner ready to put on the table while I ask your husband a few more questions that might save him a trip to headquarters."

Morgan got up. He raised her from the arm of the chair

and faced her toward the door. "Go on, darling. When a policeman sounds almost human you've got to do what he says."

She had a protest ready but she closed her lips upon it. She went from the room, and Morgan Woodruff returned to his chair. "Alone at last," he said. "Not very cozy—but alone." Then he said challengingly, "You'll never have the good fortune to meet another woman as forthright as my wife. Must be she's had a stinker of a day—with you to put the topping on it. Otherwise she wouldn't be taking this so big."

*Wouldn't she?* Nelson thought. And he thought that Morgan, too, must have had a stinker of a day—or a series of stinkers. He waited, saying nothing.

"And while we're on the subject of being forthright," Morgan said, "I might as well tell you that there was a point during lunch when I wanted not just to murder Glen Williams but to cut him up into bite-sized chunks. I didn't because the joint was too classy and Emile kept too close to give me elbowroom."

"Emile?"

"The waiter. Glen kept Emile-ing him all over the place. I didn't kill Glen later, either, for the simple reason that my little tempers never warm me for more than a couple of minutes."

"Why did you want to murder Williams?"

"A personal matter—very boring to the outsider."

Nelson said what, considering the facts, he had been oddly reluctant to say before Joss. He was reluctant to say it now. "Was it because Williams and your— Did you quarrel with Williams because he and your wife were in love with each other?"

Morgan Woodruff came out of his chair.

"It's a logical assumption based on your wife's—" Nelson side-stepped the thrown fist and caught Morgan, who had flung himself off balance. It was like grappling with an armful of live coals.

Morgan panted, "Let go—the take-off was wrong—if I'd been on my feet you'd be off yours—"

"Stop it—you'll only add to your wife's distress." Nelson managed to pinion his arms. "All you'll gain if you insist on a battle is temporary release from what's eating you."

"Shove it. You're what's eating me—and what I want is permanent release from you. Get a warrant—get anything—but get the hell out—"

Nelson released him. "If you were in better condition," he said sincerely, "we'd be fairly matched—"

"Sure—sure—a psychologist, too." He was breathing heavily, but he made no move to swing again.

"You gave me some voluntary information, Woodruff, either because you thought I'd check with your Emile at the Gateau or because you're an honest man—"

"Don't flatter me. I gave it to you because I thought the waiter might come forward with a statement as soon as he saw Glen's picture in the paper. He did, didn't he? That's what brought you here."

"I'd have come anyway," Nelson said. "And now I want your version."

"You won't get it. I'll cosign anything the waiter said. That should be good enough."

"It isn't good enough." Nelson sat down. His eyes glanced off the typewriter on the desk. He shrugged his wide shoulders and turned back to Morgan. "And I want my dinner, too."

"You mean they actually feed you?" Morgan met Nelson's gaze squarely. A latent awareness of something he had failed to note before flashed across his features.

Nelson said, "You've just decided that in a dim light I might pass as any honest citizen."

Morgan caught himself returning the smile and tightened his lips. After a minute he said, "Was it shock tactics or what—that business about Glen Williams and my wife?"

"It could have been Emile, the waiter."

"Oh." There was another pause. "I take it back. I won't cosign his statement. He's got it garbled."

"But the quarrel was about your wife?"

"No—not directly. Joss didn't even like Glen. She tolerated him because she thought I liked him. Bringing Joss

into it was something he thought up on the spur of the moment to make matters worse."

"What matters?"

"You win," Morgan said. "A little background music, please." He took off his coat and flung it over the chair arm. He wriggled in his damp shirt and began. "After I came out of the army and after a few hundred false starts I landed on my feet—and I do mean feet—in the fine upstanding job of selling encyclopedias. Glen Williams was my first customer—that was how I met him—and, oh, what a high-type guy he was. Oh, what an interest he took in his fellow men—in me—in my career—" The lines deepened on his scowling, thoughtful face.

"In your career as a salesman?"

"No—as a song writer." Then he said defensively, "I really liked him—it wasn't opportunism—at least not entirely. Aside from being a little precious, he seemed okay. The run-around he gave me was unnecessary. I didn't ask for it."

Nelson recognized the familiar pattern. "He promised to launch your songs?"

"Yes. He said he knew everybody. A word in the right ear at the right moment and I was in. With my talent and his connections I couldn't fail. He made it sound so real that I could see Joss in sables—enjoying the sort of life she deserves—"

"That's what you meant when you said the quarrel only concerned her indirectly?"

"Of course. Joss was the one big reason why I forced myself to believe everything Glen said against what I foolishly choose to call my common sense. The big reason. There were little reasons, too. You see—I'm what they mean when they speak of a maladjusted man." He gave an involuntary turn toward the kitchen. "Not in my home life. If you're any kind of a detective you can tell that at a glance. But in my job. I don't like my job. I keep being rubbed raw by the idea that I'm fitted for something more stimulating. You wouldn't know what I'm talking about, would you?" He minced it out. "I'm sure you simply adore

your job."

Nelson said, "For the most part, yes." He might have added that he did know what Morgan Woodruff was talking about, but he was not sure that it would be true. Princeton had provided Nelson with an education but with no clue to his place in the world. And he had arrived at that place through a series of jobs including work in a research laboratory, in a garage, in a little-theater group, and as a rookie on the police force. He had many influential friends, but he had elected to go his way alone without specific aid, and now he was indebted only to the sum total of every experience that had befallen him. Yet there had been no economic pressure behind his essay to become what he was, the round peg in the round hole. His mother had left him an adequate income which robbed the process of urgency. And looking at Morgan Woodruff, he thought that, common belief to the contrary, poverty was not always the best nourishment for ambition. He said, "Quite probably you *are* equipped to do something more stimulating."

Morgan seemed to be searching his tone for sarcasm. "Yeah—well, there was no 'probably' in Glen's line of chatter. It was all 'for sure,' and he ladled it out with a king-size spoon."

"And when he stopped ladling, you were naturally—"

"He didn't stop. I stopped believing. It suddenly looked like too much—and I could only smell it but I could never get near enough to taste it. Maybe if he'd allowed me the smallest taste—say a glimpse of New York's leading publicity agent, who was his close friend and who was itching to take me on—or an introduction to New York's leading producer, boon companion, whose tongue was hanging out for fresh new songs for a fresh new show—or a shakedown to his buddy, New York's leading crooner, whose silver throat could make the public like any song—or even a black look from Petrillo, ditto close friend, buddy, and boon companion—" His mouth twisted. "But curiously enough, these close, close friends were always apologizing profusely because they had to rush to the Coast or something and plans would have to be deferred until further

notice. Yeah—that was Glen's story—and I was stuck with it."

"So you decided to have a showdown."

"I didn't decide. The showdown happened. The only decision I'd made was to drop Glen by degrees. As a matter of fact, he'd invited us to a party last night and I'd intended to start dropping him by being indisposed. But I ran into him and found myself accepting an invitation to lunch because he was so insistent—and face to face, it was always easier to accept his invitations than to argue. And I didn't feel like arguing. That sounds funny, doesn't it, not feeling like arguing—and later— Well, Glen was in fine form—his usual form. We'd no sooner got seated when he asked me if I had any new songs. I said no and he reproached me. He said he'd dined with a Mr. So-and-So—I'd stopped bothering to remember the names quite a while ago—who was president of the biggest music-publishing firm in America—and he wanted to see me as soon as he could find a blank spot on his calendar. And he said it might be a good idea if I dropped in at the apartment around five so that he could brief me on the coming interview. He said that he knew Joss and I were coming that evening but that he might not have a chance for a private talk then." Morgan breathed deeply. "The waiter had just set a dish of shrimps in front of me. I looked down at them and they looked at me and I was embarrassed. For some reason or other the shrimps brought everything to a head. I felt that what intelligence I had left was being clubbed to death by Glen Williams. And then I got angry and let loose. Glen gave the waiter an apologetic look and asked me to lower my voice. I did—but I lowered my vocabulary at the same time. I said all I wanted to say, and when I'd said it I wasn't angry any more—just tired and wanting out."

"You left right after that?"

"No. I told you we parted outside the restaurant. I started to leave, but Glen put up his hand to stop me. He had a funny expression on his face and—so help me—because there were people staring our way and I felt like a

dope for making a scene, I sat down again. Glen shed the funny look. He smiled and said he couldn't let me go off angry and that he was making allowances because he knew my nerves were on edge and that in turn I must make allowances for him, too. I said I'd make anything provided I didn't have to listen to any more talk about my genius. Then he played tremolo and accused me of losing faith in him—of not giving him an opportunity to explain why there'd been such a delay in the flowering of his plans. He said he'd hesitated to burden me with his own troubles, but the truth of the matter was that he'd had a financial setback and that there'd be no point in trying to proceed until he could get the publicity man on the job—because without publicity I'd be just another song writer and I couldn't get half the money I'd get if my name became a household word. And unfortunately, even though the publicity man was a close friend, business was business and he'd need a good lump sum waved under his nose before he'd start pulling—and Glen just didn't have that lump sum at the moment—merely a temporary nuisance—a carload of dividends would be coming along any minute and all I had to do was sit tight." Morgan tugged his coat off the chair arm and rooted through the pockets. Something fell to the floor. He did not look to see what it was or make an effort to retrieve it.

"Cigarette?" Nelson said.

"Thanks—I've got a pack somewhere." He found what he was seeking, struck a match, and drew smoke with difficulty through a squashed cigarette. Nelson's following of the procedure seemed to amuse him. He grinned naturally and said, "Well, anyway, the matches are high class—straight from the Gateau."

"Where you left Glen talking about his financial setback."

"Yes." The grin faded. "He sure talked volumes. Then at last he must have noticed a kind of skepticism on my part, because he paid the check and got up and we left. Outside, after I'd been the polite guest and thanked him for the lunch I couldn't eat, he made one more try. He

asked me please to drop around for a cocktail at five, if only to show there were no hard feelings. I told him there were no hard feelings except the ones I cherished toward myself—and I guess he realized that I didn't mean to drop around that afternoon, or ever, because it was then he tried to plant the seed about Joss. It didn't take root—it was strictly for the birds. And at that moment the waiter came rushing out with a cigarette case Glen had left on the table. He took it and went right on talking. And the waiter, maybe thinking he was talking to him or maybe expecting a tip or a thank-you, got an earful before he decided to return to his station."

"What exactly did Glen say about Joss?"

"It doesn't bear repeating," Morgan said calmly, "but it did provide me with the exit cue I'd been waiting for. I stalked off."

"You reacted by stalking off. Yet when I dug up the same seed you swung at me. So perhaps it did take root. Perhaps you changed your mind and dropped in to see Glen—"

Morgan said, "Congratulations. It's a real high-grade theory." He got up stiffly and stretched. "I'll bet you'd be more comfortable with it if you hadn't met my wife."

That at least was true up to a point, Nelson thought. Meeting Joss, he could have dismissed the theory entirely if it had not been for the letter. He left his chair and bent his knees to retrieve the article that had fallen from Morgan's pocket.

"Where the hell did that come from?" Morgan said.

"It fell out of your pocket." He extended the flat cardboard packet, holding it delicately by its edge. Its cellophaned window showed two glistening hypodermic needles.

"What is it—Victrola—? No—well, I'll be—"

"Don't you want it?"

"In the pig's eye." Morgan put his hands behind him. "Nix." He gave Nelson a level stare. "This is the clumsiest frame since Adam's day—and I was almost beginning to like you. Look—I've only got about two dimes on me—so

if you're so anxious to put me behind bars you could make a vagrancy charge stick easier. Nix, I said. You don't get me to put my fingerprints on that—"

"My guess would be that they're on it now. Smudged beyond recognition, perhaps, but—"

"Guess again." He kept his eyes on Nelson. They looked bewildered. "I don't get it. Why hypodermic needles? What could they have to do with the case? Glen was shot—"

"They might have a great deal to do with the case. Glen was an addict."

"Glen? He was?"

"You didn't know?"

"I—sometimes I thought he took Benzedrine or something, but—"

"It was heroin."

"Heroin? Well, that could account for his pipe dreams—the poor—" He came back to his own immediate predicament. "Do you, by any chance, think I peddled the stuff to him? Is this more shock tactics—flashing those in the hope I'll break down and tell all? Listen—is selling encyclopedias supposed to be a cover for my real activities? Some hard cover!" He wilted on his feet. "And is this luxury I'm surrounded with the fruit of my ill-gotten gains? Get your head examined, will you?"

Nelson could not make him admit that the needles had dropped out of his coat pocket. He did not think he could make him admit it at headquarters, even if he employed aids to which he had never subscribed. His efforts produced nothing more than a white ridge around Morgan's lips, and suddenly Morgan was struggling into his coat and shouting, "Come on! If there's only one way to get you out of here, I'll buy it. Let's go to headquarters. Maybe I can find an honest cop there who'll recognize the truth when he hears it—"

"Calm down," Nelson said. "I haven't charged you with anything. For the time being I'm letting it rest with the usual caution not to leave town—"

"Save it," Morgan shouted, "unless you can tell me how

to leave town on a shoestring." Then his drawn face smoothed out a little. His voice dwindled. "You're not arresting me?"

"The unattached needles aren't good enough," Nelson said. But all things considered, he had no full belief in the words.

Remembering the detective's account of the "thin, dark guy" he had frightened from the door of Glen Williams's apartment, Nelson extracted the names and addresses of the clients Morgan had visited that day, along with the approximate times of the visits. According to Morgan, they had all taken place a good distance away from the Williams house, and Morgan was above average height. But then Morgan had ample reasons for lying, and the detective had received no more than a brief impression of the unsuccessful intruder.

Morgan, coatless again, accompanied him to the door, not out of politeness, Nelson thought, but out of a need for corroboration of his exit. Radio music was seeping under the closed kitchen door at the end of the hall. It created an atmosphere of normalcy. Nelson wondered if that was Joss Woodruff's intention.

## CHAPTER IX

GRIDLEY NELSON felt depressed when he left the Woodruff apartment. He phoned Kyrie from a drugstore on the corner. He told her among other things that he would not be home for dinner.

She said, "Are you sounding sorrowful to ease my feelings or have things gone wrong?"

"They're not going too well," he said. "How's Junie?"

"Almost too well." He heard her tap the wood of the telephone table. "But I'm sure the first words he lisps will be, 'Where is my wandering daddy tonight?' "

As always, her low, throaty voice conjured up a life-sized picture of her. He took time out to contemplate it.

She said, "Grid—are you still with me?"

"Always. Junie will never call me 'Daddy.' He's too tough. Pop or the old man, more likely."

"How soon will you be home, Grid?"

"As soon as I can."

"That's a sane answer to a foolish question. I'll have Sammy put some choice bits aside for you. Meanwhile get a sandwich and coffee to stave off the pangs."

He promised. He said, "Good-by." He hung up feeling better. Talking with Kyrie had performed the miracle of re-establishing him as a warm-blooded human being with a private life, and for a moment he experienced quite human resentment as he thought that the Woodruffs, murder suspects, would have the pleasure of dining together that

night. Then he thought that Kyrie would like the Woodruffs, and that their likable qualities accounted for much of the conflict that was raging in his head.

He strode the three blocks to his car and drove to headquarters. It was late enough for the night shift to be on duty. The sergeant on the desk was an old-timer who had known Nelson since rookiehood and who called him by his first name on all save official occasions.

"Grid—Clevis wants you on urgent business—"

"Where is he?"

"In the ready room. There's also a little dark fellow name of Acevedo and—"

"Let Clevis know I'm back, Rufe."

"Okay. It seems there's been a follow-up to— Excuse it, Grid." He picked up a ringing telephone.

Nelson did not wait to learn what had been followed up. He hurried to his office.

While he waited for Clevis he called the Gateau. The waiter named Emile had gone off duty, but Nelson asked for and received his home telephone number. A woman with a French accent answered, and Nelson identified himself. She summoned Emile, whose accent was even heavier than hers.

He admitted that Mr. Glen Williams had been a regular patron and that he had served him on the afternoon of his death.

"Then you overheard the quarrel?" Nelson asked.

Emile admitted that, too.

"And when you read about his death didn't you realize that it was your duty to come forward?"

Emile stuttered something about not wanting to make trouble for anybody or for the restaurant or for himself, and Nelson, by persisting, received the same account of the incident that Morgan Woodruff had given, including the fact that M'sieu Williams had left his cigarette case behind and that he, Emile, had rushed to the pavement to present it to him. But M'sieu Williams had been in such a disturbed state that he had not even thanked him.

Nelson asked him what he meant by a "disturbed state,"

but Emile's own state was disturbed and he seemed unable to explain. So Nelson told him to come in on the following morning to make a detailed statement, and hung up.

Clevis shambled into the office. His beady eyes, bright with excitement, were the only signs of urgency he showed. "Well, Lieutenant, I think we got it nipped. Too bad it had to sprout an extra branch—but the way it looks now, two will be the total score."

"Two?"

"Didn't old Rufe brief you when you came in?"

Nelson shook his head.

"Then I better lay some groundwork before you see Gaudio. I brought him in—him and the girl's uncle who couldn't bear to be parted from him. Grandma wanted to come, too, but she was stretched two ways—wanting to stay with her dead and—"

"Start at the beginning."

