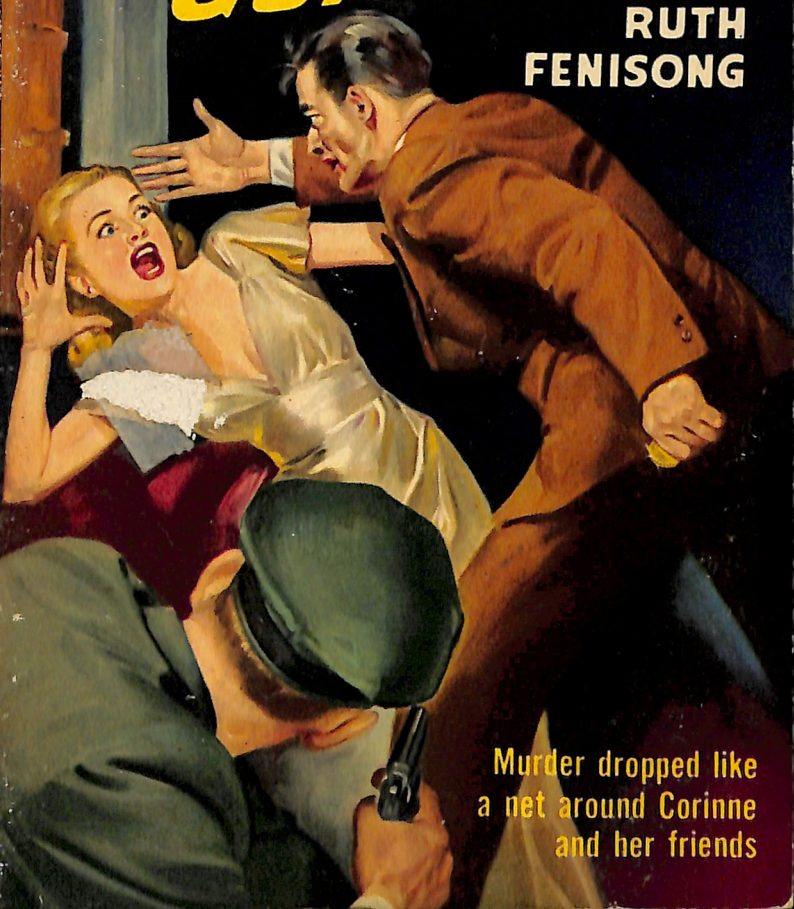


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How Much Evil Can A Woman Endure?

DEATH is a Gold Coin

RUTH
FENISONG



Murder dropped like
a net around Corinne
and her friends

AN EXCITING SUSPENSE NOVEL

DEATH IS A GOLD COIN

(THE LOST CAESAR)



RUTH FENISONG

POPULAR LIBRARY



NEW YORK

POPULAR LIBRARY EDITION

**COMPLETE AND
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CHAPTER I

ROBERT IVORS joined Corinne at the breakfast table. Usually she left the apartment long before he arose. She said, "Good morning," but it was not a good morning. For a long time nothing had been good.

The maid brought Corinne's coffee and attended to Robert's larger wants. The maid, a plump middle-aged woman, just managed to conceal her surprise at Robert's presence. Of the apartment's small staff none slept in, and she always arrived earlier than the others because something about her young mistress tugged at her easy heart.

She could not put a name to that something. Why pity Mrs. Ivors? She was surrounded by luxury, wasn't she? And if her lovely face was a little thin and strained that was her own fault, with the outsized refrigerator always crammed full. She had a fine husband, too. Watch how he catered to her, his soft voice dripping honey each time he used it. That voice was enough to melt the flesh off your bones. Even when he said, "Pass the butter," he sounded like a regular speechmaker. Of course he was a bit older than she, but not enough to matter. You'd have to look real close to see that his hair was thinning on top or to notice the lines in his face. No, it couldn't be that she had married him for his money as some held. She was a rich lady in her own right, with a thriving business people said she had built from a shoestring. And movie stars and other famous folk came from all over the country to buy from her.

When the ever-pondering maid had gone back to the kitchen, Robert said tenderly, "You look rather tired, darling. Didn't you sleep well?"

Corinne tore her gaze away from his almost uxorious approach to his eggs. "Yes, thank you, I slept well." She could hardly remember what it was like to experience a night of unbroken rest.

"I thought I heard you moving about."

She shook her head. She no longer struggled against the wakeful hours induced by waiting for his step across the threshold of

her room, never knowing which of two personalities she would be expected to receive, the sniveling slave or the gracious king.

Often, when she thought the dreaded time had passed, she arose and walked aimlessly through the apartment or listened to music, tuning the radio so that its murmur reached her ears alone. Sometimes she sketched designs for the leather pocket-books and belts and sandals that had given Hastings Accessories its reputation. She did not need to do this. Willard Hunt had taken over the design department. What she did need was not to think.

Robert was studying her, and to make him stop she said, "What made you get up so early? I know you had a late meeting last night."

"I'm turning over a new leaf. If you can rise at dawn every morning, then so can I."

Corinne moved restlessly. If there must be conversation she wished it to take a different turn. And there must be conversation, because silence and the way he looked at her were the alternatives. "I've always kept working hours," she said. "I wouldn't know what to do if——"

His voice was wistful. "Hastings still means everything to you, doesn't it?"

"I'm sorry, Robert. I——"

"Sorry? Sorry you married me? Is that what you're trying to say?"

It was what she could not say. Once more she let the moment pass.

He cleared his throat delicately, as a musician tunes an instrument. "If I seem to complain it's not because I so rarely see you. It's because I'm concerned about your health. Those shadows under your eyes—the tense way you hold your head——"

"I'm all right, Robert."

"You work too hard. Willard Hunt is quite capable of carrying on. I've never asked you to retire completely. I've only asked that you take a less active interest—for your own sake."

For my own sake, she thought. It's for my own sake that I work so hard. If I stopped I'd go mad.

He was still talking, going over the same ground he had walked again and again. But this time there was a difference.

This time he was treading lightly, almost carelessly, as though he did not want especially to reach his goal. "First thing you know," he ended, "people will be saying that I'm too stingy to support you in proper style." He smiled to show that humor was intended.

She gave the expected answer. "Everyone knows how generous you are." And in desperation she added, "What really made you rise at this hour?"

"Not, as you might conclude, tennis or golf or polo. I've given up games. I've never been really good at them, you know, in spite of my athletic appearance. And now that Louis isn't here to egg me on and trim me unmercifully, I've decided to turn to more important pursuits."

She waited for him to come to the point. She had never met his younger brother Louis, who had been doing his spectacular bit overseas since the beginning of the war.

"No," he continued, "not golf or polo or tennis. As I said before, I'm turning over a new leaf. You see, since I no longer have any real hope of persuading you to ease up, there's only one course left me."

The tone of his voice raised her guard. "One course?"

He liked the tense question. He liked to capture his audience. "I'm going to share your labors. You've accomplished a miracle. You've transformed Robert Ivors, playboy, into Robert Ivors, worker. I had a talk with Willard Hunt yesterday."

"You had a——"

"I dropped around for a glimpse of you—but you were in conference. Hunt told me more about Hastings in a half hour than you've told me in our year of—connubial bliss. I found it fascinating. So fascinating that I asked him if he could fit me in anywhere."

She did not grasp what he was saying. She repeated, "Fit you in?"

He said, "If you and I had a common interest perhaps——" and left it hanging.

Her mouth was dry. She did not want him at Hastings. Hastings was her escape from him. "You must be joking, Robert. You'd be bored—you'd—what about all your directors' meetings—your——"

"No doubt I'll still have a bit of time to spare for—er—my own small affairs."

"But——"

"Don't worry, dearest. I won't be bored. I've always had something of a collector's urge—and I don't see why I shouldn't gratify it by selecting the ornaments used on the Hastings' products. Hunt explained to me that each pocketbook or belt was set apart by some unusual clasp. Fortunately for me, the fellow who's been handling that end of things is not averse to making a change. A friend of mine has just the opening for him. It's all arranged."

Once more she started to protest. She had the words ready. "Highhanded" was the least of them. But he was staring at her and her lips would not part.

"You're pleased, aren't you?" he said. "I did it to please you. Your enterprise has always been a reproach to my idleness. And now you won't be putting me to shame any longer." He got up from the table. "There's an auction at nine o'clock this morning that Hastings Accessories can't afford to miss. I mean to be there on the dot. I hear they're putting up a miniature enamel plaque dating clear back to the Renaissance. Hunt says it's just the thing you've been after for Elsie Morgan's pocketbook." He stooped, and she lowered her head at the same time so that his mouth glanced off her cheek. His expression did not alter. "I expect to make some wonderful finds for you, dearest. And after this when I visit Hastings, I won't feel like an outsider. There'll be a legitimate excuse for chatting with my wife." He started for the door.

"Robert—wait."

He halted and turned to her questioningly.

The words that had refused to come before mobbed her lips. "It's no use—we've made a big mistake. I'm not blaming you—it's not your fault. It's not mine either—or perhaps it is—I don't know. I only know——"

"Corinne—you're not well—you're trembling." He took a step toward her.

She strained against the back of her chair. "No—I'm not well. I'm not well because it's all wrong—it's been that way since the beginning."

"I don't understand." His face was expressionless.

"Please—please—don't make it any more difficult that it is. I want a divorce."

"A divorce! But why? You're my most prized possession, Corinne. I mean—well—everything I am or think of being is for you. What's wrong with me?" His voice climbed perilously. "Haven't I tried to—to do everything I could to make you happy?"

For a horrible moment she thought he was going to cry. She steeled herself. "I'm not happy. You must know that. I——" The steel broke as she wielded it. She had not the ruthlessness to say, "I cannot bear you—physically or mentally I cannot bear you—your touch—your bombast—your mediocre mind—your swift transitions that spring from heaven knows what muddy source——" She went on helplessly, "There's nothing disgraceful about an admission of incompatibility. You'll go on—with someone else—and I——"

"And you?" His resilience was astonishing. He had suddenly and completely regained royal calm. "You've seen the morning paper?"

She could read no meaning into the question. It seemed so irrelevant that she had a hysterical inclination toward laughter. Her mouth twitched. "No—no, I haven't. What has the morning paper to do with it?"

She winced as he cleared his throat. It meant that he was about to launch one of his meandering perorations. As usual he made no apparent connection with what had gone before.

"The war news is good," he said, "if American losses of only four ships in the Pacific are good. Of course the news is bad if one's mind should dwell upon the parents and wives and children and sweethearts of the men who have gone down with 'only four ships.' And it's good to read that the FBI is still on the job and has made another startling arrest, with further disclosures to come. But again it's bad if one happens to be frightened by the fact that the present government finds it necessary to exercise such vigilance and——"

"Robert!"

He was standing very straight, his eyes examining her anxiously. "Excuse me, I've gone off on a tangent, haven't I? The

news I thought you might have seen deals neither with war nor government. You'll find it in one of the columns on the amusement page. It states simply that Justin Corley is in town."

"Oh no!"

"Be frank, my dear. You did see it. Surely nothing else caused your little outburst. Or perhaps you received your information by way of another source. Perhaps Mr. Corley has been in direct contact with you."

Corinne said quietly, "I didn't see the paper—and he hasn't—and he won't." Her heart repeated hopelessly, He won't—ever. "Believe me, Robert, when I asked for a divorce I——"

"There—of course I believe you—and it proves I have nothing to worry about. This strange demand of yours for a divorce means simply that you're tired—keyed to a false emotional pitch. Dearest, if you must maintain your present pace won't you please permit me to arrange a visit for you to Dr. Hendrickson? He's—er—doing wonders for me—and I'm sure he can help you too. Naturally, the first year of marriage is a period of adjustment. Some day when you're older we'll laugh together at our seeming difficulties—and you'll be glad I had patience enough and maturity enough to weather them for both of us." His step was brisk as he left the room.

Corinne sat quite still. She closed her eyes. Dark lashes fringing her faintly purpled lids lay thick as embroidery floss upon her cheek.

The maid, coming to clear the table, was startled to see her that way and coughed an intruder's cough. Maybe, the maid thought fleetingly, Mr. Ivors is not as nice as he seems. She had overheard part of the conversation. She did not approve of divorce and was shocked. It just showed that you could never tell. It did not occur to her to condemn her mistress.

Corinne opened her eyes. The maid knew her eyes by heart. "Not so much gray," she often said, attempting to describe them, "as the color of silver that's waiting to be shined up." She coughed again because it was taking time for the silver eyes to clear and find her.

"Anything else you want, Mrs. Ivors?"

"No, thank you, Emma."

Emma lingered, torn between a moral desire to reprove and

a maternal longing to comfort. Prewar trained, she did neither. She compromised with a small gesture, made to dispel, if only for a moment, the misery implicit in that haunted face. She refolded the newspaper at Robert's place. "Wouldn't you like to see the news?"

Corinne accepted the paper as she had accepted everything else for the past year. But she set it aside without progressing beyond the first page. She did not want to read a printed notice of Justin Corley's return to New York.

Self-sick, she thought. In a world that's full of real suffering why do I make so much of my small sordid problem? Incompatibility—she would not face a stronger word—is not unique. There must be scores of other women who find courage to adjust to it. But the clutch at reason yielded nothing. Perhaps other women have been provided with some well-proofed insulation that I lack. I only know I can't go on this way.

She forced herself to think honestly of Robert and of her relationship with Robert.

She had met him at the home of one of her clients. Immaculate, courteous, polished by generations of wealth, he seemed all that was desirable. Two months later he had proposed. He had been exceedingly patient while she considered, while she turned over and over the contents of her sore heart.

"Robert—I'm in love—I was in love with someone else. I——"

"It couldn't have been right for you, or you wouldn't be free at this moment."

"I don't think I am free. Feeling the way I do, it isn't fair to you——"

"Let me chance that. How many times in your life have you been in love, Corinne?"

"Once. Only once."

"Then I won't worry." He had been so sure, so plausible. "First love," he had said, "is no more than the inevitable awakening of mind and spirit and senses. I experienced it too. But I can't even remember her name. First love is usually nothing more than an alarm clock—a contrivance especially designed to rouse you for the real business of living. I promise to make you forget its clamor—if you'll let me."

She had only half listened. First love, she knew, was waking

to strange awareness. It was seeing all things with fresh, incredulous eyes. It was a shattering fragrance in nostrils become too sensitive. It was an overacute sense of touch, and the fingers trembled to it, and for release there was a need to kiss the world. And Justin was the world and . . .

Robert had talked on. "Everybody forgets—or if they remember at all it's with the tolerance set up by time—so that what was once too bitter or too sweet becomes in memory one flavor—pleasing but quite devoid of nourishment. You can't live on that flavor for the rest of your life. Those who try shrivel. You've seen them on the streets airing their pets but never airing themselves. They're easily recognized because they're unwilling even to relinquish the styles and manners of a earlier day for fear the sterile flame of the past will be blown out by the lusty breath of the present."

She had believed his full stop was made to give her time to savor the wisdom of his words. Later she realized that he had stopped to savor this wisdom himself. But that was later, when she also discovered that the speech about first love was an item he kept in stock and dusted off at every possible opportunity.

He had taken her to meet his long-widowed mother, who for some reason showed none of the customary reluctance to surrender a son and heir to a comparative nobody. The emphasis in the Ivors home was all placed upon the absent Louis, a youth, who, according to old Mrs. Ivors, excelled in everything that mattered.

Corinne had received an enigmatic and almost indifferent blessing. "In spite of the fact that you have no social position," the old lady told her, "Robert could do far worse, and often I've been afraid he might. You're an unusually beautiful girl, and your manners are good. I hope your choice is wise."

Corinne was in no state to record the overtones of this acceptance. Everybody forgets, she had assured herself passionately. I'll forget. "Men have died from time to time," her mind quoted, "and worms have eaten them, but not for love." Justin didn't want me. I won't die—or shrivel. I'll have a full rich life, and Robert will help me to it. He *really* wants me.

So Corinne Hastings became Mrs. Robert Ivors. And even admitting that the side Robert had presented to her at first

showed less endearing with every added moment of familiarity, the words that had been used to persuade her might have been true. She might in time have forgotten Justin, and healed, and discovered that second best could in the end be better than the first wild surge of the blood. If only there had not been that other side, the side that flashed from abject servility to overbearing arrogance at any or no cause.

A child—children—had been part of the full rich life she sought. But Robert's children, with a heritage of mental instability! She should have faced it sooner, translated into words the shrinking terror that he could not or would not hear.

But it is not too late. I'll make him listen. I'll make him hear. This sudden interest in my work is just his last attempt. In his heart he knows. I pity him. Basically he's kind. He *is* kind. Even this morning—"I did it to please you," he said. The other things he said . . .

She shivered. The finger of fear was on her spine. She tried to dislodge it. I won't give way to nerves. Soon life will be supportable again. I won't demand that it be full or rich—just supportable. That isn't much to ask. No more—no more Robert. Justin has nothing to do with—

She heard the phone ring in the next room. The treacherous beating of her heart mocked all resolve and all reason. But of course it could not be Justin.

The maid came hurriedly. "Your secretary called, Mrs. Ivors. It being later than you usually get to business, she wants to know if you're sick or——"

"Oh." Then Corinne said, "Tell her I'm on my way."

CHAPTER II

THE BRISKNESS had gone from his step, and the face that was not so young at second glance wore an injured expression. Now you could see why he had failed at sports. Rapport was lacking between his brain and his large frame. Shoulders sagging, he walked through the lobby of the apartment house at Sutton Place. He waited outside under the canopy while the doorman signaled to his chauffeur.

The car drew up and the chauffeur stepped to the pavement. He assumed a stance of stagey impeccability as the master approached.

Robert Ivors emerged from his black depths for long enough to note that there was something wrong with the man's uniform. It seemed too tight, and that was queer because it had been made to measurement only a month ago. His other troubles so swamped this secondary puzzle that he was about to climb into the car without comment when the chauffeur's voice stopped him.

"Good morning, Mr. Ivors."

Ivors stiffened with shock. The uniform had not been made to this man's measure. This man was taller, bulkier. This man was—"T-Topping!" Ivors stuttered. "I don't understand. Where's Bondy?"

"You mean your ex-chauffeur? A long story—but this isn't the place to tell it." Topping's thick mouth opened on a row of strong white teeth. A close-up of the grin revealed strain, but to anyone standing several feet away it looked natural enough to be the result of pleasantries between employer and employee. "Get in—and don't use my name again. I'll explain while we roll. Where to?"

Ivors produced the address of the auction rooms. "Eleventh Street and University Place." He tripped over the running board. His buttocks bounced against the cushioned springs. He tried to light a cigarette but it jumped from his hand.

Topping brought the car to motion. He shifted the rearview mirror for a brief glimpse of his quaking cargo. His voice rose

and traveled around his fixed head. "Take it easy, Mr. Ivors."

Ivors did not find his own voice until they were riding down Fifth Avenue. "Has this anything to do with——"

"So you heard about it. Yes—I was with Krimmer, but I gave them the slip. We were standing outside that cigar store when they tagged us. Krimmer wasn't so quick on his feet. But he'll be all right. No evidence."

"My God!"

Topping, shifting the mirror again, saw him clap his hand to a side pocket.

Ivors burst out resentfully, "It would have been better if they'd caught you. Krimmer's important. He——"

"And I ain't important?" Topping chuckled. "Never mind—forget it. We can't afford arguments, because we're stuck together until the dust blows over. This is my best bet—just in case anyone should take the trouble to look for me."

"You can't——"

"Who says I can't? I even had you fooled. You expected to see a familiar pan—and expecting is practically the same as seeing. Nobody bothers to examine the filling in a monkey suit. Why, if I hadn't opened my mouth you'd——"

"Where—how did you get Bondy to——"

"That's not your worry."

"Now look here, Topping, I refuse to be responsible for any foul play. I——"

Topping said dispassionately, "You better call me Al—or Joe—or maybe Benson. I've used Benson before. It's got class."

"If you've done Bondy any injury I won't stand for it—I'll——"

"Your money makes a lot more sense than you do, Mr. Ivors, not meaning any disrespect. You leave the heavy stuff to those that can handle it, and the day after V-J day you'll be way up in front."

"Well—I——"

"That's more like it. How's about stopping off for a drink? I know a place where the bartender's so damn democratic he won't bat an eye at a pair like us hoisting one together."

"No—I'm late as it is." Ivors groaned, recalling his errand, recalling Corinne. It seemed to him that, boil-like, his troubles

had come to a bursting head. He raised his voice in complaint. "Your presence is a danger to me. I am certain that the Council would not approve. I must find some way to get in touch with——"

"You'll get in touch with nobody. It wouldn't be healthy."

Ivors drew himself up. "Is that a threat?"

Topping moved his head from side to side. "Course not." He muttered, "Our outfit's too partial to those golden eggs you lay."

"I can't hear you."

"No one's going to threaten a man like you, Mr. Ivors." The reassurance was delivered paternally. "I just mean it wouldn't be healthy for you to get in touch with anyone right now, because who knows who's watching who?"

"It's all so absurd. I'm a public-spirited citizen—a man of position. I was led into this by my honest conviction that——"

"Now, now—calm down. Save the speeches till needed. Danger won't even spray you with spit while I'm around. Instead of putting up a beef you should be thanking your lucky stars you got someone by who knows all the answers. Besides, this isn't exactly my own idea."

"Whose idea is it, then? Who gave you orders to——"

"Patience, Mr. Ivors. It was agreed in the beginning that the less you know about certain things, the better." He turned east at Twelfth Street. "A smooth job—this. I'll bet Blondy or Bondy or whatever his name was couldn't handle it the way I do."

"Was! Did you say, 'his name was'?" Ivors' face twitched.

"I never did get my grammar straight. And don't be so suspicious. The guy's more alive than you are. I've got too much sense to invite a murder rap. Here's where we park. Funny-looking joint—but it sure is packing them in. I'll go with you to help clear a path."

Corinne went out of the Sutton Place apartment house, neither knowing nor caring that the April air was warm and sweet. She walked downtown for a few blocks and turned west automatically. It was half-past nine when she entered the large building that roofed Hastings Accessories.

There were no impatient ladies in the reception room as she

stepped out of the elevator. She supposed, gratefully, that Willard Hunt had attended to her first appointment. The room was empty, or almost empty. A dingy little dog occupied a cushioned chair near one of the display cases.

The dog, busily scratching itself raw, looking up for a moment and fastened its sad eyes upon her. A touch of color was stirred into the cream of her cheeks as she recognized the animal. I wonder what excuse Dodie Merritt will offer today, she thought, and made a mental note to be firm with the brittle assistant designer.

She averted her head, hearing the renewed sound of scratching as she passed. Her feet made soundless contact with the deep rug that ran from wall to wall. Fear struck her again, roughly and with no apparent cause. The room seemed hostile. She could not help being aware that she was something of a riddle to her clients, and all at once it seemed to her that they had left imprint of their gossiping voices upon the air.

At the head of the corridor beyond was the workshop. Its walls were lined with shelves on which rested plaster casts of feet, some ticketed with famous names. They kept company with pairs of unfinished sandals, belts, and bags.

Corinne stood in the doorway and breathed the good smell of the leather suspended on racks over the cutting tables. Her eyes singled out a peccary skin, part of a recent shipment from the Argentine, and her mind saw it transformed: handstitched to completion as adornment for a special client. The familiar exercise rested her. Her tense shoulders relaxed.

The workshop hummed. Some twenty-odd girls talked to and over each other. A silence fell upon them as her presence made itself felt. She might have been a ghost figure for the effect she had, neither friendly nor unfriendly, but incomprehensible, and therefore giving rise to a moment of unease.

She said, "Good morning," in a low, clear voice. She went on to her office, hearing the wave of resumed conversation behind her. She did not hear the words that were said. Nor did she know they were repeated with variations almost every morning after her greeting. Only her physical presence stilled the tongues of her employees. In her absence, discussing her was as much routine to them as the jobs they did.

"Did you get a load of the princess? She looks kind of peaked."

"There must be something wrong. She never gets in this late."

"That's because she's nuts. You wouldn't catch me dragging myself out of bed if I didn't have to make a living."

"Maybe she's getting sense at last."

"Maybe she looks peaked on account of Merritt's pooch. He was shedding all over the reception-room upholstery when I passed through a few minutes ago."

"Merritt has a nerve. You'd think she was boss instead of just an assistant designer. Too bad she doesn't get slapped down once and for all."

"Whatever you say about the princess, you can't say she slaps people down."

"All night long I was trying to think what she reminds me of."

"Ain't you got a better way to spend your nights? Okay, I'll bite. What does she remind you of?"

"Her face is like one of those masks you see on the stage when they're trying to revolutionize the drama."

"Or something. Revolutionize the drama! Pardon me while I go home and read a book."

"You don't need to read a book. In plain English, Anna means she's got no expression—like she's walking in her sleep. She wasn't that way always. She used to——"

"She wasn't walking in her sleep when she snared Robert Ivors. She did all right."

"What he sees in her!"

"She's beautiful."

"If you like the type. Thin as a rail."

"No rail ever had breasts like——"

"Especially in the suit she's wearing. It must have cost a——"

"Say—did you hear the latest?"

"What are you whispering about? Let us in on this."

"Don't crowd me. Robert Ivors has gone and got himself a job here."

"Are you kidding?"

"He never did a lick of work in his life."

"Where did you hear it, Olga?"

"By grapevine. He told Merritt and Merritt told——"

"I guess he got tired of the little wife who wasn't there."

"Or could be he's got his eyes on one of the chicks here and wants an excuse to stick close."

"You mean Merritt, for instance?"

"Why not? She'd give her soul for a chance to muscle in."

"Her what? Well—a lot of dames I mention would raise the ante—or maybe lower it, depending on where the soul hangs out. Personally, I don't think he's such a dream boat, but his money really sends me."

"Anyway, he doesn't know Merritt or any other would-be glamour-puss from a piece of skiving when the princess is around."

"And the thanks he gets. She don't even use his name. Miss Hastings this—Miss Hastings that."

"Lots of businesswomen do the same thing. Outside of business hours she's Mrs. Ivors. I know because I had to go to the apartment once and——"

"Yeah—you told us about that. What's wrong with the princess? In her boots I'd be glad to knock off and play house. Willard Hunt could run this place with both hands tied."

"Did you ever notice the way Willie looks at her?"

"That's old stuff. She's the only one who doesn't notice it. She's got a leather heart."

"Don't you believe it. Ask Joan. Joan's been with her since the Sixth Avenue days. Tell how she used to go swoony about that Tin Pan Alley fellow who wrote 'And So Were We.'"

"Shhhh. Willie's right outside the door. . . ."

In her office Corinne took off her hat and the jacket of her suit. She drew on a heavily embroidered white smock with belling tight-cuffed sleeves. She went to the adjoining bathroom and appraised herself briefly in the full-length mirror. There was a peculiar lack of vanity in the way she corrected such flaws as the April breeze had wrought in her grooming. She ran a comb through the dark softness of her hair and deepened the red of her beautiful curved mouth. Her coldly efficient gestures were telling. It was plain they stemmed neither from love of self nor of another, but were merely offshoots of a position which demanded that she be entirely presentable.

When she returned to the office, her secretary was there with the mail. Corinne thanked the girl for a vase of spring flowers on the desk's broad surface.

"From your garden?"

"Yes—I thought you might like them for a change instead of the florist kind. If you don't I'll——"

"But I do, Mildred. They're so fresh—and young."

Mildred often brought flowers. Her feeling for Corinne was similar to that of the maid's. She was large, high-colored, rather boyish looking. She suggested that she had not left a girl scout's career far behind. Next to Corinne she looked raw.

Corinne had been dictating for about half an hour when the phone began to ring. Mildred handled the first two calls easily, but seemed troubled by the third. She put the receiver down and said, "There's a—I can't pronounce his name—outside. I'm sorry, but it sounds Polish. It has a lot of consonants. He seems positive you'll see him."

"I really haven't time. Mrs. Case is due in about fifteen minutes. By the way, I suppose Willard Hunt took care of Madame Dossette?"

"Yes—he did."

"Well—go to the reception room and find out what this man wants. And on the way please stop at Miss Merritt's office. Ask her to step in here."

In about five minutes Mildred returned. She seemed quite distressed.

Corinne said quickly, "Did Miss Merritt——"

"No—it's not that. It's the Polish man. I can't understand what he's trying to say. It's——"

A baritone voice finished the sentence. "Double talk. Don't worry. Nobody can understand it."

Corinne's eyes lifted to the owner of the voice. And Dodie Merritt, who had crept up behind him, stiffened and came to attention.

"Mr. Prznkichk," the voice said deeply. "Your humble servant."

Dodie Merritt saw that her employer no longer wore the face of a sleepwalker.

"Justin," Corinne said. In that unguarded moment she was

radiant. She had risen, and she came from behind her desk with hands outstretched. The perfect grace of the gesture was like a movement in a dance.

The man muttered something that sounded like, "Well, it seemed the best way to get in." And then his arms encircled her.

They kissed as though they could not help it, as though if they abstained they would starve to death.

Mildred was standing between them and the door. She gave Dodie Merritt a firm push, followed her into the corridor, and closed the door behind her.

The two left in the office were conscious only of each other. He was muttering words against Corinne's mouth, jumbled, wondering words.

"The same perfume . . . God, I could . . . You're thinner, my darling——"

Home at last, and fed and warmed and vastly comforted, Corinne had no will to move. It was the man who thrust her out into the cold again. He held her from him and stared as hungrily as he had kissed. "What's happened to you? What have you done to yourself?" And then he added anticlimactic words that were typical of him in their curious blend of anger and compassion. "You look rotten."

She found that she could laugh. "Oh, Justin, Justin, at least you haven't changed." She put the desk between them, glad of the chair that offered support for her drained limbs. The moment had flattened, and she saw her own awareness of this reflected darkly on Justin's face.

She said politely, "Won't you sit down? It's been so long, hasn't it?"

But he fought on, unwilling to concede. "Stop it, Corinne. Look—can't we go somewhere?"

She was back in her office. She was Miss Hastings—also known as Mrs. Ivors. And she was remembering images that joy had prevented her from recording before: her secretary's startled eyes, a cloudy figure of someone else who had been there.

"You shouldn't have come here, Justin."

"But where else could I go—surely not to your home under the circumstances?"

"There are no circumstances."

"Oh yes, there are. We were damn fools once. Do we keep on being damn fools for the rest of our lives? Shall I grovel for you? Is that what you want?"

She had known that he must come back. It had been only some atavistic fear of angry gods that forced her to deny the knowledge. Now she was afraid of her lifting heart. "I'm married," she said.

He blew the stilted pronouncement aside. "You'll get unmarried—and married again—to me."

"It's not as easy as that."

"Just recite me the complications. And see how quickly I get rid of them."

"I—I can't—not now. Go away, Justin. I'll call you when——"

"I won't go away. I make it a rule not to repeat my mistakes. I've come for you."

"Why didn't you come for me before? What makes you so much more eager for marriage than you were a year or so ago?"

"All right—I *will* grovel. A year or so ago I was a little fellow with a giant-sized inferiority complex. I'd been piddling away my time. I didn't amount to anything. You had beauty plus dough—and I had neither."

"I don't believe it. You just couldn't bear to be tied down. The Hollywood job was in the offing. It meant you were on your way. I'm not blaming you, Justin. Some men aren't the marrying kind."

"That wasn't my trouble. I wanted to marry you—to chuck everything and marry you."

"To chuck everything?"

"There was my sister—Martie," he said. "Martie was in a spot. She'd earned the right to be my first consideration. There were no two ways about that. I couldn't tide her over and have anything left to spend on a private life."

"Oh—I see." Then Corinne said passionately, "No—I don't see. You were selfish—rotten selfish. You knew how close I was to Martie. Why didn't you give me a chance to help her? She'd have let me, even if you wouldn't. Martie's generous enough to give or take with exactly the same grace."

"All right—maybe that fine balance has been left out of the

male make-up. Anyway, it was left out of mine. But I mean to acquire it. Oh sure—I'm a hell of a lot more mellow than I was when my pockets were empty. I grasp your point. What I can't grasp is why you were in such a hurry to burn your bridges. How was I to know that you'd label my flight as unwillingness to change my bachelor's status? Could it be that you had the good old inferiority complex too—or simply that you'd never taken time out to appraise your value—never looked in the mirror to see what I see—what everybody sees?"

Someone was knocking on the door. She stiffened warily. She sent light conversational tones through steadied lips. "How is Martie now? Has she come to New York with you?"

