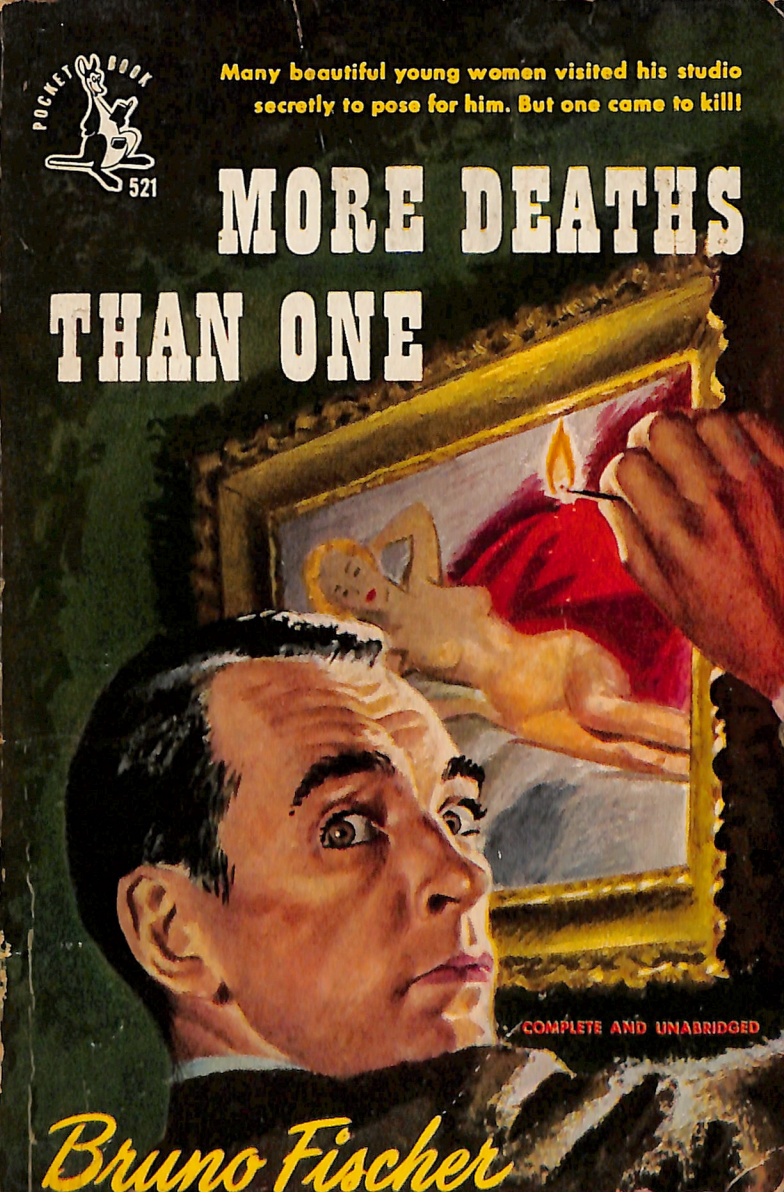
POCKET BOOK
521

Many beautiful young women visited his studio secretly to pose for him. But one came to kill!

MORE DEATHS THAN ONE



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

Bruno Fischer

A GENUINE POCKET BOOK

Bruno Fischer is fortyish, on the thin side, with brown hair and blue eyes. His favorite hobby is pottering around the cellar with tools. His greatest extravagances are: ". . . two houses, two children, a car and a wife."

MORE DEATHS THAN ONE

BRUNO FISCHER

POCKET BOOKS, *Inc., Rockefeller Center* • NEW YORK

The Printing History of

More Deaths Than One

Mammoth Detective magazine version published January, 1947

Ziff-Davis edition published July, 1947
1st printing .....July, 1947

POCKET BOOK edition published August, 1948
1st printing .....July, 1948

THIS *POCKET BOOK* INCLUDES EVERY WORD CONTAINED IN THE ORIGINAL, HIGHER-PRICED EDITION. IT IS PRINTED FROM BRAND-NEW PLATES MADE FROM COMPLETELY RE-SET, LARGE, CLEAR, EASY-TO-READ TYPE.

Notice—POCKET BOOK editions are published only by POCKET BOOKS, INC. and POCKET BOOKS of CANADA, LTD.
Trade-mark Registered in the United States Patent Office

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

This POCKET BOOK edition is published by arrangement with Ziff-Davis Publishing Company.

COPYRIGHT, 1947, BY BRUNO FISCHER

Contents

1.	Frank Townsend	1
2.	George Atwood	14
3.	Beverly Atwood	23
4.	David Reese	29
5.	Kathryn Atwood	47
6.	Frank Townsend	54
7.	Rachel Townsend	63
8.	Ben Helm	76
9.	George Atwood	88
10.	Beverly Atwood	96
11.	David Reese	104
12.	Ben Helm	110
13.	Rachel Townsend	121
14.	Frank Townsend	129
15.	Kathryn Atwood	133
16.	David Reese	139
17.	Ben Helm	145
18.	Beverly Atwood	156
19.	George Atwood	164
20.	Rachel Townsend	190
21.	Ben Helm	196
22.	Kathryn Atwood	209
23.	David Reese	222

Cast of Characters

PAGE

SHERIFF VALENTINE STARK, of Cagula County.... 1

FRANK TOWNSEND, frequently in a fight, working as chauffeur for Rudolph Matterson 1

RUDOLPH MATTERSON, owner of a factory his grandfather had built. For recreation, he paints pictures 3

BEVERLY ATWOOD, a young woman, blond and beautiful, who has many suitors 8

GEORGE ATWOOD, her father, a history teacher at Central High School in the town of Rexton ... 14

KATHRYN ATWOOD, wife of George. At 46 she is still as slim as a girl, but doesn't get on so well now with her husband 14

DAVID REESE, in the real-estate business, one of Beverly's admirers, favored by her parents 18

ABEL TORREY, coroner of Cagula County 30

RACHEL TOWNSEND, Frank's sister, pretty and dark-haired 32

KENNETH FLEET, district attorney of Cagula County 33

JERRY FOLLETTE, gardener of the Matterson house .. 33

ETTA SAUNDERS, maid at the Matterson house 33

MRS. JORDSON, Matterson's cook 33

HAL, a bartender 54

BEN HELM, private detective, who does a great deal of wandering about the town 60

ED WONDER, a licensed electrician with his father Andrew 110

MISS MARGARET K. HOOPES and MRS. DOROTHY EBLING, keepers of the boardinghouse in which Ben Helm lives 115

DR. RAYMOND KENDRELL 147

MR. GRAYSON, undertaker, of the Grayson Funeral Home 147

1. Frank Townsend

TUESDAY, MAY 13—5:10 P. M.

THE JALOPY SQUEAKED up the concrete driveway and stopped a couple of inches from my left heel. Sheriff Valentine Stark got out and hitched up his pants. I kept on hosing down Mr. Matterson's convertible like I didn't know he was there.

"You use your fists too much, Frank," he said.

"That so?" I said.

He rubbed his chin, what there was of it. He had a long sad face and teary eyes, and always looked like he'd start crying any minute. The reason he was sheriff of Cagula County was that his brother-in-law was state senator and had enough votes in his pocket to elect his pet police dog if his missus nagged him into it. The difference that would've made was that the police dog would've known a little more about the job.

"Last night you beat up Ed Wonder in Teepee Inn," Stark said in that whining voice of his.

"I only hit Ed once," I said. "I didn't hit him hard enough to knock him a great deal more than halfway across the room."

"You think you're smart, that's the whole trouble with you," he said.

I put the hose full force against a hub cap. The water bounced off and sprayed his legs. He jumped out of the way, yelping.

He jabbed a finger at me. "I think I'll run you in and see how you like it," he said, sounding like a complaining old woman.

I turned off the hose and went into the garage for a chamois. When I came out, he was standing at the left front fender. I went around to the other side of the convertible and started to rub it down.

"So you got nothing to say for yourself?" Stark said.

"If you want to run me in for socking Ed, go ahead," I said. "See where it'll get you."

"What's the matter with you?" he said. "Ed Wonder made a complaint, and I got to investigate. I hear you was with the Atwood girl in Teepee Inn."

"Miss Atwood to you," I said.

"I been told he made a pass at her. Is that what happened?"

I looked at the sheriff over the hood. "Listen. I would've broken Ed's jaw if he'd made a pass at Miss Atwood. He danced with her. That was okay, only he held her too close. I told him to break it up. He said to go roll my hoop, so I hit him."

"Is that all he did?"

"Nobody dances like that with a swell, clean kid like Miss Atwood," I said.

Stark hitched up his pants, but it didn't do any good. The seat kept on sagging halfway to the ground. With what they paid the sheriff of Cagula County I guess he couldn't afford a new pair.

"All the same, you should keep your fists to yourself," he said. "You're all the time beating somebody up. Like you beat up Mike Parker the day before he was killed. That fight was about another woman, about your sister Rachel."

"What's the difference?" I said. "Mike is dead."

Stark kicked a tire. "Killed with a shotgun," he said.

I worked the rag toward the back of the car. "Accidental

death with his own gun while he was hunting. That's what the inquest said. Anyway, what's it got to do with Ed Wonder?"

He rubbed his chin some more. It was like watching wheels turn in his head—rusty wheels.

"I guess Ed Wonder was no more in the right than you," he said like he didn't want trouble with anybody.

"So what are you after?" I said.

"Well, I have to investigate," he said.

I went behind the car to wipe the rear window. Where I was I couldn't see him, and he'd run out of talk. Maybe he was trying to think. There was a chance that even the sheriff of Cagula County tried to think sometimes. After a minute he gave it up and I heard him get into his jalopy. I heard the springs squeak all the way to the street.

"Frank," Mr. Matterson called me.

Mr. Matterson was standing in the doorway of his studio at the far corner of his two acres. I hung the chamois on a door handle and walked over to him across a lawn that wasn't any rougher than an army blanket.

The studio was fieldstone and big enough to hold a square dance in. Everything on the place was too big. He was only one guy living alone, but the fieldstone house had twelve rooms and he hardly ever had company stay overnight. The garage had room for three cars, but he had only the convertible. The apartment over the garage could've held a wife and a flock of kids, but I had it all to myself. He had four people working for him: a cook, a housemaid, a gardener and me. Lots of people paid for this by slaving in a factory his grandfather had built. I'd lay even money he didn't even know what they made in the factory or where it was.

Mr. Matterson was big too, tall as I am, but with lots more meat, especially around the hips. He wore a dirty white smock splotched with every color of paint you could think of. That was what made him an artist.

"Come in, Frank," he said. "I want to show you something."

I tagged after him into the studio. The pictures he'd painted covered all the walls, I guess because nobody else would hang them in their homes. There were trees and flowers and tables and chairs and lots of undressed women, but I'd need the D. T.'s before I could dream up anything like them. The picture he showed me was on the easel. There was somebody without any clothes on, and one or two things suggested it was supposed to be a woman, but you couldn't be sure offhand. The eyes and nose were in the wrong places and the body was like a broken spring. Off at a corner a goat with a man's face was shooting a crooked arrow at her with a bow without strings.

"How do you like it?" Mr. Matterson said.

"Well . . . ." I said.

He started to giggle. "I was anxious to get the proletarian reaction," he said. "Does it mean anything to you?"

What it meant to me was he was lucky he didn't have to paint for a living. But I didn't say it. "Well, Mr. Matterson, when I was in the army we'd never pin a picture like that up in our lockers, even if she isn't dressed," I said.

He laughed so hard his belly shook. "You're wonderful, Frank," he said.

He had pinchbottle Scotch and glasses in the studio. He poured a shot for each of us and handed me one of his fifty-cent cigars and took one himself and we lit up. Mr. Matterson was rich and useless, but you wouldn't want a better guy to work for. He treated a chauffeur like a human being.

"I noticed Sheriff Stark talking to you," he said. "Is he still curious about how Mike Parker died?"

I tossed the Scotch down my throat. "Didn't you hear what they found at the inquest?" I said. "Mike went hunting and dropped his shotgun on a rock and it went off and filled him with buckshot. That's all there was to it."

"And you were nearby," he said like he was telling me something I didn't know.

"Listen," I said. "It was Sunday morning and I was fishing in Edgeman's Pond. That's a good two miles away."

He poured himself another drink and looked at me. I shook my head. I'd had enough.

"You were working for Mike Parker when he was killed, weren't you?" he said.

"I was working for the Apex Construction Company," I said, trying to keep my voice even. "Mike was only the foreman of the gang laying down the Crown Hill Road. Anyway, I quit the day before the accident."

"I heard he fired you," he said.

I didn't like the way this was going.

"Okay, he fired me," I said. "So what?"

"It's not important." Mr. Matterson blew smoke at the picture on the easel. "I don't think it's wise to interfere with the police in what is strictly their affair."

"A guy named Ed Wonder got fresh with a girl I was with last night," I said, getting real sore. "I smacked him. That's what the Sheriff came to see me about."

"I take my hat off to a man who defends the honor of the fair sex as zealously as you do," he said with a smile as fat as his face.

There wasn't any answer I wanted to make. He walked away from the easel and started to unbutton his smock. I turned to go and stopped.

"Listen, Mr. Matterson," I said. "Are you using the car tonight?"

"I doubt—" He looked at me over his shoulder. "I see. You wish to borrow the car again."

"If it's okay with you," I said.

"Beverly Atwood, I suppose. She's a lovely creature. Are you getting anywhere with her, Frank?"

"How do you mean that?" I heard my voice very loud.

"Keep your shirt on, Frank. I was simply making conversation."

"Listen," I said. "There's no straighter girl than Beverly Atwood."

"I don't doubt it for a moment." He pulled his smock off and tossed it on a chair. "You can have the car," he said.

"Thanks, Mr. Matterson," I said.

There was a table between me and the door. When I passed it, I saw a sketch pad on it and on the top page a pencil sketch of a girl. This wasn't like his painted pictures. You could recognize the girl right off.

I started to sweat. "That's my sister," I said.

Mr. Matterson came to the table. "I hope you like this sketch better than you do my paintings," he said.

"What was she doing here posing for you?" I said.

"I invited her to see my paintings. She is such a delightful subject that I couldn't resist sketching her. I assure you, Frank, that it was perfectly innocent."

That's what *he* said. You'd think an artist who painted pictures of women, even screwy pictures, would have models come to pose for him occasionally. But I'd never seen a woman, a professional model or any other kind, go in or out of the studio. That didn't mean that none came. There was another door in back of the studio, and that door opened right out into a slit in the ten-foot hedge that ran all around the two acres. In town there were all sorts of stories about that back door, about women sneaking in and out. Maybe there was something in those stories and maybe not. Up to now I'd figured that it was none of my business as long as he paid me on pay day and treated me regular.

But what was on the sketch pad *was* my business. I looked hard at the woman without clothes in the picture on the easel. She still didn't look like any women you'd see anywhere. There was no way of telling.

"I say, Frank, you don't imagine Rachel posed for that?" Mr. Matterson said. "Those are the only sketches I made of her. You can see for yourself that there is no reason to take offense."

"I don't want her coming here at all," I said.

His smile got fatter. "You don't think I'm good enough for her?" he said.

"If you want to marry her, okay," I said. "But—" I let the rest ride.

"You don't trust me, Frank?"

"Not with a woman," I said.

His belly shook again with his laughing. "I suppose if I invite her here again you'll give me a beating."

"Let her alone," I said.

"I don't think you frighten me," he said slowly, "but I'd hate to lose a good chauffeur. Henceforth I'll cross the street when I see your sister approach. Will that satisfy you?"

"Just let her alone," I said.

He slapped my shoulder like I was one of the boys. "You're delightful, Frank. I've seldom known a man I liked so well. What particularly impresses me is that you're never obsequious. You're the only man who ever worked for me who didn't *sir* me half to death."

"I was in the army three years," I said. "I made up my mind that when I got out I'd never say *sir* to another man."

"Splendid," he said and laughed again.

There didn't seem anything else for me there, so I left.

When I finished washing and polishing the convertible, I saw it was twenty after six. Dinner for the help was at six sharp because Mr. Matterson liked to eat at seven. They were way ahead of me when I came into the kitchen, but I shovelled down the onion soup and roast duck and trimmings and was out of there before the rest of them were through with coffee.

In my apartment over the garage I took a hot shower

and shaved for the second time that day. I dressed in my pearl-gray slacks and the black cashmere sweater Rachel had bought me for my last birthday and the tweed sports jacket that had come yesterday in the mail from Sears. But all that my rushing came to was that I was all set at ten to eight and my date wasn't till nine o'clock because she didn't want to meet me till it was dark. I fiddled with the radio, but I was nervous as a cat and didn't want to listen to anything. At a quarter after eight I drove out in Mr. Matterson's convertible.

The Atwood house was right next door, one of a lot of frame houses on the edge of Rexton, with Mr. Matterson's two acres hidden behind the hedge plunk in the middle of them. Lots of windows were lit in the Atwood house, but I couldn't stop there and visit and wait till she got ready. I drove to town and had a pair of beers at Hal's. At nine I passed the Atwood house again, but I wasn't supposed to stop this time either. I wasn't supposed to stop till I came to the corner of Lane and Morgan.

Street lights didn't extend that far out, and all I could see was what the headlights showed me. That was her idea. If I couldn't see her, nobody else could. I waited. After a while I cut the motor and waited some more. All of a sudden there she was beside the right door.

She was a shadow in white. I leaned sideway to open the door. She got in beside me and pulled her dress over her knees.

"Am I late, Frankie?" she said.

"Only a couple of minutes," I said.

She was closer to twenty minutes late, but I was too glad she'd come at all to bring that up. The dash light showed her knockout figure and her yellow hair piled high on her head. I took out a cigarette, but I didn't offer her one. She didn't smoke. She didn't drink either except for a small beer now and then. I reached for the lighter in the dash, and then changed my mind and struck a match.

I held the match between us so her face came out of the shadows.

Beverly Atwood didn't use makeup. She didn't pluck her eyebrows or paint her fingernails red. She didn't have to do the things other girls did to make themselves look like they were wearing wax masks. She already had all she needed.

"Like me?" Beverly said.

"God!" I said.

The flame was almost down to my fingers. I shook it out and started the car and drove north. We didn't say much. I could feel her sitting close to me. I could smell her. It wasn't a perfume smell like with most girls, but a clean, sweet, live smell. I drove up the new Crown Hill Road.

"Didn't you build this road, Frankie?" she said.

"Me and a lot of other guys."

"I remember," she said. "Mike Parker was your boss when you got into a fight with him over a girl."

I glanced at her and by the dash light I saw her face turned to me. I put my eyes back on the road.

"It wasn't a girl," I said. I thought of a wisecrack: That was no girl, that was my sister. "I mean, it wasn't because we wanted the same girl."

"Rachel, of course," she said.

"What do you know about it?" I said. Now she was the one making me sore. A few hours ago it had been Mr. Matterson.

"Last month on a Friday night Rachel came with Mike to a square dance at the school," Beverly said slowly. "Saturday morning you had a fight with Mike."

She could've finished it. She could've said that Sunday morning Mike was found with a chest full of buckshot.

For a couple of minutes neither of us had a thing to say. Our party was about spoiled. Then I felt her fingers on my arm. It was like being touched by something hot and cold at the same time. Through my jacket and sweater

and shirt I felt it on my skin and it made my muscles quiver.

"What's the matter with you tonight, honey?" she said. "You're so quiet."

We'd reached the top of Crown Hill. I swung the convertible into the wide semicircle where the road ended. The idea was for people to be able to turn around and go back after stopping to look at the view, but mostly it was used by parking couples at night. Two other cars were there already, dark and quiet, but you knew what was going on inside them. I parked all the way on the right, as far away as possible.

"Frankie," she said nervously, "why did you come here?"

"Look at the view," I said.

The moon was coming up, and through the windshield you could see half of Cagula County rolling off to the foothills. Off to the right were the lights of Rexton. There weren't many lights because it wasn't much of a town, but all the same it was bigger than anything else in the county.

I cut all the lights. Moonlight didn't come into the car. I couldn't see her at all now, but I could smell her clean smell.

"This isn't a nice place, Frankie," she said. "People come here at night for only one reason."

"Listen, Beverly," I said.

The right words wouldn't come into my head. I reached out my hand and touched her, and all at once the rest of me was moving to her, and my arms were around her and I was kissing her.

Her mouth was soft and warm and open a little. She was kissing me back. I didn't want it ever to stop.

Then she pushed her hands against my chest and pulled her head back. I held onto her.

"Frankie!" she said. "Frankie, stop it!"

I let her go. I felt her move all the way to the door.

"You'd better take me home," she said quietly.

"I wasn't trying to neck you," I said. "All I wanted was to ask you to marry me."

"Is that all?" Her voice had a soft laugh in it.

"Listen," I said. "I've known you a long time. You were only a kid when I took you to a high school dance."

"How thrilled I was," she said. "Frank Townsend, the greatest football player Central High School ever had. It was my first real date. How shocked I was, though, when you tried to kiss me good-night."

"I was a heel," I said. "But I never tried to kiss you again, did I?"

"I know, Frankie."

"Listen," I said. "That kiss just now was strictly on the level. You kissed me back. You can't say you don't like me."

"I like you an awful lot." She was quiet for a little while. "But it's not as simple as that. My parents would never let me marry you."

My hands got tight on the wheel. "I'm not good enough," I said. "I'm only a chauffeur. I guess if Mr. Matterson wanted to marry you that would be okay. He's not the kind of guy you'd want any girl to know, but he's rich."

"That fat tub!" she said.

"He comes to your house all the time," I said.

"Rudy Matterson comes to visit Daddy. They're friends. Is that my fault?"

"Okay," I said. "Dave Reese can come right up to your house to call for you, but I got to meet you in the street after it gets dark so nobody can see you get in a car with me."

"Do you think I like it?" she said. "My parents are very strict. Mother heard that I was with you last night when you had that fight with Ed Wonder. She'd be terribly upset if she knew I was with you now."

"You don't need anybody's consent to get married," I said.

My eyes were getting used to the darkness and I could see enough of her to see her move a little. "Frankie, how can you ask me to do anything like that to my parents?" she said.

I felt like slamming something. "I suppose Dave Reese is a lot better than I am just because he has a real estate business?"

"It's not that he's better," she said. "It's just that he makes a decent living. If you had a steady, reliable job, my parents would approve of you."

"I've got a steady, reliable job."

"A chauffeur!" she said.

My hand tightened into a fist. I waited till I stopped breathing so hard before I said anything. "So you'll marry Dave Reese because he's not a chauffeur?"

"I'm not going to marry anybody till I'm good and ready." Her voice got so hard I wouldn't have known it was her sitting beside me in the dark. "Besides, Dave and your sister Rachel are in love with each other."

"Listen," I said. "That guy can't see anybody but you. You going to marry him?"

"If you don't mind, I'll decide what to do with my life when I'm good and ready."

"Yeah?" I said. "You just got through telling how your folks live your life for you."

"Of course I wouldn't do anything to hurt them," she said. Her voice got soft and pleading. "Honey, we've been such good friends. You're the only man I know that I'd trust parking in a place like this. Can't we go on the same way?"

"Yeah, friends!" I said bitterly.

Another car drove up and parked next to ours.

"I don't feel comfortable here," she said. "This place has such a bad reputation. And if I don't get back soon

Mother will ask me where I've been. I can't lie to her, and if I tell her there'll be a terrible argument."

I drove her back to Lane and Morgan.

"About Mr. Matterson," I said when I stopped the car. "Just because he's a friend of the family, don't you go to his studio to look at his pictures or anything. He's a swell guy to work for, but he's after only one thing with a woman."

"Aren't all men?" she said.

I looked at her. "Not me. Not with you. I told you I was on the level."

"You're awfully sweet, Frankie, honey," she said. And before I knew what was happening, she leaned over and kissed me right on my mouth. Then she got out of the car and walked away.

I sat behind the wheel listening to the clicking of her heels till there wasn't a sound left in the night. I touched my lips. The feel of her mouth was still on them.

2. *George Atwood*

TUESDAY, MAY 13—9:08 P. M.

Genral Grant became president because they shot Lincoln. His foremost contribution was building Grants tomb in New York."

My eyes lifted to the upper right-hand corner of the paper. Elizabeth Burgess had written it. She was seventeen years of age, the possessor of a blatantly mature figure which she accentuated through the aid of tight sweaters. She would require no passing mark in American History II to become eminently successful in the career a sardonic nature designed for females. The mission of her sex was not to fill her pretty head with knowledge, but to spread tragedy among men.

I put aside the papers I was correcting and went into the kitchen. Kathryn was drying the supper dishes.

"Where's Beverly?" Kathryn inquired.

"I have no idea." I filled a glass at the cold water tap and stepped aside to permit Kathryn access to the dish drainer. "It may interest you to know that last night two men fought over our daughter. To complete the charming picture, it occurred in a beer joint."

Kathryn continued to wipe a dish. Twenty-four years ago I had married a serene, delicate-featured girl with the figure of a wood sprite. The ravages of middle-age had only slightly altered that figure; time had been conquered by

that indomitably placid face. Imperturbably she accepted my information.

"Why, dear, you know perfectly well that Teepee Inn is a respectable place. More than once you've taken me there for a glass of beer."

"I never got into a brawl over you," I pointed out dryly.

Kathryn regarded me with that secretive little smile with which she had striven for many years to drive me mad. "I can't imagine you fighting for anything, dear."

She was not a clever woman, but her sex knew how to hurt. No, I was not a fighter. I should have been principal of Central High School, but I was not even head of the History Department. A younger and more aggressive man had obtained that position when my experience and service had merited it. I had not fought my wife for the son I had wanted—at least to attempt to achieve a son—nor to maintain my position as head of the household, nor for her affection, nor for the understanding and admiration of my daughter. I could not now recall how I had permitted myself to become a stranger in my house.

I held the water untasted before me. "Bill Wilcox, the math teacher, was at Teepee Inn last night with his wife, and he told me what happened. I had to learn from a comparative stranger. Of course I am only Beverly's father. You did not think that I was entitled to know."

"What happened wasn't Beverly's fault."

"It was her fault that she went there with a roughneck like Frank Townsend."

"Men don't let her alone," Kathryn declared complacently. "It's the penalty a girl has to pay for being beautiful."

"I doubt that Beverly considers it a penalty."

"George, you can at least spare your daughter your cheap cynicism!" Her vehemence was so shocking because it was so unusual. "You should thank your stars that you have a daughter against whom there's never been a breath of scandal."

"I merely implied that she does not have to go out with Frank Townsend or any other man if she does not wish to."

Kathryn turned to the drainer for a fresh dish to wipe. Her placidity, momentarily jarred, had returned. "They're all madly in love with her, and she is so good that she can't bear to hurt any of them. Though I wish she would marry that nice David Reese."

"There I agree with you." I drank the water down and went out to the hall.

Beverly was descending the stairs. She was clad in a simple white frock which Kathryn had made for her; her hair, gathered into a rather severe bun, was like corn silk. Her appearance was that of a healthy, wholesome young animal.

"What time is it, Daddy?" she asked.

"About a quarter after nine."

Beverly moved past me, pausing before the mirror to survey herself. She was nothing like Kathryn or me. She was a head taller than her mother and three inches taller than I; she was big-boned and lush, whereas both her parents were slender. She favored my sister May somewhat, although May had never been so beautiful.

"Are you going out?" I inquired.

"For a walk."

"Alone?"

She frowned into the mirror and readjusted a hairpin. "I might meet some of the girls on the way. Do you mind, Daddy?"

"Would it make any difference to you if I did mind?"

"Daddy, how can you say such a thing?" she said gaily. She gave her hair a final pat; a gesture, I thought, dismissing me or putting me in my place. Without another word or glance at me, she stepped to the door.

The door had scarcely closed behind her when Kathryn came out of the kitchen. "Where is Beverly going, dear?"

"Evidently that's none of my business," I replied.

Kathryn hurried past me. "Beverly!" I heard her call when she was out on the porch.

I returned to the living room. As I passed a window fronting on the open porch, I saw Kathryn and Beverly in conversation under the street lamp on the sidewalk. That was, I felt, part of the ancient conspiracy between mother and daughter from which I was barred.

I settled myself into the armchair and picked up the history papers.

"*Genral Grant became president because they shot . . . .*"

Elizabeth Burgess again. I copied those first two sentences on a scrap of paper, intending to show them to my fellow teachers for their amusement. For a time I sat holding the note limply between two fingers; then I tore it into small bits which I deposited in the ash tray at my side. A man who laughs at stupidity is as cruel as one who laughs at any other affliction.

I labored through the remaining papers. I could not bring myself to concentrate on the task. Presently I gave it up and went out to the porch.

Kathryn was a motionless shadow erect beside one of the porch columns.

"Is Beverly now becoming ashamed to have a man call for her at the house?" I said.

Kathryn did not stir. "Why do you hate your daughter?"

Her tone was quiet, but her words were like the unexpected lash of a whip. That was the most vicious thing anybody had ever said to me.

"Because I show a father's interest in my daughter, is that a sign that I hate her?" I was so angry that my voice shook.

"She went for a walk to Grace Rubenstein's. Does that satisfy you?"

"I am grateful for any civil answer I receive from either of you," I retorted.

For several minutes my wife and I stood on the porch in

silence. It was spring; the air was soft and heady. A man and a woman passed the house. They did not appear to be younger than Kathryn or I by more than five years, but they strolled in slow intimacy with arms about each other's waists. Why must we continue to tear at each other's nerves? There had been a time when any argument had ended in kisses of atonement. That had been a time, also, when my arm had slipped naturally about Kathryn's waist.

My arm did so now, tentatively, as nervously and awkwardly as a young lover's. I did not feel her yield.

"Kathryn, let's go somewhere?" I whispered.

"Somewhere?" she echoed abstractedly.

"It's a pleasant night for a walk. Or let's sit here on the glider. Or—" I fumbled for words. I had forgotten how a man makes love to a woman, even to his own wife.

"I've a headache, dear." That phrase was automatic on her tongue; her headaches were confined to moments like these. She withdrew from the circle of my arm, and I was alone, as I had been alone for so long.

She entered the house. I remained at the porch railing and looked out at the quiet, elm-lined street. At my back was the modest, graciously aging house which I had bought when Beverly had been a year old. On the second floor there were three bedrooms; in those early days two had been adequate—one for husband and wife and one for the baby—and the third had been designated the guest room. Through a series of gently executed maneuvers, I had been relegated to that third room for increasing periods of time until I had given up the struggle and become its permanent occupant. Between that room and Kathryn's the years had beaten no path.

A sedan pulled up in front of the house. David Reese emerged from it and came up the walk with his free-swinging stride and jaunty carriage. Two at a time he mounted the porch steps.

"Hi, Mr. Atwood," he greeted me. "Bev inside?"

"I'm afraid she's out."

His shoulders became somewhat less straight. "Any idea where she went?" he inquired, attempting to sound casual. "I sort of told her I'd drop in tonight."

"I believe she's visiting Grace Rubenstein."

"You sure? I passed Grace's house a minute ago. Grace was on the terrace and I stopped to talk to her. I told her I was going to visit Bev; she would've told me if she'd seen her."

I moistened my lips with the tip of my tongue.

David peered at me, as if trying to read an answer in my face. "Did she go toward Grace's house?"

"I think so," I muttered.

"How long ago?"

"Perhaps thirty minutes," I muttered.

He looked down the street. His head shifted slightly; his eyes fixed themselves on the high hedge which surrounded Rudolph Matterson's small estate next door. Was he thinking that Frank Townsend lived there and that it was on the way to Grace's house? He must have heard of the brawl last night at Teepee Inn; such news spreads almost as soon as it occurs. And Matterson lived there also. What of Matterson?

David Reese turned back to me with a deprecating laugh which rang false. "I didn't make a definite date with Bev. Can't expect a girl to sit twiddling her thumbs on the chance that I'll drop in."

"I'll tell her you were here, David," I muttered.

He did not leave at once. He stood at the top step as if waiting, his boyish, freckled face static, yet as eloquent as tears.

Why do women do such things? She would never know a more personable or dependable young man. Since he had been a youngster he had sat at Beverly's feet. He was still there, in that humiliating and degrading position sex had designed for men.

David roused himself as if from a dream. "Well, so long, Mr. Atwood."

He departed less jauntily than he had arrived. After his car had driven off, I turned to the door.

Upstairs, my room—which was still the guest room whatever else it was called out of politeness—waited for me. The thought of those lonely four walls filled me with terror. I stepped off the porch and found myself walking.

I passed the driveway entrance to the Matterson estate. Perhaps it was not Frank Townsend tonight. Matterson then?

I hurried on as if in flight from unseen specters, but the specters were in my mind, living with me, and there was no escape.

Rudolph Matterson was one of the few men in Rexton capable of informed conversation. I looked forward to the occasional evenings he came to my house. As he was a rich man living on unearned increment, it was almost inevitable that he salved his conscience by giving lip service to communism, chiefly because of its ruthless and reactionary aspects; and he was somewhat contemptuous of my socialism. Frequently our discussions became spirited, but on a rather high and stimulating level.

His politics, however, were not the concern of the moment. It had occurred to me before this that a man of his rather sinister reputation with females was strangely disinterested in Beverly during his visits to my home. He scarcely ever so much as glanced at her or had a word for her; it was not in character for him, or for almost any man, to show so little response to the physical presence of an attractive young woman. Was his lack of attention to her when I was in the same room deliberately calculated to hide the fact that there were surreptitious meetings between them?

Matterson, then?

I strode in a kind of fury until I reached the business

section of Rexton, now asleep with the night, and then I retraced my steps. The Matterson hedge appeared on my right. This time I paused at the entrance. It would be the ultimate in nastiness if my daughter were among those who were said to slip into Matterson's studio through the back door.

Did I, as Kathryn said, hate my daughter? Look into yourself, George Atwood. Do you resent your daughter because she is not the son you have always craved—the son who would have been all that you were not? If you maintain that you have never learned to know your daughter, how are you justified in forming a judgment of her? Is the evil only in your frustrated and cynical mind?

As a father, it was my right to know.

I turned into the Matterson driveway. Only one or two windows in the house showed light; the apartment over the garage and studio was completely dark. The moon was sufficiently bright to guide me across the lawn. The studio door was unlocked. I stepped inside.

I was a thief in the night; I did not dare turn on the electric light. Instead I struck a match.

This was by no means my first visit. His agonized abstractionist paintings had left me bewildered. Tonight I was not concerned with artistic merit, but with the features of his models. Within a minute I felt utterly ridiculous. How could a comparison be made between a human face and those monsters Matterson placed on canvas?

At one painting I paused longer than at the others. It was on an easel and depicted a particularly repulsive Pan shooting a crooked arrow with a stringless bow at an obscenely contorted caricature of a female. That flight of sardonic fancy I could appreciate. But the weird features, the insane female form—was there anything in it for which I searched?

Abruptly I felt tired and foolish and unwholesome. I had not the temperament for this kind of task. At the door

I blew out the tenth or twentieth match I had struck and stepped out into the clean night air.

The lights of the apartment over the garage went on.

3. Beverly Atwood

TUESDAY, MAY 13—10:32 P. M.

So now Dave Reese will be mad at me.

A few minutes after I returned home I heard Daddy let himself into the house. I went into the hall from the kitchen. He looked at me in surprise.

I couldn't imagine why he should be surprised at seeing his daughter in her own home.

"You're home early," he said.

"I told you I was just going for a walk."

"To Grace Rubenstein's?"

I hesitated for a fraction of a second. His mouth had that twist to it that always made me nervous.

"Grace wasn't in," I told him, "so I went to Madge Johnston's house."

"Why do you take the trouble to lie to me?"

So he had checked up on me.

He was like all the men, wanting to know every time a girl took a deep breath and why and what it meant. If I were a man I wouldn't have to apologize for being alive. Who said women were emancipated?

"Why would I lie to you, Daddy?"

I started up the stairs.

"David Reese was here," he said.

Halfway up the stairs I turned.

"What did he want?"

"He mentioned an appointment with you."

But it hadn't been definite. He'd phoned me this morning. He'd been sore about last night.

It had been a mistake for me to go with Frankie to a public place like Teepee Inn where everybody would see us and it would get back to Dave. And then Frankie made it practically a public scandal by getting into that stupid fight with Ed Wonder.

Well, this morning Dave and I had had it out over the phone. I knew how to handle him, and at the end he said he'd be over in the evening if he could get away early enough. He had to show somebody a house at eight. Why should I hang around waiting for him when Frankie was more definite about a date for tonight?

"I didn't have a real date with Dave," I told Daddy.

Daddy just looked up at me from the foot of the stairs.

Nobody would think that that meek, insignificant little man could frighten anybody, but there was something deep and frightening about him when he looked at me like that.

I turned away quickly and went up the rest of the stairs. I knocked at Mother's door.

"Beverly?" she asked through the door.

"Yes."

"Come in."

I wondered if she would have said come in if it had been Daddy who knocked.

Mother was undressing for bed. She was in her slip. At forty-six her figure was as smooth and slim as a girl's.

"Did you have a nice time, dear?" Mother said.

"We sat and talked for a while and then I came home."

That was practically the truth. I didn't have to say that it was Frank Townsend with whom I'd sat and talked. I had told her that I was going to walk to Grace's house, and she assumed that I still meant Grace.

Daddy was the only snooper in the household.

Mother fetched her pink rayon nightgown from the dresser, but she didn't take off the rest of her things and

put it on. She was very modest, even in front of me. I wondered if Daddy himself had ever seen her undressed.

She stood holding the nightgown and spoke about her plans to visit her sister in St. Louis next month. She wanted me to come along. I put her off by saying I'd like it, but not saying yes or no.

We kissed good-night and I went out.

Daddy came out of the bathroom. He looked at Mother's door and then at me.

"For God's sake, marry David," he said, "or let him alone."

When he kept at it long enough, he got under my skin.

"Daddy, we don't live in a country where a father can decide whom his daughter should marry."

"Nor, unfortunately, where a father places his grown daughter across his knees and spanks her."

That made a funny picture—me, bigger than he was, being spanked by him.

But not so funny either. There was still that look in his eyes that made him seem twice as big as he really was.

I wished he'd go to St. Louis for a while instead of mother.

"Good-night, Daddy," I said, opening the bathroom door.

He glanced around at me as if he weren't sure he'd heard me.

"Good-night," he murmured and went into his room.

When I came out of the bathroom, I paused in the hall.

So now Dave was mad at me because I hadn't kept myself at his lordship's disposal.

He was mad at me most of the time, anyway. People only knew the gay part of him, but half the time he was with me he was moody or nagging me about one thing or another.

I went downstairs and dialed his home number on the phone.

He answered at the first ring. When he heard my voice, he just grunted.

"Honey, it wasn't a definite date," I told him. "When you didn't come by nine, I was sure you weren't coming at all."

"You weren't at Grace's."

"No. It was Madge Johnston's. Surely you're not jealous of a girl?"

"Frank Townsend wasn't a girl last night."

If I knew him, he'd keep bringing up that subject for weeks.

"Honey, you're not implying that you don't trust me with another man?"

"I never said that. But I don't trust Frank."

That was funny. In all the years I'd known Frankie, tonight was the first time he'd kissed me. And he'd hurried to follow it up with a marriage proposal.

I supposed I was the only one who really knew Frankie.

"Well," I said, "for that matter I don't trust you with Frankie's sister Rachel all day in your office with you."

"Don't be stupid."

If he weren't so mad, he wouldn't have spoken like that. It made me mad too.

"If I'm so stupid, why don't you marry Rachel, who, I suppose, is so brilliant?"

"Maybe I will," Dave said and hung up.