"Will do. Guess I'm rattled—the whole thing was so unexpected." He did not seem rattled. "When I leave you I go express to Gaudio's rooming-house. I make a deal with the landlady, smearing it on how important it is for me to have a talk with Gaudio—and she plays along about giving me the signal as soon as he shows. I stake out opposite the joint and I stand for a good hour with nothing to reward me but a few stragglers going in and out. Then I see a beat-up young guy climb the steps and something tells me. I don't wait for the landlady's signal, which comes when I'm halfway across the street. But before I can raise my foot to the curb Gaudio's out again, heading west. I tail him. He's so wrapped up he wouldn't notice a tribe of Ubangis at his heels. We go underground at Lexington and take the train to One Hundred and Tenth Street. Then we walk some more. He knows where he's headed and gets there fast even though I can see he's short on energy. Goal is a tenement job on One Hundred and Seventh to which nobody's donated a nickel's worth of spit and polish since it was built. The lock on the street door has been blitzed long ago, so Gaudio don't have to ring a bell to get in. I hang behind on the street, which

is crowded. Reason I don't follow him, I figure I'm not risking a thing, there being only one exit—and I want to see if the names in the bells tie in with the Williams killing. They don't. I pick myself a vestibule on the other side, and just when I'm beginning to wonder why a guy with free choice and a real tony social list should be slumming forty minutes of his life away, he comes out. I'm primed to go where he goes, but he ain't in a hurry no more. And from clear across the street—which ain't so wide at that—I can see a change in him. It's something in the way his shoulders are straighter and his head higher, and in the way he's acting as leisurely as a tycoon taking the air from the terrace of his million-buck estate. Right away it hits me. I get a kind of movie flash of the hypo scars on Williams, deceased—and I connect. You get it?"

Nelson nodded briefly.

"Yep—it stands out that Gaudio's just had a 'fix'—and it stands out likewise that a peddler lives at the selfsame address where he's now standing. A pretty dumb peddler—or he wouldn't let his customers come to the house, let alone linger on the doorstep. So it ought to be a cinch for me to tag his contacts because, while I ain't working for the Narcotics Detail, it never hurts to help a good cause along. Well—I'm keeping my eye on Gaudio and chewing over what's my best move. I could go see if he's got the junk on him as well as in him—but I'm solo—and the sidewalks are packed—and it don't seem to me they're packed with people a cop could look to for sympathy. Luckily I don't have to decide. He leaves the stoop and starts walking, and I walk over and clap the mitt on his shoulder because the way he's moving I wouldn't be surprised if he spreads wings and flies away. And almost simultaneous an old woman hops out of the house. I make her as the same old woman who passed Gaudio on the steps a few minutes back. She's yelling blue murder—and that's what it turns out to be." He slowed up. "The murder of her granddaughter—age eighteen—name of Bernice Acevedo."

Nelson said angrily, "Go on, Clevis." His anger had several ingredients, among them the time he had wasted

while another murder was being committed and, in lesser proportion, his apparently unnecessary invasion of the Woodruffs' privacy.

"You think I handled it wrong? You think I should have followed him in? How could I know—"

"Of course you couldn't know. Go on."

Clevis seemed satisfied that the anger was not directed at him.

"Well—Grandma makes like a homing pigeon straight for Gaudio—a homing pigeon gone haywire because it looks like she's trying to peck him to death—and she's assisted by a troop of tenants who've followed her into the street and by some fun-loving folks who are already on the street. I'm taking steps to protect my interests. I've got a grip on Gaudio and I'm flashing my badge at all and sundry and trying to find out what's what. And because Gaudio's an outsider, too, I'm getting co-operation—only it don't amount to much because it's mostly in Spanish—so I blow my whistle and raise two harness bulls who come running from opposite directions. One of them stands by while the other calls the wagon. The one who stands by is an up-and-coming rookie of Puerto Rican descent, and he interprets for me and keeps some kind of guard over Gaudio, who's meanwhile passed out and is laying on the pavement—which don't stop Grandma from taking kicks at him when she can get near enough. Some kinder soul thinks to run for a doctor for Gaudio, but I figure that will keep—and I thumb the doctor upstairs with me—and we're chaperoned by Grandma's son, who turns out to be the dead girl's uncle Luis—bachelor. She's dead, all right. The doctor can't do her no good. He ain't even willing to say how she died—nor how recent—which is sensible enough from his angle, because while rigor hasn't set in, the room being like an oven might have staved it off. But she's got bruises on her skinny upper arms and on her skinny throat, and her tongue's swollen and her face is cyanosed—so it seems open-and-shut to me how and when she died." He closed his beady eyes for a moment as though the act made him see better. "There ain't much to her. A

sharp-faced, dark little number. She don't look a full-fledged eighteen so far as her shape goes—and yet she looks older—which may be due to the way her face is twisted up. She sure didn't die happy." He opened his eyes. "Plus being hot, the room's sour because she's been vomiting. It's messed up in other ways, too. Stuff all over—tossed out of the bureau and out of one of them ready-made beaver-board cupboards you buy when you ain't got enough closet space. I make it Gaudio is responsible for most of the mess on account of I judge by her habits she's been trying hard to rise above her surroundings. Her nightgown and the bed linen is clean except for where she was sick. Her underwear is folded neat on the one chair in the room, and there's a fancy new-looking black dress on a hanger which dangles from a hook near the bed." The voice of Clevis rose thinly. "That black dress gets me, Lieutenant. It's hanging there like it might be a new toy the kid wants to see first thing when she wakes up. It makes me itch to run down and take a few kicks at Gaudio myself. The way I see it, he came there for the junk and she wouldn't part, so he killed her and tore the room up and got what he came for—and was in such a state by that time he couldn't wait. He took a 'fix' on the spot—after which he sailed so high he got the notion he was above the law. He must've snuffed it that time instead of main-lining, because there wasn't a needle or a spirit lamp in the room and he had none on him."

"How do you account for the vomiting?"

"I thought you'd ask. Before I climb into the wagon with Gaudio and the uncle who don't want to be left behind, I naturally leave a harness in charge and I advise the medical examiner and the lab boys to move in—and I suggest they take a sample of the vomit—which they inform me they'd do anyway. They came back fifteen minutes ago and are going to work on it. But we don't have to worry, because Grandma explained it through the uncle. Seems something this Bernice ate didn't set right and she had cramps last night and chucked. Grandma don't believe in doctors, but when she went out to do her shopping she bought something in the drugstore guaranteed to cure any-

thing from corns to a spoiled stomach. She said she washed Bernice before she went out, and left her sleeping."

"How long was she gone?"

"About two hours. She'd stopped in to see a daughter-in-law who lives in the neighborhood."

"And you say Gaudio stayed forty minutes."

"On the nose—so that would have given Bernice time enough to wake up and be sick again before he arrived."

"Have you booked him?"

"I thought you'd want me to wait till you saw him—or maybe till you got the lab story."

Nelson nodded.

"You going to inspect the scene of the crime? I gave orders for the morgue to refrain until you said the word."

"You can tell them to stop refraining. I might have a look at the room later, but I'm sure there was very little you missed."

Clevis said without conceit, "I did do a thorough job, at that—and the lab boys took up where I left off."

"Did anyone else in the Acevedo family complain of cramps and nausea?"

"No—but Grandma says Bernice ate out a lot."

"What does the family consist of?"

"Grandma—the uncle—and two male boarders. Seems everybody in the house takes boarders. They were away at work, though."

"Are the girl's parents living?"

"Legally she never had more than one—and not much of that one—a mother who got into trouble and skipped, leaving the trouble with Grandma."

"Did you find any drugs in the room?"

"No—not in the other rooms, either. I had Mack Hanley of the Narcotics Detail send one of his men to give the whole place a going over. But Gaudio had enough in his pocket to keep him going for a week. Heroin. According to Hanley, it's high-grade stuff—better than forty per cent. Hanley's real sore because the girl died before he could talk to her about her contacts. He didn't get to first base with the uncle. Uncle, by the way, ain't what you'd call

a sweet personality. I found two hundred and thirty-one bucks in the girl's handbag. I didn't get a chance to examine the rest of the stuff in the bag, so I took it all along in case it might be evidence—and also I didn't like the way Uncle was looking at it."

"Where was he during Gaudio's visit?"

"In a cigar store around the corner. Somebody ran and got him. He works nights in a joint called Ramondo's. That's how come Grandma can take boarders. They're getting up when he goes to sleep. Maybe it's a good arrangement in winter, with the bed not getting a chance to cool off."

Nelson smiled, not because he thought it was funny, but because he felt that Clevis had done a good job and was entitled to what humor he could squeeze from it. He said, "What's Gaudio's story?"

"At first he not only swore he didn't kill her, but he wouldn't even admit she was dead. He put on we was slipping him a frame that didn't fit no picture. Later he wouldn't talk at all—and now all he does is sweat and beg. Believe it or not, he's on the nod already, and it wasn't more than a couple of hours ago that he snuffed the stuff—but I guess only main-lining can give him any kind of a lasting charge at this stage. He's hooked—but good. It takes four or five 'fixes' a day to keep him happy—and Hanley says that runs into heavy dough."

"Did the girl show evidence of being 'hooked'?"

"No—not a mark of that kind on her. Course she might have got bored with peddling it and tried one of her own samples—them capsules they sometimes pass out free to make new customers. Hanley says the first try often brings on a vomiting-spell."

"One more thing. The grandmother must have met Gaudio before, if she could single him out on that crowded street."

"She hadn't met him—but she'd seen him a couple of times on the corner talking to Bernice. She thought from the way Bernice looked at him that it could lead to monkey business, and she didn't think any good would come of it

because he wasn't their kind. Also—once before she'd seen him coming out of the house when she was going in—and it worried her. She didn't want Bernice to get into trouble like her mother. She'd tried to raise her nice—beating the hell out of her so she'd know right from wrong—but she was too old and too weak to keep beating the hell out of her after she grew up—so what could she do?" Clevis added, "Don't glare at me. I'm just quoting."

"I'll see Gaudio now."

"And you'll be seeing something!"

"Bring a stenographer," Nelson called as Clevis shambled out of the room. Left alone, he picked up the telephone and asked if Judd, the man he had sent to Connecticut to cover Betty Conway, had checked back. The answer was no. Not that it mattered. The probabilities, he thought, were that Judd, too, had spent a wasted day. More to be doing something than with the conviction that what he did was important, he pressed the buzzer, and when a messenger appeared he handed him the hypodermic needles that had fallen from Morgan Woodruff's pocket and asked him to take them to the lab. As an afterthought he included the typewritten statement signed by Joss Woodruff and said it was to be compared with the letter he had sent down earlier over the same signature. Then he glanced at some assorted papers and memoranda that had been placed on his desk during his absence. One of the sheets dealt with the financial status of Glen Williams, deceased. It declared that Williams had overdrawn his checking-account, that no savings account had come to light, and that in so far as the operative had been able to ascertain, he had died poor. The operative promised that a complete bank statement of deposits and withdrawals would be available the next day.

So from one point of view, anyway, Nelson thought tiredly, Williams could not have come to a more timely end. He was still thinking about it when Clevis and the stenographer appeared with Gaudio between them. They dumped Gaudio, who seemed unable to manage without support, onto the chair that had been occupied by Sarah

Thrace.

"Quit sliding," Clevis said. "What do you want—a seat belt or something?"

Gaudio made an obvious effort to hold to the chair.

Nelson said, "Has he had medical treatment?"

"Sure. Them brown stains on his face ain't dirt. They're iodine—and except for a few bruises on his body, he's as good as he ever was—which ain't—"

"Well, Gaudio?" Nelson said. He had meant his voice to be harsh. It was evident that Gaudio had expected it to be harsh. What stamina remained to him fled at the kindly inflection. His large eyes swam in his white face.

He wailed, "Please—I'm sick—"

"The doctor will give you something to make you sleep as soon as this is over. You can hurry it along if you'll help."

Clevis, as though he were divorcing himself from the proceedings, walked to the wall and leaned against it. Disgust showed on his face.

Gaudio spoke just above a whisper. Nelson had to crane to hear. Clevis craned, too, in spite of himself. And noiselessly the stenographer who had sat down near the door pulled his chair closer. "How can I help?" Gaudio said. "It's all mixed up. I don't understand why they say I— She isn't dead—she was sleeping and I tried to wake her so she'd—so she—please—"

"We know why you went there," Nelson said, "so you're not incriminating yourself on that score. You were found with an illegal drug in your possession, and you'll be charged with it in any case. But we are giving you a chance to prevent a murder charge." Again he leaned forward to hear the reply.

"I didn't kill her. When I went in I called her name. She wouldn't answer. I thought she was sleeping—but she wasn't lying in a comfortable position—her head was in the pillow, and nobody could sleep that way—it was too hot—and so I thought she was pretending because she was mad at me, and I went over and I turned her around and shook her. I took her by the arms—then I put my hands on her throat just to scare her so she'd stop fooling and give

me—sell me—then I noticed that she'd been sick and I thought she'd been drinking and passed out—so I thought it would serve her right if I looked for it and helped myself. I thought it would teach her a lesson when she woke up—not to drink so much—"

Clevis's mouth dropped open. He tried to catch Nelson's eye.

"So I found it," Gaudio droned, "and after—after that I went downstairs. I was fine—I was fine until that man—" His head wobbled in the direction of Clevis. "He stopped me and—" He was sweating. The sweat crawled down his weak, handsome face. He could hardly get his shaking hands up to wipe it away. He said, "I'm sick—I hurt all over—please—give it back to me—make him give it back—"

Nelson said, "Why was the girl angry with you?"

"I need—she was in love with me—"

Clevis snorted.

Nelson gave him a warning glance.

"She was just a crazy kid," Gaudio said. "I didn't encourage her. I had to see her because—but I never—well—once. But I had to—and after that I stood her up whenever she wanted a date—except when—" He floundered. The sweat kept crawling down his face.

"Did she supply Glen Williams with heroin, too?"

The question jolted Gaudio. He stopped shaking for a moment. For a moment he was rigid. "You leave Glen Williams out of this." Even his voice was braced.

"That's the second biggest laugh of the year," Clevis said.

"Glen was my friend," Gaudio said. "Why don't you find out who killed him? He knew it was going to happen. He told me—"

"He told you that he expected to be murdered?"

"Yes—he told me—"

"Why didn't he tell the police?"

"He wouldn't—he was too good—"

"Did he tell you who was going to murder him?"

"No—but it was—it was Sarah—or the Woodruff girl—or her husband—" The stiffening had left him. "My

friend," he repeated on a dwindling note, "everybody's—but not Bernice's. When she came there it wasn't for social—social—" His eyes skittered in his head. "I'm sick—I need it—make him give it back. Glen paid for it—he would have wanted me to have—he wouldn't have liked this—"

"You killed Glen because he stopped supplying you," Nelson said.

"Glen was my best friend—Sarah killed him—jealousy—she wanted me all to herself or—Woodruff—Woodruff killed him because Glen and Joss—women—"

"Did Woodruff get his supply from Bernice?"

"Woodruff didn't—it was just Glen and me—it was private—nobody else knew—private—" He brought his hands to his head. He winced as his fingers probed.

"Did he get a head injury?" Nelson asked Clevis.

"Nah—didn't even hit it on the sidewalk when he fell."

Gaudio moaned. "It hurts—tingles—my feet, too—all over—"

"Why did you go to Glen's apartment this afternoon?"

The skittering eyes came to a brief rest on Nelson's face. "I didn't go in—there was someone there—I went because Glen never let himself run short—and the last I had was early this morning from a fellow I met in a bar—only he wouldn't give me any extra—he said he didn't have it—so later I went to Bernice—I'm not the kind—I was never rough with a girl. I just wanted—I want—please—" He slid into his refrain. It was the only thing that held importance for him. Nothing else mattered.

Nelson said slowly and distinctly, "You didn't mean to be rough. You only meant to scare her—but you killed her."

"No." Gaudio turned his wobbling head from side to side to implement the weak denial. The effect was grotesque.

Nelson stood up. He said abruptly, "Take him away, Clevis. I've finished with him for the time being. Get the doctor to prescribe—"

Clevis came away from the wall. "Lieutenant—you can't." His voice was incredulous. "It will never be easier than now to get a confession—"

Nelson did not look at him. He said to the stenographer, "Lend a hand, will you, Hodge?"

After they had gone, Nelson did what he never did when he was alone. He took the Scotch from the bottom drawer of the desk and poured and downed a stiff drink. As he returned the bottle to its place he could almost hear Kyrie saying reproachfully, "Grid—you haven't eaten!" And for some reason that created more warmth in him than the whisky.

He sent out for a sandwich and coffee. What he received was neither a good sandwich nor good coffee, yet the joint effect made him feel less hollow. The misery of Gaudio did not torment him quite so much, and he was able to view with more balance the sordid picture of the Acevedo tenement as evoked by Clevis. He lifted the telephone receiver and asked if the dead girl's uncle was still on the premises. He held the line while the hands of the clock on his desk dragged from eight-fifty to eight fifty-four. He said, "All right, send him in," and at three minutes past nine Luis Acevedo entered his office. Nelson dismissed the accompanying policeman and gave Acevedo his undivided attention.

He saw a small, dark-skinned man with a smooth, taut face upon which all the hair seemed concentrated in long sideburns. The man looked familiar, but only, Nelson realized, because there were many copies of his physical type in the city's Puerto Rican districts. He could have been nineteen or fifty, depending on whether the judgment was based on his unlined face or on his wary old eyes. There was a wariness, too, in the way he handled his light body.

"Sit down, Mr. Acevedo," Nelson said.

He sat down. The half-smoked cigarette seemed very white against his dark-red mouth. He removed the cigarette with a quick gesture, dropped it to the floor, and crushed it out with his pointed black shoe.

"I'm sorry about your niece," Nelson said.

"That's all right."

It could have been interpreted as awkward acceptance

of sympathy or as indifference. Nelson did not yet know how to interpret it. He said, "Were you waiting to speak to me?"