He stared at her in horror, but after a brief moment he answered the appeal in her eyes. "Martie's all right. Yes, she's with me."

"I've thought of her so often. I'm glad you dropped in to choose some accessories for her. Let me show you the new workshop——"

The knocking had stopped. Footsteps were receding down the corridor.

Justin detoured the barrier of the desk. He took her hands and held them fast. "Corinne, let's not play it that way. Let's flaunt it. Before I crashed this door I didn't know anything about the guy you married. I wasn't sure that things would go my way. I was prepared to take a beating. But not now. Now I'm sure. Now I know that he's made you into a frightened shadow. Maybe it's his fault—maybe it isn't—but one way or another sooner or later his toes will get stepped on—and it might as well be sooner. We love each other. Neither of us can escape from that. I've had a whole year of trying—and so have you. Let's go on from there—good and loud and proud."

"Justin, I love you."

"You don't have to say it."

"But I'm afraid. Robert's not predictable. He——"

"Let me at him."

"No. Justin—I asked for a divorce this morning."

"Then everything's——"

"It isn't. He wouldn't listen. He said I'd be grateful for his wisdom later on. He intimated that I was hysterical—the first-

year-of-marriage kind of thing—that my failure to adjust was due to overwork.”

“Well—we’ll put him straight. We’ll——”

“No. He will listen—later. I’ll make him—only not if he knows that you’ve come back to me.”

“That kind of guy?”

“I’m not sure. Perhaps I’m doing him an injustice, but——”
She raised their welded hands. Her mouth pressed against the backs of his.

He said shakily, “So we go devious. We play it your way. I’m a customer and you march me to the workshop and I buy something to make Martie’s eyes bug out and to keep anyone else’s eyes from doing likewise.”

CHAPTER III

ROBERT IVORS went into Corinne's office. He was carrying a square box under his immaculate arm and he was smiling a set smile until he realized that he had no audience. He placed the box on a small table covered by a leather skin. He went to the desk and pressed the buzzer. Mildred appeared.

"Where's Mrs. Ivors, Mildred?"

"She just stepped into the workshop—with a client."

"I see. Then perhaps we'd better not disturb her."

Mildred said fervently, "No, Mr. Ivors." She squirmed to show that she was animate. His scrutiny did not seem to grant this fact.

"You've been working here for about six months. Is this your first job?"

"Yes—yes, it is—and I lo—I like it very much."

"Good. That's the way it should be. My wife's former secretary stayed right up until the time she married. Unfortunately, her husband wasn't very broad-minded. He thought a woman's place was in the home."

Mildred had nothing to say to that. She clicked her tongue, hoping that it would serve as comment.

Ivors turned his head toward the desk. He seemed disturbed. "If that's the best the florist can do, I'll have to transfer my standing order to another firm. Mrs. Ivors is a hothouse bloom herself. These flowers don't express her at all."

Mildred said with considerable effort, "I'm sorry. I brought them from my garden. I thought Mrs. Ivors might like a change."

"I see." His smile came back. "How thoughtful of you. And no doubt you're right. She might like a change at that."

"Shall I ring your office when Miss—when Mrs. Ivors is free? She may be tied up for quite a while."

"I don't know what office I'm to occupy—if any. Besides, what I wanted isn't urgent." He indicated the box on the table. "I've just come from an auction. This is all so new to me—I can't help feeling like a small boy who's caught an unexpectedly large mess

of fish. Perhaps you'll let me show off for you—since Mrs. Ivors isn't here."

Nervously she glanced toward the door. "Well—I don't understand much about——"

"Nonsense. All women understand beauty. Open the box." It was a royal command.

She went over to the table. Her fingers fumbled with the string. When she had lifted the cover, Ivors began to unwrap the separate little packages of tissue paper with which the box was filled.

"Not a bad haul," he said, lining the trinkets up for her inspection. "Do you think my wife will approve?"

"Oh yes." She jumped as a wheezing gray-white shape scurried at her from the doorway.

He jumped, too, before he said, "My dear child, one shouldn't have nerves at your age. That's Miss Merritt's dog, isn't it? She was telling me about it yesterday. I believe she calls it Misty."

Misty was on her hind legs, yapping and scraping her claws along the leather skin that hung over the table.

Mildred said resentfully, "Miss Merritt has no right to bring it here. The smell of leather seems to drive it mad."

"It—or rather she—seems to think she's a puppy again—a conception we shouldn't begrudge to man or beast. Whoa there!" The dog had succeeded in gripping a corner of the skin. A tug dragged it to the floor, scattering the trinkets.

"Oh, Mr. Ivors, that's too bad."

He said ruefully, "No harm done—but who would have suspected she had so much zest?"

Frightened by the small rain of objects, the dog scuttled to the far end of the office. Ivors got down on his hands and knees.

Mildred joined him. "Let me—you'll get your suit out of press."

"Well—tailors have to be kept going too—I guess." He had squeezed as much of his body as possible under a chair. "There—I think they're all accounted for." He emerged and squatted on his haunches. His hand hesitated over the folded elegance of the handkerchief in his breast pocket, passed downward, and produced another from his trousers. He wielded it delicately, flicking off minute pieces of fluff. He was puffing a little, and he

seemed in no hurry to rise. He scooped up the heap he had collected. "Look at this—a genuine Egyptian amulet. What a story there must be behind it. It would be interesting to discover who wore it—or carried it—or whatever it was they did in——"

Mildred made desperate interruption. "Why don't you ask Mr. Hunt? He's an expert on such matters. You'll find him in his——"

"A good idea. Perhaps I will. Now take this intricate silver circle of filigree. I've seen similar pieces in Dutch paintings. They're used to decorate the Sunday caps of peasant women. Not valuable, perhaps—but quaint—and bound to come in handy. I'm sure there are quite a few peasants among the Hastings clientele."

Mildred gave a shocked giggle. It was not the sort of remark she would have expected a man like Mr. Ivors to make. She warmed to him a little. He did look so democratic squatting there on the floor. Nevertheless she wanted to get him out of the office before Corinne returned with—with that man. She thought loyally, Miss Hastings is above reproach—and there must be some decent explanation for the way she acted, but . . . Hurriedly she placed the skin back on the table, gathered up the loose pieces of tissue paper, and began to rewrap some of the ornaments.

Ivors said, "Don't bother. Just drop them in as they are." He arose slowly. "The miniature plaque you just wrapped is the real find. It—— Hello!"

Willard Hunt crossed the threshold on the run. He was tall and so lean that at first glance he seemed one-dimensional. But he was more like a figure cut out of sheet iron than a paper doll. His thin fair hair came up in wisps over a face that had the austerity of a medieval monk. His business suit was covered by a frayed gray smock that resembled the habit of some religious order. But his speech was not monkish.

"Did that damn dog come in here? Oh—Ivors—I didn't see you." His fanatical blue eyes seized upon Ivors for a moment before they were diverted by Misty's wheeze. "Ah." He swooped. Misty crawled under the chair, and Hunt's bony fingers gripped air. He swore. "I've had enough of this. Merritt's got to toe the mark."

As he stood up to face Ivors, Mildred caught the gleam of another trinket on the floor. She dropped it into the box. She decided to hold the fort no longer. She would give warning that it was under siege. She addressed no one in particular. "If you'll excuse me, there's a letter in my typewriter I must finish." She hurried out.

Ivors said, "What's all the shooting about, Hunt? Surely that poor little dog isn't doing any harm."

"That poor little dog is driving the girls in the workshop crazy. It chews things—or swallows them without chewing. Certainly its teeth aren't up to much. Anyway, several leather buttons have disappeared on orders due to go out today. Damn it all—this is a business—not a kennel. Merritt should know better than——"

"Come now—you mustn't be too hard on the girl. She told me yesterday that she was in something of a predicament. It seems that Misty's taken to crying when she's left alone—and the landlord has had so many complaints that he refuses to put up with it any longer. I'm sure Miss Merritt brought the dog here this morning only as a last resort."

"She's brought it here as a last resort once too often. It was sick all over the reception-room upholstery the last time she came to grips with her landlord. How can she expect Corinne to put up with——"

Ivors smiled.

"I imagine you were more upset than Corinne."

Hunt said grudgingly, "Corinne has her moments—and that was one of them. But as a matter of fact, I was upset because I hired Merritt in the first place."

"Oh? I thought Corinne was the last word in such matters. Perhaps that explains something I've sensed. Corinne doesn't seem to like Miss Merritt very well."

"That's rubbish. Corinne wouldn't know she existed if the little fool didn't go out of her way to annoy her. What kind of a game does she think she's——" He bit his lip. He said more calmly, "Corinne is the last word, of course, but I try to spare her as much as possible—and the job that Merritt applied for happened to be in my apartment. I hired you, too, without Corinne's consent, didn't I?"

"So you did." Ivors laughed. "But you weren't taking much of a risk there—considering the fact that Corinne's my wife. She's fortunate to have such a loyal and considerate manager who—er—who has an eye for beauty as well."

Hunt looked at him curiously.

Ivors went on, "I mean—Miss Merritt is a beauty, isn't she?"

Hunt seemed tired of the subject. "Did you attend the auction this morning?"

"Indeed I did." Ivors glanced toward the small table. "That box holds the fruits of my astute bidding." He looked down at his closed hand. "Or most of the fruits. I still seem to be clutching one of them." He spread his palm. "How about an expert opinion on this Egyptian amulet? I understand you've done quite a bit of research——"

Hunt gave it cursory examination. "It's not Egyptian—it's Hindu. Kali—Goddess of Death—wife of Siva. See—four arms. Those tiny raised blobs are intended to be bloodstains."

Ivors coughed apologetically. "I guess I have a great deal to learn. I suppose you specialized in these things at your university."

"Thanks for the compliment," Hunt said sourly. "The public library was my university."

"Well—I guess democracy is of some use."

"What's that?"

"Er—is this Hindu goddess made of wood?"

"Ebony. Kali was thought to be black. But don't worry—it's a nice bit of carving—and we have several customers with a taste for the macabre."

"Well—thanks—I'm glad I haven't failed entirely."

Under the chair, Misty's breathing had taken on a peculiarly unpleasant threat.

Hunt said, "Oh my God—the little brute's getting ready to heave. I'll have to get her out of here before Corinne comes back. She's been awfully edgy lately, and——"

"I've noticed that," Ivors said dryly. Then he said, "It doesn't look as though she's coming back at all. Her client must be buying her out lock, stock, and barrel."

"She spends very little time in her office after the mail has been taken care of." Impatiently, Hunt dropped the Goddess

of Death into the open box. He made another unsuccessful attempt to catch Misty.

Ivors laughed. "She's on to you. You'll have to be more subtle than that."

"Subtle hell! If you ask me, it's a piece of subtle cruelty to let anything as old and sick as that go on living. It's nothing but a nuisance—even to itself."

"There's something in what you say—but I'm sure Miss Merritt wouldn't agree with you at all. She——"

Hunt muttered a prescription that covered both Ivors and Miss Merritt.

Ivors looked interested for a moment. Then he said stiffly, "Business careers certainly do not seem to have a refining influence on those who pursue them. By the way—have I been allotted some sort of cubbyhole where I can hang my hat?"

"Use the office Storensen used. It's right next to Merritt's."

"Very well—and perhaps I might make myself useful by having a few tactful words with the young lady. Then I'll send her in here to coax her poor little——"

"Send her in here before you have a few tactful words," Hunt said.

"I beg your pardon? Oh. Well—I'll leave my—er—haul on that table. Please call my wife's attention to it if you see her before I do."

Hunt nodded. He knelt and said in suffering tones, "Come out, Misty, there's a good—— Here—no one's going to hurt you."

Misty growled and snapped at his hand, then darted out and took refuge behind the desk. Hunt got up. He flung a bitter, contemptuous glance at Ivors' departing back.

Thorough to the point of mania, Hunt hated dilettantes. But there were other reasons why he hated Ivors. He was furious because he had been compelled to fit him into the Hastings' scheme. . . .

Face grimly set, he returned his thoughts to the business on hand. He strode toward the desk, once more intent upon routing Misty. He did not notice Dodie Merritt, who had come to take survey from the doorway. Nor did she bring herself to his attention. Robert Ivors had not yet exercised his tact upon her.

She was looking for Misty quite on her own and had no desire to publicize her search. This time she backed out under her own power, realizing that Misty was an issue upon which she and Hunt could not agree.

In the corridor again, she hesitated before the closed door of the workshop, shrugged her graceful little shoulders, and moved on. A quick glance into the reception room showed several lovely ladies but no trace of Misty. She probably *is* in the workshop, Dodie thought. And who cares? As far as I'm concerned, she can make herself comfortable anywhere she likes from now on. And just let Corinne sound off about it. Corinne, the untouchable!

Dodie's round blue eyes had seen how untouchable she was; had seen enough to furnish her sharp little wits with a full-course meal. Her only regret was that Robert Ivors had not been present to appreciate his precious wife's new face.

Dodie had never deigned to participate directly in the gossip of the workshop girls, so she could not guess at the stranger's identity. But, whoever he was, the smell of man with a capital M exuded from him. Not that her mind had lingered upon this impression of virility. More consciously she had registered the fact that he was dressed like a student—or a tramp. And her contempt for her employer had fattened.

In Dodie's world a kiss was nothing of consequence. She had witnessed many kisses without grieving because one or both participants had been legally bound to someone not on stage. And she herself had received more than her quota long after she outgrew the age when such demonstrations were merely innocent tribute paid to a very pretty little girl. But Corinne!

At thirty—twenty-three for publication—Dodie was still a very pretty little girl, possessing a vivaciousness that showed and a rapaciousness that was fairly well concealed. She never passed a mirror without smiling at her proportionately rounded five-foot-two, her innocent dollface topped by upswept yellow curls. The smile did double duty. It expressed the delight she felt in her reflected image and provided her with opportunity to admire her sharp white teeth.

She had come to New York to meet the right people, the right rich people, from whose ranks she intended to cull a husband.

She had come armed with courses in several branches of design and with a talent for non-stop talking which she used to batter down sales resistance. She could, however, stem this talent when she felt that it would further her ends to listen. At first she had tried to get a job in the theater and had thrived on promises for a while, but there was too much red tape to be unwound, and she could not afford to wait. Then, by chance, she met someone who knew Willard Hunt and who suggested that she apply for work with him.

So she had settled for Hastings. It was, after all, a place where moneyed people gathered—women for the most part. But women had husbands and brothers and sons, and flattery was a weapon that Dodie thought she knew how to wield against locked gates.

She had arrived at Hastings in time to attend Corinne's wedding along with the rest of the personnel. And the quest that had brought her to New York ended as soon as she saw the bridegroom.

An avid reader of society columns, Robert Ivors' name was quite familiar to her. Viewing him in the flesh went straight to her head. She who was not a dreamer suddenly began to dream. Being Dodie Merritt, she dreamed with a purpose and in the light of day.

Ivors happened to be the first man she had ever met who could bring her ambitions to goal. He had entry into all the doors she wanted to crash; he had money enough to buy all of the things she wanted to own. And additionally his physical appearance was a fitting adjunct to social status and wealth. Since she would have settled for a similarly endowed monster, his acceptable appearance was an out-and-out premium. So adept was she at specious reasoning that Corinne immediately became "the other woman," the threat to her future happiness.

Who was Corinne, anyway? What were her beginnings? Dodie was willing to bet that her high-and-mighty employer had no more background than—well—than Dodie. And yet she had captured a leading socialite, a millionaire, presumably hunted for years by the females of his own set. If she could do it, so could— The crowning insult was that Corinne seemed too stupid to appreciate her prize. In a very short time any fool

could have sensed that the marriage was not successful. But it took Dodie's mentality to translate its failure into the raised hand of opportunity.

She managed to be in evidence each time Ivors came to Hastings to seek his wife. Soon her open admiration got through to him. He began to call her by name, to pause for conversation. Upon this small ground she built a top-heavy edifice from which she peered out, full of hatred for Corinne, who blocked her view.

Until now she had been able to air her hatred only in little ways. Misty, quite by accident, became her chief vent. Her relationship with the dog was the only one she had ever managed to sustain, and she would not have sacrificed it except in a very good cause.

The first time her landlord complained, she had brought Misty to Hastings, hoping that the storm raised by the tenants would blow over and that she would not have to move. But when she saw Corinne give way to a rare display of nerves because of Misty's nuisance value, she kept the wretched animal on the scene as much as possible. Her excuses, delivered against a backdrop of tears, seemed valid. "My landlord asked me to move—but there aren't any apartments available. Please—just for the time being. I'd be so lonely without——"

She was not afraid of losing her job. She felt that she was indispensable. She could manage Willard Hunt, and even if Corinne tried to discharge her, she was certain that Robert Ivors would intercede. Lately their conversations were lengthening. . . .

Dodie went into her office and made some pretense at setting her hands to work. Her mind was genuinely busy until its star boarder materialized in the doorway.

"Why, Mr. Ivors!" Her confusion was real but she remembered to make it charming. She had covered a sheet of drawing paper with triangles. She turned it over hurriedly. "I—I didn't see you. I was concentrating—trying to think of something new in bags."

"I won't take up much of your time."

"Oh—but I want you to—that is—I've finished. Please sit down."

He advanced a few steps. "Your welcome might not be so warm if you knew the reason for this visit."

She clasped her little white hands despairingly. "It's Mrs. Ivors—she's sent you to——"

"Now—now. Don't run away with yourself, child. As a matter of fact, I haven't seen Mrs. Ivors since I came in." His thoughts switched tracks. "I tried to, but she was busy. I was quite disappointed, because I wanted to show her what I'd bought at the auction."

"Oh—what a shame!" Immediately Dodie shed her woes to assume his. She continued mournfully, "I did think he'd have left by this time."

"He?" Robert smiled. "Is Hastings going in for male clients these days?"

"We always have a few who come in to order accessories for their wives—or friends. This man isn't a client, though. At least——" Her teeth scraped her short bright lips.

"At least he didn't look like a client?" Ivors seemed amused.

"I do hope you won't think I'm prying. It just happened that Mrs. Ivors had sent for me, and then she forgot about it because he—well—he was there before me. I guess he's a friend, I couldn't help hearing his first name—Justin." More than slightly chagrined, she saw that Robert Ivors was not paying much attention to her.

One of his hands was thrust into a pocket. He withdrew it, glanced at the watch on his wrist, and said, "Dear me—time does go quickly for a workingman. I'd almost forgotten the real object of our little chat." He cleared his throat. "I'm afraid that Misty is in disgrace again. It's the general opinion that she doesn't belong in an establishment of this sort and—er—Mr. Hunt wants to talk to you. He'll probably be back in his own office by now."

She gazed at him tragically. "He'll discharge me. Oh—what shall I do—Misty's all I have. I—I can't leave her at home because——"

"But there must be a solution. Have you tried looking for another apartment—a place where they won't object to——"

"I've walked my feet off. There just aren't any apartments to be had. I can't give Misty up—I can't—I——"

His eyes were on her heaving breasts. "Of course you can't," he said. "Let me see—I have several friends in the real-estate business. I'm sure one of them can help you out."

Her look of tear-starred gratitude contained the act of kneeling at his feet, of covering his hand with kisses. "You—you mean you'll really find an apartment for me?"

He wallowed in it. "I don't make promises lightly, my dear. Feel better now?"

"You'll never know how much better. Oh, thank you—thank you."

"It's only right for me to do what I can to make the wheels run smoothly here."

"You're wonderful to want to help Mrs. Ivors. So many men would object to their wives— Oh—I'm sorry—I didn't mean——"

"That's perfectly all right. I suppose I'm not the average husband. I want Corinne to be happy—no matter where her happiness lies."

She could have told him where Corinne's happiness lay, but she postponed it. Instead she printed a legend in her eyes and made sure that he read it. You—average? You're a king—a god!

He read it. He responded warmly. "Now promise that you won't worry any more. Just tell Hunt that you're about to locate new living quarters and that it won't be necessary for Misty to disturb the peace here any longer. That's all Hunt wants. He knows that good workers don't grow on trees these days. Of course when the war is over all that will alter and——" He interrupted himself. "How I do ramble on. Au revoir, my dear."

She stayed where she was, making no attempt to seek out Willard Hunt. Ambition cleared the tangle of her thoughts and rose up sharply defined. Surely Robert Ivors, in spite of his superior caliber, would be no harder to manage than any other man she had known. Surely his interest could be ascribed to more—or perhaps less than altruism and a desire to keep the peace at Hastings. Snobbery made her unwilling to cherish a growing suspicion that he was—well—not quite bright—almost too ready to succumb to her flattery. After all, he was a gentleman—born to great wealth—and he had every excuse for being less worldly than those who had to fight tooth and nail for

each forward step. Anyway, what difference did it make? She wasn't seeking an Einstein. He would find an apartment for her—and after she was settled it would be only natural to postulate a carry-over of his interest, to extend an invitation . . .

At twelve-thirty hunger disturbed her concentration. Dear darling little Misty must be hungry too, she thought in gratitude. I'll get her some nice juicy hamburgers. She's got them coming to her.

Well pleased with the morning's achievement, she went to the ladies' room. It was empty and she smiled with satisfaction. She did not like even her unimportant co-workers to view her without benefit of cosmetics. Uninhibited by audience, she cleaned and redecorated her face.

On the way back to get her hat and coat she almost tripped over the old man who did odd repairing jobs. He was kneeling before a tall metal cabinet in the corridor.

She mouthed a gutter word and skirted him.

"Say, miss." His voice was hoarse and troubled. "I was getting a broom to sweep up some cuttings—but this ain't a broom. It ain't a mop either."

She said impatiently, "So I give up—what is it?" Then she saw the gray white heap at the bottom of the cabinet. She knelt and gathered it to her. She began to scream.

She kept screaming as the corridor filled with men and women. She was like a mad doll with circles for eyes and a wavering circle of mouth—"Misty—Misty!" she screamed.

CHAPTER IV

SOMEONE was at the door. Mrs. Martha James gagged the telephone's round mouth with her hand. She called in a voice gruff with hope:

"Justin?"

"Room service, madam."

"Oh. Come in." She had been happy and hungry when she awoke in her high place overlooking the park. Her first act after bathing had been to order breakfast. But no sooner had she replaced the receiver than the telephone began a demanding series of rings. All of the calls were for her brother Justin. Some came from people she knew, some were from those who up to this moment had been no more than voices on the radio or names in the newspapers, and several were put through by total strangers.

At the first ring she had gone to Justin's room. But his bed held only lumped masses of sheets and blankets. Justin slept strenuously, as he did everything else.

Bless him, she thought. He couldn't wait to re-explore his home town. She glanced at her watch. Good heavens! No wonder he couldn't wait. Eleven o'clock. I've never slept so late in my life. That hectic train trip—and no little imps to wake me up. She felt a pang as she realized how far away the children were. But Justin—dear generous Justin was right. In spite of the firm hand she had kept upon herself since the death of her husband, a change seemed indicated. That long period when she could not bring herself to leave the sickroom had told. And Linnie and Nick were safe enough and happy enough with their paternal grandparents, who loved them mightily. Now that she was here she meant to enjoy herself. She felt better already.

She went back to the phone to record every message faithfully against Justin's return.

After an undeterminable while she began to long for his capable secretary. "Nope, Martie," Justin had said, "I'm not taking Miss Dunbar with us. She stays behind in California.

This New York trip is strictly for pleasure. No work. No nothing but fun."

She had answered with a pretense of severity. "You're beginning to sound like one of your own song lyrics—and what Father would have said to that——"

"Father was the most tolerant 'long hair' I ever knew. He'd have said, 'Keep your boots on, Son. You're solid.' Of course he might have couched it more elegantly," he conceded, narrowing his dark eyes to hide their glint.

His eyes, she thought, were as vital and as warm as live coals. It did not occur to her that they were almost perfect replicas of the eyes that took stock of him. She was eight years older than he, and their mother had died when she was fifteen. She had assumed responsibility for him without breaking stride. Father had lived in a dream world which he relinquished only to follow his dead wife on Justin's own fifteenth birthday.

The waiter had completed his arrangement of the tray and was staring at her or through her. She said into the telephone, "No, I can't say exactly when he'll be back. Yes, I'll be glad to. Thank *you*. Good-by," and hung up on the echo of a Broadway voice. She regarded the instrument apprehensively as she added another unfamiliar name to the list on the pad. Then, before it had time to cry out again, she jiggled the hook.

"If any more calls come for the Corley suite," she said to the hotel operator, "please take them. I'm—I'm out." And that's as true as makes no difference, she told herself. In Justin's language I *am* out. She dropped the pencil and stretched her fingers. She looked at the waiter and smiled.

"Good morning. That coffee smells good."

"Yes, madam." His response to her smile was something more than reflex or training. She had a triangular face and very dark deep-set eyes that could express mood without aid from the rest of her features. Nice and trim, the waiter thought, in spite of no permanent wave and red fingernails. Ready to put on her hat and go anywhere. He felt refreshed. Years on the room-service shift had conditioned him to negligees and unmade faces. Not that this lady's face needed a lot of paint and stuff to make it presentable. It had its own warm color—sort of gypsyish. The aristocratic gypsies you saw in pictures—not the kind

that roamed Third Avenue. And it was a young face, no matter what was hinted by that white splash in her clean brown hair. . . .

Justin returned at one o'clock. He wore creaseless tweeds and his head was bare.

He said a baritone, "Greetings, Martie. City noises get you up?"

"You forget I was raised on city noises. Besides, look at the time. What got you up—your sweetheart?"

That startled him.

She said hastily, "I meant New York."

"Oh. New York's a sweetheart all right." He was not a tall man but he was straight and compact. He had tangled lashes and a full, hungry mouth. Although he was only twenty-nine, his almost black hair had started to recede from a scholar's brow. He was not a scholar, being impatient of all that could not be absorbed at a glance. Everything about him was quick and strong.

"What have you been doing?" he asked.

"Enjoying my solitude—writing a few letters. I had a shamefully late breakfast. The waiter hasn't come for the tray yet."

"So I see." Absently he reached for her empty cup and filled it.

"Don't drink that stuff. It's stone cold."

"Huh?" He looked at the cup.

She knew that he had no idea of how it had come to be in his hand. But she made no comment. "You've had a great many phone calls. I wrote them all down." She gestured toward the desk.

"Oh? I'm sorry. I thought I'd be back before the rush started." He walked over to the desk and turned the pages of the pad. His deep eyes took in nothing.

"Justin, I could have saved myself the trouble. You're not reading them."

"Yes, I am." But he wasn't. He had a pencil in his hand and seemed bent on obliterating the messages.

"Justin—don't. After all my hard work. There might be at least one offer among that lot for you to pick up another million or so."

She expected his ready grin at the matter-of-fact way in which she pretended to accept his spectacular leap to fame. But there was no trace of a grin upon his brooding face.

He had been writing music and lyrics for a movie studio in Hollywood. Good songs and good lyrics, she thought proudly, though they had created no stir. And then, overnight, that ridiculous novelty tune had captured the public's fancy, jumped to first place on the Hit Parade, netted an absurd sum for so small an effort, and brought in all kinds of offers from all kinds of people. He had followed the novelty by creating in succession the most outstanding song of the war and the score of the most popular show on Broadway. He was a rich man. She wished that he was a happy man. The bleakness that possessed him at odd moments was not due, she knew, to the fact that the Army had turned him down. An improperly set knee fracture was the reason for the rejection, and since he hadn't the slightest limp to show for it, he had been annoyed but philosophical. He had even prophesied that they would call him again when they couldn't afford to be so choosy, and he had proceeded to make cheerful contribution on the home front. No, it wasn't that. It was . . .

The telephone cut in upon her thoughts. "Funny," she said. "I told the operator not to ring until further notice."

"Too bad you didn't get hep before you slaved over all those messages." He picked up the phone. He said, "Justin Corley speaking. . . . You saw me come in? That must have been a treat. . . . Oh—thanks. . . . George Valento . . . Alex Mor—Never mind. Don't bother to go through the rest. I'll collect them later. . . . Someone on the line now? . . . Well—if he insists . . . Who? . . . Yes—I'll take it."

His tone had altered and he was frowning. He spoke briefly and with a hesitancy that was foreign to him. Somewhat disappointed his sister heard him make an appointment for dinner. He had apparently forgotten his promise to dine with her. That, too, was unlike him.

He set the phone down with a thump. "Got any plans for today, Martie?" Behind his words there was a sturdy attempt to shrug off whatever it was that troubled him.

"Yes," she said, making plans then and there. "I intend to

shop a bit and pay a few visits if there's any time left over."

"You won't shop without me along to watch your expenditures."

"Hmmm. The kind of watching you do is a spring tonic for salesmen." She could not grow accustomed to wealth. Father had been a teacher of music, and the small returns of his profession had meant a strictly budgeted life. Her husband, whom she had married for love, and who offered nothing material, could not even provide a budget. Now that Justin had insisted upon settling an undreamed-of amount upon her, she had learned with ease to tip lavishly and to buy lavish presents, but it was difficult for her to indulge her personal wants.

"The salesman will have to struggle along without their tonic for once," Justin said. "You've got yourself a couple of dates, Late lunch and a preview of that short I scored for the Treasury Department. Then dinner and theater." He sat down opposite her. There was a lighted cigarette in his mouth and smoke flowed through his nose. Extracting the cigarette from a crumpled package, placing it between his lips, applying the match, and inhaling was like sleight of hand, a series of motions quicker than the eye and without visible break.

"What are you looking at, Martie? Didn't you hear me?"

"I heard you—but I thought——"

"You thought you could brush me off. No soap. When will you realize that being kin to me isn't all roses?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about sacrifices—such as staying awake through *The Blue Market*." He patted his breast pocket. "The Annie Oakleys are right here. And believe me—with the S.R.O. sign waving at full mast it was some stunt to chisel them. Authors and composers are strictly bad news around the box office these days."

"Oh, Justin!" Pleasure lifted her face and carried it back through time. She became younger than Justin who was trying so hard to be so gay. "We're really going to see your show tonight? I'd been hoping we would, but I didn't dare to build on it too much for fear of——"

"Take it easy, my little six-year-old. If you're good I'll buy you a nice fat lollipop too."

She chuckled. "Don't be impertinent. What shall I wear?"

He drawled, "I see by the papers they got a sale of real silk dresses in Garfinkel's bargain basement."

"Justin Corley, you know quite well——"

"But the crops is bad this year, so maybe you could make do with that little old rag Vanna of Hollywood stitched up."

Little rays appeared around her eyes. "If I just let down the hem——"

"Sure—and hoist the neckline a couple of feet. Over my dead body. It's time you let the public in on the fact that you've got gams and a chest."

She quoted, "'You wouldn't dare insult me so if Jack were only here.' No—that's not apt. Jack was a brother too, wasn't he? But about dinner—I thought I might have it with Mrs. Kerr. I promised to look her up—and anyway——"

"Anyway, you heard me make an appointment with some meatball. This eavesdropping's got to stop."

"Meatball?"

He shed the forced gaiety. The strong bones of his face seemed to dissolve in a wash of gloom. "Yeah—meatball. Corinne's husband to you."

"Corinne Hastings!" And to herself she said. You fool! She was fully aware that in Justin's scheme there was only one Corinne. One too many, she sometimes thought, although she had been genuinely fond of the girl.

"Corinne Hastings as was. Now Corinne Ivors."

He could not bear the bitter taste of that. His lips seemed to contract.

"Are you telling me that Corinne's husband telephoned and asked you to dinner?"

He was a good mimic, and although he knew the man only by voice, he brought him into the room. "This isn't purely a social call, Mr. Corley, even if I have heard enough about you to feel that it might well be. I've been—er—presented with a little problem that's right in your line—and when I discovered that you were in town—er—unfortunately my wife is otherwise engaged—but suppose we meet in the lobby of your hotel—certainly—as early as you like—I'll recognize you by that picture in *Newsweek*—er—you celebrities are——"

"Stop it, Justin." She was uneasy. "How did he learn that you were in town and why should he——"

"Maybe he can read print as good as he can look at pictures. Why he would want to meet me is anybody's guess. But we're granting him his wish—you and me both."

"Me? He's included me in the invitation?"

"Expressly."

"That's queer."

"Everything's queer."

She stared at him. "Well—we're not going. At least I'm not." She hesitated. "I don't often give you advice, do I?"

"Not since I've been a big boy."

"Big boy or no, I'm giving you advice now. I was fond of Corinne Hastings. I'd have been happy if you'd married her. But it's too late to talk about that. So——"

"Ha," he said. "It's too late, is it?"