I hung up too, but I didn't go away from the phone. A girl never got anywhere if she didn't give in a little when she had to.

I waited two or three minutes and dialed his number again.

"We're acting like children, honey," I said. "You know I love you."

"Then why don't you marry me?"

"Be here tomorrow and we'll talk it over."

All at once Dave's voice was eager.

"You mean it's yes?"

"Well, let's talk it over," I said.

"I'll be there with bells on. At eight?"

"Yes. Good-bye, honey."

So that fixed that.

I went up to my room and undressed. I'd have all day to work out how I'd handle Dave tomorrow night.

But I'd have to be careful.

A girl always had to be careful with men. They wanted you to be warm flesh and blood and at the same time as cold as a porcelain figure, and if you weren't both at once they got mad and jealous and fought each other.

All my clothes were off. I looked at myself in the dresser mirror. I'd have to watch my diet. Women like Mother were lucky. They ate anything they wanted and their figures simply shed the food.

But Mother had been twenty-two before she'd got her first proposal, and that had been her only one. I was seventeen the first time a man asked me to marry him, and tonight I'd been proposed to by two different men, if I included Dave who'd been asking me for ages.

Only Rudy Matterson never . . . .

My fists clenched at my shoulders.

A girl could hate a man and not hate him at the same time. She could want him dead and want him very much alive in the same moment.

Downstairs the doorbell rang.

I stood where I was before the mirror, with my arms crossed. Maybe it was because I didn't have a thing on that I was so cold.

The doorbell kept ringing. Some idiot was keeping his finger on the button.

It was at least eleven-thirty. I got colder and colder. I shivered all over.

It was very late for anybody to ring the bell.

I took my quilted satin robe from the closet and put it

on and stuck my feet into my mules. I heard Daddy come out of his room and go down the stairs. I heard him open the front door and then a man spoke in an excited tone.

I went out to the hall, but I couldn't make out what they were saying downstairs.

I opened the door to Mother's room. She slept soundly on her back. Nothing ever disturbed her, walking or sleeping.

I went to the head of the stairs.

"What is it, Daddy?"

The voices stopped. Daddy appeared at the foot of the stairs, and then another man moved forward. He was a tall, gaunt, sloppily dressed man—Valentine Stark, the sheriff.

Daddy was still fully dressed. For a long time he looked up at me standing at the head of the stairs. His thin face looked sick, and Valentine Stark's even thinner face looked sick too.

"What happened, Daddy?" I asked.

"Rudolph Matterson has been murdered," he told me.

4. David Reese

WEDNESDAY, MAY 14 — 12:10 A. M.

THE PHONE RANG while I was taking off my pants. My watch said twelve-ten. Hardly an hour for random phone calls.

Beverly again? Maybe Bev saying she couldn't sleep thinking of how she loved me and couldn't wait till tomorrow to tell me she wanted to marry me right away. I lost a couple of breaths as I scooped up the phone.

A woman all right, but it was only Rachel Townsend, my secretary and assistant at the office. She said, "Dave, I need a lawyer."

"For Frank, I bet. Whom did he sock this time?"

"Rudy Matterson was murdered," Rachel blurted.

I reached for the pack of cigarettes on the table, shook one out, snapped my lighter.

"Dave, did you hear what I said?"

"Where did it happen?"

"In his kitchen."

"How?"

"With a cookie jar."

"A what?"

"Oh, does it matter?" Rachel said. "I need a lawyer and you're one."

I put the flame to my cigarette, then said, "Why use a cookie jar? Frank never before needed anything to help out his fists?"

"Dave, you blithering idiot, Frankie didn't do it. Nobody knows who did. George Atwood is as much under suspicion as anybody. For that matter, so am I. I'm calling you from Rudy's house."

I said, "You don't have to tell the police anything. I'll ring up Joe Rubenstein. He's a good enough attorney for any—"

"I want you," Rachel cut in. "You're a lawyer."

"I haven't practiced in three years. Not since I learned that there was more dough in selling houses to people who couldn't afford them."

"Dave, for God's sake, come right over!"

I pulled smoke into my lungs. "In ten minutes," I said.

I put on pants, necktie, jacket. Then I left. I lived smack in the heart of Rexton, in what was called an apartment house because it had two stories. It was constructed of hideous cream-colored brick, had eight apartments you couldn't swing a cat in, and a garage under the building. And it had a name—Eagle Arms, no less.

I didn't take my car. I needed a walk to get myself back on even keel. I knew whichever way this turned out it would be bad. Very bad.

They were in the living room in Matterson's house. When I stood on the terrace, I heard their voices and glimpsed people through the picture window. He'd got it in the kitchen, Rachel had said. I walked along the terrace which was on two sides of the house, then along a colored flagstone walk to the back door which led into the kitchen.

Abel Torrey was keeping the dead man company. Torrey was county coroner. His pay was five hundred a year, generously figured at around one hundred bucks an hour for the work he did to earn it. For a living he ran a filling station at the edge of town.

He sat at the kitchen table, brooding at a design on the oilcloth. He perked up when I entered. Glad, I guess, to

share the presence of the dead with another member of the living.

He said, "Ain't it hell, Dave?"

It looked like hell. The kitchen was large enough to contain an entire three-room Eagle Arms apartment, with enough space left over for a couple of extra closets. Rudolph Matterson's body lay not far from the table. Blood glistened evilly on the green inlaid linoleum. His skull was a mess.

Against one bent knee was the large red earthenware jar. It seemed undamaged except for a minor crack running from its bulging middle to the base. From the broad mouth of the jar cute round cookies sprinkled with colored sugar decorations had spilled and scattered.

"A lot of good his money does him now," Abel Torrey observed profoundly.

I said, "That jar killed him?"

"Did you ever heft one of them bean jars?"

"Bean jar?" I said. "What about those cookies?"

"They was kept in the bean jar. My missus has one just like it only smaller and she uses it for cookies too."

I made a wide sweep of the thing on the floor. I didn't want to look at it again, but I did. So this lump of blubber was supposed to have made women weak and amenable? Even Rachel. She'd posed for his screwy pictures. Had come right out and told me. That was Rachel. She did something and didn't care who knew. But why would a smart, good-looking girl have wanted to mess around with that heel? His money? Not Rachel. Though how was a mere man to know how a woman would act?

I looked away from the dead and at the living. The table at which Torrey sat had on it two cups and saucers, a sugar bowl, sliced lemon on a plate, the round red bean-pot cover with a fat knob in the middle. I went closer to the table.

Torrey warned me, "Don't touch nothing. The state po-

lice are coming to dust for fingerprints. Looks like Matterson was having tea with the guy who killed him."

"Any idea who?"

"Nope. Matterson was the only one saw him, and he ain't telling. Matterson didn't even have a chance to yell. He was killed instantly."

I said, "How do you know? You're no doctor."

"Doc Kendrell was here."

"Where's he now?"

"He made out the death certificate and went home. Nothing Doc Kendrell could do for him, was there? When one of them bean pots hits you, you're hit." He cackled. "Guess I better get rid of the one in my house. Maybe the missus will get ideas from what happened here."

I passed into the oak-panelled dining room which could hold a banquet. Wide-open, double doors showed me the living room beyond—beamed ceiling, pickled-pine walls, a fireplace which could take a young tree at a time, massive furniture, and deep chairs built for comfort. A man's room. At the moment most of the people in it were bunched near the picture window.

Rachel Townsend saw me through the open doors and came toward me. I waited for her in the dining room.

She said briskly, "Dave, do you know who inherits?"

"This estate? No."

"Whoever does will probably want to sell. We could turn a nice penny on the deal. I know Willoughby likes the place. I think he'd go to fifty thousand."

She didn't look like a ghoul. She looked like a very pretty dark-haired, dark-eyed girl, straight and slender in a business suit. Yet here she was pouncing on the idea of a fat commission to be made out of the fact that a man lay in the kitchen with his head smashed in. She might be a lass who liked to run around with men after working hours, but there was a completely different side to her in the of-

fice. A cool, efficient business woman who sometimes made me feel like a novice in the real estate racket.

The business woman went on, "Of course we should ask Willoughby sixty thousand. When we come down to fifty, he'll think he's saving ten thousand and he'll grab . . . ."

Her voice faltered. She turned her face away, but before she did I glimpsed something crawl in the dark, bottomless depths of her eyes. She was talking real estate for the same reason a boy whistles when passing a graveyard.

I said, "What's going on in there?"

"I'm not sure. They're asking all sorts of stupid questions."

"Let's hear them," I said.

Together we went into the living room.

The representatives of Cagula County law and order were there in full force. Both of them, Sheriff Valentine Stark, a thin man, and District Attorney Kenneth Fleet, a fat man.

George Atwood stood in front of the fireplace, hands clasped behind his back. If I blocked out the room and the other people, I could imagine that he was lecturing to my high-school class ten years ago—a wisp of a man with pale eyes, unhappy because I kept confusing Henry Clay with Daniel Webster.

Frank Townsend sat on the couch and smoked a cigarette with a kind of fury. That brute build and that dark, rugged face was what got the women. But not Beverly, not Bev really. To her Frank was merely somebody to take her dancing now and then till she made up her mind to marry me. Damn it, that was all it was!

Also in the living room were Jerry Follette, the ancient, wizened gardener. And Etta Saunders, a mountain of flesh, who looked the way the cook should look and was the maid. And Mrs. Jordson, a slip of a woman who looked the way the housemaid should look and was the cook.

Kenneth Fleet came forward to greet me. "Ah, Dave,"

he said and pumped my hand. As if I'd come to a party. "I suppose Miss Townsend sent for you. I heard her call you on the phone."

I said, "Tonight I am a lawyer."

Frank stood up. "I don't need a lawyer. And if I did, I wouldn't hire you."

"Frankie, be quiet!" Rachel used her crispest business tone, strode to her brother's side, pulled his head down to the level of her mouth, and whispered into his ear. Sullenly Frank subsided.

Nobody seemed to be able to think of anything to say, so I said, "What's the dope, Ken?"

"We know how and when," the D. A. told me. "The last time Matterson was seen alive was around ten tonight when Jerry Follette came home from town and saw him in this room."

"Sitting in that chair reading." The gardener nodded at a club chair standing at right angles to the fireplace.

The D. A. went on. "At ten-thirty Mrs. Jordson came down from her room to the kitchen for a drink of water. She found Matterson lying in a pool of blood. He hasn't been moved yet. If you want to see—"

"I saw him," I said.

"I just stood there and yelled," Mrs. Jordson announced proudly.

"Wonder you didn't wake Mr. Matterson up," Follette said. "I never heard nobody yell so loud."

"It woke me up," Etta Saunders said. "I ran down to the kitchen and saw—" Abruptly she started to sob.

The D. A. cleared his throat. "Frank Townsend heard the yells in his room over the garage and came running over to see what was up. He phoned Dr. Kendrell who lives next block. Dr. Kendrell says he got here in five minutes. He took one look at Matterson and called the sheriff."

"Doc Kendrell got me out of bed," Stark said eagerly, anxious to assert his authority by contributing to the talk.

The D. A. waved his dead cigar. "So we know that Matterson was murdered between ten and ten-thirty. I'd say a lot closer to ten-thirty, because he prepared tea for somebody after Jerry saw him in this room at ten. I was just about to put the pieces together, Dave, when you came in. Let's see what we have."

He paused and swept his eyes over us. As if we were a jury and he was going to do a job on us. When he was convinced that we were holding our breaths, he let us have it.

"Matterson had a visitor after Jerry saw him. The visitor didn't gain admittance by ringing either the front or back doorbell. Both doors have spring locks. Etta made sure that they were both locked when she went upstairs to her room at eight-thirty this evening. I understand that that is one of her duties."

"I lock the doors every night before going up," Etta declared.

"Yes. Well, those doors are still locked. All windows are screened and the screens locked on the inside. There's a third means of entry into the house—the cellar door. But I found that locked on the inside with a key."

"I always keep it locked," Jerry Follette said.

"Once the murderer was in the house, it was simple for him to get out. He had only to turn the lock of either the front or back door and let the lock snap shut when he closed the door behind him. But the point is—how did he get in?" The D. A. brought his cigar to his mouth, found to his surprise that it was unlit and took it out. "Both doorbells are connected to a buzzer in the maid's room. She says she fell asleep before ten o'clock, but—"

"The buzzer always wakes me," Etta Saunders asserted. "It's near my bed and I sleep light."

"This matter of how the killer gained admittance is important. He did not ring the bell because he did not wish to be admitted by a servant and seen by anybody but Mat-

terson. He had come here to murder. In other words, the crime was premeditated."

The D. A. put a smirk on his face. He was showing us how a really clever D. A. could take a little here and a little there and reconstruct exactly what happened a couple of hours ago and why.

"This is what happened," he resumed. "Matterson, reading in that chair by the light of that floor lamp, was visible through the picture window to anybody who came up on the front terrace. The visitor tapped on the window. Matterson rose and admitted him through the front door. That was why no bell was rung. The visitor was somebody Matterson knew very well. He suggested tea and they went into the kitchen together."

"Wait a minute," I chipped in. "Wouldn't Matterson have called a servant to serve tea?"

Etta Saunders answered that one. "Oh, no. Mr. Matterson was a wonderful employer. Even if I wasn't sleeping, he wouldn't make me come down late at night for tea. He was always doing little things himself."

"Besides," Mrs. Jordson added tartly, "he thought he was the only one who knew how to brew tea. I never had complaints about my tea any place I worked, but Mr. Matterson always brewed his tea himself."

The D. A. said, "So there we have Matterson and his visitor drinking tea together in the kitchen. The signs are plain. Matterson, having poured the tea, brought out the bean pot in which Mrs. Jordson keeps her cookies and placed the pot on the table. The fact that they were having tea in the kitchen shows that the visitor was somebody with whom Matterson did not have to stand on formality. Somebody with whom he was on very friendly terms. But he could not guess that this friend, this guest, had murder in his heart. He could not guess that when he stood up and turned his back for a moment, the visitor would snatch up the bean pot and bring it down on his head."

"A bean pot's silly," I commented.

"Is it?" The D. A. was wearing the supercilious smirk for the night. "Can you doubt its effectiveness after what it did to Matterson?"

"Wasn't any sound made by the visitor or Matterson?" I asked.

"The servants' quarters are upstairs and this is an extremely solidly constructed house. In addition, Etta was asleep. Jerry was in Mrs. Jordson's room listening to her radio with her. Even so, they would have heard an outcry or sounds of a struggle. We may be sure that conversation between Matterson and his visitor was in normal tones and that the murder itself was silently executed."

I set fire to a cigarette and let my eyes go around the room. Stark and the servants didn't interest me. Rachel and Frank and Mr. Atwood appeared to be waiting for something, their faces carefully empty. Maybe their thoughts too.

I said, "So anybody at all could have done it."

"Anybody who knew Matterson well enough to be invited into the kitchen for tea." The D. A. put a match to his cigar. There was another dramatic pause. "Like George Atwood, for instance."

Mr. Atwood unclasped his hands. He didn't look particularly disturbed. "I believe that evidence is required before a charge of murder is hurled at a citizen. Isn't that so, David?"

"Is it a charge, Ken?" I asked the D. A.

"By no means. Not yet, at any rate. But I want to know why Atwood was sneaking across the lawn outside this house at around a quarter after ten tonight."

Mr. Atwood said, "I protest your description of what I was doing as sneaking."

"But you were here. Frank Townsend says he saw you from the garage."

Frank stood up. Face as rugged and rigid as a rock. "All

I saw was a shadow. Somebody walking. It was dark. I didn't know it was Mr. Atwood."

Sheriff Stark pointed a skinny finger at him. "You told me yourself right after I got here. You said you seen Mr. Atwood go across the lawn."

"I didn't know what I was saying," Frank said woodenly. "Listen! I was getting ready for bed when I heard a scream in the house and I ran over and saw Mr. Matterson dead and bloody on the floor. He was a good guy. I never knew any better to work for. Then when you showed up and started throwing questions at me, I spoke without thinking."

Stark said, "Don't be so smart, Frank. You said it. Just because you're sweet on Mr. Atwood's girl—"

"Shut up!" Frank said.

George Atwood stepped away from the fireplace. A little man, smaller even than any of the women in the room except Mrs. Jordson, but all at once he dominated the place. He said with a tired smile, "Thank you, Frank, but you needn't try to protect me. I was here at the time."

"Why?" the D. A. flung at him.

"To visit Matterson."

"What about?"

"We were friends. I consider it perfectly proper for men to call on each other."

"But wasn't it proper to ring the bell? The servants would've heard you ring. They didn't. What did you do, go right into the kitchen?"

I dug out cigarettes. Everybody watched Mr. Atwood, waiting.

He said calmly, "When I almost reached the house, I decided that it was too late for a casual visit and returned home."

"Just like that?" the D. A. growled.

"Yes," Mr. Atwood said.

I expelled smoke and kept myself from smiling. A quiet

little man like that would say yes till doomsday. Only evidence could change his answer, and I wasn't sure even that would.

The D. A. switched his attack to Rachel. "Everybody just visiting," he said bitterly. "Miss Townsend, why were you visiting Matterson? Old friends too, eh?" The inflection at the end of that sentence was sheer nastiness.

Frank had sat down. Now he stood up for the third time since I'd entered the room. Took a couple of menacing steps toward the D. A. before his sister could hook a hand through his arm and bring him up short.

"Don't mind him, Frankie," Rachel said. "He's just trying to be clever. He knows very well that I was on my way to visit you."

"That's your story," the D. A. scoffed.

I said, "What goes, Rachel?"

"I came to see Frank," she told me. "I saw a car parked on the driveway and heard excited voices in the house. I didn't think it was any of my business, so I went on to the garage. Then Ken Fleet pulled up in his car and saw me by the light of his headlights. He told me that Rudy Matterson had been murdered and made me go to the house with him. After a while he started to act as if I'd done it. That's why I phoned you."

The D. A. snorted. "Just paying a visit after eleven at night."

Rachel was the cool, efficient lass dismissing a customer's objection to a deal. "Frank is my brother. There is nothing wrong about my going to his room at any time of the day or night. Besides, it happened to be an hour after Rudy Matterson was murdered."

The sheriff contributed another mite. "Murderers return to the scene of their crime," he stated as if reading it out of a copybook.

The D. A. said, "All right, keep lying to me. I'll find

the flaws." His cigar swung and fixed itself in a line with Frank's barrel chest. "Where were you tonight?"

Frank let his mouth hang open for a long moment. He wasn't as good as Mr. Atwood or Rachel. His face announced: Here's another lie coming. Aloud he said uneasily, "Mr. Matterson let me use his car tonight."

"For what purpose?"

"Just for myself. Mr. Matterson was swell that way."

"Where did you go?"

"I drove to Hal's bar and had a couple beers. You can ask Hal."

"When did you leave?"

"Around nine."

"Where did you go then?"

Frank looked at his feet. "Just drove around."

"With whom?"

"Just myself."

All at once I found it hard to breathe in that room.

The D. A. was saying, "So you have no alibi?"

"What the hell do I need an alibi for?" Frank said pugnaciously.

There were answers to that, but the D. A. didn't have a chance to give them. The doorbell rang. Automatically Etta Saunders jumped up, but before she could reach the hall we heard the unlocked door open. Beverly and her mother entered the living room.

Bev was a dream in white. White dress and shoes, fair complexion, and her hair was somehow subtly blonder tonight. Her coming into the room was like a dazzling light suddenly turned on.

Mrs. Atwood abandoned her daughter near the door and moved to her husband. No sign of worry in her sweet, calm face, but when she spoke there was a tremor in her voice. "Dear, is anything wrong?"

"Not a thing, Kathryn." One corner of his thin mouth lifted. I could see heavy sarcasm coming, the way it used

to in history class when a student was particularly dumb. "Only that Matterson was murdered."

"I am aware of that. But why should the sheriff have dragged you out of bed in the middle of the night? Beverly and I could not sit at home and wait. We dressed and came over."

Mr. Atwood said dryly, "So I see."

It wasn't nice. It was more than the words Mr. Atwood used. His tone mocked her, treated her like dirt. If a man had to talk like that to his wife, why did he do it in front of a lot of strangers?

Then Bev was at my side. Her hand touched mine. Past her shoulder I saw Frank glower at us. She hadn't gone to him. Hadn't given him the smile she turned up to me. Or any smile. I love you, honey, she'd said tonight over the phone; and now she'd headed straight for me. Frank wasn't anybody.

The D. A. had joined Mr. and Mrs. Atwood and was saying something I didn't catch. But everybody heard Etta Saunders. She exclaimed, "Oh, my God!"

Everybody turned to her. The huge housemaid gaped at me. No, not at me. At Beverly.

The D. A. said, "What is it, Etta?"

"I just remembered," she said thickly. "Last week. Friday afternoon it was. Mr. Matterson and Miss Atwood were having tea on the terrace. I came out with the tea things and there were Mr. Matterson and Miss Atwood" —she groped for a word—"struggling."

"Struggling?" the D. A. said.

"Well, he was trying to kiss her and she was fighting to get away from him. Mr. Matterson saw me standing there with the tea tray in my hands, and he let her go. She didn't say a word. She walked off the terrace and down the driveway." Etta's vast bosom heaved. "I didn't tell a soul what I saw because I thought a lot of Mr. Matterson, and I didn't want people to think he was a man who did such things.

But now, Mr. Matterson being murdered, I guess I ought to tell everything I know."

"Thank you, Etta." The D. A. turned to Beverly. "Well, Miss Atwood."

Beverly fluffed her yellow hair. "Rudy Matterson was a beast. Any woman can tell you that. You can ask Rachel Townsend."

Rachel said rather brightly, "It depends on the woman. I found him a perfect gentleman."

"Different girls expect different things from a gentleman," Beverly said sweetly.

The feline streak in them. When women got like that, all a man could do was be embarrassed.

"Please, girls," the D. A. said weakly.

Bev swayed against me so that our shoulders touched. She said to the D. A., "I met Rudy in the street and he invited me to his place for tea. He visited my home often as a friend of my father, and it was only being sociable to accept his invitation. Perhaps I shouldn't have, knowing his reputation, but it was broad daylight and we would be on the terrace. While we were waiting for tea to be served, he told me that he admired my figure and would like to paint me."

Frank growled deep in his throat.

She went on hurriedly, as if to cover that growl, "Naturally I refused. He kept telling me how beautiful I was, and all of a sudden he put his arms around me. Naturally I struggled. I don't know what might have happened, but just then Etta came out with the tea and he had to release me. I did the one thing a self-respecting girl could do. I left."

There was a brief silence. Then Mrs. Atwood said bitterly to her husband, "And you kept inviting that man to our home, George."

Mr. Atwood laughed unpleasantly. I couldn't understand

why he laughed like that or what it meant. Just that short, jarring laugh without saying anything.

Then Sheriff Stark pitched in, suddenly cocky and confident. "Like I thought all along. Last night Frank got in a fight with Ed Wonder over Miss Atwood. Then he found out Mr. Matterson got fresh with her, so he killed him."

Frank said, "Listen! I didn't know about it. I'd have beaten his ears off. But sock a guy with a pot! Hell, I've got fists."

"Smart," the D. A. commented. "A smart killer would use the sort of weapon it'd be unlikely he'd use. Like a man who's handy with his fists using a bean pot."

Beverly asked, "What time was Rudy murdered?"

There was a breathless quality to that question that made something inside of me jump. And the way the others looked at her, it was plain that they reacted similarly.

"Between ten and ten-thirty," the D. A. told her. "His body was found at ten-thirty."

She smiled. "Then Frankie is certainly innocent. He was with me until ten-thirty tonight."

I turned hot and then cold. Last night and then again tonight.

There was a stillness in the room as if all the air had been suddenly sucked out of it. I didn't look around or at Bev or anywhere but directly ahead. In my line of vision I saw Mr. Atwood's mouth become as thin as a knife edge, Mrs. Atwood frowned, and the D. A.'s smirk filled all of his fat face.

"Were there witnesses, Miss Atwood?" the D.A. purred. Setting a trap. If I warned her, it would only make it worse.

She patted her hair negligently. "Frankie and I went for a drive and didn't stop off anywhere. Though, of course, I'm a witness."

Frank said heavily, "You didn't have to tell, Beverly."

I no longer felt her shoulder against mine. She'd moved

away, an inch or two, but it was like a million miles. I heard her say, "Why shouldn't I tell? It was perfectly harmless. Certainly in this day and age there's nothing wrong in a girl going for a drive with a young man."

"Ten-thirty, Miss Atwood?" the D. A. said, opening the mouth of the trap wide. "You're sure it was ten-thirty?"

"Of course I'm—"

"You're not sure, Bev," I practically shouted. "You're not wearing a watch."

She threw me a startled glance. She opened her mouth, but before she could put her foot in it, her father said quickly, as if taking a dive, "Beverly, don't you remember that when you left the house at nine-fifteen you had no idea what time it was? You had to ask me."

The D. A.'s smirk gave way to anger. "Why are you men afraid to let her speak for herself?"

"There's no sense confusing the time element," I said. Monumental lack of logic, that, but I knew what I was doing. "You see, Bev, you couldn't have been with Frank till ten-thirty. At ten-fifteen Frank was in his room and saw your father from the window."

She said in a small, thin voice, "Saw Daddy?"

And Mrs. Atwood said in bewilderment, "I'm sure you were at home all evening, George."

Mr. Atwood shrugged skimpy shoulders. "I was on my way to visit Matterson. I changed my mind and returned home. Mr. Fleet is attempting to read significance into that act."

Beverly didn't give up easily. She insisted, "But if Frank saw Daddy, it must have been after ten-thirty."

The D. A. brought his smirk back. "We know it was quite a few minutes before ten-thirty, because at ten-thirty Mrs. Jordson discovered the body and screamed. Frank rushed over from the garage. That means he'd come over before then."

Frank said, "So Beverly made a mistake about what time

I left her. What the hell's the difference? You still got nothing on me."

"I'll tell you what I've got." The D. A. swung his cigar to include everybody in the room. "I've got a conspiracy. I've got people trying to cover up for each other. This is murder, and anybody who tries to help anybody else get away with it is an accessory after the fact. Now then, I want the truth from all of you."

It lay like that for long moments. Nothing happened, of course. What had the D. A. expected—that somebody would break as a result of his outburst?

Then Stark said petulantly, "Frank done it. Miss Atwood knows he did. Tonight she told Frank that Mr. Matterson tried to attack her and when he came home he killed him. That's why she tried to give him that fake alibi. I'm the sheriff. I'm going to arrest Frank."

"Dave," Rachel said. She sat on the couch, legs crossed, fine knees showing, a cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth. Through the smoke weaving across her face her dark eyes told me that she needed me. If not for herself, for Frank. For all I cared, he could hang ten times over. But it wasn't that simple. The D. A. was right. We were all against him, each of us for a different reason maybe, but all of us frightened by the implications of Rudolph Matterson lying dead in the kitchen.

I said, "You'd be wasting your time, Sheriff. I'd have Frank out of jail by morning, and the D. A. knows it. You haven't more against him than against a number of other people. Including myself, if it comes to that. The fact is, that everybody in Rexton who knew Matterson even casually is a possible suspect. In other words, you're exactly where you were the moment you walked into this house tonight."

The D. A.'s smirk was permanently dead. He looked depressed. "We may find fingerprints," he muttered.

"Let's hope so," I said, "but do you want to bet you

don't? Nobody is stupid enough to leave fingerprints these days."

In the room somebody sighed. I didn't know who it was, but it was as if everybody in the room except the D. A. and the Sheriff uttered that sigh. With relief.

5. *Kathryn Atwood*

WEDNESDAY, MAY 14 — 8:25 P. M.

TWILIGHT IS THE loveliest time, and May the loveliest month. It is a period of gentleness and rebirth. In the soft hush of the departing day I strolled through the garden. The flower beds were as yet barren; the myriad-colored heads of flowers bobbing at me were for later and hotter days. But along the side of the house, bridal wreath stretched skyward, their arms filled with virginal blossoms; and the two dogwood trees were breathtakingly white against the grayness seeping in from the east.

As I passed one of the two living room windows on that side of the house, the subdued mutter of voices drifted out to me. The young lovers sat in almost complete darkness, for romance does not like the harsh glare of electricity. At that moment David Reese raised his voice, and I could not help but hear what he said.

"If you claim you love me, why do you keep running around with other guys?"

I approved of David, but like most men he possessed a streak of vulgarity. I was glad to hear that my daughter resented it as much as I did.

"Running around!" echoed Beverly. "You sound as if you think I'm dissolute."

"You know I didn't mean anything of the kind. God, Bev, I'd kill anybody who said anything about you."

"Don't say that!" cried Beverly.

"Say what?"

"About killing anybody. Rudy Matterson was murdered right next door last night and the police are suspecting everybody who ever knew him and—well, you ought to be careful of what you say."

"Holy cats!" exclaimed David. "You don't think I had anything to do with it?"

"What an absurd notion, honey! But you're so awfully jealous and now you talk about killing anybody who—"

"You bet I'm jealous. You give me plenty of reason. But if I started knocking off every guy I was jealous of, I'd have to go around with a tommy-gun." His voice lowered; I had to move closer to the window to hear him. "You're driving me crazy with those other men."

"We're not living in the last century," said she sharply. "I can go dancing with a man or take a ride in his car without losing my honor. I'm sure I've never done anything I'd be ashamed to have you or Mother or anybody else know, and I'm sick and tired of you doubting me."

"I never—"

"When I'm married to you, honey, it'll be different. I'll never as much as look at another man."

"You mean you're telling me you'll marry me?" burst out David.

"Honey, honey, don't you know that you're the only man I ever really loved?"

An eloquent silence ensued. There can be no tenderer moment than two young lovers kissing.

I strolled to the back of the house where over the years we had cultivated every inch of our narrow, two-hundred-feet-deep property. I moved along the paths between the dormant flower beds through the tiny peach orchard, and to the grape arbor at the far corner.

The arbor was close to the hedge which separated my property from Rudolph Matterson's—rather, what had been his property. I observed that the wild honeysuckle,

which had been cleared last autumn, had obtained a new lease on life; it was again spreading out to choke the arbor and hedge. I would have to hire a boy to uproot it properly.

Last night Rudolph Matterson was uprooted from life.

The man had often been a guest in my home, but I had scarcely known him, and what I had known of him I had disliked. He had possessed a certain charm of manner, but I was not one to be deceived by such a façade. I had been aware that behind it had been the real creature, a dilettante artist who painted nudes, a suave lecher, a being without a single moral attribute. He was not a man to be welcomed to a home which contained a beautiful unmarried daughter, but George had had a curious affection for him, and as a dutiful wife I had received him with as good grace as I could muster.

No, there was no reason why I should feel any particular regret at his passing. Yet, as I stood beside the impenetrable hedge, I experienced an overbearing sense of sadness.

I retraced my steps. As I turned the corner of the house, I saw George stand close to the window through which I had heard the conversation between Beverly and David. Their voices were again audible.

George was within several feet of me, but in the gathering gloom he did not notice me. He was concentrating on the talk of the two young lovers in the living room. I was ashamed of him.

David's voice came argumentatively through the open window. "Are you trying to drive me completely off my nut? You say you'll marry me and everything is fine, and then when I try to pin you down to a date, you say next year. And next year you'll say next year. Do you or don't you want to marry me?"

"It's not that. I don't want to leave Mother alone just yet."

"She has a husband, hasn't she?"

George uttered an only half suppressed snort. He was always full of snorts and grimaces which had no meaning.

"All the same, Mother will be lonely without me," replied Beverly. "She is very attached to me. After all, I'm her only child."

"Won't she be just as lonely without you a year from now?"

"Please don't nag me, honey. I've thought it over and my mind is made up. Next year it will be easier to leave her."

"Why will next year be easier than now?"

It was going to be one of those interminable lovers' squabbles which were interesting only to the participants.

I raised my voice. "Good-evening, dear."

Beverly's reply to David was cut off in the midst of a word. Aware now that people were outside the window, they became silent.

George stepped away from the window, and together we walked to the front of the house.

"If David were half a man, he would wring her neck," said he when we reached the foot of the porch steps.

"I'm surprised at you for eavesdropping."

His thin mouth twisted at the right corner, in that way that had annoyed me for so many years. "I have learned that it is females who insist on a double standard of morality."

Another thing that annoyed me about him was his habit of referring to women as females. And still another thing was that he was seldom capable of a civil statement. I did my best to make a pleasant home for him, but he had never once as much as indicated that he appreciated my efforts.

"We have to defend ourselves from men who try to drag us down to their level," was my retort.

He uttered his short, harsh laugh. "I wonder if you are stupid or if you deliberately pretend never to understand me."

A wife becomes hardened to a husband's insults and learns to shed them as a duck sheds water. I changed the subject.

"Dear," said I, "I can't believe that Frank Townsend murdered Rudolph because he learned that Rudolph had tried to—to become fresh with Beverly."

"Why can't you?"

I folded my hands and looked at his pinched face, shadowy in the deepening twilight. "I couldn't stand having our daughter's name dragged into a murder trial."

"So all that the murder means to you is a possible scandal?"

His tone bore its usual quota of mockery. Why couldn't he speak to me the way other husbands spoke to their wives? But I would not let him know how greatly I resented his manner.

"Dear, last night in Rudolph's house didn't Mr. Fleet mention that he hoped that the murderer would be identified through his fingerprints? It seems to me that the police would have had enough time to—"

"There were no fingerprints," he interrupted me. "Sheriff Stark visited me at school this afternoon and requested me to attend the inquest tomorrow. He told me that the murderer had had the wit to wipe the teacup."

"Then it must have been somebody very clever," said I.

George looked at me with his mouth twisted. "It must be a relief for you to know that a dull witted, fumbling man like your husband would not have thought of removing his fingerprints."

Having said that, he turned and ascended the stairs. His shoulders were bowed as if with weariness.

I entered the house a minute later. A floor lamp was now lit in the living room. As I passed the doorway, I saw David Reese stride back and forth in front of the fireplace. He was alone. I mounted the stairs.

Beverly came out of her room. She wore her brown

flannel skirt and the yellow blouse I had made last month to wear with the skirt. No mother had ever had a more perfect model for whom to sew. Over her arm she carried her brown-and-white checkered topper.

"Are you going out, dear?" I asked her.

"Only for a walk with Dave. I'll be home early."

"I'll find the house empty when you marry," said I, "but we'll see each other every day if you live in Rexton, as, of course, you will."

"You want me to marry Dave, don't you, Mother?"

"He's a splendid boy."

She tossed her gorgeous hair. "He nags too much. He's always arguing and finding fault."

"A woman must not look for a god on earth," said I. "She must accept the best she can get."

"Oh, I'll marry Dave all right, but I hate to be rushed." My big daughter patted my cheek. "Well, Dave is waiting for me."

She rushed away from me with the buoyant rapture of youth. I moved on to my room.

I had come for my knitting bag, but I did not turn on the light. I crossed the room and stood at the window. The world outside had grown dark. From my height on the second floor I could look over the hedge. The floodlights over the driveway next door were on, and in their glaring illumination I observed a man carrying two suitcases from the garage. At that distance I could not distinguish his face, but his brutish figure told me who he was.

Frank Townsend was leaving, following the other servants who had departed in the afternoon. An empty house was left, and there was a man to be buried.

A coldness lay about my heart. Why should Rudolph's death mean more to me than that of a moving picture actor whom I had known only as a shadow on a screen? I looked deep into myself and wondered if what I felt was not sorrow but fear. For his manner of death was a thing of

terror, of police and suspicions and perhaps scandal, of the possibility of dreadful ramifications.

My gaze shifted to the small section of street within my line of vision. Arm in arm, Beverly and David passed. They strolled very slowly, as lovers will, oblivious to the world about them.

I turned my head. Frank Townsend was returning to the garage after having placed his bags in the driveway. The floodlights went out.

I picked up my knitting bag from the dresser where I had left it that afternoon. I took it downstairs to the living room, turned on the lamp beside the couch, and resumed work on the cardigan sweater-set I was knitting for my daughter.

6. Frank Townsend

FRIDAY, MAY 16—3:13 P. M.

A GUY COULDN'T even get drunk. In thirty minutes I poured three double ryes into an empty stomach and nothing happened. I ordered a fourth.

Hal didn't pay any attention to me. He was at the door-end of the bar, talking to a couple of men I'd never seen before.

"Damn it," I said, "let's have the bottle."

Hal turned his beefy face to me. "You had enough for this early, Frank," he said.

"Damn it, isn't my money good?" I said.

Hal came over and put the bottle down in front of me and went back to the men. I poured. I didn't spill a drop. I put both hands around the glass, but I didn't raise it.

After a while I heard the door open and close. The two men were gone. I looked up and saw Hal standing in front of me, leaning his elbows on the shelf behind him. His head was round as a balloon and had just about as much hair.

"A real cop came to town this morning," he said.

Hal had waited till we were alone before talking about it. It was too soon after lunch for the beer drinkers and too early in the day for the hard drinkers. Except for me. Except for a guy who was trying to drown the thoughts in his head in whiskey.

"What cop?" I said.

"A private detective all the way from New York. The County Supervisors had a meeting and voted to hire him to work on the Matterson murder."

He ran a towel over the bar. The bar was clean. He wiped it so he could lean toward me and look close into my face to see how I took the news.

"I won't believe it," I said, "till you show me how the County Supervisors can make dough for themselves by hiring a private cop."

"It ain't legal to knock off a rich guy like Matterson," Hal said. He tossed the towel under the bar. "Kill anybody else in this county, and they bury him and forget about him. But don't let anybody make the mistake murdering guys with dough. That's against the law."

I lifted up my glass a little way and put it down without tasting the rye. Hal's head was a balloon all right. It started to float toward the ceiling.

"What about this private cop?" I said. "Is he any good?"

"Val Stark says he's a whiz."

"How would Stark know if a cop is any good?" I said.

Hal chuckled. "You got something there," he said. "Anyway, Stark had a beer here before the train came in this morning. He told me all about this detective. Ben Helm his name is. He writes books and lectures at colleges on how to catch crooks. What do you think of that—an educated cop? All these modern scientific methods. The way Val Stark talks, the guy is going to take a look around and say, 'There's your killer,' and take the next train back home."

"I saw 'em in the movies," I said. "They wear beards and smoke pipes and nothing fools them. The hell with him."

Hal's balloon head snapped back onto his neck and leaned over to me. His eyes and nose and mouth all came together and looked like a single hole in a blank surface.

"You scared of him, Frank?" Hal said softly.

I put both hands flat on the bar. "What d'you mean by that crack?" I said.

"Nothing," Hal said in a hurry. "Frank, you been drinking too much too early."

"You're only a barkeep," I said. "Don't try talking like my sister."

I brought the glass all the way to my mouth. The stuff tasted bitter on my lips. I looked into the glass and didn't see whiskey. I saw what I always saw, when I was awake or sleeping—the face of an angel.

I put down the glass and went into the phone booth and slipped a nickel in the slot and dialed.

"Hello?" Mrs. Atwood's voice said.

I hung up without saying a word. What was the good? If I asked was Beverly in, Mrs. Atwood would recognize my voice and say she was out. If Beverly herself answered, it would come to the same thing. She'd talk to me nice and friendly, but she would be going somewhere with her mother or have a headache or something and she wouldn't be sure she could make a date tomorrow or the next day.

Up to three days ago I hadn't had much trouble dating her. Up to the night I'd asked her to marry me—the night Mr. Matterson was killed.

I went back to the bar and picked up the double rye and without sitting down poured it down my throat. It felt flat inside of me. I couldn't even get drunk.

"I need a man behind the bar, Frank," Hal said. "How'd you like a job?"

