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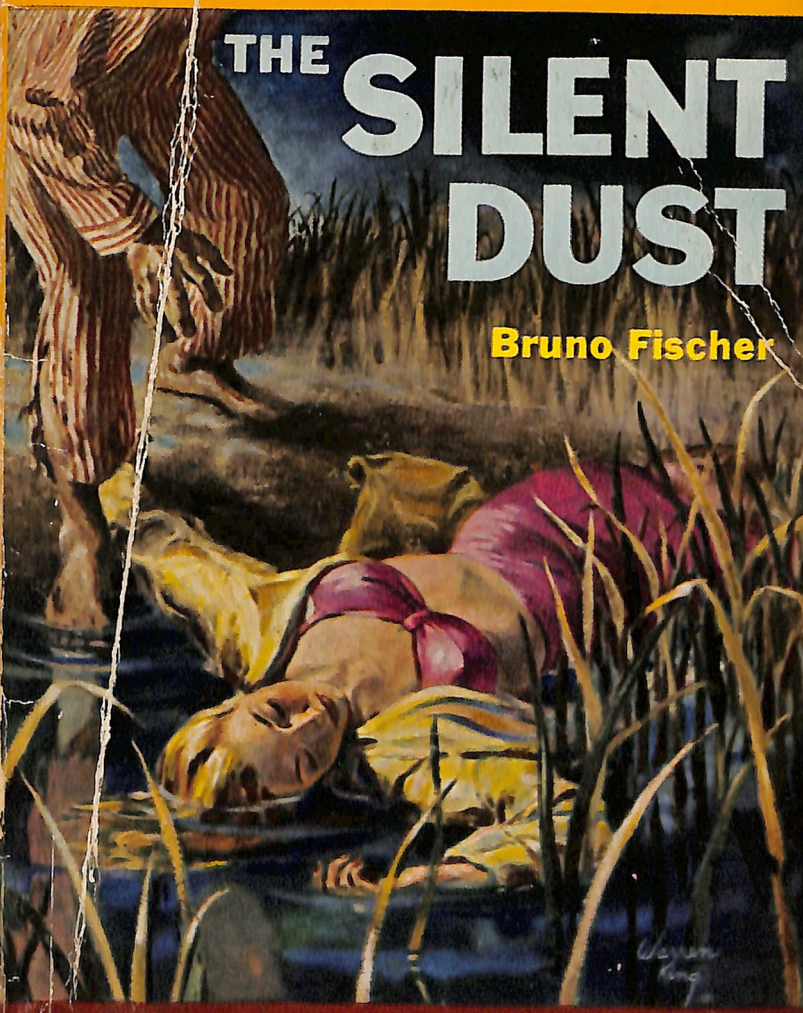
N·A·L SIGNET BOOKS

A Secret Scandal Leads To Murder



A SIGNET BOOK

Complete and Unabridged

The Perfect Murder

"I believe you can help me out," she said somewhat breathlessly.

"I need an air-tight, foolproof way to murder somebody."

Ben Helm, ace private eye, happily married to a beautiful actress, suddenly receives a call from a former sweetheart who demands that he supply her with a perfect murder technique. She claims she needs it for a novel she's writing, but when she is found dead during a gay Long Island week-end, Ben begins to wonder—and worry.

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The Silent Dust

by

Bruno Fischer

A SIGNET BOOK
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Chapter One

SHE PHONED ME at the apartment the Friday before Labor Day. The name she gave, Elaine Coyle Lennan, meant nothing to me until she added with a coy titter: "Don't tell me that you've forgotten Elly Coyle after only eighteen years."

"Oh," I said. "How are you, Elly?"

"Ben Helm, nobody's called me Elly in ages. Not even my husband. It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

"Uh-huh," I muttered politely, and waited for her to ask whatever favor she had in mind. I couldn't think of any other reason why she would get in touch with me.

"I believe you can help me out," she said somewhat breathlessly. "I need an air-tight, fool-proof way to murder somebody."

And she tittered.

"That shouldn't be so hard," I told her. "Whom do you want to murder?"

The silence on the line was so deep that I could hear her breathe. She wheezed.

"I'm serious," she said. "We can't discuss it over the phone. Can you come here? I'm in a bar on Forty-eighth Street, just east of Seventh. Stacey's. Can you hurry?"

"Well—"

"Ben, I need you. You're the one person who must know how to get away with murder."

Within an hour I would have to be in that neighborhood anyway to pick up Greta. I told Elaine I would meet her in fifteen minutes.

"You always were a dear," she said. "And, Ben, please don't delay."

She hung up. I dialed the theater where Greta was rehearsing and left word for her to meet me at Stacey's when she was through.

I put on a necktie and jacket. The apartment, eleven floors above Central Park, was open to a breeze. That was more than you got on the steaming street below. The day was sticky. Though Greta and I weren't going anywhere for the long weekend, I didn't want rain to spoil it for the millions who were. I walked a couple of blocks down Central Park West before I caught a cab.

Stacey's was almost deserted. It was four-thirty, a quiet hour, especially on the Friday before a holiday. Two men at the bar were watching the Giants on television, and the only

woman in the place sat off by herself at a far table. She waved to me.

I recognized her smile. It was the only thing about her that was the same, the mouth remaining compressed with only the corners lifting, as if she restrained herself from giving too much of herself.

"Ben," she said, thrusting a moist, pudgy hand at me. "Why, you've hardly changed except that you're starting to lose your hair."

The gallant thing would have been to say something similar to her, but I wasn't that gallant. Over the years her ripe curves had loosened and deepened; she was now a blowsy, flabby-faced woman rushing toward middle age a lot faster than she should have. And her clothes didn't help. Under a tiny blue jacket that hung limply from meaty shoulders, she wore a white, filmy, elaborately-filled blouse, and at her monumental bosom there was a big jabot like meringue topping on cake. On her head drooped a huge velvet beret.

But she didn't look insane, and I couldn't see her luring me here for a practical joke.

I sat down and said: "Elly, what's this about wanting to murder somebody?"

She was drinking a brandy Alexander. She sipped and put the glass down and broadened her smile a bit. Her lipstick had too much orange in it and she had overdone the rouge on her plump cheeks.

"Please, not Elly," she said. "I used that name over the phone only to identify myself. These days I'm hardly the Elly type. Remember how you hated to be called Benny?"

"All right, Elaine," I said. "What's the gag?"

The only waiter in the place came over. I ordered beer.

"So Ben Helm became a policeman," she said when we were again alone. "Who would have thought it?"

"I'm no longer a policeman. I'm a private investigator."

"And a very clever one, I've been told. Is it true that you write and lecture on criminology?"

"Uh-huh," I said. "I know all the tricks of murder. Who's to be your victim?"

The titter came, a completely unpleasant sound. With a sense of narrowly escaped doom I recalled how one night, after having taken Elly Coyle canoeing in moonlight, I had briefly debated with myself whether I was in love with her. Maybe if at that time there hadn't been still a year of college ahead of me and no immediate way to support a wife, I would have kept in touch with her after the summer, which could have led to anything.

"I haven't yet given the victim a name," she was saying, "but he will be a stupid and namby-pamby sort of fellow."

The waiter brought my beer. I felt ridiculous. When he was gone, I said sourly, "Are you a writer?" and drank.

Elaine laughed. The jabot on her bosom shook. "Did you actually believe that I was preparing to murder somebody?"

"I kept an open mind."

"I assure you that if I did plan murder I wouldn't broadcast my intention." Over the rim of the glass tilted to her mouth mocking eyes studied me. Many women with round, full faces were rather pretty; she had completely lost all that. "I see," she said. "You rushed here because you thought I might be a homicidal maniac."

"Wasn't it your idea to make me rush here?"

She put down the glass. "You're angry," she said peevishly, as if nothing could be more unreasonable. "I just came from my publisher and I'm tired and I have a long train ride ahead."

"Where do you live?"

"Right here in New York, uptown on Riverside Drive. In the winter, that is. Thayer and I rented a summer cottage in New Rod. Thayer is my husband, of course; he's in advertising. Do you know where New Rod is?"

"Long Island?"

"On the north shore. Ben, are you doing anything this weekend?"

Instantly I was on guard.

"I'm not sure what arrangements my wife has made," I hedged.

"She would have told you if she'd made any. I'd love for both of you to come out to New Rod."

"You didn't trick me into meeting you here just to give me an invitation," I said.

The fact that her glass was empty displeased her. She pushed it aside.

"Really, I had to see you today, and I didn't want to give you a chance to say you were busy," she said. "Don't you think it was clever the way I worked up suspense? After all, suspense is a writer's stock in trade."

"And mine is murder, but I don't encourage it."

"Ben, you're fascinatingly suspicious." The jabot quivered. "No doubt that's the policeman in you. I really am a writer and I restrict my violence to my typewriter. Do you read?"

"I can hold my own with most sentences."

"You know very well I mean books and the better magazines. I'm sure you don't because then you would have heard of Elaine Coyle Lennan. My short stories appear everywhere and I have done two quite successful novels. In fact, I've just finished my third." She leaned forward as if to tell me something in deepest confidence. "This one will create a sensation. One of the big book clubs is sure to take it."

"Is the book about murder?"

"Oh, no. There does happen to be a murder in it, but that's not—" She broke off to shout to the waiter for another Alexander.

Reluctantly he moved away from direct view of the television screen.

"Don't get the idea that I write mysteries," she said haughtily. "I treat murder seriously, like Dostoyevsky and Dreiser—as a profound interplay of emotions and social conflicts. My book is finished. This is a short story I am planning to start next week. I want it to be a perfect crime, but I can't quite work it out. I've heard so much about you, Ben, and as we were once friends, really close friends, I was sure you wouldn't mind."

She beamed ingratiatingly.