"Yes. For some reason or other you didn't marry her when she was free——"

"Pride—if you must know."

"I mustn't know—it's none of my business—so long as you—so long as you realized what you were doing—and I took it for granted that you did."

"And now?"

"And now I can see you didn't. I can see it in your face every time you think you're safe from observation. You've got about all a man needs to make him happy—and still——"

"I've got nothing," he said emptily.

"Then you'll have to get yourself something—someone. You'll have to put Corinne out of your plans."

"Just like that?"

"Yes. Just like that."

He had another cigarette in his mouth. He looked at her through smoke. In words he said, "Martie, could you be a little bit old-fashioned?" and the tone of his voice said, Suppose we drop the subject.

She did not intend to drop the subject now that it had at last been placed within her hands. She intended to shake the life out of it. "You're the one who's being old-fashioned. People don't pine away for love in this modern world—torch songs to the

contrary. Yet that's exactly what you've been encouraging yourself to do. Give it up, Justin. Start again. Seeing Corinne's husband isn't going to serve any purpose at all. Call him and say you've changed your mind." She saw that she would have to do better than that. She knew well the obstinancy that lodged upon his face.

"But I haven't changed my mind."

She sighed deeply. "Why should you want me along—or why should he want me, for that matter?"

"I can't answer for him—but you're my previous date. And besides—you're a hell of a swell judge of human nature, Martie."

"You mean if I say this meatba—this Mr. Ivors is the right man for Corinne, you'll go about your business?" She made no attempt to cloak her skepticism.

"I wouldn't fool you for the world. No—I'm not setting you up as a one-woman board of mediation. But if you do pass on Ivors as—as something a step removed from a two-headed jerk, I'll know *how* to go about my business."

She stood up. She was only a few inches shorter than Justin. "You'd better change your clothes somewhere between now and dinner—unless you're planning to picnic in the woods. That costume may be suitable in Hollywood, but——"

"Afraid I might suffer by comparison to Mr. Ivors?"

"Not at all. I'm afraid we might meet some of my friends. I've lived in New York a good part of my life, you know."

"Martie, you're a right guy."

"And you're spoiled. I hope I do a better job with my own kids."

"I ain't so bad." His hand was in his pocket. "I almost forgot—I have something for you." He gave her the small package. "A piece of leather goods."

He did not look at her.

She said without surprise, "You saw Corinne this morning."

"Yes. I saw Corinne." He said nothing else.

She hurried to fill the gap, as though they were not alone, as though there were others present and it was necessary for her to make some social gesture to keep them from discovering his open misery. "I haven't had much chance to read the ads lately

—so I've lost track of Hastings Accessories. When I heard about her marriage I thought she might have sold out——”

“Sold out? That depends on the way you look at it. She's still in business.”

“And you bought something from her?” Her voice was still a bright cover for him. “It was thoughtful of——”

He watched her capable hands as they worked at the string. “No—it wasn't thoughtful—and you needn't thank me. It's Corinne's gift to you.”

“Oh?”

“It's a sample. Corinne made me take it because—because she said she often thought of you and wanted you to have it as a remembrance.”

“How nice.” The tiny flat lavender box lay exposed, with the ivory trademark slanting across the lower corner. Martie took out the compact. It was black antelope, decorated with a small pocket into which had been tightly fitted a gold disk. The top of the pocket curved.

The section of gold that rose above it looked like a crescent moon.

“The gold gimmick is supposed to be a luck piece,” he said, “as well as a decoration to relieve the black.”

She put the compact back in its box. She reached for Justin's arm and pulled him to her. She kissed his cheek. She wished that he was a little boy with a little hurt so that the kiss might be all the remedy he needed to cure him. “Subconsciously you must have willed her to make it a compact instead of a pair of barefoot sandals or a belt—because I sure wanted a new one. The thing I'm using keeps me from powdering my nose in public no matter how great the glow. Just watch me go to town with this.”

His face was straining to accomplish a smile. Now, inconsistently, she wished that he was older—even her age—which was old enough to realize that everything passed.

“Martie—how well do you remember Corinne?”

“Very well indeed—naturally. After all, she grew up right next door to us.”

“What was she like?”

“Justin—I——”

"So help me, this is no gag. Describe Corinne as she seemed to you."

She responded to the urgency of his voice. "You mean when she was a child or——"

"The last time you saw her."

"Let me think." It was well over a year ago, before Justin took the studio job. He had been out of work for quite a while and was living with her and Nick Sr. The children were respectively three and five. They had been pretty poor because Nick's heart had forced him into a vacation from his never-too-lucrative medical practice. But Justin had large satisfying hopes that kept their spirits nourished. Later, when the job materialized, he had insisted upon transporting them all to California, Nick's native state. He——

Justin said impatiently, "Well?"

"Oh—I'm sorry. It was at Jones Beach. Nick and I and the kids went there for an outing. You and Corinne joined us later. Corinne was more beautiful than I'd ever seen her—so alive—so gay. She had a hilarious time with the kids and—well—she fairly bludgeoned us all into being her guests at dinner. She was the only one who had any money then, and she stuffed us so that you got indigestion worrying about the size of the check, but——" She broke off. "Most of all I remember how relaxed she seemed—the way she looked when she smiled—I mean when you—when something pleased her. A lovely really happy smile—not just on the surface."

"That's enough, Martie." Then he said in anguish, "You ought to see her now. You just ought to see her now."

CHAPTER V

THE CROWD that had been drawn by Dodie Merritt's screams made way for Corinne. Corinne was white as paper.

"What's happened?"

Mildred was pushing toward her. "Nothing, Miss Hastings."

"Then stop that noise. They'll hear it out in the reception room."

Dodie stopped it. Into the sudden quiet she threw a blasting charge. "You should have thought of your precious business before you killed my dog. You're not going to get away with it—I'll call the police—I'll——"

Someone's breath came sharp. Robert Ivors went to Dodie and gripped her shoulders. "Hush—you don't know what you're saying. It's been a shock. Come along now—there's a good girl."

In the moment before she realized who he was she tried to free herself.

Then, still clasping Misty, she slumped against his chest and sobbed heartbrokenly.

He murmured mechanical words of comfort and sent an apologetic glance over her head to Corinne. Presently the sobs lessened and Dodie permitted him to lead her away.

Hunt and Mildred worked their way to Corinne. The others in the corridor were a tight excited huddle.

"Let's go to your office." Hunt had to touch Corinne, to repeat his words before she heard.

Mildred added her voice to his. "Please come, Miss Hastings. They'll—you have an appointment with Miss Palmer, and she'll think it strange if you keep her waiting."

Corinne moved along the corridor, Mildred at her side. Hunt lingered behind. "Break it up," he said to the huddle. "You've all got jobs to do."

One of the workshop girls protested. "We just came back from lunch. We need to wash—and personally I need to puke."

"This corridor's not equipped for either project," Hunt said. He turned on his heel.

A Western Union boy, two male sandal makers, the book-

keeper, and the odd-job man dispersed. The females made for the ladies' room. Safe inside, they gave tongue.

"How do you like that? This corridor's not equipped for either project, he says."

"If it was me I'd've told him it ain't especially equipped for dead pooches."

"He's sore on two accounts—one because a rumpus was raised on the sacred precincts—and two because Merritt——"

"Yeah—we know. Do you think there's any truth in it?"

"Now listen—the princess never——"

Other voices took it up loyally.

"Pipe down or you'll have Hunt in here. I wouldn't put it past him."

Someone giggled. "Hunt in the ladies' room—with his manly nature?"

"I didn't mean——"

"Will Merritt really get the police?"

"The police ain't interested in dead poodles."

"Besides—only Merritt said anybody killed it. It's always eating stuff. This time it could have guzzled something fatal."

"That's right. I heard old Henry tell Hunt he found it in the bottom of the closet. They say animals usually try to creep off alone when they know they're going to die."

"Well—I don't like anything dead—except when it's cooked—like steak or——"

"Cut it out—I feel sick. I really do feel sick."

Corinne felt sick too. The clock on her desk said five minutes to one, and she thought that either the clock or time had stopped. She did not want to go on with this trying and utterly confusing day. She sipped the glass of water that Mildred had insisted upon bringing to her. She wished that it contained knockout drops. She wished that Mildred and Hunt would stop hovering, or at least say something instead of clucking.

Only in part was her state due to the incident in the corridor. Justin's kiss had been a restorative, transforming her numbness to active pain. But his visit had solved nothing that had not been solved long ago, and when he left she was like the victim of an accident, forced back to consciousness to take stock of her injuries. Dodie Merritt's screams had almost seemed to

issue from her own throat, so great was her inner tumult and the necessity for release.

She pushed a silky strand from her high, wide forehead. Her silver eyes went to Hunt. "Willard, I'm sure you have things to do. I know you gave up a good part of your morning to see people I should have seen."

"That's all right—I was just going to lunch when——"

"Then go now." She realized that both he and Mildred thought she had taken Dodie Merritt's accusation to heart, and she was touched and impatient at the same time. "I'll survive," she said. "I didn't kill the dog. I don't think even Dodie Merritt believes I did."

"Of course not," Hunt said. And Mildred echoed militantly, "Of course not."

"Well—I might as well see Miss Palmer now."

Hunt said, "I'll take care of her. You go to lunch."

"But why? I'm not hungry."

"Please," Mildred said. "You look so white. Some food will pick you up, and your next appointment after Miss Palmer isn't until three o'clock."

Corinne's lips smiled a little. "You do take good care of me." She could not very well explain to them that Misty's death and the ensuing scene was no more than an additional surface wound, a pinprick of sadness because someone had lost something loved. She said, "What shall I do about Dodie to show my sympathy?" and wondered vaguely why the girl disliked her so.

"Do about her?" It was Mildred. "I know what I'd do. I'd give her a good sock. If she hadn't brought the dog here in the first place——"

Corinne shook her head. "How do you suppose it died?"

Hunt said, "It choked on something. It was always choking on something. But just to make sure, I'll take a close look before she carts it off to wherever they do cart dead dogs."

Ivors came into the office carrying his hat. "That won't be necessary. I checked. There aren't any signs of violence. Of course it was preposterous to think there would be." He sounded as though it was not preposterous. His face was gravely sad. "Corinne, my dear, I hope you'll forgive the girl. She——"

"Of course I forgive her."

"Nobody really believes you had anything to do with it," he went on earnestly. "You wouldn't poison an animal."

"Poison?" Hunt spoke. "I thought you said——"

"I said no signs of violence. I don't understand enough about drugs to know whether or not——"

Hunt said sharply, "Oh, for heaven's sake—that animal died a natural death. It was old and overfed."

"No doubt you're right—although Miss Merritt insists that it was in the best of health. A veterinarian assured her of that. She had taken it to him only two days ago to have a splinter removed. At any rate, I've told the entire staff to pay no attention to—er—that unfortunate accusation—and I'm sure Miss Merritt will be glad to make a public retraction. I've convinced her——"

Corinne pressed her hand to her temple. "You told—you convinced——"

"So you've nothing to worry about. It will blow over. And now, with your permission, I'll escort Miss Merritt home. She's too distraught to work this afternoon, and I think it's wise to show her every consideration."

Hunt was scowling. He said, "Now look here, Ivors——"

Corinne stopped him. Corinne had moved in her chair, and her face was a face he remembered but had not seen in a long time. Her cheeks and eyes had taken on color.

She had intended to tell Robert of Justin's visit before someone else told him, but coupled with that intention was a sudden wish to hurt him because of the ridiculous thing he was implying. It made her forget that she had planned to move cautiously. She heard Justin's voice saying, "Let's go on from here—good and loud and proud."

"By all means see Dodie home, Robert." Her voice was clear and warm. They were all listening intently, as though to half-remembered music. "But before you go I want to congratulate you on your morning's work. You've done wonderfully well. I found immediate use for one of the ornaments—on a gift for Justin Corley's sister."

Ivors said, "Did you? Thank you, dearest. Your praise means a good deal to me."

Corinne's smile was tranquil. "Justin came in and stayed for

quite a while. We were talking of him only this morning. Remember?"

Mildred sighed with relief, glad that her Miss Hastings had nothing to hide.

"Yes. Of course I remember." Ivors walked over to the table which still held the box of ornaments. He fingered them abstractly.

Hunt was watching him. "If you should happen to be superstitious, I'm sure Corinne didn't choose Kali, the death goddess, for the gift that went out this morning."

Corinne said, "No. I used something that looked like a gold piece. It just happened to fit into the pocket of that 'Lucky Compact' Dode Merritt designed. Speaking of superstition, if there's any luck going, Martie James deserves it."

After a moment Ivors said, "I hope you'll let me live down that mistake, Hunt. You scholars are really the intolerant people of the world." He addressed Corinne. "So Mr. Corley took the purchase with him. Wasn't that short notice for Hastings? After all—you've worked hard for your reputation and should uphold it."

"I don't think I've jeopardized it," Corinne said. "I told you it wasn't a purchase—it was a gift from me—a sample—all ready except for the gold piece which turned up miraculously. When Justin said that Martie was in New York I wanted to make some gesture to welcome her."

Justin's name, each time she pronounced it, was too rich, too warm. Mildred noticed it, but neither of the men showed awareness.

Hunt said to Ivors, "Merritt's probably working herself into another frenzy while she waits for you. If you don't hurry, she might do something drastic. What about the body?"

"My chauffeur took it. He's driving out to the Long Island estate to bury it. The usual channels for disposing of a pet in a city like New York seemed a bit callous to Miss Merritt, and she was greatly comforted when I suggested that arrangement." He went to Corinne. He kissed her forehead. "Don't take this to heart, dearest. Until dinner, if I don't see you before then."

Hunt said, "Tonight the Designers' Guild is throwing its annual dinner, Corinne. You promised to attend."

"That's so. Do you mind, Robert?"

"Not at all," he said graciously. "It's part of the price I must pay for having such an important wife. Instead of a lonely dinner at home, then, I'll make some other arrangement. Er—I presume you'll be her escort, Hunt. Take care of her. She's very, very precious."

"We'll have to call a taxi," Ivors said. "My chauffeur——"

"I know." Dodie Merritt's voice was tremulous. "Don't let's talk about it. Let's talk of other things."

After several tries a taxi stopped before them. As they rode across Fifty-ninth Street, Dodie talked of other things. Shock had not blunted her powers of speech. She was rounding off a highly stylized vignette of her past life and future hopes when the taxi driver braked. She swallowed and said, "This is where I live."

Ivors got out and assisted her to the sidewalk. She raised her tear-washed eyes.

"How can I thank you?"

"You're thanking me now by being brave."

Blatant courage emanated from her. "Will you—will you come in? If you only would—just for a little while. It would help me so much."

He did not hesitate. "Of course—if you wish." He paid the driver while she waited near the entrance of the apartment house. He joined her as the taxi moved off, and together they crossed the small run-down lobby. A self-service elevator carried them to the second floor.

"It isn't much," she said, fitting a key to an anonymous-looking door, "but I was happy here until——" Her voice quivered.

He followed her through the foyer, past one closed door, into a brittle modern room, a surrealistic portrait of Dodie Merritt. There were no books, and the pictures on the light green walls had matching frames and nothing else to recommend them. The only object that did not match the rest of the decor stood near the artificial fireplace. It was a dog's basket padded with a soiled blanket.

Observing the hasty swerve of his eyes, Dodie shed two more tears. "I'll be so lonely—so terribly lonely. How can I bear it?"

His "There—there" was a shade perfunctory. He made no move toward her.

She gulped. "I—I didn't mean to—I know that men hate tears. I won't give way again—I promise. P-please sit down." She made an appealing gesture, scrubbing at her tears with childish little fists. She achieved a wan smile. "May I give you a drink? I'm afraid I have only sherry to offer, but——"

"Sherry will do very nicely." He by-passed the angular chairs and walked toward the couch. There were small tables at either end of it, and one of them held a telephone. "Why don't you bathe your poor eyes before you trouble about—er—being a hostess? I've always found that cold water is a wonderful morale builder."

"Well—if you don't mind waiting. Perhaps you'd like to look at a magazine while——"

"What I would like, if you'll allow it, is to make a phone call."

"Oh—please. My house is yours." She lingered. "Heavens, it's after one. I hope I'm not interfering with any business appointments or——"

"Not with anything very urgent."

"Well—I——"

He waited until she had gone from the room before he took up the receiver and consulted information. There was dust on the table. He traced small circles in it with his forefinger while he waited for the connection to be made. "Hello." He reduced his normal volume. "Let me speak to Mr. Justin Corley. . . . Try it anyway. He's in now. He left me a short while ago to return to the hotel. . . . Very well. . . . Hello, Mr. Corley? . . . Robert Ivors speaking. . . . Yes—er—this isn't a purely social call, Mr. Corley, even if I have heard enough about you to feel that it might very well be. . . ."

There was no expression on his face as he hung up, but his shaking hand was expressive. He took a flat gold case from his pocket. He placed a cigarette between his lips. Five minutes passed before he lit it.

He arose as Dodie Merritt entered the room. She had removed the pins from her upswept hair and brushed it into a sleek yellow cascade. She had removed all signs of weeping. She had removed her dress. She wore a blue satin house coat so

tightly fitted that it was more of a second skin than a garment.

"I know you must be hungry," she said. "I'm afraid I ruined your lunch hour. But there just isn't a thing in the house to eat. I get so little opportunity to entertain—working all day." Her tone was graphic illustration of a woman facing a sad lot with fortitude. She went to a shelf that had been designed for books and which now held glasses, a few wine bottles, and an assortment of ragged magazines. She brought sherry and glasses to the table at the far end of the couch. She filled the glasses, gave one to Ivors, and sat down.

He took the place beside her. He lifted his glass. "To a better day tomorrow," he said. "It could hardly be worse—for you, I mean."

"Today was horrible—but it could have been far worse if you hadn't seen me through." She hesitated. "I don't know what you'll think of me—you've done so much already just by being sympathetic—but could you—would you still find me another place to live? If that's too much to ask—if I seem to be presuming, please forget about it. But this apartment—I—I'll keep seeing Misty no matter where I turn—and the tenants were so unkind about her that whenever I meet one of them I'll remember." She moved nearer in her distress. "You do understand?"

"Yes—I understand." He looked uncomfortably warm. He managed to put a few inches between them. "If that's the way you feel," he said laboriously, "why wouldn't it be a good idea for you to move to a hotel for a week or two—just in case I'm not successful immediately?"

"Oh—I can't afford that—and besides—even the lower-priced hotels are filled up."

His response was disappointing. "And what about your job? Won't that have unpleasant associations for you too?"

She had never met anyone as rich as Robert Ivors, but she had come to grips with several men of substance who shied at the slightest attack on their wallets. Remembering, she quickly subscribed to the change of subject. "My job? That's different. The work I do is so absorbing that I don't have time to think of anything else." She drew breath. She batted her stiff eyelashes at him. "Let's not talk about my troubles any more. Do

you know—having you here—sitting beside me—somehow doesn't seem as strange as it should—even though I never dreamed you'd be so easy to talk to. But perhaps there's reason for it being so natural. Perhaps it's that I knew so much about you long before we met."

"You knew so much about me?"

"Yes—from newspaper stories. I used to hunt especially for the ones that gave you mention. Will you laugh at me if I make a confession? Once—when I was still in school—I cut your picture out of the social page and kept it on my dressing table where I could see it whenever I——"

She was robbed of his reaction to this romantic little offering. The telephone bell was the thief.

"That's funny," she said. "Who could be calling at this time of day? All my friends know I work."

"Shall I take it?"

"Oh no—I'll——"

"Don't disturb yourself. I'm nearer." He had the phone in his hand. "Yes."

She thought angrily, And I was going strong! I hope it's Her Highness, or Hunt, or at least somebody from the office who'll recognize his voice and spread the news around. . . . Elaborating upon this theme, she missed Ivors' opening words. Puzzled she heard him say, "I know—you could have saved yourself the—— Never mind. It's all right. . . . I'm not interested in the details . . ."

"Who is it?" she asked.

He flung her an impatient look and went on talking. "That's too bad, but . . . I don't know—I can't—— Where are you now? . . . Well, it didn't take you . . . Yes—you might as well." The instrument made an angry sound as it hit the cradle. Ivors readjusted his face and presented it to her.

She said stupidly, "It wasn't for me?"

He shook his head. His words were apologetic. "You said your house was mine. I'm afraid I took advantage of your generosity. When I phoned before, the person I tried to reach was out. I left a message for him to call me here."

She knew that was not true. Skepticism took possession of her eyes and mouth before she could control it.

He said, "The walls of places like this are thin, aren't they?"
"Well—I——"

"No matter. I wanted to spare you. That was my chauffeur. I asked him to ring up here when he was—er—through. You see—I rather thought you'd ask me in. And just now it occurred to me that if I told you it was he you'd only be reminded of your loss."

"You're so wonderfully thoughtful." She bit her lip. "Has Misty been——"

"Yes."

She felt that she had lost ground and could have done herself violence for betraying that she had been within earshot when he used the phone. But of course, she thought, he can't actually know that I listened on purpose. It had been of considerable interest to learn that "Justin" was Justin Corley, the song writer, and that friend husband was not quite so unsuspecting as he appeared on the surface. So he was taking matters into his own hands . . .

But he was looking about for his hat. Quickly she chose between a fresh bid for sympathy and a disarming exhibition of candor.

She said, "I'm sorry about being forced to hear bits of your talk on the phone before. This place is so small it's impossible to have any privacy. A man like you could never get used to it because you've always lived in large soundproofed houses." Then she overflowed with sweet defiance. "No—I'm not really sorry I heard. If I could only help you——"

"My dear girl, I don't understand what you're talking about."

Timidly she placed her hand on his arm. She bent her pretty head back to stare at him. "I mean—well—I have the strangest feeling that something's troubling you—that someone——"

"Troubling me? I'm afraid I don't follow."

He had assumed a manner that unquestionably she would have used to address servants if she had any. And she meant to have them. Hurriedly she discarded the touchy subject. Later perhaps. Later undoubtedly. "It's just that sometimes you seem so sad—as though you've suffered. I can't put it into words—it's intuition more than anything else."

"Any man who lives in these trying times must suffer," he said. "There is so much to be done to remedy the——"

She did not want a speech. Drastic measures seemed imperative. She arched her body. The blue satin skin of the house coat rippled and grew taut. "You're not angry with me?" She was very close to him. She did not need to see his face. It was enough to hear his breathing. It sounded as though he were striving for a corner on air.

"Angry? Dear little girl." His next words were unexpected and queerly voiced. "You—you find me attractive?"

"Attractive!" She filled it with as much wonder as she could summon. "I—I——"

He fastened his arms around her.

Strictly observing the rules, she indulged in a little preliminary struggle. No different from other men, she thought smugly. How far shall I——

But she was not called upon to decide. Abruptly he thrust her from him. She stumbled. She saw, without crediting her sight, that he was eyeing her as though she were some doubtful bargain he had purchased in the market place.

If there was humor in the sudden hauteur of his bearing, she did not appreciate it. She closed her open mouth. Purposefully she took a step toward him.

There was no mistaking the lordly gesture with which he waved her back. And his "My dear Miss Merritt" was plainly "My dear serf, you forget your place."

Blood flushed her face a dark and ugly red, but her ready vocal response was checked by the ringing of the doorbell.

"Answer that," said the king.

"Listen—who do you——"

The bell went on ringing insistently. She clutched her yellow hair. She shouted "Dammit, hold your horses," and turned and rushed to the door.

The bulking figure saluted her by pushing his chauffeur's cap to the back of his head. His surveyor's look was equivalent to a whistle. "Hiya, doll. I was waiting downstairs for the boss till I got to thinking he might need a bodyguard. Get me? Say—what are you so sore about?"

CHAPTER VI

OUTSIDE the bedroom door, Justin called, "Martie, are you decent?"

"I'm not at all sure, but come in." She turned away from the full-length mirror as he entered.

He nodded approvingly. "I ain't ashamed of my family."

"Well, that's something. But I do wish we were dining later. It seems so early to be so dressed up."

"I had to make it early. We don't want to miss any part of the show, and that meatball gave every evidence of being long-winded." He sat down on the edge of the bed. "Besides, you're not so dressed up."

"That's what worries me."

"Pooh! What I mean is the outfit seems as much a part of you as though you'd been born in it."

"I still don't like the implication." She smiled at him. "Just to keep the compliments from being one-sided, I'm not ashamed of my family either. You ought to wear a tuxedo more often." She thought with pride, If there must be competition, he can compete with any man.

She held the thought until they descended to the lobby and she came face to face with Robert Ivors. Then she was not so sure. He cut a good first impression.

He sat facing the elevators. He picked them out the moment their feet touched the floor of the lobby. He came forward with outstretched hand. "Mrs. James—Mr. Corley? I'm Robert Ivors."

Nervously Martie noted the pause before Justin accepted the hand. Nervously she heard him say, "And all done without the aid of red carnations."

Robert Ivors smiled. "Your face is entirely familiar to me. I'm well up on personages and events in the theater."

And that's where those dulcet tones belong, Martie thought. She felt disloyal because she was forced to concede that Corinne's husband did not look at all like a meatball. He was tall and well built, taller than Justin, which immediately gave him an

advantage. On the surface only, of course. But if she knew the signs, Justin was preparing to retire so far below the surface for the duration of this encounter that not a bit of his true self would be glimpsed.

She took further stock. Ivors' business suit was immaculate and wonderfully tailored, but so was Justin's tuxedo. And a tuxedo is a tuxedo, she thought triumphantly. Then she smiled in self-mockery. Me and my middle-class mind.

She said, "I'm sure I've seen your face before too, Mr. Ivors. Or rather—pictures of it."

"Have you? I do get into print occasionally, but I've done nothing to deserve it. I just happen to be descended from an old line."

Justin muttered something that sounded like "An old clothes-line, no doubt," but to Martie's relief Ivors had taken her arm and was steering her through the crowded lobby. She managed to turn her head to give her brother a look of supplication. She wanted to give him a slap. This is only the beginning, she thought. I'll be an old white-haired woman before dinner's over.

She became conscious that Ivors was talking. She said, "I'm sorry. It's so noisy that I didn't quite hear what you said."

"I was apologizing for my appearance. Mr. Corley chose such an early hour for dining that I took it for granted you wouldn't dress." He added chivalrously, "You look charming enough to merit a host of suitably attired escorts."

She wondered why he sounded disappointed, and for a moment doubted the black Vanna creation that her mirror had blessed so freely. Perhaps, accustomed to beautiful women, he was ashamed to be seen with— She dismissed that with another mental hoot. I'm not the main passenger this trip. Just a bit of extra baggage—and I mean baggage. But he does sound disappointed. Why?

She said, "You see—we're going on to the theater to my brother's show."

"Oh yes—of course. It's *The Blue Market*, isn't it? My wife and I went to the opening night. I had a bit of difficulty getting tickets. As a matter of fact, my wife didn't particularly want to go. Nothing to do with the merits of your brother's work, naturally. It's just that she's so wrapped up in her—in Hastings

—that I have a hard time persuading her to—er—— I believe you've met my wife."

"Corinne and I are friends of long standing."

"Then that makes us friends too."

She kept an open mind about it. He led her into a small gay room where a small loud band played on a mauve dias. Justin formed a reluctant rear guard.

Ivors was apologizing again. "Formal dress isn't required in the Mauve Room. I hope you don't mind. Of course if I presumed upon long acquaintance I might get by the headwaiter in the——"

Martie said hastily, "I like this much better." Justin was right. Corinne's husband *was* long-winded. She kept calling him Corinne's husband to herself, so that she might keep the issues squarely before her. She made conversation to stem further apologies. "Justin and I arrived late last night and we stopped in here for a few moments before we went to bed. The music's good, isn't it?—and the light's so flattering."

The light, she saw, was not flattering to him. It brought out lines and shadows under his eyes that had not been noticeable before. It showed his mouth as boyish, but not in a complimentary sense. Rather, a feature not quite set into lines of manhood. He isn't such a much, she thought. And he's nervous, too. Justin's not the only one who's undergoing an ordeal.

A functionary with a sleek black velvet bow on his upper lip broke trail to a table. He had bowed to Mr. Ivors, but his best blandishments were for Justin. And before they were seated the band began to play one of Justin's songs.

"Justin," she said with inordinate pleasure, "that's a tune from the show." She began to chant it softly. "If they had a black market in love——"

Justin's look was a wet blanket that smothered the chant. Dashed, she sat down in the chair that Ivors had pulled out. She placed her small evening bag on the table. Ivors sat beside her, and Justin took the place opposite him. She tried to catch Justin's eye while Ivors made fussy progress through the menu. But Justin was fathoms deep, and would not or could not come up for air.

When Ivors had finished ordering he said, "Perhaps you would have preferred your cocktails in the bar. I——"

That made the third apology in less than ten minutes. Martie thought that either he was suffering from an anxiety neurosis or that he knew no other way of making small talk. Giving him reassurance was taking on the proportions of a full-time job. She resigned with too much of a flourish. "How is Corinne? It was so sweet of her——"

Justin made an abrupt shift in his chair.

She saw with relief that the movement need not have been occasioned by her words.

A lush growth of flowering manhood had sprung up on the mauve dais and was making a windy moan of Justin's song.

*"If they had a black market in love—would I
Be strictly the sane little plain little guy
Who passes up cheese with the greatest of ease,
Goes meatless with hardly a sigh?
Would I be the one who pays nix above par
For butter or butts or the juice for my car,*

*Who cries 'No, no, no' and adds a 'Pooh-pooh'
When sizzling hot tires are rolled into view?
Would I have the grace not to fall on my face
If they had a black market in you?"*

Martie had heard the song often. But here and now it stopped being a bit of harmless doggerel and sharpened its point. She did not dare to look at Corinne's husband, and when she dared to look at Justin she saw that his mood had changed. For the first time he was gazing directly at his host, and there was a wicked glint in his eyes. She could not control an anticipatory shudder.

"Like it?" he asked.

"The song? Er—I'm not much of a judge of popular music." Ivors' right hand was on the table kneading her evening bag. She did not know whether to rescue it or him first. Her problem was solved by the waiter. While he dealt a round of martinis, she put the bag in her lap. She launched an inconsequential

monologue, word following word in such tight file that there was no possible opening into which her unruly brother could slide.

At first Ivors seemed bewildered by minute descriptions of her children, her house in California, her day in New York. She was bewildered too. Have I always been this kind of a bore? she asked herself. Has the disease been lurking in me for years, waiting an opportune moment to show its disgusting symptoms?

By the time the main course had come and gone, her pains were rewarded by Ivors' frequent gusts of laughter. His laugh, she observed, was automatic. He kept watching her face anxiously and coming in on cue each time he judged by her expression that humor was intended. Justin's deep chuckle was less frequent but more potent. She refused to analyze it for humor or for anything else. She was very angry with him and very sorry for herself and for her floundering host. All things considered, it was shameful to accept his hospitality, and even more shameful that Justin had seen fit to involve her in such an acceptance. Corinne's husband was no one she would have chosen to take by the ladleful, but on the other hand there was small reason why she should aid and abet Justin to machinate against him. Justin possessed too much imagination. That was his trouble. Corinne had probably blinked with surprise when she saw him, and straight off he must tag the natural flutter caused by his unexpected appearance as a nervous breakdown.

When the coffee arrived, Martie's throat ached from its unaccustomed workout. She broke off suddenly in the middle of a sentence, deciding to let nature take its course.

Justin was grinning. He said mildly, "What was all that again?" He ducked her glare. "Great little trouper, isn't she, Ivors?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"No—this one's on me. I beg yours. I was so entranced by my sister's performance that I forgot you had something on your mind."

Ivors looked worried, then foggy.

"There *is* something on your mind, isn't there? I don't want to hurry you, but when you telephoned you *did* say the call wasn't purely social."

A smile forced its way through the fog. "Oh yes—of course. It isn't important—hardly worthy of your valuable time—but—well—nothing ventured nothing gained, as they say."

Justin murmured politely, "What will they say next?"

"I beg——" Ivors swallowed it.

He was perhaps only two-thirds fool, Martie decided. He was entirely conscious of Justin's deliberate rudeness, and whatever his feelings had been before dinner, they were crystallized now into extreme distaste. She could hardly blame him. But nonetheless the cold stare he centered upon Justin made her uneasy.

His musical chest tones remained steady as he continued, "Even if you can't help me directly, I'm sure your knowledge of backstage operations makes you competent to give me advice. It's not for myself. I like to lend a helping hand to deserving people whenever I can—and there's a girl—a really clever girl—a designer in my wife's employ—who is interested in doing work in the theater. But she has no contacts—and I wondered what would be the best way for her to break into the field."