I put down the empty glass. "What gives you the idea I wouldn't drink up your profits?" I said.

"You're not a soak, Frank," Hal said. "Okay, a man is entitled to go on a bender now and then, but you drank more today than I ever seen you. I've known you since you was a kid. You never hung around doing nothing like lots of others I could name. You always worked hard and

steady, and you're honest. I need a man I can trust at the register when I'm away."

I could use a job. But what kind of job was it being a barkeep? It was no better than driving a truck, or working on a road gang, or chauffeuring a rich guy, or doing all of the other jobs I'd ever done for a living. Beverly wouldn't marry a man who couldn't support her in style. I didn't blame her. What kind of a life would it be for a girl like her being Mrs. Chauffeur or Mrs. Barkeep?

Damn it to hell, why didn't I finish high school like Rachel begged me to, and then go to college?

"What say, Frank?" Hal said. "It's worth fifty a week to me to have a reliable, honest man like you."

The whiskey was spreading through my body. All of a sudden it made me feel warm and light. I felt myself smile.

"Aren't you scared?" I said.

"I said I wasn't worried about your drinking. You'll level off soon as you work steady."

"I mean scared of being my boss," I said. "You know what happened to my last two bosses—Mike Parker and Mr. Matterson."

Hal looked at me with his eyes queer. "You trying to be funny?" he said.

"Yeah, I'm a comedian," I said.

I started to walk to the door. My legs wobbled a little.

"You didn't pay for your drinks," Hal said.

I fished out two singles and two dimes and slapped the dough down on the bar. Then I said, "The only job I want is something like a doctor or a lawyer or a real estate broker."

Hal turned from the cash register and looked at me. His head had come off again and looked down at me from somewhere near the ceiling. I started to laugh. I sounded nuts to my own ears. I broke off laughing. The door floated toward me.

Sunlight jabbed into my eyes. Heat bounced off the macadam road and twisted my stomach. I turned back to the gin mill. If I was going to be sick, I didn't want it to be right out in the open where everybody in town would see.

I stopped with my hand on the doorknob. I was okay now. I was a little drunk, not messy drunk. The only thing wrong was I hadn't eaten lunch. I stepped back into the sunlight and my stomach held on. The match I brought up to my cigarette didn't shake much. When I put my mind to it, I could walk without a wobble.

Division Street was quiet. The people and the cars came in the morning and the afternoon, and I'd seen traffic jams that had any big city beaten. There was a deputy sheriff, a sleepy guy named Kraft, who was supposed to worry about traffic; and sometimes the state police pitched in to help. The sheriff, Valentine Stark himself, kept himself for the brainy work, such as solving murders. That was fine. I couldn't have asked for any bloodhound I'd like better than Stark.

Wait a minute! They'd gone and got a detective in. A real cop, Hal said. How the hell did Hal know how good he was? And a cop was only a cop. He was only a human being.

"Why, hello, Frankie," a girl said.

Her arms were full of bundles. She'd come out of the Great Otter Food Center. Way down below me she was looking up at me with her red mouth half-open and her eyes shining. Why was I so high up? Then I had it. My head was a balloon too. Hal wasn't the only guy who could make his head float in the air.

"Don't you even say hello to a girl?" she said.

Mary Hoppenfeld. That's who she was. If I didn't know any other way, I should know by the way her eyes shone when they looked at me. She'd looked at me like that when we were kids going on hay rides together, and later too,

even after Beverly, when I'd still thought that other girls could take Beverly's place.

"Hello, Mary," I said. I started to go on.

"Frankie," she said, "haven't you anything to say to an old friend?"

What, for instance? How are you and isn't it a hot day for May? And after that, what?

"Well—" I said.

"Why don't you come around to see me?" Mary said. "Don't you like me any more?"

She had looks and a build. All I had to do was reach out my hand for her. I'd done it before, lots of times. I could do it now.

Only she wasn't Beverly. Nobody was Beverly but Beverly.

"I'm pretty busy these days," I said.

The shine went out of her eyes and her mouth got ugly. "So I've heard," she said. "Busy with Beverly Atwood. You and a couple of dozen other men."

You can't hit a woman. My right hand was clenched, but I didn't lift it because she was a woman. I went past her and my legs were wobbling again. They wobbled for a little while before I could get them to become steady.

A long, low wooden building had a row of stores in it. "DAVID REESE. REAL ESTATE," gilt letters on one of the store windows said.

Dave Reese, the guy Beverly was making dates with at the same time she was telling me she had a headache or couldn't see me for other reasons that weren't reasons. Okay, if he wanted her and she wanted him, let them get married. I could take a fair and square licking. But let him let my sister alone while he was running after Beverly. I knew how it was—Rachel with him all the time in the office, and Rachel no better than Mary Hoppenfeld chasing a guy she wanted, and he, I bet, not running away. By God, I didn't have to stand for it!

I pushed the door in.

A couple of years ago it had been a shoemaker's shop. Now the walls were painted tan and the floor was varnished and there were easy chairs and two desks, the one up front Rachel's and Dave's near the back so you couldn't get to see the great real-estate agent unless Rachel said it was okay.

Rachel sat at her typewriter, and Dave sat on a corner of her desk. A couple of men were there with them. One was Sheriff Stark. The other was nobody to me.

I wasn't looking for an audience. Before I had more than one foot inside I turned to go.

"There's Frank Townsend now!" Stark yelped in that high, woman's voice of his. "You wait a minute, Frank!"

I took another step and stopped. If I kept going, he'd think I was running away from him. So I went back.

"What do you want?" I said.

Dave slid off the desk. "Frank, Mr. Helm would like to meet you," he said. "He's a private detective who arrived this morning to work on the Matterson case."

"What do you want me to do," I said, "call out a band for him?"

The private cop was coming over to me. He didn't have a beard. He didn't look different from any guy you'd see in the street. But he had a pipe. He was chewing on it and looking me over, and he was smiling like he'd just thought of a good joke.

"Hello, Frank," he said and stuck out his hand.

My hand went out by itself and shook his. I tried to crush his bones, but he had a good grip. The smile was pasted on him. I dropped his hand. I could see through him like a window. One of these personality boys. The idea was to make me feel like he was my pal, and then when I wasn't watching my step he'd give me the works.

"I was just about to look for you," he said.

"What the hell for?" I said.

"Frankie, please!" Rachel said. She leaned forward against her typewriter and gave me the look that said: Now be a good boy and don't play rough with the company.

Dave Reese put in his two cents. "Helm only wants to ask you questions because you're an important witness."

"Witness, eh?" My head wouldn't stay on my neck. It had learned that from Hal. My head was way up, looking down at all of them. "I didn't witness a damn thing," I said. "All I did was come running into the kitchen when Mrs. Jordson yelled."

Helm sucked his pipe and looked at me and then took the pipe out to speak. "I'd also like to speak to you about Mike Parker," he said.

It was the way he said it, so quiet and with only his eyes smiling at me. Like he knew many things nobody else did. Like he was telling me he'd only hit Rexton this morning and was already way ahead of everybody else there.

It got very still. Rachel had her fingers on the typewriter keys, but she wasn't typing. She just sat there looking at me, and her lips started to tremble. For all I cared, Dave Reese and Stark weren't in the room. It was between Rachel and me and the cop sucking on his pipe and waiting for me to say something.

I couldn't look at him. My head was so light and empty that there wasn't anything in it except fear. I'd been under fire. I'd been pinned down on an empty beach by Jap machine guns. But I'd never been scared like I was then.

And I was outside in the street. I didn't remember leaving the office, but there was the sun pouring down on me and my body covered with sweat.

"Hey, you, where do you think you're going?" I heard Stark yell.

I was walking away from them. I was almost running.

"Let him go," I heard Helm say.

I knew that I had done the wrong thing. I was always doing the wrong thing. I walked slower, but I kept walking.

7. *Rachel Townsend*

FRIDAY, MAY 16 — 4:40 P. M.

HER HIPS WILL SPREAD. Give her a year of marriage and her flesh will start to pile up. Give her a baby or two, and she'll be a big washed-out blonde.

Oh, cut it out. What if your own figure has the slim, modish dimensions the magazines prefer? Does a man choose his love with a tape measure? And if he did, wouldn't he, being a man, prefer a juicy blonde and consider you on the unvoluptuous side, if he considered you at all except as a profitable fixture in his office?

That wasn't quite fair. Phone him in the middle of the night and say, Dave, I need you, and he'll dash over to rescue you from the police. Ask him for the shirt off his back, and he'll give it to you gladly. But you can't have the one thing you want from him. You can't have a swoony look come into his face at the sound of your voice over the wire.

Beverly's call came through me, as did all calls to the office.

"Rachel, honey, how are you?" That sugar-sweet, intimate tone which made the men start to pant and which Beverly Atwood used on women just to keep in practice.

"Busy." I could overlook the social amenities with her. She wasn't a potential client—not for me, at any rate.

"How I envy you career girls." A knife in the ribs, that career girl crack. The way she said it, it conjured up a

picture of a sexless old maid with glasses and too many bones and a leaky nose. "I feel so useless being nothing but a home girl."

How did that wisecrack go? A home girl—home to anybody at all.

I waited. I wouldn't give Beverly the satisfaction of saying that Dave was right here and I'd put him on the wire. She'd have to ask.

She had something else on her mind first. "Is it true that a detective came to town this morning? I mean to work on poor Rudy's murder?"

Poor Rudy! Last week he had tried to assault her on his terrace—why a terrace of all places?—and now he was poor Rudy. I'd need proof before I'd believe that she hadn't been the one to do the assaulting.

"It's true."

"You're not very talkative today, Rachel."

"I'm over my head in work."

Beverly waited. We both waited. I'd hang on all day before I'd say that Dave was here to speak to her.

She gave in. "May I speak to Dave?"

I turned my head. He was bent over his desk, studying the map of the new Cook Valley development. I told him the call was for him and clicked the switch at the side of my desk. He picked up his phone and I hung up mine. He said hello, and that was when the expression came into his face I'd have given both arms to have my voice inspire. He hunched over his desk, put his mouth close against the mouthpiece, lowered his voice.

Back to work, my fleshless, bloodless, sexless secretary while I hold sweet converse with my love. I resumed typing a lease, but my brain didn't know what my fingers were doing.

You'd tried. There was a traditional way which always worked in the movies and in magazine stories. You roused the dormant passion of the man you adored by pretending

that you'd gone overboard for another man. He began by finding, to his bewilderment, that he was jealous. He ended by realizing that you were his true heart's desire. Wedding bells.

So you selected Mike Parker rather cold-bloodedly. He was a perfect stooge, a virile, handsome beast who was supposed to be quite a lad with the ladies. You went with him to a square dance at the high school gym. Dave was there with Beverly, and you bore down heavily on inspiring jealousy. Your eyes and manner demonstrated that you thought Mike something wonderful, but it was wasted on the only member of the audience who counted. To Dave you remained just one of the girls in the square he had to swing in his arms for brief intervals because the routine of the square dance demanded it when he wasn't dancing with his Beverly.

All you accomplished was having to fight Mike off later when he saw you home. And to make Frank, who throughout the dance had stood against a wall of the gym alternating his glowers between Dave and Mike, grimly defend his sister's honor the next day by beating up Mike. And the day after that Mike was—

Don't think about that part of it. You'd promised yourself never to think about it. Keep your thoughts on your love, which has enough terror in it.

Last week you were more subtle—or thought you were. You asked Dave if you could get off early that afternoon.

"I have a date with Rudy Matterson," you told him. "He says I have a wonderful figure. He'd like to sketch me."

Dave's eyes didn't flick over your figure to corroborate the opinion of an artist. And, though knowing Rudy's reputation, especially with girls who posed for him, he wasn't in the least distressed. He merely grinned.

"What's the difference whom he uses for models for those nightmares he paints?"

You kept plugging. "He wants to paint my whole figure.

I don't know if I should let him." And you tried not to blush as you said it. You sought for jealousy in his eyes, some hint that you had made the slightest breach in the wall.

Only that grin again. "If I know Matterson, you'd better take a gun along with you. Go ahead, Rachel, but please send out the Morgan letter first."

Another blank. But you had to go to Rudy's studio because you'd made the date. You went through the back door so Frankie wouldn't see you from the garage; and then you had your work cut out for you convincing Rudy that he had the wrong idea of why you came. It was a mess, because Rudy wanted what he wanted and you got frightened. But not as frightened as days later when Rudy—

Don't ever, ever think about *that.* If you have to think, think of Dave speaking on the phone to the juicy blonde he loved.

I turned my head to look at him. He wasn't aware that I was in the office, that I existed. Haggard lines were etched about his eyes and mouth. They'd been there for weeks; they'd got deeper in the last few days. Beverly had done that to him, the way she had done worse to Frank. She was like the female preying mantis who devours the males who love her.

He spoke louder now, excitedly. "There's no reason to worry because a detective is on the case. I'm sure your father couldn't have . . . . I know you didn't say that, but then why are you worried? . . . . Frank?" His voice dropped, but I wasn't so far away that I couldn't hear if I strained. "I'm not Frank's lawyer. And if he did kill—" He glanced up at me as if startled to see me there in his office where I worked, and then swivelled his chair around to put his back to me.

I had to do it. I opened a drawer in my desk and leaned over as if searching for something, and at the same time

I put my phone to my ear. If he turned suddenly, he wouldn't see me listening in.

Dave's voice was a dull, metallic whisper. "Why should you be so upset because Frank might be the one?"

"Honey, I keep telling you that Frankie means nothing to me. But I couldn't stand it if Frankie killed him because Rudy tried to—well, you know what happened on his terrace last week, and Frankie might have found out, and you know Frankie's temper. And if it wasn't Frankie who did it, but—"

"But your father?" Dave's voice was so tight that I wouldn't have recognized it.

"No! I can't believe it!"

"Neither can I, so get it out of your head."

"Honey, can you come right over? I feel so frantic. I need your arms about me."

By an effort of will, I kept myself from slamming the phone on the hook. I hung up softly.

I was typing when Dave came to the side of my desk and stopped. His hat was on his head. He shouldn't cover that thick, unruly hair worn as carelessly as a boy's. His face was a boy's too, freckled and guileless and snub-nosed. It was a face you wanted to press to you while you ran a hand through his hair. But now he was a boy grown old all at once, the lines pulling his mouth down and the fresh clearness of his eyes fading.

"I'm knocking off for the day." He spoke mechanically, a boss giving his secretary orders. He looked at his watch. "Twenty to five. You can close up before six if you want to."

"There's enough work to keep me busy." He needn't worry. I'd keep his business running while he held her in his arms.

"Yes. Well." He didn't go. He stood looking at me. "Rachel?"

"Yes?"

"Frank was drunk. He wasn't responsible for what he did."

My fingers were claws on the typewriter keys. "Did?" I whispered.

"The way he didn't want to answer the detective's questions and walked out. He was obviously drunk."

"I suppose so."

"Sure he was." He put on his hat. "So long."

The door closed. It would serve him right to have Mrs. Atwood for a mother-in-law. He'd find out soon enough that he'd married two wives.

Through the window I saw him get into his car and go.

Thank God for work. Thank God for Mr. MacDougall who kept me occupied making a dozen phone calls to find out if the Board of Supervisors would grant him a zoning variance in the Woodmere section. Thank God for Mrs. Norton who was having plumbing trouble and thought we were responsible because we'd handled the sale of the house to her. But Mrs. Norton exhausted her indignation and left, and I was alone and it was only twenty-five to six.

I fled that office.

"Through for the day, Miss Townsend?"

The detective materialized at my side as I turned the key in the lock.

My fingers dropping the key into my handbag were stiff and cold, but I couldn't let him guess that he bothered me in the least. "Don't tell me, Mr. Helm, that you've been wasting the county's money shadowing me?"

"Hardly. I think I've been earning my pay." A finger trailed along the zipper of a leather brief case under his arm. Was that where he kept the clues detectives were supposed to collect like windblown apples? "May I walk you home?"

He didn't ask if I generally walked home or if I lived close enough to walk. He seemed to know. There was a quiet assurance about him that wasn't good for my nerves.

Ben Helm fell into step beside me. The questions I tensed myself against didn't come. He made light conversation about Rexton, real estate, and the weather. I kept glancing sideways at him. You expected a detective to be pouchy and hard-boiled. This one was youthfully slender and flat at the stomach, though he was at least in his late thirties and was losing his hair. He had nice brown eyes and the kind of mouth that smiled easily and a thin patrician nose. He looked like a man with whom a girl would enjoy going to a dance.

All the same, he was a manhunter.

We were turning up Ivy Lane when he ceased to be a gallant gentleman escorting a lady home. Even then he seemed to be appealing to me only for help. "I'm having trouble obtaining background material on Matterson."

"You sound as if you're writing a story about him."

"In effect, yes. I can't draw deductions from people unless I know the essentials about them."

"I was under the impression that detectives drew deductions from clues."

"There are also psychological clues. What do you know about Matterson?"

A hundred feet ahead the cottage nestled at the side of the road. Part of my mind noticed that during the day Frankie had cut the lawn. Nobody had ever been able to say of him that he was lazy or shiftless.

"I hardly knew Matterson," I told him. "He kept to himself a great deal. He was a lone wolf."

"With emphasis on the wolf?"

It was a spot for a smile, and I gave it to him. "And you said you had trouble getting background material."

"That much was easy, though it's hard to tell what isn't just gossip. I don't suppose you can give me anything definite?"

"No."

We were at the door of the cottage. I fished out my key and waited. It was his move.

Ben Helm looked at the clipped lawn, at first one and then the other of the two red maples standing like sentinels on either side of the cottage, at the royal-blue window trim bright in the sunlight. He delivered an opinion. "Cozy. Do you own the house?"

Did a detective have to know everything? "I rent it. Would you like to come in?"

He would come in anyway, and I preferred that the suggestion be mine. He responded as if I were conferring a favor on him and followed me.

Frankie had made up the day bed on which he slept in the living room. I needn't have worried; he was neat as a pin. There was only one bedroom and that was mine as the female and more permanent occupant.

Ben Helm paused just inside the doorway. His head did not turn or his eyes move in their sockets, but I had a feeling that he was looking for something. For Frankie? But if he had hoped to find Frankie here, why hadn't he come here directly instead of waiting to walk with me?

I remembered that I was the hostess—at least that it was my home and that he was supposedly my guest. "Would you like a highball?"

"No, thanks."

I sat down at the table. Everything that happened now was up to him. He crossed the room and arranged himself in the armchair, placing his brief case across his knees. Then he looked at me. His gaze wasn't that of a detective studying a suspect, but of a man hungrily taking in a woman's face and figure. I'd always blushed too easily. I turned my head to hide the blood I felt rushing to my cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Miss Townsend. That was rude. But you remind me so much of my wife."

Give me a bullying, roughneck detective every time in-

stead of a gentlemanly one with an ingratiating manner and a technique of taking his time until your nerves are raw. "Spare me the soft-soap. What are you after?"

My outburst bounced off him. "I mean it, Miss Townsend. You're very much like Greta. You've her black hair and black eyes, and you carry yourself in the same proud way." He fumbled with his tobacco pouch, and his voice became remote. "I haven't seen her in nine weeks. That's one disadvantage of being married to an actress."

"Greta Helm?" I murmured. "An actress?"

"Greta Murdock. That's her stage name." He shook his head. "You've never heard of her. She's never been on the screen and has had only minor parts on Broadway. Usually she acts in stock. That's where she is now, on the west coast. I wish she'd quit and stay home."

You can't fear a lonely man hungering for his wife. Because you know how it is to hunger for the one you love. You wouldn't mind if he cried on your shoulder, and perhaps you would find a measure of comfort crying on his.

"About Mike Parker."

I didn't quite jump, but a firecracker exploded under me wouldn't have shaken me more. There it was suddenly, without warning, without transition. Mike Parker.

"You must be able to tell me something about Mike Parker. You knew him well." He said it casually, as if it weren't very important.

"I went out with him only once in my life." My tone was apologetic. It annoyed me.

"And your brother beat him up."

"Is it your business? Mike killed himself accidentally long before Rudolph Matterson was murdered."

"I fully realize that Parker couldn't have murdered Matterson." The tone was dry with sarcasm. The brown eyes lay flatly on me, without warmth now.

Be careful, I thought. Be so very careful of this sweet, horrible man.

"Then why is it your business?" I repeated. "The county is paying you to find who murdered Matterson."

"Uh-huh. I propose to earn it, Miss Townsend."

That was when Frankie came out of the bedroom.

He had been in there all the time, listening to us. He strode to my chair with his head down and his very wide shoulders hunched. Then he stopped beside me and glared at the detective.

Ben Helm's eyes became amused. I'd already decided that you couldn't tell anything about him from what you saw in his eyes. "Has he anything to hide? Or have you?"

"I heard you ask her about Mike Parker." Frankie was cold sober, but he sounded uglier than if he had been drunk. "Like she told you, what's that got to do with Mr. Matterson?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

"Yeah? Well, why don't you find out from the coroner's inquest? The jury said Mike dropped his shotgun and it went off and killed him by accident."

Ben Helm opened his brief case. I stood up and Frankie slipped an arm about my shoulders. It was, I thought, as if we were clinging to each other as we watched Ben Helm take out a folder of typed papers.

"This is the transcript of the inquest. I've been reading it. On Sunday morning, April 6th, the day Parker was murdered, you were near the scene of the crime."

"So what? I was fishing a couple of miles away."

"You objected to Parker going with your sister."

"So what the hell does that mean? Mike was killed by accident. Those papers you got tell you the whole thing."

"Uh-huh." Ben Helm applied a match to his pipe. We waited silently, tensely, for him to draw a light. Then he smiled at me. "I was in Matterson's studio this afternoon. His paintings fascinated me. He had considerable talent."

It made me feel better to let him have a touch of sarcasm. "So our detective is also an authority on art?"

"I know enough about it to know that Matterson was fair with oils, even though his stuff irritated me; and he certainly could draw. Like these sketches."

He dug again into his brief case and pulled out a sketch pad. Frantically I wanted to move away from Frankie then, but I couldn't without struggling out of the circle of his arm. Ben Helm rose lightly to his feet and dropped the pad on the table where Frankie and I could see it. I didn't have to look at it to know that on the top page there was one of the sketches Rudy had drawn of me last week.

Frankie was very still.

I felt that I had to say something or come apart. "He was in my office one afternoon and sketched me."

Ben Helm turned the page. "Did he sketch this in your office?"

That one showed my shoulders as well as my face, and my shoulders were bare.

Frankie made a sound in his throat. His arm dropped from me. I glanced at him then, and he was staring down at the pad with hard and bitter eyes.

I forced words past my constricted throat. "Frankie, I didn't pose for him—I mean, not like that. I was wearing my yellow pique dress with the shoulder straps. All he did was sketch my shoulders without drawing in the straps."

Frankie looked at me, his eyes on me and not seeing me; and then he looked again at the pad. He turned a page. There were no more sketches of me, of course; there had been only those two. The next page was blank.

"Some pages could have been torn out," Ben Helm said.

He was a devil. How had Shakespeare said it? A man can smile and smile and be a villain. He had worked up to this. He had walked home with me on the chance that Frankie would be here, intending all along to confront us with the sketch pad in the hope that Frankie or I would do something or say something to give us away.

But right now he wasn't as important as my brother.

"Frankie, listen to me. I went to Rudy's studio only to make Dave jealous. All that happened was that Rudy drew those two sketches of me. There was no harm in that. I knew I could take care of myself. I guess it was stupid. Dave didn't get jealous. He can't see anybody but that—"

I broke off, breathing hard, I'd said too much. I must learn to keep my mouth shut when the manhunter is within earshot.

Frankie patted my shoulder. There were times when he could be kind and understanding the way a girl wanted her brother to be. "Sure, Rachel. Mr. Matterson told me all about it. He didn't have anything to hide about you being in his studio, so he told me."

"Uh-huh. So Miss Townsend, you hardly knew Matterson?" Ben Helm's voice came at me like the edge of a chisel. "But you went to his studio for him to sketch you."

"The fact that I was in his studio for half an hour doesn't make me an authority on his personal history. That was what you said you wanted to know about him."

"And why were you going to see him the night he was murdered?"

I looked down and saw one of Frankie's big hands clench. I looked up quickly, facing the detective squarely. "I was on my way to visit my brother. And it was at least an hour after—after it happened."

Ben Helm turned away from me as if he'd had enough of me and was disgusted. He picked up the sketch pad from the table and flicked back the page to the sketch in which my shoulders were bare. "Which one of you is trying to cover up for the other?" He said it musingly, without directing the question to either of us.

Frankie took a step forward. "Get out before I push your face in!"

Ben Helm looked him over curiously. "Still anxious to use your fists on any face available. What have you got against the world?"

"Get out!"

Ben Helm nodded. "It's your house. There are two ways to run away from me—the second by kicking me out of your house."

"I don't run away from anybody. Get out!"

I stood huddled within myself, watching the detective shove the sketch pad and the typed pages back into his brief case. Then he flashed that warm, open smile which had become so hateful, and he left.

I listened to the door close behind him, but still I couldn't quite breathe. I glanced at my brother. He was unclenching his hands. He looked at them as if in surprise that they belonged to him, and pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his face.

"What's for supper?" he asked kindly.

It was too much. If he had roared at me or had tried to strike me, I could have taken it more easily. I started to sob.

He put his arms about me and held me against his deep chest. "Don't let that fly-cop bother you, Rachel."

"It's not that," I sobbed. "It's not that at all."

It was everything.

8. Ben Helm

FRIDAY, MAY 16—8:30 P. M.

THE COUNTY BUILDING was a two-story frame, gingerbread affair. It had been a large residential house, very old, very dignified, set in an acre of lawn and massive elms. The first floor was now a courthouse and the upstairs bedrooms were offices.

The place had the hush of public buildings at night. A sickly light showed me the way across the cramped lobby. A flight of morbidly creaking stairs took me up to a long corridor. A glow behind the glazed glass of a door revealed the district attorney's office. At one time it must have been a spacious master bedroom; now it was an overcrowded office without a chair to relax in except the one behind the glass-topped desk.

I had been here this morning, very briefly, borne from the railroad station by Sheriff Stark to meet District Attorney Kenneth Fleet. Fleet had been in a hurry—an important engagement, he'd informed me in the manner of a man to whom important engagements were always happening. He'd explained to Stark that I was to be sworn in as a deputy sheriff to give me official standing. He'd said that he hoped I would be able to get along without him for a while, but hadn't sounded optimistic. Then he'd bustled off.

Here I was again, at eight-thirty P.M. Fleet's phone call had interrupted my dinner at the rooming house where Stark had settled me. Any progress to report? A little.

Well, suppose I came right over to his office and reported it. I could have made it in twenty minutes. I took an hour.

"We've been waiting for you, Helm," Fleet said.

I moved forward to the plain wooden chair nearest his desk and took out my tobacco pouch. Fleet stuck a cigar into his fat face and leaned back in his red leather desk chair. Stark clamped bony palms over bony knees which extended straight out from his chair like a schoolgirl's.

"Any progress?" Fleet demanded when he had his cigar lit.

I pressed tobacco into the pipe bowl with my pinky and looked the district attorney over. Fleet was a plump, middle-aged man in a blue serge suit and a high white collar. He probably was kind to his wife and children and liked by his neighbors. But he was a politician, which meant that he considered his pond too small for a frog his size. The smaller the pond, the bigger the inferiority complex, and Cagula County was a very small pond. I was an investigator from the big time. I might or might not be much, but I was from the big time, so it was necessary to his ego to make clear to me that he was the boss and I the hired help.

"Progress," I said, "is what the police tell newspapers they're making when they're up a tree."

"Call it what you want to. Have you got anywhere?"

"How do I know at this point?" I said. "Before I set myself up as a private detective, I was on the Coast City Homicide Squad. Our crime detection was as modern as that of any city in the country. We had manpower and experience. Yet a depressing lot of murders remained unsolved in our books."

"And this is a small, poor county with only a sheriff and a deputy for a police force. And our state police—" Fleet's cigar seemed suddenly tasteless, but it wasn't the cigar. "Traffic cops!" he snorted. "They came around after Matterson was murdered and took a quick look and dusted the kitchen and the bean pot for fingerprints and went back to

chasing speeders." Obviously the state was run by the wrong party. "No, we haven't much police organization. What can a district attorney do without investigating assistance? That's why I recommended that you be hired."

"We don't ask for miracles," Sheriff Stark added brightly. Then he looked anxiously at Fleet to see if miracles were what the county was paying me for.

"By no means," Fleet agreed graciously. "All we ask is that you do a job to the best of your ability."

"Uh-huh," I said, "now that it's understood that there's no money-back guarantee."

Fleet's plump face couldn't decide whether to frown or be amused. It dipped to the desk. "I suppose you know that the inquest was held yesterday. I've been after Mrs. Bookman to type out the transcript in a hurry." He reached the papers across his desk.

They were patiently silent while I read. There was little in the transcript that Stark hadn't already told me. The only one with real police experience to testify was a state police sergeant who said that one of the teacups and a saucer found on the kitchen table appeared to have been wiped clean; and that whatever other fingerprints he'd found either belonged in the room or weren't, as should be expected in a busy kitchen, readable. At the end of a dozen pages the jury found that Rudolph Matterson had been murdered by the usual party or parties unknown. At that, it was a step forward. They could as easily have decided that Matterson had stumbled against the wall and the bean pot had fallen on his head.

"What's the good of it?" I tossed the transcript back on the desk. "Nothing was brought out at the inquest that couldn't have been obtained more effectively through private questioning. And the person who ran the inquest isn't a doctor or a cop or a lawyer. I understand that he's very good at repairing automobiles."

"Ben doesn't think much of coroners," Stark explained helpfully to Fleet.

"I'm talking about the system," I said. "If I wanted to murder somebody, I'd steer clear of places like New York or Coast City where they have medical examiners and laboratories and trained homicide specialists."

Fleet's pudgy fingers tapped his desk. I was rapidly making him dislike me. What the hell? They said they didn't expect miracles, but that wasn't what they meant. They'd got their idea of private detectives from fiction, and who ever heard of one failing in a book? I knew small towns. If they had to spend money, they preferred it to end up in their own pockets, or be sure of full value received.

"You mentioned that even Coast City murders are unsolved," Fleet reminded me sourly.

"But not practically all of them. And they're able to recognize murder when they see it." I opened my brief case and tossed the transcript of another inquest on his desk. "The sheriff gave me this to read. It's the Mike Parker inquest."

Fleet's eyes slid sideways to Stark. Stark shifted in his seat. "I figured he ought to read it, Ken," he said apologetically.

Fleet transferred his disapproving gaze to me. His cigar was a stubby rod in a corner of his mouth. He didn't remove it to speak. "You were brought here for a specific purpose, Helm. To find, or try to find, Matterson's murderer."

I grinned. "We were discussing the coroner system. Parker was found dead with his chest full of buckshot. There was no autopsy."

"A reputable physician examined the body," Fleet countered coldly. "A shell in his bolt-action, repeater shotgun had been fired. There was no doubt that the buckshot which killed him came from that gun. His body lay across the barrel and his shoulder on a jagged rock. What happened

was clear. He stumbled and dropped his gun on the rock and it went off and killed him."

"Smart gun." I put a fresh light to my pipe. "Was the angle of entry of the buckshot determined? Was that particular gun dropped repeatedly on the rock to see if a sudden jar would set it off?"

Stark sat on the edge of his chair. His slack mouth hung open and his negligible chin wasn't in sight. He saw me looking at him and closed his mouth and nodded eagerly.

"We're not as incompetent as you'd like to think," Fleet said. "The state police dusted the gun for fingerprints."

"And found nothing. What did you expect? Most people keep their guns oiled, and fingerprints are greasy impressions. You don't find them on oiled surfaces. And, anyway, most killers today avoid leaving prints, at least on the weapon."

"You said killer." The creases of Fleet's face worked themselves into a smirk. "Does a trained detective make up his mind without evidence?"

I waved my pipe at Stark. "The sheriff gave me the transcript of the Parker inquest. He must have had a reason."

Stark's tongue moved slowly over his lips. "Well, the safety was off the gun. Mike Parker went only a couple of hundred feet up the path from the highway. It was a mile or better before he'd reach anything to shoot at." He paused and then repeated determinedly, "The safety was off."

"I get the idea," Fleet said. "The safety was off. If it hadn't been, Parker wouldn't have shot himself when he dropped the gun. He wasn't the first hunter who paid for his carelessness."

"Frank Townsend!" Stark blurted the name as if afraid somebody would stop him. When nobody made anything of it, he went on. "Well, Frank had that fight with Mike. Because Mike went with Frank's sister Rachel and has a bad

reputation with women. Frank said he was fishing in Edgeman's Pond when it happened. Well, there wasn't anybody seen him fishing. And Frank's got a terrible temper, so—" He spread his hands palms up and looked hopeful.

"My God, Val, I had that out with you," Fleet said. "Parker's body was on the gun."

"Well, say the killer stuck the gun under Mike after he shot him." Stark appealed to me. "It could be."

The Sheriff was not a genius, but he was not a fool either. He only looked it.

"It could be," I agreed. "Easier than that he was walking along a path where there was no hunting, with a loaded shotgun and the safety catch off, and that he dropped it and it went off with the muzzle tilted at the precise angle to fill his chest with buckshot."

Fleet removed his cigar and rolled it between his fingers. "You may be as smart as they say, Helm, but don't get the idea that I don't know my job. Do you imagine that Parker would've let Townsend, with whom he'd had a fight a couple of days before, come up to him in the woods and take his shotgun from him? Townsend had licked Parker once, but Parker was no weakling. He could've put up quite a scrap. There was no sign of violence on Parker's body other than the buckshot. No sign that he'd been slugged from behind. No sign of a struggle in the immediate area."

Stark's throat made a rumbling sound. When Fleet and I looked at him, he squirmed. "Well, say another gun killed Mike," he offered diffidently. "Then the killer shot off Mike's gun in the air and stuck it under Mike's body." He squirmed some more, then added doggedly, "Nobody could never tell that another shotgun killed Mike. You can't check buckshot like bullets. I told you, Ken, but you wouldn't listen."

Fleet spread his fingers on the edge of his desk and froze in that pose. I knew how it was. Particularly in a small community, the coroner was the district attorney's stooge;

and at an inquest the jury almost always followed the coroner's lead. An accidental death closed a case immediately and satisfactorily. It eliminated dull, plodding sleuthing and the odds-on chance of an unsolved case to mar a district attorney's record.

"You told me, Val," Fleet said testily after a silence, "and I told you that there still wasn't a scrap of evidence against him."

I heaved a sigh. "You're backing into the problem. You can't go after a murderer until you've decided that there's been murder."

"Helm, you're here only to work on the Matterson case."

"Uh-huh. That's what I'll do if you don't put walls around me," I said.

Bleakly, Fleet's eyes sighted me along his cigar. Stark sat perched on his wooden chair like a baseball spectator watching a pitch with three and two on the batter and bases loaded. I blew smoke at the ceiling.

"What's up your sleeve, Helm?" Fleet demanded.

"Nothing that hasn't been out in the open for anybody to look at. We've looked at how Mike Parker died. Now let's look at the Matterson murder. According to the reconstruction of the crime—"

"*My* reconstruction. The coroner used my words to sum up at the inquest. Nobody has found fault with it." Fleet jutted his jaw, daring me to find fault with it.

"It's a good reconstruction," I said. "Matterson was reading in the living room when somebody came up on his terrace and attracted his attention by tapping on the window. Almost immediately after Matterson admitted his visitor, he took him—or her—into the kitchen for tea. When Matterson rose from the table for some reason and turned his back, he got the bean pot over his head. Then the killer took a kitchen towel and wiped his cup and saucer."

"Wiped only the cup and saucer," Stark muttered. "Funny."

"One of three reasons why he didn't do a better job of eliminating possible prints," I said. "He may have been a member of the household, in which case his prints on anything but the cup and saucer wouldn't matter. He may have known that readable prints aren't easily left, in spite of stories to the contrary, except on smooth, clean surfaces on which a finger is carefully pressed. He may have been simply careless and lucky, which I consider most likely. But to get back to the reconstruction—I concede that what evidence there is backs it up."

"So?" Fleet said.

"My chief objection is that the killer came to see Matterson with murder in his heart. In a murder plan it is essential to get the victim off beyond possible witnesses. But here was a house full of servants, any of whom might pop out at any moment."

"Are you saying that the crime was not premeditated?" Fleet asked dryly. He hadn't his murderer yet—if he ever would have—but he was already thinking in terms of a first degree indictment.

"It was premeditated in the legal sense of a lucid interval before the commission of the crime," I said. "But not an interval of more than a few minutes at the most. I can't see that setup selected in advance for a murder, and I can't see a bean pot as a weapon chosen after careful deliberation. It's like a brick, or a milk bottle, or a poker; something that becomes a weapon only because it's the nearest thing at hand. While they were drinking tea, Matterson said something that caused the visitor to decide to murder him. By that time the visitor knew that the servants were all upstairs; Matterson must have mentioned it while preparing the tea himself. And there was that heavy bean pot right on the table. Matterson would suspect no danger, even if he saw the visitor pick it up. What harm is there in a bean pot? Matterson didn't remain alive long enough to find out."

Thoughtfully Fleet rolled his cigar between his lips. "Possibly you're right," he conceded. "But it's a minor point. I don't see where it changes anything."

"Mike Parker," Stark blurted.

"What's that?" Fleet gave him a sidelong glance.

"Mike Parker." Stark nervously massaged his bony knees and plunged. "That's how Mike was killed too. I mean by somebody he knew well. Somebody met Mike on the path and said, 'That's a nice gun you got. Let's have a look at it.' Mike was proud of his gun. He liked to show it off. So he handed it over and the person turned it around and shot him. Ain't that what you got in mind, Ben?"

"Something like that," I said. "I doubt if Parker's murder was planned in advance either. It would have been too subtle, too elaborate. It would have meant knowing that Parker would go hunting that morning and where; and that he would take that path, and at that time; and that he would be alone. I'm inclined to believe that the killer just happened to meet Parker, or that the killer was driving along the highway when he saw Parker step into the woods, and called to him, and walked a short distance up the path with him. They talked, and Parker said something that made his death necessary to the killer. But Parker didn't know it, any more than did Matterson weeks later. He trusted the person he was talking to. He saw no danger in handing the other person his gun."

"The same man or woman in both cases?" Fleet said. "Is that your idea, Helm?"

"Uh-huh."

Fleet grunted. "So that's your connection between the two cases? But what have you got to back it up?"

I said, "Not much, I'm afraid, but something," and opened my brief case. When my fingers touched the sketch pad, I hesitated.

A few hours ago I'd pulled a dirty trick on the two Townsends. It hadn't even worked, which deprived it of

justification. I could still see the expression on Rachel's face when I had shown her brother the sketches, and for a long time I'd feel like a heel.

What the hell, I was a cop. In my profession I often had to hurt people, many of whom deserved hurting. Okay, I was a cop, even an official one again now that Stark had sworn me in as a deputy sheriff.

I pulled the sketch pad out of the brief case and went to the desk and placed it down in front of Fleet. "This is what the Sheriff and I found this afternoon in Matterson's studio."

Stark left his chair and came to the side of the desk. For a little while the three of us brooded wordlessly at the pretty face on paper, though two of us had seen the sketch before. Then I reached over and turned the page to reveal the second sketch—the one in which Matterson had omitted to draw in the shoulder straps of the dress, according to her story.

"Rachel Townsend," Fleet muttered. "Strange that we didn't find this when we searched the studio the night of the murder."

"Maybe because it was on the table," I observed.

Fleet let that lay. Five minutes ago he would have bristled. He pushed his chair back and nodded slowly.