"How did you get a line on me?" I asked.

"From Laura Canell. I understand that she's your wife's friend."

"Sort of," I said. "One of Laura's ex-husbands was a producer and she's been hanging around the theater ever since."

"I saw your wife in a bit of fluff entitled *Call Me Early*. She acts under the name of Greta Murdock, doesn't she? A rather tall brunette."

"Uh-huh."

"Her part wasn't much and I can't say I was impressed by what acting she did."

That was to pay me back for not being acquainted with the writings of Elaine Coyle Lennan. I didn't resent it. Greta would never be a star, which was all right with me if not with her.

"Of course I had no idea she was your wife until I heard it from Laura Canell," she went on. "Laura is Muriel Rauch's sister-in-law. You must remember Muriel. She worked with us at the Manne House that summer. At the time she was Muriel Gregory."

"That pale, frail blonde who always hung around with you?"

"If anything, Muriel is now paler and frailer, though of course she touches up her hair. She's married to Laura's brother, Hugo Rauch. You must have heard of him." She paused and then added with envious distaste: "Hugo is fabulously rich."

"Sorry," I said. "There seem to be rich men as well as writers whose fame has passed me by."

"Well, Muriel and I have been friends since we were girls together in Indiana. We've kept more or less in touch, and this summer Thayer and I rented a cottage near the Rauch estate." She couldn't keep her mouth from twisting into bit-

terness. "Our cottage is rather humble compared to the Rauch mansion. I hadn't Muriel's luck in hooking a wealthy husband."

She glanced up as the waiter set down a brandy Alexander. She sipped and tittered to herself. I decided that she was at least slightly drunk.

"Laura Canell lives with her brother and Muriel," she chattered. "One evening I was there and Laura happened to mention you. When I heard your name, I asked her to describe you, and Muriel and I both agreed that you must be the Ben Helm who had been lifeguard at the Manne House back in 1932." She sat back. "So here I am consulting a friend and authority on murder."

I dug out my pipe and pouch and got down to the business at hand. "Who's going to knock off your victim?"

"His wife—the heroine of my story."

"Has she a lover?"

"Is that important?"

"Generally. The cops see an almost inevitable pattern when the wife of a murdered man has a lover."

"No lover. My heroine is merely fed up with her husband and prefers him dead."

"Some heroine!"

"I try to understand my characters, not judge them," she told me crisply. "This murder must appear as a perfectly natural death. She mustn't have even a shadow of suspicion directed at her."

"She doesn't want much, does she? Well, let's see what we can do for her. Have an electric bath cabinet in her house. The husband is fat and uses it for reducing."

"And he's electrocuted," Elaine sneered. "I'm surprised at you. That's been done hundreds of times in fiction."

"Let me finish. I know electrocution is corny. Just before he enters the cabinet she gives him a drink spiked with barbital. He falls asleep in the cabinet and dies comfortably of dehydration. All traces of the drug are sweated out of his body. There's absolutely no evidence."

Elaine still didn't care for it, though I thought it rather cute along strictly fictional lines.

"The husband isn't fat," she argued, "so he wouldn't take a reducing bath."

"Make him fat. You're the writer."

"He wouldn't be in character as a fat man. Besides, wouldn't that at least appear as an accidental death? I don't want a murder that looks like accident or suicide—nothing that will lead to the remotest police investigation. She must be completely free from annoyance."

"Then don't you think that in all fairness she shouldn't

annoy her husband while murdering him? I assure you that death by dehydration is quite pleasant."

"He can die unpleasantly for all I care. What about insulin? Is it possible to determine the cause of death from an overdose?"

"Only if the medical examiner makes a blood-sugar estimation and finds a very low sugar content. The post-mortem findings aren't characteristic, so unless he has a notion of the cause of death he wouldn't make the test. And if she lives in a community where they have the usual inefficient coroner system, which means most of the country, the chance is good that she'd get away with it."

"But there's also a chance that she wouldn't, isn't there?"

I sighed. "Wouldn't your heroine accept even one hundred to one odds?"

"No odds. Certainly."

"I like your heroine less and less," I said. "Let her use pure nicotine. A few drops cause death almost instantly. Given orally, nicotine produces inflammation in the digestive tract, but that can be avoided by injecting it with a hypodermic syringe."

"And it will leave no trace?"

"That again depends on whether there is a post-mortem. The usual needle will leave a mark in the skin."

"Then it's out."

"Let me finish. It's possible to obtain a hypodermic with a needle so fine that it can enter a single pore and leave no sign."

"That's it!" she practically yelled.

Her eyes gleamed avidly, greedily. She reached for her glass; with a convulsive snap her fingers closed around the stem. As she drank, the corners of her mouth lifted in a shocking self-satisfied smile.

2

I renewed the light in my pipe and assured myself that there was no reason to be uneasy. What I had glimpsed in her face —and was now gone as she put down the glass—had been a writer's intense identification with her characters. She was completely engrossed in her story and the problem it presented, that was all.

"Have you a cigarette?" she said.

"I don't use them, but I'll get you some."

I went to the vending machine near the door. On the way back I paused to watch on the television screen an outfielder chase all the way into the Polo Grounds bull pen for a fly. The scoreboard flashed on and I was pleased to note that after eight innings the Giants had a six-two lead over the Braves.

Elaine had finished her drink when I returned.

"No," she declared dismally, mangling the pack to get out a cigarette. "I don't care for drugs and hypodermics any more than bath cabinets. If a gadget must be used, I prefer it to be something found in almost any home."

"The weapons found in almost every home are knives and sash weights. That's why they're so popular."

She said sternly: "I was informed you were an authority. If that's the best you can do . . ." Abruptly she brought up her half-smile and changed her tactics. "I realize, Ben, that I caught you unprepared. Obviously this requires thought. Come up to New Rod this weekend where I can pick your brain at leisure. There's fine swimming in the Sound."

"I'm afraid we can't make it."

And then there was Greta coming through the door, moving past the bar, past the empty tables, with that flowing stride and tall, proud carriage that looked so good on the stage and everywhere else.

"Hello, darling," she said and looked at Elaine.

While I uttered introductions and pulled out a chair, the two women eyed each other with that incisive feminine appraisal that at a glance took in clothes, figure, weight, probably age. I thought they didn't approve of each other's get-up.

Greta was wearing her silk jersey dress, as black as her eyes and hair, form-fitting to her hips and then breaking into pleats. From the turtle-neck collar four little rhinestone men marched down to her luscious left breast. Her hat was an immense black bow on a velvet-covered wire ring, and on her it didn't look silly. Her high-heeled shoes, above the instep, consisted of multicolored strips of leather, yellow and black and green. To please me she wore no make-up but lipstick and needed none.

"You're lovely," Elaine said surprisingly. Greta was, after all, not much younger than herself. "Ben and I are old friends. He spent all one summer making love to me."

Greta shook a cigarette out of Elaine's pack. "You were lucky."

"Well, I certainly enjoyed it at the time." Elaine tittered. "He was really a sweet boy."

I tried not to cringe. A man is never more ridiculous than when caught between two women.

"I've been an admirer of yours for years," Elaine told her shamelessly. "You were simply marvelous in *Call Me Early*. You immersed yourself so completely in your role, and, my dear, you're so decorative on the stage."

Greta's dimple showed. She was as human as anybody else. I wondered what possible favor Elaine wanted from her.

"I can especially appreciate acting because I am also an

artist, though a creative artist," Elaine went on. "I write fiction. Did you catch my name? Elaine Coyle Lennan." And she watched Greta's face for reaction.

Greta was more judicious than I, and she was an actress. "Oh, of course. Elaine Coyle Brennan."

"Lennan," Elaine said.

"Of course." Greta turned her head. "Darling, I'd like beer."

The waiter wasn't in sight. I stood up and asked Elaine if she'd have another Alexander. She hesitated and then regretfully shook her head. I went to the bar and saw on the screen that the Braves had men on second and third.

"Two in already," the bartender informed me nervously, "and only one down."

He drew two beers. It was the top of the ninth inning with the Giants trying to cling to a six-four lead. Leaning against the bar I watched the batter pop out to short. The bartender sighed. I glanced around; the women were deep in conversation and I had no desire to get back to them. The Braves' batter worked up to a three-and-two count and then pushed a blooper into short right. The right fielder tore in and the second baseman scurried back and the ball dropped between them. Both runners scored. The bartender said a word under his breath. I picked up the glasses and returned to the table.

"Then it's all settled," Elaine was saying enthusiastically to Greta.

I put down the beer glasses. "What's settled?"

"Why, the weekend." Elaine fluffed her jabot. "Greta says she'd love to come."

I opened my mouth and shut it.

Greta said: "Did you know, darling, that Laura Canell lives next door? Laura has been after me all summer for us to come out."

"But of course you'll stay with us," Elaine said. "I have hardly as sumptuous a place, but it's comfortable. And you will have enough time, Ben, to work out the perfect murder. Do you know how to get there?"

"Uh-huh," I muttered, thinking of the ruined three days in which we could have lingered in bed mornings and lounged in the apartment afternoons or gone to a ball game and in the evenings walked in the park with no social turmoil but just each other which was always better than anything else.

Elaine dabbed lipstick on her fleshy mouth. "We live on Kinder Lane. The second house on the right. Be there as early as you can tomorrow afternoon." She gathered up her handbag. "I must run to Penn Station. I hope you don't mind paying for my drinks?"

"No."

"You're still the same sweet boy, Ben."

Standing, she looked shorter than I remembered her. On the way to the door her more than ample hips waddled under a flaring skirt.

When she was outside I heard the throaty chuckle I expected.

"Darling," Greta said, "I'll have to stop dieting if that's the way you prefer your women."