Luis Acevedo crossed his legs. His knees pushed hard against his tight trousers. His voice was thin and brittle. "I'm waiting to see this bastard don't get off easy. What you done with him?"

"He's getting the proper treatment."

Luis Acevedo grinned. "The works? That's good. I wish I'm in on it. Maybe then I can make the old woman believe it when I tell her. She thinks you cops don't give the works to nobody except people like us." He stared at Nelson, measuring him. "This bastard gets the chair, huh?"

"If he committed murder he'll be punished."

"Who says he didn't—him? You keep giving it to him right he'll change his tune. I got him sized up."

"Do you know him well?"

"I never seen him before today. I don't have to see him more than once to size him up." He was still measuring Nelson. He said, "Listen—I—" He hesitated.

Nelson, maintaining a casual front under the stare, knew with certainty that he was not meeting the Acevedo standards for a cop. He said, "Well?"

Luis Acevedo stood up. "Nothing. Glad to know you. I got to go to work now." He started for the door.

"Wait a minute."

He halted. "What for? I'm on duty at Ramondo's—a Hundred and Sixteenth. We get a big crowd. Ramondo don't like it if the waiters come late—"

"Yet you were willing to stay here all night, if necessary, to see justice done."

"Justice!" He made it sound profane.

"Sit down."

He perched, his tightly covered rear contacting no more than the chair's edge.

"You know, of course, that your niece was peddling drugs."

"Who—me? I don't stick my nose in her business."

Nelson said, thinking how sententious yet how true it

sounded, "Things like that are everybody's business."

Luis Acevedo misunderstood, or pretended to misunderstand. "Not mine—I don't do no peddling. I work steady as a waiter."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-nine." Then he said, "Why you start asking me questions?"

"Are you married?"

"Me? What for? You think I need a chiseling wife and no-good kids? The only dame sees my dough is the old woman."

"Your mother?"

"Sure my mother." The look in his eyes might have been a proclamation of the fact that he had just discovered Nelson's intense stupidity. The discovery seemed to give him courage. "Talking about dough—I seen that cop lift a roll from Bernice's pocketbook. Maybe he don't mention it to you, but I seen it and so did the quack."

"Is that what you waited to tell me?"

"Sure—I got my rights. That dough belongs to nobody but me and the old woman—and you're the cop's boss, ain't you?" His eyes said that he could not imagine why Nelson should be anybody's boss. "How about it?"

"Bernice was probably holding the greater part of that money for *her* boss," Nelson said expressionlessly. "We need a clear claim of ownership in cases like this—so perhaps you'd better take it up with him."

For a brief moment the old eyes of Luis Acevedo looked thoughtful. Then he sucked in his cheeks, darted from his chair and leaned over the desk, his face close to Nelson's.

"Don't do it," Nelson said. He used the voice that almost always worked, but to make sure that it worked this time he raised a hand and shoved.

Luis Acevedo did not do it. He braked a few feet from the desk, swallowed the gathered saliva, and spat venom instead. He seemed to have only one adjective at his command and he attached it to almost every noun. What he said in substance was that every so-and-so cop was a so-and-so robber, that the old woman was right, and that his

people were always given a so-and-so crooked shake, that so-and-so Nelson and Clevis intended to split Bernice's money, but not if he could help it, because maybe Nelson had a so-and-so boss, too, who would want to know what was going on—

The ringing telephone stopped him. He looked at it, at Nelson regarding him sadly from behind the desk. He shouted, "You got nothing on me," and turned and ran out of the office.

Nelson picked up the receiver. He said rapidly, "Rufe? . . . I'll take the call in a moment. Is Fernandez in the ready room? . . . Good. Get him on the double. Luis Acevedo just left my office. Hold him on some pretext and tag him for Fernandez. It will take him a good five minutes to find his way down, because I doubt if he'll ask anyone for directions. Fernandez is to stick with him until further notice and check back at convenient intervals."

He hung up. The phone rang again. He regarded it absently. Before he answered he wrote a memo to Narcotics suggesting that when Fernandez checked back he be relieved by one of Hanley's operatives. It was possible, of course, that Luis Acevedo was more of a concern for Homicide than for Narcotics, but he did not believe it.

He silenced the ringing telephone. "Who? . . . Clevis? . . . Put him on."

The voice of Clevis had altered since their last encounter. It was now a compound of apology and awe. "My hat's off to you, Lieutenant."

"Put it back on before you catch cold."

"Okay—I rate a ribbing. I wish I knew how you did it. You must have had more than a hunch that Gaudio had an out. You still there?"

Nelson said he was still there and asked where Clevis was.

Clevis took the question literally. "In the lab. Maybe it ain't news to you, but they found traces of poison in that vomit. Still, you got to admit I had a leg to stand on—the swollen tongue and the color of her face and all. But they tell me oxalic acid will do that—so it don't look like Gau-

dio killed her after all—anyway, not with his hands—"

Nelson said, "How long does oxalic acid take to act?"

"Berman here says it varies—sometimes three minutes—sometimes an hour—and it's been known to take as long as fourteen days. He says the bruises on the throat were surface. Also he says he didn't like the look of that vomit to start with. I wouldn't know—not being a connisure. But if she starts throwing up during the night, Gaudio's clean as far as today's visit goes. Berman's rarin' for Doc to get busy with the autopsy. He's betting her insides are pickled—"

Nelson said, "I'd like to have a look at the girl's handbag."

"Coming right up. The way you're cooking, you're set to find all the answers right there."

Nelson's wry smile was turned upon himself. He decided that it would only lower the morale of a realist like Clevis to learn that his chief's failure to follow through with Gaudio had been prompted by compassion rather than astuteness.

The phone rang again almost as soon as he replaced the receiver. A woman's impersonal voice asked if he were the acting captain of Homicide. She said that Detective Sergeant Gilbert Judd had asked her to say that he would be detained overnight and to please notify his wife that he was on a job. She hung up before Nelson could ask her to elaborate. He had the call traced immediately. It was from the Sellars Memorial Hospital in Howardsville, Connecticut.

## CHAPTER X

THAT NIGHT a scattering of people who had been on more or less intimate terms with Glen Williams slept poorly or not at all.

In Howardsville, Connecticut, long before dawn, Betty Conway struggled out of a nightmare's ugly grasp to find reality no marked improvement. She reached for the light over her bed, switched it on, and tried to take reassurance from her surroundings. But the bedroom's gaily papered walls, the furnishings adapted to her changing tastes since childhood, had suddenly assumed an aspect of smug self-righteousness, and every object her eyes touched seemed to say, "You're not the girl we know. You don't belong here."

She was alone in the house. Her mother and father had left a week ago for a visit to California. She told herself that at least she was spared the effort of dissimulation their presence would demand. But it was very cold comfort, because she would have given much to run to either of them.

She got out of bed and, barefoot, walked to the open window. The still air had no healing in it, and no friendly whisper came from the leaves of the tall elm outside. She retreated into the room. She went to the dressing-table mirror and stared. Her nightgown clung damply, her short yellow curls were any old way, and her eyes stared back, dark blue and smudged beneath. Fairy-tale princess, she thought. Witch! She picked up a brush and dropped it, smiling an ironic little smile. She lit a cigarette. She

thought of a man named Judd, and of what Mike had done to him. And she thought that it was all her fault, and it would be her fault if Mike was arrested. Because if she had used her head there would have been no need for Judd to come to Howardsville. And when he did come she had not used her head, either. If she had answered the bell earlier, Judd would have been and gone before Mike got there. But she had not answered the bell because she did not want to see anyone, and when at last its persistent ringing had forced her to answer in spite of herself, she had behaved like an idiot. And then Mike rang. And that was the time not to answer. But Judd, with a great play of innocence, had offered to go to the door, so she had no choice. And she had continued to behave like an idiot. That drive back from the hospital. A hussy as well as an idiot! *Poor Mike. I made him say it at last. I made him.*

She giggled. *It must be nerves,* she told herself. *Certainly I have nothing to giggle about.* She covered her face against the room's smug gaze. She longed for daylight, so that she could go to New York and do what she had to do.

Mike Williams did not go to bed that night. He made much of a sick cow's need for his attention. Only when he took periodic trips to the barn to minister to her could he forget his own misery. Between trips he sat in the living-room of the farmhouse and thought about Glen, and about Betty Conway, and about Mike Williams, fool. The living-room was stuffy and drab. The alterations and improvements he had made on the farm proper had not extended to the house, because in the back of his mind had lurked the thought that when he married, his wife would apply her magic womanly touch and transform what had been shabbiness and general disrepair to new and shining beauty. Now, sitting in the worn chair, a stocky, deep-chested man with a bruised face, hot-eyed and wide awake, overalled and booted, vaguely conscious of his own aroma of sweat and barn, he extracted the thought, examined it, and deliberately tore it to shreds. There had never been and there never would be any woman he wanted to marry

but Betty Conway. And seeing himself as surely she must see him, he could no longer even weigh his chances. He had been a lout seeking the moon, with nothing for barter but callused hands and a stumbling tongue. And if there was any doubt in Betty Conway's mind, he had extinguished it by offering indisputable proof that his physical seeming matched what it contained.

When he left the office of Homicide's acting captain he had been terribly disturbed at the turn the interview had taken. Not that he held anything against the acting captain for doing his duty as he saw it. His disturbance was due to his own shortcomings, his blundering stupidity in being unable to keep Betty's name from cropping up. Glen would have handled it easily. Glen, by brilliant sleight of hand which he, Mike had always found so difficult to follow, would have hog-tied that acting captain. Or would he? Unbidden, the doubt crept in, the doubt that had seldom been granted admittance while Glen lived. That Nelson fellow was clever. Not in a showy way, but quiet-clever. And Glen? Had Glen ever been pitted against anybody like that? Certainly not among the constantly changing group of Glen's companions that he had been permitted to meet before Glen left the farm. They were— Drop it. Glen was dead. And it was bad enough that Glen's death, let alone the nature of it, left room for anything but grief and guilt. Face it. Guilt. He was responsible. He should have whipped sense into Glen long ago instead of waiting, watching him drift until—until it was too late. And while he was alone and facing the truths he might as well admit that neither grief nor guilt had been the first emotion aroused by his brother's death. Love had been first. Love for Glen's girl. Instantly, like a clear, cool spring, it had come welling up from its buried source. And he had been ashamed. But not too ashamed to want to drink. Yes, he might as well admit it. Here in this shabby room that would never be transformed, that would never be anything but the shabby reflection of a shabby soul, he might as well admit it.

He had gone from the acting captain's office to the sta-

tion and waited for the next train to Howardsville. He had boarded the train and sat until the end of the trip painstakingly trying to recall every word he had said to Nelson and every word that Nelson had said to him. It had ceased to matter to him whether or not the investigation unearthed the murderer. What mattered was that Betty be left untouched by it, and he kept wondering if there was anything he could have said or left unsaid to spare her. Oh, he had made a mess of it. But one thing he could do, he had thought. He could warn her of a possible visit from the police, so that at least she'd be prepared. And, too, before she read the sordid details in the newspapers, before the cold printed word could inform her that her sweetheart, her beau, had died with the stamp of vice upon him, he, Mike, could tell her himself. Break it gently. Say that Glen had been ill and had needed the drug to ease his suffering. Something like that.

At Howardsville he had stepped into his rickety old car and driven straight to the Conway house. But when he turned in at the front gate his own inadequacy caught up with him again. How should he account for his presence? He could not burst in upon her and with no preliminary blurt out what he had come to say. As never before he longed for polish and tact. He knew that just the fact of his visit would surprise her. He knew that she was alone, and even when her parents were there he came by invitation only. His impulse was to turn back, to wait until he could think of a suitable opening. But there was no time for that. The police might invade her privacy at any moment. And aside from that, the longing to see her was stronger than shyness or fear of intruding. So he went up the cobbled walk and climbed the porch steps and rang the bell.

Betty answered the bell. She looked much as usual to him except that her cheeks were pale. She said, "Mike!" And his ears were at first deceived into hearing a note of gladness in her voice. But her next words were bleached and dry. She said, "I'm sorry about Glen," as though she might be saying, "I'm sorry your hens aren't laying," or "Too bad we don't have rain."

He had forgotten that this must pass between them. He stood there making a clumsy to-do of wiping his feet on the mat, forgetting that his city shoes had been exposed to nothing more than dry pavements. He muttered foolishly, "So you've heard." And he thought that Glen's death would account for her pallor, and knew a treacherous stab of pain for which Glen's death was not accountable.

She said, "I'd ask you to come in, Mike, only I—I have a caller here on business. Could you come back later?"

Closed in with his pain, he had not understood. He had crossed the threshold to stand beside her in the entrance hall. He had seen and aped the involuntary turn of her head toward one of the rooms that gave on to the hall. It was her father's study and it was occupied. A strange man stood facing the open door.

Betty had made an odd, uncertain gesture. Then she had stepped into the study, he following automatically. She had performed no introduction. She had said flatly, "This man is just leaving."

Mike had looked from her to the man, a nondescript man of average height and indefinite coloring, impossible to classify. Mike had stepped aside to give him room to pass. But the man had stood firm, eyeing them both with impersonal curiosity, and he had said politely enough, "I can't go, Miss Conway, until you've answered a few questions. If I'd got to see you earlier, this would have been over and done with."

"I won't answer your questions," she cried. "I can't—not now. Please go."

The man had looked at her almost pityingly before he turned to Mike. "What's your name, mister?"

"Don't answer him—it's none of his business." She had seemed on the verge of panic.

And it had caused Mike to forget the reason behind his errand. Conscious only that his lady was in distress, he had come to the rescue. "Don't you understand English? Go on—scat—out." He had not even heard the argument that the man started to advance. He had grabbed him by his

arm and started to drag him toward the door. But the man was agile beyond ordinary for all his ordinary appearance, and he had twisted free. He had thrust a hand into his pocket, and Mike, bemused by some memory of a Western he had seen, believed that he was reaching for a gun. And that, so far as he could recollect, was how the fight began.

He huddled deeper into the chair. So help him, he had assaulted a police detective. Not only assaulted him but knocked him flat. He touched his own face, as though seeking solace by counting the bruises he had received in return. But the detective had received more than bruises. There had been a bad bump on the back of his head where he hit the hearth, and because they could not raise a doctor they had driven him to the hospital. He came to on the way and seemed to have some foolish notion that he was being taken for a ride. But perhaps he was raving. In the hospital a staff doctor insisted that he spend the night and pumped a sedative into him before he could say much more than: "For Pete's sake phone headquarters and get Acting Captain Grid Nelson to tell my wife I'm working." Mike had asked him if he wanted to press charges, and he had answered, "Just don't try to skip. I'll attend to you later."

After that, Mike had insisted that Betty drop him at the Howardsville police station. They had driven to the hospital in her car. He was not in the police station very long, and when he came out again he was surprised to find her waiting. He had told his story to Chief Brundage, and Brundage, an old friend, had listened incredulously and refused to put him under arrest. "The man hasn't preferred charges, Mike. You go home and get a good night's rest and we'll see what happens in the morning. Don't know as I blame you much. You didn't know who he was, and if I caught anybody bothering Betty, I'd haul off myself. Besides, I can't see that he had business in her house. Not if she didn't want him there. Not without the proper papers—"

So he told Betty that Chief Brundage was reserving judgment, and she drove him back to her house to reclaim his

car. Mike found little to talk about on the way. He had fixed things up for fair. His fists had been as quick as his wits were slow. He had caused trouble for the girl he would have given his life to shield. Right in her house, before her eyes, he had engaged in what was no better than a barroom brawl.

Several times he had tried to make fumbling apology. But she scarcely seemed to listen. Quite naturally she had more important things to occupy her. But when they reached her house she invited him in for a drink or a cup of coffee or whatever he wanted. Of course he had refused. He was not going to add insult to injury by taking advantage of her good manners.

He groaned. And then what had he done? He had added insult to injury, all right. Of all the times to choose—with Glen not even buried—

He was getting into his car when she said, "Mike—why did you do it?"

"Hit him? I told you—I lost my temper. I didn't know he was a policeman. I should have known it but I didn't—"

"I know—but why did you lose your temper?"

And with no warning at all the words had jumped to his lips. "I love you. I'll love you as long as I live—and as long as I live nobody's going to hurt you—" Then his foot had come down hard on the starter and he had driven off. Too bad, he thought, that he could not have driven off the earth.

Joss and Morgan Woodruff lay side by side in the double bed. Neither dared to stir for fear of disturbing the other. But finally Morgan was unable to control his right leg. It twitched, and Joss jumped.

"Sorry," he muttered. "I tried not to wake you."

"I was awake."

"Hot—isn't it?"

"Yes—but the window's open as far as it will go."

"I know." He knew, too, that the heat was not responsible for their unrest. "What time is it?"

Joss sat up and looked at the radium dial of the alarm

clock. "Five after three."

"Oh, lord—I thought it was later."

"Be glad it isn't. You can still get in a good few hours' sleep."

"An oversimplification if ever I heard one."

"Try."

"You don't sound like you."

"Voices always sound strange in the dark."

"A nice kind of strange—not—"

"Morgan, don't talk any more. You'll be dead tomorrow."

"That's a pretty thought. It ties in so well with—with everything."

She did not answer.

"Joss?"

"Yes?"

"What did the detective say that upset you so much?"

"We've been over all that. I'm not used to entertaining detectives. Just the fact of his coming to question me was upsetting."

"It wasn't any specific question that he asked?"

"Morgan—please stop thinking about it."

"He didn't, for example, ask if you and Glen had been—had been interested in each other?"

She lay quite still. He turned toward her. He flung an arm over her, the flat of his palm resting against her heart. He said, "Whoa—Joss—darling—what's that African tom-tom doing in there?"