"Yes, I see the possible connection. She was Parker's girl friend and you've just proved that she posed for Matterson. But does that necessarily mean Frank Townsend?"

"It sure does." Stark spoke up vigorously for once. His pet theory at last had something to back it up. "Frank, he beat up Mike for going with his sister Rachel. Say Mike didn't stop seeing her, so Frank killed him. Then there was Mr. Matterson. Rachel let him draw her picture in the studio. Frank found out, and on top of that he found out Mr. Matterson tried to get fresh with Beverly Atwood. That made two things against him, so Frank killed him too. Did it the same way both times, like Ben said, just talking

friendly like and then all at once letting them have it." And he actually beamed at me.

I said, "Would Parker have handed his loaded gun to a man he'd had a fight with the day before?"

"Could be. Say Frank talked Mike into being friends again."

I tried it from another angle. "Would Matterson invite his chauffeur in for tea and then serve him?"

"Yeah, that bothered me too," Stark said. "Had a talk with Jerry Follette and Mrs. Jordson. Yesterday that was, after the inquest. They said Mr. Matterson was a real democratic boss, not like lots of rich men. They said he wouldn't think nothing of inviting his help to have tea with him. So it was Frank, all right."

"Nuts!" I returned to my chair and crossed my legs.

"I agree—nuts!" Fleet said. He was picking up the pieces of his pride, re-establishing himself as the brains of Cagula County. "For that matter, we could make out an abstract case that Rachel Townsend is the guilty party. Parker threw her over and Matterson preferred another woman, and add that to the fact that I caught her on Matterson's grounds shortly after the murder. That must have occurred to you, Helm."

I nodded. "A lot occurred to me. If we don't like either of the Townsends, we can try David Reese. Maybe he loves Rachel and goes about knocking off her boy friends. Or George Atwood who gave an unsatisfactory explanation of why he was outside Matterson's house on or about the time of the murder. Or take your pick of a dozen other variations. We could play this game all night."

"Exactly," Fleet agreed. "At this stage it's a game. Val, how many times do I have to tell you that what we need is evidence? All this talk has got us exactly nowhere."

Stark startled us with a voice that had a sneer in it. "We got somewhere. Ben here as good as made you admit that Mike Parker was murdered."

Fleet leaned over his desk to crush out the ragged remnants of his cigar. He worked at it for quite a while; there was something furious in the way his fingers tore it shred from shred. Then he looked up at me, his face heavy and his eyes cagey.

"I admit nothing," he declared. "I concede that you have made a connection, Helm, even though a tenuous one. And I am ready to go along with your notion that the inquest botched the cause of Parker's death."

The *inquest* botched it.

"Uh-huh," I said.

He gave me a quick, blank look and then dropped his gaze to the sketch pad. "Is there anything else?"

"The same thing as when I came in here," I said. "I don't care for walls around me, I want elbow room."

"You'll get it." Fleet stood up. Business was over for the night. "We have plenty of work cut out for us."

"Uh-huh," I said.

9. *George Atwood*

SATURDAY, MAY 17—2:00 P. M.

DURING THE WINTER leaves had collected against the base of the hedge. Immediately after lunch I raked them out to the driveway and set fire to them. Kathryn was puttering in a flower garden on the other side of the house.

A strange man sauntered up the street and turned into my driveway.

"Mr. Atwood?" he inquired.

"Yes?"

"I'm investigating the Matterson murder."

I turned to rake more leaves on the fire, although the smoldering mound was already too large for safety. Then I turned back to him. "You must be Ben Helm. I have heard of you."

Grinning, he removed a pipe from one pocket and a pouch from another. As he filled his pipe, he looked about.

"This is what I'd like," he observed somewhat wistfully. "A cozy home of my own, and me raking leaves on a Saturday afternoon and my wife planting flowers, and a child or two in the house."

From where we stood Kathryn was not visible. He must have noticed her when he had passed the other side of the house.

"You are married, Mr. Helm?" I asked, merely to bear my share of the conversation. I was not certain, however, that this was a conversation. It seemed to me that he was

like a boxer feeling out an opponent before determining on a plan of combat.

"My wife is an actress and away a lot, so we haven't much of a home life, if any," he replied. "I envy men like you who have a permanent place to hang their hats and families that actually live with them."

He could not know that my house was not a home and that within my family I was a stranger.

Couldn't he know? It was the occupation of a detective to know or learn. Was he mocking me because he knew? I tried to look into his face, but we were on opposite sides of the fire and a smoke smudge was between us. I stepped around the fire.

Helm tossed his match on the leaves. "Mr. Atwood, where were you going Tuesday night at about ten-fifteen when Frank Townsend saw you?"

This was better. One knew where one stood when a policeman acted like a policeman.

"I believe that I answered that question at the inquest and before," I responded stiffly. "I was on my way to visit Matterson. When I was almost at the house, I changed my mind and returned."

"Did you go in through the front entrance and take the flagstone path which branches off to the house from the head of the driveway?"

"Naturally. Do you imagine that I climbed over the hedge?"

"There is a break through the hedge at the rear of the property, near the back door of the studio."

My hands tightened on the handle of the bamboo rake. This was not a third-degree in which a glaring light was directed into the eyes of a suspect; nor was this individual before me the fleshy, witless, stolid brute one expects a detective to be. I was standing on my driveway on a pleasant Saturday afternoon and speaking with an affable, well-spoken man who might have been one of the brighter

young teachers in my school. But at the same time I knew that this was a third-degree and that this man was in his own way more menacing than a bully with a rubber club.

"Let me anticipate you," I said. "The front entrance to the Matterson house is only four or five hundred feet from here. The back entrance through the hedge would require walking several times that distance. In your opinion, if I took the trouble to walk the additional distance, it would indicate that I was bent on a sinister purpose. For your information, I entered and departed the way a social caller would, through the front entrance, which is also the nearest entrance."

A leaf flared at Helm's feet. He kicked it toward the fire. "Don't try to out-smart me, Mr. Atwood."

"I merely anticipated what you—"

"You didn't," he interrupted me. "Here's the picture. You entered through the front and went part way to the house."

"Almost to the terrace."

"And then you changed your mind about visiting Matterson and returned home. Right?"

"Yes."

"No, Mr. Atwood," he said. "That *wasn't* the way it happened."

The mound of the leaves was now in flames and I felt acute heat on the side of my body. But I did not move away; I waited where I was in a state of suspended animation for the detective to continue.

"This morning I was up in the apartment above the garage," he said. "I should have thought of it yesterday, but I didn't. I found a comfortable apartment—two bedrooms, a living room, kitchen, bathroom. It was a home for a caretaker and his family, but hardly for a bachelor chauffeur, and obviously most of the rooms hadn't been occupied in some time. I went to see Frank Townsend. He said that because the apartment was too big for him, he'd closed up the

bedrooms and had lived and slept in the living room. He didn't use the kitchen either because he took all his meals in the house. Try anticipating me now."

Suddenly I saw that his somewhat beaked, thin nose and tight mouth made him look like a bird of prey. But I could not follow the direction of his flight or what it meant to me.

"The point is," he resumed, "that the two bedrooms face the main house. The house and front walk aren't visible from the living room or bathroom, and Townsend told me that he was in the living room when he saw you."

I remembered. I had been beyond the house, between the house and the studio, when lights had gone on in windows above the garage. Again I was aware of the heat of the fire; I moved several steps away from it, and suddenly I was cold.

"Well, Mr. Atwood?"

I compelled myself to look him straight in the eye. "Frank must have told you in which direction he saw me walk."

"Toward the house, he says."

"And the time was ten-fifteen or ten-twenty," I pointed out. "That scarcely left time for me to have tea with Matterson, let alone murder him, before his body was discovered ten minutes later."

"Assuming that Townsend was right about the time. He admits that he didn't look at a watch. And assuming that he's not trying to cover up for you. I hear he's sweet on your daughter, which would give him reason for saying he saw you go toward the house instead of away from it."

I leaned on the rake. There was a sound of bamboo cracking; I released the pressure of my weight.

"Now we're back to where you tried to anticipate me," the detective drove at me in his quiet, almost negligent tone. "You admitted there would be something fishy if you'd gone all the way around to the back of the hedge to enter the place, or if you had left that way."

"I came and left through the front," I muttered.

"And what were you doing beyond the house when you claim you went only halfway up to the house?"

Smoke shifted in my direction and stung my eyes. I closed them. "I came from the studio," I said wearily.

"Uh-huh." It did not appear to be startling information to him. "How soon did you leave after you put the studio lights out?"

I was not so distraught that I did not recognize the trap. He must have known that no lights had gone on in the studio; Frank, driving up to the garage, or probably one of the servants in the house would have noticed if the studio had been illuminated at that late hour.

"I had forgotten something in the studio during a previous visit. A—a fountain pen. The moon was bright; I did not find it necessary to put on a light."

Helm scratched his chin with the bit of his pipe. "You preferred to lay yourself open to suspicion of murder rather than say you'd gone for a fountain pen. You preferred to lie about it under oath at the inquest. I refuse to believe that you're an idiot, Mr. Atwood."

I wasn't clever enough to cope with him. I could only stand there beside the fire, naked and defenseless.

"I was in Matterson's studio yesterday with the Sheriff," he said reflectively, "but if I noticed burned matches on the floor I didn't pay attention to them. That's what comes of being the kind of sleuth who doesn't snoop for physical clues. I guess it's because I used to be on a big city homicide squad and left hunting for clues to the laboratory boys. But a little while ago I went back to the studio and found the burned matches. They made a trail completely around the walls of the studio, under the pictures."

What could I say?

"You didn't want it known at the time that you were in Matterson's studio," he continued. "You looked at the pic-

tures by match-light. What did you expect to find in those pictures, Mr. Atwood?"

Couldn't he leave me one shred of self-respect? Couldn't he bring rubber hoses and glaring lights and beat me and torture me, but leave my soul unexposed? I could not answer him to save my life.

"If you could find a face in those pictures that resembled a human being, you were better than I, Mr. Atwood. Though, of course, I haven't yet seen your daughter."

I had to do something, anything, as a substitute for speech. I picked up the bamboo rake and turned to the fire —and at the head of the driveway I saw Kathryn standing with the garden claw in her hand.

I had no idea how long she had been there. When she saw that I saw her, she came forward.

I felt Helm move closer to me. His voice was low in my ear. "That doesn't mean that you didn't visit Matterson before or after you left the studio."

My hands felt the rake move as if by itself, pulling unburned leaves to the heart of the mound which had turned to fine gray ash. Kathryn stepped around the fire and stopped; she looked at me and past me at Helm. I was afraid of what my voice would sound like if I ventured to speak, so I did not introduce them to each other.

Helm swept off his hat. "Mrs. Atwood?" When she nodded, he explained who he was. I concentrated on the leaves I was raking and heard him ask her where she had been the night of the murder.

"I was in my room," Kathryn responded. "Often I retire early and read in bed."

"What time did you go up to your room?"

"I believe it was rather early. I do not regulate my retirement by the clock."

"Were you awake when your daughter and husband returned home?"

"I did not hear them. I must have fallen asleep before then."

"Any idea what time you fell asleep?"

"My dear Mr.—Oh, dear, I'm afraid I've forgotten your name."

"Helm."

"I don't understand you policemen, Mr. Helm. Do you put so many meaningless questions to me because you get paid for the number you ask?"

I turned from the fire to look at Kathryn. She held the garden claw in both hands; her head was cocked, and that amused little smile of hers was on her lips.

"You may have something there, Mrs. Atwood," Helm retorted pleasantly. "I'll recommend to the detectives' union that we establish piece rates—say, a dozen questions for a dollar. Of course you're within your legal rights not to answer me."

"I am sure I have nothing to hide. I can't tell you what time I fell asleep because I don't know."

"Uh-huh." Helm glanced at the house. "Is your daughter in?"

Kathryn's back stiffened. "Surely you have no right to annoy the child." Her hands twisted on the garden claw. "Dear, can this man force himself on us like this?"

"I think he can," I muttered.

"George, you're absolutely spineless! I insist that you do something about this person." I had never before seen or heard her so upset.

"Very well!" Furiously I hurled down the rake. "Come with me, Helm. I will take you to my daughter."

I strode down the driveway with Helm at my heels.

"George," Kathryn said quietly.

I glanced back. She had not moved from in front of the fire. She stood small and trim, her hands clasped before her, like a mother waiting for her small son to behave himself. I went on to the house with Helm.

Beverly was in the living room. She sat curled on the couch, in the kittenish position of human females, whatever their ages. When we entered, she lifted a fountain pen from a ten-cent notebook which rested on the arm of the couch. The nub of the pen went into her mouth; she chewed on it like a student pondering a difficult question in an examination. But what she was pondering was Ben Helm, and he, in return, was studying her like a man who has at last come upon the strange and fascinating object for which he has been searching.

I muttered introductions. Beverly gave him an open-mouthed smile as she stuffed notebook and pen under the couch cushion beside the one on which she sat.

"Won't you be seated?" She nodded toward the armchair facing her. It seemed to me that she was as calculatedly cordial as if he were an eligible young man paying a first call on her.

Helm shifted his eyes from her to me. "May we be alone, Mr. Atwood?"

I left the room and the house. In the driveway Kathryn still stood in front of the fire.

"You're a fool!" I said. "He could have found legal reason to take Beverly to the district attorney's office and question her there instead. Would you have preferred that?"

Kathryn looked at the house and then back at me. She appeared to be considerably calmer than I was, but I could never tell what went on inside of her. "Why should that policeman want to see Beverly?"

"He has to question her as he did us, but that doesn't mean anything. Understand that—it doesn't mean a thing."

The little smile returned to her lips. "Of course it doesn't, dear," she observed placidly, and she moved up the driveway, back to her gardening.

I picked up the rake and resumed burning leaves.

10. Beverly Atwood

SATURDAY, MAY 17—2:24 P. M.

HE WASN'T EXACTLY handsome, but he was nice. He looked rugged and experienced and exciting.

The minute he came into the room with Daddy I was sure he wasn't like any man I'd known. He wasn't a small-town boy like nearly all the others. He looked me over as if he knew all there was to know about women.

He seemed to be reacting to me.

I was glad I was wearing my white knit jersey Basque shirt. It was very good for my type of figure. His eyes didn't leave me as he crossed his legs and filled his pipe.

"I can see why Matterson was so eager to paint you," he said.

He was a bit too smart.

"Naturally I never permitted Rudy to paint me. What kind of a girl do you think I am?"

"I'm not sure yet, Miss Atwood."

Maybe I should have resented that. With anybody else I would have taken the attitude that he had no right to talk to me like that. But even his insults were fascinating.

"Are all detectives so fresh, Benny?" I asked him.

"Benny!"

He looked shocked, though calling him by his first name wasn't so much.

"I imagine your friends call you Benny."

"They don't if they want to remain my friends. It's Ben.

And I'm to call you Beverly. Or are you Bev to your intimate friends?"

I gave him my best smile.

"Either one will do, Ben."

"Uh-huh."

He took his hat off his knees and put it on the end table, making himself at home.

"Had your father known that Matterson tried to attack you on his terrace Friday afternoon?"

With just a few words he had spoiled it. We seemed to be getting along so nicely.

"I never told a soul till Rudy's maid, Etta, brought it up the night he was killed," I said. "It's the sort of thing a girl prefers to keep to herself. You don't really think that Daddy could have—why, that's absurd!"

"Is it?"

"Why, a meek, harmless little man like Daddy wouldn't hurt a fly."

"It wasn't a fly that was killed. It was a man."

I was sitting on my legs on the couch. I pulled my skirt over my knees.

"If that's a wisecrack, it's not funny," I said.

"It wasn't meant to be." Ben puffed contentedly on his pipe. "Tell me something about Mike Parker."

The way he leaped about, he didn't give a girl a chance to get set.

"Mike who?"

"Parker. Last month he was found in the woods shot dead with his own shotgun."

"Oh, yes, *that* Mike Parker," I said.

"Is there more than one?"

"I wouldn't know. The name is so common. What do you expect me to tell you about him?"

"You can start anywhere."

If he were paying a social call and discussing the weather, his tone and manner wouldn't have been different.

"I knew Mike Parker only because in a small place like Rexton everybody gets to know everybody else. If you want somebody who can really tell you about him, ask Rachel Townsend."

"How well did she know him?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't care to gossip about my friends. You'll have to ask her."

"At the moment I'm asking you."

I ran my palms slowly down my Basque shirt. His nice brown eyes followed my hands. He was old, over thirty, I thought, and he was losing his hair, but he radiated a quiet strength that sent little hot and cold waves over me.

And he was dangerous too. He was excitingly dangerous.

"Why do you want to know anything about Mike Parker?" I asked him. "He was dead before Rudy was murdered."

"Funny how all of you give me the same line."

The phone rang. I excused myself and went out to the hall.

Frankie Townsend was on the wire. He was mad.

"Listen, Beverly," he started right in without even saying hello. "I don't want any more of that headache business or saying you're busy tonight. I'm getting fed up with this run-around."

"What are you talking about, Frankie?"

"Listen. You see me tonight or I'm through. You get me? You stop giving me this run-around or I'm through."

He sounded as if he meant it.

What was a girl supposed to do? If I started seeing Frankie again, Dave Reese would hit the ceiling. As it was, I was having a hard enough time handling Dave.

It was like I'd been writing in my diary when Daddy and Ben Helm had come in: *"Well, if it has to be one or the other of course it will be Dave. I don't think I love him more than Frankie, but Dave has more to offer a girl.*

Sooner or later I'll have to get married and Dave is the best . . . ."

Frankie was still talking.

"You've kicked me around from pillar to post long enough," he was saying, sounding kind of wild. "What's the matter, can't you talk?"

"I'm listening to you, honey."

He was like a child, so innocent and moral, and at the same time like an untamed animal except where women were concerned. Dave never made me feel the way Frankie did by just being with me. When Frankie kissed me the other night, it was like fainting. Only he was such a queer boy that a girl had to be careful, even about a little thing like letting him kiss her.

"Do I see you tonight?" he demanded.

"I can't tonight, honey."

The fact was that I had a date with Dave.

"There it goes again—the run-around. It was nice knowing you. So long."

"Frankie, wait!"

He didn't say anything, but he didn't hang up either. There was a silence. It was as if we were facing each other at opposite ends of the wire.

Why did men always have to complicate things so? Why did they always insist on owning a girl body and soul?

"Honey, suppose we see each other tomorrow?" I suggested, making my voice soft and cozy.

"Why not tonight?"

"Mother is having friends over and she'll be very disappointed if I don't help her serve. I'll phone you tomorrow morning and tell you where I'll meet you."

"I'm still not good enough to call for you at your house," he growled. But he was no longer very mad.

"Honey, we'll talk it over tomorrow. Mother is calling me now. Good-bye till tomorrow."

"So long, Beverly," he said with his voice a little mushy.

It wasn't really so hard to handle them.

When I returned to the living room, Ben's quiet brown eyes picked me up at the door and followed me to the couch. I put something special into my walk and sat down on the couch and crossed my knees and smoothed out my Basque shirt.

He was something like Frankie. He was not as young, or as big and handsome, but there was the same ruggedness and virility. And he was more intelligent, more experienced. He wouldn't apologize all over the place if he took a girl in his arms.

But just now he was attending strictly to business.

"On Tuesday night, how long before you did your father return home?" he asked me abruptly.

At once I was on guard. Daddy had told Mr. Fleet and then the coroner at the inquest that he had returned home at ten-thirty. I didn't know why Ben was trying to find out if it had been earlier, but he was. There was something deep and menacing behind that question.

"I got home before Daddy," I told him.

"And he was in by ten-thirty?"

"Just about."

"How can you be sure? I've heard you didn't wear a watch."

"I looked at the kitchen clock."

"What were you doing in the kitchen?"

He was too fast for me. I pulled my legs under me and snuggled into the corner of the couch to give myself time to catch my breath.

Something hard pressed into my thigh. It was the notebook in which I kept my diary. I thought I'd pushed it all the way under a couch pillow when Daddy entered with Ben, but now one corner was sticking into me. I shoved the notebook down as far as it would go.

Ben sucked on his pipe and waited patiently for me to answer his question. I smiled sweetly.

"I went into the kitchen for a glass of milk. I always have a glass of milk before I go to bed. I remember looking at the kitchen clock and thinking that I'd returned home early. It was just ten-thirty. Less than a minute later I heard Daddy come in."

"You went straight into the kitchen when you arrived home?"

"Well, I stopped in the hall to take off my coat."

Something was wrong. But what? Why was he staring at me so gravely?

"What did you do between the time Frank Townsend dropped you off and you came into the house?" he asked me quietly.

Now I saw it. He had been awfully smart. All along I had thought he was checking up on Daddy when really he was checking up on me.

"Frankie didn't take me all the way home," I told him. "He dropped me off a few blocks away."

"And then he drove to the garage and put the car away and went upstairs and put the lights on and looked out of the window and saw your father. That was a quarter after ten, a few minutes more or less. At any rate, you should have been home some time before that even if you had walked twice the distance. But you admit that you didn't get home till twenty or more minutes after Frank let you off."

Little shivers ran over me. He was the most exciting man I had ever known. Dangerous men were always exciting. Like Frankie, only this man was so much more dangerous.

I couldn't help making a breathless game of it.

"You're thinking that after I left Frankie there was time enough for me to go to Rudy's house and kill Rudy."

"Uh-huh."

"But was there time for him to boil water and serve tea? After all, the most I could possibly have been there was ten minutes."

"Matterson might have had tea prepared for himself when you arrived, and he invited you to join him."

I stood up and shook my hair and threw back my shoulders. I let him take a very good look at me. His eyes had become blank. He didn't seem to be seeing me as a woman. I'd let it go too far.

I walked over to his chair.

"The truth is, Ben, that after I left Frankie and walked home I sat on the porch for a while."

"Doing what?"

"Dreaming."

"About how many men can be made to dance on the point of a needle?"

I reached down and let my fingers trail lightly over his cheek.

"You've a nasty mind, Ben."

Not a muscle of him moved. I took my hand away and went to the table and stood there with my back to him.

"What does a girl dream about?" I said softly. "Maybe about a very attractive detective coming into her life."

The chair springs creaked as he rose. I would have lost my faith in the male sex if he hadn't come to me. I felt him stand close behind me, but he didn't put his hands on me.

Keeping my back to him, I looked at him over my shoulder. He had taken his hat from the end table and was running his fingers around the brim. He had strong white teeth which showed in a full, warm smile.

"Your technique is pretty good," he said. "Just about the right amount of subtlety, but not too subtle."

He was mocking me. I didn't care. I twisted my torso and my shoulder touched his chest and my hair brushed his face. I leaned against him.

He stepped back.

"Thanks for giving me your time, Beverly. Good-bye."

He was smiling and rolling his hat brim between his fingers as he strode to the door. Suddenly I hated his smile.

He thought he was so superior that he could make a girl feel cheap.

I hesitated for a moment and then went after him. In the hall he was turning the doorknob.

"Good-bye, Ben."

I held out my hand to him. He took it. I looked into his face with my mouth half-open and my eyes melting.

He dropped my hand and opened the door.

"Ben, you'll come again, won't you? Soon."

"Uh-huh."

On the porch he put on his hat and then went down the steps. I didn't know if I hated him or not, but I did know that he was awfully exciting.

11. David Reese

SATURDAY, MAY 17—8:08 P. M.

SPRING, AND SATURDAY evening, and the youth of Rexton was making love or looking for love. I drove slowly, taking in the strolling couples, the boys and girls sitting together on porch steps, the cars flashing by filled with laughter. On an evening like this all young women looked desirable.

Not that the best of them could hold a candle to Beverly. The lass I had a date with was all the great beauties of history rolled into one, and I was her errant swain.

It was swell going to her, anticipating being with her. She'd made two promises. No more Frank Townsend or any other man. Marriage within a year, maybe a lot sooner. Marriage would solve everything. Even if anything came of what had happened to Matterson Tuesday night, even if any of it touched us later, we'd face it as man and wife. We'd lick it by being together.

So what was there to torment myself with now? There wasn't anything bigger than love. To hell with anything but love!

Bev Atwood was the most beautiful woman in Rexton or the state or the world, and she loved me. I felt fine going to keep my date with her, didn't I? All right. I felt fine. Period.

I pulled my car up at the curb in front of the Atwood house, tossed my hat on the back seat, ran a hand through

my hair, straightened my tie, looked at my watch. Twenty minutes early for my date. So what? If she wasn't ready, I'd wait for her. I'd already spent a lifetime waiting for her.

Mrs. Atwood answered the door.

"Good-evening, David," she greeted me, giving me a gentle smile that made me feel like an honored guest.

Very convenient having a girl's folks cheer for you. A nice family to get into, this sweet little woman who'd make a pleasant mother-in-law, and Mr. Atwood, who was a pretty decent guy when you got to know him.

"Bev in?"

"I saw her in the garden a few minutes ago. Come in, David. I'll call her."

I said, "Don't bother. I'll fetch her myself."

I sauntered around to the back of the house. Bev wasn't in sight, but the rather narrow garden stretched for a couple of hundred feet, and toward the back, against Matterson's hedge, there was a grape arbor with a wooden bench in it. Maybe she was waiting for me in the arbor. A place for lovers. A place to gather her in my arms, to hold her close, to dip my mouth to her fresh, eager, unpainted lips.

I walked up the path between the flower beds which had just been planted. Walked between four peach trees centering the garden. And heard voices in the arbor.

She was there, but she wasn't alone.

I stopped. Night was falling and there was the stillness of twilight. Even so I couldn't hear what they were saying. They were keeping their voices low.

I moved closer. Then I could distinguish their words. Again I stopped. Listening to them was like dying.

"Frankie, you're impossible!" Bev said. "Our date was for tomorrow."

She'd promised me she'd never again make a date with him.

Frank Townsend growled, "Yeah, because your mother

is throwing a party tonight. I came around to see if you were still giving me the run-around. Where's the party?"

"Silly, it's too early. They won't be here till nine."

"All right, so you can be with me till then."

"Frankie, honey, you make it so hard for me. You know how Mother feels about you. Suppose she were to see you here with me?"

Honey. She called me honey. She called him honey.

He said, "What am I, diseased or something? I see you in the garden and come over to you, and you drag me in here so I'll be hidden. I don't have to be treated like that. I'm as good as anybody."

"Of course you are, honey."

Her tone was soft and wheedling, the way it was with me when I got sore and she was trying to pacify me.

He said, "If you liked me, you wouldn't give a hang what your mother said. You're no kid."

"I do care for you, honey. Lots."

The silence was back. I heard heavy breathing and thought it was the two in the arbor. Then I realized that I was listening to myself. I was moving again, approaching the arbor by the side. I was spying on them.

All right, I was spying. Who had a better right?

Frank said hoarsely, "God, Beverly, you're so beautiful!"

Then I saw them. I stood at the side of the arbor. The grapevine hadn't reached its lush summer growth, and I could see through it and through the lattice to which it clung.

It was darker in there than out in the garden. They were shadows so close together that they seemed like one. Her yellow hair and white face were scooped out of the gloom. Her head hung back, face tilted up to him bulking over her, white hands flat on his barrel chest.

"God, Beverly!" he said in a queer, tight voice.

The two shadows became completely one. His head

bowed down to her uplifted face. Her arms were around him, hands clawing at his back.

I stood watching them kiss. This was death. I listened to a voice that was not hers, and yet had to be hers, murmur thickly, "Honey, honey, what do you do to me?" And still their mouths remained together.

I was very calm. Knew exactly what I was doing when I turned the corner of the arbor to the entrance. His broad back bulked in front of me. All I could see of her was her hands agitated below his shoulder blades.

I said, "You don't have to worry about your date with me tonight, Bev."

Frank swung around. He was still holding her and pulled her sideways with his motion, and there was the pale blend of yellow hair and white face against his dark jacket. She made a noise. A bleat, a sob, a choked outcry—one or all of them mingled into a single discordant sound. I kept hearing it after I had turned and was striding away from them down the path between the flower beds.

Then that sound of hers gathered volume and became words. "Dave, wait! Dave!"

With my head down, I kept walking. She was following me. Calling my name over and over as she ran. I turned off the path to the driveway, and now I could hear her running feet on the cinders.

She caught me when I had almost reached the street. She grabbed my upper arm with two hands and pulled me hard against her. I had to stop.

"Dave, let me explain!"

The soft pressure of her body was against my side. I turned my head to her. She didn't look so very beautiful. Maybe because of the fading light or whatever it was that contorted her face. Maybe because of an abrupt change in my perspective.

I said, "What's there to explain? If you enjoy Frank's kisses, don't let me stop you."

"Dave, honey, listen to me!"

A minute ago Frank had been honey. Now I was honey again.

I tore myself away from her. She clung and I had to be brutal. I didn't particularly want to hurt her, but I didn't particularly not want to hurt her. I got myself free of her, continued down the driveway.

She followed me, taking small, running steps at my side, touching me, saying my name. I didn't even glance at her. My car at the curb was my objective and nothing would keep me from it.

When I reached the sidewalk, Frank was with us. He had run after Beverly who was running after me. She was between us, and over her yellow hair Frank's eyes and mine met.

He wasn't going to hit me. His face showed that this time he wouldn't try to settle anything with his fists. There was something flabby and bewildered and stricken about him. Oddly, I felt myself feeling sorry for him. A little.

Beverly didn't seem to know he was there, as close to her as I was. She reached for me.

"Dave, honey, if you'll only come into the house and let me talk to you!"

I stepped away from her hands touching me. Went to my car and tore open the door.

"Let me alone!" she cried. "I hate you! I hate all men!"

I looked back. Frank had put his hands on her shoulders and now she was tearing away from him.

She screamed, "I hate everybody!" and ran to the house.

For the first time I was aware of the audience. The street seemed choked with Saturday evening strollers, and people sitting outside their houses. Everybody, everything, had stopped. The street was holding its breath. Watching, listening. In an hour everybody in town would hear of it. There would be nudges and smirks wherever I went. And shame.

I got behind the wheel of my car. Fumbled for the starter with my foot. Couldn't find it. Reached in my pocket for a cigarette. Found myself looking at the Atwood house.

Beverly had reached the porch. Her father stood in the house doorway. In that silence I could hear the mutter of his voice speaking to her. She didn't even look at him. Moved through that door as if he weren't there. And he stepped back into the house and both were out of sight.

The street stirred. Talked it up as if a curtain had just fallen on a play. I abandoned hunting for my cigarettes. Made an effort to find the starter with my toes and did and jammed in the gears.

Halfway up the block, I passed Frank Townsend walking with his head down and his stride quick and angry. My foot went on the brake, slowed the car. I didn't know why I'd done that. My foot hadn't obeyed any conscious command of my brain.

I brought my foot back on the gas and shoved the throttle all the way down to the floor board.

12. Ben Helm

SUNDAY, MAY 18—11:35 A. M.

THE SIGN UNDER the mailbox said: ANDREW WONDER AND SON LICENSED ELECTRICIANS. A hundred feet in from the road a low, green-shingled house squatted at the foot of a deep lawn unbroken by trees or shrubs. A nice-looking young man and a nice-looking young woman sat rocking gently on a porch glider.

The glider came to a halt when I ascended the porch.

"Ed Wonder?" I asked.

The young man stood up. "We'll be out in a minute, Rose," he told the girl. Then he said to me, "Mind coming into the house, Mr. Helm?"

He led me through a living room and into a dining room which was at the rear of the house. Obviously he didn't want the girl on the porch to hear what we said. He sat down at a round table covered with an embroidered cloth. A cut-glass vase crowded with lilacs stood in the precise center. I sat opposite him.

"Mind hurrying it?" he said. "My folks already left for church and I promised to meet them there with Rose."

I looked at my wrist watch. It was twenty after eleven. "You're late already."

"We wanted to talk something over. We—"

Ed Wonder broke off and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He reached across the table to offer me one. I shook my head and dug for my pipe and pouch.

"How do you know who I am?" I asked.

"Everybody knows you're in town and why. Yesterday somebody pointed you out to me on Division Street."

Nothing in his face or about his movements as he lit his cigarette showed that he was nervous, but he was. He had pink cheeks, a small mouth, warm blue eyes, and lustrous blond curly hair. A strong jaw and a hard masculine body saved him from being merely a pretty boy.

When he had his light, he went to a sideboard for an ash tray and returned with it to the table and placed it between us. He looked at me and away and back at me.

"Aren't you curious to know why I came here?" I said.

"Sure, but you'll tell me in your own sweet time. I can save you some questions by telling you I didn't know Matterson."

"Not at all?"

"I did a wiring job in his house a few months ago and he gave me a drink when he paid me. That was the only time I ever said a word to him."

"But you know Beverly Atwood," I said.

Convulsively his fingers mangled his cigarette. The fire touched his palm; torn and twisted paper, shards of tobacco, and sparks fell on the tablecloth. He slapped his hand down, smothering the glowing ash with his flesh.

"You have it that bad?" I said.

Ed Wonder's small mouth clamped tight. Carefully he brushed the ruins of his cigarette into the ash tray.

"Are you trying to protect her good name or your own?" I asked.

A smile came into his soft eyes. "Look, mister. You ask any of the mothers in town. They'll tell you they wished their daughters were like Beverly Atwood. You never catch her necking in a corner at a party. She doesn't paint herself up or smoke or drink. She's never seen with a man that a decent girl shouldn't know. All that makes her a good girl, doesn't it?"

"No."

"You're a detective all right, mister." He laughed with subdued bitterness, then broke off and stared bleakly at me. "You're talking about Bev Atwood, but you're thinking of Frank Townsend. You came here to talk to me on account of that fight I got into with him last Monday at Teepee Inn."

"I heard it wasn't much of a fight."

"I spot Frank fifty pounds and he's a one-punch man. I'd like to get in a ring where there are rules. I'm a hell of a lot faster. I'd cut him to pieces. Trouble was, Monday night I was a little high and left myself wide open to his sock."

"Did you get fresh with Beverly because you were drunk?"

"You've been listening to Frank. All we did was dance. He claims I held her too tight. He'd say that about anybody who came within a foot of her. And Bev didn't mind. Plenty of times I'd held—" He wet his lips. "Anyway, Frank barged over. I spot him fifty pounds, but I wouldn't let anybody in pants get wise with me. So I told him where to get off and he socked me before I could get my hands up. That's all there was to it."

I let a minute pass without conversation.

The silence got under Ed Wonder's skin. "I'll tell you this, mister. You can't find out from me if Bev played around with Matterson. Maybe she did, but I just don't know."

"You think she made Frank jealous of Matterson?"

Ed Wonder slouched back in his chair. Caution wiped his face blank. "You're being paid to do the thinking."

"You've just done some of it. You suggested that Frank murdered Matterson because of Beverly."

"You didn't hear me say that."

"Not directly. What can you add?"

"All I know is some of the talk around town. I hear the

police have the finger on Frank and are trying to prove he did it. Well, you can't prove anything by me because I don't know anything."

"Never mind Frank. I'm interested in Beverly."

"What man isn't? You can put it the other way around too."

I let another silence lie between us. Then I said, "What makes you so bitter about her? Were there too many other men?"

"A guy can stand so much and then he's through."

"No," I said. "A man becomes bitter because the girl throws him over. There'd been David Reese and Frank Townsend for a number of years. They were the stand-bys. But there were others, like you, the ones she tired of after a while and dropped."

He said something under his breath. I didn't hear what it was. I didn't have to.

"Was Mike Parker another one?" I asked.

He laughed between his teeth. "Mike was on the prowl for any female who wouldn't yell bloody murder if he laid a hand on her. I told you Bev was a good girl. She wouldn't have anything to do with a wolf like Mike."

"Is that your cute way of saying that she did?"

"You're a detective, mister. Figure it out."

I shook my head. "I don't believe you. In a town this small two people can't go out together without everybody knowing. I've spoken to a lot of people since I came here and I've heard a lot, but I've never heard of Beverly and Mike together."

"I can show you a dozen places within a mile where two people can meet and nobody will know."

"I still don't get it," I said. "Beverly wasn't married or even engaged. She was seeing a number of different men. Why make a secret of Mike Parker?"

Ed Wonder plucked a cigarette out of his pack and thumped it on the back of his wrist. He seemed to be trying

to smash the cigarette. "I'll tell you why. A girl can go out with Dave Reese and Frank and me and practically any other unmarried guy in town, and she'll still be a good girl. But good girls don't mess with wolves. So what does a good girl do when she falls for a wolf? She doesn't let anybody know about it."

"But you knew."

"Yeah. The thing about wolves is they like to shoot their mouths off about the girls they make."

"And Frank must have known too."

"If I knew, why not Frank? He and Mike were working together on the Crown Hill road at the time. I always figured Bev was the real reason they had that fight. People said it was on account of Mike took Frank's sister Rachel to a dance. Maybe that was part of the reason. If I had a sister, I guess I wouldn't like her going with a guy like Mike. But if you ask me, the big reason for the fight was Bev."

"A big enough reason to murder Mike?"

Ed Wonder found shreds of tobacco caught in the embroidery of the tablecloth. He plucked them out and deposited them in the ash tray. "Is that the way you figure it, mister?"

"Didn't it occur to you?"

"Well, you get all kinds of ideas when a man is killed. The police said it was an accident, and they should know." His head lifted sharply. "Look, Mr. Helm. It was all over between Bev and me when Mike was killed."

"Meaning you wouldn't have any interest in murdering Mike?" I said.

"That's right. I was going out steady with Rose Craston."

"The girl on the porch?"

"Yeah. We've known each other since we were in diapers. We're going to be married next month."

"Then why don't you get Beverly out of your blood?"

He watched me cautiously out of narrowed eyes and de-

cided not to comment. I tapped out my pipe in the ash tray and said that I'd kept him and Rose from church long enough. He walked me back to the porch. I left him there with the girl he was to marry.

The day was warm, the sun was bright, and I was lonely. As I walked through the town, I washed my mind of my job and daydreamed of Greta.

Sundays especially a man and his wife should be together. They should lounge on the porch reading the Sunday paper, or stroll in shady places, or visit relatives and friends, or, if they felt like it and had no children, lie in bed all day. How was Greta, two thousand miles away, filling the emptiness of a Sunday?

Somebody called my name. I glanced to my left to see a car pass and a pudgy hand wave through the driver's window. District Attorney Fleet was driving somewhere with his wife and two grown children. I waved back. A few minutes later, when I was passing through the closed-down business section of Rexton, I saw somebody else I knew. Across the street Frank Townsend stood against a telephone pole.

He wasn't looking in my direction, but when I started to cross the street he turned suddenly and walked rapidly away. At the moment there wasn't any reason to chase after him. I continued toward the house where I boarded.

It was a decaying frame house which looked older than anything else in town except the two women who owned it. They were sisters, one named Mrs. Ebling and the other named Miss Hoopes, and they were withered and genteel and poor. My room was airy and my bed soft and Mrs. Ebling cooked superbly, but I was the only boarder. I wished that I could drum up trade for them.

On the way to my room I passed them listening to hymns on the radio. Always before they had greeted me with benign little smiles. Now their wrinkled faces were stern and their old eyes disapproving.

"A young woman telephoned you," Miss Hoopes told me tartly. "She refused to leave her name."

"Any message?" I asked.

"She said never mind when I asked her and hung up." She turned her head to her sister. "A young woman who refused to leave her name."

Mrs. Ebling glared at me. "People who do not leave their names are ashamed to tell who they are."

I had told them that I was married. I had received a phone call from a young woman who would not leave her name. *Ergo*, scandal.

"It must be a business call," I explained.

"It is my understanding that business people always leave their names," Miss Hoopes countered primly.