I said: "Eighteen years ago she was built something like you, except maybe a little more here and there, and she was sort of pretty. One summer while I was still going to college I was lifeguard for the Manne House, a swanky Michigan hotel, and she was one of the waitresses. Our love-making was limited to some fairly heavy necking. This is the first time I've seen her since."

"You needn't explain. I'll never be jealous of a woman who dresses like that, though she seems to be clever and you like clever women."

"She's clever, all right." And I told her how she had tricked me into meeting her here and why. "And then she worked on you to accept the invitation she knew I was trying to turn down politely. I should have guessed what she was doing when she gave you that line about being a fine actress, but it didn't occur to me that she was so anxious to lure us out to her place."

"What's wrong with somebody saying I'm a good actress?"

"Nothing. I like to hear it as much as you do."

"Even if you don't agree?" She had that argumentative glitter in her black eyes.

"Don't try to back me into a corner. I'm talking about Elaine Coyle Lennan. Just before you arrived she told me you were a lousy actress."

"Oh." Greta drank beer.

"What's she after?" I said. "If it's merely a plot for a story, she could have asked me to think about it and write her or meet her again in a few days. Why all this hipper-dipper to lure us to New Rod?"

"That's twice you used the word lure. You make it sound sinister. Wouldn't it be fascinating if she really intended to commit murder?"

"Uh-huh. And then maneuver to get me out to her place so that I can make sure she carries it out properly."

"Darling, stop being a detective and buy me a meal. It's too hot to cook. We don't have to go to New Rod. Tomorrow morning I'll phone and say you broke a leg." She leaned against my shoulder and brushed her mouth against my chin. "Darling, it will be nice spending a quiet three days at home."

My hands tingled for her.

"We'll go," I said. "I'm curious."

She nodded, showing her fine teeth and her dimple. "Curious about what? If she still cares for you? Are you sure you don't prefer women a little plumper? Some men do. I'm going to have a thumping big dinner."

"If you put on an extra pound," I said, "I'll buy you an electric reducing cabinet."

3

By early afternoon much of the traffic had been exhausted on the bridges and highways running out of New York. It was possible to move for considerable stretches at a time and the two-hour drive took us hardly more than three hours.

All morning it had threatened rain, but when we reached New Rod the sun welcomed up by breaking through, and steamed the heavy air. The village had the usual dozen stores and two dozen filling stations fringing a single sticky main street overwhelmed by limp shoppers and frantic cars hunting for parking space. We smelled salt water and were anxious to be in it.

A sweating, harassed cop at an intersection gave me directions. We had to go back two miles to Kinder Lane. It was a narrow oiled road running flatly through scrub growth toward Long Island Sound, but there still was no breeze.

The first house we passed was a crumpling shack that looked abandoned. The second, a quarter of a mile farther, was all in one piece, but it needed paint badly and it was very small. A disorganized beach chair lay on unmowed grass; towels and bathing suits dangled over the railing of a miniature porch. I stopped the car and wiped my brow.

"This can't be it," Greta said.

"Elaine said the second house."

"That first place we passed wasn't a house."

I drove on. The road ended at a pair of high wire gates, both open. A paved driveway led through a lot of clipped lawn to a meandering ranch-type, flat-roofed house, very modern, that had more glass to it than gleaming white stucco. Some distance away there was another house, two stories but smaller, probably for servants, and a wide garage. An immense flagstone terrace was partially hidden by flowering shrubs and there was a tennis court with freshly marked lines and not a weed on it. And there was the Sound, temptingly green, and I saw a sandy beach and a cabin cruiser moored to a very long dock.

"Pretty swanky," I commented.

"It ought to be," Greta said. "It belongs to Laura Canell's brother, Hugo Rauch."

"I thought you were never here."

"Darling, living with a detective has taught me ratiocination. I deduced it from the sign at the side of the gate."

The name was there all right, "Rauch," carved on a modest wooden plaque in Old English script. It was partly obscured by an overhanging branch.

"Watson, you amaze me," I said and started to turn the car.

A boy of fourteen or fifteen came through the gate. He was mostly legs in shorts rolled up to his crotch. He carried a white T-shirt over an arm and his bare chest showed ribs, but his shoulders were very good. Disheveled brown hair dangled moistly over a high brow indented at the temples.

I called to him, and when he came over to the car I asked him where the Lennans lived.

"Are you Ben Helm?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."

"Thayer Lennan told me you were expected." The boy looked me over. "A private eye. You don't look like a thug, though doubtless you are."

That delighted Greta. "You must be Shelley."

"You'll call me Spike," he said, "if you wish to be my friend." And past me his gray eyes stared with precocious fascination at where Greta had opened the two top buttons of her blouse for coolness. "And, needless to say, you're Greta Murdock. I've heard you were a tasty dish, and what I can see of you verifies it."

"And you," I said, "need your rear end fanned."

The boy withdrew his head from the window and nodded solemnly. "That's in character. The hard-boiled, two-fisted shamus who is limited to brutality by his own inadequacy."

He was too much for me. I turned to Greta for an explanation.

She was trying not to laugh out loud. "Darling, Shelley is a genius, and doesn't genius excuse anything?"

"Spike," the boy corrected her. He made no protest over the other thing she had called him.

"Not Elaine's?" I said. "She didn't mention a son."

The boy gave an exaggerated shudder. "Fortunately for Elaine's unborn progeny, she's childless."

"He's the Rauch genius," Greta told me. "Laura Canell's nephew. Laura is always talking about him. He's going to enter Columbia this fall just when he's fifteen."

"I wish Laura would keep me out of her insipid conversations," he said. "As for the Lennans, you passed their place a short way up the road. I'm on my way there to play chess with Thayer. I'll go with you."

He sauntered around the coupe and got in beside Greta.

In less than a minute we were back at the small bungalow with the towels and bathing suits on the porch railing. This time a man was outside, struggling to assemble the beach chair. He straightened up as I turned the car off the road.

He wore bathing trunks and nothing on his feet. His rangy, narrow body was young-looking and smoothly bronzed as if he had spent the summer letting the sun get at him. But there was a lot of gray in his hair flattened on his skull and curling thickly on his bare chest, and the rakish mustache planted in a vacuous face was peppered with it.

Spike opened the car door on his side and whispered a warning. "He's a good egg, but he enjoys wrestling with girls."

"Does he?" she muttered indifferently and got out after Spike.

The man was heading toward my side of the car, but when he saw Greta fully revealed he veered to her. His facial muscles set themselves into benign lines.

"I'm Thayer Lennan." He took her hand and clung to it. His eyes absorbed her. "I've seen you on the stage, and I was smitten. Positively smitten. But footlights don't do you credit. Here in the sunlight, in all your loveliness . . ."

Gently she reclaimed her hand. "This is my husband."

Thayer Lennan took time off to concede my existence. He brushed a palm across mine and said that he had expected us earlier.

"Traffic held us up," I said.

He discussed traffic. It was intolerable in summer; he would not own a car if you paid him. He said all this to Greta, ignoring me. He was not one to waste attention on a male when an attractive female was in the neighborhood.

"It's too hot for chess," Spike said impatiently. "Let's go swimming at my place."

We heartily agreed. I went around to the car trunk for the bag. That broadened my area of vision and I saw Elaine.

She was standing just around the corner of the bungalow, a bulgy, flabby woman showing considerable bare flesh. Her figure needn't have been quite as bad as it looked; her sagging posture made her bulge out of herself. She didn't come forward to greet her guests. She remained there partially hidden; and as her husband took Greta's arm and steered her toward the porch, one side of Elaine's face twisted.

"Hello, Elaine," I called to her.

She had to come out into the open then. Being a woman, she wore one more garment than her husband, a yellow halter to go with yellow shorts. The halter was too skimpy for what

was in it. She jiggled as she bore down on Greta with both hands outstretched.

"This heat!" she exclaimed. "My dear, aren't you glad you came?"

Dutifully Greta said she was.

Elaine transferred her hands to me. I could accept only one because my other hand held the bag.

"Ben, have you come up with a first-rate idea?" she demanded.

"It's not easy."

She pouted. Sweat beaded her upper lip. "But you must."

It was practically an order.

Thayer said, "Let's for heaven's sake get out of the sun," and reached out to regain possession of Greta's arm.

I foiled him by slipping my free arm possessively about her waist. I had no objection to men showing her small attentions, which was part of her being admired, but I thought that Elaine would feel better if I reclaimed my wife. We entered the bungalow.

As soon as we were inside I appreciated Spike's judgment in waiting on the porch. Under the sun there had been some air. Here we simmered. There wasn't enough pitch to the roof and the two windows did little good.

We were in a small, cluttered living room. A dining table and four chairs took up a good deal of it, and what was left of the walls between doors were devoted to a desk and a narrow bookcase and a daybed. There were three doors beside the entrance door. One, partly open, showed a piece of kitchen, and another a bedroom that had space for only a three-quarter bed and a chest of drawers. The remaining door, closed, would be the bathroom.

Greta looked about dubiously.

"You and Ben will have the bedroom," Elaine assured her. "We'll sleep on the daybed."

"We don't want to put you out of your bed," Greta protested. "We don't mind sleeping out here."

"No, no, you're our guests. Now you'll want to change your clothes."

Elaine swept into the bedroom. We tagged after her. I didn't have to look back to know that Thayer was watching the sway of Greta's hips.

In the bedroom there was hardly room for the three of us. Elaine said: "I'm afraid you'll have to keep your clothes in your bag. The dresser drawers are full. As you see, we're rather cramped here."

We said that was all right. Elaine squeezed past me and shut the door after her.

Greta unbuttoned her blouse.

"Well, we're not snobs," she said. "It's lavish compared to some of the rooming houses I've slept in. But I can't understand why—"

"Shh," I warned, waving at the plyboard partition.