"Did the detective tell you he'd asked me that about Glen?"

"Only after I gave him the lead."

"You gave him the lead?"

"I couldn't avoid it. He wanted to know about my lunch with Glen—and it was that among other things that made it such a gala occasion."

"You mean Glen told you we—and you never said anything?"

"I didn't take it seriously. I wasn't ever going to mention it. But you—you've been acting so unlike yourself that I

thought if we brought everything out into the open you'd —we'd feel better."

Her voice was choked. "Glen must have been crazy to invent a story like that."

"He was taking an awful risk—because if I'd believed him I'd have—"

"Don't!"

"Don't what? Where are you going?"

"To get a drink of water."

"I'll go."

"No—I'm up."

At the end of five minutes he called out, "Are you all right?"

"Yes—I'm coming. Shall I bring you some water?"

"Please." He switched on the light. He saw her shrink from it. He said, taking the glass from her, "I wanted to see you." He drank thirstily. He leaned over and set the glass upon the night table. "No dark, devious thoughts stand a chance with you in sight."

She sat down in a chair away from the bed. "And when I'm not in sight you think it was true about Glen and me?"

He said, "What is this? Are you suspecting me of—of suspecting you? You couldn't stand him. I know that."

"Do you?"

"Joss!"

"I'd better tell you the whole business. Perhaps it's too late—but I'd better tell you."

"You don't have to tell me a thing." Then he said, "What do you mean about it being too late?"

"I don't know what I mean. Glen told me he loved me. He begged me to leave you."

"When was this?"

"A week ago."

"And you kept it to yourself? If I'd known, I'd have—"

Again she cried, "Don't!"

He stared at her. He said slowly, "You think I'm going to say I'd have killed him? Maybe you think I did kill him."

Wordless, she shook her head.

He said, "A guy goes along certain he has no secrets from

his wife—or she from him. He doesn't have to be a stupid guy, either—just a guy like me." Frost touched his voice, hardened it. "Did Glen make you this sweet little offering in person?"

She nodded.

"Joss—why did you keep it dark? You couldn't have thought it would bore me."

"I didn't want to spoil things between you. I thought I could handle it myself. I said he was never to mention it again, and I wrote to him making it absolutely plain, in case he had any room for doubt."

"He said you'd written. Only he seemed to have been more encouraged than otherwise by your letter."

She breathed sharply. Then she said, "The detective has the letter. He'll probably let you see it if you feel the need."

Their eyes seemed entirely detached from the conversation. Joss studied the wall above his head. Morgan gazed intently at the bureau behind her. He said to the bureau, "I'd be more interested in seeing Glen's reply."

"There was no reply. There was nothing to reply to."

"That's not his version."

She stopped staring at the wall. "Morgan—look at me. You put the light on because you wanted to look at me, didn't you? You've got to make a choice. You've either got to believe everything Glen said—or you've got to discount it entirely."

It seemed to both of them that the choice involved their love, their marriage, everything they had been or ever would be to each other. But neither of them was ready to admit it.

Morgan got out of bed. He went to her. He knelt beside her chair and put his arms around her waist. He said, "I don't care—I wouldn't blame you—I—after dinner I was looking through the desk for some paper clips and I found a scrap of a letter in his handwriting—"

"A letter in his handwriting? You must be mistaken. I wouldn't even know his handwriting if I saw it."

"I would. I've seen it often enough on notes he's written

on my song sheets." His voice was pleading. "Joss—think—please think. It said. 'Thank you, my sweet. We'll—' and then the rest of the sheet was torn off. If you say so, of course it wasn't what he said it was—he always flung endearments around, and I'd be the first to grant he couldn't help lying about anything and everything—but maybe he sent some invitation you forgot to mention." Still holding her, he watched her face, dismayed because she seemed to be concentrating so hard on what should have been a simple, straightforward answer.

"No—he didn't write to me—not ever. He telephoned or dropped in, but he never wrote. That scrap of paper must have fallen from his pocket when he was here. I don't know how it got in the desk—"

Morgan broke his hold upon her waist. He stood up. There was comedy to be extracted from his tousled black hair, from the cotton pajamas, shrunken by many washings, that fell inches short of his thin wrists and ankles. There was no comedy in his face. He wore the look of a man crucified.

"Morgan," she said, "something's happening that I don't understand."

"That makes two of us. At least we have that in common —or have we?"

"I won't let you do this, Morgan." The words were ripped from her.

"Won't let me do it?"

"Yes—you. You're destroying yourself—us."

*Don't let me,* he begged silently. *Say something—anything that will restore my balance—my faith.* He took a cigarette from the open pack on the bureau. He lit it.

Long habit made her ache to tell him not to smoke, because what with lack of sleep and the poor pretense he had made of eating dinner, smoking would— She put aside the humdrum concern, realizing its relative unimportance. Deliberately, she whipped herself to anger as the only means of reaching him. "Apparently you aren't Glen's sole confidant in regard to his love life. You aren't the only one who believed him, either. You share honors with

Tom Gaudio. Tom Gaudio came to see me this morning, his object being that I, as Glen's bereft lover, join forces with him in tracking down the murderer."

"What?"

"So you see—the letter you said you found just adds to my guilty confusion. This is the truth, Morgan, whether you want to accept it or not. The only inkling I had about the peculiar ideas Glen was fostering came on June fourth out of a perfectly clear sky. He never mentioned them before or after—either in writing or in person. I'd remember the date quite well even if he hadn't made it a—a what you'd call a gala occasion. Because it was little Brigid Jorgensen's birthday, and I'd been downstairs helping her mother to entertain some of the neighborhood babies. I'd been home only about ten minutes and I was just going out again to shop for a few things when Glen rang the bell. I asked him to come in. I didn't expect—" The false anger evaporated. "Oh, Morgan, it was so ugly. I ran out and left him—and when I came back he was gone. Can't you see why I didn't want to tell you?"

Blindly, she reached out her arms. And like a sleepwalker he came into them, hiding his tormented face in her neck.

In the basement apartment only Fred Storch slept. Dora, his wife, prodded him. "Fred—Fred—you having a bad dream?"

He made incoherent protest. He thrashed about. Then, under her insistent repetition of his name, he heaved himself to sitting posture. He said, "Huh?" and, not fully awake, thrust off the light cotton blanket.

"Fred—you don't have to get up yet—it ain't morning—but you was yelling fit to raise the house—"

His head turned automatically toward the other bed in the room.

She sensed or felt the movement. "It's all right. Billy ain't there. I took him to the bathroom a few minutes ago. He'll call out when he's ready to get back to bed. He can go by himself now, but I'm always scared he'll hit against

something in the dark. What was you dreaming, Fred?"

"How do I know?"

"You ain't been sleeping good at all lately—turning and twisting until I—"

He said sourly, "Maybe your ladyship would like me to buy a pair of them twin beds."

"What are you getting sore for? It ain't my own rest worries me."

"You don't have to worry about mine." He was scratching his head, his fingernails scraping the cropped hair. He said laboriously, "What was I yelling?"

"You know—them crazy noises you make in bad dreams when you think you're really saying something only it don't come out."

"Oh." For the first time he became aware of the sound under their voices. He looked toward the streak of light that came from the bathroom door. "Want me to get him? He's got the water running like—"

"Leave him be. It won't hurt nothing. I turned it on for him and he's probably dabbling in it. He can do that by the hour and he won't catch cold in this heat. It makes him awfully restless—the heat does."

He muttered, "Maybe things ain't always going to be this way."

He was given neither to optimism nor to idle remarks. She said, "What do you mean? Fred, you ain't changed your mind about putting Billy in—"

"No charity home is ever going to see me or mine—that's for sure."

"Then—"

"Forget it."

She said fearfully, "You—you ain't been up to something?"

He stretched his length along the bed again. He yawned decisively.

"Fred—you answer me. You been carrying on in a funny way lately—not eating enough to keep a bird alive—not hardly sleeping—"

"I notice you ain't in such a hurry to let me sleep now."

"No—nor to let you start dreaming and yelling again, either. I want to know what's the reason for it. If you're sick you'll go to a clinic—and if it ain't that, it's something you got on your mind."

"Ain't I always got something on my mind? Ain't you?"

"That's got nothing to do with it. You been different since Mr. Williams got himself shot. You can't hide nothing from me, Fred. I'm your wife."

"Who's trying to hide—"

"You are. Whatever it is, you tell me and we'll—"

"Shut up and lay down or I swear I'll shut you up."

"There—in all the years we're married you never talked to me like that. Now I'm sure you ain't yourself. You been a good husband—a good man—"

"And where did it get me?" He heaved himself over on his side. Deliberately he began to snore.

She stopped talking, and presently the snore became the rhythmic breathing of a sleeper. Sighing heavily, she pulled the light blanket over him. She longed to obey the demands of her own tired body, to lie back and rest for a few moments before she went to fetch Billy, but she dragged herself out of bed. She hoped as she neared the lighted bathroom that he would not be mulish and refuse to come. He had evidently heard her approaching steps. He was not at the sink. She turned the water off before she attempted to rout him from his crouch behind the door. He had taken to doing that a lot lately, she thought wearily, to hiding from her in any place where he could squeeze his poor overgrown body. With infinite patience she started to coax him out.

By grant of a police doctor's injection, Tom Gaudio was temporarily released from his misery. And in another part of the city a sturdy nightcap performed the same service for Sarah Thrace. But during the period before it took effect she thought unhappily of the Judas role she had played that day. She thought about the trouble that Glen Williams had stirred up alive and dead. She wished that she could have kept Joss Woodruff out of her session with

the acting captain of Homicide. She wished that she had met the acting captain under other circumstances, socially for choice, and in her younger days. Yet she conceded glumly that even in her younger days, when men swarmed, her special brand of honey had succeeded in attracting none on a par with Gridley Nelson. More on a par with Tom Gaudio, and it was strange how some women never learned but just kept repeating and repeating their mistakes. She wondered where Tom Gaudio was, and what would become of him. She wondered what would become of herself if she kept on drinking and if she did not get work. Her last conscious thought was a comforting cliché. Tomorrow was another day. She would go on the wagon tomorrow. Tomorrow she had that audition for the new television program. It just might pan out.

Acting Captain Gridley Nelson tried to sleep on his problems. They made a lumpy mattress, and each lump had a name like Glen and Bernice and Betty and Mike and Joss and Morgan and Sarah and Tom. There was even a composite lump named Storch. At about four o'clock in the morning it caught him at the base of his spine. He sat up and said, "Oxalic acid."

Kyrie murmured, "What, Grid?"

"Oxalic acid—for pickling."

"As in Heinz?"

"No—furniture."

"Oh—you mean what Stella did to that desk she bought at auction for six dollars?" Then Kyrie laughed. She was one of those who made almost instant transition from sleeping to waking. Her laughter was a lovely normal sound. It seemed to flood the dark room with sun. "Grid—I've had weird conversations in the night, but this one wins. Does it lead to anything?"

"It might." He drew her softness closer. And for a while the problem lumps receded.

## CHAPTER XI

NELSON AWOKE to the hot June morning and reached headquarters before 9 a.m. He started his official day by telephoning the lab. While he waited for an answer to his inquiry, he stared at the handbag of Bernice Acevedo which lay open upon his desk. He had gone through its contents with care the night before, finding of special interest a stiff, self-conscious picture of a thin girl in a black dress, obviously spot-developed by a street-corner photographer, a brown stain on the otherwise clean lining of the bag, and a damp squashed chocolate which had burst through its wrapping of silver foil to make the stain. Almost before his eyes had recorded the chocolate and the stain his mind had leaped swiftly to connect the tiny raised letters on the foil with the voice of Dora Storch saying, "He had the food and drinks sent from Neuilly's."

"Yes, I'm here," he said into the telephone. "Yes, Ralph, go ahead."

"The candy was loaded with it, Grid. Doc hasn't started the autopsy yet—the body arrived too late last night—but there doesn't seem to be much doubt as to the cause of death. Looks to me as though one piece of that confection would have been sufficient—"

"Doesn't it have a taste?" Nelson asked.

"I don't know," the laboratory technician said without humor, "I never tasted it. And the crystals as such have no odor except when they're mixed in a solution of hot

water. But our malefactor didn't bother with a solution. What he started with is a date—dipped in chocolate and stuffed with a mixture of chopped nuts and some kind of liqueur like a strong brandy. He cut the date in half lengthwise—removed the stuffing, and put it back after he'd mashed the crystals in with it. On the piece you sent down you can see the signs of doctoring plainly even though the chocolate's been smoothed back over the jointure, but I guess the poor girl wasn't looking for it. If she noticed any irregularity she might have put it down to the hot weather."

"What's oxalic acid used for?" Nelson said not very hopefully.

"Dyeing—also some kind of printing on fabrics—and on giving old furniture a new finish. That's about all I can tell you offhand."

"Thanks."

"Don't hang up. Fields has just handed me this report on the hypo needles and the letter. Just smudges on the needle package. The typing on the letter and on the woman's statement match. So do the signatures—of course there's a difference in touch, but the machine's the same."

"All right. Return the material and the reports when you get time." Nelson could not put much feeling into the request. Both the needles and the defection of Joss Woodruff seemed vastly unimportant as compared to the latest evidence. He sat trying to weigh it.

Neuilly was the trademark of one of the most expensive caterers and purveyors of sweets in the city. Glen Williams had been a Neuilly client. And someone had poisoned his last purchase. But drugs might have dulled Glen Williams's appetite for sweets, and therefore the impatient someone had used the thirty-two as a surer, quicker means of accomplishing his purpose. And it followed that Bernice Acevedo, visiting Glen Williams on the afternoon of the murder, witness the description given by Mike Williams and by the superintendent's wife, had helped herself to the chocolates. Nelson winced, sidetracked by the thought of the superintendent's wife, whose miserable privacy was

shortly due for another invasion because the oxalic acid so directly pointed to her husband. He thrust the thought aside and went on with the interrupted saga of Bernice.

She had helped herself to the chocolates, carried some of them away in her handbag, probably made a clean sweep, witness the empty candy dish. She, who had so patently put away childish pleasures, had been brought to her end by childish greed.

Yes, thought Nelson, it was easy enough to establish her presence on the day of the murder. And if it needed verification, he could get it by means of showing the street-corner photograph to the two who had encountered her. But then what? What else could be established? Neither the murderer nor the motive for the murders.

Assuming—and it seemed a safe assumption—that the same person had poisoned the chocolates and used the thirty-two, it was also safe to assume that the criminal had not been the victim of said chocolates. Which exonerated Bernice as a murderer. And little such earthly exoneration meant to her now. And little did it serve the ends of earthly justice.

But wait a moment. It did introduce a variation on his theorizing. It cast no light upon Glen Williams, corpse number one, but it did suggest a secondary motive for a secondary corpse. Say that the poison had not been intended for Glen Williams at all. Say it had been a death trap for Bernice because she knew and could have named the criminal—

*All right, say it,* he thought angrily. *Say it until your own doomsday. She can no longer name anyone. Get back on the track!*

He got back on the track. Deliberate poisoning by oxalic acid was rare. Impossible, then, to dismiss as coincidence the fact that it was an indispensable item in the process of pickling furniture, and that Fred Storch, superintendent, had pickled furniture in Glen Williams's apartment. And the thought of what this might mean to the superintendent's wife, Dora Storch, could no longer be set aside. It swelled to such proportions that it seemed the woman her-

self stood before him. "Fred wouldn't hurt a fly," she said, and her ravaged, bony face was sick with fear.

In fancy he could hear the thick-tongued utterance from the other room of the basement quarters. And he could hear himself saying, "I'm not accusing Fred of anything. But I must question him." And suddenly Junie was in the picture, too. Junie, whose sturdy little body he had hefted a short while ago, whose face was already stamped with bright new intelligence.

The phone rang. Nelson answered it and was informed that a man named Emile Renaud wished to make a statement concerning the Williams case. Nelson asked that a stenographer take the statement, type it, and put it on his desk. Confused, he wished that Emile Renaud, waiter at the Gateau, was sufficient reason to delay what must be done.

He pushed his chair back. He arose, experiencing an unaccustomed resistance to action throughout his length and breadth. Ever since his latest promotion, Kyrie had accused him of doing a great deal of unnecessary leg work instead of delegating it as was fitting to a man of his exalted status. Quite naturally she hated the often dangerous paths he traveled in his quest for firsthand information. But her protesting was only half in earnest, because she understood that he was not the stuff of which desk-sitters are fashioned. Yet now, for once, he would have preferred to delegate the leg work that was indicated.

*And why am I making such heavy weather of it?* he thought. *It doesn't mean that the man is implicated. He might have forgotten to take the leftover crystals with him when he finished his work in the apartment. He has no criminal record—not so far as we've been able to check. And certainly he has enough on his mind to explain his surly attitude toward life in general.* Nevertheless, Nelson went on to wonder unhappily if the personal affairs of Fred Storch fully explained his unwillingness to co-operate with the police in Glen Williams's apartment on the eve of the shooting. There had been long and painful pauses between questions and answers. And he had deliberated with

more than ordinary caution before he undertook to approximate the length of time that had elapsed between his discovery of the body and his call to the police. He was a slow-witted man. That much was apparent. But was he all that slow? And if not, what had he been attempting to conceal from the Homicide Squad, whose specialized interests lay solely in tracking down a murderer?