Justin was surprised. Martie could almost see him busily weighing the matter behind his face, placing the unknown girl and Ivors on one side of the scales, himself and Corinne on the other.

She was also struck with a notion that Ivors had cut his designer and her ambitions out of whole cloth, that he had extended the invitation for the same reason that it had been accepted, which was simply for the sake of reconnaissance.

Justin said slowly, "I have nothing to do with that end of production, but I'll make inquiries for you."

"That's most kind." Ivors seemed quite content to drop it right there.

But Justin picked it up and played with it. "Is your friend interested in designing sets or costumes?"

"Er—sets, I believe. She isn't exactly a friend. As I said, she works at Hastings, where there's not a great deal of scope for her talents. Besides, certain things have—well—it's beside the point, but my wife——" He paused to light cigarettes for Martie and for himself. It seemed that he had nothing further to say, but the pin-drop attention of his audience forced him to stumble

on lamely. "Er—my wife often laughs at me for my habit of digressing from the subject."

"I'll bet it kills her," Justin said too pleasantly. "Does Corinne know that you are planning to decrease her staff?" Corinne, on his telltale mouth, was definitely not Ivors' wife.

"As a matter of fact, I'm presuming upon your good nature for my—for Corinne's sake. She'll be glad to get rid of Miss Merritt. She doesn't like her."

"Then neither do I," Justin said flatly.

Martie made a queer little gasping noise, out of amusement by horror. Over her glass of water she stole a covert glance at Ivors. He had become Ivors during the last half of the silly game. He could not possibly be Corinne's husband.

Ivors actually said, "Ha-ha," and added, "Come now—you can't take the foibles of women seriously. They're such dear illogical creatures."

And men are such blank-blank illogical creatures, Martie amended silently. She had an overfull sensation, and it was not because she had eaten too heartily. She could not even recall the name, taste, or quality of the food that had been placed before her, but she thought that she would never forget the quality of the conversation, her own share included. She saw with joy that Justin was holding an ostentatious conference with his watch. She took a mirror from her evening bag, wondering if she looked as hot and ugly as she felt. Her cool gypsy face stared back at her, and she smiled experimentally as she added a little color to her lips. She could still smile.

"Powder up," Justin said. "We haven't much time."

Ivors was regarding her so intently that if she had been younger, or even if she had wanted to be younger, her ego could have taken a bow. She shut the bag. "I'm ready. My nose isn't shiny—and anyway I forgot my compact—left it upstairs." A covert glance at her own watch told her that there was time to spare. But immediate departure held strong attraction. She said, "Thank you so much, Mr. Ivors. I'm sure Justin will make inquiries about your—about——"

"Miss Merritt," Ivors supplied the name absently. "Dodie Merritt. And thank you. You've been very gracious. Perhaps if you're staying in town for any length of time . . ." He paused

to take his wallet from his pocket because the waiter had put the check on the table. He reached out for it, but Justin was quicker. Justin transacted the whole business with sleight-of-hand dispatch.

Ivors protested. "My dear sir—I must insist—this was my idea—I——"

"Think nothing of it. It's not the first time a good idea has been plagiarized—and I mean a good idea."

"I'm delighted you feel that way, but——" He continued to protest all the way through the crowded lobby, as passionately as though he had been robbed of his birthright. "At least," he said when they reached the sidewalk, "you'll permit my chauffeur to drive you to the theater. My car is——"

Justin was firm. "No, thank you. It's earlier than I thought. We'll walk."

Martie added weakly, "You see—the weather's so lovely—and we don't have to go very far. Good night, Mr. Ivors."

She waited until he was out of sight. Justin sensed the intention behind her sudden stiffening. He disarmed her before she could lunge. "Don't be cross with me, Martie. That was just a rehearsal. Later on I may be offered the part of Louse, first class, and I want to be in the groove."

"You don't need rehearsals."

"Tell me honestly—what do you make of him?"

"I feel sorry for him."

"That's evasion. You weren't so smoked up with pity that you couldn't see to form some kind of an opinion."

She shook her head. The New York evening, freshly bathed in April, had a special fragrance. She wanted to enjoy it. She did not want to discuss Robert Ivors. She said, "This is wonderful—being here and everything. I'm glad you made me come."

He did not persist. "Yeah—it could be wonderful. But we'd better take a taxi. It's really too far to walk in those high heels." He raised his voice. "Taxi! Hell—that one's full." The next was occupied, too, and the next.

"You mean we'd better take a bus," Martie said when five minutes had passed.

"I guess so. Wait—what's this?"

"This" was a large black limousine which had drawn up be-

fore them. Its driver stepped out. He cast a powerful shadow. "Mr. Corley?"

"Mr. Jinn, I presume. I must have rubbed my lamp by mistake."

"I'm Mr. Ivors' chauffeur. I'm to give you a lift."

"I'll be damned. Is Mr. Ivors in the car?"

"No sir. He had some business to transact back at the hotel." The chauffeur was assisting Martie toward the running board. Overdoing the assistance, she thought. She drew away from him to consult Justin.

"What can we lose?" Justin said. He climbed in after her. "Would it be superfluous to tell you our destination?" he asked the chauffeur.

"Mr. Ivors gave it to me—the Empress Theater."

"Right. Remind me to send Mr. Ivors a nosegay. He's that thoughtful."

"Well, he *is* thoughtful," Martie said as the car started.

Justin whispered with exaggerated caution, "Shhhh. That ain't no chauffeur. That's a spy—sent to get the goods on us."

"You're not funny, Justin." She sounded as though she meant it.

He was instantly solicitous. "Hey! What's the matter? Honest—I didn't mean to get you down. Look—want to stop off and call the kids? Maybe——"

"No—I'm not down. I'm going to have a swell time."

Spy or no spy, Mr. Ivors' chauffeur handled the car as though it were a precision instrument. He took a short cut that canceled the distance between the hotel and the theater to its smallest fraction. When she saw the marquee flaunting *The Blue Market* legend, she was ready to laugh at the irrational disquiet that Justin's words had caused. At least, she told herself, we weren't taken for a ride.

In the theater she did have a swell time. She sat on the edge of her seat, feasting uncritically upon the music, the spoken word, the dancing, the color, not only because she thought the show was good but because her little brother had contributed so large a part to it. And during the intermissions she gave her whole smile to every stranger who clapped him on the back and spoke his name, and to the highly cultured star who received

them with open arms when they went behind the scenes to congratulate her. That was during the second intermission. She left Justin backstage and hurried to her seat because she could not bear to miss a thing. Justin said he would watch from the wings for a while, and did not join her until the last curtain, nor did she miss him.

The only cloud in this bright thrilling world was a miniature cloud labeled, "If only the children were along." For here Justin had been Justin again, chuckling, clowning, lapsing into Broadwayese or double talk, liking and being liked by all and sundry.

In the taxi on the way back to the hotel she hugged him impulsively.

"What was that for?"

"Never mind. Your head's swollen enough." A thought struck her. "You didn't refuse all those invitations to go places after the show because of me?"

"Nope—I refused them because of me. You've never cramped my style noticeably. Why—did you want to go places?"

"Oh no. I haven't had so much fun in years. I don't believe I could take another drop."

"That's good. I couldn't take any more either." He did not mean "fun." "Know what? While I was trying to scare up a taxi I half expected the jinn to turn up again. That Ivors guy is slipping."

She sighed. He had shelved the matter only for a little while.

"Martie—how could Corinne have married such a schizy citizen?"

"That's a question nobody can answer but Corinne. Maybe she wanted to get married and he just happened to come along. If a woman wasn't prejudiced before she met a man like Ivors, she might find him attractive—especially if——" She did not finish it. She had been going to say "especially if she'd been in love with someone else who let her down."

Justin was not listening anyway. He was off on a path of his own. "I think I could have swallowed Hunt more easily. There would have been a penny's worth of logic in that setup. At least they share the same interests." His face was unhappy again, bewildered.

"Hunt? Who's Hunt? Oh—I know." She found to her horror

that she was off again, busily stuffing up gaps to keep out the cold wind. "He's the man she met in the public library when she was doing research on early Roman sandals or something. I remember her telling me about him. He'd been out of work for a long time—long enough to memorize practically everything in the place. She asked him some question about how to use the card index—and he began to hold forth—and the library officials began to frown because he was talking too loud—so the discussion was continued at lunch—and she was so impressed by all he knew that she offered him a job. At first he didn't want to take it. He said all that stuff was just a side line—that he went to the library because he was mostly interested in history—but she managed to persuade him."

Justin's silence endured. After a long moment Martie asked, "Is he still with her?"

"Who?"

She said patiently, "Hunt. You said Corinne should have married him."

Justin was indignant. "I did not—except that he's nuts about her—and he helped to put Hastings on the map." Changing his tone completely, he said, "What are you gilding yourself for? I thought you said you left your compact at home."

She stopped powdering her nose. "I meant the new compact. It's too big for my evening bag, and I'm ashamed to use this one in public. I'm prettying myself in case we bump into more of your numerous friends in the lobby. I don't want you to be known as the song writer who has a sister who has a shiny nose."

A moment later she said casually, "Justin—did you ever meet that girl—the one Ivors was rooting for?"

Forthwith he confirmed a suspicion that had been lurking in the back of her mind. "Merritt?" He produced the name as though it was something he had stored carefully against a lean future. "No—I guess she must be a comparative newcomer to Hastings. Now there's an angle."

"No."

"Huh?"

"I won't have it."

"Won't have what?"

"You know quite well what I mean. All this skulking around under cover isn't for you. I suppose divorce is necessary sometimes—and if this is one of the times—and if Corinne feels the way you think she does——"

"Don't strain yourself any further. I can hear the end of your spiel just as plain as though you had bellowed it to the house-tops. You're trying to say that if Corinne feels the way I think she does—and I *know* she does—why can't she come out fair and square and ask for a divorce."

"Well?"

"She did ask for a divorce and she got worse than a refusal—because you can fight a refusal. Her request was ignored—brushed aside—squelched—all in a noble 'papa-knows-best' vein. Furthermore, Corinne seems certain that when, as, and if he discovers I'm waiting to take over—and he has discovered it—he'll hold on tighter than ever."

"Does he—does he treat her badly, Justin? I mean—has she any real grounds——"

"Oh my lord! How can I answer that without being accused of exaggeration? It depends entirely on what you mean by 'real grounds.' I don't suppose she has one external bruise to bring down the jury in a court of law—if she had I'd push his face in and be done with it—but——" He raised his shoulders helplessly. "It's no use. You'd have to see her for yourself to get the picture."

Immediately after they stepped into the lobby of the hotel, Martie saw her.

CHAPTER VII

WANT SOMETHING to eat before we go upstairs?" Justin asked as they entered the lobby.

It took a moment for Martie to adjust herself to the sudden change of atmosphere. The street had been fresh and dark. Here there were lights and the hothouse smell of a groomed assembly.

She turned to reply and saw the muscles of Justin's face tense. His eyes had been drawn to a girl in evening clothes who stood at the edge of a large festive group. The girl and one of the men in the group separated themselves from the others and started to walk toward the door. The girl wore a long, low-cut white jersey dress that brought out line and curve in sculptured detail. She would have commanded anyone's eye. Her escort carried her wrap, and as they neared the door he arranged it about her shoulders. The gesture was an abridged dissertation upon the state of his emotions.

But the girl seemed unresponsive. The ice princess, Martie thought. Shocked, she realized that the ice princess was Corinne. She called her name.

Corinne stopped at the sound, and her lovely spellbound features stirred to an expression of polite interest. She found Justin first. As suddenly as she metamorphosed into quickened flesh, Martie's skepticism vanished. Justin had not been dramatizing. This was real.

Something had to be done at once, because it was obvious that Justin was about to act as a man acts who is entirely alone with his love. It seemed incredible, but she knew that for him the crowded lobby might have been a figment of someone else's imagination. Corinne's presence had placed it outside his realm of vision.

Martie stepped in front of him. She held out her hands to Corinne.

Corinne's silver eyes focused upon her. She said, "Martie," and did not quite turn to ice again. That was something. She took the outstretched hands.

Once more Martie brought forth her newly discovered talent for inanities. "It's been years, hasn't it? I was going to send you a letter to thank you for the beautiful compact, but I'd so much rather do it in person. What a lovely dress. It suits you so well. I do believe you've grown taller since last we met."

"I'm glad to see you, Martie," Corinne said softly.

"Are you staying at the hotel? No—of course you're not. Justin told me——"

"I've been attending the annual dinner of the Designers' Guild. It's always held here."

The forgotten escort moved restlessly. He was a tall, thin, steely-looking man, Martie noticed.

Corinne glanced at him as though she had difficulty in recalling his identity or his reason for being at her side. Then she said, "I'm sorry. This is Willard Hunt, Martie. Mr. Hunt, Mrs. James."

She seemed unable to period the introduction. Her eyes went to Justin. "Mr. Hunt, Mr.——"

Martie had a helpless feeling that it might go on forever, an interminable series of "Mr. Hunt, Mrs. James—Mr. Hunt, Mr. Corley——" Weariness descended upon her. She could make no further effort. This time it was Justin who came to the rescue.

"You don't have to introduce Hunt to me, Corinne, or vice versa. We met long ago."

"That's right," Hunt said without enthusiasm.

"Why don't we have a drink?" Justin said. "Unless you're in a hurry."

Martie shook her head. She wanted no more sessions with Corinne's men. "Will you excuse me if I go up to bed? I suppose I should be ashamed to admit it, but I'm tired. I guess it will take me a day or two to get used to New York's pace."

Hunt's austere face showed relief. "Corinne's tired too," he said, "and, as a matter of fact, so am I. We've both been working hard. The Designers' shindig was part of it."

"I'd rather like a drink." It was a soft but surprisingly firm statement from Corinne.

"Well——"

Justin said, "Look, Hunt, I'll see Corinne home if you——"

"I wouldn't think of it." His chin came out like a knife blade.

He added dryly, "Corinne is a sacred trust. I promised her husband I'd stick close."

That's enough of that, Martie thought. "Good night," she said.

Corinne turned to her. "I hope we meet again before you go back to California, Martie. May I call you?"

"Please do."

"Wait, Martie, I'll take you to the elevator." But Justin called it to her vanishing back. She moved as though she were pursued.

Both her room and Justin's had hall entrances so that the suite could be split up on demand. But now Martie unlocked the main door and found her way through the small dark foyer. In the living room she pressed the light switch and sank into the nearest chair. She kicked off her shoes and lit a cigarette. It was good to be alone, to be free of the need to talk. She relaxed, emptying her mind deliberately until thoughts clamored for readmittance.

Trivia rushed in first. Justin smokes too much. The air in this room is close and stale. Windows should have been opened before we went out. I'll do it in a minute or two. She sat waiting for sufficient energy to motivate her. Sections of the evening returned. Ivors. His large chauffeur. The black limousine. The theater. She wished that the evening had been all theater and no Ivors. She wished that the path of Justin and Corinne lay straight and safe, without the threat of dangerous twists and curves. She missed her children. She wished that she could put her arms around them. She saw Corinne's face again, and it reminded her of Linnie's face when she was hurt. Presently she arose, flung the windows wide, picked up her shoes, and walked on tiptoe to her bedroom. She would undress and get into bed and read herself to sleep. And tomorrow all that had happened, or tried to happen, would dwindle to its true daylight proportions.

Her bedroom door was closed. She turned the knob and entered. She lit the lamp on the dressing table. She sniffed distastefully. The air was bad in here too. And that was strange, because the curtains billowed away from a pushing breeze. A strong odor of perfume forced its way to her nose. Was it hers? Was that the way she smelled to others? Why hadn't Justin told

her? But what was she thinking of? She knew quite well that her own perfume had only a slight, barely suggested aftermath. Puzzled, she looked around the room.

The bed was in shadow. She had left her slippers near it. She went to put them on. There was no point in ruining her stockings while she pondered the riddle of the heavy scent. Riddles could wait until she was comfortable.

She started to sit down on the edge of the bed. She changed her mind swiftly.

A curly head was lying on her pillow. She gave a thin squeak, but it was a squeak of surprise rather than fright.

Someone's mistaken the room, she thought. Her eyes measured the small peaceful form. Why, it's only a child. I'll bet the mother's instituting a frantic search. Her fingers sought the lamp on the night table. Carefully she shaded its sudden glow so that it would not strike the face of the sleeping child.

But it was not a child. And it was not sleeping. It was all that remained of a small woman. The head was bent unnaturally upon the slim neck. The round chin was discolored.

Martie had encountered death several times. Even before she found courage to place her hand over the silent heart, to touch the frightening unwarmed flesh, she knew that this was death.

She did not scream. Her body was as calm as ice, but her pulse ran wild. She went back to the dressing table, gripped it for support, and put her feet into her discarded high-heeled shoes. Then she went to the bathroom.

It's all a mistake, of course, she thought idiotically. A child—a strange child. No—not a child—a strange woman. Justin. I'll go downstairs and find Justin. Or should I call the police first? Her mind groped and produced a tentative rationale. I'm the one who's in the wrong suite. That's it. She left the bathroom and started toward the outer door with the intention of checking the number. Midway she halted. Maybe she isn't dead. I'm excited—overwrought. I'll go back and make sure. What's that!

She had heard muted voices outside the door and a key turning stealthily in the lock. She called, "Who's there?" her voice ragged and odd. She wheeled to face the three figures that crowded the foyer.

From one of them came Justin's familiar baritone. "Martie, I

thought you'd be in bed. That's why all the hush-hush." He went on talking. "The populace was lined up six deep at the bar, and all the tables were taken. So I ordered a bottle sent up here. Mind?"

"Mind?" She repeated it like a parrot. She wanted to laugh. She bit her lips to hold the laughter back.

Corinne said hesitantly, "Perhaps we're disturbing you. If we are we——"

Justin said, "Martie doesn't disturb so easily. Prove it, Martie. Make like a hostess. Where the hell is that light gimmick? Ah!" A decisive click brought the foyer to life. Martie swayed toward him.

Corinne cried out, "Something's the matter. She's going to faint. Catch her, Justin."

Justin caught her. "Nonsense—she's not the fainting kind." He gripped her shoulders. "Martie—what is it?" He saw her white face. "Martie!" His voice deepened anxiously. "Are you sick?"

She shook her head. "There's a—there's a——"

"Take it slow and easy. There's a what, Sis?"

"Justin—I want to sit down."

He picked her up in his arms and carried her to the couch in the living room. "Don't sit. Stretch out. There." He knelt beside her and began to rub her cold hands. "Tell me what ails you, Sis, and I'll put it right in two shakes." His brow was channeled with worry.

She tried to look as though nothing ailed her. She waged a losing fight to regain her voice.

Corinne and Hunt had come into the room, Hunt uncertain but dogged. He muttered, "We ought not to stay. If she's——"

"I'm staying," Corinne said. "There may be something I can do." She listened. "Wasn't that a knock?"

Hunt nodded. "I'll answer it. The drinks, I guess. It might disturb her to have the waiter come in here."

Martie sat up as he returned with a laden tray. "I want a drink—straight." It was said quite steadily.

"Martie—do you think you should?" Justin asked. "I don't know what's up with you, but——"

Corinne was tearing the seal from the bottle. Hunt looked at

Justin questioningly. He nodded. Hunt took the bottle from Corinne. He opened it and poured rye into a glass. He stepped forward and placed the glass in Martie's hand.

She drank in a manful series of gulps. Justin took the empty glass from her. He stared at it, astonishment making a blatant mask for his dark face.

Martie said, "I've never had to break news like this before, but——" She flung it at them desperately. "Either I've gone mad or there's a dead body in my bedroom."

"Come again?" It was Justin in the ludicrous cracking voice of an adolescent.

The eyes of Corinne and Hunt left Martie and met briefly. Hunt whispered, "Does she—is she subject to spells like this?" He gave the whisky bottle a telling glance.

Corinne said, "Hush." For a moment she seemed to be studying the layout of the suite. Then she moved in the direction of the bedrooms.

Martie attempted to rise. "Corinne—no. Let Justin." She prodded him weakly. "Go on, Justin. If I'm wrong I can't know too soon."

Justin went, Hunt following without excitement in his rushing wake.

The two women looked at each other. Martie spoke. "They're taking their time about it."

"Shall I——"

"Stay here. I have a horrible feeling that this isn't a dream—and if it isn't I don't want you to get a bad shock." Then she said, "Thanks for believing me. Even Justin thought I——"

"I knew you couldn't have changed that much. Don't try to talk, Martie."

"I—I'm wound up." She added forlornly, "I've been wound up all evening. Sit down—or—don't sit down—get out of here. I'll be a hostess some other time. I think we'll have to call the police—and there's no sense in your being subject to a lot of—— Well—you're practically a public figure. You know how people are where sudden death is concerned. They get all kinds of notions."

Corinne dragged a chair to the couch. She sat down. She took Martie's hand.

Martie said, "What can they be doing in there? I don't know whether to hope they find a body or to hope they don't. Which is worse in a case like this—hallucinations or——"

"You're perfectly sane—Martie."

"I always was. Corinne—I think I'm a little drunk. I've never been drunk before, but I guess this is the way it must feel—all blurred and run together. I'm not used to drinking straight whisky—and it was a large——"

The men had returned to the room. Justin looked sick. He made for the couch. "Martie—how rotten for you." He touched her hair compassionately. "She's there all right. I might have known she would be."

"Who do you suppose——"

"A complete stranger—poor thing. How did she get——"

Martie swung her legs over the side of the couch. "No use speculating. Call the police."

"Yes—and we'd better say we just discovered it—or they'll think we took time out to tamper with the evidence." He strode purposefully to the telephone.

"Evidence?" Corinne said.

Hunt had poured a stiff drink into a glass and into himself with no measurable lapse between. He fixed Justin with a monkish stare. "Wait a minute, Corley. Don't you think it would be wise not to mention that you had guests? All things considered, it might not look well for Corinne."

Justin said slowly, "Are you making some kind of an insinuation?"

"He's making a point that should have been clear to you without insinuations." Irritation marked the fact that Martie was in the final stage of convalescence. "He wants to get Corinne out because there's no reason for her to be involved in this. It would only mean bad publicity for Hastings. It won't be so good for you either, but——"

"*Maybe* that's what he meant," Justin said. He turned to Corinne. "Anyway, it's true. I'm a dope not to have thought of it. Good night, my—good night. I'll let you know how things turn out."

"I don't want to leave you." The words stood alone, naked and plaintive. Hurriedly Corinne tried to clothe them. "It's

bound to be unpleasant. Perhaps I can divert some of the attention away from Martie. She's in no state——"

Hunt placed his hand on her arm. "Your being here won't do anybody any good. Believe me."

She tore her eyes away from Justin's. "Please—you go. It's different with me. They're my friends."

"If you stay, I stay. But I think you'll change your mind."

Martie said, "I'd advise you to leave, Corinne, but if you won't—you won't—and this is no time to argue. Someone may have seen that poor girl come in here. Put in your call, Justin, or they'll really be angry because you waited so long."

Hunt drew a sharp breath. "Before you call, there's something Corinne must know. Brace yourself, Corinne."

Justin said angrily, "A fine moment you picked for girlish confidences. Stop hounding her. This isn't your affair."

"But it is—and Corinne's too. I wish I hadn't gone into the bedroom with you. That was a stroke of bad luck. But if Corinne stopped being stubborn we could both leave and show the proper surprise when it's required of us. You see—I identified the body at once. It's a young woman who worked for Corinne. Dodie Merritt."

In unbelief, Corinne said, "Dodie Merritt? But why should she come here? She doesn't know Justin or Martie. She——You're sure?" She saw that he was sure. "Willard!"

"Dodie Merritt—dead." Martie echoed it faintly. "She's the——"

Justin said nothing for a moment and illustrated it by placing a protective arm about Corinne. He turned her toward the door.

"You're going, darling. I don't get it, but I do get an idea that this isn't the place for you right now."

Hunt nodded expressively and started to follow. He was blocked by Corinne's abrupt halt.

She drew away from Justin. "I don't understand—anything—but more than ever I think I should stay. Martie said someone might have seen her—might have seen Dodie come in. Willard and I might have been seen too. We *were* seen. If you remember, the elevator boy recognized me on the way up—and I spoke to him. Several of my clients stop here when they're in town.

I visited one only last week. That elevator boy will mention my presence to the police the moment he hears of——”

Martie said sharply, “Are you sure it’s murder? I know she——”

Corinne stared at her. “But didn’t you——” She transferred the stare to Justin’s face and was visibly taken aback by what it presented.

She went on quietly, “There *has* been a murder—unless—unless you didn’t mean what you said, Justin.”

His voice was strained.

“What did I say, Corinne?”

“Something about tampering with the evidence. In a natural death there wouldn’t be——”

He grinned crookedly. He took her hand and kissed it. “Some people need a ‘yes man,’” he said. “What I need is an ever-present ‘kicker-in-the-pants’ to apply the boot at required intervals. For a second there I thought you were a Borgia-Borden combine.” And he added gravely, “Not that it would have made any difference, you understand.”

“I understand.”

Martie’s voice dragged them out of it. “You two are not alone.” Symptoms of shock were beginning to return. Again she thought idiotically, This is all a mistake—it can’t be true. What could that girl be doing in my room? With great effort she made herself talk sense. “Corinne’s right. She can’t leave now. As soon as the police make the identification—which they’re bound to do even without the aid of Mr. Hunt—they’ll question Corinne and her associates—and they’ll discover that she attended a dinner in the hotel tonight and that the elevator boy brought her up here. So for heaven’s sake let’s get it over with. If we keep putting it off, the boy might start imagining she arrived before instead of after.”

“You’re running away with yourself, Martie, if you think any suspicion will fall on Corinne.”

“Am I? I’ve read accounts of murder cases in the newspapers. The police don’t neglect even the remotest connections—and Corinne’s isn’t so remote. As an employer she’d naturally be expected to throw light on the girl’s life and habits.” Beside herself because of his unyielding stance, she kicked below the belt.

"So I'm running away with myself, am I? What of your own suspicions a little while ago?"

"You're right—as usual." He went to the telephone. "Get me police headquarters," he said to the operator. "Yes—you heard me the first time."

They could hear the volley at the other end.

"No, there's nothing wrong. That is—— No—I don't want the manager. . . . Listen—do I have to go down to a phone booth? . . . Yes, Corley speaking. . . . No—I don't want anyone thrown out. . . . I'm not unreasonable. Can I help it if someone parked a corpse on my sister's bed? . . . Oh, for heaven's sake—I don't get that kind of tight. Stop being so tactful. . . . All right—send the manager and the house detective—but don't say I didn't ask you to send the police."

CHAPTER VIII

AFTER a few preliminary questions, during which their identities and the identity of the corpse had been established, they had been herded into Justin's bedroom. There they waited while strange men with strange jobs treated the rest of the suite to a trial by flashlight bulbs and fingerprint powder. They had been commanded not to touch anything, and to see that the command was enforced, a policeman leaned against the closed door leading to the outer hall. His presence did not make for conversation. Even though we have nothing to hide, Martie kept telling herself.

Corinne, flanked by Justin and Willard Hunt, occupied chairs facing Martie, who sat on the bed.

So this is the way it happens, she thought. We are thrust into an entirely new phase of existence, without warning or preparation. How inadequate is the newspaper presentation of a murder case. "So-and-so, an acquaintance of the murder victim, stated to Detective Blank that——" But the newspaper barely suggests that So-and-so—even as you and I—is a human being with coursing blood, a thinking brain, and a full set of emotions. Nor does it note the phenomena that, innocent as So-and-so may be, she gives off emanations of guilt with every movement, every utterance. Because, absolutely unprepared for the detour in her hitherto straight road, she is seized with self-doubts more potent than anything the law can be wrestling with behind its impassive façade. Doubts such as——Martie shivered. Well—take me, for example. Where was I really when the deed was done? If this is possible—isn't it possible that all else is false? Justin and Mother James were so insistent that I take a vacation. Perhaps the onset of a nervous breakdown was apparent to everyone but me. Perhaps the corpse was not a corpse when I came into the room. She was alive and she frightened me. Fright caused an aberration—or schizophrenia. My personality split, and one half, not knowing what the other half was doing, launched what that detective called "a sock on the button" and—— She broke off

to ask herself. Are chin and button synonymous? And then she giggled. The giggle effected a brief restoration of balance.

She saw Justin looking at her. He said dryly, "They tell me there's a funny side to everything."

"Shhh." She glanced nervously at the policeman.

"What are you shushing me for?"

"Justin, you're like the man——" She swallowed it. She had started to say that he was like the man whose wife had kicked him under the table as a reminder of some taboo, and who loudly advertised her action by a blunt "What are you kicking me for?" That's a joke, she thought helplessly. And this is no time for jokes. This is no time for anything. Silence will surely be construed as guilt. And frivolous chatter will be construed as cold-bloodedness pointing to guilt. To say nothing of uneasy conversation relevant to the murder.

Neither Justin nor Hunt nor Corinne showed any signs that they were sharing her inner tumult. Justin's mouth opened to free a thoroughly relaxed yawn. Hunt kept glancing at his watch, more in impatience than nervousness. And although the shadows had deepened under Corinne's lovely eyes, she seemed at peace.

"I'm sleepy," Justin said. "I've never been an early bedder, so it must be the monotony." He addressed the policeman. "How's chances for getting some coffee sent up?"

"Not right now."

Hunt said, "It's part of the police tactics to wear you down. They want you to come to the slaughter without benefit of stimulants."

The policeman eyed him sternly. "I wouldn't say that."

Hunt ignored him. "It's getting chilly in here—they must have turned off the heat. One warm day and——"

"Hotels have to conserve fuel like everybody else," the policeman said. He had apparently decided to while away the time by educating Hunt. "There's a war on."

Hunt acknowledged his existence. "A most convenient war—a war designed to accommodate every excuse known to man."

Justin leaned toward Corinne. "Are you cold? Hadn't you better pull that wrap around you?"

"I'm not cold."

"Could you rest your head on my shoulder and try to take a little nap? Nobody knows how long they'll keep us here."

She smiled at him. "I could rest my head on your shoulder, but I couldn't nap. I never get to sleep before this."

"Well, you should."

Again it was Martie's task to remind them that they were not on a desert island.

Her lips parted, but Hunt took over before she could manage a sufficiently harmless remark.

Hunt twisted his thin, bitter mouth. "Corinne, I'm afraid I've fallen down badly in the 'Sacred Trust' department. Your husband will be scouring the town for you."

Corinne reacted as to cold water. All the tranquillity was washed from her face.

Martie said "Oh!" and pulled herself up short. She had mislaid Corinne's husband somewhere in the chaos of her mind. She did not know if there was reason to conceal the fact that she and Justin had dined with him, but in a brief span caution had become chronic.

It had not become chronic with Justin. Nothing was chronic with Justin except Corinne. He said, "I'll be damned! Ivors—the forgotten man." Shoots of thought sprouted on his forehead. His eyes sought Martie's. A short telepathic exchange took place.

Martie broke the spell. "That's fantastic."

"Is it? Name me three non-fantastic things that have happened in the last hour." He paused significantly to listen to the noises that the busy homicide experts were making in the next room. "I hope you haven't anything dead in your bureau drawers. They seem to be doing a thorough job."

Martie winced.

"Sorry, Sis. What was I saying? Oh yes. I believe in coincidence to a certain extent—but it sticks in my craw that a name I never heard until dinner turns up as a label on a midnight surprise."

The policeman moved a few steps away from the door. "Would you mind going through that again? I think I get it, but——"

"You're not expected to get it," Hunt said. "It's not general conversation—it's family secrets."

Justin murmured pleasantly, "It seems M'sieu Hunt and *moi* took a sudden unshine to each other."

The policeman was scowling at Hunt. "Button it, mister." He jerked his head politely toward Corinne and Martie in turn. "If you'll excuse the expression."

Justin grinned. "Don't be harsh with the man, Officer. He's peeved because he feels left out. There are no family secrets to it. There isn't any promotion to it for you either, on account of we intend to come clean with your boss—so clean that he won't need your gleanings."

The policeman said, "Maybe—but a little rehearsal might help you to remember when your turn comes." He had a shrewd Italian-American face. "Now about this name you heard for the first time at dinner?"

"Thanks for cueing me." Justin altered his tone. "Corinne."
"Yes?"

"It slipped my mind somehow—lack of opportunity—and all kinds of stuff coming up on the agenda—but I meant to tell you that Martie and I had dinner with Ivors tonight."