Mrs. Ebling nodded, tight-lipped.

I was trying to think up a convincing rebuttal to save my character when the doorbell rang.

The front door led directly into the living room, and Mrs. Ebling had only a few feet to go to open it. Rachel Townsend stood there.

"Did Mr. Helm return yet?" she asked. Then she saw me and sighed, "Mr. Helm," and backed out of the house as if in flight.

I moved to the door between two pairs of old eyes smug with scandalous wisdom. As soon as I was outside, I heard Mrs. Ebling breathe ecstatically, "It's that Townsend girl! Did you see, she wouldn't even come into the house to talk to him. Business indeed!"

Well, old women have so little fun they are entitled to some.

Rachel Townsend was waiting for me by the crumbling picket fence. It struck me again how much she resembled Greta. Not as beautiful, not as stately and mature, but she had Greta's vivid coloring and black eyes and fine, proud carriage.

She took a step forward to meet me. "Mr. Helm, did you arrest my brother?"

"No."

The information didn't make her feel better. Her hands were locked in front of her and her arms were close against her sides, as if she were holding herself together. "I haven't seen Frankie since yesterday afternoon. He didn't come home to sleep."

"He's a big boy," I said. "Can't he spend a night away from home without his sister's permission?"

"He phones me whenever he intends to stay away overnight. He always does when he lives with me. He's very considerate that way." Her dark eyes appealed to me—for what, I couldn't quite understand. "Maybe I'm silly worrying over a grown man spending a night away from home. But at a time like this . . . ." Her voice faltered and died.

"A time like this," I echoed softly. "A time of murder and hunting for a murderer. What's the reason you thought he was arrested?"

She turned her face away.

I stretched out a hand to pat her shoulder—a reassuring gesture, maybe because she looked like Greta. I withdrew the hand before it reached her; my landladies would be watching from a window.

"Frank's all right," I told her. "I saw him on Division Street less than half an hour ago."

Rachel's hands unclasped. She brushed a stray black strand of hair from her brow. "I wonder where he could have been," she murmured.

"Maybe on a bender."

"No. Frankie doesn't drink that much. He hardly drank at all until—" Her face darkened. "He used to be so sweet and good-natured. When he was a boy he was almost as big as he is now, but he never got into a fight. Whatever he's become, Beverly Atwood did it to him. The other day in my house you asked him what he has against the world.

He's taking out on the world what Beverly's doing to him. When he hits a man, he's really hitting out at Beverly, but he doesn't know it."

"Good psychology," I commented. "But right now Beverly's not all that's eating him. He thinks maybe you murdered Parker and Matterson."

"I? What earthly reason would I have?"

"A very earthly reason. Perhaps both men preferred Beverly to you."

Her eyelids flickered. She took a deep breath. I had long ago stopped trying to interpret facial expressions. Some people showed emotions more easily and some were better actors.

"So you know about Mike and Beverly?" she whispered.

"Uh-huh. And you knew and Frank knew."

"Oh, I admit I knew. Mike boasted to me of his many conquests the night I went to that dance with him. But Frankie didn't know. Nobody would have dared tell him, and he wouldn't have believed anybody who did."

"Mike Parker would've dared," I said. "I think something like this happened. The day after you went to the dance with Mike, Frank told him to stay away from you. Mike was a two-fisted road foreman, a pretty tough guy himself. He mocked Frank. Next, he said, Frank would want him to stay away from Beverly Atwood too in spite of the fact that she had other ideas on the subject. And Frank beat him up."

Rachel looked me over disdainfully. "You're guessing. Even if it had happened that way, Frank would have convinced himself that Mike lied."

"Then why are you afraid your brother murdered Mike?"

She leaned lightly against the picket fence. The line of her torso from knee to shoulder was a charming arc. "You're quite a detective to be able to look into people's minds," she said sarcastically.

"I do my best. Take Frank, for instance. If he were trying to protect his own skin, he'd roar and bully and fight. Instead he runs away from me. He's afraid of me because he's afraid for you."

"So you want it both ways. I'm the murderer and Frankie is the murderer."

"I didn't say that. I said that you each suspect that the other is the murderer and you're trying to cover up for each other. You can relax as far as your brother is concerned. He didn't kill Mike Parker."

Rachel straightened up. Her eyes were wary, anticipating a trap.

"The fact remains that it was Frank who beat Mike up," I said. "Frank had found his satisfaction through his fists. It's the beaten man who goes for a weapon, who broods revenge."

"Yes," she whispered eagerly. "Frankie wouldn't kill a man."

"I agree. Murder is a crime of frustration. A person murders because he can't get what he wants in any other way. Frank has his fists. For the same reason he didn't kill Matterson. A bean pot is a coward's weapon, a sneak's weapon, a physically helpless person's weapon. Frank's none of these. It would never have occurred to him to use anything but his two hands."

She turned her head to watch a car go by, as if it had particular interest for her, though likely she didn't actually look at it. "You don't have to convince me, Mr. Helm. I never doubted Frank's innocence."

"Because you knew all along who the murderer is?"

She turned back to me with a wry smile on her generous mouth. "What a way you have of making a living! Doing low mean things like showing my brother the sketches Rudy Matterson drew of me. Trying to trap people. Trying to frighten them. Doesn't it ever make you sick to your stomach?"

"Sometimes."

She tossed her head. "If I had to kill anybody, wouldn't I have selected Beverly?"

"A woman scorned takes it out on the man."

"And a woman like me, who wouldn't beat up a man like Rudy Matterson, would snatch up a bean pot?"

"Uh-huh. And Mike Parker, meeting you in the woods, wouldn't hesitate to hand over his loaded shotgun to you."

I didn't like it, but that was the way I worked. If her contempt bothered me, it was my job to take. I fished out my pipe.

"I suppose it'll be a waste of time to tell you how wrong you are," she said.

"Time is what I have plenty of. I'll stand here all day listening to you."

"Because I remind you of your wife?" she sneered. "No, thank you. I have something better to do."

She moved away from me, walking straight and proud along the picket fence to the gate hanging on one hinge.

I started back to the house. A pair of curtains in a window came together. At any rate, my landladies had enjoyed it.

13. Rachel Townsend

SUNDAY, MAY 18 — 1:47 P. M.

THERE WAS A SHORTCUT through the patch of woods which lay between the highway and my cottage. The path brought you so close to the living room windows that you couldn't help looking through them as you passed, especially since I'd taken down the curtains for belated spring cleaning.

Through the window I saw Dave Reese sitting on the couch. His elbows were on his knees, his head bowed, a cigarette limp in the corner of his mouth.

For once my heart didn't bound at the sight of him. If Dave visited me, it had something to do with business. It always did, even on Sundays. And today I was fed up with men. I was fed up with a brother who was letting an illusion destroy him, with a detective who had friendly brown eyes and was as insidious as a devil, with the man I loved but to whom I was little more than an animate part of his office equipment.

I strode into the house and slammed my handbag down on the table. "What's the job this time? Do I try to sell a house for you while you keep a date with your girl friend?"

Only Dave's head lifted. The rest of him remained inertly bowed on the couch. Not even the cigarette stirred in his mouth. His eyes were hollow, his cheeks taut, his mouth slack.

"Dave, you're sick!"

He spoke without taking the cigarette from his mouth, without any of him but his lips moving. "Just tired. I drove half the night and then walked the rest of the night. Not going anywhere in particular. A little while ago I went home, but I couldn't stand being alone, so I came here."

There was so little of his cigarette left that in another moment it would burn his lips, and likely as not in his present state he wouldn't feel it. I plucked the cigarette out of his mouth and crushed it out in an ash tray.

"I'll lay ten to one it concerns Beverly."

Dully he looked at me. "I saw Frank kiss her."

Sensational discovery! Somebody besides himself kissed the succulent blonde.

"What did you think Frankie and Beverly did when they were together, read Elizabeth Barrett Browning to each other?"

"You don't understand." He was being very patient with me who had never loved and wouldn't know about such things. "She promised to marry me. It was all settled except the date. Then last night she was kissing Frank in the grape arbor."

"A grape arbor is a conventional place for kissing."

I was hurting him. What did he expect? Was I supposed to provide a nice soft shoulder for him to weep on because he was getting a very small share of what he'd given me for so long? He had never encouraged me to weep on *his* shoulder.

He stood up. "Why bother you with my grief?" He was huffy now. Men get like that when women don't supply them with a large enough dose of soothing syrup.

I grabbed his arm with both hands and swung around him and tried to pull him down on the couch. "Don't be a dope. You came here because I'm the only real friend you've got."

He grinned—a poor, weak imitation of the grins I had

known. "That's right, Rachel, my only real friend." And he submitted to my pressure and sat down beside me.

His head touched my shoulder and stayed there. It meant nothing. It was a gesture of weariness by a man physically and emotionally exhausted, and my shoulder was more convenient than a pillow. My arm went around him, and when he relaxed against me, I felt all mushy inside. It was nothing to him, but so very much to me.

Then came the confessional. A woman could keep a thing like that locked up inside her forever, but a man had to talk it out. Tell me, darling. Sit here closer than you have ever been to me and pour out your woe.

He spoke slowly, thoughtfully, as if looking at all of it again in order to make up his mind that it had really happened. It wasn't much. He had a date with Beverly last night and had found her kissing Frankie in the arbor. Kissing him passionately; that he was sure of. And saying passionate words to Frankie, though he couldn't recall what they were.

I remembered that that other man was my brother. Two angles of that particular triangle touched me personally. "What did Frankie do?"

"It was a mess. She ran after me. She wanted me back. Half the town saw it."

"And Frankie?"

"He ran after her while she ran after me. She wouldn't let him come near her. The last I saw of him he was walking away."

Prowling out the night like Dave. That was why he hadn't come home. She had kissed Frankie, but it was Dave she had run after. She was a marvel. Other women broke one heart at a time, but she could break two at a clip.

I stroked his hair. He sighed and snuggled closer to me, like a small boy being comforted by his mother.

"You're a swell kid, Rachel."

I could have torn his hair out. You were a swell kid in

the office when you turned a profitable real estate deal for him or did little things for his personal comfort. You were a swell kid now because with you there was none of the tensions and restraints and suspicions he'd felt with the man-collecting blonde he'd fallen for.

I didn't tear his hair out. I kept stroking it.

"A kiss isn't so much." Dave said it suddenly, not speaking to me, but to my shoulder. "Even when you're married such things happen, and intelligent people forgive and forget. But when a girl like Beverly kisses somebody—a girl as—as—"

"As pure as the driven snow?"

"That's about it, even when put with the notorious Townsend sarcasm. When Beverly kisses a man, she means it. I've had all night and morning to think about it. The only answer is that she loves Frank and doesn't love me. That's all right if that's the way she feels, but it hurts like hell."

She wasn't out of his blood, and there wasn't anything you could do about it if holding him in your arms wasn't enough. You couldn't give him what he called the notorious Townsend sarcasm, saying: What of all the other kisses she's given all the other men—and not only kisses? He wouldn't believe you. He'd flare up in rage because you'd sullied her fair name, and you'd lose him for good—if you could lose what you didn't have.

So you had to be content with what little of him was for you and hold him close and stroke his hair.

I don't know how many seconds or minutes or hours had passed when I heard a sharp intake of breath. I raised my eyes, and above Dave's disheveled hair I saw Frankie's head and shoulders framed by the open, uncurtained window. He must have come up by way of the path through the woods. A moment after I saw him he was gone.

I pulled my arm away from about Dave. "Frankie is coming."

Dave sat up. There wasn't any reason why we should act

as if we had been caught red-handed. But Dave was on his feet and I was smoothing out my skirt when Frankie entered the room.

Frankie's strong face had become flabby and his eyes were feverish. One night without sleep shouldn't have made him look like that. As he came into the room, you could feel his rage like a physical force.

"Hello, Frank." Dave was calm and deliberate. He held a pack of cigarettes in his hand. "I'd like to have a talk with you."

"Yeah?" Frankie took a couple of more steps into the room and then balanced himself on the balls of his feet. "Isn't Beverly enough for you? Do you have to have every decent girl in town?"

"It was my impression last night that Beverly was yours." Bitterness touched Dave's voice.

"You keep your dirty hands off my sister!" The stubborn, unreasoning, violent mood was on Frankie.

A spot of red appeared on the paleness of Dave's cheek. He had an anger to match Frankie's. "How'd you like to go to hell?"

Frankie swung at him.

By the time I reached them, each had struck at least one blow. Now Dave was clinging to Frankie's arms, trying to keep those terrible fists away. I could not tear them apart, and my voice, shrill and discordant, scolded them as you would scold uncontrollable children. I doubted that they knew I was there.

Suddenly Frankie twisted, wrenching away from Dave's grip, and as he did so, his hard body struck mine. I was hurled against the table. Breath was knocked out of me. Numb with despair, I sagged there, watching Dave retreat before Frankie's onslaught. A chair crashed over, and then the floor lamp. Frankie leaned forward, and Dave dropped down to one knee.

Dave shook his head and grinned, and blood on his

mouth made that grin a grotesque thing. His breathing was like the sound of a rusty engine. Frankie stood over him with his fists ready and a kind of madness in his face.

"Stop it!" I screamed at them. "Oh, you idiots, stop it!"

Dave shook his head again and leaped up at Frankie.

What I did was as stupid as the fight, but I couldn't just stand there impotently. I hurled myself between them. Frankie's fist was already on its way, and my face came into its path. Nausea flowed all the way down to my legs. The room wavered and started to rise. Then it came to rest and I found that I was sitting on the floor.

There was a stunned silence. Frankie gaped down at me, blinking foolishly. Dave's hands were to his bleeding mouth. At any rate, I'd stopped the fight.

I started to rise. The nausea was settling in my stomach; I thought I could hold it down. When I was on my feet I wobbled.

Dave put an arm about me. "Your face! Does it hurt?"

My face was numb. I touched my cheek. It didn't feel like skin, and as soon as I put my fingers on it, it started to smart.

"Take your hands off her!" Frankie was at it again, or still at it, and his fists were clenched.

"Cut it out, Frankie," I told him wearily.

"Then let him take his hands off you."

The pressure of Dave's arm on my shoulder didn't loosen. He had his handkerchief in his free hand and was dabbing blood off his lips. He was still grinning, recklessly, angrily, tautly.

I took a step away from his arm. "You'd better go, Dave."

"Not if it means leaving you alone with him."

"He's my brother, Dave. Please go."

He looked for a clean spot on his bloody handkerchief and then nodded. "Sure, Rachel." He walked halfway to the door, remembered something and came back for his hat

on the table. He put it on at a cocky angle. He spoke through the handkerchief against his mouth. "If you need me, Rachel, phone me."

Then Frankie and I were alone. He touched my arm.

"Gosh, Rachel, I didn't see you. I'd cut my hand off before I'd hit you."

I turned away without looking at him and went shakily into the bathroom. The mirror showed a raw, ugly bruise below my right cheekbone. Frankie must have struck me only a glancing blow; generally he did more damage with his fist.

I washed the bruise. That made it hurt more. I'd be disfigured for a week. What would I tell people—that I had fallen against the edge of the door? That explanation had become a stale joke, one followed by smirks and innuendoes. Well, it was a joke, wasn't it? Like two men beating each other for the same reason that a man in a prison cell pounds his fists against stone walls.

When I returned to the living room, Frankie was drinking whiskey out of the mouth of a bottle. He put the bottle down and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"Why should you want to get drunk?" I said. "You must feel wonderful already. Twice as good as usual because this time you hit two people."

"Jees, I didn't mean it." He came over to me, and for one of the few times in my memory he was contrite. His eyes blinked as if about to shed tears. "Listen. There's nobody means more to me than you do."

It was probably true, perhaps even including Beverly, but I was too empty inside to care. I went to the cigarette humidor on the table. There was nothing in it but grains of tobacco in the corners.

He was again at my shoulder. "What kind of brother would I be if I let guys mess around with you?"

I laughed harshly. "You and Dave didn't fight over me. You fought over Beverly."

"That's something else. I wouldn't mind if Dave was on the level. But he's not. Beverly is his girl. Listen—I know. Last night—"

He stopped. He didn't want to speak of how she had kissed him but run after Dave.

My handbag was on the table. I went to it for cigarettes. Frankie had the bottle tilted to his mouth.

"Why do men bother with that tramp?" I burst out as I opened my handbag. "She's not good enough for any of you. She wasn't even good enough for Mike Parker."

The bottom of the bottle struck the table with a thump. "Who you talking about?"

There was no point to it, but if I couldn't batter flesh with my fists, I had to find release in some way.

"When I mention a tramp, whom can I mean but Beverly Atwood?"

He lurched toward me. His face looked the way it had just before he had swung at Dave.

I stood where I was, looking at him. "Go on, hit me again. Get it out of your system by hitting me."

He wilted. His head, shoulders, body drooped. "God, Rachel, I'd never want to hurt you!" His words were almost sobs. He stepped around me to the door.

I felt that I had to do something. I was the only one he had in the world. But I was too weary down to my bones, and deeper, to make more effort than was required to dig into my handbag for cigarettes.

My pack was empty. I let it fall from my fingers and started toward a window. Perhaps I intended to call Frankie back; my mind was blurred with defeat and exhaustion. My foot struck a small object on the floor. It was the pack of cigarettes Dave had been holding when the fight had started.

I picked up the pack and shook out a cigarette. When I had it lit, I didn't want it. I went into my room and fell on my bed.

14. Frank Townsend

SUNDAY, MAY 18 — 10:32 P. M.

HEADLIGHTS KEPT FLASHING by around the curve, but I was too far in from the road for anybody to see me. That was good. Somebody would stop if they saw a man on his face just back of the road shoulder, thinking he was dead or hurt or something, and all they'd find would be Frank Townsend so cockeyed drunk he didn't know where he was or how he'd got there.

One thing nobody could say about me, that I was a soak, that I ever drank more than was good for me. Till today.

God, how sick I was! It was worse than drunk sickness. It hurt every part of me.

Maybe because I hadn't eaten for so long. Yesterday at around five I had made myself two cheese sandwiches at home and had drunk a glass of milk. This morning I had coffee and two crullers at the Twin Elm lunch wagon. Then this afternoon I'd poured a couple of slugs of rye down my throat. Just two drinks. Pretty big ones, but the bottle was more than half empty to begin with, and there'd been plenty left when I'd put it down. Nothing after that—no food, no liquor; just walking the way I'd walked last night till I started to vomit.

How could one guy throw up so much, even after when there was no food or liquor or anything except my twisted guts left in me?

It was coming again. My knees jerked up against my

belly. My body twisted into knots, and it hurt. It hurt so much I wanted to die.

Maybe I was dying.

Nuts! A guy like me didn't die because he poured whiskey into an empty stomach. They didn't come stronger than me.

Yeah, a powerful guy. So strong he could knock his sister right off her feet with one sock.

It wasn't my fault. I didn't see her. She was trying to keep me from taking Dave apart. Everything that guy wanted he got, even having my sister jump into my fist so he wouldn't get it in his own face. What did he want—the whole world? He had a good real estate business, and that made him somebody fathers and mothers wanted their daughters to marry. It made him somebody Beverly chased after even before she'd finished kissing me like her whole soul was in it. Did the heel need my sister as a side dish?

So I smacked him around and I'd do it again.

It was cold. I was shivering like I was wrapped in ice. The ground was damp. Maybe that was what was giving me cramps and making me sweat at the same time I was freezing. The thing to do was to get up and walk.

She'd meant that kiss. She loved me all right, the way she hung onto me and said, Honey, honey! I bet if I had a real estate business she wouldn't have chased after Dave. She was like all the rest of them, wanting a guy who could buy her a nice home and nice clothes.

Why don't you get up? You're not a baby, lying on the ground and shivering and twisting your body against the pain and waiting for your mother to come along and pick you up. Get up and go home.

I started to get up. After a long time I was on my hands and knees. I couldn't move another inch. What was the matter with me? I was supposed to be a strong guy, wasn't I? Get the bottoms of your feet solid on the ground. Now push up with your hands.

I fell flat on my face. I lay like that, shivering and retching.

You can't kid me, Beverly. You love me. You wouldn't kiss somebody the way you kissed me last night unless you loved him. It isn't right not to marry the man you love. I'll work my fingers off for you. Ask anybody, they'll tell you Frank Townsend is a decent, hard-working, sober man. Maybe I can't give you right off all the expensive things Dave Reese can, but I'll make you happy. I'll spend every minute of my life making you happy.

Come on, get on your feet and go home. You're sick. You have a fever. You didn't eat and sleep enough. Go home and Rachel will take care of you, like she always did when you needed her.

And maybe your sister needs you more than she ever needed anybody.

She didn't kill them. Who says she did? I'll beat hell out of anybody who ever says she could've killed anybody. All right, then why do you even think it? Who says I think it? All right, then why did you start thinking in the first place that she didn't do it?

Shut up, damn it!

That's the stuff, on your feet. It's so dark you can't see a thing, but the road is over there to your left. Now walk slowly. All you have to do is get to the road. A car will stop for you and take you home. You're not drunk, you're sick, so you don't have to worry what people will think. Anybody can get sick.

You're a tough guy. A little sickness can't get you down. Just keep walking.

Where's the road? I've walked for so long and there's no road.

But I'm not walking. Oh, God, I never got on my feet. I'm lying here all twisted up and so cold I can't stand it.

Beverly, darling, sweetheart, lovely girl. You're so beau-

tiful, so good and clean. Kiss me the way you did last night. Put your arms around me.

Ah, like that. You're so warm. You're so wonderful. And your mouth feels so ....

15. Kathryn Atwood

MONDAY, MAY 19—3:20 P. M.

THE BED JACKET was rich yellow silk with lace beading at the neck and pushed-up, elbow-length sleeves, and through the beading black velvet ribbons were drawn.

"The rage of New York," read the sign on the bed jacket "$12.95."

The wife of a schoolteacher seldom has extra money, but I could see Beverly's hair, more vividly yellow than the silk, cascade over the bed jacket when she rose in the morning. I would tell George that it had cost $4.95, and tonight I could begin to make up the difference in my budget by serving spaghetti and tomato sauce instead of steak. I entered the store.

"Is it Beverly's birthday?" asked Mrs. Carrigan as she wrapped up the bed jacket.

"Does it require a special occasion for a mother to buy her daughter clothes?"

"Especially a lovely daughter like yours," commented Mrs. Carrigan. "Lovely things for the lovely."

The words of this shrewd and discerning business woman were their own answer. With the neatly wrapped package under my arm, I stepped out into the street.

Carrigan's was on the same block as David Reese's office. As I passed the office, I glanced through the broad window. At that moment David came out and brushed by so close to me that he might have knocked me down if I hadn't

halted abruptly. Even then he did not appear to see me.

"Good-afternoon, David," said I.

He looked back at me over his shoulder. "Hello, Mrs. Atwood," he mumbled and walked on without having paused for more than an instant. He had not even tipped his hat.

I was deeply shocked by his behavior. Possibly he had not yet recovered from his absurd quarrel with Beverly, but that was no excuse for him to forget his manners.

He strode around the back of his sedan at the curb, and it was then that I noticed that Rachel Townsend sat in the car. She stared directly ahead; she did not move her head when David got in beside her. He leaned close to her—somewhat intimately, it seemed to me—and spoke to her. Her face turned to him then. I saw him pat her shoulder.

Beverly was in the kitchen when I returned home. I saw her from the hall as I placed my hat in the closet. She wore the light-blue sweater I had knitted for her last year, the Botany flannel skirt of identical shade, and my red-and-white coverall apron. Her gorgeous hair was gathered up in a tight bun and the sleeves of her sweater were rolled up over dimpled elbows. She was pouring gingerbread mix out of a package into my cookery bowl.

Not even the kitchen advertisements in the women's magazines could show such a charming picture of domesticity.

I preferred to present the bed jacket to her when she was going to bed and could try it on immediately for me. I placed the package next to my hat on the closet shelf and went into the kitchen.

My daughter looked at me with a glowing smile. "I'm practicing to make somebody a good wife."

When I was a girl, baking was an art. Nowadays one simply has to open packages.

"I saw David in town, dear," said I.

Beverly kept her eyes on the mixing bowl. "Did he have anything to say about—me?"

"He didn't seem to have time to give me a civil greeting. Apparently he was in too great a hurry to get into his car where that Rachel Townsend was waiting for him."

"Well, she works for him, Mother," said Beverly, ever eager to see the best in people.

"Was that the reason he stroked her shoulder?"

"Did he do that?"

"I distinctly saw him. When you marry David, you will have to make him discharge that girl. While I consider David a steady and reliable young man, I wouldn't trust any man alone all day with that Townsend girl, whose reputation, I hear, isn't all that it should be."

Beverly smiled rather wanly. "Those particular wedding bells are off, Mother."

"Nonsense. There are always meaningless little squabbles between young people." I was tired from the walk to and from town; I pulled out a chair from the kitchen table and sat down. "Dear, I simply cannot understand why you permitted that unspeakable Frank Townsend to call on you in the garden Saturday night."

"I told you, Mother," said she, stirring the batter with a wooden spoon. "I had no idea he'd be out there when I went out to the garden. After all, would I make a date with him when I already had one with Dave?" She stabbed the spoon deep into the bowl. "Everything went wrong that night."

"David will come back to you. Just give him a few days."

"Do you think so, Mother?" said Beverly eagerly.

"He'll come back on bended knees. You'll see."

The front door opened. I glanced at the electric clock on the wall and was surprised to see that it was a quarter past four. George was a painfully precise man; a clock could be set by the time he returned home from teaching school. Today he was twenty-five minutes late.

He came directly into the kitchen. His hat was still on his head and his topcoat was neatly folded over one arm.

This morning I had told him that the day was too warm for a topcoat, but George was ever the pessimist.

"Good-afternoon, dear," I greeted him.

He did not respond at once. I noticed how old he was looking. He had always looked older than his years, even when I had married him, but now I observed with a shock that he was rapidly becoming an old man, though his age was not much more than mine.

"Frank Townsend is dead," said George heavily.

Something fell. I turned my head a trifle and saw that Beverly had dropped the mixing spoon. Brown spats of batter splattered the floor.

"What—happened to him, Daddy?"

"It's still uncertain," said George. "Stark and Helm came by in a car as I was walking home from school. They stopped to tell me. It appears that early this morning tourists parked their car on Route 37 to stretch their legs. They found the body a short distance off the road."

Beverly's fingers fumbled at her strand of small pearls. Her lips quivered. "Maybe he was hit by a car."

"Helm told me that there is absolutely no sign of violence on the body. All that has been ascertained so far is that he has been dead for a considerable time."

"Then he wasn't—wasn't—" Beverly took a deep breath and shivered.

"Murdered?" George's mouth had that twist to it that I so disliked.

It seemed to me that a chill swept through the kitchen, as if a door had suddenly been opened on a freezing day.

"Dear, you're upsetting the child," said I sternly.

"I'm sorry," said George slowly. "It is possible that he took sick and collapsed and died where he fell."

Beverly drew in her breath. It sounded like the briefest of sobs. Then without another word she left the kitchen. George stepped aside to let her pass. I heard her go up the stairs and then I heard her bedroom door close.

I leaned over from my chair and picked up the mixing spoon she had dropped. The chill had not left with Beverly's departure. It was, I realized, inside me.

"That was cruel, dear," I told George. "You had no right to shock the child."

"She would have learned soon enough from other sources that he was dead."

I fetched a rag from the sink and wiped the batter from the floor.

George strode over to me with his hat on his head and his topcoat over his arm and his thin face older than I had ever known it. "Go up to her, Kathryn. She needs you."

"Nonsense." I wiped my hands on a dish towel. "It's not as if anybody who meant anything to her had died."

George's tone sharpened. "If I were her friend instead of only her father, I would go up to her. She needs you this minute, Kathryn."

"Very well."

As I ascended the stairs I remembered the gift I had bought for her in Carrigan's. How fortunate now that I had given way to that impulse. I returned for the package and carried it upstairs with me.

In her room, Beverly lay face down on her bed. She did not stir when I closed the door behind me.

I stood at the side of the bed. "Dear, it can't be that a coarse creature like that meant so much to you."

She turned her left cheek to the pillow and looked up at me. Her eyes were dry, although sad. "After all, Mother, he was somebody I had known for years."

When Beverly had been twelve years of age, our cocker spaniel had died of old age, and for days she had been inconsolable. Two years ago, when my brother Alfred had succumbed to cancer, she had wept, although she had hardly known him. My daughter was tenderhearted and sweet.

"Dear, here is something I bought for you this afternoon," said I.

Beverly sat up. "For me?" She ripped open the package. Thrusting tissue paper aside, she pulled out the bed jacket. "Why, Mother, it's gorgeous!"

The gift was like a tonic to her. She jumped off the bed and removed the coverall apron and put on the bed jacket over her sweater. A thirty-six fitted her perfectly. As she tied the black ribbon at the neck, she surveyed herself in the dresser mirror.

"How does it look, Mother?"

"As adorable on you as I knew it would."

She threw her arms about me. "Oh, Mother, you're so good to me."

Then she turned back to the mirror, and in the glass I saw the glow return to her eyes.

16. David Reese

MONDAY, MAY 19 — 7:01 P. M.

A FEW MINUTES AFTER the detective and the Sheriff left me I drove to Rachel Townsend's house. My guess was right. Stark's car was parked outside.

When I reached the front door, I heard Helm, in the house, ask Rachel where she'd got the bruise on her cheek. He sounded merely solicitous. A pretty smart cookie.

She said, "Last night I stumbled against a door in the dark."

You shouldn't lie to cops about matters that can be easily checked. Twenty minutes ago I'd given Ben Helm straight stories about the mess Saturday evening outside Beverly's house and about the fight I'd had with Frank next day. It wasn't good, but better than if I'd held anything back and he'd learned the facts from other sources.

Now here he was matching up my story with whatever Rachel would tell him, and she was playing it all wrong. I barged into the house.

Rachel sat on the edge of a chair, her hands twisting the handkerchief she'd held most of the afternoon since word had come to the office that Frank was dead. She hadn't used it, hadn't shed a tear, not even when we'd viewed her brother's body in the funeral parlor. And she was dry-eyed now, though the handkerchief was still out. A symbol of the grief she was holding inside her.

"Tell him about the fight," I said. "I've nothing to hide."

Stark yelped, "Hey, you!" and at once subsided as Ben Helm turned to me.

The sleuth wasn't pleased at the fact that I'd appeared. "Anything you want, Mr. Reese?"

"I'm her lawyer. It's my right to be present."

"My impression is that you're in the real estate business."

"That's how I make my living," I said, "but I'm a lawyer. Go on, Rachel, tell them how Frank hit you by accident when he swung at me."

Her eyes, looking up at me, were empty. The handkerchief rose to her face, but only as high as her mouth. Dully she said through the handkerchief, "If you know, why ask me?"

"We got reasons," Stark informed her profoundly. He jabbed a bony finger at Rachel. "And you got reasons for lying about that sore on your cheek. You are trying to protect somebody." And he made sure there was no doubt whom he meant by giving me a hard look.

Helm didn't care for the sleuth's bluntness. His own assaults were from the flank. He grimaced and fished out his pipe.

Rachel said thinly, "Protect?" The handkerchief came away from her mouth. "Mr. Helm, how did Frankie die?"

"We're not yet sure."

"Then why are you asking these questions. As if . . . ." Her eyes widened darkly. "Frankie didn't just drop dead."

"Probably not," Helm agreed and let it go at that. Hardly a communicative lad. "I'm waiting for you to tell me what happened Sunday afternoon."

She looked at me. I nodded.

Apathetically she said, "I came straight home when I left you. Dave was here. We were sitting together on the couch and Frankie saw us through that window and got the—the wrong impression. He came into the house and started to fight with Dave. Frankie punched me by acci-

dent, and that stopped the fight. He was very contrite. Dave left a minute later and then Frankie left. I—" Her voice cracked on the upbeat. "I never saw him again."

"Did he make his own meal here or did you prepare it for him?"

The detective's technique was something to observe. He didn't ask if Frank had eaten anything Sunday in this house. Crept up on his question from behind.

"I told you when I saw you Sunday that Frankie hadn't been home all night and next morning. He didn't return till Sunday afternoon, and then he—" The handkerchief flew to her mouth. "Eat! Then you think he was—that it was something he ate?"

Helm said, "Dr. Kendrell hasn't completed the autopsy." His way of saying: I'll do the asking and you do the answering. He put a match to his pipe. "He must have eaten something between Saturday evening and Sunday afternoon."

"As far as I know, all he had in this house was a drink."

"A drink of what?"

"Whiskey."

"When was that?"

"Right after Dave left. I went into the bathroom to wash up, and when I came out he was taking a drink."

"Did you wash the glass?"

"He drank right out of the bottle." Without conscious effort, Rachel was trying to tear the handkerchief to pieces. "But I'm sure he didn't have anything to eat here. Of course he might have been here the half-hour I was away to see you and taken something from the refrigerator, but I doubt it."

Helm said, "Where's the whiskey?"

"In the kitchen cabinet." Her dark eyes moved past Helm, rested on me for an instant, dropped to the tight fist in which she had crushed her handkerchief. "Do you want me to get it?"

Helm nodded, but he was at her heels when she went into the kitchen. Stark shifted his position so that he could see them after they were out of my sight. Not a muscle in my body moved. I found myself holding my breath.

In a matter of seconds Rachel reappeared with the detective still behind her. He was carrying a paper bag twice as big as it had to be for what was in it. He held it gingerly by the top. When he reached the table, he carefully set the bag down and opened it to expose the long neck of a whiskey bottle. Between thumb and forefinger he removed the cork.

"You'll spoil prints!" Stark yelled a warning.

"Not on this cork." Helm pushed his nose down to the mouth of the bottle. Then sniffed, frowned, stuck the cork back. I wasn't fooled: that was a show to build up tension. His nose couldn't get him anywhere.

"Smell anything?" Stark asked eagerly.

"I smell very good rye." Helm closed the bag. "But we'll see."

I said, "Your notion is cockeyed. Anything dropped into that bottle might have poisoned anybody at all. That's no way to select a particular victim."

He turned to Rachel. "Do you drink, Miss Townsend?"

"Social drinking only. I never drink alone."

"But your brother did."

Rachel was back in the chair, sitting listlessly, giving an impression of slumping without quite letting her body go. Now she sat upright, a little of the old fire coming back into her eyes. "Frankie wasn't a sot. The only solitary drinking I ever saw him do was a nip before meals sometimes."

"But this was his bottle," Helm persisted.

I said, "Nobody would be so stupid as to use the method you're thinking of. There was a chance Frank or Rachel would have company and invite them to have a drink."

Helm looked me over impassively. "You were here Sun-

day when Miss Townsend came home. How'd you get in?"

"I found the door unlocked."

Rachel put in with more vigor than she'd shown for some time, "I seldom lock the door unless I intend to be gone for some time."

"Uh-huh. So anybody could have come in."

"Well, we know somebody who was here alone for a while," Stark said and handed me another hard look.

I said, "I'll lay odds you're wasting your time with that bottle."

Evidently the detective wasn't a betting man. He patted the paper bag. With ghoulish affection, I thought. "Anything else either of you would like to tell me?"

Rachel brought her handkerchief back to her mouth. I stuck a cigarette between my lips. Neither of us had an answer for him. Not even when he said good-night and the Sheriff echoed him. I stood where I was, setting fire to a cigarette, listening to them leave the house and drive away.

The tableau held, she sitting, me standing, neither of us looking directly at the other. The silence tied up my nerves. I went to an ash tray, crushed out the cigarette after only a couple of puffs, said, "I'm taking you out to eat."

She raised her head then. "Why don't you go back to Beverly? You don't have to worry about Frankie now."

She'd recovered that old sarcasm of hers, but now with a bitterness that cut like a scalpel.

"That's over," I said. "I've stopped feeling about her."

"For how long?"

"Oh, hell!" I said. "Let's go out and eat."

"No." She slumped back on her spine. For the first time since I'd known her she was without her lithe grace. Little of her animation and high color were left in her face, and without it she was just any female.

I said, "Are you afraid of me? Because of what might be in that bottle besides rye?"

"Dave!" She was on her feet and staring at me. As if

I were a vicious looking stranger who'd come upon her suddenly in a lonely place. "Don't ever say that, Dave."

"Then don't make me say it. Come out to eat. Get out of this house for a while. Stop tearing yourself to pieces."

She tossed her head. Loose hair flew. Wide, full mouth smiled recklessly. "I'll be with you in a minute, Dave." Shoulders squared, slim body straight now as she left the room.

I prowled the living room. Took deep breaths to loosen the load on my chest. The load pushed down further, a dead weight in the pit of my stomach.

Being a woman, she was in her room a lot longer than a minute. When she came out, she had a different dress on. A simple white affair that went great with her black hair and eyes. Face tastefully renewed. She looked good.

I had as keen an eye as the next man for a pretty girl and I'd known all along she was easier to look at than most. But I doubt if I'd ever realized before how very good she looked.

She came to me with that set smile she'd worn when she left me. As if she'd pasted it on as a permanent fixture.

17. Ben Helm

MONDAY, MAY 19 — 8:27 P. M.

STARK TOLD ME proudly that the day after he took office as sheriff he sent away for fingerprint paraphernalia and a book on how to use it. The stuff was in a small valise in a small closet in his small office in the county building. Also in the valise was a cardboard file containing a hundred or so sets of local citizens' fingerprints he'd obtained in one way or another.

Scientific crime detection had come to Cagula County.

"Guess we want Frank and Rachel Townsend first," he said, fumbling through the cards. "Here's George Atwood's too. Got these only a couple of days ago. They're copies of the prints the state police took Tuesday night when they had hopes the killer maybe left a print or two in the kitchen."

He spread newspaper on the desk and dusted Frank Townsend's bottle of rye. As he worked, what little confidence he had evaporated.

"Maybe we ought to let the state police do it," he suggested glumly. "They got a real expert."

"Who's two hundred miles away, you told me. We won't get a report till tomorrow, and it'll take them even longer to analyze the whiskey. I'd like some answers in a hurry for once before there's another corpse."

He gave me a startled look. "You don't think—"

"I don't know what to think," I cut in testily. "But I'd like some sort of answer now."

Stark sighed and rummaged through the valise. He took a long minute to find a magnifying glass. He frowned through it at the bottle, then frowned at the print cards, then at the bottle again, then looked at me in embarrassment. "I guess I'm not so good reading them."

Angrily I snatched the magnifying glass from him. His pale, watery eyes looked as if I'd slapped him. I felt like a heel. I had nothing against the sheriff personally. It was the police setup I resented, or more properly speaking the lack of one, where even the hunting for fingerprints on a bottle became a major and uncertain project.

But what I really resented was myself, for having let Frank Townsend die.

I concentrated on the bottle. A label in front and another in back covered more than half the surface. The glass was clean except for an unreadable smudge or two, one partial print between the labels that matched up with Frank's thumb and, on the long neck, two more, close together, which were apparently Rachel's.

"Then it's this bottle," Stark exclaimed excitedly when I told him what I'd found. "I mean, a whiskey bottle's handled a lot and should be all covered with prints. So it was wiped clean before Frank took it out of the kitchen cabinet yesterday. Who'd wipe a bottle if it wasn't to wipe off prints?"

"Uh-huh. Frank held it around the middle, his hands mostly over the labels. Later, when Rachel took it back to the kitchen, she held it by the neck. But that doesn't mean anything unless we know what's inside."

I dropped the bottle back into my pocket. Stark put his paraphernalia away and we left the building and drove a quarter of a mile in his car to the Grayson Funeral Home on Division Street.