Nelson slid the photograph of Bernice Acevedo into an envelope and put it in his pocket. As he walked toward the door he heard voices in the anteroom and placed one of them as issuing from a reporter who had covered several of his cases. The morning papers had given no headlines to the passing of Bernice Acevedo. In most instances it was tucked away on the back pages. The presence of oxalic acid was undiscovered at the time the press arrived on the scene. Therefore the public had been told briefly that the condition of the body pointed to foul play, and that a man named Thomas Gaudio had been taken into custody. Drugs were not mentioned, nor was Bernice Acevedo linked with Glen Williams. Nelson had given Clevis full counts for his handling of the matter. He could well imagine the little detective assuming his village-idiot stance as he spouted the special brand of double talk he reserved for such occasions.

Nelson hesitated before the door, shrugged, opened it, and walked into the anteroom. There were three reporters waiting. The man whose voice he had recognized represented a respectable evening paper. The other two represented tabloids with wider circulation.

One of the tabloid men spoke first. "At least we can't say you keep banker's hours, Lieutenant."

"What's the least you *can* say?" Nelson asked mildly.

"Oh—it's like that, is it?"

"For the moment. I may have something for you later in the day."

"Not so fast." The short, fat spokesman blocked his exit. "We're early birds, too. We got a right to get a worm."

"Just what worm are you after?"

"The one that ate the Puerto Rican tomato. I under-

stand you got him under lock and key—which is pretty quick work—or would be if you'd booked him—which you haven't—and why?"

The other tabloid man gave tongue. "That's not my pigeon. My paper wants the love angle on—"

The representative of the evening paper grinned. "Why bother the lieutenant? Why not ask an expert like me? How's this? Crime of Passion. Young photographer kills luscious Latin-type sweetheart in jealous rage."

The second tabloid man looked interested. "You got an inside line?" Then he said sulkily, "I'm not on that case. Mine is the Williams murder." He narrowed his eyes at Nelson. "I have it that yesterday you sent a plain-clothes man named Judd out to Connecticut to work over Williams's ex-girl friend, who turns out to be some kind of prize fighter because Judd's just checked in with plaster on his head and a mouse on his right eye. I horn in while the desk sergeant is kidding him—but he's not in the mood to talk—"

The fat man said, "Maybe the mouse got his tongue," and laughed fatly.

Nelson looked at the reporter who worked on the evening paper. "What's yours, Garvey?"

"Williams case. Any angle you can give me, including the man and his mouse."

Nelson glanced at his watch. "Come back later in the day—bring your friends and I'll make a statement."

"Good enough." He addressed his vocally dissident colleagues. "Do what the acting captain says, boys. He's a leveler from way back."

Nelson eased out quietly while they were arguing about it. A sheepish, battered Judd waylaid him in the corridor.

"I caught the milk train in. I was just heading for your office."

"Change your mind. My office is full of reporters."

"Yeah—I ran into one downstairs."

"Rumor has it that you ran into something else."

"A closed fist. I—"

"Should you be up and around, Judd?"

"I'm not hurt—just my feelings. That damn hospital doctor had me pounding my ear before I could—"

"Later, Judd. Go home and take it easy for a while. I'll talk to you this afternoon."

"You mean the trip wasn't necessary? Something else broke?"

He left Judd looking insulted as well as injured. He managed to quit the building without further interference.

The bell marked *Superintendent* did not respond to Nelson's first pressure. He had to ring several times at reasonable intervals before the catch on the door was released. In the lobby he was received by Dora Storch.

Her scraped-back hair was damp with sweat, and there were damp patches on her cotton dress. She did not recognize him at first. She said, "We got no vacancies, if that's what you want. And if it's something else, you should have come down them stairs on the street. They lead to the basement. I can't be letting anybody and everybody into the house." As he came closer she studied him for a moment and said, "Excuse me—you're the officer who—"

"I'd like to talk to your husband, Mrs. Storch." He tried to steel himself against the strain that tautened her face. "Is he downstairs?"

"No—no, he ain't. But I got to go down right away. I left my boy alone." She tugged at the door of the elevator.

Nelson opened it for her, followed her into it, and pressed the basement button. She looked at him helplessly. "I don't know how long Fred will be—"

"I'll wait for him, if you don't mind."

She did mind. But when the elevator came to a stop she led the way submissively to her apartment. The electric light was on in the hot kitchen-living-room, and what seemed to be the same clothes Nelson had observed on his first visit hung limply from the line.

He glanced at the dry kitchen sink. He said, "You've left the water running somewhere." He located the sound and turned toward the closed bathroom door.

"My boy's in there. He don't want to do nothing lately

but splash himself. I guess it keeps him cool. Ain't it fierce the way this heat don't let up? Early for it, too, and we still got July and August to go." Her nerves had surfaced to egg her on. "Reason I kept you waiting upstairs, he ain't satisfied unless I turn the water on full for him—and it kind of drowns out the bell."

"Is your husband in the building?"

"I guess so. He overslept this morning—and the owner was due to talk over some repairs. I guess they're stopping in at the different apartments to find out what's wanted—not that the owner's going to order it done—he—" They were both standing. She said, "You can sit down if you want to—but like I say—"

"I don't want to keep you from your work. If you can give me the names of the tenants who need repairs, I'll try to locate your husband."

"From the way they been complaining, they all need them. Do you have to see Fred, officer? He ain't been feeling good, and it will only— Can't you ask me what you have to know?"

"I'm sure you told me what you could when I talked to you before, Mrs. Storch." He tried to make his smile reassuring. He took the envelope from his pocket. He removed the photograph and showed it to her. "But there is one way you can help."

She took the cardboard-framed oblong from his hand. She stared at it, wrinkling her bony forehead. She nodded. "I seen her someplace—where I don't— Oh, sure—that dress—it's the same dress, all right. She was the one come looking for the Smiths' bell."

"You're sure," he said, more to divert her from the real purpose of his visit than because he doubted the identification. "You saw her only for a moment or so."

"I couldn't forget that dress—and the way she was too skinny to fill it out. Her face don't seem as sassy as it did—but people always put on their best face for a picture." Her own face had relaxed. "Is that why you're here, officer? Did this girl—did she have something to do with Mr. Williams being shot? If that's all it is, you don't have to ask

Fred, because he didn't see her. He wasn't back yet from settling the garbage violation." She looked almost happy with relief.

"You say he hasn't been well. I hope it's nothing serious."

"No—he ain't exactly ailing. It's just that ever since—" She turned away as though the words she had almost said might be written upon her face. Then she gave a suppressed exclamation.

He followed the turn of her head. Water was seeping from under the bathroom door, forming a steadily growing pool upon the linoleum. He strode toward it, but she was there before him, fumbling with the knob.

"He must've somehow went and put the stopper in." Pride entered her voice in spite of her annoyance. "You'd be surprised how smart he is sometimes. I never put the stopper in for him—I just let it run so's he can dabble. Will you look at the way this door sticks. If I told Fred once I told him a hundred— Billy—Billy—be a good boy—see can you open the door for Mamma—" She managed it herself. She looked behind it. She said coaxingly, "I know you're hiding—come out now. Billy! Say—he ain't—"

Nelson removed his coat and bared an arm. He reached past her, closed the taps, plunged and pulled the stopper from the high tub. The water began to drain off with a sickening gurgle. She stood transfixed, the overflow soaking her flat-heeled shoes.

Nelson backed out. He tossed his coat on a chair and, rolling down his sleeve, went to the kitchen's one window. He leaned into the bare, sooty yard that was set off from other yards by a shoulder-high fence.

Dora Storch crowded him. "He ain't there," she said unnecessarily. "And he couldn't climb over—not without a chair to stand on—and he didn't have a chair. He ain't in the bedroom, neither—he must have got out when I went up to let you in."

"He couldn't have taken the elevator. Can he climb stairs?"

"He can climb stairs—he falls, but he can climb."

"Is there anywhere down here he might be hiding?"

"The furnace room—he could be there. He likes to hide—he's full of mischief." Again, in spite of her fears, the pride was in her voice. "Sometimes I think he knows as much as other folks. Sure—that's where he's got to—the furnace room." She hurried to confirm it. She called over her shoulder, "I don't care, so long as he ain't loose upstairs. The owner would kick up and Fred would get awful sore—"

Nelson, close behind her, saw the large wet footprints she left on the cement flooring outside the apartment. Evidently Billy had ventured forth before the tub overflowed. There were no signs to show that he had passed that way.

The heavy fire door of the furnace room opened easily. It opened upon nothing but the furnace and the intricate sweating pipes that branched over wall and ceiling. "Billy," she called. "Billy!" And her voice was hoarse with renewed fright.

Then Nelson heard that thick-tongued utterance once more. It tortured his spine. He and the frantic woman collided at the door of the storage room a moment before the crash came. His hand reached the knob first. His eyes were the first to see the queerly angled leg jutting from under the piled trunks.

Instinctively he moved to block her vision. "Go for help," he said.

But she was beside him, her back bent, no sound coming from her but the sound of her labored breathing. She teamed with him, and as a team they worked to free the boy of the crushing pressure.

And when the boy was free she knelt, and with her skirt dabbed at the blood that trickled from his nose and mouth. She gathered him to her breast. "It's all right, Billy. You didn't mean to do no harm. It's all right. Mamma ain't going to scold. Mamma's here, Billy. You ain't hurt bad—nothing but a little nosebleed. Mamma will—"

She did not hear the footsteps angrily pounding the cement. She crouched and crooned to the weight in her bony arms.

It was Nelson who turned at the outraged roar, Nelson

who stepped back into the furnace room to confront Fred Storch.

"Who the hell is in there?" Fred roared. "What goes on? Why are you—"

Nelson told him. And showed him. And watched a great hulk of a man disintegrate.

## CHAPTER XII

THE METAL CORNER of a trunk had cracked the boy's skull. He was dead before a doctor arrived to make official pronouncement.

After the body had been carried to the basement apartment, Nelson lingered alone in the furnace room. He could not remember when the demands of his calling had waged such bitter warfare with his emotions. Several times he had started purposefully toward the cement passageway, and several times he had been halted by an intangible barrier. He could not bring himself to scale it. He could not intrude, even though the words of Fred Storch were a mocking echo in his ears.

"I killed him," Fred had howled. "I killed him same as if I went for him with my own two hands—and I never meant it. I didn't want it this way, Dora. You got to believe me. I guess I must've known no luck would come of it—but I swear I done it for Billy's good—"

Head bent, Nelson stood in the cubicle that had been the boy's next-to-last hiding-place. Absently he stirred the littered floor with the toe of his shoe. The lock on the trunk responsible for the boy's death had been sprung by the force of the lethal blow. The tray had fallen out, scattering such articles as people habitually store in old trunks. There were schoolbooks, a faded sweater, a box of dominoes, a few photographs, a large crumbled silk handkerchief, a split brown paper bag, a box camera, an assort-

ment of rolled woolen socks, a fishing-reel—

*Could there be any verdict but accidental death?* thought Nelson. Could Fred Storch have meant anything but that he had been careless in stacking the trunks, and by that carelessness guilt-stricken, his plodding mind shocked to conscious realization that he had been harboring a death wish? But would that explain his anguished "I did it for Billy's good"? Had Billy hidden in the furnace room before, and had his father actually planned his end? His grief was real enough. But grief was often real enough after the fact.

*Then go,* thought Nelson, *intrude upon that grief. Demand the answers.* And he repeated to himself the words that Clevis had said the night before. "It will never be easier than now to get a confession." But Clevis had been referring to Tom Gaudio. And Clevis had been wrong. And Nelson's foot, about to take the initial step, kicked at the split brown paper bag.

The split widened. A funny sort of container, he thought inconsequentially, to lock away in a trunk. He stooped to retrieve its contents. He stooped and stared at the roll of bills, at the revolver with the ebony handle.

The revolver had bounced from the bag to land on the faded sweater. He judged it to be a thirty-two. And when he had examined it, using the sweater sleeve to preserve it from his own prints and to preserve the doubtful existence of other prints, his judgment was substantiated. It was of English make, and one shot had been fired from it. Later, Ballistics would fire another, a test bullet to be compared striation by striation with the bullet probed from Glen Williams's chest. But Nelson was convinced without benefit of Ballistics that here was the missing weapon.

He wrapped the revolver in the silk handkerchief, secured it with twine from the fishing-reel, and returned it to the torn paper bag. Then he counted the money. There was a fifty-dollar bill on the outside of the roll. The rest were fives and tens and ones. The total was one hundred and fifty dollars, and he thought that under the circumstances it was a paltry sum. The circumstances, as he

saw them at first glance, were that Fred had known there was money in the Williams apartment and killed to get it. But then why had he left the money in the dead man's wallet? If he had killed for one hundred and fifty dollars, would he have scruples that prevented him from adding forty or more to his little hoard? Unless some interruption had prevented him from completing his project. Bernice?

No, it did not make sense. The untouched bills in the wallet indicated that Glen Williams had not carried the one hundred and fifty dollars on his person. So if the motive was robbery, Fred, who possessed keys to the apartment, could have entered it at any time during Williams's absence and helped himself without resorting to murder.

An alternate and sounder theory was that someone had paid Fred Storch to kill Glen Williams, and that Fred had wanted the money to ease life for his son. Not that one hundred and fifty dollars could provide more than transient ease in these days of inflation. But perhaps it was merely a down payment. Accepting that, Nelson went on to absolve Fred Storch of deliberately planning his son's death. There Fred's guilt was by indirection. In his haste to conceal the weapon and the blood money, he had neglected to set the trunk firmly in place. Could he be absolved in much the same manner from the poisoning of the girl, Bernice? Nelson thought so. He thought that whoever had paid Fred for his one overt criminal undertaking had made use of the forgotten oxalic-acid crystals. And his earlier guess as to motive still held—namely, that Bernice alive would constitute a menace, a potential betrayer. Then he thought of certain other aspects of the case and both theories collapsed and he was back where he started.

He dropped the roll of bills into the bag. He stood up, flexed his long legs, and leaned over to inspect the trunk's sprung lock. He nodded as he saw the impress of the hammer. It was an old trunk, and it might have been tampered with before Fred used it as a receptacle, but the chances were that he had done the tampering, since it seemed unlikely that he would be entrusted with keys to the tenants'

luggage.

The trunk was not initialed. It bore the traces of several labels that had been scraped off. But there was one label intact, pasted to the side. Nelson moved the trunk a little in order to read it. It said *Glen Williams* over the apartment-house address.

He was not a superstitious man. Yet for a moment he felt the cold breath of superstition and heard it whisper something about a dead man rising from the grave to take revenge. He shook himself impatiently. He tried to shake off the clinging sympathy he had been entertaining for the Storch family. He picked up the brown paper bag and pulled the split ends together so that it would be a secure package. And he tried resolutely to act as a policeman should act. The effort brought him to the door of the Storch apartment. He knocked.

Dora Storch came quickly. In the dim light she was a gaunt, red-eyed figure of tragedy.

She said, "Please don't make no noise. He was carrying on something terrible. The doctor made him take pills for his nerves, and now I just got him to lay down. Maybe he'll fall asleep if—"

"I must see him, Mrs. Storch."

"Shhh—I don't want him to know you're here. He keeps raving he wants to talk to you. He wants to go to the police station and give himself up—"

"He wants to—"

"Yes—he thinks it's his fault about Billy. It ain't. He wouldn't hurt a fly if he could help it." She scrubbed at her dry red eyes. "It don't do no good for him to take the blame." Then she said in a low, fierce voice, "Go away. It's your fault as much as anybody's. If you hadn't come horning in, I wouldn't have left my boy alone and he wouldn't—" Her voice broke. "Excuse it—I'm talking as crazy as Fred."

Nelson, the man, said, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Storch." And the policeman added, "May I use your phone?"

She showed him where it was in the little dark hall outside the kitchen. She left him to it. He heard the bedroom

door close softly as he dialed headquarters. After that his muted voice was the only sound in the apartment.

He gave the street and number of the building and said that he wanted two plain-clothes men immediately. One was to stand guard in the furnace room to see that nothing was disturbed should developments require the services of the lab. The other, armed with a warrant for the superintendent's arrest, was to stand outside his basement quarters. He was not to make his presence known until he heard activity in the apartment. Then he was to bring Fred Storch in for questioning. He was not to use the warrant unless Storch refused to come.

Quietly, Nelson let himself out into the passage. He waited for the arrival of the operatives, repeated his instructions, and drove back to headquarters. Because it was past lunchtime he stopped at a restaurant along the way. But he had seldom felt less like eating.

At headquarters he entrusted the thirty-two to a policeman, along with a precisely worded order. Clevis was waiting in the anteroom of his office.

Clevis looked at him, looked away, and said offhandedly, "You going to take a vacation this summer? Must be a long time since you had one."

"And it's showing," Nelson said. He had not taken a vacation since his chief, Waldo Furniss, had departed for Florida to convalesce from wounds received in the line of duty. And he was beginning to think that Furniss intended to convalesce permanently. The thought brought him no cheer. As always, when downed by the ramifications of his job, he missed the flamboyant old extrovert who was his friend as well as his superior officer. Furniss drew a sharp line between right and wrong and was seldom troubled by the psychological factors behind a crime. He leaned toward oversimplification in his appraisal of human beings, whereas Nelson, with whom he had worked closely, tended, in his striving for the secret of human complexities, to inhabit empathically almost everyone with whom he had dealings. Between them, he and Furniss had achieved a

good balance, and now he longed for the old man's ear, his unsparing criticism, his advice. He went further. He wished he were Furniss. He wished he were in Florida—And then, thinking of the comment such self-pity would have drawn from Furniss, he smiled.

Clevis said hopefully, "Ain't it as bad as it looks?" He followed Nelson into the office.

Nelson sat down behind his desk and tried not to wish he had been sitting there all morning. He put the brown paper bag containing the money in a drawer. "This is how bad it is," he said, and gave Clevis a summary of his recent activities.