Martie saw Hunt stiffen. She saw Corinne's long silky lashes drop and then lift to expose troubled eyes. She saw that the policeman had a notebook in his hand.

The policeman said, "Who's this Ivors?"

Corinne answered mechanically, "My husband."

"Your husband, lady?" Disillusioned, the policeman looked from her to Justin. "You got a husband?"

She did not hear him.

She said, "Justin—why did you have dinner with Robert? It wasn't to——"

"No. Not a word was mentioned about our—about what we talked of this morning."

"Then why?"

"He called up and asked us—Martie and me. And we accepted—Martie under duress—and I for a complication of reasons. I——"

"I don't like it, Justin. It frightens me. What made him——"

"There's nothing to be frightened of." Justin was lacing his

reassurance with a reportorial description of the dinner party when Martie received her summons to the living room. He had not mentioned Dodie Merritt. She wondered if he would and wondered if she should.

He interrupted himself to give her a warming smile. "Make like it's a visit to the dentist, Martie, and think how good you'll feel when it's over. Also, shout if anybody gets tough."

The detective she found herself facing in the living room was not, at first glance, an inviting specimen. He arose with seeming reluctance as she entered and motioned her brusquely to a chair. His expression said that, all things considered, a display of good manners was wasted energy. He was middle-aged, of average height, but thin, with thick graying hair thatching his head and eyes. He had a large censored face which did not show that the sum of his self-doubts nearly equaled her own. He was far from a stupid man, but he knew he had been assigned to this case because the heads of the Manhattan Homicide Squad were neck-deep in other matters. He intended to prove that their confidence was not misplaced.

He introduced himself as though it were none of her business. "I'm Detective Sergeant Gorse."

A policewoman sat at the desk with pencil and notebook ready. She did not look like a woman, except that her hair was long. She took down Martie's name, address, occupation, and the length of time she had been in New York.

Detective Sergeant Gorse turned upon Martie eyes that were like blue half-moons. His voice sounded angry. "Mrs. James, give me an account of how and when you discovered the body. Be as accurate as you can."

Martie refused to be afraid of him. He's probably somebody's father, she thought, and quite kind in his private life. All this is a pose, a part of his stock in trade, poor man.

She was very accurate. She did not omit a single detail, even to kicking off and putting on her shoes. She lived it through again and hated it. Once was enough for anybody.

Several times he seemed on the verge of making an impatient interruption, but he restrained himself. When she came to a stop, he said, "Go on."

"That's all."

"You thought at first that she was asleep?"

She nodded.

"And then you tell me you put your hand on her heart."

"That was after I turned on the light near the bed. The position of her head was strange."

"How many dead people have you seen in your life?"

"Too many," she said in resentment.

"How's that?"

She moistened her lips. "My father. My husband. My mother."

"Accidental deaths?"

"I'd rather not talk about it if you don't mind."

"I guess you have your reasons." He did not pause. "When was the last time you saw Dorothy Merritt?"

"Dorothy? I thought it was Dodie."

"You and her other pals called her Dodie. It's a nickname. But I didn't get acquainted soon enough to be so familiar. Just answer my question."

She had a delayed reaction. "I never called her anything—I never saw her until she was dead."

She witnessed an elaborate display of skepticism. "Don't you believe me?" she asked naïvely.

"We'll come back to that. You say you arrived in New York"—he consulted his watch—"on——"

"What time is it?"

"It's tomorrow. You say you arrived in New York the night before last. Have you been in correspondence with the deceased?"

She decided to treat him as a half-wit child. She said patiently, "Try to understand. I never corresponded with the deceased. I never met her or heard of her until tonight."

"But you met the dame she worked for."

Martie looked at him blankly. It took her a moment to identify the dame as Corinne. "Oh yes—years ago."

"You're good friends?"

"We've been out of touch with each other—but—yes—we're good friends."

"You write to each other?"

"No—I said we'd been out of touch." She glimpsed the workings of his mind. She did not think much of what she saw and

showed it by her next words. "Even if we had corresponded, it would have been a purely social exchange. I doubt if Miss Hastings would have sent me a list of her employees and underlined the one she wanted me to kill first thing when I came to New York." The ideas that she herself had housed while waiting were gone.

"Miss Hastings? Oh—you mean Mrs. Ivors."

Not once during the interview had the set of his face loosened to reveal humor or humanity, but now he threw a worried glance toward the policewoman. As though, Martie thought with a flash of insight, he feared her opinion of the way he was handling matters. He said, "What's your alibi for the time of the murder?"

"Alibi?" She considered the word. She had heard it in the movies, read it in the newspapers, and listened to it often as a slang term. For the first time it had real meaning.

"You've thought long enough," Gorse said. "I wouldn't try to make it too involved if I were you."

She asked in wonder, "Do you honestly think I committed murder?"

He looked away. "Why not? I don't know you and I haven't had a chance to check on you. This is your suite, isn't it? You qualify all right, but I'm handing you all the breaks you need to move yourself into the clear."

"Thank you." Her voice was small. Then it gathered volume. "I can't give you an alibi until I know when the murder was committed. I realize, of course, that it must have been somewhere between the time that Justin and I left the suite and returned. I can tell you what we did during that time if you like."

"Justin? The one who looks like you—your brother?"

"I suppose there is a family resemblance. Yes—Justin Corley—the song writer." She could not help adding proudly, "He wrote the words and music for *The Blue Market*."

The policewoman took time out to give her a sexless smile. She warmed it up and cast it back.

Detective Sergeant Gorse remained cold. "Tell me exactly what you and your brother did from the minute you both left until the minute you came back up here alone."

She told him, deliberately stripping her facts bare of personal

bias before she presented them for clinical inspection. Nevertheless, since in her own case Gorse had been making much of little, she half expected him to go into instant action when she mentioned the part that Ivors had played in the evening. But he did not stir a feature or a limb.

She decided that Gorse was not very quick. It seemed obvious that if he insisted upon singling one of them out as a suspect, Ivors was his man. It was not obvious, of course. She did not believe that Ivors was a murderer. Yet it needed only an average moviegoer to supply him with motive and opportunity. He had asked Justin to get Dodie Merritt a job. Why? Simple. She was his mistress or had some other hold upon him. She had threatened to tell all unless he used his influence to satisfy her ambitions. Thin? Not half so thin as Gorse's implied theory concerning one Martie James. One Martie James concluded her recital without causing even a minor sensation.

Gorse said, "Yes—that jibes."

"Jibes?"

"With Ivors' story."

"You've talked to Ivors?" It was her turn to be skeptical. "When?"

Gorse condescended to explain. But he had to make it official. "Put this on record," he said to the policewoman. "You weren't around when it happened." He turned back to Martie. "While they were moving the body out I——"

She shivered. Body! Where am I going to sleep—if the time for sleep ever comes? Not on that bed. I couldn't. Maybe it's callous of me to worry about such——

He had observed the shiver. He shrugged and went on, "I was downstairs asking the clerks and elevator men some questions. In hotel crimes the word crawls around like a cockroach, no matter how hard the management tries to squash it. Ivors, it seems, hadn't realized that his wife's dinner was being held here. But after he finished eating with you and your brother he happened to bump into a sign saying, 'This way to the Designers' something-or-other.' So he decided to hang around in the bar until the missus was ready to go home. While he was there he got the vine that there had been foul play in the Corley suite. That's what he says. He was grilling the desk clerk

with more than common garden nosiness, and the clerk was calling him by name, when I horned in. I'd swapped a few words with Mrs. Ivors in the prelims, so I put two and two together and drew him into the manager's office for a chat. I didn't tell him his wife was up here."

"Why not?" Martie asked curiously.

"Lady, I'm the inquiring reporter around here." But he seemed to be thawing a little. "I didn't tell him—one—because his name and the way the desk clerk was bowing and scraping wised me he might be a gent with influence."

"Oh."

Gorse might not have heard the exclamation. "And I wanted to brace his wife before he could deck her out in a pair of lawyers."

Martie said gravely, "I'm glad the snob element didn't enter in. At least you're fair."

"Snob element?" For the first time he looked at her and seemed to see more than a stone in his path. "Oh—I get it—but what do you mean by 'at least'?"

The contagion of her smile spread to his own mouth. He struggled with it for a moment. Then he paid her what amounted to reproving tribute. "You're not the sort of person I'd expect to find even on the edge of a mess like this."

The policewoman said, "Do I write that in?"

"No. And not this either. Mrs. James, where are you sleeping later?"

The policewoman gasped. Martie looked startled.

The interpretation put upon his innocent words reached Gorse slowly. He muttered, "Well I'll be——" and turned blushed. "I only—I mean—women are funny about things. Your brother wouldn't give it a second thought—so I was just thinking you could switch beds with him in case you're squeamish or anything."

Martie was touched. Somebody's father under the skin, she thought. "How kind of you when you have so much on your mind. A very good suggestion—and it does solve my problem."

"So much on my mind is right," he said explosively.

"I wish I could help you." She meant it. He was not a bad sort. Just plain worried. She added, "But I don't think you'll

get to the bottom of this if you spend such a lot of time on people like me."

That sent him scuttling back into his tight shell. "By people like you I take it you also mean your pals in the next room."

"Yes. Justin, for example. He——"

"As long as you're so anxious to give me the low-down on the others, let's skip Justin for a moment and go on to Mrs. Ivors."

"Corinne? She's absolutely incapable of——"

"Sure—but we'll take it for granted that her husband knows her better than you do."

"Do you mean to tell me that he's been——"

"He suffers from looseness of the mouth—not that I care. It might come in very handy for me. He spilled a sad story about the deceased. It seems her pet dog died on his wife's premises—and not of old age. It also seems that his wife has been suffering from war nerves or something—and that between her and the deceased there was a hate-me-hate-my-dog relationship. Know anything about that?"

She said furiously, "I know it's ridiculous. Corinne's as gentle as a lamb—and I'm beginning to really believe that Mr. Ivors is a—*a meatball*. So there!"

"Huh?"

She rushed on. "Besides—even if Corinne wasn't the person she is, she couldn't have done it, because she was at the dinner all evening. Mr. Hunt, too. And Justin couldn't because he was with me. There are lots of other reasons why he couldn't, but you wouldn't be interested in them."

"Mrs. Ivors and Hunt haven't got even a second cousin to an alibi. They were right here in the hotel. Together or separately they could have left the dinner without being missed. Do you happen to know how many people were present? Well I do. I saw the list. There were exactly one hundred. What's two out of a hundred—to say nothing of circulating reporters and photographers? And there's the ladies' room angle—dames darting in and out on various errands all evening, I'll bet. I don't say she could have done it all by herself. The nature of the crime doesn't point that way."

Martie said, "Corinne's an outstandingly beautiful woman—

beautifully and outstandingly dressed. If she came up to this suite alone or with somebody during dinner you'd have heard about it. You yourself said that word travels quickly in a hotel."

"She could have borrowed someone's coat as a disguise and passed unnoticed through that lobby. I hear it was pretty crowded earlier. I'm not saying she did—but she could have. Or let's suppose she didn't have to show at all. That fellow Hunt isn't outstandingly beautiful—or dressed ditto. What have you got to say for him?"

Martie had nothing to say. "I don't know Mr. Hunt very well. But——"

"Never mind. We'll pass on to brother Justin. He was with you every minute—all evening?"

"Yes—except——" She was not going to defend Justin, she told herself. He did not need defense and he would not thank her for it. "He wasn't with me for most of the last act. He was backstage."

"How long?"

"I don't know exactly. I was so interested in the show. But I'm sure he was with someone who can vouch for him."

"Don't worry. I'll find out."

He paused for so long that she thought the interview was over. Then suddenly he dug into his pocket and produced an envelope. He transferred the contents to his spread palm and thrust the palm under her nose. "This yours?"

She stared at it. "No—I——"

The outer door opened. Gorse's fingers closed over the gold coin. He gave the intruder a stony eye. "Who let you in?"

"Where's my wife? How dare you hold her here? Do you realize the hour? She's not well. If this peculiar behavior on your part has deleterious results I can promise——"

"Oh, shut up," Gorse said.

CHAPTER IX

THE DISGUSTED COMMAND might have been a sorcerer's rune for the way it affected Ivors. Not only did his tongue freeze, but his body as well.

Driven to absurdity by fatigue, Martie wished that she had thought to employ it earlier in the evening. Yet she succumbed to what was by now a compulsion and rushed to the rescue.

"Corinne's all right, Mr. Ivors. She's in the bedroom with Justin."

That did not exactly break the ice that incrustated him, but he began to bubble through it.

"And Mr. Hunt, and a policeman," Martie said hurriedly.

"S-see here! See here!" That seemed to be as far as he could go at the moment. He lifted a foot gingerly, as though it were the property of someone else, and placed it before him. He repeated the robotlike action with the other foot, and then alternately, until he was standing in front of Gorse. He made a fist and shook it, and his voice shook. "I don't want my wife in there with—I don't want her in there—do you hear? I'm not the type of man to put up with your highhanded methods. I'm going to take my wife home right now."

Gorse said, "Which fellow is it you object to having your wife closeted with?"

I underestimated him, Martie thought. He's quick enough.

Ivors retreated a step. "I didn't say—I—she needs her rest."

"Is it Hunt or the other one? Never mind answering. It isn't Hunt. The way I understood it, he works by her side all the time, so you'd be used to him."

Ivors looked insane. "I don't know what you're talking about—but you—you're highly insulting." His rage seemed to steady him. "How dare you read false meaning into matters that are not your concern?"

"They might concern me. It's funny, but often a slight case of domestic ructions leads to bigger business. I'm not saying the deceased had an oar in your family troubles—but could be."

Ivors started forward again, halted. "If dueling still obtained

I'd make you answer for your insinuations." He did not, however, offer to substitute his fists for the sword.

Martie fully expected him to call Gorse an unmitigated cad, but he seemed to have shot his ineffectual bolt.

Gorse said, "You disappoint me, Mr. Ivors. You were a lot more co-operative when I talked to you downstairs."

"You didn't tell me then that my wife was up here. Believe me—if I have to get every lawyer in town out of bed you'll——"

"I know. I know. How long have you been married?"

"A year. I fail to see——"

"Practically a bridegroom. No wonder you're so devoted to the little woman. Well, I'll release her if you insist—but that will mean I'll have to bother her tomorrow. This way she could get the routine over with and have nothing on her mind."

His attempt at diplomacy was wasted. Some inner fulmination made Ivors explode again. "Routine! The manner in which the law functions in this country makes us a laughingstock for the rest of the world."

"You think so? I got a notion the rest of the world isn't in a laughing mood, due to its own laws. I'm not saying there's no room for improvement here, mind you. Still, we're on the way."

Ivors actually said, "Bah!"

"Maybe you've got something there. This isn't the spot for armchair politics." Gorse yawned openly.

Too openly, Martie thought with interest, and watched for his next move.

Both men had apparently forgotten her presence. She did not see fit to remind them of it.

"By the way, Mr. Ivors," Gorse said, "you lost something. I picked it up close to where you were standing. Here." He extended his open hand.

"You found that—in the lobby?"

"So it *is* yours."

Ivors' head was lowered to study the coin. "No—it isn't mine—er—what a curious piece. Possibly a collector's item."

"I'm not a collector, so I wouldn't know. Perhaps, being a rich man, such pastimes are more in your line."

"I'm afraid I'm not an expert." He reached, then dropped his

hand. "It's—er—interesting. Not quite round—rather crude, in fact."

"Very crude." Gorse put the coin back into the envelope. "I'll turn it over to the police if no one claims it. It might be valuable."

"Why don't you leave it at the hotel desk? If you found it in the lobby someone might make inquiries."

"Someone might," Gorse said.

Martie heard one of the bedroom doors open and close. She heard men's voices and a louder version of the sounds that had come through the walls of Justin's room.

The policeman with the Italian-American face made his appearance. "Sergeant," he said tentatively.

"Hello." Gorse looked up at him. "What's the matter? Customers complaining?"

"One of them is, but that's not bothering me. The boys are finished in there." He jerked a thumb in the general direction of Martie's room. "They want me to switch quarters."

"Go ahead. There'll be nothing around to make anyone squeamish. The body was carried out long ago. And they might as well give the other room the once-over. Just in case."

"Okay—I'll wake the lady."

"Wake her? Then I take it she's not the one doing the complaining."

"No. She went to sleep with her head on her boy friend's shoulder. He ain't beefing either. It's the other fellow—Hunt."

"What's eating him?"

"Jealousy, maybe. The lady looks like a—a lady—but you can't always tell. Those two are ready to give her all they've got, and she ain't exactly discouraging one of them—even though she has a husband kicking around somewhere."

Ivors was sputtering again and pointing his toes toward the bedrooms.

"Hold it," Gorse said. "I'm going to break it up in a minute myself. Besides, you might get maimed. That song writer's shorter than you but he's got plenty muscles." His words did not reach Ivors, so he thrust out a foot which did.

Ivors tripped and righted himself painfully. He could not make a fresh start because the policeman blocked his path.

Martie spoke up indignantly, "Justin doesn't brawl. He's not that kind."

Gorse turned to her in surprise. "Say—I forgot about you. So he's not that kind? But he's the kind who lets another man's wife go to sleep on his manly shoulder."

Martie said, "If that was anything but innocent he'd hardly choose such a time for it." The statement limped and she knew it. She had seen Corinne and Justin escape into their own timeless world by the simple enchantment of a gesture or a look. "They were practically brought up together—they——"

"No need to lay it on so thick. Maybe it ain't relevant—and anyway, why should I bother to accept secondhand information when I can get it straight from the horse's mouth?" He addressed the policeman. "Bring the three of them in here."

The policeman performed a sharp about-face. His path cleared, Ivors started to follow.

Gorse said, meaning it, "Sit down, Mr. Ivors, and control yourself."

Ivors obeyed the first part of the order. He sat down.

The policewoman had paused in her labors to indulge in an uninhibited stretch. Gorse caught her at it. "You go home if you're that beat," he said. "Anything worth recording from now on can be written down in my head. Besides, I've a hunch that the important part of it won't be told in words."

The policewoman looked affronted. As though, Martie thought, some favorite bit of reading matter had been snatched from under her blunt nose. But after brief consideration she capitulated and made a stiff exit.

A silence held until the policeman returned with his charges. Hunt came into the room first, Justin followed with Corinne. Justin looked as fresh as a man who has stepped out of a brisk shower. He did not see Ivors because his eyes immediately searched for Martie. He seemed reassured to find her all in one piece.

"Tired, Martie?"

"Not any more."

"Good. If he takes as long with us as he did with you, we'll be lucky if we get home for Christmas."

Gorse said, "I thought of that myself. That's why I decided to

go in for mass production. I'll speed it up as much as I can. Sit yourselves down. You're all acquainted with this gentleman, I guess." He nodded toward Ivors.

Corinne, as she entered, had looked sleepy and lovely. Now she looked disturbed and lovely.

Ivors was staring at her. He seemed unable to leave his chair.

"Robert—we met Martie and Justin in the lobby and they asked us to come up for a drink. Then Martie found Dodie, and—and I thought I'd better stay."

"He gets the idea," Gorse said.

Ivors was struggling to his feet, but Corinne did not wait for him to complete the operation. She walked to the couch and sat down. On impulse Martie left her own chair and took the place beside her before either Ivors or Justin could reach it. Her motive was to chink what appeared to be an inviting loophole for trouble. Corinne understood and gave her a grateful glance.

Martie saw that the policeman and Gorse were huddled together in muttered conference, but she could not distinguish a word of it. The policeman handed something to Gorse. Then he went over to the desk, turned the chair around so that it faced the room, and dropped heavily into it. Notebook and pencil appeared in his hand.

"This belong to either of you ladies?" Gorse asked, and exhibited Martie's new compact. It did not look new.

Everyone except Ivors made sounds of recognition. Martie was the first to speak intelligibly. "That's mine. What happened to it?"

"I'm asking you." Gorse seemed almost sad. Instinctively his eyes went toward the desk.

"I'm getting it, Sergeant," the policeman said.

Gorse turned back to Martie. "Now then—you claim this powder gadget?"

"Of course I do." She extended her hand for it.

He leaned forward and made an accurate toss. The compact landed in her lap. "Don't be afraid to handle it. It's already been worked up for prints and had its picture snapped."

"You might have broken the mirror," Martie said reproachfully, "throwing it that way."

"The mirror *is* broken. In fact the boys dug out the splinters so you wouldn't cut yourself."

Martie was completely bewildered. "I don't understand. The leather's scraped—and even the puff's soiled—it must have fallen out." She looked at Corinne. "Oh, Corinne, what will you think of me? Truly—I was so pleased when you sent it."

"Wait a minute—skip the Emily Post routine. Mrs. Ivors sent it to you?"

Hunt scowled. "That, my good man, is the lady's business."

Gorse's large face assumed an expression of cold anger. "Don't 'my-good-man' me." He mimicked Hunt's tone. "So it's the lady's business, is it? Well—it happens to be my business from now on."

"He means Hastings Accessories," Martie explained. "Leather goods. Bags and sandals and things. He wasn't——"

"Oh! Oh—I get it. Hastings Accessories—where cute stuff is the order of the day—like dead dogs turning up in closets."

Justin murmured, "Somewhere I seem to have lost the drift of this B picture."

Martie was staring forlornly at the compact. "Corinne—the gold luck piece. Someone took it out of the little pocket. It couldn't have fallen out—it was wedged in so tightly." She lifted her head suddenly. Her eyes met Gorse's.

"So," he said. "Gold luck piece."

She stammered, "I hadn't examined it closely—that's why I didn't realize it was mine. Besides—you said you found it in the lobby—and naturally—well—I didn't have it in the lobby."

"Never mind what I said. Give it here." He leaned across Hunt and took it from her. He scrutinized it closely. "Yep—no doubt about it. The impression's bit deep into the leather."

"Where did you find it?" Martie asked.

"This? Under your bureau where someone with a nasty temper had thrown it. That's how come the mirror was broken. Seven years bad luck for that someone—all pressed into one second when the switch is thrown in the toaster."

Hunt snorted.

"Riddles at daybreak."

Martie said accusingly, "I didn't mean the compact—and you know it. I meant where did you find the gold piece?"

Gorse produced the envelope again and extracted the coin. He forced it into the pocket of the compact.

Hunt was watching him closely. "That's a replica of a Roman denarius, 44 B.C.," he said in a detached voice. "It's stamped with a head of Julius Caesar."

"You're just guessing, naturally," Gorse said. "You never saw it before."

"Don't be so subtle. It isn't necessary for me to guess. I've seen pictures of the original coins—and I offered the information because if I withheld it someone would be sure to pipe up and tell you that I'm an expert on such matters—in which case you'd begin to wonder why I kept my mouth shut."

"That right," Martie said. "He is an expert."

Gorse pounced. "Mrs. James, will you please not feel so kindly toward your fellow men. It might lead you into deep waters. If I'm not mistaken, it's in the stenog's notebook in your own words that you don't know Hunt very well. So how do you know so much about him?"

"Corinne told me. You see—she met him in the library. That was how he happened to join the staff at Hastings."

"Seeing it's you, I'll take your word for it. Which finds us back with the charming Mrs. Hastings-Ivors."

Justin said deeply, "I don't like your attitude."

"Dear me! If my handkerchief wasn't in the laundry, I'd bust out crying."

"I don't ask you to bust out crying," Justin said. "I ask you to tone it down. It's late, and neither Miss Hastings nor my sister has as much endurance as you might be accustomed to meeting on your usual rounds."

"I give you credit for trying to shield your sister, but you shouldn't take on the other lady too. She's got a close relative on hand to see that she don't get a raw deal."

Justin's eyes talked but his mouth was still. His eyes said what he thought of the close relative.

Ivors cleared his throat and became vocal. "As I warned you before, Officer, my wife is a delicate, sensitive girl. You'll have much to answer for if her nerves suffer because of the ordeal to which you are subjecting her." It was said in the long-winded manner of that Ivors who had played host in the Mauve Room.

Corinne spoke unexpectedly. "I'm not delicate or particularly sensitive." She looked straight at Gorse. "I realize that you're only trying to do your job, and I'm ready to help you in any way that I can."

Gorse said mildly, "Thank you, ma'am," and kept his voice down for as long as she remained the center of his attention. "Tell me everything you know about this powder case and the coin."

"It's one of our latest novelties. We had ordered small gold disks to go into the pockets, and we intended to monogram them and have good-luck symbols—perhaps four-leaf clovers—engraved on the back. But the disks were late in arriving. Today, when Mr. Corley visited me, I wanted to give him a present for his sister and I thought of Dodie Merritt's compact."

"Dodie Merritt's compact?"

"She was the one who designed them."

"I see. Continue."

"I choose one and looked for something to put in the pocket. I——"

Hunt interrupted her. "That's simple enough for anybody."

"Simple, but not complete," Gorse said. "Do you object to having the lady continue?"

"For God's sake!" Hunt shouted. "Even a New York cop should be able to take it up from there." He glared at his watch.

"Maybe—but we New York cops don't get time to browse in the public library. We leave that for the students, and the bums who sneak in to get warm. You must be crowding forty. That's kind of old for a student, unless you aimed to be a college professor and made a quick change in favor of the leathergoods business."

Hunt started out of his chair.

Gorse waved him back. "You start something and it's two against one. Mr. Corley won't fight on your side because he's not the brawling type, and Mr. Ivors doesn't feel well. But I've got a handy policeman in case I can't manage you myself."

Corinne said, "Willard, you're not improving matters."

Gorse eyed her with approval. "You were saying?"

She went on obediently, "Robert—Mr. Ivors—had gone to an auction and bought quite a few ornaments that he thought we

could use as decorations for the different articles we make. He'd left the box on my desk, and I looked through it and found one that would do for the compact."

"You found this?"

"Yes."

Ivors said, "You're confused, my dear. That coin wasn't among the trinkets I bought at the auction."

Justin shook his head. "Oh no—Corinne's not confused. And oh yes, it was in the box. I saw her take it out myself."

"You were there at the time?" Gorse asked.

"Sergeant, let's not waste more words than necessary. You heard Miss Hastings say quite clearly that I visited her."

Ivors' balloon-shaped tones might have been pricked with a pin. They sounded flat. "Then someone must have dropped it into the box."

Gorse said, "What makes you so anxious to disclaim all knowledge of it?"

"Anxious? I'm not at all anxious. It's simply that I chose everything in that box with considerable care. If I had bid on that coin I'd most certainly recognize it."

"Maybe you don't want to recognize it."

"Nonsense."

Hunt said, "Nonsense is right. This entire investigation is nonsense. Hasn't it struck the keen brain of the law that the auctioneer, or whoever packed the stuff, could have slipped it in by mistake?"

Ivors was silent. After a moment he nodded in apparent acceptance of Hunt's theory.

"I'll give the auctioneer a chance to confirm that—or otherwise," Gorse said.

Hunt laughed. "Some chance—for a man who handles hundreds of objects a day."

Justin addressed Gorse. "I don't want to impede progress, but I think we could all be more intelligent if you explained why this coin is so important."

"I was waiting for that question," Gorse said, "and for a couple of other questions that innocent people like you should have been crazy to get off their chests right from the start. I'll take the other questions first. Both Mr. Corley and Mrs. James

say they never met the deceased. Hunt admits he's seen her every day for better than a year. Mrs. Ivors, too. Mr. Ivors knew her so well that his interest covered a desire to improve on her present job. Okay. So all of you sit back and calmly accept without a whiff of curiosity the fact that she's found dead on the premises of two alleged strangers. None of you say, 'How did she get here—or——'."

"We did our wondering before you arrived," Justin said.

"And you came to a satisfactory conclusion so that it wasn't necessary to bring up the subject again."

"We didn't come to any conclusion."

"Not even a little one—like maybe somebody trying to frame you? Somebody who didn't like your face or your manly shoulder?"

Justin did not reply.

"That's insane," Ivors said. "You can't be civilized to suggest such a thing."

Justin let it go at that. "What was the other question we didn't ask?"

"You didn't ask what killed her."

"You provided that information when you looked at the body. You thought out loud that her head had been snapped back by a too-hard blow on the chin, resulting in a broken neck. The bruise was there to bear you out and there wasn't a sign of a weapon."

"You don't miss much. Yes, that's how I figured it, and will until further notice from the medical examiner. So far he agrees with me. Her neck was broken and there was no other wound or bruise—only the bruise on the chin, indicating that the weapon was a fist." He arose abruptly. He looked smaller standing. "Well—pleased to have met you. We'll be seeing more of each other."

He beckoned to the policeman who pocketed his notebook and joined him.

The others in the room began to stir, as though they were testing their sudden freedom. Hunt said dryly, "Don't forget the classic about none of us trying to leave town."

"Traveling's not so easy these days," Gorse said, "and I don't think any of you are dumb enough to attempt it."

Martie stopped him before he reached the door. "You still haven't told us why the coin is important."

"Well—well! I didn't know you cared." He cut his words out sharply. "That luck piece was nestling in the bosom of Dodie Merritt when someone smacked her out of this world. I was ready to believe it might have been something she always carried around with her—but it doesn't do to overlook any angle, so I thought I'd make a few inquiries anyway. What turned up makes me sure she hadn't been carrying it long."

Martie said eagerly, "But if any of us had been responsible—if the coin had anything to do with the murder, wouldn't we have removed it before you arrived?"

"Aside from you—and we'll count you out for the moment—nobody had opportunity to remove it. Mrs. Ivors didn't go into the room. Mr. Ivors ditto. Corley and Hunt went in together, and unless they were in cahoots it isn't likely one of them would have tried it. So good morning to you. Close your mouth, Mr. Ivors."

CHAPTER X

MARTIE opened her eyes reluctantly to the dark room. The touch of the bed linen against her bare arms was cool and delicate and unfamiliar. She turned over with a ripe sense of well-being and burrowed into the yielding mattress. She was in Corinne's apartment. "Please come home with me," Corinne had said. "I have plenty of room." It was an urgent appeal. And she had responded, weighing something in Justin's expression against Ivors' lack of cordiality. Justin had packed a small bag for her while she hurriedly changed into street clothes. It must have been nearly four o'clock when the embrace of this wonderful bed blotted out everything.

But what time is it now? She forced herself to consult the radium dial of the bedside clock. Only a quarter to five, the clock said. She wondered what had dragged her back to consciousness. Had she dreamed that hysterical voice ranting on and on?

She listened. She was in a room adjoining Corinne's. She heard a sound but could not translate it. Then she heard sobbing. She put a foot out of bed. Poor Corinne. I'll—— But surely such devastating abandon was no part of Corinne. A man might weep like that. Ivors!

She withdrew the foot. She lay back, holding the blanket close to her ears. This was not her affair. She was a guest in the house—and to her unwilling host an intruder. When at last her tense hold on the blanket loosened, the sobs had stopped. But there were footsteps passing her door, receding with heavy stealth. After that there was quiet.

She wanted to drain her mind, but against her will it worked busily, placing brick after brick upon that foundation of sobs.

She was under a murderer's roof. Robert Ivors was the murderer. He had been in the hotel when Dodie Merritt was killed. He had arranged a rendezvous with her there, and on some pretext or other he had sent her up to the Corley suite and followed her. But when the crime was committed, he could not live with it. He had confessed to Corinne, confessed and cried

in a passion of remorse. What the detective had hinted about someone attempting to frame Justin was true. That was why Justin's suite was chosen as the setting. And her own hypothesis that Dodie Merritt was blackmailing Ivors held truth. His motive had been to rid himself of two menaces to his security.

Looming high against the dark, this structure seemed sturdy and weatherproofed. Corinne—what will she do? I must go to her. But she could not stir her leaden limbs. If there were words to give Corinne in comfort or advice, she did not know them. She longed for wisdom. She longed . . .

When she awoke again, the sun was in the room. During her brief period of orientation the rattle of dishes elsewhere in the apartment lent substance to a general air of normalcy. The structure she had built in darkness collapsed. There were more reasons than one to make a man weep, she thought firmly. And perhaps it wasn't Ivors at all.

She arose and went to the connecting bathroom. Bathed and dressed, she picked up the scent of coffee and trailed it to the breakfast room.

Corinne was there alone. She sat at the table, a cigarette in one long exquisite hand, her forehead propped by the other.

"Good morning," Martie said. "I was afraid you might have left without me."

"No, I waited." Corinne did not alter her position. "Sit down." The hand that held the cigarette reached out for a small crystal bell.