She lowered her voice. "Why would she inconvenience herself like this for people she hardly knows?"

I shrugged. Shedding my clothes, I thought of our cool city apartment. Greta stepped out of her skirt and sat beside me on the bed.

"Darling, don't mind Thayer. I know how to handle his kind."

"I don't mind him, but Elaine does. She was spying on the way he welcomed you, and she didn't approve."

Greta put a hand on my knee. "Then why was she so anxious to get us here?"

"Not you, baby. She had to accept you if she wanted me."

"To learn how to murder a husband?" Her dark eyes widely searched my face.

"Let's not get far-fetched ideas," I said as much to myself as to her. "We're stuck, but not too badly. Any room is tolerable with you in it."

She kissed me. After a minute we got into our bathing suits.

4

I didn't go swimming with Greta. There I was ready and anxious in trunks and sneakers and the eye-filling blazer Greta had bought me and made me wear on every suitable occasion; but I watched her drive off in our car with Thayer and Spike while I remained behind to earn my keep.

There was no putting Elaine off. "I can't get a moment's rest until I straighten out my short story plot," she had insisted.

So I sat on the daybed in the stifling living room and leafed through her two published novels and nodded respectfully at Elaine Coyle Lennan stories in half a dozen women's magazines.

"All right, I'm convinced you're an author," I said. "Now let's attend to murder."

"But you had your doubts when you saw where we lived. Nobody would call this dump a symbol of success." Elaine rose from her desk chair and prowled barefooted. "The fact is this was the only place available for the summer close to my friend Muriel Rauch. Of course we can afford much better even on my own income alone."

The six magazines containing her stories covered a period

of four years. One of her novels had been copyrighted eight years ago, the other four, and I doubted if they had brought in more than the average novel, which was little. Occasionally I did a piece on criminology for the top-paying magazines, so I knew that writing was like any other profession, like being a lawyer or an actress or a salesman or a musician: the handful on top did all right while the great majority definitely didn't. My own profession couldn't be included in any such category because I had never heard anybody connected with crime becoming rich outside of crooks and those politicians who fed on them.

"And on top of my income there's Thayer's," she was saying. "Advertising pays well, you know."

She was protesting too much, trying too hard to exhibit pride, which in this case meant our society's one criterion for success: how much money could you get out of it. I yearned to join Greta in the Sound. I said testily: "How about your plot?"

"That's up to you, isn't it?"

I dug my pipe and pouch out of the blazer pocket and went into my lecturing manner. "Murder, like art, is most effective when simple. Yesterday you were right when you said what ideas I had were too elaborate. The more complicated, the more mistakes are possible. The perfect murders are those where you stab or bludgeon your victim and then stroll away."

"But I made it clear that won't do." Prowling, she drew on her cigarette with short, impatient puffs. "The police will look for motive. That must be avoided."

"Don't avoid it. Let her do it right in her own home and then call the police and admit it."

"You're pulling my leg."

"No. I'm talking about a case I was on some years ago when I was a police Homicide sergeant in Coast City. Her name was Agnes Clure. A pretty little thing of thirty, with two children. Her husband owned a pistol. One evening she pumped two slugs into his heart, then called the police. We got there to find her wearing a robe over her undies; she opened the robe to show us a torn shoulder strap and a deep scratch on her breast. She said he had tried to assault her and she had shot in self-defense."

"Her own husband?"

"Her own husband. We knew she had planned it that way. She had thoughtfully sent her children to stay with an aunt overnight to spare them the shock of seeing their mother shoot their father. It was unlikely that he would keep his gun fully loaded in the top drawer of the dresser, especially with children in the house. To clinch it there was no sign under

his fingernails of blood and skin from her scratch. Yet inevitably the jury freed her."

"Why inevitably?"

"Let a woman cry assault and who is so unchivalrous as to doubt her, particularly if the man involved is dead and can't talk back? What if it was her own husband? There were seven men on that jury, and at least some of them had at one time or another been bitterly inspired to assault their wives. They understood and didn't dare approve. As for the five women jurors, they were doggedly protecting the tradition that sexual virtue is confined to the female of the specie against the innately lusting male brute. So Agnes Clure's homicide was found justifiable. It will happen all the time under the right circumstances."

Elaine sat down, lit a fresh cigarette, stood up. For a meaty woman her movements were quick and nervous.

"What are the wrong circumstances?"

"If there's a lover in the background. That eliminates the key factor of outraged virtue. Juries don't approve of killing merely to exchange bedmates. What wrecked our case from the beginning was that we were unable to find another man in Agnes Clure's life."

"Like my heroine. Was Agnes Clure's husband rich? Had he a large insurance policy?"

"He was a bus driver with two hundred dollars in savings and a three thousand dollar life policy. Women don't murder for money. They leave that to the men. Women murder out of fear or jealousy or love or frustration or protection—the gamut of a psychiatrist's handbook."

"I see." Elaine stared into space, maybe at a plot developing, maybe at something else.

I felt my spine prickle. It annoyed me because there was no reason for it, like being afraid of ghosts you have decided must be hovering over your bed if you opened your eyes.

"But you can't use it," I said. "You don't want your heroine to be bothered with a trial."

"Wait!"

Imperiously a chubby hand waved me silent. Her face was rapt with creative effort. She roamed the room soundlessly on bare feet, and I wondered how much damage I would do to her inspiration if I dared breathe.

I picked up one of her novels. Its title was *Satan in a Tuxedo,* and it started off with wind blowing in the hair of a girl named Nelda who stood on the shore of a lake. I skimmed through pages and lingered over a detailed and accurate description of the Manne House where we both had worked eighteen years ago. Was there enough autobiography to include me? I hunted for a line on the inevitable

boy who would be involved with Nelda, no doubt a great deal more deeply for the purpose of fiction than Elaine and I had been with each other.

Before I could find anything, Elaine had labored and brought forth.

"Exactly!" Ecstatically she hugged her indifferently haltered bosom. "Just what I was after. I knew you'd do it, Ben. I could kiss you."

I needn't have worried; evidently she didn't mean it literally. She sat at the desk and smiled with the corners of her mouth.

"I don't get it," I said. "The problem you set up was to spare your heroine even the irritation of being suspected. Now you have her go through a trial."

"It will make a better story. Don't you see—what's the good of committing a perfect murder if nobody can appreciate it? It's not artistic. She kills him and admits it and is tried for it; and she not only gets away with it, but is completely vindicated by law. How can I pass up such irony?"

"And she'll live happily ever after," I said.

"Certainly. Like Medea. You may have heard the story of Jason and the Golden Fleece. Medea helped him steal it from her father and fled with him to Greece. She murdered a number of people or got others to murder them for her, and she slaughtered her own two children merely because Jason, their father, was very fond of them, and then moved to Corinth where—"

"Athens," I said. "She murdered her children in Corinth and moved on to Athens where she married a guy named Aegeus."

Elaine scowled, resentful of the fact that I wasn't completely a lowbrow. "The point I'm making," she said, "is that after wading in oceans of gore Medea married again and lived out her years in peace."

"Like your heroine."

"It happens in real life, doesn't it?"

"Uh-huh." I knocked out my pipe in an ashtray. "There's another flaw in that murder method. If at the trial a witness told the jury that your heroine had discussed the method with him before the murder, it would show premeditation and she wouldn't stand a chance."

"That's easy. I won't have her tell anybody. I'm the author. I make my characters do or not do whatever I—" Suddenly she tittered. "Don't tell me, Ben, that you're afraid I want this information because I actually intend to do away with somebody, and that you're making it clear to me that you wouldn't let me get away with it." She jiggled with her tittering.

"There's no harm in protecting myself," I said.

"From being an unwitting accessory? I have no desire to kill anybody. Certainly not poor Thayer. He's too inconsequential for me to—" She broke off, flicking her tongue between her lips. "Oh, dear, no, I'm not the murder type."

"That's good," I said. "Now that you have your plot, let's go swimming."

"I can't. I must prepare dinner. And Ben, will you do another thing for me? The novel I've just finished—there's considerable crime in it, including a murder, and I'll appreciate it if you'll go over the manuscript and see if I've handled that part properly."

I felt oddly relieved. It explained why she had inconvenienced herself in this cramped bungalow by luring us here. She had chores piled up for me; I'd sweat for my weekend in the country.

I told her I would be glad to read the novel that evening.

"But this is the best time, before the others return," she insisted. "I promised my publisher he would have it by Tuesday morning. If you have fault to find with the way I handled the crime parts, I may need all of the next two days to make the revisions."

"All right," I said, crushed by argument, defeated by the situation into which I had been inveigled.

Elaine fetched the manuscript from the desk and bore it to me on two outstretched palms like a ritual offering.

5

A hundred feet behind the bungalow there was a comparatively cool spot. Elaine had sent me out to it. Trees provided shade over a spring that formed quite a spread here before it raced off between rocks toward the Sound. If it had been more than eighteen inches deep anywhere I would have soaked myself in it as a desperate substitute for swimming, but the best I could do was dip my head into the wonderfully tingling water and bathe my bare chest with my hands.

I dried my hands on my swimming trunks and sat on the backless wooden bench beside the spring and picked up the manuscript. The title page said:

A HANDFUL OF ASHES

BY

ELAINE COYLE LENNAN

The title was faintly reminiscent. Probably taken from

a line of poetry, but it wasn't quoted on the title page or the opening chapter. I started to read:

Elvina awoke slowly, reluctant to abandon the bright dream she had snuggled to her in the night. Early morning sunlight caressed her like the remembered fingers of her phantom lover. She luxuriated in the fragments of her dream—the adoration in hungering gray eyes, the competent strength of enfolding arms, the passionately bruising mouth crushing her lips.

"Elvina!"

The voice of her roommate roused her fully. Elvina stirred, opened her eyes, and felt wistful regret at being returned to reality.