The funeral parlor was a store between a tailor shop

and a food market. Coroner Abel Torrey was sitting in the hushed, dimly lit room in front. He nodded somberly to Stark and me.

"I was in there watching Doc Kendrell cut up the body," he told us, "but it made me sick to my stomach. He don't want to say what he's found till he's through."

I went through a door which led to the rest of the funeral parlor. Stark started to follow me, but changed his mind. In this community both the sheriff and the coroner hadn't the stomachs for cadavers.

I stepped into a cramped office. Grayson, the undertaker, a slender, middle-aged man as stiffly dressed as a bank teller, sat behind the desk. Dr. Raymond Kendrell was getting into his jacket and telling Grayson that arsenic had been the favorite poison of the Borgias.

"So it was arsenic?" I said.

Dr. Kendrell grinned cheerfully at me. He was a breezy young man with a build like a football guard.

"Loads of arsenic," he said happily. "Of course this is only a preliminary post mortem. I'll save the kidney, spleen, lung, heart, hair and the rest for tomorrow. I've got a call to make and my wife has company and wants me home. But I found enough arsenic in the stomach and intestines to state definitely that death resulted from the oral ingestion of the poison."

"Food in his stomach?" I asked.

"Surprisingly little. I'd say he ate almost nothing for twelve hours before his death, probably longer. That makes it harder to pin down the time of death more exactly. If you want me to stick out my neck, I'd say some time between Sunday night and early Monday morning."

"I suppose there's no telling when he took the poison?"

"You suppose right. A couple of hours before death or a couple of days. Perhaps a toxicologist can give you the hour and minutes, but I doubt it. Arsenic works differently

on different people. Don't expect more from me. I'm merely a general practitioner."

"The doc is modest," Grayson assured me. "You should see the laboratory he has in his house."

"Just a hobby." Dr. Kendrell ran a comb through his wavy hair. "In my spare time I hunt for the Elixir of Life."

"Can you hunt for arsenic in this?" I handed him the bag containing the bottle.

"Easy. This is where it came from, eh?"

"That's what I want you to find out."

He studied the label. "What a grisly idea, ruining good rye with arsenic."

Grayson laughed uproariously. "The doc's got a sense of humor," he explained to me.

Dr. Kendrell and I went out to the front room or sitting room or whatever it's called in an undertaking establishment.

I was telling Stark and Torrey about the arsenic when Grayson stuck his head through the door. "There's somebody on the phone wants to know what Frank Townsend died of. What do I say?"

"Ask him his name," Stark said excitedly.

I said, "I'll take the call," and went into the office and settled myself in Grayson's chair with the phone. "Hello?"

"Is this you, Grayson?" It was a quiet, modulated voice I recognized at once.

"No," I said.

"Who is this, please?"

"Ben Helm. What did you want to know, Mr. Atwood?"

He was silent, and for a moment I thought he'd hung up. But he had too much sense. He said, "I'm curious to know how Frank Townsend died."

"Why?"

"What's that?"

"Why are you curious?"

George Atwood took time to decide on an answer. "As

I recall, you were the one to stop me on the street this afternoon to inform me that Townsend was dead. I have been wondering if you did so because you considered that I could possibly be concerned."

"Somebody fed him arsenic."

"I see. Well, good-night."

"Wait a minute," I said. "If you're so curious, aren't you curious to know who did it?"

"Do you know?"

"Somebody who likes a variety of weapons."

"Oh, then you think it was the same person who murdered Matterson?"

"And Mike Parker."

"Parker!" His voice rose an octave on the name, then dropped to its normal key. "I see. Good-night, Helm."

I said quickly, "For a curious man, your lack of curiosity for details is monumental."

"It appears to me that the finality of death makes all other details unessential."

"Not to the police it doesn't. Or to the murderer."

"It happens that I am neither," Atwood said dryly. "Good-night."

This time I let him hang up.

When I returned to the others, I found that Dr. Kendrell had left to keep an appointment with a patient. Torrey went soon after to discuss with District Attorney Fleet the result of the autopsy. Stark remembered that he hadn't eaten since lunch. Neither had I.

We left his car in front of the funeral parlor and walked a short distance to a lunch wagon called Twin Elms. The place was spotless and wasn't overladen with the smell of greasy cooking, but as soon as I stepped through the sliding door butterflies fluttered in my stomach. The counter man extolled his pot roast and Virginia ham, either of which should have tempted famished men, but when Stark ordered blueberry pie and coffee, I did the same.

"Get a nervous stomach at times like this," Stark confided. "I didn't eat for two days when Mr. Matterson was killed. Looks like you ain't hungry either, Ben."

"It's a hell of a case," I said.

"Ain't an experienced man like you hardened to murder cases?"

"No."

When we finished eating, we drove to Dr. Kendrell's house. Mrs. Kendrell, a svelte young redhead, answered the door. From behind her came sounds of a party or of noisy company. Her husband had seen his patient and was now in his laboratory, she informed us coldly as she shunted us through a side door in the vestibule and into a two-by-four waiting room. Then she said bitterly that she wished patients and policemen would let him occasionally have a life of his own, and shut us in.

Fleet and Torrey were already there. As usual, the coroner was doing nothing. The District Attorney paced the room and worried a dead cigar with his teeth.

"You sure it's in the bottle?" Fleet demanded.

"We'll know soon enough."

"What will we know—that there's been another murder?" Fleet removed the cigar from his mouth and gave me a beady eye. "What have you been doing, Helm? We bring you in to solve one murder and you let another man get murdered under your nose."

There was nothing I wanted to make of that. I took out my pipe.

"Ben done his best," Stark came to my defense, though I'd rather he'd kept quiet. He rubbed his skimpy chin contemplatively. "Fact is, I've been thinking that this murder has nothing to do with the other murders." He peered from Fleet's face to mine to see what effect his pronouncement had.

Fleet stopped prowling. He looked at the tip of his cigar as if to read an answer on it. Slowly he nodded. "It has

occurred too to me that in this case the *modus operandi* is different."

"The which?" Stark said.

"*Modus operandi*—the method or mode of operation." Fleet struck a lecturing pose. "It is well-known in criminology that criminals tend to use the same technique over and over in the commission of their crimes. Both Parker and Matterson were killed with weapons immediately at hand. Townsend was poisoned—a completely different *modus operandi*."

"There's nothing gaudy about arsenic," I said. "It's as common as a shotgun or a bean pot."

"But poison means preparation beforehand. It indicates a far more calculating temperament than snatching up a bean pot at the spur of the moment." Fleet sighed and didn't seem particularly impressed with himself. "You don't agree, Helm."

I said, "I like psychology as well as the next man, but I'd say that in each case the murderer selected whatever weapon and method was most convenient at the time."

Torrey spoke up brightly. "They all had one thing in common. They was murdered." When nobody reacted to his unusual display of wit, he subsided to study glumly Dr. Kendrell's medical school diploma framed on the wall.

The topic died. Fleet resumed prowling the room which was as cramped as a cage. Stark turned pages of a picture magazine. I thought of Dr. Kendrell's attractive wife and wished that I was with mine and wondered what madness had made me choose this lousy profession.

Presently Dr. Kendrell came briskly into the waiting room.

"That was it," he announced cheerfully. "Good rye ruined by loading it with arsenic."

None of us had an immediate comment. Probably we were busy remembering where that bottle had come from.

"When I say loaded, I mean loaded," Dr. Kendrell went

on. "Two grams in the half-pint left in the bottle. Under normal circumstances, nought point one to nought point five is considered lethal. Whoever spiked that whiskey wasn't taking a chance that it wouldn't be effective."

"Wouldn't Townsend have noticed the taste?" Fleet asked.

"Arsenic is odorless and practically tasteless, especially when dissolved in a strong drink. That's why it's been so popular throughout history."

I said, "Was the arsenic in a pure state?"

"Offhand, I'd say rat poison."

"You mean those hard little balls of rat poison was dropped right in the bottle?" Stark said incredulously.

Dr. Kendrell grinned. "And eaten by mistake for a cocktail olive? I don't know what form the poison was in, but it was completely dissolved. If I were doing it, I'd have dissolved the arsenic in whatever state in boiling water, then let it cool, and pour the result into the rye. Probably that's how it was worked—the poison prepared and bottled in advance. That would cut the rye, but not more than in some bars I could mention."

"Are you stating definitely that it was rat poison?" I asked.

Dr. Kendrell lost some of his exuberance. "Well, I'm not a toxicologist. I haven't the equipment here for all the necessary tests. I think it came from rat poison, but I won't give my affidavit on anything but arsenic." He looked at his watch. "How about letting me have a couple of hours of my own life before my wife breaks my neck?"

Stark, Torrey, and I went out and stood on the sidewalk. Up the street was a corner of the hedge which bounded the Matterson place, and beyond that the Atwoods lived.

"So what if we find rat poison in anybody's house?" Stark complained. "It wouldn't mean a thing. I got it in my own house."

Fleet came out with the bottle in the paper bag. He intended to send it to the state police toxicologist.

"This is awful," he said, coming up to us. "Two murders in a row and the second one disposes of our chief suspect for the first."

"Three murders," I reminded him.

"If we include Parker, three, but officially he met his death by accident. My God, doesn't the record look bad enough with two murders?" Fleet yanked open the door of his car, recklessly dropped the bottle on the seat, whirled back to me. "And we haven't got anywhere, Helm. Not an inch since you came to Rexton, and there's a homicidal maniac running around loose."

"Don't you mean two homicidal maniacs?" I mocked him gently. "Remember your *modus operandi.*"

Fleet took it in stride. "I'm not saying these murders aren't connected, but there could be more than one killer. For instance, Frank Townsend murdered Parker and Matterson, then he in turn was murdered in revenge—say by his sister who was in love with both his victims."

"Aw, no!" Torrey said. "His own sister!"

"You'd be surprised how much murder goes on inside a family. Half the murders in the papers are husbands and wives killing each other, or fathers chopping up their families and so on." Fleet stuck out his meaty jaw. "Frank struck her, didn't he? There's one thing you overlook, and that's the crude and clumsy and unreliable method used. How could the murderer know Rachel wouldn't offer a guest a drink from that bottle or that Frank wouldn't invite friends in for a drink? But the fact is Rachel could control that bottle, and she was the only one who could. Living in the house, she could see to it that nobody but her brother drank from it."

Stark didn't care for that. "She'd be dumb to put the bottle back in the kitchen cabinet after he'd drunk the poison."

"Or smart." Fleet was getting warmed up; if given a chance, he'd talk all night. Spreading himself out on a subject with words gave him the illusion that he was doing something about it. "Because it wouldn't be logical for her to hang onto the bottle, the fact that she did would be a red herring to divert suspicion from herself. Of course, at the same time we mustn't overlook Dave Reese, who has all the motive and opportunity the murderer needed."

"Uh-huh," I said disgustedly. "And the three Atwoods and Ed Wonder and likely several others we haven't tagged yet. Why not put all their names in a hat and pick one out?"

Fleet sighed. "Is that the way you work, Helm? For all that you've accomplished, the hat method may well be the one you rely upon."

Maybe he had something there. I was beginning to think so myself. I had ideas, plenty of ideas, but that was the trouble. One was all I needed—the right one.

I said sourly, "I told you when I arrived that if you wanted a superman out of a book, the county was throwing away money on me. I'm merely an investigator."

"Then why do you make snooty cracks when I try to help you?"

"Because standing here and beating our gums doesn't get us anything but conversation. Anybody could have done it, and I doubt if there's a convincing reason for all three of these men to have been murdered."

Stark nodded vigorously. "Sure, a madman."

"No," I said. "No killer is normal, of course, but we're not dealing with a madman running amuck."

"I'm trying to follow you." Fleet spoke with taunting patience. "The murderer has no motive for three murders and at the same time is perfectly sane."

"Not the kind of motive that makes sense to anybody but the murderer," I told him. "In all my experience I've

never come across a murder that was worthwhile, even from the murderer's point of view. There are few murders for grand stakes and from grand passions. Most of those belong to history. What we generally have is a woman's head beaten in by a poker because she refuses to pay two dollars and twelve cents she owes. A man shoots his wife and children because his supper is cold. Naturally it goes deeper than that; the motive has to be found outside the victim and deep inside the murderer, and often it has little to do with the act itself. Did you ever beat your fist against a wall in rage? You're not angry at the wall, but the act helps get out from inside you whatever's eating you."

"A mental quirk which causes an outburst in the form of murder," Fleet said, demonstrating that he was right up there with the heavy thinking. "A policeman has to be a psychologist. Fine, but where has your psychology got you in this case, Helm?"

I tapped out my over-heated pipe on my heel. "Hell, I'm going home and get some sleep."

"That's a good idea for all of us." Fleet was suddenly almost amiable. "Our nerves are upset by this terrible mess. Tomorrow we'll be fresher. Can I drive you home, Helm?"

"I prefer to take a walk, thanks."

I waited until the three men had each driven away in his own car before I moved. I walked toward the Matterson and Atwood houses.

18. Beverly Atwood

MONDAY, MAY 19 — 10:43 P. M.

FRANKIE WAS COMING down the street.

A terrible coldness gripped my stomach and spread up to my chest. He's coming back, I thought, because he loves me so. Coming to me from the grave.

I locked a scream in my throat, but something came out of my mouth. It was a crazy laugh that frightened me even more than seeing Frankie.

Though of course it couldn't be Frankie. The dead stay dead. I stood up so I could see him more clearly on that dimly lit street.

Just then he started to cross the street diagonally toward the house and came within range of the street light, and I saw that it was Ben Helm.

He walked the way Frankie used to, with firm, athletic, confident strides. He was not nearly so big, but the shadows had distorted his size.

All the same, my fright had been perfectly ridiculous.

Behind me in the house Mother said to Daddy, "Dear, isn't there anything else on the radio?" Daddy didn't answer her. He had a way of not answering Mother when she asked him to do something, and tonight his mood was especially bad.

I went off the porch steps. I was standing at the side of the driveway when he passed it.

"Ben," I whispered.

He stopped walking and peered in my direction. It was dark where I stood with a barberry bush at my back, but not so dark that I was completely invisible. He came over.

"Hello, Beverly."

I kept my voice low so I wouldn't be heard in the house.

"Did you come to visit me, Ben?"

"At this hour?"

"You were coming to the house."

Though there wasn't enough light, he looked me over the way a man looks a desirable woman over.

"All right, call it a visit," he said.

I put a hand on his arm.

"Let's not stand here talking," I said. "Let's go to the arbor in back."

Ben didn't come along at once. He looked over my head and over the barberry bush at the house. The living room windows were bright with light and there was the sound of a radio voice speaking in a monotone. Then Mother's voice rose above the radio voice. "Dear, can't you find music on the radio?"

"Let's go," Ben said. He too was whispering now.

There was just enough moonlight to keep us from groping blindly, though not enough for him to see clearly the unfamiliar path between the flower beds. He tripped over the stones which lined the path. I reached for his hand and guided him.

His hand was warm and firm—the strong hand of a strong man.

But I didn't get any feeling out of holding hands with him. Saturday afternoon it had been very exciting being alone in the same room with him, but that had been Saturday.

How could a girl feel anything about any man when there was such a heavy load on her chest?

When we were in the arbor, he slipped away from me. It

was so dark in there that it was like keeping your eyes closed. I started to move to find him when he spoke.

"So this is where Dave Reese saw you kiss Frank Townsend?"

He was a horrible man. He always said the thing you didn't want said.

I shouldn't have brought him here. But where else could I be alone with him?

"You must think I'm awful," I said. "But it could happen to any girl. Frankie and I were standing right here and talking, and all at once I was swept off my feet. I didn't want—I didn't mean . . . . "

I stopped, and I was panting.

What I told Ben was the truth. I'd been anxious for Frankie to leave before Dave arrived, and I certainly wouldn't have kissed him—not at that time, anyway—and all at once there had been a kiss and it hadn't been like any other kiss.

There was something about Frankie, a brute vitality—

I was using the present tense in thinking of him. Frankie had become past tense.

"When did you hear that he was dead?" Ben asked me out of the darkness.

"This afternoon Daddy came home and told me. It was an awful shock."

"Because he was dead or because of the way he died?"

Did he mean because the same thing had happened to him as to Mike and Rudy?

"Naturally I was shocked and grieved." I found myself clearing my throat. "Was Frankie murdered?"

"Didn't your father tell you?"

"Daddy didn't know."

"He phoned me a couple of hours ago at the funeral parlor, and I told him that Frank had been poisoned."

For a little while then it was as if I were alone in the

arbor. He made no sound, no move. He was part of the black darkness.

Daddy hadn't said a word to me or Mother all evening. He had been remote and tired-looking during supper, and right after he'd gone up to his room and stayed there till ten-thirty, though I remembered now that he had come down to make a phone call and had gone right up again. The second time he'd come down had been just before I'd gone outside to sit on the porch steps because my nerves hadn't been able to stand the closeness of the house. Without a glance at Mother or me, he had taken a book out of the bookcase and hunted through it, left it open on the table and then had gone to the radio to turn on the ten-thirty news. He'd stood leaning against the radio and there had been such a faraway look on his face that I didn't think he'd even listened to the news.

He hadn't mentioned that he knew Frankie had been murdered.

The darkness and the silence in the arbor were like madness. I had to speak. I had to ask Ben, "Was he poisoned?"

"Somebody slipped into his house and dropped arsenic in his bottle of rye."

A match flared and hovered over his pipe. For the first time tonight I could really see his face, it was a flickering ghost face suspended in space. Then the darkness returned.

There had been something terrible and remorseless about that face, but it wasn't a face a girl couldn't like. I didn't have to force myself to take the few steps to him.

I touched his shoulder. My fingers trailed lingeringly down his sleeve to the back of his hand.

He jerked away from me as if I were contaminated.

What had he to be so snooty about? The men I knew were happy if I so much as smiled at them.

"You needn't think I want to throw myself at you," I said huffily. "I'm not like that Rachel Townsend."

"What about her?"

"Don't try to pretend you're not having an affair with Rachel. It's all over town."

He laughed softly.

"That's a story my landladies started."

The bowl of his pipe glowed. He was the most difficult man I had ever known.

"You don't like me," I said.

That always worked. The men protested that they did and before they knew it they were telling you how much. But Ben didn't.

"I haven't thought about it. Besides, you're not a safe girl to make love to."

Dear God, he meant what had happened to Mike, then Rudy, then Frankie. Without touching me, he was tearing me to pieces.

I went toward the small, flat glow of his pipe and stopped only when our bodies touched.

"Please, Ben, don't be mean to me. I need you so much."

He took the pipe from his mouth because my face was so close to his, but that was the only movement he made.

But at least this time he didn't run away from me.

"Need me for what?" he asked.

I shouldn't have put it that way. He picked up every word I said and turned it against me.

I gave him the best answer a girl can give a man. I threw my arms about him.

"Honey," I whispered, "you do something to me. You're not like any man I've ever known."

He was as animate as a stick of wood.

"Honey, I'm a—a woman."

I felt the breath of his laughter against my forehead.

"Uh-huh, you're a woman. That means that when you're in a corner you call on your sex appeal to get you out."

"You're so wrong. I brought you here because I'm crazy about you."

"Or is it that you're merely trying to store up good-will

for possible contingencies?" he went on as if I hadn't said what I'd said, as if I weren't pressed against him.

I made myself go limp against him and put a swoon in my voice.

"Ben, I feel so alone."

"What can you expect when your boy friends have a habit of getting themselves knocked off?"

I could have killed him as he stood there with no reaction to me except those awful wisecracks.

"Though David Reese is still around," he added after a small pause. "With your technique you should be able to get him back without trouble."

"I'm afraid of Dave."

He put his hands on my shoulders, but only to push me away from him. Though not really away from him. He held me at arm's length as if peering into my face through the darkness.

"Why are you afraid of him?" he demanded.

I writhed under his grip without trying to break away.

"I don't know. I just said it."

"Why did you say it? You must have something to back it up."

"The words just came out. They don't mean anything. I don't like Dave. I don't care for anybody but you, honey."

He gave me a mild little shove and his hands fell from my shoulders.

"Save yourself the trouble, Beverly."

I was breathing harshly. I was trembling.

"God, how I hate you!"

"Uh-huh," he said. "Does that mean I'll be the next victim?"

Just then Mother called me from the house.

I stood alone in the darkness, alone though he was there, so awfully alone in the world.

"Beverly, where are you, dear?" Mother called.

I went out of the arbor into the moonlight. Ben was visi-

ble now. He strolled nonchalantly at my side, his hands in his pockets and his pipe in his mouth.

I stopped.

"Stay here, Ben, till I'm in the house."

"I'm not ashamed to be seen with you."

There was nothing I could do with him at any time. I hated him, but it struck me that I could love him just as easily.

Side by side, with our shoulders brushing occasionally, we walked to the house.

When we were halfway there, the floodlight which covered the driveway went on. It could be switched on from the hall.

"Beverly," Mother called anxiously.

Then I heard Daddy say, "They're coming from the back yard."

"She's with somebody?" Mother asked.

"Did you expect her to be without a man?" Daddy said dryly.

All men were hateful. Daddy wasn't worse than the others. I had thought so only because I had known him longest.

Mother was waiting for us at the side of the driveway as we walked in the glare of the floodlight. Daddy was on the porch, leaning against the rail.

"Good-evening," Ben greeted them.

Daddy nodded briskly.

Mother gave Ben a gracious smile.

"I had no idea you had called on us, Mr. Helm," she said.

"I happened to pass and saw Beverly on the porch and stopped to chat. We took a stroll through your garden."

Then there was a silence. I waited for him to start with his eternal questions. Probably Mother and Daddy were waiting for the same thing.

This time he didn't.

"Well, I'll be pushing along," he said. "Good-night."

He walked to the sidewalk and turned left. For a little while after he was out of sight we continued to look in that direction.

Mother was the first to rouse herself.

"It's eleven o'clock, dear."

I went ahead of her into the house and right upstairs to my room. A few minutes later I heard Mother come up to her room, then a minute later Daddy came up the stairs.

He stopped in front of my door and knocked.

I opened the door and stood there as if he were a stranger trying to get into my room. The last thing I wanted to do now was to speak to anybody, especially to him.

"Let him alone," Daddy said.

He looked very small and gaunt and tired. But his tone was firm and angry.

"I don't know what you mean," I said.

"Ben Helm's a married man. For heaven's sake, Beverly, do you need married men too?"

I tried to hold in my own anger.

"Why do you always think the worst of me, Daddy?"

"Because you always give me reason to."

I gripped the edge of the door. I felt my voice rise hotly in my throat.

"You're a nasty old man with a nasty mind!" I flung at him.

And I slammed the door in his face.

The house was very still. Daddy didn't make a sound outside in the hall.

I didn't care what he thought, what anybody thought. I was so terribly, terribly alone.

19. George Atwood

MONDAY, MAY 19—11:25 P. M.

I WAS A NASTY OLD MAN with a nasty mind. I had lived to hear my daughter call me that.

Through the door panel I heard her weep. I had not moved from before her door; I stood as if transfixed by Medusa. At the sound of her grief, compassion touched me, and also shame. The slamming of that door in my face was a climax as inevitable to all that had happened between us through the years as the shattering triumph of fate in a Greek drama.

What right had I now to judge a daughter to whom I had never been a father?

My hand closed over the doorknob. I paused in that position, calling up courage to enter her room and ask forgiveness for a cruelty which at the least matched her wantonness. But such courage I lacked. My hand fell from the doorknob.

As I passed Kathryn's door, I wondered why she had not heard our outburst and come out to the hall. All her life she had evaded unpleasantness by ignoring it. Probably that was what she was doing now.

Slowly I descended the stairs. In the kitchen I filled a glass with cold water from the tap. If I were a man who could abide the taste and resultant sensation of strong liquor, I would get drunk. Alcohol could perhaps obliterate . . . .

My brain closed over a picture of a man drinking out of a whiskey bottle and then going off to die in loneliness and agony.

With shaking hand I put the water untouched from me. I was halfway up the stairs when I recalled that, as nominal head of the household, I had certain small duties to perform before retiring. I went back downstairs to put out the living room lights and was moving toward the front door when it began to open slowly.

I believe that I uttered a startled outcry; I may have actually screamed. The dread of watching that door open was almost too much to endure. The second that passed in terrified uncertainty appeared to have no end.

Then Ben Helm's face appeared in the opening. The rest of him followed.

"I was on the porch and saw you put out the living room light," he explained affably. "I didn't ring the bell because I didn't want to rouse anybody else in the house."

My nerves refused to relax. "What do you want?"

"To have a talk with you."

"In order to have a talk with me, did you have to pretend to leave and then stand on the porch until you ascertained that I was alone?"

"Uh-huh." And with that he sauntered into the living room. Casually he flicked the electric switch and flooded the room with light.

"Just how many privileges does being a detective give you?" I demanded.

"Very few. You can kick me out, of course."

As if it were inconceivable that I would do such a thing, Helm turned his back to me and crossed the room to the couch.

"I assume that you wish to discuss my inquiry concerning Frank Townsend's death," I said.

He continued to move further into the room. He did not, as I expected, seat himself and cross his legs and make him-

self at home as a preliminary to questions. Instead he pulled up one of the couch cushions.

"Still here," he grunted with satisfaction. "I'd hoped she might leave it somewhere around here, but I didn't expect this kind of luck."

I observed that he held a ten-cent notebook in his hand.

"Do you know what this is?" he inquired.

"I know that it is not yours. I'll ask you to replace it where you found it."

"It's Beverly's diary," he stated blandly. "She was writing in it when you and I came in here Saturday afternoon. She stuffed it under this cushion."

I recalled the incident. "How do you know it's her diary?" I demanded.

"I glanced at it when she went out to the hall to answer the phone," he responded without embarrassment. "But I didn't read it."

"You surprise me," I said dryly. "I did not imagine that a detective had a sense of ethics."

"Sometimes it surprises me too." His fingers ran over the edge of the notebook, but he did not open it.

I stepped toward him with hand outstretched. "Give me that. It belongs to my daughter."

Helm did not surrender the book; I had hardly expected him to. His eyes regarded me quizzically. "Speaking of ethics, Mr. Atwood, last Tuesday night you sneaked into Matterson's studio to see if your daughter had posed for any of his paintings."

"That was different. The pictures were on open display."

"The way you did it, it was spying, Mr. Atwood."

"Just what do you want?"

"With your permission, I'd like to read what's in this diary."

"I absolutely forbid it."

Four of his fingers gripped the edge of the hard book cover. If he opened the notebook and read its contents,

what could I do? Struggle with him? Hardly. Could I call the police? But he was the police. Perhaps later I could take legal action against him, but that would be after he had accomplished his purpose.

Still he hesitated. "I could have slipped this into my pocket Saturday afternoon. I'm kicking myself because I didn't. A little matter of ethics may have cost Frank Townsend his life."

I said nothing. My mouth was too dry for words.

Then he was extending the notebook to me. I stared at it.

"We can read it together," he declared.

I licked my lips and found my voice. "What can be in this to interest you?"

"That's what I'd like to find out."

As if by its own volition, my hand moved out and accepted the notebook. You are a nasty old man with a nasty mind, she had said. My hands gripped the book fiercely.

"If I refuse to let you read this," I said, "you will be convinced that I am afraid of what my daughter may have written."

"Or that you have already read it yourself."

Although I had physical possession of the diary, I was helpless before his overpowering personality. I turned from him and started toward the hall door; half-way there I glanced back. He had remained where he was, apparently confident that I would not flee with the book. He was a student of psychology; he knew me better than I did myself.

When I moved again, it was toward the table on my right. I placed the notebook on it, and as I did so, he came to stand beside me. I opened the book to the first page. It was blank.

Was Beverly still weeping upstairs? Was Kathryn asleep? There was no sound anywhere; no smallest sound from the two of us who stood staring down at an empty page as if the blue lines across it conveyed a decipherable message.

Ben Helm was the one to turn the page. On the second right-hand page was Beverly's thin, rather neat script. There may have been previous volumes of this diary, for the first entry commenced abruptly some eleven weeks ago.

March 4

I told Mike never to phone me at home, but yesterday he did and of course Mother had to answer the phone.

Later Mother asked me who it was, and I couldn't tell her because his reputation in town is so bad, so I said it was a new boy I'd met at Grace's party last week.

Mother is very sweet about the men I go with. She realizes I'm old enough to lead my own life, but she still thinks that girls live in the Victorian age and she'd be very unhappy if she knew I went with Mike.

In fact, Mike has such a bad reputation that I don't let anybody see us together.

I met Mike by the blasted elm and we walked to the brook. It was chilly and I came home early.

I'll have to watch myself with him. He's so demanding. Sometimes I think I'll drop him, but he does things to me.

It no longer seemed to matter that if a man had to do a thing like this it should be in the secret of his own conscience. I was committed to read, with a stranger, my daughter's innermost thoughts and yearnings, and almost my only emotion now was a gagging suspense. What would the rest of those pages reveal?

March 9

Last night Dave and I drove to Fort Hals and went to the movies there and then, on the way back, stopped off at a new inn for a midnight snack and dancing.

I think I'll marry Dave.

Eventually, I mean.

A girl wants to have some fun first.

March 10

Yesterday afternoon, Sunday, Frankie called for me and we went for a walk.

He's like a child. I know he's crazy for me and I really like him awfully, but if I kissed him he'd think I was a fallen woman. What can you do with a man like that?

When I came home, Mother was annoyed because I'd gone out with Frankie. She's very sweet. She never scolds me or tells me what to do or not to do, but she said that Frankie is a roughneck.

Daddy said the same thing, but nobody pays attention to him.

They think Frankie is an evil influence on me.

That's really very funny.

March 14

This afternoon I was walking along the street when Mike Parker drove by in a truck he uses on the road work and stopped to speak to me.

I didn't want to be seen speaking to him in public, but there wasn't any help for it.

He wants me to meet him tonight. I have a date with Ed Wonder, but Ed is beginning to bore me.

I'm not sure if I should break the date with Ed.

March 15

I'm afraid of Mike.

Last night he was too demanding. I had quite a time handling him.

I don't think I should see him any more. At least not as often as I have been.

March 20

I can't understand why Rudy Matterson never gives me a tumble.

He was here tonight to visit Daddy. He's supposed to be quite a wolf, but he just says hello and good-bye to me and in between acts as if he didn't know I was alive.

You'd think an artist especially would at least be interested in a face and figure like mine.

I don't say I like him. He's plump and in some ways repulsive.

But there's something about him. His manners are so smooth and he's always so sure of himself.

We were all sitting in the living room. Mother was knitting and pretending to listen to the political argument between Daddy and Rudy, but I'm sure she didn't hear a word. I was there because it was Thursday and I had no date.

The only thing Daddy becomes really violent about is his socialism. He's got the advantage over everybody because he knows so much history, being a history teacher, but Rudy is pretty glib himself. It was about Russia, as usual, Rudy saying that the Russians weren't people like us who could appreciate democracy but needed a strong man to boss them, and Daddy saying what they needed was a revolution to establish democratic socialism.

It was really interesting.

Maybe I'd be less restless if I took an interest in such things. After all, I'm home all day with not much to do except help Mother with the housework. A girl gets bored.

I ought to get active in some sort of cause or organization. A committee for this or against that.

I'd meet a lot of interesting men that way.

Anyway, about Rudy Matterson. For just about a minute tonight I was alone with him. Mother went into the kitchen to prepare coffee and then Daddy went out too.

I asked Rudy how his painting was going. He said it kept him occupied.

Then I said, "You know, Rudy, you never invited me to see your pictures."

"My dear child, I live next door," he said. "Any time you drop in you're welcome."

I detest patronizing men.

Then Daddy returned. I didn't wait for coffee. I said goodnight and went up to my room to read, but instead I'm writing this.

There's nothing about Rudy Matterson to attract a girl.

I started to turn the page. Helm put a hand on my wrist and read that entry again. I could hear the thumping of my heart.

March 24

Met a new man last night at a small gathering at Grace's. His name is Ambrose Warrender.

He walked me home and I let him kiss me good-night, but he's not so much.

March 26

Took a walk with Frankie last night. We had ice cream in town, and I got home early, before ten.

I think that if Frankie had a future I'd marry him.

He doesn't even kiss me good-night, but just being with him is exciting.

March 28

I'm restless.

Dave phoned me after lunch and we made a date for tomorrow night, but I'm still restless.

I had nothing to do all afternoon. Around three o'clock I made up my mind to visit Rudy Matterson.

After all, he had invited me to drop in at any time.

I started for the front entrance and then changed my mind. He's a friend of the family and I guess it's all right for a girl to drop in on him, but maybe tongues would start wagging because of his reputation.

I walked all the way around to Willow Road which hasn't any houses on it and runs along the back of Rudy's hedge, and there's an opening in the hedge at the back door of the studio, so nobody would see me go in.

The studio door was unlocked, but he wasn't there.

I'd never been in the studio before. The walls were covered with paintings. There were a lot of nudes, but none of them looked particularly undressed.

For a man who is supposed to be quite something with the ladies he certainly gets very little sex into his nudes.

The pictures are very modern. I don't like them.

I waited for nearly an hour. Then I went home the way I came.

I feel so on edge I could scream. And I don't know why.

March 30

Dave gives me a pain.

Last night he took me to the movies in Fort Hals.

I didn't have a good time.

I'd like him a lot better if only he'd stop brooding and nagging me. He hits the ceiling every time he finds out that I've had a date with another man.

He's especially jealous of Frankie and he saw us walking together in town the other night.

I just looked back over this diary for the last few weeks and saw that I hadn't mentioned three or four times I was out with Dave. That was all having a date with him meant to me.

It isn't that I don't care for him. I'm sure I'll be happily married to him.

He just doesn't make it very exciting for me.

April 1

Today Daddy is in one of his bitter moods.

I'm writing this in the living room and I can hear him striding about the dining room and calling in snide remarks to Mother who's in the kitchen.

Sometimes he's worse than other times, but he's always ready to be nasty.

This time he's claiming a home isn't a real home because Mother thinks more of spending her afternoons sewing clothes for me than preparing him a decent supper.

Mother knows how to handle him. She never gets excited. She merely pointed out that this was the first time in a month she didn't have a veritable banquet ready for him.

Then a few minutes ago he stalked into this room and looked at me for a long time. This was before I'd started writing in this diary. I'd just been sitting here thinking about Mike Parker.

"What do you do with yourself?" he said. "Simply vegetate between dates with men?"

"Why, Daddy, if you want me to go out and get a job say so," I said.

"In heaven's name, why don't you marry David Reese?" he said. "Although it's unfair to ask him to inflict such a fate on himself."

Mother heard what he said, and now she's scolding him from the kitchen, and he's answering her from the dining room.

Daddy isn't so bad if you don't take him seriously.

I think I know what's eating him. It never seemed like much of a home to me where the husband doesn't even share the same room with his wife.

Poor Daddy! What he does is take it out on all women.

My husband won't have that problem with me.

Before I got sidetracked, writing about Daddy, I opened this diary to write about Mike Parker.

I haven't really anything to write about him because I haven't seen him in a couple of weeks.

I haven't been able to get in touch with him. I phoned him yesterday and again today, but each time his married sister answered and said he wasn't in.

I bet he's out with some other woman.

Why should I hang around waiting until it's my turn?

I think I'll phone Dave. If he's home, he'll drop whatever he's doing and be here in ten minutes.

If Dave isn't in, I'll phone Frankie.

Helm was reading slowly, as if memorizing the words, and when he completed the entry he turned back to the preceding page to reread the beginning, where she discussed me. I would never again be able to look him in the face, or look myself in the face.

April 2

Ed Wonder keeps phoning me. I get bored simply listening to him on the phone.

Can't he get it into his head that I don't want to see him?

Saw Dave last night. We sat and listened to the radio.

I phoned Mike again this evening and finally found him home.

He said he couldn't see me tonight. Then there was a silence. I have a date tomorrow with Dave to go to a square dance, but I could find a way to break it without making him angry, so I suggested to Mike that we meet tomorrow night at the same place.

Mike said he's busy tomorrow night too.

I was so mad I hung up on him.

I don't mean any more to him than any of the other women on

his string. Maybe less. I was willing to break a date for him, which was more than he was.

I don't have to stand for such treatment from any man.

April 5

Last night I went to a square dance at the school gym and had an awful time.

I went with Dave.

Mike was there with Rachel Townsend. That was the date he had that he hadn't wanted to break for me.

And the way she acted with him, practically throwing herself at him in public!

If that's what Mike likes, he'll get none of it from me. I know how to conduct myself in public.

Practically everybody in town was there. Frankie too.

Frankie spent the whole night glowering at me, when he wasn't glowering at the way his sister carried on with Mike. He didn't dance once. I would have liked to be his partner for at least one set, but I was afraid Dave wouldn't like it, so I had to more or less ignore him.

Men are impossible.

Especially Mike, practically flaunting Rachel in my face. Mike always said he didn't like skinny girls, and Rachel is close to anemic.

I could break his neck.

And this morning Frankie came pretty near doing it.

Grace Rubenstein phoned me a short while ago. She'd just heard that Frankie beat up Mike at the job where they're building the road on Crown Hill and Mike is Frankie's foreman. Gracie said Mike fired Frankie after the fight.

I hope the fight wasn't because Frankie found out about Mike and me.

No, he couldn't have. Grace says it was because of the way Mike and Rachel carried on last night. That must be the reason.

What should I do?

Mike is in my blood.

I think Frankie would get into my blood like that if he made love to me, but he never would unless we were married. He's such a big, rough, tough man, and so innocent.

April 7

Mike is dead.

Only those three words were on the page. *Mike is dead.* I read them over and over until they formed a litany in my brain. "Brevity is the soul of wit," Helm commented dryly. I gave him a dull glance. He averted his eyes from mine and turned the page.

April 9

I don't feel anything about Mike being dead.
Not sorry or glad.
Not shocked.
Nothing.

April 11

Met Frankie this evening in town by arrangement. I've discouraged him from calling for me at home because my folks object to him.

I don't want to hurt Mother if I don't have to.

We took a walk. Frankie is very sweet when he's alone with me. It's only when people are around that he tightens up and glowers and looks mean.

I could be very happily married to him if only he could get a very good job.

He got another job, but it's only as a chauffeur. For Rudy Matterson, of all people.

He said that Rudy had been south for a couple of weeks and came back a few days ago and offered him the job as soon as he heard that Frankie no longer worked on the road.

So that's why I wasn't able to get in touch with Rudy. I was in his studio again last week. I don't understand why they don't lock it when he's away. I waited for two whole hours.

I wanted to phone Rudy, but I was afraid it wouldn't look right. That's why I didn't hear till tonight that he'd been away.

April 13

Rudy wasn't in his studio yesterday afternoon either.

I have to be very careful now that Frankie is living over the garage. But he can't see me if I slip in the back way.

I feel perfectly ridiculous sneaking in and out of the studio without even meeting Rudy.

And the funny thing is that I don't really like him.

April 16

Drove with Dave to the movies at Fort Hals.

April 19

After slipping into Rudy's studio like a thief in the night, I finally met him there in a very simple way.

I was sitting on the porch this morning when he drove by in his stunning new car and stopped to speak to me. I told him again that I would love to see his pictures. He said come along, but I said I'd meet him there at two in the afternoon.

I went in the back way so nobody, especially Frankie, would see me, and Rudy was there waiting for me.

He explained his pictures to me.

Half of the time I didn't know what he was talking about.

I think that what fascinates me is that he's so sure of himself and so mature and so much a man of the world. The other men I know are really no more than boys.

I asked him where he got the models to pose for his pictures. He said some were professional models and some he copied from other pictures.

"And some are lady friends?" I said, giving a knowing smile.

He smiled back urbanely.

"Gentlemen don't tell," he said.