Martie noted with relief that only one other place was set. She took it and smiled at the maid who answered Corinne's summons.

"Please bring fruit and fresh coffee for Mrs. James," Corinne said. "What else would you like, Martie?"

"Just toast, I guess. I don't think I'm hungry."

"You try a nice omelet," the maid said.

"Thank you. That does sound tempting."

"Did you sleep well?" Corinne asked when the maid had gone.

Martie said, "Yes," without hesitation. "That was the most comfortable bed in the world."

"You could have slept much longer," Corinne said. "I'd have

waited." She was staring straight ahead, her hand still pressed to her brow.

The newspaper, in its initial folds, lay at Martie's plate. "Do you mind if I glance at the headlines?"

"That's an early edition. I'm sure it doesn't carry last night's——"

"Didn't you look?"

"If the story was out, the maid wouldn't have been able to resist showing that she'd seen it."

Corinne did not stir or speak again until Martie had been served. "I'll call you if we want anything else," she said to the maid, and waited for her to leave. Then she lowered her hand from her brow.

Martie paused in the act of raising her grapefruit spoon. She stared at the dark bruise above Corinne's right temple. It stood out shamefully, a vandal's mark upon a work of art. A bruise. Another bruise! "You—you hurt yourself?"

"Yes—I hurt myself." Corinne spoke tonelessly. "Eat your breakfast, Martie. Emma shouldn't have brought the omelet so soon. It will get soggy."

Martie plowed through the grapefruit. She ate the omelet because the nice maid had suggested it, and drank two cups of coffee because she wanted them. She refilled Corinne's cup.

"Was that all the breakfast you had—coffee?" Martie asked.

"I never have much more. I'm glad you're here, Martie." The last was a childlike declaration, simple and touching.

"You were kind to ask me."

"No—not kind. Selfish. You're on vacation. I—— Oh, Martie, I do need help."

Martie wished that she was back in California. That's where I belong, she thought. Corinne's tormented face made her ashamed of the wish. She heard herself saying with deep sincerity, "I'll help you if I can," and waited.

"I want to talk to you, but I don't know where to begin."

"It isn't anything to do with Justin—is it? I think you've settled matters between you—and when the time comes you'll have my blessing." How smug that sounded.

"Thank you, Martie." Corinne repeated softly, "When the time comes." Then she said, "No—it isn't Justin. It isn't even

anything I can tell Justin. It's almost too sordid to tell anybody." She raised a glass of water to her lips. She swallowed painfully.

Martie plunged. "You asked me how I'd slept. At above five o'clock I was awakened by——"

That seemed to make it easier for Corinne. "You heard Robert."

Martie glanced fearfully toward the door. "Is he——"

"He left before I got up. I can't stay here any more. Whatever happens, I can't stay here. I think he's—I think he's mad."

The structure that Martie had built and razed in the space of a few hours flew up again, intact and ugly. "Before you go on, Corinne, you'll have to realize that I won't promise to withhold what you say from the police. I know a wife can't be forced to testify against her husband, but——"

Corinne cried, "No, Martie, he didn't kill Dodie Merritt. At least I don't—— Why should he? That wasn't what I meant to——"

Martie said gently, "What did you mean? You said you thought he was mad."

Corinne touched her finger to the bruised temple. Her eyes mirrored a nightmare. "There isn't any starting point for it," she said, "unless my marriage was the starting point. You'll never ask me about that, no matter how much you wonder. But I want you to know that I did it in good faith. I believed Justin was lost to me. I didn't understand his pride. I was numb and I wanted to be alive. I wanted a husband and children. I didn't want Hastings to be my life. I'd always thought that any woman could love any fairly personable man—given proximity and a will to love—and decent normal instincts. But I was wrong. At least I—it didn't hold for me. Robert——" Her voice was bleak. "I hate women who make conversation by analyzing their sex lives. I just want you to understand why——"

"It's all right," Martie said. "You're not the only one to fall into that kind of a trap. You mustn't blame yourself. I met Robert Ivors last night, you know. Many women might find him attractive—at first. Especially a woman caught on the rebound. When you make a mistake, the only sane thing to do is to right it. But it's obvious that, no matter how you feel, he loves you—and I got the impression that he'll try to hold on to the bitter

end." She looked around the luxurious room. "Somehow, in spite of his position—wealth and all that—he seems insecure."

Corinne said bitterly, "He is insecure. He has a younger brother—I never met him—he took all the honors away from Robert by being a sort of paragon in everything he tried. That might explain why——" She made a new start. "That might explain Robert's unwillingness to let me go. It hasn't much to do with love. It's that he regards me as a prize he's won by his own efforts—a prize he intends to keep at any cost. I don't mean to be smug. I'm not a prize." Her mouth wavered unhappily. "Not for him. All I can give him is pity. A rotten sterile business—pity." She touched the bruise again. "He came to me in the early morning," she said, "and begged me not to leave him. He boasted of a hidden power—one that would soon be recognized by all the world. He swore that if I went I'd regret it to my dying day—that I'd be turning my back on glory for the sake of a—a cheap whim. It sounds ridiculous. But it wasn't. It was horrible. He'd been strange before—beside himself—but this time it was worse than ever. I was frightened—frightened almost to death. I didn't answer him because I couldn't—and in the end my silence must have infuriated him, because he struck me with his fist."

Martie looked sick. Her fingers curled around the crystal bell. "And the sobbing?" she said to the bell.

"That came right after. I hadn't moved. He stared at me. I thought he would strike me again—he looked so d-d-eranged—but he didn't. Suddenly he went to pieces. He groveled—and cried."

Martie set the bell down with a thump. "Well—at least that's something tangible. Now you have grounds for a divorce." She listened with surprise to the echo of her brisk practical tones.

The maid stood in the doorway. "Yes, Mrs. Ivors?" she said. Corinne covered the bruise quickly, and in time.

"I'm sorry." Martie drew the maid's eyes. "I rang the bell by accident. I lifted it without thinking."

"That's all right, Mrs. James." She pronounced the name triumphantly, as though she were performing a memory feat.

"Thank you for the omelet," Martie said. "It was delicious."

"I like doing for company." She addressed them impartially.

"Will you be in for lunch?"

Corinne said, "No—you can clear now. I'm going to the shop—as usual. I took a little time off because of Mrs. James. She's here on a visit from California."

"A short visit," Martie said hastily. "And so many things to do."

"We'd better get started." Corinne arose. "Coming?"

"Yes." She followed Corinne.

Corinne stopped when she reached her bedroom. She drew Martie inside and shut the door.

A fitting chamber for an ice princess, Martie thought. Silver and white. Corinne stood before a triplicate mirror, studying her face objectively.

Martie said, "You can't go around all day clapping your hand to your brow. Haven't you some of that—what's it called—pancake make-up?"

"No, but I could send for a box. Only I think the bruise would still show. Perhaps adhesive tape——"

"Dark glasses might cover it." Martie noted that now they were both using brisk practical tones.

"Sunglasses? I have a pair." After a short methodical search Corinne found the glasses and put them on. "No—they're not high enough." She tossed them aside. She sat down in a white tufted chair. Her voice changed. "Martie—I hate it—all of it."

"I know." The words stretched to hold a world of sympathy. Justin mustn't see that bruise. She took Corinne's hand. "Are you really going to the shop?"

"Yes—they'll have heard about Dodie. If I don't appear——" She lifted her shoulders. "But first I'll have to put some clothes into a bag. I won't come back here."

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know—to a hotel, I guess—if I can get accommodations. If not I'll sleep in the office—anywhere."

"Shall I go to the shop with you?"

"Yes—I wish you would."

A telephone bell rang softly. Martie looked around for its source.

"On the night table," Corinne said. "I suppose it's the shop—but if it isn't I—— Martie——"

"Sure." Martie walked over to the night table and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

The answering voice was Justin's. "Hello—do I or do I not recognize that well-modulated contralto?"

"You do."

"Greetings, Sis. How are you?"

"Fine," she said automatically.

"Did you get some sleep?"

"Yes—did you?"

"Soit'n'y. Me and my nice clean conscience. Is Corinne all right?"

"Yes."

"How's about breaking into the polysyllabic class? Or is the meatball home?"

"No." She placed her hand over the mouthpiece. "Corinne, it's Justin. Will you talk to him?"

Corinne started toward the phone, halted, and shook her head. "I'd better not. It would take so little to make me cry."

Justin roared, "Hey—what is this? If you can't talk, meet me somewhere quick."

"I'm going to the shop with Corinne. I'd like to see it and she's invited me."

"Well, why didn't you say so? Any chance of my having a word with her?"

"Not right now."

He said disappointedly, "Being unhep to the circumstances, I won't insist. Oh—I almost forgot—we have an apartment on Park Avenue."

"What?"

"It belongs to Oaky Forest."

"Justin, you made that name up."

"Nope. Oaky did. He's leaving town for a coupla three weeks, so he gave me the key—on condition, of course, that you start leading an honest life. No open house for your stiff pals."

"Did you—have you given up the hotel suite?"

"Not yet, but when I do it won't be a minute too soon for the powers in charge. They froze on me."

"Hold on to it until I see you."

"What's up, Sis? I thought you'd be tickled pink about the apartment."

"I am. It sounds wonderful. What's the address?"

"It's on Thirty-ninth Street. I've forgotten the number, but you'll find it in the phone book. There's only one Oaky Forest. Anyway, you don't need the address. I'll move your kit and you too. But I don't get the hotel angle. Could I come to the shop?"

"That wouldn't be wise. Where can I reach you later?"

"I'll be in the hotel. You're sure you and Corinne are all right? You haven't heard any new developments or anything? I didn't see the paper yet, so——"

"Neither did I. Don't worry, I'll call you at noon."

She hung up. Corinne had taken several pieces of luggage from one of the closets. She was opening and closing drawers.

"Corinne, one of Justin's friends lent him an apartment. You can share it with me until you find something else."

"Are you sure you want that? I know it's wrong to involve you——"

"Don't be genteel. The apartment's a stroke of good luck on both sides—unless you want me to spend my vacation worrying about you."

Corinne said, "Martie." She did not cry, but the tears were there, waiting. She shook her head and winced.

"Does it hurt?"

"When I move my head a certain way—or touch it, I meant to apply some ice, b-but——"

"Do it now. I'll get my own things together. We can have everything picked up and taken to the new address."

Corinne stopped her. "Martie—last night—Dodie Merritt—does it seem real to you?"

"Off and on."

"It doesn't to me—not even off and on. Martie—someone was murdered, and all I can think of is me."

"Nobody expects you to be a hypocrite and put on a show of grief. Naturally the death of even a stranger isn't a pleasant thing to be in on, but aside from that, this girl wasn't a particular friend of yours."

"No—she wasn't a friend of mine. I didn't think much about her one way or another—except that I was upset when she kept

bringing that dog to the shop." Corinne caught her breath. "Oh."

"Oh what?" Martie stared at her. "The dog—the one your husband told the detective about?"

"Robert told the detective? Why should he have——"

"I don't know. What actually happened?"

She listened intently to the account of Misty's sudden end. "Corinne—that's awfully queer. First the dog and then its mistress."

"You don't think there could be any connection?"

"It's a pretty strange coincidence."

Corinne said tiredly, "Robert's attitude toward the whole thing was even stranger. He acted as though he thought I'd done it—and yet as though he was quite willing to make allowances and cover for me if necessary."

"You're imagining that."

"No, I'm not." She smiled a salty, curling smile. "It was after Dodie had accused me out in the hall. I'd gone back to my office with my secretary and Willard Hunt. Robert came in full of—well—a sorrowful kind of importance. He kept insisting that nobody believed I had anything to do with Misty's death—that he'd convinced both Dodie and the entire personnel that I was innocent. But he hinted that under the circumstances it was well to pacify Dodie and that he would escort her home while the chauffeur took the dog out to the Long Island estate to bury it."

Martie digested this. After a moment she said, "Did he escort Dodie home?"

"Yes, I guess so. Martie——" Her pallor had increased. "Do you think he *is* insane—that all this is an elaborate plot to keep me from belonging to—to Justin? Maybe if I go from him he means to see that nobody has me. Could it be possible that he killed the dog to make it seem as though I were the one who'd become unbalanced—and then followed it by killing Dodie for no other reason than to establish the fact that I was well out of hand—not fit to be at large? Else why should he tell the detective about Misty?" She pressed her hands to her head. "Why should Dodie be found in your room—with the luck piece I gave you inside her dress and——"

Martie had completely forgotten the compact and the luck piece. "Corinne—stop it. You sound like a soap opera. You're overtired. If anyone wanted you to seem guilty, the murder would have been done some other way. Not with a fist. Nobody, looking at you, would be stupid enough to think you even had a fist."

That made Corinne smile.

Martie hugged her, the comforting hug she usually reserved for Linnie or young Nick. "We're going to get out of here—into the fresh air. I'll finish your packing for you—and then we'll go to the shop—but we needn't stay long. And the first thing you'll do when we get to the new apartment is crawl into bed."

There was a knock at the door. "I'll see who it is. You go into the bathroom and wash your face and see if you can find something to hide that bruise." She waited until Corinne had closed the bathroom door behind her. Then she said, "Come in."

It was the maid. Her eyes popped when she saw the pieces of luggage on the floor.

"I've persuaded Mrs. Ivors to pay *me* a visit," Martie said. "She's getting ready now."

"I—I see, ma'am." Training fought with a mixture of bewilderment and curiosity. Training won. "It's about the new chauffeur. He's on the house phone to ask if Mr. Ivors left any instructions for him."

"I don't think so." Martie hesitated. Then she said, "But we'll be down in a short while. Please tell him to wait."

CHAPTER XI

YOU'RE STILL BEAUTIFUL," Martie said, "but won't that adhesive tape attract more attention than the bruise itself?"

"I don't care if it does. When people stared at the bruise I'd be sure to betray myself because I'd imagine they must know where I'd got it. This way I can pretend that the tape covers a cut or a pimple."

"A pimple—on your skin!" They were crossing the lobby of the apartment house. Corinne walked with grace. The taped brow might have been a fashion she had created in a moment of whimsy.

Out on the sidewalk they paused, tasting the day. Perfect, Martie thought almost resentfully. But she felt the lift of her spirits.

"There's the car," Corinne said. "I hate to use it. I'd been promising myself that I'd take nothing more from Robert."

"I'm sorry. We can still walk."

"No. Bondy's seen us."

The chauffeur stood on the pavement. He touched his cap as they approached.

"He's new. Isn't he, Corinne?"

"No. He worked for Robert even before we were—— Good morning, Bon——" Puzzled, Corinne's eyes went to the car.

"Good morning, Mrs. Ivors." He grinned. "Yes, it's your car, all right. My name's Benson. I'm subbing for Bondy. He's sick."

"Oh? That's too bad. What's the matter with him?"

"Pneumonia."

"Is he in the hospital—and does—does Mr. Ivors know?"

"He knows, ma'am. Everything's attended to. I took the job on yesterday. Matter of fact, I drove this lady and a gentleman to the theater last night."

"What hospital is Bondy in?"

"I've got it right on the tip of my tongue—uh—St. Martin's—that's it." He held the door wide. "Where's it to be this morning?"

They got into the car, and Corinne gave the address of the shop. Again Martie observed that the chauffeur drove well.

He did not move his head, but his voice curved around ears that were close-set and unusually small for a man of his size. "Your husband didn't leave me any instructions last night, Mrs. Ivors. Will he be at your place of business?"

Corinne stirred uneasily. "I don't think so."

"Well—I just thought he might be. He happened to mention he was helping you out."

Martie said abruptly, "You were at the hotel last night. I suppose you couldn't help hearing about the—accident."

The chauffeur said curiously, "An accident? Is that how Mrs. Ivors— Beg pardon, ma'am, but I noticed the sticking plaster and——" He did not complete the sentence.

It could not be called insolence. It could not be called anything, but it fired Martie's instinctive dislike for him. "What time did you leave the hotel?"

"When I went back after I dumped—drove you to the theater, Mr. Ivors told me he was going to hang around. He said not to wait—he'd taxi home. So I blew. Looks like maybe I missed something. Was there a fight?"

Martie said dryly, "I came in when it was over. I just thought you might know something about it."

"No, ma'am. I guess it was nothing much or it would have been in the morning paper." He parked the car, got out, and opened the door. "Should I wait?" he asked Corinne.

"I won't use the car any more—today."

"Then I'll go back to the apartment. The boss might try to reach me there." He performed a cocky salute. He stood looking after them as they entered the building.

Corinne said, "What made you question him? Surely you don't think he's involved in this. He came to work only yesterday."

"Somehow he doesn't look or act like a chauffeur."

They stepped into the elevator. The boy greeted Corinne by name, then hastily averted his eyes. Corinne did not appear to notice. The floor indicator might have been a clock ticking away the moments to her end for the way she watched it. Her

shoulders tensed as the car stopped. "Here we are," she announced unnecessarily.

There were about five sleek women seated at garrulous ease on the reception-room chairs. Their talk stopped as the elevator cage opened to release the newcomers. Corinne nodded from right to left but did not break her straight line toward the inner door. As Martie joined her on its other side she heard a highly audible gasp.

A large murmur swelled out from one of the rooms they passed.

Corinne stopped irresolutely and then moved on. "The workshop," she said. "I always stop in, but——"

In her office she motioned Martie to a chair and herself took refuge behind the desk. She looked chilled.

Martie attempted to spread warmth. "What luxury. This isn't the Hastings I remember."

"You mean the loft? That was fun."

"Just the same, you're an awfully smart girl to have created all this."

"Willard helped," Corinne said. "I suppose I ought to let him know that I'm here—with all those women waiting." She looked helplessly at the mail piled on her desk. She gave it a little push. "Martie, something's snapped. I don't want to be here any more. It's funny—I had an offer last week for Hastings and I turned it down—I laughed—as though it were fantastic for anyone to think I'd ever sell. But now—right now if the offer were made I'd accept it."

"You would—really? I hope it isn't only a phase. It would make Justin so happy."

"Justin. Do you think Justin and I will ever——"

A young girl came into the office. "Miss Hastings—I thought I heard your voice—I——"

"Mildred—what is it, child?"

Mildred had burst into tears. "My mother—Miss Hastings—she——" The rest of it was soaked shapeless.

Corinne thrust a handkerchief into her hand. "Blow your nose and start again."

Mildred blew. She mopped the still-flowing tears to clear her

vision. Her voice rose above water. "I'm sorry—I didn't know. I'll—I'll come back."

"It's all right. Mrs. James is a friend of mine—not a client," Corinne said. "Is your mother ill, Mildred? Do you want some time off?"

Mildred shook her head. "No—she—it's my brother's fault. He works at night in a plant near New Rochelle—where we live. He always gets home in time for breakfast, but this morning he was late and I was just leaving when he came in. He was late because he met a girl—a friend of mine who lives on our street. She has a job at the York-Plaza as night operator. Some friend—I'll never speak to her again! She had to tell my brother about you being there last night—and about Miss Merritt——"

Corinne and Martie exchanged glances.

"So my brother laid down the law to my mother. I'd have to quit Hastings right away, he said, because it didn't sound like a respectable place to him—judging from—— Well—my mother always does everything he tells her to. She—she never listens to me." Mildred blew her nose again. "That smart aleck. He socked me when I tried to argue. But I socked him right back. They didn't even want me to come in this morning. As if I'd do that when you've been so g-good to me. You're nicer than just about anybody I ever met, but my mother won't——"

"It's all right, Mildred. I understand."

"Oh, Miss Hastings, if jobs weren't so easy to get nowadays she wouldn't have been so stubborn. It isn't fair. I'll never have another as interesting as this. I want to stay."

"Never mind. It will all blow over—and then perhaps you can come back."

"You'd take me back?" Slowly the mist lifted over Mildred's boyish face. "You're a saint. I don't care what they say—you're a real saint. I'm going to stay all day. I'm going to attend to the mail and clear up as much as I can."

"No. I'll borrow Mr. Hunt's secretary to help me out. You run along."

"Please—I——"

"There might be some unpleasantness. It isn't necessary for you to be subjected to it."

"You mean like detectives? That doesn't matter. I've been

subjected to one already. He was waiting when I came in, and he asked me all kinds of questions."

Corinne said faintly, "What questions?"

"About yesterday when Mr. Ivors brought in the ornaments he'd got at the auction—and about Miss Merritt and you—and her dog and you—and about—about everybody who came here yesterday—and what they said and did—and what you said and did. He even wanted to know where I was last night and why I was crying. I told him I was at the movies, and I had to explain why I was crying because he'd have—he'd have thought it was something to do with Miss Merritt. I told him nobody would cry for her." She went on earnestly, "I said if it came right down to it, nobody here liked her—and that meant me too. And I said she must have known plenty of people outside who felt the same way. He didn't frighten me a bit. I think he's still here. Oh, Miss Hastings, let me finish out the day. I'm to have dinner in New York with a girl friend, so my mother won't know the difference."

"Very well—and thank you. Tell the bookkeeper to have your check ready for me to sign. Tell him we owe you a two-weeks vacation."

"But you needn't—you—— Well," Mildred beamed.

"Do you think you can handle the mail yourself?"

"You bet I can." She gathered up the letters. She hesitated for a moment. "Miss Hastings, did you hurt yourself?"

Corinne's hand rose to the adhesive tape. "It's nothing—a slight infection."

Mildred looked shocked, as at the profanation of a goddess. "An infection—on your lovely skin?"

Corinne's lips smiled. "You might tell Mr. Hunt that I'm here."

"Yes, Miss Hastings."

But she did not have to tell Mr. Hunt. He jostled past her as she walked out.

"Corinne, I just saw Mrs. Griswold. She told me you'd come in." His blue eyes stretched. "What happened to your forehead?"

"A boil," Corinne said, "a festering boil."

He looked at her incredulously. "A boil! You don't put adhesive tape on a boil—unless you want to kill yourself."

Martie said, "Good morning, Mr. Hunt."

"Oh, good morning, Mrs.——" He reduced her to the smallest fraction. "Corinne, you'd better see a doctor if that's really a boil." He added doubtfully, "I've never known you to have anything like that before—and there was certainly no sign of it last night."

Corinne said calmly, "I've never known you to fuss about trifles before either. Mildred says there's a detective here."

Hunt scowled. "Sure enough. The same bird who kept us awake all night—singing the same song. He's disrupted the workshop. It's a wonder he hasn't started in on the clients."

"How is it going, Willard? Do any of the clients—— Mrs. Griswold was here only last week to collect her sandals."

"You may well ask. I've been up to my neck since nine o'clock. So far a half dozen who weren't due came in for an earful. Either they're staying at the York-Plaza or they've got spies staying there." He shrugged. "At least it isn't ruining business."

"Well—now that I'm here I'll take them off your hands. By the way, Mildred's leaving."

"Mildred? I don't have to ask if you fired her. You never fire anybody."

"Her family doesn't like the atmosphere we create."

"You don't say! With jobs two for a penny, the little people are having a Roman holiday." Then he said, "I'll stick an ad in the paper. Meanwhile, there's no need for you to stay. You couldn't have had much sleep. I'll take over."

"Willard, perhaps one of these days I'll pull out and let you—or you and someone else—take over entirely."

He stared at her for a moment. "Don't do anything in a hurry this time, Corinne." His voice was toneless. "See you tomorrow."

"No. The detective might want to talk to me again. I'm sure he's discovered by now that I'm at Hastings rain or shine. If I don't carry on as usual he'll begin to wonder."

"What he should begin to wonder is how long he can hold down his job. Well—suit yourself. Is Ivors coming in?"

"He left the house before I did."

"He left the—— For a man who was so anxious to join our

happy family and make himself useful, he isn't putting up much of a show." Hunt's eyes were on her brow. He wrested them away and made his exit.

"I was snubbed," Martie said. "That man doesn't like me."

"Willard doesn't seem to like anybody much."

"He likes you."

Corinne made no denial. "I've never encouraged it. Not that he's made a nuisance of himself—ever. And I don't know what I'd have done without him so far as Hastings is concerned."

"What did he mean about Mr. Ivors being so anxious to join the happy family?"

"Just that he decided to share my interests and talked Willard into making a place for him here."

"Oh—of course—I knew he'd gone to the auction, but I didn't realize it was to be a regular thing. Kind of pathetic in a way." Then she looked at Corinne's forehead and added, "Maybe." A slight sound made her turn her head.

Gorse stood in the doorway.

He removed his hat grudgingly.

Martie was indignant. "You don't have to listen at keyholes. You can come right in and sit down and we'll keep talking the same as we would in private."

A smile broke out like a rash on his large face and faded like a rash as his eyes touched Corinne's forehead.

Corinne steeled herself, but all he said was, "If you had that last night, I'd have thought maybe the cat scratched you."

"A cat scratched her this morning—a stray cat that she stopped to pet on the street," Martie said.

"My little girl pets stray cats too," he offered casually, "except when she's got on her best clothes."

Martie said, "So you *are* somebody's father. I thought you must be married and——"

"Widower. Nice setup you have here, Mrs. Ivors. All yours, or do you just front for it?"

"Front for it?"

"Well—sitting behind that bare desk, you look more like a decoration than a lady executive."

Martie decided to see if frankness was really disarming. "Miss Hastings wouldn't have come in at all this morning. Only she

thought you'd put her absence down to something more than fatigue."

"And what about you? You could have stood in bed. You're not part of the happy family."

"So you did eavesdrop. I hope it helps you to solve the case. I just came along to provide moral support."

His head swiveled back to Corinne. "Last night I didn't figure that Hunt was the big cheese of the outfit. I thought it was yours and that he was one of the hired hands."

"It is mine—except for a small interest that I made over to Mr. Hunt after he'd been here awhile." Corinne looked puzzled.

"Now what could Hunt have done to rate an interest?"

"He worked hard—and contributed a great many ideas."

"You sound like the ideal boss. Yes—quite a setup."

Corinne flared suddenly. "Are you making conversation? Because you needn't. I feel a certain obligation to answer your questions, but I don't feel obliged to converse with you."

He parodied a hurt expression. "No reason for you to take offense." His eyes toured the office. "A fellow like me doesn't see places like this every day in the week." He walked over to the small leather-covered table. He fingered it. "My little girl thinks there are only two kinds of leather—patent and the dull stuff. Wait till I tell her different."

"I'm sure it can't really matter to you."

"I wouldn't say that. Not being one of these college policemen, I have to learn where I can."

Martie said abruptly, "What are you learning about the death of Dodie Merritt?"

"A little bit here and there." Far off a noon siren whistled. "Time flies in pleasant company," Gorse said.

Martie persisted. "We have a right to know." Then she exclaimed and glanced at her watch.

"You in a hurry to go somewhere?" Gorse said. "Don't let me keep you."

"No. I just remembered a phone call I'd promised to make at noon."

"Well, if this was my office I'd say help yourself." He gestured toward the desk telephone.

Corinne interpreted Martie's expression and rescued her.

"There's a booth down the hall, Martie. I like to keep this wire open for business calls."

Martie said, "Of course. I'll be right back." She did not want to desert Corinne, even for a few moments, but it would be impossible, with Gorse there, to inform Justin of her plans for the borrowed apartment.

On her way to the booth several young girls crossed her path. From the look of their freshly rouged faces she supposed that they had just come from the washroom. They were deep in conversation, but not so deep as to forget caution. They stopped talking when they saw her and somehow managed to convey the impression that they had been engaged in a business conference.

One of them addressed her with synthetic graciousness. "May I help you, madam?"

"I'm just looking for the telephone booth."

She received explicit directions. Closeted in the booth, she took time out for a crooked smile. The little frauds. Poor Corinne. She had caught the drift of the gossip before it was turned off. Merritt, Mrs. Griswold, and adhesive tape figured prominently.

Justin was cross at first, but when she told him that Corinne had quit Ivors' bed and board he shouted triumphantly, "That's your doing, Sis. It must be. Yesterday Corinne was all for running it off in slow motion. Has she seen a lawyer yet? Mental cruelty should do it—if you can call anything connected with Ivors mental, except in a purely institutional sense. Where will she stay? Oho—Sly Boots! So that's why you told me not to give up the hotel suite. Does she stay there or with you?"

"With me."

"Bless you, Martie. Bless Oaky Forest. Hurray. I'll leap over to the apartment with flowers and a welcome mat."

"Do, Justin, but don't wait for us to come."

"Why not? I gotta see my girl. I gotta. I promise I won't stay longer than it takes to say 'prunes and prisms' and I won't make a move that the most misanthropic house dick extant could find fault with. Besides, when better chaperones than you are——"

"Justin, hold on." She hated to thwart him, but she could not

chance the possible effect of the bruise. Intuitive, he would refuse to be fobbed off with cat scratches and boils. And, brawling type or no, he would most certainly seek Robert Ivors to make full return. "Look, Justin, Corinne's all in. I'm going to take her to the apartment as soon as I can and put her to bed. I know you want to see her, but——"

"You're not keeping things from me?"

"No. What with last night and the decision she's made, it's natural that she should be a bit upset——"

"Just the same, I think it would help her to have me around—but I won't insist—if you insist. I'll leave Oaky's key at the desk."

"Good boy. Want to be of real service? Have someone pick up my bag and Corinne's at the Ivors' place."

"Done. Martie, you get some rest too. *A tout à l'heure*—English translation—toodle-oo."

She stepped out of the booth and came face to face with Detective Sergeant Gorse.

CHAPTER XII

SHE HUNG between relief that he was no longer bothering Corinne and anger that he had been eavesdropping again.

Gorse said affably, "That must have been an important talk to make you willing to trust me alone with your girl friend."

"It wasn't important, but I hoped it would be private."

"I didn't hear a word of it. Party at the other end seemed to be doing most of the talking. Anyway, I got in at the tail end, and besides, you talk too low."

"Next time I'll yell like a fishwife. I like to keep people happy."

"You do at that."

"Are you finished with Miss Hastings? I want to take her home."

"Yep, I'm finished—or interrupted for the time being. But that's no good to you, because it seems your Miss Hastings will be tied up a while longer. A customer found her way into the office and started gushing oil—not the kind that's valuable—so I excused myself like a gent or a leather fancier or something."

"That was decent of you." She meant it.

He looked sheepish. "Miss Hastings is a beautiful girl—too beautiful to be so bowed down. Whatever ails her, I don't want to add it to more than is strictly necessary."

Martie believed in striking while the iron was hot. "What did I miss? What did you ask her while I was gone?"

"Some more about a dog—where he was buried—and is Mr. Ivors a boxer."

"Is he?"

"He had mild workouts at a gym but gave it up. He's soft. Not that it takes a champ to break a skinny little female neck."

Martie shuddered. "Then it was the blow on the chin."

"The p.m. doesn't offer anything to deny it. Doc lays two to one on it being a plain fist without benefit of brass knuckles. At least that tells us the crime wasn't premeditated."

"You think it was Ivors' fist?"

"I suspect him as much as I suspect anyone else. I——"

Three more girls came down the hall, each carrying a towel. Martie judged that Gorse was no part wolf from the scowl with which he discounted their feminine charms. He grasped her arm at the elbow and steered her toward the reception room.

"You're heading me in the wrong direction," she protested.

"I'm hungry. I haven't eaten since six o'clock this morning."

Her dark eyes sparkled. "Is this a lunch invitation?"

"Yeah—at the corner drugstore. You said you had a right to know what's what. We could swap ideas over a sandwich."

"But Corinne will wonder what became of me."

"She'll have no time to wonder. That gusher won't be exhausted for another hour."

"All right," Martie said. The opportunity to be in on the ground floor was too good to miss.

There was one woman left in the reception room. She had a small peevish mouth and a slim tapping foot. She stared at Martie and at Gorse with greedy eyes. She was obviously tuning up for speech when the elevator arrived to swallow them. Serves her right, Martie thought. Let her go home and drown her curiosity in a bubble bath.

The drugstore was crowded and noisy. Privacy in reverse. Anyone could have arisen and shouted murder without causing the lift of a tweezed eyebrow.

Gorse commandeered a small glass table as it was being vacated. "Ham on rye and coffee," he said to the busy waitress. He cocked his head toward Martie.

"The same." Lunch was to be no lingering affair, and she did not want to waste time in a more careful choice.

Gorse said, "You spent the night at the Ivors' house. How did he act this morning?"

She hesitated. "I didn't see him. He left before I got up."

"Oh." He looked discouraged. "Maybe his wife said a few things that would give you a fair idea."

She felt sorry for him. "I'm not working against you," she said impulsively. "I——" She had an urge to present him with her theories. Perhaps somehow he could make them airtight. I owe no loyalty to Ivors, she told herself defensively. "Mr. Gorse, if I said something in confidence, would it be printed in the newspapers?"