Marcia stood in her nightgown beside the bed, and Marcia's pale-lipped smile was bright.

"I couldn't wait till you woke up," she said. "What's his name? I hope he hasn't a wife and kids stacked away somewhere. Tell me all about him."

With a long-drawn sigh Elvina sank back on the pillow and hugged herself. So Hubert was not a figment of a dream! This time it was no phantom, but a man of flesh and blood—

A station wagon came up the road from the direction of the Sound and turned in at the bungalow. One of the two women who got out was Laura Canell. A corner of the bungalow blocked them out of sight when they neared the porch.

I put aside Elvina and her phantom lover. I draped my blazer over the manuscript on the bench to prevent the pages from blowing away if by chance a breeze came up, and I reloaded my pipe. In less than a minute Laura came out and headed toward me.

Her thighs were heavy in shorts and she was somewhat hippy, but her clinging white jersey shirt with plunging neckline was neatly and tightly filled. Her angular, prominent-boned face was seldom in repose; its arrangement was constantly changing with her moods and thoughts, so that she wore her emotions like a placard. I thought her attractive, and I had once heard a man call her ugly: she was that kind of woman. She had run through three husbands, all of whom, Greta told me, had hated to let her leave their bed and board.

Laura Canell said, "Darling, I came to rescue you," and kissed my cheek.

I did not know her well. The darling and the kiss were evidence that she hung around theatrical folk. She was, as a matter of fact, a minor angel of *Mrs. Albert's Daughter*, the play Greta was currently rehearsing.

"I'm trapped," I said.

"Greta told me. She sent me to get you out of Elaine's clutches. My sister-in-law Muriel came along. She says she used to know you."

"Uh-huh. I'm sorry, but Elaine asked me to go over a novel she's writing."

"That woman will have you scrubbing her floors before she's through with you."

"You don't seem to care for her."

"No." Laura's expressive face made blatant her dislike. "And the same goes in spades for her husband who can't keep his hands to himself. This is the first time I've been here, and I came only to fetch you." She looked around. "Where's her novel?"

"Under my blazer on the bench."

"Did you read much of it?"

"Only the first few paragraphs."

Laura said, "I wish—" and stared at my blazer. Her face shut tight, the first time I'd ever seen it empty, which in itself was expressive.

"Don't you like her writing either?" I asked.

"I wouldn't know. I only read Walter Winchell." She hugged my arm to her breast. "I promised Greta I'd bring you back if I had to kidnap you."

I hesitated, then decided on rebellion. The hell with Elvina and her phantoms. "I consider myself kidnapped," I said.

I put on the blazer and picked up the manuscript and we strolled to the bungalow.

When we went through the door, Elaine was lighting a cigarette clamped between compressed lips. At the sight of me returning so soon with her manuscript, she didn't order me to go back to the spring and finish it. She said pleasantly: "You remember Muriel."

Muriel Rauch hadn't changed greatly in the eighteen years since I had known her as a waitress in the Manne House. Those pale, frail blondes often carried their years well, and if bleach or dye or tint or whatever they used kept her fine-spun hair golden, why not? She was the first one I had seen in that neighborhood who wasn't bare-legged. She wore a dress, pale-blue like her eyes, buttoned from neckline to hem. She was still pretty as porcelain.

"It's been so long, Ben," she said. The hand she put in mine was cool and so was her smile.

"Looking at you," I said, "it seems like yesterday."

Muriel blushed charmingly. And over her golden head I saw Elaine flush with harsh self-consciousness and resentment. I hadn't had any compliment for Elaine after having met her again; if I hadn't remembered that too late, I would have kept my mouth shut now. Elaine's reaction was understandable. At the Manne House in 1932 Muriel, shy and mousy, had been completely over-shadowed by the voluptuous and vivacious Elly Coyle. It hadn't seemed possible then that she would be the one to marry a wealthy man and beget a son who was a genius.

I skirted around the table and put the manuscript down on the desk and asserted my independence. "I'm going swimming, Elaine," I announced.

All three women stared at the four or five hundred typewritten pages, and it seemed to me that it got hotter, more stifling in that room. The silence held too long. Elaine blew smoke at the desk. Muriel turned her head away, showing me the back of her head, and her hand came up to pat her tightly drawn-back hair. Laura eased toward me as if to make sure I wouldn't get away before she delivered me to Greta.

Then Elaine said tiredly: "Thanks, Ben, for what you've read. Did you like it?"

"I didn't get through the second page. I'll read it tonight."

"But you can't," Laura said. "You're all coming over to the house this evening."

Elaine didn't quite give up. "You'll read it after dinner," she stated flatly. "Now will you pardon me? I've got to put up the roast."

"Why not have a swim with us first?" Muriel said mechanically, trying to get a sincerity into her voice she didn't feel.

Elaine stopped at the kitchen door. In spite of her loose and sloppy half-nakedness and the sweat on her brow and upper lip, she managed to look haughty. "You forget, Muriel, that unlike you I haven't servants to work for me."

And she swept into the kitchen, jiggling.

Gratefully I went off with Laura and Muriel.

Chapter Two

AT THE SIDE of the station wagon I paused. Muriel Rauch was behind the wheel; Laura Canell sat close to her to leave room for me in the front seat.

"Did you forget something?" Laura asked.

I turned to the bungalow. If Elaine was watching us from a window, I didn't see her. What did I expect, another prop on which to hang a notion? I had too many already.

I said: "I ought to stay and read Elaine's novel."

That sentence was an experiment, a test check on whatever was cooking.

Something jumped into Muriel's pale eyes. There was no more than a glimpse of a flickering shadow, and immediately she dipped her head to turn on the ignition.

"We promised Greta to bring you back with us," she said, "and we will."

Laura's laughter, meant to be light and gay, sounded unnaturally sharp and hoarse. "My God, Ben, you're not her slave," she said.

I got into the station wagon. A positive reaction to my experiment seemed indicated—the cautious way an uncertain man would put it. I distrusted reasoning from sensation; you believed what you thought you ought to believe.

Anyway, my sole desire was to dive into cool water.

A black limousine came from the Rauch estate, and driving it was a man in a white shirt and a black bowtie and a chauffeur's cap. His face was squat and beaten and completely familiar. He pulled over to the side of the road to let us pass.

Muriel stopped the station wagon. "George, are you going for Mr. Rauch?"

"No, ma'am. He hasn't arrived yet." The chauffeur's red-rimmed eyes rested impassively on me. He said to Muriel: "It's Mr. Boxhardt at the station, ma'am."

"George, wait!" Laura yelled. "I'll go with you."

She climbed over me and transferred to the limousine. Muriel and I drove on. I couldn't decide whether or not to tell her who George Duffy was.

"I think you know Quinn Boxhardt," Muriel said. "He and Greta are in the same show."

"Uh-huh. Is Quinn slated to be Laura's fourth husband?"

"If he doesn't find out that she isn't a rich woman."

"She's one of the backers of the show."

"A small backer, and I suspect Hugo lent her the money. She's run through most of the settlement Will Canell made when they were divorced. That's why she's back living on Hugo."

Muriel spoke without animosity. When a husband was as rich as Hugo Rauch, his wife didn't necessarily resent the fact that he supported his sister. There was enough to go around.

"Ben," she said, hunching woman-like over the wheel as she rolled the car through the wire gates, "why are you here?"

"I wish I knew."

"Elaine invited you because you're a detective, didn't she?"

On the tennis court Greta and Spike were batting a ball to each other. Thayer watched from the sideline on a bench under an awning.

"Did she?" I said.

"I suppose a detective is like a lawyer—he mustn't violate confidences."

"There are no confidences. She wants technical advice on a story she's writing about murder."

Muriel pulled up the handbrake and cut the ignition.

"The novel?" she asked.

"A short story. The novel is a little extra she's piling on me. Did you read it?"

"How could I? She doesn't show her stories around before they're in print."

"Then how do you know there's a murder in her novel?"

She got out of the station wagon and put a hand up to her hair, its gold glittering in sunlight, and she tried to smile. "You just told me there was. But why are you cross-examining me?"

It was neat. She had started the questions, and when I had thrown in a couple of my own I was cross-examining her.

"Look," I said, "I'm on a vacation of sorts, if anybody will let me be. I came here to swim."

"Then by all means do. You join the others while I get into my bathing suit."

We moved off in opposite directions.

2

I sauntered to the tennis court. Greta waved a racket to me and ran to return the ball Spike lobbed to the baseline. She had a vigorous forehand, but no control. They weren't playing a set.

I sat beside Thayer Lennan on the bench under the awning. He didn't even glance at me, not sparing the time to remove his gaze from Greta bounding about the court in two

skimpy bits of red cloth that comprised her bathing suit. I couldn't blame him; she was an altogether delightful sight. I lit my pipe.

After a minute Thayer acknowledged my presence on the bench.

"Did it ever strike you that it would be money in your pocket to be famous?" he demanded. "Who ever heard of Ben Helm, the private detective?"

"Almost nobody," I admitted placidly.

"You've solved some cases, haven't you?"

"It's like everything else. Sometimes you succeed and sometimes you fail."

"Did the ones you solved make headlines?"

"Some did, but I didn't."

"You see?" Triumphantly he patted the gray curls on his naked chest. "There's only one reason you're not the best known private detective in the country, and that's lack of publicity." He jabbed a forefinger. "I'm telling you, it pays to advertise."

"And you're in advertising."

"Matter of fact," he said with less gusto, "I find the advertising racket too stifling for a man with ideas."

"What agency were you with?"

"Well, I'm looking around for something I can dig my teeth into. Free-lance public relations is the answer. After Labor Day I'm going to start looking around for an office."