There was a small raised platform which was the stand on which the models posed. I stood on it and smoothed out my dress. It was the green knit dress Mother had made for me and it certainly didn't hide my figure.

"How would I do as a model?" I said.

I was only teasing him. Of course I would never pose for him, especially with Frankie so close all the time and maybe my face recognizable in the picture.

He looked at me, then shook his head.

"Not you, Beverly," he said.

I felt insulted.

"Don't you like my figure?" I said.

"It's admirable on the voluptuous side," he said, "but posing isn't what either of us is thinking of. It won't do, my dear child, for two reasons. One, you live too close, which will complicate matters when I tire of you. Two, you are the daughter of my friend. I have my own peculiar moral sense which compels me to eschew the wives and daughters of my friends."

Nobody had ever said anything so outrageous to me. You would think I was offering myself to him.

Nothing of the kind had entered my mind.

I said as coldly as I could that he was completely mistaken about me.

"I'm glad," he said.

I walked out without saying good-bye.

How dared that fat, gross, repulsive creature imagine that I wanted any part of him?

I am a nasty old man with a nasty mind, I reflected emptily, because I had known my daughter for what she was.

April 21

Dave can be awfully sweet at times.

My parents were out and we sat in the living room listening to the radio.

He is very anxious for me to marry him right away.

Mother likes him a lot. Daddy does too, and Daddy doesn't like many people, especially when I go out with them.

I think I'll be very happy married to Dave, but right away is much too soon.

April 24

Rudy was here for dinner last night.

Mother didn't want him and she had one of her very mild arguments with Daddy. For once I took Daddy's part.

I'll say this for Mother. When Rudy arrived, she was a most gracious hostess.

Right after dinner I went out to meet Frankie. I was glad I had a date. It would show Rudy that I didn't care to be in his company.

Frankie calls him Mr. Matterson and thinks the world of him. And he had Rudy's car which Rudy lets him use sometimes.

It's funny.

April 28

Had a row with Daddy.

It wasn't really a row. Daddy doesn't operate that way. He just makes nasty cracks which I try to ignore.

It happened this time because I parked in a car with Ambrose Warrender. He's the boy I met last month at Grace's.

Sunday night Dave was supposed to come over. He phoned me at almost the last minute that he couldn't make it because it would be the only time he could bring together somebody who was buying a house and somebody who was selling it. Sunday night of all times, but that's the real estate business.

A few minutes later Ambrose Warrender, whom I hardly remember, phoned, and as I had nothing to do I went with him.

His idea of a date was to drive to the darkest spot he could find and park. He's really very handsome.

How Daddy found out I don't know. I suppose, being a man, Ambrose talked about it and somebody told Daddy, probably at school where those teachers do nothing but gossip all day.

Daddy started making cracks as soon as he came home.

He said sarcastic things like it was a pity that I should undermine my splendid reputation for virtue through a mean little indiscretion like parking in a car with a man when I've so successfully concealed my major expeditions into wantonness.

That's just the way he talks. I'm not sure I've written the sentence the way he said it, but I'm sure about mean little indiscretion and major expeditions into wantonness.

Mother came into the room and told him to let me alone.

She'd heard the whole thing and said that was nothing wrong in a girl going for a drive with a young man, especially if she was a good girl and could be trusted the way I certainly could be.

Mother is a dear and very naive. She's had so little romance in her own life that she doesn't even know what it means to park with a man.

Daddy just looked at her and his mouth twisted in that bitter way of his. Then he went out.

My major expeditions into wantonness. Does he really know anything? If he does, he's the only one.

He's very deep. Sometimes he scares me.

It's not nice to have your own father think such things about you.

I think that he would be very surprised to learn that I'm still a virgin.

Ben Helm uttered a short, caustic laugh. "So she's just a little teaser!" I slammed the diary shut. "Sorry, Mr. Atwood," he murmured somewhat contritely. "I should have kept my mouth shut." But it was not only this one thing. It was that I stood with a detective, a stranger, and gazed into my daughter's soul and found that there was very little soul. It was also looking at myself through her eyes and despising what I saw. Helm had reopened the notebook and was continuing to read the entries. For a while I could not bring my eyes to Beverly's script. He turned a page and then another; I did not read what was on them. Gradually shame and rage seeped out of me, leaving only fear. The detective was not concerned with her character, but with murder, although there could be a connection. I had to know what was in the remaining pages. When I turned my eyes again to the diary, the date at the top of the page was more than a week later. She was again visiting Matterson in his studio. What had happened between them since the last time she had seen him, I had missed.

May 8

This afternoon Rudy kept me waiting nearly an hour in his studio, though I'd told him I'd be there at three.

The back door of the studio is so close to the hedge that nobody from the garage or the house can see me come or go, and Rudy has assured me that nobody who works for him would come to the studio without his permission.

All the same, I felt better when I heard a car leave the garage and, from the bit of driveway I could see through the window, saw Frankie drive off.

If anybody should read what I've just written, they'll think I was having an affair with Rudy when the truth is he hasn't even tried to kiss me yet. People would get the wrong impression if they found out I went there.

Well, I waited and waited and got more and more angry. I looked through some art magazines and then opened a sketch book.

There were two sketches of Rachel Townsend and in one of them her shoulders were bare. At least her shoulders.

You'd think Rachel was deliberately going after all my men. There was Mike and now Rudy and she used to go out with Ed Wonder, though she can have him now for all I care. And she works for Dave, and it wouldn't surprise me if she was making a play for him.

Probably she'd be after Frankie too if he weren't her brother.

Then Rudy came in and didn't even apologize for being so late.

I was burning with rage. I practically pushed the sketches into his face.

"The other day you told me you had a moral sense about the wives and daughters of your friends," I said. "That doesn't seem to include the sister of your chauffeur."

"My dear child," he said in that patronizing way of his, "an artist can sketch a pretty subject without making love to her."

"I bet you wouldn't want her brother to know she comes here," I said.

"For that matter, the same applies to you," he said, looking at me gravely. "Frank is extremely fond of you and would be very unhappy over your visits. I think it advisable that you don't come here again."

It's funny how much I wanted him to kiss me.

Not because he was so attractive, though really he isn't a bad-looking man. He's not actually fat. He's just a big man, almost as big as Frankie, though I guess a lot softer, and he's so urban and worldly.

He wouldn't be brooding and jealous all the time, like Dave, or afraid to even hold hands with a girl, like Frankie. I wanted to show him that I could make a man like him kiss me.

I cuddled up to him.

"Well, I'm here now," I said.

He got a little pale around the lips.

"I think you'd better go," he said.

And, instead, he went. He just turned and went out and left me there alone.

Well, I know now that he reacts to me. He didn't kiss me, but kisses aren't everything.

I'm sure he cares a lot for me.

It was a form of recreation for her, I thought. Some women played bridge, some went in for tennis, some were active in civil organizations. She collected men. She was not vicious. She was many other things, but she was not vicious.

May 9

This afternoon I had to do some quick thinking on Rudy's terrace.

I met Rudy on the street and we stopped to talk and he invited me to his house for tea.

"I thought you didn't want me to come," I said.

"I referred to surreptitious visits to the studio," he said. "It's perfectly proper for you to have tea with me on my terrace."

So I went with him.

The maid set a table on the terrace. It was a lovely spot.

I couldn't help glancing every now and then at the garage.

"If you're worried about Frank, it's his day off," Rudy said.

"I'm not owned by Frankie or any other man," I said. "I can visit anybody I please."

"But cautiously," he said, smiling. "I understand that your reputation for virtue is unexcelled in Rexton."

I really did hate him.

"I don't have to stay here and be insulted," I said.

I stood up and started to go off the terrace.

He grabbed my arm and spun me around to him.

"Damn you!" he said.

His face was all screwed up and his eyes were frightening.

Then he kissed me.

He kissed wonderfully.

Then I heard a sound and out of the corner of my eye I saw the maid, Etta Saunders, come out with the tea tray.

In an hour everybody in town would know that I had kissed Rudy Matterson.

I tried to pull away from him. He hadn't seen Etta and held me tight, and that gave me the idea.

I started to struggle with him as if he were attacking me. I kicked at him and sobbed. I don't know if he let me go because he saw Etta too, or because he was so bewildered by my sudden change, or because I broke away from him.

I didn't look at him and Etta again. As soon as he released me, I ran off the terrace and didn't slow down till I was out on the street.

It's eight o'clock now and Dave is coming to keep a date with me, but all I can think of is that brief kiss.

Rudy was so supercilious and smug and sure of himself, but I made him lose his head over me right there on the terrace in broad daylight.

I'll make him do a lot of begging.

If I know men, he'll be after me to come to his studio.

"Uh-huh," Helm grunted. "The pure and innocent lass was assaulted by the evil man." I offered no comment.

May 13

I can't understand why Rudy hasn't got in touch with me.

Yesterday I phoned him. He wasn't in. I didn't leave my name with the maid, of course, but he should have guessed when she told him a woman called. And he should have called me back.

Is he too busy with that underfed Rachel Townsend?

Had a date with Frankie last night.

We went to Teepee Inn. I don't care for drinking places because I don't drink, but there was dancing. Frankie dances only well enough to get by.

A very messy thing happened.

Ed Wonder was there. He asked me for a dance, and though I don't like him any more, he dances divinely, so I danced with him. He was a little drunk, but it didn't hurt his dancing.

Right in the middle of the dance Frankie came out on the floor,

and he and Ed had words about the way Ed was dancing with me.

There really wasn't anything wrong with the way we danced, but Frankie is like that, and before I could say a word Frankie hit Ed and knocked him right off his feet.

Well, there was a lot of commotion. I tugged at Frankie's arm and made him drive me right home, though it was early.

I was angry. It cheapens me to have men fight over me in public.

Frankie and Ed are really children. Dave is too in a way.

Rudy is the only really adult male I know.

Just before lunch this morning I slipped into Rudy's studio. He wasn't there.

About an hour ago I was going out to the hall to try to get Rudy on the phone when Frankie phoned me. He wants to see me again tonight.

I've more or less of a date with Dave, but he couldn't make it definite. I'm tired sitting at home waiting for men to make up their minds. Rudy doesn't get in touch with me, and Dave makes dates when he isn't sure he can keep them.

So I told Frankie all right.

It's six o'clock now and I'm still waiting for Rudy to phone me. I'll wait till seven and then I'll phone him again.

That will be the last time. A girl must have her pride.

May 14

Last night Rudy was killed.

Five words this time. Five words standing alone on a page, saying too little or too much. My breath was locked in my throat as a fresh page appeared under the flick of Helm's hand.

May 15

Mike and Rudy both dead.

I was afraid to start writing in this diary today. I wrote the first sentence and now I'm not going to write any more about that.

Last night I was very glad that Dave came. I was glad even though he was in another of his impossible, brooding moods.

He had found out Tuesday night, when we were all in Rudy's house after he was dead, that I had been parking on Crown Hill with Frankie. I had told the District Attorney and all the others

there including Dave because I'd thought that Frankie needed an alibi for—

No, I'm not going to write a word about it.

Well, last night Dave and I sat on the couch and it was so very good to feel his strong arms around me even in the mood he was in, and hear him telling me that he loves me.

He wants to marry me right away. I tried putting him off and at the same time not discourage him.

Then he insisted that I don't see Frankie again. He said that if I do he's through with me. I think he really means it.

There are other reasons too why I shouldn't see Frankie any more.

My stomach muscles ached from the slumped position in which I stood. I straightened my body. "It is obvious that she suspected that Frank was the murderer," I commented. Helm glanced sidelong at me. "What's obvious," he stated, "is that she's afraid to put down on paper what she knows or thinks about how Parker and Matterson died."

May 16

I wish I had somebody to talk to. I mean really talk to.

Mother and I are always talking to each other, but about clothes and gossip and things like that.

I could never dream of confiding in her.

She'd be horrified if she thought I so much as kissed a man, let alone anything else. Except kissing Dave. In her eyes we're practically engaged, so that makes it all right.

She's so remote from the world. Even when Daddy makes his cracks about me and the men I go with, Mother refuses to believe that he's being anything but mean and making up stories about me.

She's so sweet. She's everything to me but somebody to confide in.

The trouble with Mother is that she's never had any romance in her own life. She doesn't believe in it. She thinks I'm just the way she was as a young girl.

I remember once, months ago when I was wiping the dishes

and she was baking, she started to talk about herself. She was telling me how she'd met Daddy at a church social.

"For a long time I couldn't make up my mind to marry him," she said. "But in those days a high school teacher was quite a catch and so I gave my consent."

"Didn't you love him?" I said.

"I found him interesting company," she said.

"But look, Mother," I said, "wasn't there any other young man you ever loved?"

She was silent for a moment.

"For a while I had a girlish infatuation for the boy next door," she said, "but one evening he tried to snatch a kiss from me. Naturally I would have nothing more to do with him."

"But of course you let Daddy kiss you," I said. "I mean before you married him."

She turned to me with that gentle smile of hers.

"Naturally he kissed me when I consented to marry him," she said.

"And during your engagement?" I said.

"Dear," she said placidly, "I've always considered kissing a rather vulgar demonstration of affection."

I remember thinking then that Daddy got a pretty raw deal. That explained why they'd had different rooms ever since I could remember.

I hadn't thought about that conversation with Mother since, but suddenly it all came back to me.

I could confide in Daddy. I think he would understand.

I don't mean tell him everything, of course, or even anything very important, but just talk to him like a friend who hasn't cut himself off from the world.

He's really decent underneath. I think he's lonely and that he would like to have somebody to talk to also.

But I don't really know him. Boys I've gone out with for only a couple of hours I know better than I know him.

As I write this, I can hear Mother and Daddy downstairs, but there's nobody in this house I can talk to.

Not even about small things about myself.

I feel so terribly alone.

A mist formed before my eyes. This was the real Beverly. This was my daughter whom I had failed as my wife had failed me. Helm turned the page.

May 17

Frankie keeps phoning me. I give him excuses, and I told Mother that when she answers the phone to say I've just gone out.

Mother is glad. She and Daddy don't approve of Frankie. Though the real reason I've been meeting him away from the house, is Dave.

Frankie is awfully sweet.

He actually kissed me Tuesday night when we parked on Crown Hill. And he asked me to marry him. Even then I was the one who had to kiss him good-night when we parted.

All these years I've known him he'd never kissed me. Imagine!

He kisses wonderfully.

But I've got to make up my mind. It's come to the point where I'll lose Dave for good if I don't give up Frankie.

I have a date with Dave tonight.

Well, if it has to be one or the other, of course it will be Dave. I don't think I love him more than I do Frankie, but Dave has more to offer a girl.

Sooner or later I'll have to get married and Dave is the best

There was no punctuation to indicate an incomplete sentence. She had ceased writing when Helm and I had entered the room Saturday afternoon, and she had not taken up the diary since.

Helm closed the notebook regretfully—like a man, I thought, who had found an old magazine and had read in it one chapter of a fascinating serial story which for him would have no beginning or end.

"Nothing from Saturday afternoon on," he mused. "Afraid that whatever she wrote would be saying too much because somebody might read it."

"She did not make an entry every day," I pointed out.

"A diary is a confidant in which you pour out your emotions. Saturday night Dave Reese caught her kissing Frank

in the arbor. From what I hear, she experienced a considerable emotional crisis. But she didn't go to her diary that night or Sunday or today to write of that and other things that happened."

I regarded the detective. Contemplatively he puffed his pipe; I would have given all I possessed to have known what went on in his head.

"She did not know that Frank was dead until I told her late this afternoon," I declared. "She was too upset to write of it in her diary."

"Uh-huh. And maybe too upset Sunday, and today before you told her he was dead."

His sentences appeared to be disjointed, indefinite; yet they were fraught with terrible implications. To reply, to attempt to clarify them, would be to fall into his trap by saying more than I intended to say. So I said nothing.

"I suppose you've guessed why your daughter and I were in the back yard," he broke the heavy silence that lay between us. "Gentlemen aren't supposed to tell, but I'm a cop, not a gentleman; and we've both just read the diary and know how she likes to add men to her collection. She took me to the arbor to get me to make love to her. Not because I attract her. Maybe I do—I flatter myself that it's possible—but she was playing for much higher stakes. I'm not just another man; I'm a detective working on three murders. She was out to make me fall for her so that, like in the story books, I'd go to bat for her, or anybody else she wanted to protect, whenever she asked me to."

Helm moved back to the table and knocked out his pipe in the ash tray. He picked up the book which I had taken out of the bookcase earlier that night. It lay open at the page I had been reading when I had turned from it to switch on the radio.

"Oscar Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*," he said. "These open pages were staring me in the face all the while I was reading the diary."

"Are you interested in literature, Mr. Helm?"

"At the moment," he said quietly, "I am interested in why this book should happen to be open to a poem about a man in prison."

I stepped to his side. "You have read my daughter's version of my relationship with her. It has not been a pleasant one. It occurred to me that I might be to blame; I recalled certain lines by Wilde and looked them up."

I placed a finger on a stanza and read aloud the first four lines:

> "Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
> By each let this be heard,
> Some do it with a bitter look,
> Some with a flattering word . . . ."

I drew back my hand. "*A bitter look.* No flattering words from me. *Bitter* words. Are you satisfied now that you have gazed upon the naked anguish of a father? This has nothing to do with you."

He brooded at the open page. "I could paraphrase one line: *Yet each girl kills the man she loves.*"

I stepped away from him as if to avoid a physical blow.

"You can't escape the pattern, Mr. Atwood," he said with rather startling gentleness. "Three men she loved were murdered."

"But that doesn't mean—"

"It means everything, Mr. Atwood. But just what is a different question." He did not raise the question. "As a matter of fact, there are more appropriate lines in this poem if I can find them."

I attempted a sneer. "In this fabulous age policemen are familiar with poetry."

"Uh-huh. Required for a B. A. degree in college." As he spoke, he was occupied with leafing through the book.

I stood thinking how ridiculous it was to search for a

murderer in the lines of a second-rate poem. Yet the interval that passed as he ran his eyes down page after page was one of almost unendurable suspense.

"Here it is." He read two lines aloud:

> "For he who lives more lives than one
> More deaths than one must die."

With that he laid the book on the table and commenced to fill his pipe with tobacco.

I essayed a laugh. "So I am not only the schoolteacher you see before you. I have another life in which I am a murderous desperado out of a comic strip."

His gaze rested gravely on me. "That's not what those lines mean, and you know it." He struck a match for his pipe and snapped the brim of his hat which he had not removed in the house. "Well, good-night, Mr. Atwood."

As abruptly as that he departed.

I did not see him to the door. For a long time after he had gone I stood where I was. Presently I picked up my daughter's diary and replaced it between the cushion and the arm of the couch.

20. Rachel Townsend

TUESDAY, MAY 20 — 11:05 A. M.

I PAUSED IN THE street to look through the broad window into the office. Dave was sitting at his desk, leaning back in his chair and doing nothing.

He didn't greet me when I entered. He looked like a man sleeping with his eyes open.

"Good-morning, Dave."

He nodded, but it wasn't much of a nod. Not more than a vertical twitch of his head.

The remote and indrawn mood was on him. He got like that whenever he was bothered by something, though I'd never known it to be as bad as Sunday when I'd come home to find him in my house after he'd spent a night and morning agonizing over his precious Beverly not saving her kisses exclusively for him. And this morning he was like Sunday all over again.

There was no air in the office. I laid my handbag on the desk and returned to the door and left it open to admit the warm May morning. As I walked back to my desk, I was facing him again. His eyes moved in their sockets to follow me, but there was nothing in them or in the rest of his face.

When I sat at my desk, my back was to him. I felt as if there was nobody behind me, and somehow that was as frightening as a feeling of somebody crouching at your back with a raised knife. I busied myself with reading the

mail. The breeze flowing in through the open door made the envelopes flutter, but there was still something wrong with the air in the office—or with me. I was choked up.

Dave spoke suddenly. "You shouldn't have come in today." It was an objective, disinterested statement in monotone.

"I didn't intend to." I continued to open the mail with my back to him. "But after a while I decided that it was better working and being with people than staying alone in the house."

That ended the conversation.

The silence that returned between us was worse than being alone. In the empty house you kept remembering Frankie, not the way he was that last time you'd seen him, but all his innate sweetness and decency and how for years he'd been all you'd really had. Here in the office you tried to close your mind to all but the routine letters you were glancing through, but you couldn't because of the man who sat behind you in silence.

I pushed away the mail. I turned in my chair to face him.

"Dave, Sheriff Stark was in my house this morning. He roused me out of bed at eight-thirty. He was looking for rat poison."

His eyes lifted to rest emptily on me. "It was in that bottle of rye. I spoke to Ken Fleet on the phone."

"Dear God, rat poison!"

"Arsenic." Dave brought a pack of cigarettes up to his mouth and extracted one with his teeth. "They're not positive it came from rat poison. They don't expect a report from the toxicologist before tonight." He lifted the desk lighter to the cigarette, then puffed without removing the cigarette from his mouth, as if he had already made too much effort lighting it. "Was there any in your house?"

I started to giggle. I took a deep breath before I dared to bring out words. "There was a box of mouse seed in the pantry. The sheriff took it with him." The giggles rose vio-

lently. I screamed what I said next. "Mouse seed and rat poison!"

Dave jumped from his chair.

With an effort, I regained self-control before he took more than a couple of steps toward me. "I'm all right, Dave. You're not going to have an hysterical employee on your hands."

I turned back to the mail. I heard him settle in his chair. The curtain of silence, and something worse than silence, dropped between us.

Last night you'd had your first date with the man you loved. After that dull-witted sheriff and that invidious detective had gone, Dave took you out to dinner. It wasn't the first time you had eaten with him in a restaurant, but it was the first time he had taken you anywhere when there wasn't a business reason.

Because last night he was sorry for you. Why kid yourself? He would have taken out to dinner anybody whose brother had just died. It was a duty—something to be got through because a person had to eat, and this silence had been between you even then.

But you called it a date because that was what you wanted, and you held it close to you in spite of all that went on inside you, in spite of all the hopes and fears and doubts you tried to banish and could not, trying frantically not to keep remembering that there had been murder and that there was a murderer.

Now here you were at your job with the mail read and not knowing what you had read, and he sitting behind you in a world in which you had no place.

I swung in my chair, and what I said to him was strident, my nerves shrieking.

"Go on, phone her! Or did you phone her already and did she tell you she didn't want you back?"

He looked up. "Who?"

"Whom do you think? The girl you're sitting there tearing yourself to pieces over."

"Beverly?" Startlingly, a piece of his old grin came back. It was as if my outburst had revived him. "The fact is, Rachel, that I haven't given her a thought since last night, and not much more than that since I was at your house Sunday afternoon."

"Then what's eating you?"

The cigarette in the corner of his mouth sent thin smoke across his face. "Can't a man sit and think?"

"About murder?"

That came out by itself. I hadn't meant to say it.

He nodded. "Partly. But do you know what I was doing since you came in? I was watching the way you walk and sit. I was watching the back of your neck and the way your hair is like glistening spun-coal when the sunlight hits it."

I sat half-turned in my chair, looking at him.

He took his cigarette out of his mouth and scowled at it. "I'm not saying I loved you all along and didn't know it. At one time I had it pretty bad for Beverly. Well, I've got it for you now. I don't suppose you give a hoot for me, but it's only fair to let you know if you keep on working for me."

"Oh, Dave!"

I know my mouth was half-open and I could actually feel my eyes glow. He leaned forward, poised over his desk like a runner waiting for a starting signal.

"What does that mean—that you care for me?" He spoke with deliberation, as if each word were one to be carefully chosen.

"Dave, you idiot. I've loved you ever since I can remember."

Clichés. The corny sentences plucked right out of a sloppy romance. But wasn't love a cliché, repeated over and over since the beginning of time? What I'd said sounded exactly right.

He stood up. He tossed his cigarette into the ash tray, ran fingers through his hair, then strode to my desk. I was on my feet when he reached me.

But that kiss was nothing like my dreams of it. It drove coldness through me.

He withdrew his mouth. His eyes, solemn and hurt now, stared down into mine. "Don't you like it, Rachel?"

I looked away from him. "That's not it."

"Listen," he said. "I'm not going to tell you that I didn't kill your brother. If you haven't faith in me, it's no good. We wouldn't have enough to start on."

I felt his arms leave me.

Tears blinded me, and blindly I groped for him, found him, held him to me. This time it was the kiss I had wanted, and it wiped everything else out of my conscious mind.

He ended it too soon—ended it abruptly and with a twist of his torso away from me. No voice should have been there but his and mine, but in the office another voice was speaking smoothly.

"Sorry, but what can you expect in an office on the street? You can be seen as easily from outside as from in here."

Past Dave's shoulder I saw Ben Helm standing inside the open door. He was sucking reflectively on his pipe.

Dave slipped an arm possessively about my waist. "Okay, snooper, what do you want?"

"Nothing in particular." The pipe dropped into a pocket. "I was passing and dropped in to say hello."

That diabolical detective didn't drop in anywhere to say hello. He hadn't a decent human emotion; whatever he did was for a cold-blooded, calculating purpose.

Dave and I waited for him to go on.

Ben Helm's brown eyes crinkled in that smile I had learned to fear. "Are congratulations in order?"

An angry ridge formed along Dave's jaw. "Is that your business too?"

"Maybe not." There was a lingering inflection in that *maybe.* "Sorry I intruded." And he left.

Left without attending to the purpose of his visit, whatever it was. He'd asked us nothing, told us nothing.

How could you know that he hadn't accomplished his purpose? How could you guess what was behind his smile, behind any of his words and acts?

Dave's arm dropped from me. There was a faraway look on his face as he automatically took out his cigarettes.

We didn't kiss again. The detective had ruined it for us.

21. Ben Helm

TUESDAY, MAY 20 — 11:40 A. M.

SLEUTHING, LIKE WAGING WAR, consists mostly of waiting for something to happen. If you had an office and men working under you, you could put on a show of activity by letting the normal machinery of the organization function. The scurrying and bustle could be meaningless, and often was, but outsiders would be impressed. For that matter, you'd be somewhat impressed yourself, if only because doing something is easier than marking time.

In a small town like Rexton, where I was practically under the eyes of everybody, the best demonstration I could make of working for my pay was by talking to people and walking down the street looking profound.

When I approached David Reese's real estate office, there was another place where time could legitimately be passed. I turned in, and before I was through the open doorway I saw Reese and Rachel Townsend ardently kissing.

Almost any other man would have had a decent regard for the moment and have gone about his business. But a detective on a case isn't supposed to have the reactions of other men. A kiss could, perhaps, be his business, and what was said and done when he broke it up could have significance.

A couple of minutes later I was back outside.

I crossed to the other side of the street and turned. Even from there I could see halfway into the office. Rachel was

standing at her desk and facing the rear of the office, evidently speaking to Reese, whom I couldn't see, but who must have been at or near his own desk farther back. Anybody who'd passed at the time of the kiss would have observed it. That office was hardly the place for private lovemaking.

Which meant that the kiss hadn't been haphazard or so usual that it could be delayed for the proper time and place. Even the rear of the office would have been more advisable. They'd been swept into each other's arms, forgetting that they were practically on public display.

Well, if I were to meet Greta suddenly, I wouldn't care where I kissed her as long as I kissed her. But Greta was my wife, and I hadn't been in love with another girl a couple of days before.

At noon I found myself in the neighborhood of the county building. I went in. The sheriff's office was unlocked, but deserted. No doubt Stark was still hunting for rat poison. When I'd seen him earlier that morning, he'd announced triumphantly that he had found mouse seed in Rachel's pantry. He'd had quite a let-down when I'd pointed out to him that the box said the mouse seed contained strychnine.

I went up the hall to the district attorney's office. Fleet was in, but left as soon as I entered, asking—or rather telling—me to wait. I waited thirty minutes before he returned.

"Well," he demanded, "anything new?"

"I've been questioning the people who live around the Townsend cottage," I reported. "Hoped that somebody might have been seen entering or leaving the place Saturday night or Sunday morning. Nobody was. I expected as much. The houses aren't particularly close, and there's a path through the woods that goes right up to the cottage."

"It would hardly be evidence if anybody had been seen

entering that house. We know already that Dave Reese was there, and it doesn't prove a thing against him."

"I guess not," I agreed.

Fleet found his cigar distasteful. He discarded it. A night's sleep hadn't improved his disposition. He growled, "It's all right for you, Helm. You'll collect your fee and leave and never see Cagula County again. I've got to live here. I'll go through life with this mark on my record."

"I doubt it."

He looked eager. "You've got something?"

"I don't know."

"But you think you've got something?" he persisted.

"Uh-huh. I've got several things."

"What are they?"

I shook my head. "What's the good batting it around? I can't put my finger on anything concrete enough to satisfy either of us."

"Hell!" Fleet said. He reclaimed his dead cigar from the ash tray. "I had no right to expect so much from you, Helm. I guess I've been reading too many detective stories."

"Everybody has failures on police cases," I said. "But I doubt if this will be a failure."

He'd lost his capacity for hope. "You're sure of it?" he asked without enthusiasm.

"No," I said. "My understanding is that only death and taxes are sure."

It was considerably after twelve-thirty when I left the county building. I walked rapidly. My landladies had me bullied. Yesterday the matter of Frank Townsend's death had kept me away from supper. When I'd phoned Mrs. Ebling that I couldn't make it, she'd complained bitterly that a leg of lamb, roasted and waiting for me, would be partly wasted. And at breakfast this morning Miss Hoopes had reminded me that I paid for bed and *board*, and that when I skipped meals I was paying for something I didn't re-

ceive, and that they were not women to take money for nothing.

So now I hurried because lunch was served promptly at twelve-thirty.

The front door led directly into the living room, and I swept off my hat when I opened it. Later I reflected that it must have been something like a comedy, the way I stepped over the threshold and cooperatively bared my head for the blow. Vaguely I recalled that after I'd taken a couple of steps into the room I was aware of a slight sound to my right and behind me. I started to turn toward it.

That was when the floor jumped up at my face.

I didn't feel myself fall. There was the dull impact of the blow, and, without transition, I was on the floor, sick to the roots of my being, feeling consciousness slipping away. A part of my brain that was unhurt knew that if I let go it would be death. Another blow would follow and another until my head was a pulp.

I struggled within myself. It went on for a long, long time in a half-world between waking and sleeping. I should have been dead a dozen times over in the interval if it had been as long as it seemed. But time must have gone as haywire as in a dream because when I won the fight over unconsciousness and was rising to one knee, the second blow hadn't yet fallen.

My attacker was still there, so close to me that I could sense the menacing presence without seeing anybody. A blurred haze like a curtain of tears blinded me. Behind me I could hear a half-muted cry or sob. Here it comes, I thought, and I swung one arm wildly in an arc, like a man brushing away unseen cobwebs.

My hand slithered past loose cloth. The cry or sob became a frantic yelp. I called up strength to turn, but the one knee supporting my weight wavered. Something crashed to the floor so close that it was thunder in my ears.

Then there was another crash, sharper than the first, and I knew that the door had been slammed.

I was alone and still alive.

I managed to turn to the door. The furniture danced. I shut my eyes tightly, and when I opened them much of the haze had been dissolved. Before me was the solid door, blocking out sight of the killer. I was on my hands and knees, crawling toward it, but when I reached the door it struck me that it was not worth the effort to try to open it. Long before this the killer had slipped around the corner of the house out of sight.

Then I remembered my landladies. They should have heard something from whatever part of the house they were in. I yelled. I called each of them by name. There was no answer.

After a while I tried to stand. I got hold of the doorknob and started to pull myself to my feet. Pain stabbed me behind my right ear like a second blow. I dropped back to my hands and knees and turned from the door.

One hand almost touched a pair of fire tongs. That was my first sight of them since I had seen them this morning with the poker and shovel and broom on the stand beside the fireplace. But I had heard them crash when the killer had dropped them before fleeing through the door.

On hands and knees I crawled across the room. My objective was the phone sitting on a round mahogany table. Once I had to pause to keep myself from passing out.

Presently I crawled on, reached the table, rested, then slowly, keeping my head and neck rigid, pulled myself up on a chair. I wanted to lie down anywhere and sleep, but first there was something I had to do.

I stretched out a hand for the phone. Beside it lay a sheet of paper torn from a notebook. I found myself staring at the wavering writing. There was a name at the top of the paper. It was my name. I wondered why my name should

be on a sheet of paper, and then it came to me that I was supposed to read the note. It said:

MR HELM

Mrs Wanderson who is chairman of the church bazaar a week from Friday invited my sister and me to eat lunch at her house because we are on the bazaar committee to discuss the bazaar I hope you will forgive us for not being here to give you lunch but you did not come to supper last night and ruined the leg of lamb and we are not sure you will come for lunch you will find lamb curry on the stove and coffee all made

Sincerely yours

MARGARET K HOOPES

I read the note over to see if she had used a single period. She hadn't. It was a form of madness solemnly to consider a literary style while I was fighting to remain conscious. I reached over the note for the phone and dialed the Sheriff's number.

"Ben?" Stark said in the tone of a man with a good lunch under his belt. "Practically everybody in town has some rat poison in their house. I found some in—"

"I'm hurt." My voice sounded so small that I wondered if he heard me. "Maybe dying."

"Huh? For God's sake, what happened?"

"I'm . . . . I'm at the . . . . boarding house."

It was too difficult to talk or sit. My head refused to stay up. I lowered it to the table top, but at the last instant something went wrong. My head missed. I felt myself topple off the chair . . . .

The next thing I remembered I was speaking. I had no idea what I was saying or to whom. Then I became aware of a face hanging over mine. Dr. Kendrell's face, and he was replying to something I must have asked him.

"Not even a fracture," he told me with indecent cheerfulness. "Plenty of skin laid open. You received a rather low, glancing blow that sliced behind your left ear."

I was in my bed. Dr. Kendrell was bending over me, doing things to my scalp. Stark stood behind him; Fleet and his cigar were near the dresser.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Five after two," Dr. Kendrell said. "Why should you be interested? You're not going anywhere till tomorrow at the earliest."

Fleet came forward from the dresser. He looked as grim as a fat-faced man can look. "Did you see who did it, Helm?"

"No. The killer was behind me."

"Killer, eh?" Fleet considered his cigar. "So you think it was our murderer?"

"Who, then?"

Stark spoke up. For the first time since I'd known him he was really angry. "He was scared of Ben. That's why he laid for him."

Fleet approved of the notion. "The murderer was afraid you knew who he was."

"Nuts!" I said weakly. "There's no percentage in that for him. If I knew, chances were I'd have already told you."

"What other reason could there be for the attack?"

I closed my eyes. My throat was tired. I was tired all over. But my head didn't feel very bad. It had never hurt much, not even when the blow had descended. I'd been like a fighter knocked out without feeling pain.

Dr. Kendrell straightened up. "Well, that'll hold you for a while." He beamed at Stark. "I wish you'd catch your murderer, Val. His handiwork is taking up too much of my time."

I reflected that I'd never met anybody who had a more depressing effect on me than that hearty doctor. I lay with my eyes shut.

After a long silence Fleet complained, "But it doesn't make sense that he'd come here of all places to murder

you. It was the rarest coincidence that the two old women were out."

I opened my eyes. Dr. Kendrell was gone. Stark had shifted his position to the foot of the bed.

"The preliminary idea wasn't to let me have it here," I said. "Maybe only to have a talk with me. Maybe to lure me away where I could be murdered in leisure and security. But there was Miss Hoopes' note on the table. Did you see it?"

Both Fleet and Stark nodded.

"It was practically an announcement that it was safe to knock me off," I went on. "It told that I would be home for lunch at any minute and that we wouldn't be disturbed. The killer snatched up the fire tongs and waited by the window. I could be seen walking up to the house. The killer waited beside the door, and when I came in stepped behind me and let me have it."

Stark frowned at the scene I'd reconstructed. "So why didn't he kill you, Ben? I mean, why didn't he keep beating you on the head till you were dead?"

"You heard what Dr. Kendrell said," I told him. "It was a low, glancing blow. It knocked me off my feet, but it didn't quite knock me out cold. I got up on one knee and waved an arm. Probably I looked as if I had a lot more strength left in me than I did. The killer got panicky and dropped the tongs and beat it."

Fleet said, "We'll have those tongs gone over for fingerprints. He certainly didn't have time to wipe them."

"That rough castiron will never hold a print," I said.

"My God," Fleet said, "what does hold fingerprints?"

"Fingerprint cards," I said and closed my eyes.

I wished they'd go away and let me sleep. And right on top of that thought I fell asleep.

I woke up hungry. I was alone with Stark who was occupying the one chair in the room.

"Ken said he'd come back later," he announced when he

saw that I was awake. "I'll stay with you till Mrs. Ebling and her sister get home. They'll take care of you all right. Guess I could call them up at Emma Wanderson's, but it's past four and they'll be back any minute. You want anything, Ben?"

I said that I could use some of the coffee he'd find on the kitchen stove. He returned with a steaming cup of it and buttered toast, and he propped me up with a couple of pillows behind my back. I didn't feel like an invalid. I ate what there was to eat and wondered if I should ask him to heat and serve the lamb curry.

"You want me to help you put on your pajamas?" he suggested tenderly.

I was dressed except for shoes, shirt, jacket. My shirt and jacket had been tossed into a corner of the room by whoever had taken them off me; there was probably blood on them.

I said, "I'm going to dress," and got off the bed.

"Hey!" Stark protested. "You can't!"

"Sure I can." I walked the length of the room and back. There was a wobble in my knees, but otherwise I'd felt worse on occasions when I'd been up and around.

Stark watched me silently while I got into a fresh shirt and my other suit. I was knotting my necktie before he asked, "Something you got to do in a hurry, Ben?"

"The sooner the better."

He wet his lips. "The murderer?"

"Uh-huh."

My hat was where I'd dropped it in the living room. As I picked it up, I saw blood on the green rug, spatterings where I'd been struck and a trail of drops to the table. My landladies wouldn't like it.

"Can't you tell me who?" Stark's high-pitched voice made him whine his question.

"Wait a bit," I said. "I haven't completely convinced myself."

My hat wouldn't fit properly because of the elaborate bandage Dr. Kendrell had wound around my head. I pulled the hat forward and down over my eyes, which made me look comic or sinister or both. At the door I decided to abandon it and went hatless out to the car with Stark.

His eyebrows arched when I told him where to drive. "Don't you think, Ben, we should take Ken Fleet?"

"No. This will be a very delicate operation. He might bungle it by horning in at the wrong moment."

When we pulled up in front of the house, I was glad that I hadn't attempted the lamb curry. It wouldn't have rested easily on my stomach. I always got queasy inside at the kill, and this one would be the most unpleasant in my experience.

Before I could push the bell-button, George Atwood answered the door. He must have seen us coming up to the house. Maybe he had been standing at a window, watching for me, waiting for me. His cheeks were pasty, skin hanging loosely on fleshless bones. His eyes were those of a man slowly and sorrowfully dying, and they were fixed on my bandaged head.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Atwood," I said, calling up my best manners.

He found part of his voice. "Come in." He led us into the living room.

Beverly was rising from the couch. In a blue knitted dress she looked rather good in a lush, cozy way.

"Ben," she said and stopped, staring at my head. "What happened to you?"

"Somebody tried to murder me a couple of hours ago," I told her conversationally. "I was luckier than your three boy friends."

"Oh, no!" Her hands flew up to her mouth.

I dug out my pipe and tossed a grin at George Atwood. "The men she falls for die. Maybe she doesn't care for me, but the fact is she went through the motions."

Atwood said hollowly, "You're absurd."

"You're saying that because it's expected, but you know better," I said. "It built up from corpse to corpse until there's no getting away from it. Beverly's affection is lethal."