The food had arrived. He began to eat without taking his eyes from her face.

"If you said the murderer's name, it would."

"I can't do that. I can only——" Corinne would hate me, she thought helplessly, but it isn't a betrayal. He's so impersonal—not a man—a job. And he just might find a connection that we've missed. "It's more of an index to character than anything else," she said.

"So shoot. What can I lose? I'm not interested in chucking bones to the *Daily News*. I'll take the essence of what you have to say—if any—and throw the rest away."

She told him of the sobbing in the night, of the structure she had built to house it, and of Corinne's story at breakfast. She gave him almost every thought she had harbored since Dodie Merritt's body was discovered, including her suspicion of the new chauffeur.

He swallowed a bite of sandwich. "You got imagination, Mrs. James."

"Is that all you think of it?" She felt ridiculous.

"No reason to look so insulted. Comes down to it, I've got imagination myself. Take your brother, for instance. You left him out of the picture entirely, but——"

She said scornfully, "I didn't leave him out. He is out."

"Well, I could find a nice little place for him somewhere in the middle. He said he never saw Merritt until she was out of this world—but little Millie, Miss Hastings' secretary, says different." He spoke rapidly to prevent interruption. "She says Miss Hastings had sent for Merritt yesterday, just before your brother arrived unexpectedly, and Merritt was right behind him when he stepped into the office."

"And Justin killed her because he has a phobia about people walking right behind him."

"He could have thought Merritt saw or heard something he didn't want her to see or hear."

"Justin has never cared who sees or hears anything he says or does. If you were the right kind of detective you'd have noticed that last night."

"The frankness I noticed might be part of what my superiors would call his criminal pattern."

"Mr. Gorse, I raised Justin. If he had a criminal pattern, it's likely I'd have noticed it long ago."

"And unlikely you'd tell me about it."

"Look—I respect you too much to take you seriously."

"Your brother has some time to account for during the last act of his show. It wasn't possible to really check. Everybody was too busy backstage to keep track of him." He sent a wash of coffee down his throat. He changed the subject. "Why do you suppose Millie was crying so hard?"

Martie said, "She told you why. It seems to me she told you more than her prayers."

"Think so? For that matter, if I was the right kind of detective I could work up a lather of suspicion because you've been more than average open and aboveboard too." Her expression drew a hasty follow-up. "But I'm not the right kind of detective. All I know is you're okay. To get back to Millie—she's a healthy-looking youngster—plenty muscular. That story she told about being forced to quit her job by Mama could be eyewash. She knew Miss Hastings was dining at the York-Plaza. Maybe she suddenly had to see her about something and went there—or maybe she went to visit her friend, the telephone operator. So she accidentally bumped into Merritt—accidentally or on purpose bumped her off—and didn't feel so good about it today."

"She killed Merritt—and in my room? Oh, Mr. Gorse." Her voice was inflected with mock sorrow. "If I were you I'd call up her mother and——"

"I did that—but she wasn't home." He drained the last of his coffee. "Right now I got to make another call—to headquarters." He turned the check over and slapped it with a half dollar. "Eat your sandwich. I won't be long."

She was completely deflated.

She left the untouched food and waited near the door, her eyes fixed unseeingly upon a row of empty cigarette compartments until he joined her.

He grinned and took her arm. Out in the air he said, "Cheer up—we might be getting somewhere at that. I told you we'd swap ideas, didn't I? Well, I went to the auction room at eight-thirty this morning and proved to my satisfaction that the luck piece didn't come from there."

"You don't have to humor me. What good did it do you to prove that?"

"Elimination. Meanwhile I'd let the reporters photograph the thing for the late editions." He guided her into the lobby of the office building. "One minute," he said, and trotted to the newsstand on his short legs. He bought a paper, manipulated it dexterously, and returned to her side.

He led her out of the way of hurrying workers and thrust the paper under her nose.

She did not read the account of the murder. Her attention was claimed by a blown-up picture of the denarius.

"I wanted folks to get a squint at it and maybe start thinking."

"Did——"

"Nothing definite yet. Can you describe the chauffeur?"

"Yes, but——" She described him. "A big man—a very big man. Blond. Small eyes—large white teeth. The back of his head's flat—small ears. I can't do better than that. He said his name is Benson."

"What was the hospital he mentioned?"

"St. Martin's. Is he the murderer?"

"He could have been hired. Some of those plutocrats don't do a thing they can pay to get done."

"But why?"

"Who knows—yet? I think you've been a help. Mum's the word?"

"Yes—but——"

"I'll be seeing you—and thanks."

Frustrated, she wailed, "Mr. Gorse, wait——" But he was gone.

She returned to Hastings Accessories. The reception room was empty. Corinne stood at one of the windows in her office.

"Martie—I couldn't imagine what was keeping you."

"I met the detective in the hall. He said there was a customer with you, so I didn't hurry back."

"I wish you had. I thought she'd never stop talking."

"Poor darling. There was another woman in the reception room. Did she find her way in too?"

"No. I guess Willard diverted her to his office—or to the workshop. What did Justin say?"

"He insisted that you share the apartment with me before I had a chance to ask his permission."

"You didn't tell him about Robert? I don't want him to know—ever."

"I didn't tell him. Come along now while the coast is clear. You have the detective's permission."

"Is he getting anywhere, Martie? He pretended to be so casual—and yet——"

"Don't think about it." Gorse had said, "Mum's the word," and aside from that there was nothing to be achieved by contributing to Corinne's almost tangible misery. "Have you a phone book? Oh, here it is. I want to look up the address. Justin wasn't sure of it." She found Oaky Forest's improbable name. She read his address aloud.

"I'll let Willard know where I'm going in case he needs me for anything," Corinne said. "I won't say I'm staying there, though. Not yet." She lifted the telephone receiver and spoke briefly.

A taxi had pulled up in front of the building to discharge a fare. "Get in quick," Martie said. "It's a good omen. Last night we couldn't get one for love or money." They leaned against the upholstery, silent until their destination was reached.

Justin had apparently rushed right over. The key was at the desk, and upstairs in Oaky Forest's apartment there were flowers: small white orchids and lilies of the valley dumped uncereemoniously into a great luster bowl. Justin had tossed a card in with them. It said in rangy scrawl, "For the new tenants with my love."

Corinne's face became less sad. She touched the card with her finger tips. Then she looked around the room with widened eyes. "Gracious," she said.

It was a setting of vividly striped upholstery, a rank growth of green rugs, cushions, rows of jacketed books, tanks of gold-fish set into the walls, and a madness of esoteric gadgets. It was an adolescent's dream of luxury.

Martie laughed and Corinne joined her. The laughter was healing. "God bless Oaky Forest, whoever he is and whatever he does," Martie said fervently.

Corinne threw unexpected light upon their absent host. "He's a band leader. I never thought when I listened to him that I'd be his guest."

"Corinne—don't tell me you're what they call a hep chick!"

"Not exactly—but sometimes when I was alone I'd turn on the radio—hoping to hear one of Justin's songs."

Martie was touched. "Did you? And you saw the show, too—but Mr. Ivors said he had to persuade——" She set her lips angrily. For a moment both of them had forgotten him, and now his mark was stamped upon Corinne's face again.

"I didn't want to see it with Robert," Corinne said.

Martie banished him. "Did you ever tune in when they were playing 'And So Were We'?"

Corinne nodded. "The moon was tangled in a cloud—and so were we," she sang softly. She looked surprised. "Oh, Martie, I haven't wanted to sing in so long."

"You'll make up for it," Martie promised. "I remember when Justin wrote that. It was for you. Most of his songs are—but that one especially."

Corinne took her hand. "To have Justin—and to acquire you as a sister seems almost too much to ask of life."

Martie smiled at her. "I'm only thrown in as a premium because life's overstocked with me. Let's explore. We owe it to Oaky."

The apartment was large. There were four bedrooms and two baths, and even the baths were striped and gadgeted. The tour was as good as an ocean voyage for the way it lifted Corinne's spirits. As each new wonder was revealed it became easier for Martie to identify her as the young girl who had once shared a little family expedition to Jones Beach.

Finally they stood on the threshold of Oaky Forest's kitchen. It was a routine affair, and Corinne made mock lament at the absence of stripes and goldfish. "Do you suppose he's got a full larder to compensate?" she asked. "I just remembered that we haven't had lunch."

"That's right—we haven't." Guiltily, Martie recalled and dismissed the drugstore venture.

They found milk and crackers and cheese. They ate at the

kitchen table, both deciding against a more formal repast. "After this a nap," Martie ordered. "Have you chosen your room?"

"I want the one with the bed that's shaped like a swan—but first choice is yours."

"I'll renounce the swan, provided you don't start dreaming of Jupiter. It wouldn't be fair to Justin."

Because Martie was sure that a man of Oaky's expansive personality could not possibly object, Corinne borrowed a pair of his pajamas. Inconsistently, they were made of a deep unstriped blue.

With Corinne settled in the swan bed, Martie went back to the living room. She sat down, vainly trying to adjust herself to a curved functional chair. She yawned experimentally but could bring no conviction to the exercise. She was not sleepy. She was restless.

She began to think about Gorse, about Ivors, and about the chauffeur. She thought herself into a state of rare confusion. She wished she had read an account of the murder. She wished she had bought a paper so that she could read it now. She wondered if Corinne had gone to sleep, and hoped she had. Corinne would need strength if Gorse was on the right track in suspecting that Ivors had hired the chauffeur to kill Dodie Merritt.

That's what he did suspect. The other stuff about Justin and Mildred had been thrown in to confuse her.

Ivors was Corinne's husband, no matter how she felt toward him. And their names would be coupled for a long time to come, even though a divorce took place. In fact a divorce would serve to fatten the gossip. There was nothing to be done about that.

Martie carried on a shifting, squirming argument with the functional chair but could arrive at no truce. She got up and paced the room. She plucked a book from one of the shelves and restored it hastily because it set forth the exploits of a popular comic-strip character with X-ray vision, super-hearing, and a talent for machineless flying. I'd be glad to discuss a little proposition with the gentleman, she thought wryly, but a meeting at second hand won't do the trick.

She stood before an octagonal desk. I'll sit down and write a letter to the children. That will make me feel better. No—I'll

phone them. I'll leave the money for the calls we make in an envelope, in case Justin's neglected to make other arrangements.

There was an electric clock built into the desk. It had a plain face and a round of large freckles that substituted for numbers. In its secretive way it said, "Three o'clock." She compared it with her wrist watch, subtracted five hours, and received a vision of Lynn and Nick engaged in postbreakfast pursuits in the patio of Grandma James's house.

Oaky's telephone sat on top of the grand piano. She found herself doodling musically on the keyboard as she put in the call, and supposed that to be the idea behind the odd mating of instruments. It was after four when she achieved the connection, and it was well worth the wait. Both children were halting and stiff at first, but finished on a robust note. She did not need Grandma James's assurance that they were well and happy. Even at that distance she could tell. Her face wore a cover-all smile as she hung up.

Before she had time to resavor the conversation she was called to the door by a tinkle of chimes. They sounded like, and were intended to sound like, a radio-station break.

A colored man stood in the corridor surrounded by luggage, Corinne's and her own, including the bags she had left at the hotel. Poor Justin, having to do all my packing, she thought. He's a darling. She changed her mind temporarily as Justin stepped out from behind the colored man.

"The only way I could get it here was to bring it myself," he said. "How's big sister?"

"Big sister doesn't know whether to kiss you or smack you."

"Extremist." He hugged her.

She released herself. "Corinne's asleep. I can't pretend I'm not glad to see you, but I'm not going to let you disturb her."

"All right, boss. I'll make like an itsy-bitsy mouse." He helped the man to carry the luggage inside. He sent him happily on his way and followed Martie to the living room. He reeled under its impact. "It doesn't improve on second acquaintance," he whispered. "Think you can bear up?"

"I think it's enchanting. And so does Corinne."

"Do you sit there and tell me she can sleep through these stripes?"

"Keep your voice down. It isn't the stripes that worry me."

"Sis, what made her decide to light out all of a sudden? Oh God, I'm glad." He said it with reverence.

"I guess your visit to New York brought matters to a head."

He seemed satisfied with that. The brooding look had gone from his eyes. His happiness sent out a deep glow. Absently he started toward the piano. His strong quick hands hovered over the keys.

"Don't, Justin."

"Not even a lullaby? This is the first piano I've seen close up since I hit town."

"Not even a lullaby. Save it for a rainy day."

"That won't be a rainy day for my money." He sobered. "I'm getting ahead of myself. There's a lot to be cleared up first, isn't there?"

"I'm afraid there is. Have you seen the newspapers?"

"Yes—three of them, all carrying larger-than-life pictures of the gold coin."

"What did they say?"

"Nothing we don't know."

She sighed. "The detective turned up at Hastings this morning."

"Hell. It's too bad Corinne has to go through that stuff."

"He was really rather considerate. Justin—he suspects Ivors."

"What!" Then he shook his head. "Next time you see him, perish forbid, tell him he's barking up the wrong tree. It must take some kind of guts even to kill a woman. Ivors might talk somebody to death, but his potentialities for being dangerous end right there."

"I'm not so sure," Martie said. "If he lost his head he might inflict physical——" Oh my lord, she thought, I mustn't get off on that track.

Justin stared at her. "How come you two got so chummy?"

"He took me to lunch and——"

"He took you to lunch?" Justin chuckled.

"Shhh."

"Excuse, please. What else did you pry loose from the gay blade?"

"If you think it's funny——"

His mood changed. "I don't think it's funny. I think it's a rotten sordid mess, and I'm sorry it had to touch you in any way. Try not to dwell on it any more than you can help, Martie. I doubt if that detective would have given you any real information considering where the body was found and——"

"All right, Justin, let's drop it." She realized that she could not trust herself to tell him the full story without hinting at the cause of Corinne's precipitous departure. "And now, hadn't you better leave? There must be loads of things you want to do."

"That goes for you too. What about dinner?"

"I'll fix something here—and go to bed early."

"I didn't bring you to town to slave over Oaky's hot stove. You're going out with me—you and Corinne. Stop shaking your head. I know an interesting little restaurant where nobody's likely to see us and make snide remarks. As if I care."

"Corinne may sleep until quite late, Justin, and——"

He raised his voice triumphantly. "Oh no, she won't." He strode across the room. "Will you, my darling?"

Corinne stood near the threshold. "Justin, I didn't know you were here. I'm not dressed—I——" It was too late to escape his outstretched arms.

"Not dressed, the lady says. Those pajamas have enough cloth in them to dress Mrs. Grundy and her whole family." He pushed the silken fall of hair away from her forehead. "I do believe you're still asleep. I know the answer to that one." He kissed her mouth. "There—just like in the story." Then he drew away and looked at her. "Baby—who hit you?"

Corinne lost the warm flush of sleep. She had removed the adhesive tape. Lines to show where it had been crisscrossed the livid flesh.

Justin stared at her. "Don't look like that, darling. I was only joking." After a moment he said slowly, "Or was I?"

She had been saving her tears. She spent them now.

CHAPTER XIII

THE DAM HAD BURST, freeing a year's emotional control. Justin did not try to stem the flood. He held her close, his mouth against her hair.

Martie stood by helplessly, feeling that any move she made would be intrusive. I'd better call a doctor, she thought. It's nervous reaction—an accumulation of—— A doctor will know how to——

"Justin," she forced the words. "I'm going to call a doctor."

He was not listening. When he raised his head there was a white ridge around his nostrils. He lifted Corinne in his arms and carried her to the bedroom.

There was nothing so plebeian as a telephone book in all that striped domain. Martie stopped searching after ten minutes and tried to recall the names of doctors she had known in New York. Her mind refused the task. It was littered with unacknowledged fragments. Why doesn't Justin come out? When better chaperones are made—— They're both adults. I trust Justin. I have my own life to live. I can't hear a sound. At least she's stopped crying . . .

When at last Justin appeared she was still standing before the telephone. "How is she?"

"All right now," he said briefly. He walked by instinct to a barrel-shaped liquor cabinet.

"I wish you hadn't come. I knew——"

"Never mind. Corinne needed to cry." He was holding a bottle of brandy. He set it down and took three small glasses from a shelf in the door of the cabinet. He filled them and said, "Will you please take one into her? She wants to see you."

"Don't go away until I come back, Justin."

"I had the impression that you couldn't wait to get rid of me." His voice was smooth.

As well as she knew him, it was impossible for her to judge what he was thinking or feeling. She carried a glass of brandy into the bedroom. Corinne was drawing on her stockings. Wet silky lashes were a matted frame for her eyes.

Martie looked at her and thought wonderingly, Eyes red with crying and an ugly bruise should be enough to ruin anyone's beauty. But I'll bet there isn't a man living who wouldn't step into the knight-errant role right this minute.

"Feel better?" she asked.

"I do. Much better. Only—I'm ashamed."

"You couldn't help it." Martie did not know exactly what she meant by that assurance. "Drink this. Justin prescribed it."

Corinne took the glass and sipped.

"You really ought to go back to bed."

"I told Justin about Robert. He made me."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. Don't let him leave, Martie. I'm afraid he'll look for Robert—make matters worse than they are."

Martie said without faith, "He won't—not now. If he intended to do anything like that he'd have rushed out right away."

Then they heard the sound of a door closing.

Martie hurried to the living room. Justin was gone. Two glasses of brandy stood untouched on the top of the liquor cabinet, hers and the one he had poured for himself. She ran to the door and out into the hall, hoping to stop him before he reached the elevator. The hall was empty.

Back in the living room she contemplated the brandy glasses with grudging pride. Anyway, she told herself, he doesn't need Dutch courage.

Corinne joined her.

Martie said, "The chances are he won't find him."

Corinne seemed to take hope. She looked at the desk clock. "If he goes to the apartment he won't. It's only a quarter to six. Friday nights we usually have dinner at home, and Robert seldom arrives before seven-thirty. He has some sort of meeting, I think."

"Then Justin certainly won't wait. He's far too impatient. And the more time he has to think things over, the more likely he is to realize that the whole idea's a stupid one." If he does wait, she thought in not quite effectual self-comfort, at the worst he'll give Ivors a black eye, which is really no more than he deserves, and Ivors will take care to keep it a secret, not because of Corinne, but to save his own ego. In spite of the fact that Ivors was

a larger man, it did not occur to her that Justin might come off second best.

"I shouldn't have been so weak," Corinne said. "I do wish Justin had stayed here. I'll worry until I see him again."

"Give him time. He'll come back. He mentioned something about taking us out to dinner." She pretended to a fine casualness. "I don't think that's so wise, but I'm definitely in the minority." She cast about for something to give them occupation and said with relief, "Did you know our luggage had arrived? Are you strong enough to do some unpacking?"

"Of course."

Together they carried the bags to their rooms. Martie kept glancing at her watch and listening for the door chimes as she disposed of her belongings. When she had finished she whiled away a little more time by combing her hair, washing her face, and applying fresh powder and lipstick. Then she went in to see if she could help Corinne.

But Corinne had finished too. Her luggage was stowed out of sight. She came out of the bathroom, showered and dressed, a wet cloth pressed to her eyes and brow. "It doesn't seem to help much," she said apologetically, "but I want to look as well as I can so that Justin won't be reminded of the way I broke down." She put the cloth aside and began to make up her face. "I'm all mixed up, but among other things I do feel awful about you, Martie. You should be out somewhere having fun. That's why you're in New York. If for some reason or other Justin decides not to come back here, why don't you call up some of your old friends and——"

"Justin will come back—and if he doesn't, you'll treat me to dinner at a really swank place. After that I think I'll be about ready to call it a day." In the middle of a realistic yawn she gave a high jump. "Was that the phone?"

"Yes—shall I——"

It was almost a race to the living room. Martie had the advantage. She knew that the telephone was on the piano. "Perhaps it's only someone who thinks Oaky's still here," she said with false pessimism. She was sure it would be Justin. "Hello?"

"I want to speak to Mrs. Ivors."

Not Justin. Hunt, she thought quickly. Hunt's the only one

beside us who knows Corinne's here. But although the voice was familiar, it did not sound like Hunt. She glanced at Corinne, whose lips were shaping Justin's name. She shook her head and said into the mouthpiece, "May I know who's calling, please?"

"Detective Sergeant Gorse."

"Oh. Well, this is Mrs. James."

Gorse said bluntly, "I still want to speak to Mrs. Ivors. Is she there or not?"

"Yes, but——"

"If she *is* there, put her on."

Martie beckoned to Corinne. "It's the detective—asking for you."

Corinne took the phone. "Hello? . . . Yes. . . . But why should—— Yes, I heard you but—— Not unless you——"

Martie, at her elbow, whispered, "What is it?"

Corinne turned to her desperately. "He won't tell me—he keeps saying he wants me to—— Here—see if you can——" She thrust the phone at Martie.

Martie said, "Mr. Gorse, this is Mrs. James—I——"

"What! You again?" He had shed all friendliness. "Well—you and Mrs. Ivors catch a cab and come to her apartment pronto."

"Why?"

"There's been what you might call an accident. Listen—I'm shorthanded, but if you don't show in twenty minutes flat I'll send a police escort. Now put your brother on the wire. I've got a yen to hear his voice too."

"My brother? He isn't here."

"That's just what I figured. I wanted you to confirm it all. Hop to it now." The connection was broken sharply.

Accident! Justin. Worse than a black eye! Martie's heart pumped furiously, and something had happened to her legs. To keep them from folding she gripped the piano, shifting her full weight to her straining hands. "Corinne—he says there's been an accident. C-could you please get our coats?"

The interlude between leaving Oaky's apartment and arriving at Sutton Place was never anything in Martie's memory but a series of flashes captioned by unfinished thoughts. Corinne's frightened eyes. A mirrored glimpse of hatless heads in the

lobby. A light rain patting the shining sidewalk. A gray-liveried doorman who whistled in vain. A fast walk. A beggar. Somewhere flowers. A traffic-packed avenue. An empty cab. Buildings in motion. The inside of a pocketbook. Fumbling hands. A bill. Close-ups of faces. The driver's, wrinkled and dry. The couple in the elevator. Sane. Enjoying life. The maid's. It had turned yellow since morning. Mildred. Why Mildred? Hunt, tight-lipped, concerned. Gorse . . .

The flashes resolved into continuity the moment Gorse spoke. He had followed the maid to the door. "This way, ladies," he said, and conducted them to a small study. "Be seated."

Mildred had disappeared. Hunt tried to enter, but Gorse ordered him back. "Wait inside. I'll call you when I want you."

Hunt opened his mouth, closed it, and went reluctantly. Corinne and Martie sank into large leather chairs. The study was aggressively masculine, except for the photograph of Robert Ivors that stood on the desk.

Martie was tight with questions she could not ask. Corinne seemed to be taking stock of the room, as though it might yield some clue to the exact nature of the summons.

Gorse watched them, his attention making record round trips from face to face. His attitude dared them to break the weighty silence.

It was Corinne who finally accepted the challenge. "What is Willard Hunt doing here?"

"I had to call him to locate you. He came right over."

"And my secretary?"

"Something about her mother and a check that you forgot to sign. She insisted on waiting."

"Her salary. I forg—" Corinne started to rise.

"Stay put. She'll keep."

Corinne stayed put. She sat tall, her chin held high. "Why did you bring us here?"

"You wouldn't have any idea?"

She did not answer.

"You and your husband live alone—no kids. But of course when I tell you there's been an accident you can't narrow it down right away."

Corinne said, and Martie wondered at her calm, "When you

told Mrs. James of an accident, I assumed that something had happened to Mr. Ivors. But I assumed that if it was serious he'd be in the hospital. So I still can't see your reason for insisting that we come here."

"Very fair." Gorse studied her sardonically. "Pardon me if I remark that your behavior is far from wifely. Or should I take that back? I see you've shed some tears." He paused. "Any comment? Well, I didn't really expect any. Not to change the subject, seen Corley around lately—say in the last hour or so?"

Corinne said evenly, "Where's Mr. Ivors?"

"Resting nicely."

"Is he here?"

"No. What about Corley?"

Martie made her vocal cords perform. "Why are you interested in my brother?"

"Okay. So I'll answer your questions and mine at the same time. Your brother got a load of that cat scratch Mrs. Ivors is wearing. Being a man of action, he went gunning for the cat."

Martie's lips did not move. She was addressing herself. I told this man that Ivors struck Corinne. I volunteered the information. I fixed everything.

Gorse said, "No denials? I'm disappointed. I wanted to throw them right back at you." He raised his voice. "Ross—send that maid in here."

Ross? Who was Ross? Martie turned to Corinne for answer but found none.

The maid came in. She did not look at anybody.

"Don't be afraid," Gorse said. "Speak your piece."

The maid's face was still yellow. Her hands plucked bunches of apron and dropped them, and plucked again. "I told you everything I could."

"Who came here at a quarter after six?"

"A Mr. Justin Corley," she said mechanically. "He asked to see Mr. Ivors. I told him I didn't expect Mr. Ivors until after seven. I said did he want to wait. He said no, he'd come back."

"Did you think it was a social call?"

"I don't know, sir."

"You can think, can't you?"

Her voice dwindled. "The people who come here on business are mostly from Mrs. Ivors' shop. They ask for her."

"So you thought that since Corley didn't say he was from the shop, and since he asked for Ivors, it might be a social call?"

"No. Mr. Corley looked—he looked as though he had business on his mind. Not that he wasn't polite—but he just seemed businesslike." She added, "It couldn't have been more than ten minutes after he left that Mrs. Ivors' secretary came—and right after that Mr. Ivors——"

"That's enough. Thanks. You don't need to stay."

The maid glanced irresolutely at Corinne. She said, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Ivors. I'm sure you're a good lady and that everything will be all right." Then she bolted.

"Now we know where we stand," Gorse said.

Martie cried, "We don't know where we stand. If Ivors really had an accident, what has it to do with us? Why are you making all this fuss? Suppose Justin was here? He didn't wait and he didn't come back, or you would have known he wasn't with me when you phoned."

"He came back all right."

"The maid didn't say——"

"The maid didn't see him. He didn't come this far. He met Ivors downstairs or thereabouts and probably steered him to a convenient alley where he proceeded to transact his business. That's how it must have been, because nobody heard—— Never mind. We can skip that part for the present."

Martie whipped herself to anger. It was the only way she could keep her voice steady. "You and your cat scratches. I can't force you to state in plain words what really happened—and I don't know whether Justin saw Ivors or not—but I can tell you this much. Justin's no brute. He'd never deliberately hurt Ivors enough to send him to a hospital."

"You admit he left you with the intention of pinning Ivors' ears back?"

"I admit nothing. I should think you'd be trying to find out who killed Dodie Merritt instead of wasting your time on anything like this. If Ivors got a black eye or a bloody nose he deserved it, and he should be ashamed to call the police."

Gorse said quietly, "He's not ashamed. He's not anything—at least not so's you can notice it."

"You mean he's unconscious?"

"Permanently."

Neither woman took it in. Corinne said, "No." Her face was blank. Martie stared at Gorse. "I don't believe it. You think Justin——"

"It's got nothing to do with what I think. Frankly I can't make it tie in with—— Nuts! He was here. And he wasn't stalking Ivors to wish him a happy Easter. That much is certain." He turned toward the door. "Who——"

Corinne said, "Justin," and Martie echoed it. They heard his voice, composed and deep, followed by the troubled voice of the maid.

Then he was in the room, a bit nonplused, but carrying it off with aplomb. "Corinne—Martie—and my esteemed friend, the sergeant. The maid told me you were on the reception committee, but I didn't believe it. Look—you've got the wrong idea. I'm not going to hurt the guy." He turned to Martie reproachfully. "You, at least, should know me better than that. I'd never use violence when honest discussion would do the trick—and in this case it will."

Gorse snorted.

Justin looked at him. "I guess Martie called on you because you're her pal—and I guess you've got a blueprint of the situation—so I might as well speak openly."

"You might as well," Gorse said.

"All I want is to convince him it would be an error to contest the divorce. I won't sock him in the teeth unless it's absolutely necessary, and if I've sized him right it won't be. So will you please kindly leave me to it?"

Martie said, "Justin, Ivors is dead."

Gorse shouted, "Damn it to hell!" He glared at her. "Keep still."

She glared back. "Why are you swearing? Why should I keep still? I didn't give anything away. According to you, he knows Ivors is dead. According to you, he killed him."

Justin looked groggy. "Now wait a minute—play that over slowly."

Gorse walked up to him. "Stand still. Don't make a move." His hands reached out and slapped the pockets of Justin's suit.

"What is this?" Justin's dark face was a blend of astonishment and distaste.

"Even you didn't have nerve enough to walk in here with it. Where did you ditch it?"

"Are you running a temperature? Boil it down."

"You get me. I'm talking about your thirty-two caliber—the one you used to kill Ivors."

"Now listen——" He shook his head. He said, "It's true? Ivors is dead—shot?"

"*You* listen, Corley—and you give the answers without spouting a lot of sludge to gain time. Not that you seem to need time. That entrance you cooked up on the spur of the moment was pretty good. Where's the gun?"

As though she had just emerged from a trance, Corinne said softly, "I'm sorry Robert is dead. I didn't want any harm to come to him."

Justin went over to her. "Easy, Corinne——"

Gorse said, "That's unnecessary advice. She's taking it easy all right—mighty easy for a new widow."

Justin faced him. "About the worst insult I can dream up is to think you really believe in this stuff you're peddling. So here goes. I never owned a gun in my life. I never handled one. I never even saw one close except in the movies. And offhand I can name you at least a hundred of my acquaintances who exist in a similar class of ignorance, all of them raised in good middle-class families in good middle-class neighborhoods where firearms rank with the crown jewels—interesting to read about, but entirely remote. I arrived here at something after six o'clock, armed only with my glib tongue and my not so glib fists. Ivors wasn't home. The maid invited me to wait, but I'm not a good sitter-arounder. I said I'd come back and I came back—as of now. And if you search for a year and a day, you'll find nothing else on my chest or up my sleeve."

Martie restrained the "Bravo" that rose to her lips. She stared at Gorse defiantly.

Corinne was staring at Justin, but not defiantly. There was color in her cheeks and love in her eyes.

Gorse alone seemed unaffected. "What did you do in the meanwhile, Corley? Between the time you left here and the time you came back?" He looked at his watch. "It's seven forty-five. According to the maid, she showed you out at six-twenty. Ivors arrived about fifteen minutes later. That gives you more than an hour to account for."

"And I can account for it. I was going to take a long walk, but——"

"A long walk—in the rain?"

"Yes—I wanted air and exercise. Don't look so skeptical. I changed my mind because I met a friend down the street—a crooner named Beck Allen. He asked me to have a drink with him—and I did—at the bar in the Hotel Tarquin. We sat there talking shop and stuff. There was a piano in the bar and they let me play it. I'll admit I hadn't decided until then whether to reason with Ivors or clip him. Music-soothes-the-savage-breast kind of thing."

"It's nice and I'll check it," Gorse said, "but it doesn't let you out unless this crooner can swear to the exact time he met you."

"I doubt if it will come to that, Sergeant. I'm optimistic. I expect you to regain your balance any minute and gallop off in the right direction."

Gorse said, "I'm a pessimist myself. I'm afraid it *will* come to that. I'm afraid I'm going to have to arrest you on suspicion of murder."

Corinne started to speak.

Martie was first.

She cried indignantly, "Oh no, you're not."

Justin hushed her.

"Please excuse my sister. She's thinking that she doesn't want her two children to own a jailbird uncle. Neither do I, for that matter."

Gorse said unexpectedly, "Neither do I," and cleared his throat.

Justin's set mouth softened to a faint grin. "Human as all get out. Look, feller, you've taken it for granted that I know what this is all about. So help me I don't. But even if you can't swallow that, what will you lose by making a nice big gesture and

laying your cards on the table? How didn't I kill Ivors with a gun I didn't own?"

Gorse said, "Ivors staggered into the entrance of this house and made for one of the elevators. The boy noticed something funny but smelled liquor and thought the usual. Ivors pounded on the door of the apartment. The maid let him in, and he collapsed before he could say more than one word. The maid thought it sounded like Corinne. It could have been Corley. She opened his coat. His shirt and vest were wet, but most of the bleeding must have been internal. He was shot just after you left, because he couldn't have staggered far with that wound. I arrived, not knowing from nothing, as he was being loaded into an ambulance. He died on the way to the hospital. Imagine my astonishment, seeing as how I'd come to talk turkey to him about that other death."