In short, he hadn't a job and wouldn't say how long since he'd had one. Elaine's income alone wasn't enough to support both of them in any sort of style, and I thought of how she kept pointing out Muriel Rauch's husband's wealth. For a moment this afternoon she had relaxed in her propaganda that Thayer was a successful advertising man and had called him inconsequential. I didn't believe that money was its own virtue and the ability to make it the sole measure of success, but a wife tended to get fed up.

And the story she claimed she was writing was about a woman whose husband . . .

There was nothing in clinging fearfully and tenaciously to that line. I said: "I don't need a press agent."

"Now that's a stupid statement." Thayer fingered his hairline mustache and eyed me with a stupid man's scorn of stupidity, which meant disagreement with him. "With publicity you'll be able to charge twice the fees you've been getting. Twice? Five times. You'll have so many clients you'll have to brush them off your doorstep."

Greta rescued me. She was wise in such matters. Panting, she came over to the bench and handed me the racket.

"Here, darling, you play with Spike. I'm no match for him."

I went out on the court. Spike was gathering balls. Greta had sat down on the bench and Thayer was shifting along it to cut down the twelve inches between them to nothing. When his knee touched hers; she stood up and did things to her black hair. Thayer was going to have a frustrating weekend. I turned to Spike.

Spike had been volleying softly with Greta; he tried to blast me off the court. He was very good for his age, the way he doubtless was at everything he did, being a genius. I turned down his offer for a set. All I wanted was a brief workout before swimming.

I didn't get even that.

Spike whooped, "Here's Kathy," and sprinted off the court and over the lawn to the driveway. The limousine had returned from the station. Seconds later Greta cried, "Look, darling, it's Quinn," and went in the same direction.

I felt stranded on the court. I carried the racket to the bench, and Thayer was still sitting there.

"Aren't you joining the procession?" I asked.

"What for?"

"There's a good looking girl getting out of the car. You'll want to at least get your eyes on her at close range if nothing else."

Coldly Thayer looked me over, unimpressed by what he saw. "Get the idea out of your head that I'm after your wife."

"That's a relief," I said and walked off.

When I reached the driveway, Greta and Quinn Boxhardt were kissing hello. Laura Canell hovered close to reclaim him as soon as they were through. Spike had led the girl up to the terrace where they were waiting for George Duffy to fetch the bags from the limousine.

The kiss was brief enough. Then Quinn held Greta out at arms' length and smacked his lips and said, "Darling, you should be in burlesque where you can give your ravishing figure a real chance," before getting around to offering me a big paw with a hearty. "How's the old boy?" followed by an attempt to powder my bones.

I used to think Quinn Boxhardt as phony as his name, but everybody in that theatrical crowd conducted themselves with exaggerated mannerisms. He wasn't a bad actor, only one step removed from being a matinee idol, a state of bliss he would achieve if he ever became a star. He was the right age, in the early thirties, tall and chesty, and he had the strong-featured face that mature women preferred to pretty boys.

"Darling, don't you go making eyes at Greta," Laura warned him coyly. "You may not be afraid of me, but Ben is a very dangerous character."

"You're telling me," Quinn said. "I take care not to commit serious crimes in his presence, and that includes wife-stealing."

"You needn't worry about Ben," Greta said. "He's the world's most unjealous husband. Sometimes I think he doesn't consider me worth being jealous over."

"It's his conceit, darling," Quinn said. "Some day you and I will have to deflate his supreme self-confidence."

"If you do I'll tear your heart out," Laura said happily.

Their chit-chat was too cute for my stomach. Greta claimed that I was a provincial under the skin, but I had my own definition of sophistication. It didn't include pale imitations of the dialogue in frothy Broadway comedies about people who didn't work for a living or use their brains as an avocation.

Greta observed my long-suffering look as I sucked my pipe, and she changed the subject. "Who's that pretty little girl?"

The girl with Spike wasn't little; Greta used the adjective to mean quite young, though she wasn't by far as young as Spike. She was leggy in a gay cotton print dress, but from the hips up adequately developed. Her face was an almost perfect oval, and violet eyes and a small naive mouth gave her an expression of startled innocence. Her light-brown hair was like a cape over her shoulders.

"Her name's Kathy Hunter," Quinn said. "We met on the train."

Abruptly Laura's mood had changed at mention of the girl. "Muriel will have a fit. During the week Spike said he was inviting a girl out, and of course we assumed it would be a girl his age. She's years older than Spike—a woman."

Quinn grinned. "This proves what we all know, that Spike's precocious."

"But bringing her here to the house!" Anger writhed in Laura's expressive face. "Darling, are you sure you don't know her?"

"Word of honor, darling," Quinn said. "I must insist I have a measure of decency. Would I bring the child here to your house? I was sitting in the train, minding my own business, when she came to my seat and asked me in awed tones if I was Quinn Boxhardt. In a matter of seconds she told me her name was Kathy Hunter and that she was an actress and that her boy friend was a very rich man—man, she called him, so help me!—named Shelley Rauch."

"An actress!" Laura sneered. "Did you ever hear of her, Greta?"

"Kathy Hunter? No."

"Neither did I," Quinn said. "You would think between the three of us we would know everybody. In the train I tried to pin her down to where and in what she had appeared, but she hedged. The child is lying about her profession, but why? Here's a mystery for you, Ben."

For the first time since I had joined them on the driveway I had a chance to say something. "She's not an actress, but she aspires to be. Probably has no more than high school dramatics behind her and would rather not admit it. She's here to meet people who have some influence in the theater. She knew you were coming, Quinn, and looked for you on the train and got right to work."

"Bravo!" Quinn said. "The infallible sleuth."

"But that doesn't make it less nasty," Laura persisted. "We sometimes forget Spike is only a child, and that woman—"

She had to stop speaking because Spike and Kathy Hunter were coming over to us.

Walking beside her, he wore the sheepish ear-to-ear grin of a young boy on the defensive and hoping for the best. He looked awkward and coltish and suddenly immature, and he introduced her to Greta and me with a stiff formality he must have learned in a snooty private school. Kathy Hunter split a demure smile between us and told Greta without gushing how she was looking forward to seeing her and Mr. Boxhardt in *Mrs. Albert's Daughter* which everybody said would be a tremendous hit. Even Laura, who had an investment in the play, liked the sentiment.

I found I was out of matches. I wandered off toward my coupe where I had an extra supply in the glove compartment. George Duffy, having delivered the bags into the house, was a dozen steps ahead of me. He paused at the side of my car and said without turning his head, "Can I see you, Sarg?" and went on to the garage.

When I had my light and started back, I saw that Muriel Rauch, small and neat in a beach robe, had appeared at the front door. She didn't come forward to greet her newly arrived guests. She nodded to Quinn and looked deadpan at Kathy Hunter.

Spike licked his lower lip, then defiantly thrust out his jaw and touched Kathy's elbow. "I'd like you to meet my mother," he said.

The group moved up on the terrace. Greta looked around for me and found me. "Come in and see the house, darling. It's magnificent."

"I want to go swimming," I said petulantly.

"All right, I'll be out in a minute."

Over at the tennis court Thayer Lennan hadn't stirred from

the bench under the awning. From the little I had seen and heard of him, it wasn't in character for him to avoid close proximity to a new and attractive female face and figure. I hadn't noticed him even turn around for a long distance view.

It was none of my business. I strolled up the driveway to the four-car garage. The front doors were closed. George Duffy was waiting for me beyond the small side door.

He had removed his chauffeur's cap and bowtie and opened his collar. He was wiping his squat, corrugated face with a red handkerchief.

"Sarg, you tell Mrs. Rauch about me?" he demanded.

"Not yet."

"I'm clean. I served my time and I'm clean. You can check."

"No more carving up girls with broken bottles?"

"You know it was one of those things, Sarg. I was pie-eyed and she got me sore two-timing me. Anyway, I didn't kill her."

"Merely disfigured her for life."

"She asked for it." The corners of his red-veined eyes crinkled. "You did a job on me," he said admiringly. "I didn't live in Coast City more than two months, but I heard all about Detective-Sergeant Ben Helm. The boys said he was a nice guy, he didn't go in for rough stuff, but watch out. In the pen I heard you got fired off the force because you were a nice guy."

"I resigned."

"Yeah, you resigned. The old freeze-out. Too bad you didn't resign before you caught up with me that time, huh, Sarg? I hear you're private law now." Duffy shoved his ugly face within inches of mine, and he simpered. "You're working for Mrs. Lennan, huh?"

"You too?" I said.

"Huh?"

"Everybody thinks the same. Why would Mrs. Lennan want a private investigator?"

Drawing back, he passed the handkerchief over his mouth, and the simper was gone as if wiped off. "Search me," he said.

"You're the Rauch chauffeur. You hear a lot of things."

He looked indignant. "I'm no pigeon. I'm living clean. And you're just private law. You can't make me talk."

Greta was calling me.

I took another moment. "Uh-huh, so there's something you can tell me."

"Who says so? And if there was, I wouldn't. I'm clean."

I left the garage. Greta and Thayer were standing beside the coupe.

"Elaine just phoned," she said. "We've got to start right back."

"Not before I go for a swim."

"But, darling, Elaine said the roast would spoil. I promised her we'd be there in five minutes."

So the three of us got into the car and drove back. With luck, I thought, I might be able to get into water tomorrow.

3

After dinner Thayer cleared the table while Greta and I washed the dishes. Elaine, having cooked and served the meal —an excellent one—was entitled to relax, but she got right down to work on the manuscript of her novel.

"You'll read it tomorrow morning," she told me.

I had become increasingly curious about it, though not so curious that I regretted the reprieve. The coming of evening hadn't lowered the temperature in the bungalow. I planned that as soon as we finished the dishes Greta and I would go out to the spring and see the twilight through with our feet in the water.