Clevis said, "You got nerves of iron," in a tone that was flooded with censure. "Me—I wouldn't have let that Storch out of my sight until he opened up with who paid him to shoot Williams. Well, it looks like it's all sewed up—or will be when they bring Storch in." He looked at Nelson doubtfully. "Provided you ain't pulling the kind of switch on me you pulled last night."

Nelson wished he could pull a switch that would permit Dora and Fred Storch to go their way unmolested by the law. He happened to glance at the folder containing the Woodruff reports, and he sighed inwardly because that was not the switch he wanted. Clevis was waiting for him to speak, so he said, "Have you seen Gaudio this morning?"

"Him?" Clevis said without interest. "Maybe he ain't no murderer, but he's sure a mess. The doc wants an order for him to be removed to that hospital in Lexington, Kentucky." He went on more enthusiastically. "He didn't get us any further, but he tossed a nice plum to Narcotics. Hanley wants to thank you personal for having the Acevedo jerk tailed. Seems he made tracks for the restaurant where he works, but he wasn't in no hurry to go on duty. Instead he beards the boss of the joint, a fat slob named Ramondo, and they disappear into Ramondo's office. Fernandez, a strictly A-1 operative, manages to ease within earshot and he hears Acevedo relate the sad story of how we glommed on to Bernice's lawful earnings and how he wants a reasonable facsimile of same to keep his mouth

shut about who she's been pushing for. He thinks it's only fair, seeing as how he introduced her to Ramondo in the first place and how she did real good business for him. Fernandez don't linger to hear more. He leaves quietly and phones. And Narcotics takes over, the press co-operating to keep it out of the papers because even if Ramondo ain't exactly small fry he's no whale—and Hanley ain't satisfied with less—his ambitions being encouraged by finding on the premises five ounces of high-grade Mexican heroin—market value about a grand and a half. Hanley's been working on Ramondo on and off since he was booked last night. He hasn't cracked yet—but he will on account of Hanley's boys ain't got no maternal instinct when it comes to dealing with riffraff." He gave Nelson a sidelong glance.

"Good," Nelson said absently.

"Sure—and could be you been casting some bread by helping Narcotics. Could be this Storch clunk will finger Ramondo for the Williams job. For both jobs."

"I doubt it."

"Yeah—me, too. Unless Williams was more mixed up in the racket than being just a customer, it ain't likely Ramondo would have personal interest in him. I'm beginning to get some kind of an idea that the dope angle don't tie in with the Williams murder at all. So with Gaudio being more or less scratched, and with Storch being no more than a tool, how does the brother strike you for a candidate? I hear by grapevine that Judd came back from Connecticut with a shiner—and sober citizens don't generally take a poke at cops unless they got a special reason for hating them." He waited for Nelson's reaction. He shuffled his feet. He said, "I keep forgetting you don't need my guesses —or won't when Storch is brought in. If."

"Do you mean if he doesn't beat up the man watching him and skip town—or if I get maternal with him?"

"Neither is preferable," Clevis said genteely. Then he grinned and said, "You were acting so far away I thought you missed that maternal crack. Seriously, though—like they say on the radio—even if Storch does finger X, we by no means got an airtight case. Because X's mouthpiece

could spout all kinds of arguments to discredit a guy found with dough and a gat on his home territory. Any smart mouthpiece could make it stick that said guy did the job solo, motive being robbery."

"Not if the jury thinks it through." Nelson advanced his reasons for dismissing robbery as a motive.

"I'm with you," Clevis said pessimistically, "but who thinks on a jury? I still say that unless we get real seeable, touchable evidence it would be only Storch's word against X's—and Storch ain't exactly the type to win twelve new friends with his personality. So leave us hope and pray the gat is registered to X."

"Leave us," Nelson said. If the gun was registered to X, he thought, then X was not one of the present suspects.

Clevis seemed to follow the thought. "That would put the Williams social list in the clear, wouldn't it? Because nobody on it has got firearms registered in his name—which, of course, don't mean he couldn't have come by that thirty-two illegal." He hesitated. Then he said almost diffidently, "When we do flush X—and if the gun ain't registered to him—I've a feeling I could get to know him real good if you left him alone with me and a few of the boys for a while."

Nelson shook his head. "I'm in full sympathy with all your doubts of me, Clevis, but—"

"It ain't that, Lieutenant—"

Nelson quoted one of his cook's favorite expressions. "There are more ways of killing a cow than slitting its throat."

Clevis said stubbornly, "There's only one way of milking it dry. Hey—company!"

Nelson had been aware of voices in the anteroom for several minutes. "Have a look," he said.

"Sure—maybe—" He re-entered the office in a few minutes, making no attempt to hide his disappointment. "You got everybody but Storch waiting to see you."

"Who's everybody?"

"The pals of the late Glen Williams—minus Gaudio and minus—"

"Never mind the minuses."

"Well, there's Mr. and Mrs. Woodruff—also an outdoor-type blonde who won't state her name and business, but I can guess—also Mr. M. Williams, dark horse. And Sergeant Judd's there, too, with his one good eye wide open and his mouth shut."

"Did the Woodruffs say what they wanted?"

"No—they're saving it for you. It's their second try. Seems they were here this morning while you were out."

"Is the blond girl with Mr. Williams?"

"They ain't conversing, but it figures. Betty Conway, huh?" He added suspiciously, "You didn't call for this gathering, did you?"

"No."

"Shucks." He gave a fair imitation of Mortimer Snerd. "I was just going to volunteer to get Sarah Thrace, so we could start the meeting."

Nelson said gravely, "If Sarah Thrace is X, I might take you up on your offer to supervise operation rubber hose. Meanwhile, I'll see the Woodruffs."

"Tease!" Clevis muttered. He made short work of ushering in Joss and Morgan Woodruff. "Want me to stay, Lieutenant?" he asked.

Nelson shook his head. "You might remind Ballistics that I'd like a rush job on that package I sent them."

Even the baggy rear view of the little man looked reproachful as he closed the door behind him. Joss and Morgan Woodruff seemed relieved by his exit, but they did not seem happy. Nelson had arisen at their entrance. He greeted them and they made mechanical response. He held the chair at the desk's side for Joss. She sat down. Morgan, after a glance at her, took the chair that was near the door. He dragged it across the linoleum until he was sitting opposite to Nelson, who had returned to his place behind the desk.

Morgan said, "I hate to give you any false hopes, Lieutenant, but we haven't come to make a confession. Our presence is purely irrelevant to murder."

Nelson's silence was inquiring. Joss sat quietly, her

hands in her lap. Both she and Morgan bore the signs of a sleepless night. Morgan fumbled in his pockets. Nelson slid a box of cigarettes toward him. He hesitated, shrugged, and took one. He lit it and drew hard. Nelson offered the box to Joss, but she said, "No, thank you," in a remote voice. Then she said, "He didn't want to come."

Nelson's silence was still inquiring.

Morgan said, "Yes—let that be understood. I have full faith in my wife—but she seems to think it needs bolstering. Psychologists might have the answer—the theory being that when people believe others are suspicious of them it's because they're harboring suspicions of others."

Joss stared at her hands.

Nelson spoke. "You didn't come here to discuss pyschology."

Joss said distantly, "He came because I insisted. I want him to see the letter I wrote to Glen Williams."

Nelson's eyes went to the top folder on his desk. He heard himself saying hurriedly, "Events have happened since yesterday to make its bearing upon the case doubtful. So I don't think it's necessary for—"

Morgan did not let him finish. He said defiantly, "You're right it isn't necessary—and furthermore, I couldn't be less interested."

"Please show it to him," Joss said.

Nelson stared at her. He drew the folder toward him.

Morgan said loudly, "I'm much more interested in discovering how those hypodermic needles got in my pocket—if they ever were in my pocket."

"They were," Nelson said, quite willing to change the subject. But Joss said, "Please," again, and the tone of it impelled him to open the folder.

Puzzled, he extended the cheap sheet of typewritten script, not to Morgan but to her. He watched her gesture as she held it out to Morgan, watched the arrested motion of her arm, the abrupt way she recalled it and began to read, brows shirred, eyes unbelieving. Could she have forgotten how freely she had written? He wondered. Could she have been nursing the hope that the outpouring would

appear innocent to a trusting husband?

She laid the letter on the desk. Her eyes were level with his. She said, "I didn't write this. I told you that I never typed personal letters. This isn't the one I sent to Glen."

Again the contradiction of her clean, straightforward appearance stirred Nelson to anger. He said coldly, "It has your signature. Experts have established that fact."

Morgan leaned forward in his chair. "Here—I don't like your tone." He reached for the letter. He glanced at it but did not read. "We're not hillbillies. That paper's for my own artistic jottings. My wife wouldn't use it for a letter—not even to a man she despised. You might not believe it to look at us, but we do own a box of decent stationery." He waved the sheet at Nelson. "Let's have done with these broken-down traps you seem in the habit of springing. I've changed my mind. I'll see the real letter—"

Nelson said, "This one will have to do. It's written on your typewriter and it's signed by your wife."

"If my wife says she didn't write it, then you can be sure it's a forgery—experts notwithstanding." He bent over the paper. After a moment he said without raising his head, "Joss, you've got grounds for a libel suit. Imagine anybody having the nerve to accuse a skilled typist like you of turning out copy like this. The lieutenant—who knows everything—doesn't know you were private secretary to a V.I.P. before you married me." His eyes traveled down the page. "As for the prose—brother, what talent! If you had it, you could write for the pulps and I could sit back and take life easy." He squinted at something. He said, "Well, what do you know. For Pete's sake!" Then he laughed.

Joss turned toward him as toward the light. She left her chair and looked over his shoulder.

He jabbed with his index finger at the letter's ending. He said, "Don't you get it, Joss?"

She nodded slowly. She said, "But you didn't need that. You believed me anyway."

"Of course. I must have had rocks in my head last night."

"Morgan—he was alone in the apartment only once—

that day when he—when I ran out and left him. He must have written it then—"

"And left that other little sweet nothing caught prominently in the back of the drawer where I'd be sure to find it. The guy was nuts—plain, unfancy nuts—"

They had managed to exclude Nelson in the same way that they had excluded him in their apartment. He leaned forward in his chair, not sure if he was witnessing a remarkable piece of gallantry on Morgan's part or a remarkable piece of acting. He said loudly, "What other sweet nothing?"

Morgan condescended to explain.

Nelson made no comment. He said, "May I have the letter, please? Evidently I've missed something."

Morgan said kindly, "Don't blame yourself too much. Here—I'll read the punch line. Up to now it's been a family joke, but I don't mind sharing it. In fact, I don't have to read it. I know it by heart." Without consulting the paper, he recited, " 'I'm running down to the grocery store. Then I'll come back and cook dinner for my lawfully wedded husband,' et cetera."

Nelson corrected him automatically. "You don't know it quite by heart. It says, 'I'm going down to the corner mailbox.' "

"Sure. Grocery store's been erased. I guess with all the other Xings out and erasures you couldn't be expected to notice that one particularly. But I noticed it because it comes in the only line in the whole works that Joss wrote. It's her standard note for me whenever I'm due home and she has to run out for something. In fact, one of her lesser economies or timesavers is to use the same note over and over until it wears out—even if her last-minute errand doesn't happen to be at the grocer's. You know—the way you use one of those printed 'Out to Lunch' signs." His amused eyes darkened. "Glen found it lying around and used it for his own ends—whatever those ends were."

Nelson had stretched across the desk for the letter. He studied it, seeing in the light of foreknowledge the way it crowded the top edge of the page, leaving a wide area of

white space at the bottom, noting that *corner mailbox* was written over an erasure, a fact which had seemed unimportant because of all the other erasures.

He said, "You believe that Glen Williams wrote this?"

"I believe it," Morgan said. "He had the opportunity when Joss left the apartment. Fantastic as it sounds, it's not half so fantastic as your belief that Joss would or could be responsible for such drivel. All things considered, it seems to me that Glen Williams was more fantastic than met the eye—my eye, anyway—and after that lunch at the Gateau nothing I learn about him is going to give me even a slight shock. I suppose he composed this effusion so that he could confront me with it if I didn't believe his invention about Joss. Of course the letter she actually did send him wouldn't have done at all. He probably burned it behind drawn blinds so that no one would ever suspect he didn't have everything that every woman wanted. Why he itched to break up Joss and me is anybody's guess. Fractured ego, maybe—or the revenge of a man spurned—or just plain jealousy because we had something he didn't have. Thinking back, he wasn't too pleased with the Thrace-Gaudio relationship, either—not that there's any comparison—but he probably wanted everybody's undivided attention." He clenched his fists. "Dammit—I wish he were alive so I could punch him in the nose."

Joss sighed. And then she smiled at him.

Nelson looked up. "Somebody took more drastic measures."

"Somebody sure did," Morgan said. His eyes widened. "You're still not satisfied that the somebody isn't me? Well—you're up the wrong tree, and the sooner you climb down the sooner you'll get places. It wouldn't surprise me a bit if Glen Williams planted that hypodermic-needle package on me—the same as he planted that scrap of paper in the drawer."

It would not have surprised Nelson, either. He was beginning to rearrange his whole concept of the Williams case. But it was a slow operation because the bulky figure of Fred Storch kept getting in the way.

He stood up. He looked at Joss Woodruff. It was a look, although he did not realize it, of complete vindication. He knew only that she smiled at him with an extraordinary sweetness which transformed her plain face. He said, "I'm glad you came."

Morgan was on his feet, too. A thought seemed to strike him suddenly. "I've a hunch that says you haven't seen the last of us—and not for the reasons you're toying with. Come on, Joss. We're going to see another man about the same dog."

## CHAPTER XIII

As soon as the door closed behind the Woodruffs, Nelson lifted the receiver and asked for the signed statement of Emile Renaud. When it was brought to him he read it carefully. If Glen Williams's last luncheon had dwindled in importance as a murder factor, the unexpected visit of the Woodruffs had brought it into the foreground again. And Nelson sought to work it into the new pattern his mind was weaving.

Two thirds of the waiter's statement repeated with a great deal of unnecessary wordage what he had said on the telephone. He kept asserting that he wanted to do his duty, and had not come forward of his own volition only because people of his calling were expected to hear and see nothing that did not directly concern them, and he hoped the police would understand that an affair of this nature would scarcely reflect credit upon an establishment such as the Gateau whose clientele was above reproach. Then, toward the end of the statement, he vouchsafed additional information, insisting that he had not mentioned it before because telephones confused him, but that he had recollected it under the stress of formally committing his thoughts to paper.

When he had rushed to the pavement to present Monsieur Williams with his cigarette case, Monsieur had been distrait. He had gone on talking to his companion as he put the case into his pocket. His hand had remained in

his pocket, and with his other hand and from another pocket he had produced a large white handkerchief. But he had not employed it. There had been a strange expression upon his face, not quite a smile. The other man's face had been full of anger and perhaps scorn. Monsieur Williams had withdrawn his hand from his pocket and let it fall at his side. He had continued to talk, once bringing his two hands together as in the earnestness of his emotions. Then Emile, realizing that he was not to be thanked for his trouble, had walked back to the door of the restaurant, turning, he knew not why, for one last look. And he had seen Monsieur Williams, under cover of the handkerchief, drop something into the other man's pocket. The other man had appeared to notice nothing. He and Monsieur Williams had then parted, each taking an opposite direction.

Nelson put the statement down. He entertained briefly and dismissed the idea that Morgan had been in contact with Emile and had bribed him to amend the statement. He had a stronger idea that Morgan was now on the way to see the waiter in the hope of eliciting just such an amendment.

He looked up. The door of the office had opened several minutes ago, and Clevis stood before it in an attitude of impatient waiting. Clevis drew a deep breath and said, "Didn't like to interrupt genius at work," and went on without pause between sentences. "Those Woodruffs don't look like respectable married folks to me. They went out with their arms around each other as if this trap was a country lane. Regarding the thirty-two, Ballistics and lab cooperated as per instructions. First it was dusted for prints, which resulted against the odds in bringing up a couple of clear ones, which same are being checked with prints of the various suspects. Storch's, which the boys got on the night of the murder—Conway's, which were lifted off her letter—Williams's, Mike, from statement—Sarah Thrace's, ditto—Mrs. Woodruff's from something you sent to the lab —and a couple of miscellaneous ones picked up in the Williams apartment, including those of the corpse. Also, test

bullet has been fired and is in process of comparison." His expression made it clear that he had saved the best for the last. He drew another breath. "Storch is here. I moved the others down the hall to spare their nerves if things got rough in here. They didn't appreciate it. Acted like I was doing them out of their next at the barber's. I got a stenographer ready and waiting. Are you?"

Nelson nodded without eagerness, and Clevis stuck his head into the anteroom and signaled.

Storch came over the threshold, prodded by the operative who had been detailed to bring him in. Storch's eyes were filmed and sunk deep in his puffed flesh. He moved like a man asleep. The stenographer brought up the rear. He moved the chair that Morgan had displaced back to its original position near the door.

The operative cleared his throat. "I didn't have any trouble, Lieutenant Nelson. He came like a lamb."

"And now for the slaughter," Clevis said. "Will you take him standing or sitting, Lieutenant?"

Nelson gave him a look that held no amusement. He thanked the operative and dismissed him. He said, "Sit down, Mr. Storch."

Storch had been gazing about him stupidly. Slowly he seemed to awaken to his surroundings, to Nelson. He shook his cropped head in the manner of a fighter after a punishing blow. He sat down.

"Your wife said you wanted to see me," Nelson said.

Storch said dully, "I didn't need nobody to come and get me. I was coming in myself."

"Good. Your willingness to co-operate will make it easier for you."

Storch hunched his shoulders. He muttered, "Nothing's going to make it easier for me, mister. I knew it was wrong when I done it. I'll take what's coming."