Corinne made a moaning sound.

Gorse did not look at her. "So what am I to do? I've got to arrest you."

"There are two schools of thought about that, Sergeant. Do you think I killed the girl too?"

"You could have. You were out of your sister's sight long enough. And it happened in your suite."

Martie said, "You know he didn't kill her. I can tell by your face."

"Never mind my face. I could be wrong, but from where I sit the two murders have no connection."

"Of course they have a connection. Only you're not smart enough to find it. You're using Justin as a scapegoat. You want to arrest him to show whoever it is you work for that you're on the job. I'm ashamed of you."

Gorse said with admirable control, "Maybe you're smart enough to take over."

"If I did take over I'd at least have the sense to make sure of what I was doing before I sacrificed innocent people to my own ego. What about the denarius? What about the dead dog? What about the chauffeur?"

"And what about your figuring at noon? Does it still make four with Ivors cancelled?"

"You never heard of thieves falling out, I suppose?"

Gorse said wearily, "Yeah—I heard of it—but in this case it doesn't fit—not if the conclusions I reached this afternoon hold water—and they do."

"What conclusions?" Martie went on firmly. "If ever a man needed help, you're that man. And how can we help you when you insist upon keeping everything to yourself?"

The "we" was editorial. Martie, and Gorse, too, had forgotten the others. Justin murmured, "That's my sister," and gave her an enchanted gaze.

Gorse did not hear. He was regarding Martie with a face full of mixed emotions. "Maybe you'd like me to bring that phony chauffeur here so you could browbeat him into making a full confession."

"I don't browbeat," Martie said with dignity, "but if you must arrest somebody, why let him go free?"

"Mainly because where Ivors' murder is concerned I've got nothing on him. You're in for a bad disappointment, Mrs. James. Right after I heard your spiel I took steps. I put a tail on him. Like he told you, he came here to wait for Ivors, who didn't show. Then, according to my operator, he left at one-twenty, drove the car uptown to a chauffeur's hangout on Columbus Avenue, a beanery with rooms upstairs and an adjoining parking lot. He parked the lot, went up to one of the rooms, and from last reports he's still there. The operator keeps phoning headquarters from a pay station in the hall of the building."

"I don't believe it. There must be another exit——"

Gorse groaned.

"So that's what you call being a help?"

Mildred stepped into the room. "Miss Hastings, Mr. Hunt sent me to——"

"Mildred, you shouldn't be here," Corinne said. "Give me your check and I'll sign it."

"I don't care about the check. I only brought it to keep my mother quiet. Oh, Miss Hastings, isn't it terrible! Can't I do something for you?" She looked important and excited.

Gorse said, "I hate to break it up——"

Mildred ignored him. "Mr. Hunt says he bets you haven't eaten—and the cook has such a nice dinner ready. Please——"

Martie said speculatively, "Dinner. Can't we all have something to eat?" She looked at Gorse. "How do you expect to think clearly on just an old drugstore sandwich?"

"Mrs. James, you don't seem to realize——" His eyes slid past her face.

A policeman stood in the doorway of the study. "Excuse me——"

"What do you want?" Gorse said. "You're not one of our boys."

"Your boys?"

"Gorse—homicide."

"Homicide? Is there——"

"Skip it—you're a precinct cop. So what?"

"I came about the car. Parked where it is by that empty lot, I thought maybe something was wrong."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"This is the Ivors' apartment, ain't it? Well—a couple of letters in the pocket are addressed to Robert Ivors, so natchally I——"

Martie said, "That much for your tails and your parking lots and your chauffeurs' hangouts."

CHAPTER XIV

GORSE HAD BEEN mumbling into the telephone. He hung up and came back to the dining room. Five pairs of eyes leaped to his face: Martie's, Corinne's, Justin's, Hunt's, and Mildred's. He ignored them. He sat down at the table and tackled his dinner glumly.

Martie put down her fork. "Did he get away?"

"Worse than that. A skip would be as good as a confession, but the tail rang up headquarters ten minutes ago to report that the lad who calls himself Benson is still in his room."

"Maybe he climbed down the fire escape, shot Ivors, and climbed back," Justin said.

"I don't even know if there is a fire escape. Besides, why should he ditch the car in this neighborhood? He could put it back in the parking lot as easy as he could take it out."

Martie said, "Are you having him brought here?"

"Yep—I'm sending a car for him. Don't ask me why. How can I crack an alibi I personally handed him on a platter?"

Hunt looked puzzled. "You must have had something against him to tail him in the first place."

"Sure—Mrs. James put a bee in my ear—and after I worked at it awhile, reports came in to say she was right as far as she went. Trouble is she didn't go far enough." He pushed his empty plate aside. "I might as well tell what I know before the lot of you hound me to death."

Martie was not fooled. She knew that if he told them anything worth the telling, it would be only to study their reactions. We're not out of the woods yet, she thought. Not any of us. He's trying to make us believe we are, but——

"To begin with," Gorse said, "I got in touch with Bondy, Ivors' regular chauffeur."

Corinne said, "At St. Martin's Hospital? How is he?"

"Wait a minute. He's not at St. Martin's. He isn't suffering from pneumonia, and he didn't send anyone to take his place. He's home with his wife and a concussion that he got while walking down a dark street. So far, so good. I can guess who

conked him—but that's not murder. Also, there are other counts against Mr. So-Called Benson, but they don't spell murder either. My smart operator lamped him as a guy with a record—no interruptions, please—I'm getting there—small blackmail—street rioting, et cetera." He pointed to Mildred, who recoiled in fright. "This young lady put a different bee in my ear when she described what happened when Ivors returned from the auction. She told me the ornaments spilled on the floor and Ivors crawled around picking them up. That's where the denarius comes in. He must have dropped it out of his pocket."

Mildred looked relieved. She nodded, pleased with her contribution. "He must have if it didn't come from the auction, because I remember picking it up myself and putting it back in the box when Mr. Hunt came in after Misty. It was the same coin Miss Hastings used later for the compact."

"But Ivors didn't see you pick it up?"

"No, he was talking to Mr. Hunt. Mr. Hunt didn't see it either."

"Yeah. So later when he misses it he comes back to look and it isn't there. And he gets a notion the dog swallowed it. That's why he kills the dog."

Corinne cried out in horror, "Robert? No—he wouldn't——"

Hunt said, "You've got no reason to defend him, Corinne. He tried to pin it on you."

Justin asked grimly, "Is this surmise, Sergeant?"

The maid appeared and said timidly, "Mrs. Ivors, do you want coffee served in here?"

Gorse said, "Sure—where else? Surmise? Nope. A couple of the boys went out to the Long Island estate and dug up the dog. It had been strangled—and later slit down the belly. Why? Because Benson had been ordered to look for the coin—and by who but his boss? That's not what you'd call surmise—is it? But it still doesn't spell murder."

Mildred said, "Slit down the——" Her voice was choked. "Excuse me, please."

She rushed from the room.

The maid brought coffee, a bowl of fruit, crackers and cheese, and a large frosted cake. She had obviously decided it was unnecessary to practice what she had learned about serving. Every-

body looked sick except Gorse. He continued to look glum as he helped himself liberally.

"What makes the denarius so important?" Martie said shakily.

"It's not important. More the mark of a guilty conscience than anything else. I showed you its picture in the paper, didn't I? But I didn't tell you it had brought response."

Four voices synchronized. "Who——"

"Not who—they—the FBI. A day or so ago they took a guy into custody on suspicion of snide maneuvers on some un-Christian front. They tried to take two, but one escaped. He wasn't more than small fry, so they let him ride for the time being."

"The chauffeur?" It came from Martie.

"Or a reasonable facsimile—according to your description and theirs. Among the stuff in the pockets of the large fish they caught was a duplicate of the denarius. They didn't attach any importance to it until they saw the picture. Now, Ivors could have belonged to the same brigade. In fact——"

Corinne said, "No—whatever he was——"

"Riffraff don't always wear baggy pants, lady."

Martie supported him. "That's true. A lot of big names are mixed up in messes like that."

Gorse nodded. "And I'm still not surmising. A respectable jeweler called in to say he'd whipped up four of those coins for a citizen named Robert Ivors. I figure Ivors kept one for himself and presented the others to the big shots of the organization."

"It strikes me," Justin said, "that even a bunch of dirty squares would have brains enough not to walk around wearing badges to advertise themselves."

Hunt offered his opinion abruptly. "Ivors was a fathead. It's just the sort of thing he'd do. Besides, there's nothing incriminating about the denarius."

Martie thought out loud. "It could be incriminating. It could have been chosen because Julius Caesar's head is on the face. He was a dictator who might well be accepted as the symbol of a fascist-minded organization."

Hunt smiled. "Pretty farfetched. And who can prove it?"

Gorse shrugged. "The thing I find farfetched is how a wind-bag like Ivors could even get near the big shots of such an organization. I wouldn't trust him loose with *my* secrets."

"They'd probably be glad to accept anyone with money and social position," Martie said. "And if they ever needed a rabble-rouser, he certainly had the voice for it."

"Could be. So let's make it they roped him in for his dough. And if they were any smart they didn't let their real plans slip while he was within hearing distance. It wouldn't be hard to keep him happy by buttering him up with flattery and promises. And to show his girlish pleasure at being chosen, he started giving out presents."

Justin turned to Corinne. "Isn't this too much for you? You don't have to sit here if——"

"It's all right—I—somehow I should have guessed."

Hunt said, "That's all they're doing, Corinne. Guessing. I hold no brief for Ivors, but on second thought that business of the denarius could have some other explanation. Maybe he belonged to some harmless secret society—and maybe this man the FBI arrested belonged to it, too, in addition to his other activities."

Corinne shook her head. "I can remember things he said—extravagant promises——" She raised her hand to her head. "No—it's too confusing. If it's true—if he had joined a group like that and they needed his money—and the chauffeur was in it—the chauffeur wouldn't have killed him."

"Exactly," Hunt said. "And may I ask where Dodie Merritt comes in? Or have we decided to forgive and forget that episode?"

Martie gave a startled exclamation.

Gorse eyed her curiously.

"Got something?"

"I guess it's nothing you haven't arrived at." Her voice was apologetic.

"Bring it out."

"When Mr. Ivors asked us to dinner, we put it down to his wanting to look Justin over as a"—she glanced at Corinne and said hurriedly—"as a rival, and we couldn't understand why he included me in the invitation. But you see—I had the compact

with the denarius, and he thought I'd be carrying it and that he could manage to get it away from me during dinner. Then, if I missed it later, I'd be sure to think I'd lost it or left it somewhere. That must have been why he seemed disappointed because I was in evening clothes. I guess he thought the compact wasn't for evening wear because most of Corinne's things are for sports. Anyway, I wasn't carrying it, but he couldn't be sure, even though I remember saying so when Justin told me to powder my nose. Only by that time he was so nervous he didn't know what to believe. Perhaps he had worked himself up to imagining that I'd discovered what it was and meant to hang on. So he made the chauffeur give us a lift. And right then I began to feel funny about the chauffeur, although I didn't dwell on it till later. He helped me out of the car in front of the theater and he came closer than necessary. He must have been trying to search for the compact. He had no luck, of course, so Ivors sent him up to the suite."

Hunt looked as though he had something to say. Gorse said, "Hold it. Let Mrs. James finish."

"I am finished. I don't know where Dodie Merritt comes in—except that Ivors was friendly with her and she was the one who had designed the compact. Perhaps Ivors sent her up to the suite instead of the chauffeur because she knew what it looked like and would be more apt to find it. And then the chauffeur went up anyway, on his own, because he had some scheme in mind for getting a better hold on Ivors. You said he had a blackmail record. But Dodie refused to give him the coin, so he——"

"Well—well!" Hunt was wearing a combination sneer and smile. "Mrs. James, you and your brother are a talented pair. Do you help him write his songs?"

Gorse eyed him without pleasure. "Know something, Hunt? When I heard that you hired Merritt, I checked on you extra special, but I couldn't find a shady spot on your past. It made me kind of sad. Of course you'd been out of work a long time, but that's no criminal offense."

"I hate to disappoint you," Hunt drawled, "so I'll let you in on a secret. Dodie, alias the spider woman, was the brains of the organization you've been mentioning. She got me in her

clutches and forced me to hire her because she'd set her wicked heart on turning Hastings into a doghouse for Misty."

Justin said, "Did your best friends ever tell you your taste smells?"

"Why play favorites," Hunt said. "It sounds as good to me as those other romances." He was about to go into it further when Mildred, weak but game, came into the room. She was followed by a short, anonymous-looking man in plain clothes.

Gorse arose. He drew the man into a corner and conferred with him briefly. The man went out again, and Gorse returned to the table. He said to Corinne, "Can I have this stuff cleared away?"

Corinne rang for the maid. Mildred helped her to take the dishes to the kitchen.

"We might as well stay put," Gorse said, settling back in his chair.

He likes it better than the study, Martie thought, because the way we're seated, he's got a full view of everybody's face. She experienced an irrational sense of fear and tensed herself against it. She knew that Justin was innocent no matter what alibi the chauffeur could produce, but innocent men had been put through it before. Was Robert Ivors really dead. That dull, pompous man? She was back in the mauve room. She heard his voice again. . . .

She saw that the others were tense too. Justin was playing with a spoon, beating out quick rhythms against the table's mellow gleam. He seemed surprised when Mildred said, "Excuse me," and took the spoon away.

Mildred came back and dropped into her chair as Benson crossed the threshold. He was flanked by two policemen. He seemed lazily at ease. He looked around, removed his chauffeur's cap, and said, "What goes? If I'd known it was a party I'd have worn my soup-and-fish."

Gorse said, "Don't worry. When the party's over you'll be wearing another kind of uniform." He dismissed the policemen. "Wait within call, boys. Your presence might dampen the festivities. Ross, you know what's expected."

Benson prodded a chair away from the wall and sat down. "Since nobody asked me, I have to help myself."

"I forgot how tired you must be," Gorse said.

"Sure I'm tired." Benson yawned. "I'm not even awake. Sleeping in the daytime does that to me."

"Pull your chair up to the table. We don't want you to feel like an outsider."

"Anything to oblige," Benson said. "I always enjoy a good clambake."

"That's right—next to the dark gentleman. Maybe you two have met."

Justin stirred uneasily.

Benson gave him a quick glance. "Sure we've met."

"So?" Gorse took it slowly. "Lodge members or something?"

"You've got your dates mixed. I gave him a lift to the theater the other night is all."

Martie, who had drawn a sharp breath, suddenly remembered her first impression of Gorse. His censored face . . .

He said, "Know anybody else here?"

Benson looked carelessly around the table. He pointed to Martie. "I got a passing acquaintance with her—and I recognize the boss's wife. The others are news. But don't bother with the introductions. My social life's too full already."

"I imagine. No doubt that's what tired you out and made you sleep all afternoon. Tough luck. You slept yourself clean out of a job."

"Says who? Listen, why not just spill what's on your mind? Speaking of jobs, where's the boss? Or don't he know he's got company?"

"You guessed it. He don't know."

Benson took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He began to fumble for matches. Hunt tossed a folder across the table.

Gorse said, "You see—you're among friends. Everybody feels sorry because your career as a chauffeur is over—especially since you went to such trouble to launch it."

Benson yawned. "Wake me up when the show starts."

"It started when you killed Bondy."

Benson awoke—but too suddenly. "I never killed him—I only—"

"Go on," Gorse said.

"I only borrowed his uniform."

"But you had to tap him on the head first. Too bad it was fatal."

Benson yelled, "Don't give me that. So I tapped him on the head—but lightly. I'll take a couple of months in the cooler with time off for good behavior."

"You've been spending a lot of time in the cooler on and off—haven't you?"

"On and off is right, on account of I got pals ready and waiting to bail me out." He was sorry he had said that. His face was not subtle, not hard to read. Just hard.

"I don't know as you can depend on your pals any more. The Feds are out to bust up a lot of beautiful friendships."

"Me no savvy. You should bring along an interpreter when you drool a foreign lingo. I'm an American myself."

"You mean you were born in this country. So are a lot of other pests—like midges—termites—mosquitoes. We've even got native snakes."

Benson muttered, "Have a good time while you can. It ain't going to last forever."

"Speak up. It's still a free country. That small-time garbage-spreading league you hang out with hasn't had its innings yet." Gorse was red-faced.

He has ideals, Martie thought. He hates this oafish man and all he stands for.

Gorse quickened his tempo. "Why did you kill Dodie Merritt?"

"Me kill a doll like her. You got your wires crossed."

"So she was a doll? Very interesting."

Benson dropped the synthetic languor. "I saw her around, wise guy, when I was hacking for Ivors."

"You hacked only one day. The day you buried the dog—after you went up to the shop to kill it. You killed it in the men's room. We found hair to mark the spot. Then you came out with it under your coat." He studied the tight uniform. "Or maybe wrapped up in something. Then you stuck it in the broom closet."

"Wrong number. I didn't go up to the shop."

Mildred shouted excitedly, "He did so! I saw him talking to——" She blushed. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"You keep interrupting all you want. That's what you're here for," Gorse said, "all of you. What I need is bigger and better interruptions."

Benson eyed Mildred with ready hatred. "Thanks, bim. I'll keep you in mind when it's time to give out the prizes. So I was up at the shop. Ivors called me to take the dog out after it was dead."

"We'll let that pass. We can't burn you for killing a dog—nor even for slitting it open. But killing a woman's another thing."

Benson crushed out his cigarette with a large stubby hand. "Don't make me laugh."

"I'm trying not to. I'd rather have you sing. I don't insist you met Merritt at the shop. She was a small-town girl—not very nice, according to fellow workers, the janitor of her house, neighbors, and such. When she first came to New York with time on her hands she could have wandered into one of those race-hatred meetings and had herself a pleasant evening or two. Those meetings where you and a couple of your buddies stand by to take care of hecklers. Maybe she fell for your brute strength. It wouldn't have gone further than a few quick—it wouldn't have become a lasting relationship, because I hear she was ambitious. Don't laugh yet. I found a few pamphlets in her apartment—the kind you patriots spread around to promote good will. Not that this build-up's important. Rumor says she was a girl anyone could have murdered even on short acquaintance. So when you were seen in the service elevator of the York-Plaza——"

"I walked—I didn't——" His tongue slid over his coarse lips.

Gorse expelled a sighing breath. "Yep—said right out in front of witnesses."

"I didn't say a thing. I've got a Grade-A mouthpiece who can tear you and your witnesses wide open. I walked around the block is how I was going to finish."

Hunt seemed amused. "Where do we go from here?"

Gorse shouted, "Shut up."

"But you said——"

"That's not the kind of interruption I asked for." He calmed down suddenly and returned his attention to Benson. "I can

now stop playing cat because you're already a dead rat. Want to hear what Ivors said in his dying statement?"

"You lying son of a bitch, he——" His eyes were glassy rounds in his straining head.

"He said he called Merritt to the hotel at ten-thirty and sent her up to the Corley suite to get that lost coin you didn't find on the dog and you didn't find on Mrs. James. He'd asked you to go up first to open the door, you being practiced at jobs like that. But he didn't want the joint wrecked, and he didn't trust you to locate the place where a lady might stash her compact, without leaving considerable traces behind you. When Mrs. James got around to missing it he wanted everything in apple pie order so that she'd just think she'd mislaid it. So there you were—the two of you. You lying doggo somewhere in the corridor ready to give warning if somebody turned up—Merritt in the Corley suite. She was taking her time. Being of a curious nature—and as Millie, here, told me—having witnessed a meeting between Corley and Mrs. Ivors, she was likely doing some extra snooping on her own account to see what she could dig up. You popped in to tell her to shake a leg just as she was slipping the coin down her dress front, having decided that it was foolish to surrender it to Ivors without striking some kind of a bargain. You told her to come across. She refused, so you clipped her. Let's call it accidental manslaughter. We don't want to be too hard on you. Let's say you felt real bad because you broke her neck. You parked her on the bed and maybe tried to bring her to. When you saw she was gone for good you lost your nerve. Or you heard footsteps or something. You didn't have time to grab the coin. It had slipped down kind of low. You just had time to douse the light and blow."

Martie had forgotten her own earlier reconstruction. She thought, How much of that is true? He sounds as though he believes it himself, as though he was there when it happened.

Benson echoed her thoughts hoarsely. "Was you there, Charlie?" As a piece of bravado it did not come off. "You can't prove a thing. I'm not taking any rap for——" He hacked his throat clear. His small eyes narrowed. "Dying statement, huh?" He squinted at each listening face in turn, as though for confirmation. He must have been reassured by what he saw, be-

cause he went on hardily. "People hadn't ought to tell lies if they're dying. Everything happened just the way you said. Only you made one little mistake. It was Ivors—see. Ivors got worried and came up to find out what was keeping Dodie so long. Dodie showed him the compact with the pocket empty and swore that's how it was when she got there. Ivors wasn't having any, so she said maybe if he made it worth her while to look some more she'd have better luck. So he saw red and brought one up from the floor. You should-a heard the crack of——"

Justin said, "That's enough," and flung a protective arm about Corinne. Martie closed her eyes and swallowed. She heard Hunt's voice, respectful now and unamused. "I congratulate you, Sergeant, for getting what you were after, but don't you think the women should be spared the gruesome details?"

"I haven't got what I'm after—not yet. Ivors isn't around to yeah or nay this new version—and his not being around is another complication—another murder."

Martie opened her eyes. She saw Benson, wary but far from cowed.

Gorse said to him, "By your own admission you're still guilty. Not going to the police with what you knew makes you an accessory. But you can't be fried twice—so we'll concentrate on Ivors. Why did you kill him?"

"I didn't even know he was dead till you told me." He spoke with malignant satisfaction. "You cooked your own goose that time—not that I spotted the tail until he and a harness bull knocked on my door and invited me to come along."

"You climbed down the fire escape and got back the same way."

"Not me. I'm no monkey. Besides, my fire escape's on Columbus Avenue. What kind of a cluck would I be to give the crowds a free show? Also, why should I fog the boss? He was doing all right by me." He laughed deep in his throat. "I can't even imagine who would want to hurt such a fine gent. Maybe he went out natural—a stroke or something. You should-a seen how purple he got when——"

Gorse said, "I missed that treat, but I saw something just as good. I saw him with a bullet hole in his chest."

"A bullet hole?" Benson made an elaborate production of relaxing. "That settles it. Me, I've got no gat."

"No? Where did you drop it? The boys are searching your room, but just in case they don't find it, I'd like to know."

"They won't find it. And what's more, I take back that accessory business. I wasn't near the hotel. Ivors told me about the whole thing is all. I'll say you got me so nervous I spouted whatever came into my head. I'll say I didn't even believe him—I thought it was a lot of smoke. These witnesses ain't official. It wouldn't surprise me if they all had axes to grind."

"There's an official sitting right out in the hall taking everything down in black and white. I didn't want him to cramp your style by being in plain sight. Never mind—we don't need to go into that. What beats me is why you ditched the car two blocks down. Why didn't you drive it back to the parking lot? There's no one in attendance there. The regular guy's sick. The owner and his partner took turns running out of the beanery all day to keep an eye on things."

Benson shot out of his chair. He yelled, "I know a frame when I see one. You won't get away with it." His eyes ran the gamut of faces. "I left that car in the parking lot. I haven't been out of my room all afternoon. If the car ain't still there—if it moved—someone else moved it."

Gorse said, "Sit back and take it easy before I shove you back. I'm a reasonable man. I'll put it to the folks here." He addressed Justin. "How does it strike you?"

Justin said firmly, "I wouldn't put anything past that square."

"And you, Mrs. Ivors?" Corinne turned her head away.

"That's an answer." He spoke to Mildred. "How about you?"

"He's a bad man. He's the only one who——"

Hunt did not wait to be questioned. "This is no time for parlor games. We're not jurors."

"And I'm not asking you to sit judgment. All I want is an opinion."

It was obviously no parlor game for Benson. He was completely off balance. He had fastened his eyes to Hunt's as though they were his only support in life. He said hoarsely, "I'm not taking a murder rap for anybody—not for anybody, you understand. You got to get me out of this, Mr. Hunt, or——"

CHAPTER XV

MARTIE had flown back to California. This was her first evening at home in the little house that was Justin's gift. Now the children were getting ready for bed and she was waiting to tuck them in.

She could hear Nick splashing about in the bathroom. She did not dare to offend a potent six-year-old ego by supervising his ablutions. Linnie, aged four, was sitting on the floor, beating time with a slipper to words and music of her own improvisation. "Mummy's home. Mummy—Mummy. Mummy will tell us a story. Mummy will—she willll. Granny tells stories. Mummy's are better. Not Uncle Justin. He didn't come home. Mummy—Mummeeee—"

Baby, I hope you'll never have to listen to a story like the one I *could* tell. . . .

Hunt had been unable to get himself or Benson out of it. He too, had lost his head and screamed. Not shouted—screamed. He had screamed, "Topping!" a name familiar only to Gorse and to Benson, because it was Benson's real name.

Hunt had regained control quickly. He did not say another incriminating word that night. Nor the next. It took days and nights to break him. But he broke.

The story that Martie and Gorse had woven was true. Except that it had been woven around the wrong man.

Hunt, kingpin of a "hate-thy-neighbor" squad. Hunt, with a mind perverted by a long stretch of poverty, who continued to carry the chip on his shoulder even when his circumstances improved. Perhaps Corinne had helped to lodge the chip more securely. He knew that she was not for him.

He had been using Hastings Accessories as a cover for his activities, carrying on what seemed on the surface a legitimate correspondence about leather shipments with a group in the Argentine. Money was needed, and Robert Ivors was easy prey. He exchanged large sums gladly for even larger promises. A place in the sun. The best place in the best sun. A throne of power

from which he would address throngs of adorers. They might even have intended to keep a portion of their promises later on, to employ his voice to their advantage. Other puppets had been chosen for no more than that single asset.

Ivors, however, had not been trusted with the fact that Hunt was the brains of the group, nor yet that he was a member. And before many weeks had passed Hunt was to regret that he had been trusted at all, in spite of his value as "angel." Ivors talked too much. That was why he had been permitted to join the Hastings' personnel. Hunt wanted to keep him in sight as much as possible.

That stupid gesture of the denarius! Hunt had received one himself, through an intermediary. He had disposed of it quickly. But he realized that he was more intelligent than any of his fellows. When he learned that one of the group had been arrested, the denarius was his first concern. He did not doubt that Ivors carried his, nor did he doubt that he might flash it in public if he believed the occasion auspicious. Hunt did not underrate the FBI.

So he had ordered Topping—general dirty-job man—to become Ivors' chauffeur. Topping was to relieve him of the denarius. Topping did. He picked his pocket in the crowded auction rooms and passed the denarius on to Hunt. Then, incredibly, or at least incredible to Hunt, he himself had given the show away. While he was in Corinne's office trying to route Misty out from under a chair, the denarius had dropped soundlessly through a hole in his pocket on to one of the small thick rugs. Mildred had seen it and placed it in the box as he talked to Ivors.

Missing the coin, he convinced himself that the dog had swallowed it. So did Ivors, who knew nothing of Topping's light-fingered operation. But it was Hunt who cornered the dog, carried it to the men's room, and strangled it with his long bony hands. It was he who stuffed it into the closet, content to let it go at that.

Ivors considered the dog's corpse a gift from the heavens. He was not content to let it go at that. He wanted the denarius back. It was his symbol of power.

He gave Topping instructions. And Topping liked them and

executed them. He made his report of failure to both masters. But by that time both masters knew where the denarius was.

Ivors' plan of recovery ended in one last gasp after the dinner party when he sent Topping to offer his guests a lift. Hunt's plan ended in the Corley suite. The denarius buried with a dog was one thing. In a carelessly flaunted compact it was another, especially since it could be traced back to Hastings.

So Hunt sent his henchmen on an errand and waited impatiently for a page boy to call his name. This had been the arranged signal of success. When it did not come he granted himself brief and unrecorded absence from the Designers' Guild Convention. By devious ways he went to the Corley suite to investigate.

He had used Dodie Merritt on extracurricular jobs before. Her letter of introduction came to him from Topping. Sufficient recommendation, and a near bull's-eye for Detective Sergeant Gorse.

Hunt had been unprepared for Dodie's attempted treachery. She had not known until that day of Ivors' connection with the group. She meant to make full use of the knowledge, to sell the denarius back to him, price uncertain. She announced this intention to Hunt.

Enraged, Hunt had brought one up from the floor. He wanted to punish—not to kill. But fury, backing his wiry strength, betrayed him. Worse still—for him—there was no time to retrieve the coin. At the sound of footsteps and voices in the hall, he and Topping had ducked. Not through the bedroom door, but by way of the living room. Unseen, they managed to reach the stairs.

Hunt must have been pretty tense when he and Corinne met Justin in the lobby, when Justin invited them to the suite for a drink. He had to go. He had to learn at first hand how much, if anything, there was to fear. How his fingers itched when he and Justin went into the bedroom before the police arrived. But Justin would not let him touch the body, and he dared not insist.

Then later—with Gorse and Ivors. He knew that Ivors was in a state because of Corinne. He did not know what Ivors would do or say under continued questioning. He decided to take no chances.

The next morning he had waited for Ivors to appear at Hastings. But Ivors was burdened with other matters and wasted no thought on his newly acquired status of workingman. He had left his apartment in a daze. He had taken a seldom-used roadster from the garage and, perhaps with no set destination, had driven off. In all probability he stopped somewhere to part with a black-market gas coupon. Members of the group were encouraged to deal in the black market. That was to show contempt for America's lawmakers.

He ended his drive at the home of a crony, a tight-lipped fellow patriot who suffered him because of his wealth. To this crony he poured out his heart.

The man became uneasy at the garbled tale of murder, of a lost symbol, of the police. He excused himself, went to another room, and telephoned to Hunt for advice, even though it was against the rules to contact the kingpin at Hastings.

Hunt had not been displeased. In a hurried mutter he had given instructions, mentioning no names, couching his words so that they would have meaning only for the man at the other end of the wire.

"Never mind why. Just do as I say."

Ivors was to be told that at last the time was ripe for a meeting between him and his Grand-Council-to-be. But extreme caution must be observed. He must spend the day where he was, showing himself to no one. He could have a few drinks to steady him. In the later afternoon he must leave, timing it so that at six o'clock he would reach an empty lot two blocks from his own address. He was to park before a watchman's shack, get out, and stand on the sidewalk until he received a sign. The shack had been built for a construction project that never materialized. Now it was abandoned. A messenger would be hiding in it. He would, if the coast was clear, tell Ivors where the momentous meeting was to be held.

No doubt Ivors swallowed this romantic concoction whole. No doubt it even made his present troubles fade into a dream of future glory. He was, after all, a sick child imprisoned in a man's body. A body he could not handle. He obeyed instructions.

Hunt was the messenger in the shack. And the coast was

clear. As soon as Ivors stepped to the sidewalk, he received the sign. The sign was two bullets, one that missed, one that did not.

He fell, and Hunt darted back across the lot, emerged on another street, and walked briskly to his own rooms. The gun stayed behind in the watchman's shack. It had been easily come by. There was an arsenal of small arms at the disposal of the group.

But Ivors was not quite dead. In a few moments he crawled to his feet. He staggered home.

Hunt responded to Gorse's phone call by rushing over to the apartment. Again he had to be there—to learn at first hand the progress of the investigation. Undoubtedly, had he realized that Topping was under suspicion for the earlier murder, he would have forced himself to stay away.

Then the roadster was discovered by a policeman, and everyone immediately concluded that it was the car Topping had left in the parking lot. So Topping's "singing" had been started by a falsely pitched note. . . .

"Story, Mummy."

She sat between them on the edge of Nick's bed. It was good to be home. It was all the component parts of good—sanity, peace, love—

"Mummy!"

She bent and kissed their scrubbed faces. She began without thought. "Once upon a time there was an ice princess——"

"A nice princess, Mummy?"

She smiled. "A very nice princess. She's going to be your aunt one of these days."

THE END

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When Corinne Hastings confessed to socialite Robert Ivors, whom she was marrying on the rebound, that she still longed for Justin Corley she opened the door to murder. For Corley, eminently successful and still in love with Corinne, came back to claim her and immediately things began to happen. First Dodie Merritt's dog was killed. Then Dodie herself was murdered in a hotel room Corinne had taken to flee from her husband. And through all the macabre horror that followed ran the saga of the Roman coin — key to the unsavory core of backstairs intrigue that enveloped Corinne in deadly mystery. A fast-moving, high-tension tale told in the modern manner.

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