An idle dream. When we came out of the kitchen, Thayer was setting up a chess game on the table. I could have wriggled out of it, but then Elaine pulled a magazine out of the bookcase and bore it to Greta. "This issue has the best short story I've ever written," she announced.

Greta didn't dare not to start reading it at once.

So I played chess with Thayer and Greta curled up on the daybed with the magazine and at the desk Elaine read copy on her manuscript. We hadn't changed clothes for dinner, meaning that we all still wore about the irreducible minimum, but still we gently simmered.

For a while it was very quiet. Thayer wasn't a strong player; that made us an even match.

Suddenly Elaine said: "Did you like the story?"

I raised my head. Greta sat upright on the daybed. Both her hands lay flat on the magazine on her bare thighs. There was a shocked look in her dark eyes.

Elaine, twisted halfway around in her chair, smirked tight-lipped.

"I—" Greta said. She drew in her breath. "No, I don't care for it."

"Don't you really? The editors were quite excited when they bought the story. There hasn't been reader response as yet because it reached the stands only yesterday." And Elaine tittered.

"Check," Thayer said. He was completely absorbed in the game.

Automatically I interposed a knight between his bishop and my king. When I looked up again, Elaine's wide back,

covered only by the cord of her halter, was bent over the desk, and Greta was on her feet.

The magazine to which she clung with both hands was *The Eternal Woman*—a blue-blooded fashion monthly that scattered sprightly articles and pretty good fiction between exotic advertisements of the expensive non-essentials for which women's hearts hankered. I had once done a short piece for it on lie detectors.

"It's time for us to dress if we're going to the Rauch house," Greta said in a curiously flat tone.

"It's only eight," Thayer protested. "They don't expect us for an hour."

I stood up. "Let's call it a draw."

"Quitting?" Thayer's mouth sneered at a quitter. "I can mate you."

"Then I concede."

I put an arm about Greta's shoulders and together we moved to the bedroom. Thayer dropped chessmen noisily into the wooden box. Elaine made a pencilled notation on a typewritten page. I closed the door and pulled Greta against me.

"What is it?" I said into her ear.

"This story—it's horrible."

"Why?"

"Read it."

We sat on the bed. She opened the magazine to a story by Elaine Coyle Lennan, called *What's the Definition of Love?* I read.

It was about a woman named Eleanor who was forty and getting fat and knew that she was losing her husband. Tom, the husband, was rangy and handsome; his hair was turning prematurely gray and he had a pencil-line mustache. Women, particularly rather young ones, went for him. He was an advertising writer who couldn't hang onto a job.

I reread that description.

"You haven't come to the girl yet," Greta said.

Continued on page 89. The girl came into the story—a girl named Kitty who was half Eleanor's age. Her face was oval, her eyes violet, her hair spread down the back of her neck like a fan, she yearned to be an actress. Tom was having an affair with her, and Eleanor, his wife, found out about it.

"Uh-huh," I said.

"She deliberately wasn't subtle," Greta whispered. "Eleanor for Elaine, Tom for Thayer, Kitty for Kathy, and anybody who knows them can identify them from the descriptions. Hasn't she any shame?"

"Everything is grist for an author's mill, especially her own soul in torment."

"Did you notice how hard Thayer tried to pretend that Kathy Hunter didn't interest him when she arrived?" She tapped the magazine. "This explains it. Thayer and Kathy are using Spike to get together without anybody knowing."

"Elaine knows."

"That's the point. How long after it's written does a story appear in print?"

"At least six months in a monthly if it's bought right away."

"So Elaine has known about Thayer and Kathy for quite a while. You remember I mentioned at dinner that a girl named Kathy Hunter arrived at the same time as Quinn. I think that's why Elaine was anxious for me to read this story. She was out to make Thayer squirm while I read it."

"He didn't squirm. He blandly played chess with me. I doubt if he's aware there's such a story."

"But he's sure to read it sooner or later," Greta said. "She wants him to. Do you remember she said there was no reader response yet? She meant Thayer and probably Kathy too."

We heard them speaking in the next room. Only mutterings came through the plyboard partition. Like us they were keeping their voices low.

Greta whispered: "To insist that I read it in her husband's presence! That's sheer masochism."

"So she's a masochist."

"Darling, you don't believe that's all there is to it."

"I believe," I said, "that the love-lives of these people are none of our business."

"But you haven't finished the story."

"Must I?"

"Yes."

I resumed reading. The wife, depressed by her husband's unfaithfulness, didn't want to live; at the same time, she had no desire to leave the stage clear for the girl friend. She induced them to go driving with her and ran the car over a cliff. The wife was killed, but they weren't. That would be enough irony for a short story, but the author laid it on with a trowel. Just as the reader was beginning to enjoy the fact that the wife had eliminated herself and left the lovers in each other's arms, it was revealed that the accident had made hopeless cripples out of both of them. The story ended with them bitterly hating each other.

I tossed the magazine to the foot of the bed. Greta had started to get into clothes. She pulled a white dress over her head and said: "Well?"

"Elaine isn't going to follow her story in real life."

"What makes you sure?"

"For one thing, the time lag. The story was written six

months or more ago. If she ever had the idea, she changed her mind. Nobody can keep up an enthusiasm for suicide that long."

"She changed her mind only about killing herself and them." Her black eyes were very large and deep, the way they became when she was worked up over something. "Darling, you see why it's our business and why I was so terribly upset when I read the story. Did you tell her how to commit murder?"

"Not in a way she can use and get away with as long as I know about it. Quit worrying."

"You're worried," she insisted. "When I suggested we get out of the invitation, you said you were curious, but you meant worried. There's something about that woman . . ."

"Cut it out!" I said, sharply and too loud. I rose from the bed and put my hands on her shoulders. "Baby, reason is against it. Killers kill. Sometimes they write or talk about it later, but not before the act. If she wants to murder Thayer, she'll do it with her typewriter. Fiction is a catharsis—art purging emotions, letting off exhaust steam through words instead of deeds."

In the other room Elaine laughed loudly. For a startled instant it seemed as if she were laughing at what I had said, but she couldn't have heard me. I stepped out of my shorts and dug into the bag.

After a minute Greta said: "At the best, she's unspeakably cruel. For all these months keeping quiet about her husband's unfaithfulness, waiting patiently for it to be spread out in a magazine for everybody to read. It's a horrible kind of vengeance."

"And a kind of suicide too. She's humiliating herself as much as she's hurting them." I pulled on my tan slacks. "But it's a substitute, not murder, so you can stop scaring yourself."

The dresser mirror reflected the graveness of her gaze. "I hate it here," she said as she molded her lips. "You wouldn't want to leave tonight, darling?"

"No."

"Worried or curious?"

"Stuck," I said.

When we left the bedroom, I took the magazine with me. Elaine was reading at her desk; Thayer's head was low over a newspaper spread on the table. I dropped the magazine on the daybed.

"Did you read it too, Ben?" Elaine asked brightly.

"Uh-huh."

She gave me her tight-lipped smile. "I hope you liked it better than Greta did."

I just looked at her.

Her smile acquired bulk. She turned all the way around to her husband. "Dear, did you read it yet?"

"Read what?"

"My story in the current *Eternal Woman.*"

Greta's fingernails dug into her palms. She looked sick to her stomach.

"I'll get around to it." Thayer yawned and scratched his naked chest. "We ought to start dressing."

"You go with Ben and Greta, dear," Elaine said. "I've come across some pages I want to revise."

Thayer was halfway to the bedroom. He stopped. "Want me to stay home with you?"

There was silence while Elaine made pencil marks on white paper. Then she said without lifting her head: "You'll only be in the way. Run along with our guests."

Thayer yawned again and went into the bedroom. Greta's stiffened shoulders sagged a little. I knew how she felt. We were relieved that we wouldn't be leaving Thayer alone at home with his wife.

4

Hugo Rauch sat deep in the foam-rubber couch in the study of his air-conditioned summer home and seemed to have forgotten that I was there with him.

His eyes, behind rimless glasses, were half-closed, his gaze indrawn as if in contemplation of the conspiracies that burdened the very rich. Tiredness was ingrained on his narrow, somewhat ascetic face. He hadn't said a dozen words since Greta and Thayer and I had arrived an hour ago. Then he had asked me into this study, and here I was in a green leather chair with a wall of books at my back and a silence between us.

This was a far wing of the rambling house. Two walls were almost completely glass, like the front of a swanky store. From where I sat I had an angling view of the mellowly lit terrace on which the theatrical contingent had gathered to talk shop, meaning Broadway and Hollywood dirt.

Greta, very decorative in egg-shell white, lay on a chaise-longue and accepted a tall drink from a haughty-faced butler or whatever his title was. At the moment Quinn Boxhardt was holding forth, gesturing dramatically, while on a hassock Laura Canell hugged her legs and looked up at him with quiet adoration. Kathy Hunter was among them, clinging to the fringe of those who had already achieved something or other on the stage, wordless and immobile except for a set smile she turned on when anybody glanced at her.

Thayer Lennan wasn't out there. Cautiously he was avoid-

ing being in the same general area with Kathy. Spike I hadn't seen at all since our arrival.

As I watched, Muriel came out. She stood a moment looking at Kathy Hunter, her face shadowed by the side of the house; then she stepped forward. Quinn stopped talking as she said something to Greta. Greta replied and Muriel returned into the house.

In the study there was still nothing out of Hugo Rauch. I loosened my collar. These people, for all their wealth, didn't abide by the rules and regulations of their caste in the matter of evening dress. It hadn't been necessary for me to put on a necktie or even a jacket. Rauch, like a proletarian on a hot evening, wore a cool short-sleeved sport shirt, and Laura hadn't changed out of her shorts.