Clevis nodded approvingly. His nod meant, This won't be any trouble at all.

Nelson said, "Who paid you to kill Glen Williams?"

"Huh?"

Nelson repeated the question.

Storch clutched the desk's edge. Rage seemed to burn the film from his eyes. "I told Dora I was coming here—I told her why—and she said you were okay. She said you had a boy of your own and you'd play fair and square. She said I had to come and I had to take my medicine but you'd play fair and square. Mister, if I felt like laughing, I'd laugh in your face. Taking my medicine don't mean taking no frame—"

Clevis said, "Uh-uh."

"Who paid me to kill Mr. Williams?" Storch said, clinging desperately to the stimulus of his rage. "Nobody paid me to kill him—I didn't kill him—"

Nelson opened the top drawer of his desk. He took out the brown paper bag and shook the roll of bills onto the desk.

Fred Storch looked at the bag and at the bills. He sagged in his chair. His mouth fell open.

Nelson said, "I have the revolver, too."

Storch raised his hands to his head. He groaned, "I was going to bring it—the policeman wouldn't let me go into the furnace room to get it—"

Clevis looked expectant. His ears seemed to stretch and grow. Then his own mouth fell open.

Storch said despairingly, "But the money—I thought Dora could have the money when I was locked up—"

Nelson said, "It wouldn't take her very far."

"It wouldn't?" He dropped his hands. Again the anger helped. "Mister—maybe it wouldn't take you very far, but we ain't fancy. Two thousand dollars ain't chicken feed to us—not the way we sweat for it."

"Then this is a down payment. Did he promise you the rest of it after you did the job?"

"He didn't promise me— Down payment? What do you mean?"

Clevis shrugged.

Nelson said, "Have you counted the money?"

"No—I stuck it away. He told me it would look funny—me using it until—until after they"—he seized almost triumphantly upon a cinema phrase—"until the heat was off.

Anyways, I didn't have to count it, and there wasn't no time to do nothing but stick it away fast."

"Count it now," Nelson said.

Storch looked at him doubtfully. He took the roll of bills. His large fingers fumbled with the elastic band. He moistened his thumb. His lips moved as he counted. When he reached the last few bills his face was an ugly purple. He bent them back to see their denominations. Then he wadded the lot in his hand and flung it on the desk. His words were choked. "Framers—robbers—where's the rest of it?" He swooped over and grabbed a handful of Nelson's shirt. "I don't take no more pushing around from nobody. You better—"

Clevis rushed forward like a small charging bull. Nelson said, "Hold it." His hand closed on Storch's wrist. His shirt ripped as he stood up. It looked like a simple maneuver, but the big man might have been a leaf for the way he spun around and landed back in his chair.

Nelson rearranged his ripped shirt. He thought fleetingly that a low opinion of police tactics seemed to be universal. He sat down and said, "There was the same amount of money in that roll of bills when I found it as there is now. You were cheated, Storch."

Storch looked at him. He was sweating and bewildered. He said, "A hundred and fifty dollars—a lousy hundred and fifty." It was a stumbling-block beyond which his mind seemed unable to progress.

"Why did you want to come here of your own free will, Storch?" Nelson asked quietly.

"Because I done wrong. I done wrong for two grand—not for no hundred and fifty bucks. It ain't even enough to bury my boy."

"What wrong did you do?"

"Mr. Bones," Clevis muttered.

Nelson went on patiently. "I want to help you."

Storch shook his head. "You want to frame me. Dora said you'd play fair and square, but—"

"Dora was right. I am playing fair and square."

"Then why did you say I killed Mr. Williams? If you

say I killed him, I ain't going to talk—it don't matter what you do to me. It don't matter anyway."

"Very well. Who did kill Mr. Williams?"

"I dunno. I dunno even if it was a man or a woman. He didn't tell me."

"Who didn't tell you?"

"Mr. Williams."

Clevis said, "A clown yet. A real circus clown. Lieutenant, he ain't going to make sense unless you convince him you mean business."

Nelson said, "Do you mean that Mr. Williams was still alive when you entered his apartment and that he talked to you before he died?"

"No—he was dead when I found him."

"Let's get back to the money," Nelson said. "Who gave it to you?"

"Mr. Williams did—"

Clevis flung his arms ceilingward. Then he made a clamp of thumb and forefinger and pressed his lips together.

"Only it wasn't supposed to be no lousy hundred and fifty—it was supposed to be two grand."

"And what did you do to earn it?"

"What I came here to tell you. He told me he'd always leave the money ready on the bedroom closet shelf—and he said it would be enough to send Billy to a home where they'd treat him good and teach him to take care of himself. It ain't no charity place—you put down a lump—as much as you can—but it's got to be at least two grand—and they take care of him for the rest of his—" He raised a clenched fist to his mouth. He bit down on it.

Nelson gave him a few moments. "What did you do for Mr. Williams?"

Storch gazed at the flecks of blood on his knuckles. "I took the gun like he wanted me to and I went to the shelf in the closet and got the money. I found a bag in the kitchen and then I went down to the furnace room and stuck the bag with the money and the gun in it in the trunk. I done everything the way he wanted me to. He shouldn't have cheated me."

Nelson waited.

Storch looked at him. "Mister—do you swear on your boy's life that you ain't got the rest of that money?"

"Lieutenant—" It was an outraged protest from Clevis.

"I haven't the money, Storch," Nelson said.

Storch seemed satisfied. His voice was pacific. "I'm sorry I tore your shirt, mister, but—" He continued to struggle with the problem. "Do you think maybe the killer found out about it and stole it? Yeah—it has to be that way. Mr. Williams wouldn't do nothing dirty like that. And the worst of it is, the killer has to get away with it, because that was the whole thing. Mr. Williams didn't want him caught."

It was much too much for Clevis. He could not contain himself. "I could die right now and I wouldn't have missed a thing on account of nothing will ever top this."

The stenographer coughed. His face expressed absolute sympathy for Clevis.

Nelson said, "We'll start with the day of the murder. Then we'll work back from there. Try to think, Storch. Try to remember everything you did from the moment you entered the Williams apartment."

"I couldn't forget it if I tried. I come back from fixing the garbage violation and I go up to do the work he wants. I don't have my stuff to get—it's there from the last time because he said he'd want more work done soon. I walk in. I ain't expecting nothing. The time he put the deal to me he only said if and when it happened—and I guess I couldn't get it into my head that anybody would really want to kill a nice fellow like him. But sure enough—there he was—laying dead on the floor—and the room all messed up—drawers open and everything. So as soon as I took it in I done like I promised. He was laying near the couch and I put him on it and straightened him out. And I took the money and the gun and beat it to the furnace room to think—and I thought his trunk would be safe enough until I could find a better place. I was in such a sweat I guess I didn't make sure it was sitting steady on top of the other trunks when I heaved it back. I never meant nothing but

good for my boy—"

Clevis's face was a blank. It went blanker, if possible, when Nelson said, "You saw that the vase of flowers had fallen over. Did you move the book Mr. Williams wrote out of the wet?"

"No, mister, I didn't do nothing like that. I didn't touch nothing but him and the money and the gun."

"Was the safety catch on or off the gun when you picked it up?"

"It was off. I put it on. I don't know much about guns. They didn't take me in the war even—on account of Billy. But Dora's cousin is a bank guard and he showed me about safety catches once on his big revolver. It was the same as on the little gun. I picked it up by the barrel—I was scared to touch the right end in case I touched the trigger by mistake—and I fixed the safety catch before I put it in the bag."

"Then your fingerprints will be on the barrel."

"My fingerprints." A new burden of distress settled upon his face. "Jeez—Mr. Williams told me to be sure and wipe off the gun and I forgot. I didn't even remember it when Dora was asking me why I didn't use his phone to call the police and I made like I couldn't because they always tell you not to touch anything that could have prints on it. Real reason I didn't call the police in no hurry after I hid the stuff was because he'd asked me to be sure to give his friend plenty of time to get away in case I found him right after he'd been shot." He shook his head hopelessly. "I'm dumb—right or wrong, I shouldn't never have tried a job like that. We was bad off, but we made out. And now—"

Clevis, too, was shaking his head hopelessly. His shoulders almost met his ears.

Nelson picked something from the chaos of the man's thoughts. "Mr. Williams asked you to remove the prints from the gun?"

"That's the whole thing. He didn't want the killer to be arrested or get the chair or nothing. He was like a saint when he put the deal to me. There was this friend of his—see—who was going to kill him. He said he seen it coming

for a long time and even knew that the friend had bought a gun to do it with. He said he loved this friend and this friend loved him—only the friend had got sick in the head and turned against him. Mr. Williams used some big words in telling about it, but I knew what he meant. He just didn't want this friend who couldn't help going crazy to take no murder rap. So my job was to make sure that the friend got off and I was to see there was nothing laying around to put the police on the track or else Mr. Williams said he wouldn't rest happy. That's how it was, mister." He added earnestly, "You see, it didn't mean nothing to Mr. Williams, because he was going to die anyway. Maybe he wouldn't want me to mention it, but he told me he had some kind of disease that the doctors couldn't do nothing about and he couldn't last no more than a few months and it didn't matter to him if he went sooner. He said this poor friend didn't know how it would be doing him a favor to shoot him—saving him a lot of suffering and all. So maybe you can see, mister, how it didn't sound so terrible bad to me—and why I done it."

Clevis shambled over to the desk.

Nelson said, "Yes?"

Clevis produced two syllables. He said them loudly. "Eyewash."

Nelson said, "Does Storch appear to be a man of imagination—a man who could invent a story like that?"

"Lieutenant—you're not going to sit there and tell me it's true. Listen—did the autopsy show that Williams had an incurable disease? He had the habit—sure—but—"

"I didn't say it was true."

"So?"

"When we questioned Gaudio don't you remember that he said Mr. Williams expected to be murdered?"

"I also remember he tried to pin it on the Woodruffs or on Sarah Thrace." He gestured toward Storch. "Gaudio was in the same class as this joker—only he got there by a different route is all."

Someone was knocking on the door. At Nelson's nod the stenographer moved his chair aside.

Nelson said, "Who's there?"

"Package from Ballistics, Lieutenant." A policeman stepped into the office. He handed the package to Nelson, saluted, and left.

Nelson opened the package. He laid the thirty-two on the desk and rapidly scanned the typewritten report. Storch was staring at the revolver as at a mortal enemy.

Clevis said, "It checks, don't it, Lieutenant?"

"Yes—it checks."

"Then what are we waiting for?" He scowled at Storch. "I move we get down to it."

"Bring a few more chairs, Clevis, and ask Betty Conway and Mike Williams to come in."

"Chief—you want a party—now!"

"Don't waste time. We've wasted enough as it is." Nelson's voice was incisive. "Tell the desk there are to be no phone calls or visitors until we give the clear signal."

Clevis seemed to take a hitch in his loose bones. Stiffly he walked to the door, a lowly sergeant obeying the command of a superior officer against his own superior judgment. "Give me a hand with the furniture," he said to the stenographer. Together they moved three chairs from the anteroom and set them before the desk. Clevis addressed Storch. "Don't let your nose get out of joint. You're still the guest of honor for my dough."

## CHAPTER XIV

BETTY CONWAY REACHED the office first. Her eyes glossed over Fred Storch. She subjected Nelson to a brief examination and said clearly, "If you're the man in charge of investigating Glen Williams's death, I want to speak to you alone. My name is Betty Conway. I came in from Howardsville, Connecticut, and I've been waiting for over an hour—"

Nelson said, "I've been waiting for longer than that, Miss Conway. Sit down."

A pink tide rose from her neck to her brow. She moved awkwardly to the chair he indicated. The rayon suit she wore was a small-town model, divorced from the lines of her well-formed body. Her flippant hat had been designed for a lesser head. Nelson thought in passing that she would look splendid in country tweeds or riding-clothes.

Storch was staring at her in a puzzled way. Nelson said, "Have you seen Miss Conway before?"

Storch shifted his eyes. "She's kind of familiar. Maybe I seen her in the house—"

Betty Conway looked at him. "You're the superintendent. You were going into Glen's apartment that night."

Nelson said, "And you were standing at the door of the Delaney apartment across the hall—as though you'd just come out."

"I guess that's right," Storch said uncomfortably. "I didn't look good, but she was a big girl—a big blonde—"

"It's right," Betty Conway said. "I'm not trying to deny it. I want to explain it—but Mike Williams, Glen's brother, is outside—and he'll be here in a moment. I can't explain it in front of him. I rushed in ahead to ask you to make him wait until—" She turned in her chair.

Mike Williams had crossed the threshold, uneasy in his city clothes, and as wary of his reception as a lost dog. Behind him, Clevis said resignedly, "Judd came, too." He gestured over his shoulder.

Judd said, "I thought you'd want me, Lieutenant."

"All right. Close the door."

Hesitantly, Mike Williams took the chair next to Betty Conway. She did not look at him. She seemed to be searching about her for an exit. Clevis and Judd stood, leaving the third chair empty.

Nelson said, "Sit down, Judd, if you're still feeling rocky."

"I'm okay, Lieutenant."

Mike Williams spoke. "I'm sorry about hitting him. I lost my fool head. The chief of police in Howardsville didn't want to arrest me, but—"

Betty Conway raised her clear voice. "He didn't know the man was an officer. He was only trying to protect me."

Mike's eyes were grateful. "That don't excuse it. I should have known—"

Nelson said, "Judd will decide whether or not he wants to prefer charges. I'm not minimizing the offense of striking an officer—but we have something even more important on hand. Yes, Miss Conway?"

The pink tide had ebbed. She seemed to be fascinated by the thirty-two on the desk. She had to tear her eyes away.

The chair creaked under Fred Storch. He coughed. He said, "Mister—my missus will be worrying—could I—"

Clevis said threateningly, "In the pig's eye."

Nelson ignored the exchange. "Miss Conway—you've seen that revolver before?"

"Yes—I think so—I—"

Nelson picked it up. He offered it to her. "Do you want

to examine it closely to make sure?"

She reached out her hand. Mike Williams said, "Wait—I don't know what this is all about, but I've heard of cases where—"

Nelson said tonelessly, "Where the police tried to frame suspects by tricking them into putting their prints on the murder weapon? Don't worry, Mr. Williams. This particular weapon has been through Ballistics and the lab. I have the report on it right here."

Betty Conway drew a quick, sharp breath. She said, "Oh?" She took the revolver. She turned it around in her hands.

"Do you recognize it?"

She nodded. "Yes—of—course—I've seen it many— Look—I want to talk to you alone."

"I'm sorry, Miss Conway. I believe you had your opportunity to talk to me alone and chose to let it slip by."

"I didn't choose," she said hotly. "I did what seemed best at the moment. I'd probably do it again—"

"Betty," Mike Williams said, "I wish you'd tell me what this is all about. It don't seem right—you being here at all—"

"*You* being here isn't right," she said.

Nelson said, "Miss Conway is in this office to give information she's been withholding from the police. If you want to help her, stop interrupting."

"You're talking nonsense. Betty has nothing to do with it, and I'm not going to sit quiet and let you—"

"Mike—you can't keep beating up everybody who looks cross-eyed at me." She lowered her voice a little. "But it's nice of you to want to try, and I can understand the impulse because—because— Oh, well!"

"Because your own actions were probably dictated by an impulse to spare Mr. Williams," Nelson said. "But he's a grown man—and if there's any sparing to be done between you, he wants to be the one to do it. You haven't been realistic. You'll be doing him much more of a service to let him hear a firsthand account than to wait until the newspapers—"

"The newspapers," she said. "Must— Yes—all right." She sounded defeated, but her chin was firm. She opened the clasp of her handbag and drew out a square white envelope. She said, "It's from Glen. I brought it along in case you doubted my word—and I wouldn't blame you. Read it."

Nelson took the envelope. He looked at the postmark before he read the enclosure. He refolded the sheet of paper and summarized its contents. "Glen Williams wrote to you. He asked you to come to his apartment at five o'clock on the day which turned out to be the day of his death. He said he knew that the request would surprise you because he'd been out of touch with you for quite a while—but he begged you to come for old times' sake since it was a matter of grave importance. Go on from there, Miss Conway."

She swallowed. "Glen had seemed very dashing to me once. I suppose it was no more than a very severe childhood crush, because as soon as I got any sense at all he cured me by simply being himself. But, being himself, he never really believed I was cured—and every so often he'd take it up again—not because he cared—just to keep in practice—or else because he knew the way Mike felt and it amused him to keep Mike guessing. I'm sure it didn't occur to him that I could possibly prefer Mike to—to a man like him—"

Mike said, "Betty—" putting his soul into it, making it cover all that was incomprehensible to him.

"Wait," she said. "Let me finish." She stared straight ahead. "I went to Glen's because I thought he might have run out of money and would ask me to use my influence with Mike. He'd done that before—about six months ago—and I'd refused. This time—once and for all I wanted to convince him that he was nothing to me except as a threat to Mike's peace of mind. I was going to tell him to stop bleeding Mike and get a job and stand on his own feet. I didn't think it would do any good, but I meant to try. Everybody in Howardsville knew that Mike couldn't go on making sacrifices—jeopardizing everything he'd worked

so hard to—"

Mike said, as though talking to himself, "Glen couldn't have run out of money—he couldn't have spent all I— That couldn't have been the reason he wrote—"

Nelson said, "You're forgetting his expensive hobby, Mr. Williams. It used up every cent you gave him. We have proof of that. Go on, Miss Conway."