Stark couldn't restrain himself. "Wait a minute, Ben. There's Dave Reese. He's been her boy friend a long time and nothing happened to him. So maybe he's the one who's so jealous he—"

"Let's stop the guessing games." I cut him off more sharply than I intended. "We're past that stage. David Reese no longer cares for Beverly. It's Rachel Townsend now. The attack on me came after I walked in on them kissing."

Beverly's unpainted mouth went sullen. "Good riddance! I never really cared for him."

"That's why he's still alive," I said.

I put a match to my pipe. They were very still, those two and the Sheriff, and I let the tension hold. I had to be careful of every word, move, mood. And I had to keep feeling my way because I didn't really know. I only thought I knew.

"The fact is that I was attacked today because somebody believed that I was the newest addition to Beverly's collection," I said, not speaking to anybody in particular. "I can see only one reason why anybody should get that idea, and that was that last night I was in the arbor with Beverly. There were only three people beside myself who knew it—Beverly and her parents."

Atwood opened his mouth and closed it without sound. He seemed to realize that there was no point in saying *absurd* again. Beverly kept her gaze glued in a kind of horror to my bandaged head.

When nobody else cared to break the silence, I did. "The reason I wasn't killed was that the killer is considerably shorter than I. The blow came sideways instead of down

and thereby lost much of its force. Fire tongs aren't as heavy and compact as a bean pot which practically does the lethal job by itself with its bone-crushing weight."

George Atwood glanced down at his short, slight body. When he looked up, there was a bitter twist to his tight, thin mouth.

He said, "Very well, Helm. I am prepared to confess."

Beverly uttered the kind of scream a terrified mouse would make. She wrapped her arms about herself and held on and locked her voice between clenched teeth.

And Stark, remembering that he represented the majesty of Cagula County law enforcement, started to recite words he must have read somewhere. "George Atwood, in the name of the law I hereby—"

Under my breath I cursed. Aloud I said, "Please let me, Sheriff." I jabbed my pipe at Atwood. "You say, Mr. Atwood, that you attacked me today?"

"I do say so." His voice rang out clearly, unafraid. His head was high, his gaze steady. "I also confess to murdering Frank Townsend." Again his lips twisted. "I assume that one murder will be sufficient to hang me."

"By the way, where did you attack me?" I asked.

"Where?"

"In the street? In the woods? Where?"

His eyes shifted to his daughter who was holding onto herself with her arms.

"Daddy!" she said brokenly. "Oh, Daddy!"

He brought his gaze back to me. "Do the details matter? It should be sufficient that I have confessed."

"One detail matters," I told him. "The fact is that it was a woman who conked me with the tongs. My hand touched her. Touched the loose cloth of a skirt. I don't think she's worth your gesture, Mr. Atwood, but I admire you for it."

Atwood kept looking at me. It struck me that he was afraid to look anywhere else, afraid that if he shifted his gaze it would light on his daughter.

"Not a woman scorned either," I said to him. "Is that what you're thinking, Mr. Atwood, or do you know better than that too? Because, aside from everything else, if Beverly were out to knock off all the men who refused to remain in her collection, David Reese would have had priority over me as a victim."

"Daddy, what's he saying!" Her voice was a constricted half-sob. "I don't understand."

George Atwood's body sagged.

I was as physically weary as he looked. The sock on my head must have weakened me more than I'd thought. Later, in just a few more minutes now, I could have all the rest I wanted.

I knew that she was outside in the hall; I'd heard her there on the stairs. I'd heard feet scuffle, and once a sharp drawing of breath—sounds so small that they would have been inaudible if I hadn't been listening for them.

I turned now and went out of the room—into the hall and to the foot of the stairs. She was already on the way up. I saw the flashing of rather nice legs for a woman her age. I ran after her.

Downstairs in the living room Beverly screamed.

22. *Kathryn Atwood*

TUESDAY, MAY 20—4:52 P. M.

THERE WAS NO KEY in my door. I leaned against it, as if to hold back with my frail weight the tide of events in the guise of a policeman. Actually, I believe, I was simply catching my breath after my hurried ascent of the stairs. I had no desire to barricade myself in my room; such an act would be undignified as well as pointless.

Let him come to me here where I would not have to face any eyes but his.

He had been close behind me, but for the space of a dozen heartbeats I did not hear him in the hall. A terrifying stillness had gripped the house. Then downstairs Beverly spoke—spoke so stridently that it was like another shriek. She was coming up the stairs.

Please don't let her come in here.

As if in reply to my unspoken entreaty, I heard the policeman's voice ring out. "Keep them downstairs, Sheriff. I'd rather handle this alone."

I turned from the door. Sunlight streamed in through the west window. I moved forward into its comforting warmth. My knitting bag lay on the rocker. I took up the knitting and moved the rocker into the direct path of the sun. I had completed the pull-over, but there was very little of the cardigan done. My fingers took up their accustomed task with the knitting needles.

He knocked at the door. My heart gave a startled leap,

as if it had been held tight and was now released by the sound of knuckles on wood. He must be a very well-mannered policeman to knock on this particular door before entering.

"Come in," said I.

The door opened and closed. Ben Helm looked at me sitting in the rocker, and then he took a step backward and put his shoulder blades against the door. It was his bandaged head, I thought, that made him look like such a very sick man. And it was that bandage that caused me to relive that terrible moment a few hours ago when I, staring down at his bleeding scalp, had felt his frantic hand touch my skirt.

I dipped my head to my knitting. The sun had lost its warmth.

"Were you jealous of them?" said Ben Helm. "Was that why you did it, Mrs. Atwood?" He was bringing a pipe up to his mouth.

"I do not permit smoking in my room."

"Sorry." He dropped the pipe into a pocket. "I suppose you kept tabs on Beverly through her diary. She left it all over the house."

"Beverly is not untidy. It was always in her top dresser drawer." I dropped a stitch. That was careless of me; I almost never dropped stitches. "It was my right," said I with considerable heat. "It is a Mother's right to know what her daughter does."

"Was it your right to murder them?"

I dropped another stitch; I had never before knitted so poorly. My inclination was to put the knitting aside, but I could not bear to leave my hands unoccupied.

"They were wicked men," I told him. "Beverly is essentially good, but weak; and they were taking advantage of her weakness—corrupting her. I begged this man Parker to let her alone. He laughed in my face and called her vile names."

"Was this the Sunday morning you shot him?"

"He brought it on himself." I rocked gently. "Everybody in town knows what he was—a corrupter of women."

"Uh-huh. So that Sunday morning you followed him to kill him."

Ben Helm leaned against the door as if for support. A man who had been struck only a few hours ago with a pair of fire-tongs should be in bed. I tilted the rocker forward, leaning my body toward him. It was so important that I make him understand that I had not wanted to hurt him and the others.

"I certainly did not follow this Mike Parker. A cousin of mine had had a baby the day before in the Fort Hals hospital and I was driving out to visit her. I passed Parker as he walked along the highway with his shotgun under his arm. I realized that that was my opportunity to speak to him in private. Before I could attract his attention, he had stepped into the woods. I stopped the car and walked after him up the path."

"Was that the only time and place you could have a talk with him?"

"I could scarcely call on him. It would be obvious to anybody who saw me with him that I could have nothing to do with such a creature except as he concerned my daughter. I must say this for Beverly; she always zealously protected her reputation, and I could do no less."

"All right, you caught up to Mike Parker in the woods."

"I pleaded with him not to take advantage of my daughter. His reply was to laugh in my face."

"How did you get your hands on his gun?"

"There was a wind and he required both hands to light a cigarette. He had placed his gun against a tree." My knitting needles were moving as if by themselves. I stared at them, fascinated by their flashing. My voice felt harsh in my throat, but I heard it quiet and controlled. "The thought to harm him hadn't occurred to me. I don't know

what came over me as I stood there listening to that evil man laugh so wickedly and asking me to do him a favor and get my daughter off his neck, referring to her with unspeakable adjectives. Then, suddenly he was dead. Please understand. I do not remember snatching up his shotgun, although of course I must have. He was dead, and I found myself running back to my car on the road."

"And I suppose you don't remember shoving the shotgun under his body after you killed him?" said the policeman with a hint of a sneer.

"I am sure I did no such thing."

"Then how did the gun get under his body?"

"Was it under him?"

He sighed. "All right, you dropped the gun an instant after you shot, and he fell on it. What did you do then—calmly proceed to visit your cousin in the hospital?"

"I drove to Fort Hals, but only because I considered it advisable to continue to my destination. Do not imagine that I wasn't disturbed."

"Disturbed, Mrs. Atwood? You had murdered a man and you were actually disturbed?"

I glanced up at him in distaste. "Would you prefer a stronger word? The lewd creature had brought his death on himself. I regretted that I was the direct cause of it, but I am not an emotional person. Except—" I hesitated, faltering; I fumbled in my mind to collect my thoughts.

"Except when you kill," said Ben Helm brutally.

"Something came over me," I murmured. "I do not remember."

The last row of my knitting had gone very badly. I should have ripped it, but it did not seem worth the effort. I continued to knit.

He was speaking. I had missed something of what he was saying.

". . . . wasn't trying to corrupt your daughter, as you

put it. If anything, in that case it was the other way around."

"Whom are you talking about?"

"Rudolph Matterson," said he. "He was trying to resist her. What could you have had against him?"

It was so simple, and the policeman insisted on making it complicated. "Beverly's curse was her weakness. If only the men had let her alone, she would have married David Reese, who is a fine, upright young man, and settled down. I read Beverly's diary and what she wrote about Rudolph Matterson. I know men. They are vile creatures, all of them. It was obvious to me that he was toying with Beverly, rousing her desire by pretending that he was restraining himself. There is no more subtly effective way to make a woman succumb than through that particular technique. And he kissed her on the terrace, didn't he?"

"My God!" He stared at me. "You knew that she had made him kiss her. You knew that after that he'd made no attempt to get in touch with her. And yet four days later you killed him."

Oddly, my fingers refused to function properly. I placed the knitting on my lap and folded my hands on top of it.

"It was a mistake," I admitted. "Last Tuesday evening Beverly left the house rather late; it was considerably after nine. I was afraid that she was bound for Rudolph's studio. I followed her, and several blocks beyond Rudolph's place I saw her enter his car."

"But Frank Townsend was in it."

"I did not see who was in the car. I had not yet read the entry in the diary that she had written that day saying that she had a possible appointment that evening with Frank Townsend. I assumed that because it was Rudolph's car, Rudolph was in it, and it seemed clear to me that after what had occurred between them he would meet her for only one purpose. After all, his reputation was at least as bad as Mike Parker's. I returned to the house and went

up to my room, but I was disturbed. I was her mother. It was my duty to go to Rudolph and ask him to let her alone."

"Didn't it ever occur to you to ask her to let the men alone?"

The sinking sun was withdrawing its warmth from the room. My body contracted with a sudden chill.

"The relations between mother and daughter are difficult for a man to understand, Mr. Helm. We are ostensibly intimate, yet there is a barrier between us where men are concerned. Beverly is particularly difficult. She is inclined to evade my questions or to lie when direct answers are required. What was I to do—confront her with the facts I had learned from her diary? And would it have been of any use? No, she would have gone her own way no matter what I had said to her."

His eyes, regarding me steadily, were very grave. "All right, so at ten o'clock that night you went to see Matterson. But if you were sure he was with Beverly, he would certainly be out at that time?"

"I intended to await his return. When I was on his terrace, I was surprised to see him in the living room. I tapped on the window. He admitted me and greeted me cordially. He told me that he was preparing tea for himself in the kitchen and invited me to join him. He wanted to serve the tea in the dining room, but it was not a time to stand on ceremony. I could tell him what I had come to say just as easily across the kitchen table."

I paused. My clasped hands tightened achingly.

"And like Mike Parker, he laughed at you when you asked him to let Beverly alone."

"He was not as crude, but his manner was similar."

"In short, Mrs. Atwood, he told you the truth, which you knew was the truth because you had read the diary."

How I detested the creature leaning his bandaged head against the door!

"You men may call it the truth, but for every weak woman there is a horde of wicked men anxious to take advantage of her. At the least, I had expected Rudolph to be sympathetic to a mother's plea. I cannot recall what he said, but I could not endure his smug, superior attitude."

My voice was unbelievably shrill. It was only in recent weeks that I had experienced these periods of agitation.

"And so you snatched up the bean pot and brought it down on his head," he uttered the blunt words. "You were not so—uh—disturbed that you neglected to wipe the cup and saucer."

"It was a thought that occurred to me as I was about to leave." I had been rocking gently, and that somehow restored my self-possession. "I have read detective stories; I was aware of the possibility of telltale fingerprints."

"Did your husband see you leave the house?"

"George? As far as I know, he didn't. But I had a dreadful experience when I had almost reached the street. A car turned into the driveway. I crouched against the hedge, out of sight of the driver."

He nodded. "Frank Townsend coming home. Your husband must have gone to the studio while you were in the kitchen with Matterson, and he returned here after you'd left."

"George in the studio? I know that he said he came to visit Rudolph at about that time and changed his mind before he reached the house. But what on earth could he have been doing in the studio?"

He made no reply to my question.

Downstairs somebody was weeping—weeping so softly that I had not been aware of it before this. It was Beverly, of course. My poor daughter! Who would sew and knit for her now and buy her beautiful things? Who would protect her from herself? And poor, floundering, inadequate George! He would be lost without me to keep a well-ordered home for him. About myself I no longer

cared. It was too late now for anything but to make them all understand that I had not wanted to do these things.

The policeman was speaking. "But where Frank Townsend was concerned, there was no sudden outburst of emotion. You didn't even go through the motions of pleading with him first. That was cold-blooded, premeditated murder. Though I suppose that after the first couple it became easier."

I picked up my knitting from my lap, but my fingers remained motionless. "He was destroying my daughter—he more than any of the others. I do not know how it is that a man can have such a hold over a woman; in particular, a crude creature like Frank Townsend. I feared that she would run off with him, or that if she did marry David, Frank Townsend would continue to be an obstacle to her happiness. I had thought that it was over between them, but Saturday evening she was in the arbor with him. I realized then that she would never be free of him while he lived."

"Uh-huh. Murder becomes the solution to all problems."

I sought for a retort, but there was a blur in my brain. I started to knit. My fingers were astonishingly clumsy.

"And in order to get rid of him," said he, "you were willing to kill anybody who happened to drink from that bottle."

For a policeman, he was not very acute. I gave him a somewhat superior smile.

"I am sure you are aware of the habits of drunkards. I expected to find a bottle of whiskey in his house, and I did. No, there was little risk that anybody else would drink the whiskey when there was a drunkard in the house. Besides, he lived alone with his sister."

He stared at me so gravely and so steadily and so long that I felt a prickling sensation on my skin.

"May I know what about me holds your attention?" I demanded.

"I'm trying to convince myself that your complacency is real," was his response.

"I am not an excitable person, if that is what you wish to know."

"Not even when you kill." There was a reflective quality in his tone. "Not even then." He took his pipe from his pocket, but made no attempt to light it. He did not even bring it up to his mouth. "All right, murder became a habit. But why me, Mrs. Atwood? Simply because Beverly had taken me to the arbor for a few minutes last night?"

At least I could look him straight in the eye; I could hurl my contempt at him.

"You were the worst of them, Mr. Helm. I must say for the others that they had not been married, but you have a wife." He opened his mouth as if to protest; I cut him off. "You're all the same, you men. No sooner did you come to Rexton than you started to carry on with that Rachel Townsend. Don't try to deny it; Dorothy Ebling told me. Your wife wasn't enough for you and that harlot Rachel wasn't enough for you. You needed my daughter also."

No, I wasn't excitable by nature, but now I found myself trembling with the violence of my outburst. I paused to regain control over myself.

He uttered no word in his defense. He stood with his pipe in his hand and his face almost as pale as the bandage around his head, and he appeared to be waiting for me to go on.

When I spoke again, my tone was listless. "This noon I went to call on you to plead with you to let my daughter alone. I found the note from Margaret Hoopes on the table, and then I saw you come to the house. I did not intend to kill you when I snatched up the fire tongs. Hurt you a little, yes, to punish you, but not to kill you."

"You would have struck me again and finished me off if I hadn't started to turn and scare you off."

I didn't know. I could not clearly remember the moment.

All I could remember was a fury I had not known in my life until recent weeks.

"Does it matter?" With an effort of will, I was compelling myself to knit. "You saw me as I left the house, and you came."

"I didn't see you, Mrs. Atwood."

"But you knew that I . . . ."

He shook his head. "I was pretty sure you were the killer, but not as sure as a cop must be. Not positive till you confessed a few minutes ago."

I rocked in my chair. There was no tumult in me. I was only very, very tired.

"So it was unnecessary," I murmured. "I had only to keep my mouth closed."

"Maybe."

I discarded the knitting and clasped my hands. I felt quite sad.

"It is better this way," I told him quietly. "I am a somewhat placid woman, Mr. Helm, but it was not easy living more lives than one. I have already died several deaths. One more will not matter."

He blinked once and then the corners of his thin mouth lifted. "Uh-huh. Snooping, of course. You were on the stairs last night when your husband and I read the diary, and you heard us talk about *The Ballad of Reading Gaol.* You were used to snooping, Mrs. Atwood—reading Beverly's diary, following her when she went out on dates, no doubt listening in on everything that went on."

"It is my duty to know what is happening in my household."

He put his pipe into his mouth, sucked on it as if it were a candystick, then removed it.

"Tell me," asked the policeman, "do you believe what you told me?"

I gave him a scornful smile. "You do not believe my confession, Mr. Helm?"

"That you murdered them? I have no doubt that you did. But why you did is something else. I don't think that you know why yourself."

The policeman had a definitely irritating manner. "I believe I made clear that I was protecting my daughter from the men who were taking advantage of her."

"And that you'd keep murdering until she finally settled down as David Reese's wife? And after that too, if necessary?"

How could I reply to what was hazy and obscure?

"No, Mrs. Atwood," he was saying. "That's too much on the surface for mass murder. Too irrationally rational. I think that the real reason was that you were jealous of your daughter."

I did not know why his absurd words should drive terror into my heart. My hands clasped fiercely, as if holding a priceless possession they must not relinquish.

"I remember now that you said something like that when you came in. Jealous!" I heard myself laugh. "Of what, pray, would I be jealous?"

"Of your daughter," said the policeman solemnly. "Of her way with men. Of the men themselves."

My laughter was like a wall shielding me from him. I laughed and I spoke.

"Is that supposed to be Freudian?"

"Good stuff, Freud. Homicide cops ought to study him. You didn't live a normal life, Mrs. Atwood. You married a man you didn't care for. You drew yourself into yourself, into a room of your own, into a shell of your own. As Beverly put it in her diary, you were remote from the world. But a woman can't simply resign from the world and remain normal and healthy in her mind. You came to hate your daughter who was born of a loveless, frustrated marriage."

"Hate her!" I rose to my feet screaming at him. "She

was all I had. I slaved for her, sewed for her, worshiped her, lived for her."

"And your subconscious hated her. She was very much like you and she was living the life denied to you. Protect her? From Frank Townsend who could be trusted with any woman anywhere? From Rudolph Matterson who was trying his best to ward her off? From me who had hardly known her? Only Mike Parker fits in, and he was trying to drop her. You were killing her again and again through the men she cared for."

"No!" The word passed my lips calmly. I had screamed for perhaps the first time in my adult life; I had been disturbed as never before. Now, like a blanket whisking over me, a sense of placidity returned.

"So you went to plead with Parker and Matterson and me to let her alone," continued the policeman remorselessly. "You ended up by killing two of them and trying to kill me. Whether or not your conscious mind knew it, you had intended to murder from the beginning. As for Frank Townsend, you didn't even rationalize his murder by pretending to talk to him first. His death was carefully arranged beforehand because he was the man Beverly loved most."

"You lie, Mr. Helm."

My knitting had fallen to the floor with my rising from the chair. I stooped for it and placed it on the dresser and returned to the rocker, where I sat facing him. I spoke quietly enough. "The proof that you lie was my attitude toward David Reese. I wished her to marry him."

"Because her diary made it clear that she cared for him less than for the others. She held onto him only because he was the best bet as a husband. If she had married him, you would have seen to it that it wouldn't have lasted. You would have killed him in another way, by making him miserable."

"You lie, Mr. Helm."

He could not touch me with his lies. He could not make me die more deaths than I had already died, except the ultimate death which would be like falling asleep after a wearying day. Let his lies go on. I was invulnerable to them.

He did not speak. I lifted my gaze from my clasped hands. His back was to me; he was opening the door.

He stepped out into the hall. One of his hands remained in the room, on the door jamb.

"Sheriff, come and get your prisoner," he called.

I rose to my feet. My legs were unsteady; I put out a hand to cling to the edge of the dresser.

"You lie, Mr. Helm!" I shouted at him.

23. David Reese

THURSDAY, MAY 22—2:20 P. M.

WHEN I RETURNED to the office, Rachel was on the phone. She blew me a kiss with one finger as she said into the mouthpiece, "I know, Mr. Ettinger, but—" which was as far as Mr. Ettinger ever let anybody get with a sentence.

I tossed my hat on a filing cabinet, sat down at my desk, and waited. Mr. Ettinger had sold his house through me and was annoyed because the title search was delaying the closing. Phoned every day to explain his annoyance in endless detail.

Rachel turned slightly in her chair as she listened to Mr. Ettinger's cackling. From where I sat I had a fine view of her profile. That was her best feature except her eyes. The only thing I wanted to do more than look at her was to be closer to her.

I picked up a pencil and ran it through my fingers. The Williams house in Cook Valley was for sale. Too large for us at present, but in time we could use that west wing for a nursery and later the upstairs room with the dormers for the oldest child's room, and the—

"Well, darling?"

She'd got rid of Mr. Ettinger. She'd turned to face me, her dark eyes grave now.

I tumbled off the cloud. Down to the depressing reality of thirty minutes ago.

I said, "Beverly and her father were packing when I got

there. They're driving to Boston to stay with his brother for a while. Mr. Atwood got a leave of absence from the school for the rest of the term. I was glad you made me go to see them. Seems they've been mostly alone these two last days."

"How are they taking it?"

I bounced the pencil on the desk blotter. "Beverly is in a pretty bad state. Blames herself for what her mother did. I guess it is her fault in a way. She was clinging to her father all the time I was there. Not really clinging to him, but staying beside him, holding his hand, not letting him out of her sight. Like a child who is frightened and afraid her father will leave her."

"She has nobody else," Rachel said.

"It's more than that. Once she'd told me that her father didn't like her. When I was there today, I got a feeling that there was a deep understanding between them. And Mr. Atwood said something when I was leaving. I told him how sorry I was. He said, 'Yes, for those poor men who died and for Kathryn and for Beverly. But don't be sorry for me, David. I've found a daughter.' I don't know why that should have embarrassed me, but it did."

Rachel looked toward the street. "I suppose they'll come back for the trial."

"If there is a trial," I said. "On the way back I stopped off to see Joe Rubenstein. He'd agreed to handle the defense. He said that if a man had done all that, or if there'd been only one victim, he would have a tough job. But Mrs. Atwood is such a sweet, respectable, middle-aged woman that no jury will believe she was sane. He's pretty sure that, at the worst, she'll be sent to a mental institution."

We were silent for a while. I was wondering about insanity. It was a legal term. Psychiatrists had a different way of putting it.

"Ben Helm was here," Rachel said. "He came to say good-bye. He's flying to the west coast to see his wife."

I went to her desk and stood at the side of her chair. Looked down at her. "I'm grateful to the sleuth," I said. "If he hadn't broken the case, you would've gone through life wondering if I was a murderer."

"Dave, don't ever say that again!"

"Sure, you would have loved me and believed in me as much as you could, but there would have been a core of doubt. That's what murder does to innocent bystanders. Beverly suspected her father, and for a while you suspected your brother, and I—"

"Please, Dave, let's not talk about it ever again."

Her face was turned up to me. I put an arm about her shoulders and dipped my mouth to hers.

"Not here, darling," she protested. "People can see from the street."

"Let them see," I said.

A SELECTED LIST OF POCKET BOOK TITLES

Believing always in giving the reader a break, we have from the very beginning tried—and we think successfully—to publish the best possible books at the lowest possible price. Modern best sellers, mysteries, classics, reference books, biography, history, travel, inspiration, and anthologies have been made available in an attractive, easy-to-read, easy-to-handle format. Printed from brand-new plates made from completely reset, clear type. POCKET BOOK editions are complete and unabridged, so you can be sure of getting everything included in the original higher-priced editions. New POCKET BOOK titles are issued each month. If you cannot get certain titles from your dealer, order from POCKET BOOKS, Inc., 18 West 48th St., New York 19, N. Y., remitting 25 cents plus 5 cents for postage and wrapping.

THE BEST OF THE WORLD'S READING—FOR ONLY 25c

Recent POCKET BOOK Publications

The Foolish Virgin
by Kathleen Norris

More Deaths Than One
by Bruno Fischer

The Longhorn Feud
by Max Brand

The Big Midget Murders
by Craig Rice

Student Nurse
by Lucy Agnes Hancock

Age of Consent
by Norman Lindsay

Peabody's Mermaid
by Guy & Constance Jones

4. Topper *by Thorne Smith.* Hilarious adventure—a sophisticated riot that the movie could only hint at!

62. The Pocket Book of Verse. A treasury of English and American favorites, from Chaucer to Carl Sandburg. Nearly 250 poems.

68. How to Win Friends and Influence People *by Dale Carnegie.* The book which has helped more than 3,000,000 people to know themselves.

91. The Pocket Book of Short Stories *edited by M. E. Speare.* 363 pages of the world's great stories by 21 masters of fiction.

104. Nana *by Emile Zola.* The scarlet story of one of literature's most vivid courtesans, here is one of the all time best-sellers—an exciting story and a great classic by Emile Zola, the celebrated French realist.

175. Green Light *by Lloyd C. Douglas.* One of Lloyd Douglas's most famous stories and a popular motion picture concerning a young doctor who sacrifices his career for an ideal.

181. The Pocket Cook Book *edited by Elizabeth Woody and the food staff of McCall's Magazine.* Over 1300 recipes, with extra hints on food preparation, leftovers, pennystretchers, and nutrition.

314. The Bishop's Jaegers *by Thorne Smith.* A wickedly gay and irrepressible book about a bishop, young love, and a nudist colony, written by the author of the famous Topper books.

360. The Stephen Vincent Benét Pocket Book *edited by Robert Van Gelder.* A panorama of adventure and beauty by a celebrated American author with magic in his pen.

377. The Pocket Book of Baby and Child Care *by Benjamin Spock, M.D.* A common-sense guide to the care of children from infancy to adolescence, with practical, easy-to-understand answers to all the everyday problems. Illustrated by Dorothea Fox.

383. Roget's Pocket Thesaurus. Synonyms and antonyms arranged *according to subject*—as necessary as a dictionary to everyone who wishes to speak and write effectively.

384. The Pocket Book of Ghost Stories *edited by Philip Van Doren Stern.* Thirteen tales of horror and the supernatural by masters of the fantastic—Alexander Woollcott, Oliver Onions, Hugh Walpole, Sheridan Le Fanu, Algernon Blackwood, and many others.

387. White Banners *by Lloyd C. Douglas.* The author of *Magnificent Obsession* tells the story of the Ward family who carried "not white flags, but white banners!"

392. The Pocket Book of Erskine Caldwell Stories. Here are famous stories of humor, passion, and realism by the author of *Tobacco Road* and *God's Little Acre.*

396. Laugh with Leacock *by Stephen Leacock.* The cream of Leacock's hilarious stories and articles in one intoxicating draught.

397. The Pocket Atlantic *edited by Edward Weeks.* Short stories and articles selected from one of America's great magazines.

404. Past Imperfect *by Ilka Chase.* Ilka Chase, the minx in mink, combines wit with solid gold glamour in her cockeyed personal history which "makes the present perfect . . . and the perfect present."

405. Forgive Us Our Trespasses *by Lloyd C. Douglas.* The story of the brilliant Dinny Brumm, who hated his fellow men until a secret from the past restored his faith.

406. Runyon a la Carte *by Damon Runyon.* The daffy Jills and Jacks of Broadway are gathered here in twelve hilarious stories about sentimental toughs with down-to-earth vigor and lusty laughter.

408. The Lost God and Other Adventure Stories *by John Russell.* Tales of adventure, of fortune hunters of the coral seas, of cannibals in the Solomon Islands, by a master of swift, compact, and unpredictable plots.

409. The Glorious Pool *by Thorne Smith.* Hilarious sex, ribald magic, and fantastic plot—the author of *Topper* is master of them all.

412. Slim *by William Wister Haines.* A tale of action, realism, and heroism about the adventures of a high-tension wire worker.

413. The Sea of Grass *by Conrad Richter.* A brilliant, stirring novel of the great American West, in the days when cattle barons fought the homesteaders. . . . By one of America's foremost authors.

415. Frenchman's Creek *by Daphne du Maurier.* By the author of *Rebecca,* this is a story about a beautiful lady who sought escape on Cornwall's moors and found a pirate whose skill in art was surpassed only by his skill in love.

417. The Peter Arno Pocket Book. Here are all the intimately familiar, laughter-compelling inhabitants of the world as Arno sees it in his famous cartoons.

418. The Razor's Edge *by W. Somerset Maugham.* Famous as a Literary Guild selection and motion picture, this story of a search for faith is woven into a plot of mysterious romance against a background of Paris, the Riviera, and India.

421. The Merriam-Webster Pocket Dictionary. Surpassing all other pocket-size dictionaries in authority, convenience, and daily usefulness, here is a volume of 25,000 definitions, synonyms, antonyms, American and British variants, abbreviations, and statistics.

424. The Pocket Treasury *edited by Louis Untermeyer, Philip Van Doren Stern, Eric Swenson, and Caryl Brooks.* Stories, articles, poems, cartoons, a quiz—a pocketful of reading pleasure.

426. The Second Believe It or Not *by Robert L. Ripley.* Page after page of unbelievable facts. Truths about how queer, amusing, horrible, and incredible a world we live in.

428. The Night Life of the Gods *by Thorne Smith.* The author of *Topper* and *The Glorious Pool* plunges into another ribald adventure —this time with a group of singularly uninhibited Olympian gods and goddesses who try to make up for thousands of frustrating years as museum statues.

430. Good Night, Sweet Prince *by Gene Fowler.* The story of John Barrymore of which the *N. Y. Times* said: "Everything that he was is interwoven in a pattern gay with anecdote, gallant with laughter, touched with pain . . ."

431. The Pocket Book of Famous French Short Stories *edited by Eric Swenson.* Sixteen unexpurgated, fast-reading English translations—romance and realism by Balzac, de Maupassant, Zola, and others.

433. The Song of Bernadette *by Franz Werfel.* The life of Bernadette of Lourdes and of her great miracle is one of the most famous and beautiful stories of modern times.

435. Father Malachy's Miracle *by Bruce Marshall.* By the author of *The World, the Flesh, and Father Smith,* here is the gay story of a little man who believed in miracles—in fact he started a miracle which caused a great deal of trouble in Scotland.

440. Wife for Sale *by Kathleen Norris.* The romance of a woman torn between love and a desire for security, and of an unusual marriage in today's world—by the author of *The Foolish Virgin.*

441. The Shepherd of the Hills *by Harold Bell Wright.* One of the most popular and continuous best sellers in book history. A strange tale of love, hate, revenge, and mystery in the Ozark Mountains.

442. Daisy Kenyon *by Elizabeth Janeway,* author of *The Walsh Girls.* An attractive woman and two men try to find happiness in the confused world of the 1940's.

443. The Postman Always Rings Twice *by James M. Cain.* The celebrated story from which the Lana Turner-John Garfield motion picture was made. A tale of passion, suspense, and breathless speed.

445. Private Duty *by Faith Baldwin.* A romantic story about a pretty nurse whose problems were far from medical—they concerned a doctor, a patient, and a playboy, each of whom wanted to marry her.

446. The Pocket Book of O. Henry Prize Stories *edited by Herschel Brickell.* Twenty of the best American short stories written during the last twenty-eight years. Each a winner of the O. Henry Award.

447. Turnabout *by Thorne Smith.* An utterly mad and hilarious comedy about a young couple whose sexes are switched by an Egyptian god. By the author of *Topper* and *The Glorious Pool.*

449. My Ten Years in a Quandary *by Robert Benchley.* A collection of Benchley's most famous and most hilarious stories and articles. As the *New York Times* said, "It is a saga of the gaga, and probably not far from his masterpiece."

450. The Second Pocket Book of Crossword Puzzles *by Margaret Petherbridge.* Eighty new crosswords ranging from the easy, dictionary definition type to those that will challenge the ingenuity of experts.

452. Dracula *by Bram Stoker.* The most famous tale of horror ever written. A sinister being rises from his coffin at midnight, seeking the blood of his victims . . . Bela Lugosi's most terrifying motion picture role.

456. District Nurse *by Faith Baldwin.* The romance of a district nurse who discovered that marriage was a dangerous dream.

457. Pitcairn's Island *by Charles Nordhoff and James Norman Hall.* The magnificently exciting sequel to *Mutiny on the Bounty* and *Men Against the Sea.* "A story of great depth and terror and beauty."

462. How Green Was My Valley *by Richard Llewellyn.* A National Book Award winner and one of the most popular motion pictures of our time—a "full-bodied, full-flavored novel" about a Welsh family.

467. Circle C Moves In *by Brett Rider.* A hard-punching Western about the fights in thickets and canyons, the shooting in the streets, and the dry-gulching that took place when Donal Cameron moved the Circle C outfit into the New Mexico country.

469. Kitty *by Rosamond Marshall.* Kitty (played by Paulette Goddard in the motion picture) was a lusty, irresistible wench. By virtue of her varied charms she rose from a girl of the eighteenth century London streets to become Duchess of Malminster.

477. Tales from the Decameron *by Giovanni Boccaccio.* One of the merriest collections of stories concerning amorous adventure ever written. Acclaimed by critics as a great work of art.

480. Passion Flower *by Kathleen Norris.* The romance of a rich girl who eloped with a poor man only to find that love, jealousy, hate, and happiness are emotions of rich and poor alike. By the author of *Wife for Sale.*

482. Deep Summer *by Gwen Bristow.* The passionate struggle of a Puritan girl and a Louisiana cavalier—adventure in the days before and during the American Revolution.

483. The King's General *by Daphne du Maurier.* Only Miss du Maurier is able to do justice to the hairbreadth escapes and exciting events of this lusty tale.

486. If Winter Comes *by A. S. M. Hutchinson.* Based on the spiritual truth revealed to the world some nineteen hundred years ago, this is not only a thrilling tale but an important work of art.

487. The Yukon Trail *by William MacLeod Raine.* A story of romance and adventure set against a background of rugged mountains, wide open spaces, and untamed nature.

489. I Am Gazing Into My 8-Ball *by Earl Wilson.* A gay and intimate account of New York night life by the Saloon Editor of the *New York Post,* whose beat covers any place with a liquor license.

493. The Flying Yorkshireman and Other Stories *by Eric Knight.* Ten fabulous stories which hit a delirious high for tall tales.

494. My Favorite Sport Stories *by Bill Stern.* 150 amazing tales and humorous anecdotes from the world of sports.

495. Carry On, Jeeves! *by P. G. Wodehouse.* Jeeves, the servant supreme!—as shrewd and as funny as ever. Inspired comedy that will delight everyone who loves to laugh.

511. We Took to the Woods *by Louise Dickinson Rich.* A writer relates her initiation into the life of the woods. How she sheds her city prejudice and awakens to the beauty and wholesomeness of her new life is an engrossing story.

516. Tales of the South Pacific *by James A. Michener.* A collection of tales set against the background of the South Pacific as told by a young naval officer during the war.

522. Freud: His Dream and Sex Theories *by Joseph Jastrow.* A penetrating study of the famous Freudian doctrines. The entire structure of psychoanalysis is clearly outlined to give us a better understanding of this controversial subject.

MYSTERY AND DETECTIVE STORIES

by ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

106. The Case of the Lucky Legs
138. The Case of the Caretaker's Cat
157. The Case of the Counterfeit Eye
177. The Case of the Curious Bride
201. The Case of the Stuttering Bishop
223. The Case of the Lame Canary
242. The Case of the Substitute Face
252. The Case of the Dangerous Dowager
277. The Case of the Sleepwalker's Niece
378. The Case of the Perjured Parrot
414. The Case of the Baited Hook
438. The Clue of the Forgotten Murder
464. The Case of the Rolling Bones
468. The Case of the Silent Partner
512. This Is Murder

by ELLERY QUEEN

77. The Roman Hat Mystery
99. Adventures of Ellery Queen
459. The Dragon's Teeth
471. The Door Between
517. The Murderer Is a Fox

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

5. The Murder of Roger Ackroyd
341. The Body in the Library
398. Towards Zero
451. Remembered Death
465. Death Comes as the End
485. The Hollow

---

389. The Lady in the Lake *by Raymond Chandler*
391. The Lucky Stiff *by Craig Rice*
411. Death on the Aisle *by Frances and Richard Lockridge*
419. Before the Fact *by Francis Iles*
425. The G-String Murders *by Gypsy Rose Lee*
427. The Innocent Flower *by Charlotte Armstrong*
432. Malice Aforethought *by Francis Iles*
434. The Sunday Pigeon Murders *by Craig Rice*
437. Death and the Dancing Footman *by Ngaio Marsh*
439. A Time to Die *by Hilda Lawrence*
444. The Unsuspected *by Charlotte Armstrong*
448. Castle Skull *by John Dickson Carr*
454. Dread Journey *by Dorothy B. Hughes*
461. The Thursday Turkey Murders *by Craig Rice*
475. Death of a Peer *by Ngaio Marsh*
476. The Corpse Steps Out *by Craig Rice*
478. Death and the Gilded Man *by Carter Dickson*
479. Did She Fall? *by Thorne Smith*
492. The Deadly Pavilion *by Hilda Lawrence*
501. Payoff for the Banker *by Frances & Richard Lockridge*
521. More Deaths Than One *by Bruno Fischer*
524. The Double Take *by Roy Huggins*
527. Final Curtain *by Ngaio Marsh*
528. The Big Midget Murders *by Craig Rice*

New POCKET BOOK titles added each month—this list as of August, 1948

If you cannot get certain POCKET BOOK titles you want from your dealer, order direct from Pocket Books, Inc., 18 West 48th Street, New York 19, N.Y., remitting 25 cents each plus 5 cents a copy for postage and wrapping.

Printed in U.S.A.

A GENUINE POCKET BOOK

MODEL KILLS ARTIST?

"I can see why Matterson was eager to paint you," the detective said.

Beverly Atwood was glad she was wearing her white knit jersey Basque shirt. It was very good for her kind of figure.

"I never posed for Rudy," she said.

Beverly ran her palms slowly down her Basque shirt. The detective's eyes followed her hands.

"Your father knew Matterson tried to attack you!"

—•—

The women in this case don't hesitate to use sex to get themselves out of tight corners. But Detective Ben Helm grimly follows the thin red line of passion that leads from the murder of artist Rudy Matterson to more killings, and finally, to one of six people. But which one?

"Reveals the workings of each suspect's mind," says the *New York Times*, "yet still keeps the culprit a shrouded specter until the last chapter!"

POCKET BOOKS

are carefully selected from the lists of all leading publishers. They bring you the world's best reading in editions of highest quality at the lowest possible price.

Front cover illustration by WILLIAM WIRTZ

PERMA-GLOSS
REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.
PRINTED IN U.S.A.

POCKET BOOKS 521 MORE DEATHS THAN ONE · BRUNO FISCHER