She struggled with her thoughts. "I got into town early. I didn't want the trip to be a complete waste, so I'd made an appointment with my doctor for a checkup. It was a few minutes to five when I reached Glen's. I rang the bell and I didn't wait for the thing on it to click because some man came in at the same time and used his key. He went to the ground floor and I went up to Glen's. I'd telephoned from the doctor's to let him know I was coming, so I expected him to be waiting at the door of the apartment. He'd received me that way the time before. But the door was closed. First I rang—then I knocked a few times. I was getting annoyed—thinking it would be just like him to keep me waiting on purpose—"

Nelson cut in. "How did he sound when you telephoned?"

"A little out of breath—the way you sound when you've just come in to find the phone ringing—otherwise about the same as usual—even more pleased with himself than usual—as though he might have had one drink too many—not that I'd ever known him to drink a lot. He said he was delighted I still had a soft spot for him—that kind of thing."

"What time did you telephone?"

"At half past three. My appointment with the doctor was for then, but the nurse said I'd have to wait a few minutes." She went on without being prompted. "I gave one last knock at the door and he didn't answer, so I took hold of the doorknob and rattled it. I was really annoyed. I must have turned the knob, because the door opened and I walked in shouting something like, 'Where are you—why don't you answer your bell?' Except for the noise I was making, the apartment seemed awfully quiet. Then I remembered that he'd always gone in for practical jokes, and

I walked to the living-room, bracing myself in case he was set to jump out at me. Just as I got to the living-room I smelled something—a smoky, powdery smell—it made me think of the hunting-season in Howardsville. And then I saw him. I suppose I called his name, because it seemed to echo back from the walls. And the next thing I knew, I was on my knees beside him—still trying to believe it was a practical joke and that he'd get up in a minute and laugh. But it wasn't. His wrist was warm when I touched it—warmer than mine—but there was wet blood on his shirt—and I couldn't find any pulse. I got up somehow. I didn't faint." She tried to smile. "I couldn't faint because my doctor had told me I was the best physical specimen he'd ever"—her voice ascended nervously—"he'd ever seen—"

Clevis looked at Fred Storch. Then he looked at Betty Conway as at a usurper. He opened his indignant mouth.

Her voice was controlled again. She said, "I looked down at the revolver and I kicked it away. I was going to pick it up and take it with me, but I couldn't make myself do it. I went out, and I wasn't panicked or anything—just numb. I started to look for the stairs, because I didn't want to wait for the elevator. And then this man—the superintendent got out of the service elevator—so I turned quickly and pretended to be coming out from the door across the hall. As soon as he went into Glen's apartment I went down the stairs."

"What time was that?"

"I don't know—about ten after five. I couldn't have been in there more than ten minutes—if I was there that long."

Her recital had seemed to hold no meaning for Fred Storch. Through it he had sat, head bowed, like a man unable to peer out from the cage of his own dark thoughts. The mention of the word "superintendent" made him stir uneasily. "That's right," he mumbled. "About ten after five. Mr. Williams told me not to make it no later than a quarter to five on account of he had something important to say to me and he'd be too busy after that. And I promised—and he knew he could count on me, but how was I to

know I'd be kept so long over that garbage violation?"

Nelson glanced at Clevis. "Do you want to say something?"

"Lieutenant, I want to say plenty. Firstly, in my opinion this don't clear Storch by a long shot. It could have been a return visit to see if he'd forgotten anything or"—he paused a moment—"the lady could be our X—"

Storch stirred again. He tried to free his voice. "Listen—"

"I've been listening until it's coming out of my ears. Secondly, I don't know what game the lady is up to now—but whatever it is, she ain't playing it very smart." He turned to her. "What's with this kicking-the-gun routine?"

"Don't you see?" Helplessly she appealed to Nelson.

Nelson said, "Sergeant Clevis is usually very quick to see the point. I know you've tried—but perhaps you haven't made it clear—"

The door was pushed open with considerable force. A resplendent Sarah Thrace entered the office. She did not get very far, because the chairs blocked her. Nonetheless it was quite an entrance, accompanied by the sighing sound of released tension as the heads of the audience turned her way.

She said in her husky, theatrical voice, "Oh—you *are* busy, Lieutenant. I was told to stay put downstairs, but I thought that the man at the desk was merely being bureaucratic, and since I knew the way up I decided to dispense with red tape. I'm afraid I was rather devious about waiting until his attention was diverted. Naturally I wouldn't think of bothering you unless it was important. I wanted to come as soon as I read about poor Tom Gaudio, but I had this television interview and it meant a possible source of income for me, which in turn meant that I'd be in a better position to give Tom aid and comfort. By the way, I'm sure you'll be glad to know that it panned out. Tell me—Tom didn't—I mean aside from being in possession of heroin, there's no other charge against him? Because you see—I'll have money enough now to finance a cure—and there's another matter concerning that delightful Morgan Woodruff—"

Nelson partially recovered his powers of speech. "Miss Thrace, I'll have to ask you to—" He saw that Clevis was looking pleased for the first time in hours. Every inch a gentleman, he stood behind the empty chair, holding it in readiness. "I'll have to ask you to sit in the other room," Nelson said sternly. It was a matter for stern measures or for loud, unseemly laughter, and he reminded himself sharply that there was really nothing to laugh about.

"But of course." She was quite gracious. She might have been easing him out of an awkward social situation. "And you will arrange for me to see poor Tom, won't you? I'm frightfully sorry I interrupted." Her apology included each separate member of the audience. She said, "I'll be waiting, Lieutenant. Whenever you're ready, of course," and made her exit.

Clevis said, "She's got as much right to sit in as—" He shrugged and returned his attention to Betty Conway. "About this kicking—"

"Wait a minute," Nelson said. "You mentioned something before about having seen the revolver many times. Explain that."

"I *had* seen it many times—but not for years. I gave it to Glen."

"Now we're hearing something," Clevis said.

She ignored him. She ignored Mike, who had jumped convulsively. "When I was about twelve years old," she said, "my mother's brother died. He'd been fond of me and he left me a little money and a small cottage he owned on the outskirts of Howardsville. Mother decided to rent the cottage until I was old enough to know what I wanted to do with it, and I went there with her to straighten things out for the tenants. She said I could look in Uncle's study and see if there was anything I'd like to take home. I chose a few souvenirs, and then I found the revolver in a drawer and I took it for Glen. I didn't tell my mother, because I knew she wouldn't approve, and I did want to give Glen something special. It was a secret between us. We never told anyone else about it. Glen managed to get some blanks for it and we'd

go to the woods and shoot at things." She added forlornly, "If it hadn't been that gun, it would have been another—wouldn't it?"

Nelson nodded. "Tell Sergeant Clevis where the gun was before you kicked it away."

She said obediently, "Next to his hand—and the fingers of his hand were spread out as though he'd just loosed his hold on it with—with his last strength. All I thought about when I kicked it away was that Mike mustn't find out that his brother had committed suicide."

Nobody spoke, not even Clevis.

She went on. "I didn't think of a murder investigation or of anyone being accused. I just thought that Mike mustn't know—because, being Mike, he'd be sure to blame himself for having failed Glen in some way."

Mike was staring at her.

Nelson said, "Miss Conway, did you touch anything else in the room?"

"No. Later I wondered why everything seemed so upset—but at the time nothing really registered except finding Glen that way."

"You didn't move the book he wrote out of the path of the water from that overturned vase?"

She shook her head.

Clevis said flatly, "Lieutenant, are you buying this?"

"Yes. I think I am."

"You're writing it off as a suicide, after the way we've been knocking ourselves out—just because she gives you some rigamarole about the gun. Listen—I'll stick with her as far as the body being warm when she touched it—no farther. It was warm because Storch shot him either while she was there or while she was on the way up. If they ain't in cahoots—"

Storch said, "No—"

Nelson silenced him. "Judd, take Miss Conway and Mr. Williams into the anteroom and wait there with them." He nodded to the stenographer. "You take a breather, too."

Storch said, "Mister—"

"All right, Storch. Judd will get someone to show you

out. You'll be hearing from me tomorrow."

"Show me out? Home?"

"Until further notice."

"Mister—what'll I tell her?"

"Tell her she's not to worry. Tell her I said so."

His large face was working. "Mister—" He gave it up. He lumbered out after the others.

Clevis closed the door. He said truculently, "That clunk has nothing on me when it comes to being mixed up. How come you swallow her story hook, line, and sinker—no witnesses—no nothing—Lieutenant, I don't like to say it, but you—"

"Don't say it," Nelson said. "It's not just her story. It's the sum total of everything. We'll start with the book Glen Williams wrote. He devoted some space to unveiling his views about people and about his relation to people—but his subject matter wasn't all that interested me. Clearly, no one in the group respected that book enough to have moved it from the path of the spilled water—no one but Glen Williams himself. Perhaps overturning the vase was an accident, but—"

"Books yet."

"All right. We'll go on to Bernice Acevedo. He murdered her and set the stage so that his suicide would look like murder—and he planned it so that everyone he had dealings with would be suspected of the crime. But his timing went off because he'd counted on Storch to remove the gun before the others showed up—Betty Conway and Tom Gaudio and possibly Morgan Woodruff. Remember he asked Storch to come no later than a quarter to five—"

"It seems a long way for a guy to go to prove something."

"You were given certain assignments, Clevis, which prevented you from getting an all-over picture of the case." Nelson reviewed succinctly the matter of Joss Woodruff and the letter, the luncheon at the Gateau, the hypodermic needles planted on Morgan Woodruff. He mentioned the appointment that had been made with Bernice Acevedo, who must have arrived when Storch was hiding the evidence in the furnace room, which would have been im-

mediately after his wife returned from the grocer's.

Clevis said, "But why?"

"A distorted sense of humor. He'd had it to start with, and it became even more distorted under the influence of heroin. He wanted to control everybody, and when he couldn't swing it in the higher echelons he tried it on a lower level. Even then he found it hard going, so he decided to make his subjects pay for their small rebellions."

"He puts the joint at sixes and sevens—pays Storch to stash the gun so we won't guess suicide—and deliberately gives all his dear pals the high sign to rally around so they'll be on tap when the police arrive—and underpays Storch, at that? I'm surprised he didn't give him stage money."

Nelson said dryly, "Probably because the hundred and fifty dollars was about all he had left and he could afford to be generous with it. Besides, Storch was doing him a great service. He realized that with the revolver gone from the room, the powder burns and the angle of the shot would receive exactly the interpretation we gave them—that someone he knew well had taken him off guard and fired at close range."

Clevis was a die-hard. "Always providing that the Conway-Storch yarn holds water."

"You don't want to believe it does hold water—and I sympathize with you. I don't enjoy being made a fool of, either—and that's what it amounts to." On the other hand, he thought but did not say, if it was a choice of being made a fool of or holding for murder any of the people concerned, he would cheerfully go down as a fool.

Clevis was still trying. "Bernice Acevedo," he said. "He poisoned her just for the hell of it?"

"I suppose he poisoned her for the further confusion of the police should they entertain any doubts that he was murdered. And he may have planted the hypodermic needles on Woodruff on the off-chance of establishing a connection—or just to give Joss Woodruff food for thought—because more likely he counted on Gaudio to provide the link to Bernice. People meant very little to him aside from

his desire to manipulate them—and a girl like Bernice would have meant even less than most. Don't you remember the chocolate on the bathroom towel—and the traces of it on his fingers? He must have known she liked sweets and laid his trap accordingly. He made it his business to know everybody's vulnerable spot."

For the first time, Clevis's skepticism wavered. "You're buiding it up good," he said grudgingly.

"Perhaps this will convince you," Nelson said, touching the report from Ballistics. "Storch's prints were on the barrel of the gun. As usual, there was nothing identifiable on the trigger—but there was a smear of chocolate on the ebony handle, along with Glen Williams's prints. After he prepared the chocolates he probably fingered the gun in preparation. He could afford to be careless, because he banked on Storch to remove any telltale signs. Bernice must have been asked to come earlier than she did, and arrived late for some reason."

"Yeah," said Clevis. "Yeah—it figures." He looked very glum.

"Have a cigarette," Nelson said.

They smoked in silence for a few minutes. "I could murder that guy myself," Clevis said. "What was that title again—the title of his lousy book?"

"*Jester in Heaven.*"

"He should've called it *Jester in Hell.*"

Nelson agreed. He realized now that Glen Williams had been referring to himself and not to God in the title.

"What are you going to give the press?" Clevis asked.

"The truth—that Bernice Acevedo was murdered by a hopped-up suicide."

"Brother!" He brightened. "Well, at least the taxpayers can't say we didn't solve her murder. What about Storch and Conway for monkeying with the evidence?"

"As little as possible—and I hope we can manage to let them off with an admonition."

"I don't know. Storch will be meat for the sob sisters, Lieutenant, and everybody who reads about him will send him carloads of cash and groceries until the next tear-jerker

takes the spotlight."

Nelson stubbed out his cigarette and arose. He did a little jig step to flex his long legs. "We must go to our guests in the anteroom."

Mike Williams sat close to Betty Conway. Judd stood behind them. Joss and Morgan Woodruff had returned to add themselves to the group. Sarah Thrace was backing them into a corner.

She said, "Lieutenant, you must help me. I can't convince this stubborn boy that I'm not being altruistic. He's simply got to appear on my program. He can't let me down. You see, I'm to be mistress of ceremonies on a television program called The Old and the New." She grimaced. "Me to be the 'Old,' and to introduce new talent to the waiting world. We'll be recruiting that talent from the ranks once we get started—but for the first few shows it's up to me to round up all my promising friends. And Morgan's a natural. He has a good voice and I've heard at least two songs of his that are topflight. He'll be paid for his appearances and undoubtedly win the thousand-dollar prize to boot—and he's being so stiff-necked I—"

Morgan stepped around her. He said excitedly, "That waiter—Emile—he saw Glen Williams drop that package of needles in my pocket—he said he put it in his statement, and I'm here to make sure you—"

"I went over his statement after you left," Nelson said. "You have a clean bill of health. Everyone here has except—"

"Me," Betty Conway said in a small voice.

"Tampering with evidence is a serious matter, Miss Conway. I'll get in touch with you when the penalty's been decided upon." He looked at her troubled face and added weakly, "I hope it won't be a harsh one." He knew that he would be severely criticized for not holding her and Fred Storch. Both had obstructed what should have been a simple investigation of suicide. And yet, he thought, there were extenuating circumstances. Without that obstruction, the connection between the suicide and the murder of Bernice Acevedo might never have been dis-

covered. So, in the end, Glen Williams had outfoxed himself.

Mike Williams was standing, holding out his hand. Nelson shook it. Mike Williams said, "The sergeant's not going to charge me, Lieutenant." He smiled at Judd, who looked sheepish. Mike Williams had more to say. He said it with dignity. "Glen will be cremated. That was always his wish. And I thank you for—for everything." He nodded to the Woodruffs and to Sarah Thrace. "I'm glad to have met you." His voice held new authority. "Come along, Betty." They left, arm in arm.

Sarah Thrace said, "Isn't he sweet? It's hard to believe Glen was his brother. What's this about a clean bill of health?"

Nelson told them.

Sarah Thrace shed her social graces. She said intensely, "The louse—the real Lane Bryant-sized louse. When can I see Tom?"

"Tomorrow morning. Arrangements are being made for him to go to the hospital in Lexington, Kentucky. You can speak to the doctor about that. I don't know whether or not they accept fees, but I'm sure you can find some way to make a contribution."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. May I say that you're a love—an absolute love."

Morgan said, "I'm not prepared to go that far." Unexpectedly he, too, held out his hand. "So long, Lieutenant."

"*Isn't* he stiff-necked?" Sarah Thrace said. "Please—won't you convince him that I have nothing up my sleeve? Just because that louse gave everybody the run-around—"

"Just because," Morgan said.

Nelson looked at him. He said, "It sounds like a good idea. I wouldn't be too stiff-necked if I were you."

He liked Joss and Morgan Woodruff, and he liked Sarah Thrace. He wished them well, but he wished they would leave. He was in a hurry to phone Kyrie. He wanted to tell her that he would be home for dinner.

AMONG THE "BEST MYSTERIES OF THE YEAR"
AS SELECTED BY
# The New York Times

**THE KEY TO NICHOLAS STREET.** By Stanley Ellin. (Simon & Schuster, $2.50.) — Unusual subtlety and complexity of character in a tight murder plot.

**THE BLOODY BOKE** By William Campb (Dutton, $2.50.) likable fusion melodrama with esque warmth. (An overlook Gault's "Don't Cry for Me.")

**BLACK WIDOW.** B rick Quentin. (S Schuster, $2.50.) ably adroit com manners treatmen tragedy of evil.

**BARBARY HOARD.** Appleby. (Cowa Cann, $2.75.) — F mantic suspense-a delightfully execu

**VANISH IN AN IN** By Margaret Milla don, $2.50.) puzzle beautifull compounding irony and pity with detection. (And add Mrs. Millar's only barely less good "Rose's Last Summer.")

**DEADLOCK.** By Ruth Fenisong. (Doubleday, $2.50.) In which Miss Fenisong cinches her place in the Allingham - Ma of

## DEADLOCK

### by RUTH FENISONG

**"Lieut. Gridley Nelson is in himself enough to make any book, whatever the murder-plot — and the Fenisong plots are usually better than average.**

**"Never better, however, than in DEADLOCK in which she brings off an extraordinary task of fully characterizing an odd benevolent-yet-evil victim and of lending full conviction to a dangerously tricky solution. All of the characters, indeed, are beautifully realized on every level of Manhattan — from cafe glitter to basement sordidness."**

**—NEW YORK TIMES**

**DEATH HA** By Michael (Ha per, $2.50.) Striking bal ance of adventure-thriller and meticulously real nove of the law

808
DEADLOCK
RUTH FENISONG
BOOK