I shattered the silence by speaking. "Maybe you can let me in on it, Mr. Rauch. I'm not an authority on how to do the government out of a couple of millions in income tax or ruin a competitor, and if it's a matter of politics you wouldn't care for my point of view because since I was old enough to vote I've voted for Norman Thomas for President, but you did want to speak to me."

Hugo Rauch's eyelids lifted. "It's been hot in the city and I had a hard day. Must have dozed off for a moment. Sorry I was rude."

So his apology made me the one who had been rude. Greta said I was a snob where rich people were concerned. Agreed. And it was all right to be snobbish toward those of them who became my clients, but after all Rauch was my host.

"It's cool and comfortable here," I said. "I could nap myself."

All the same, he hadn't dozed off. I thought he was making up his mind what to say to me.

"Drink?" he asked.

"I had one when I came in, and I prefer time to pass between them."

"Good idea. Don't touch the stuff myself. Don't smoke or over-eat." He glanced down at his hard-looking, slender body. "It pays off. I don't look fifty-three, do I?"

He didn't if you ignored his tired, heavy-lidded eyes. "You don't," I said.

"Keep fit. Ride, tennis, handball, boating. You look fit too. You're one policeman who doesn't run to belly."

"I'm not a policeman."

"But you used to be. Muriel told me about you." He crossed his knees. "So did my chauffeur. Says you used to know him."

"Uh-huh."

"There's nothing you can tell me about George Duffy that would be news. He served time in jail. I gave him the job

because he's an ex-convict. Does that seem funny to you?"

"A reclamation project?"

"Call it that. I belong to more do-good organizations than I can name. One of them tries to give ex-convicts a chance to rehabilitate themselves. So I had to do my share; gave George Duffy this position. Looked into his record before I did. I know about the trouble he got into with a girl in Coast City."

"Do you know his record before that?"

"I do. A man who never had a chance. Well, I've given him a chance, and in two years with me George has been a good chauffeur. Better than any I've had without a police record. Quiet and hard-working and never a complaint or an impudent word out of him like you get from other servants these days. Only—" Rauch spread his hands. "My wife doesn't know he has a record. She'd get nervous. You know how women are."

"Especially if she found out that George likes to push broken beer bottles into girls' faces."

"It happened only once. George was drunk. I'd fire him in a minute if I caught him taking a drink. No reason to make my wife nervous by telling her about his past."

"That's up to you."

"Then it's settled." Rauch stood up, but he didn't move from the couch. "Another thing. I can use some advice. It's about my son and this Hunter girl. You met Spike; he's too smart for his age. There's being too smart, especially with women. The most experienced adult men are pushovers for them, and Spike is a few weeks shy of being fifteen. Muriel is worried about this girl corrupting him."

He paused to consider that statement. I brought out my pipe.

"Frankly, that doesn't bother me," he resumed. "A boy's got to learn. It's something else. You're a private detective. You deal with blackmail, extortion, all the ways a woman can take a man to the cleaner."

"Spike isn't a man."

"He's a rich man's son. What are the possibilities?"

"He can't marry her without his parents' permission, and she's reached the age of consent. Has Spike money of his own?"

"Only an allowance, and if that's all she can get out of him I'm not worried."

I said: "That's not what worries you."

Rauch took a step forward and hooked his thumbs inside his belt. Appraising me, his eyes were less tired, and the bones of his face ridged.

"I'm lying?" he asked softly.

"I didn't say that, but I doubt that this is the advice you're after. You don't need it. You know very well that by going after a boy Spike's age all Kathy Hunter can get for herself is trouble. You're fishing, Mr. Rauch. For what?"

"I like you, Helm," he said amiably. "Straight to the point, and you have a head on your shoulders. Did my wife hire you to break up the affair between Spike and the girl?"

"She didn't and you know she didn't. If she told you she's worried over Spike being corrupted, she would have told you she had asked me for help. You're still fishing. I'm supposed to say: No, I'm not working for Muriel because I'm working for somebody else."

"Why should I give a damn for whom you work?"

"Everybody else around here seems to," I said. "Being an investigator is a hell of a life. Wherever he goes he frightens people the way a bogyman frightens children. There must be an awful lot of skeletons in an awful lot of closets; and as soon as I appear on a scene, even though all I'm after is some swimming, which so far has been balked at every—"

I hadn't a chance to develop the theme because the door opened and Muriel Rauch came in.

"Here you two are." She moved to the center of the room and stood between us, frail and golden-haired and anxious. "Hugo, I'd like to have a talk with Ben in your presence about that unspeakable Kathy Hunter. Ben is a detective. I thought—"

Rauch uttered a half-laugh. Affectionately he put a hand on his wife's shoulder. "We discussed the matter, and we decided there's not a way she can get money out of me."

"I don't care if it does cost money. She's so much older than Spike; she can hurt him in worse ways."

Muriel could save herself considerable anguish by reading *The Eternal Woman,* but I didn't say it.

"Leave her to me," Rauch said. "I'll have her out of here in half an hour."

"And then what?" Muriel clasped her hands and held them in front of her, stiffly. "You know how headstrong Spike is. He'll meet her in secret. We'll have to buy her off. Ben, you must know what a fair price is in such matters and how to make sure that she stays away from Spike after we've paid her."

I was framing words in my mind to decline the job graciously when Hugo Rauch got me out of it.

"Buy off that little tramp!" he shouted. "Not a cent. Leave her to me."

"But, Hugo, that won't stop them from getting together in the city."

"I said leave her to me!"

His voice lashed at her, and she cringed. Then she recalled my presence and stood still and impassive. "Very well," she said tonelessly.

I said, "I guess you don't need me any more." and their silence agreed with me. I got out of there.

5

I walked down a hall. Somebody was playing piano, softly and moodily. I opened a door and found myself in a music room. Spike sat at a grand piano.

He ignored me. His long fingers had a delicate touch. He was now too old to be a musical prodigy along with other things, but he was good.

The music trailed off dreamily. I leaned against the side of the piano and put a match to my pipe. He raised his head.

"Music and the savage beast," he said. "It's not what you hear on a jukebox, shamus, but this may have appealed to you."

"Chopin is too fluffy for my taste."

Impudently his eyebrows arched. "What are our private eyes coming to? But then Sherlock Holmes played the fiddle. If not Chopin, what is your taste?"

"Pretty conventional. On the piano, Bach."

I felt childish showing off for a snooty boy and trying to put him on a spot, but Elaine had made me fed up with the patronizing attitude of literate people toward anybody connected with police work.

He played vigorously. Bach was somewhat beyond his depth, as I'd suspected, but he didn't do badly.

When he finished, he demanded: "Name it."

"A fugue," I said and pondered, not quite sorry that I was stuck. "Sounds like the *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue.*"

"The *D Minor Toccata and Fugue,*" he crowed. Then he handed me a very boyish grin. "But close. I'm impressed. Do you play?"

"Only by ear."

Spike twisted on the bench. "What did you and Dad cook up? I saw him take you into the study. My guess is that you're to investigate Kathy Hunter's private life in the hope that she can be blackmailed into taking her hooks out of me."

"That method was overlooked. Your mother wanted to buy her off, but your father said he'd handle her his own way."

"Don't think Dad hates to spend money. He's proud. He'd spend ten times as much to prevent anybody from taking advantage of him." He watched me closely. "Probably he intends to get our chauffeur to scare Kathy off."

"By threatening to stick a broken beer bottle into her face?" I said.

He knew what I was talking about. His left hand ran up the piano keys. "So you found out about George."

"Years ago I arrested him for assault."

"Oh." His fingers ran down the scale.

"Isn't your mother nervous about having a chauffeur like George Duffy?"

"Not particularly. She's known George so long that—"

He realized that he was saying too much and stopped speaking. He didn't know that he had given the lie to his father who had asked me as a favor not to mention Duffy's record to Muriel.

"I wish they would buy Kathy off," Spike said gayly. "She can use the money."

"The point is that she hasn't got her hooks in you. She hasn't got her hooks in Thayer Lennan either. Thayer hasn't money to offer her. Only love. He's attractive in a vapid kind of way—the kind of middle-aged man a brainless young girl would fall for."

Spike's grin didn't flicker. "Now I'm really impressed. Can you let a layman in on your process of deduction?"

"I seldom give away trade secrets. But in this month's issue of *The Eternal Woman* there's a story by Elaine Coyle Lennan. Kathy and Thayer and herself are easily identifiable in it."

A discord reverberated as his fist banged down on the keys. "The monster! Does she have to hurt everybody?"

"It seems to me that her husband is hurting her by having an affair with another woman."

"I know, but—" He caught his lower lip between his teeth and chewed. "Did you tell Mother about the story?"

"I don't mess in people's lives when I'm not on a case."

"Mother subscribes to *The Eternal Woman*. There must be a copy in the house, but I guess she didn't get around to reading it." He brooded. "Look, Thayer didn't ask me to invite Kathy so they—well, so they can be together. The only word he's said to her was when I went through the fiction of introducing them. You see, Kathy does want to go on the stage and he promised to help her. Laura can do something for her, and so can Quinn, and so can Greta now that she's here. Just asking them wouldn't be enough. Thayer thought they would really put themselves out for her if they became very friendly with her over a weekend."

"Instead her visit is having the opposite effect."

"Isn't it though?" he said glumly. "Laura despises Kathy because she thinks I'm having an affair with her. And Mother could tear her heart out, and now Dad is going to get tough with her. What should I do?"

"Tell the truth."

"About Kathy and Thayer? That would make her every bit as unpopular. Though if Mother gets around to reading the magazine, she'll learn anyway."

I said: "You'll be able to get through the weekend by saying that Kathy is the sister of a friend of yours, and from there on the truth about what she's after."

"That should do it." He jumped up. "I'll see Mother right away and clear the atmosphere."

"Wait a minute. Why is Elaine a monster?"

"Didn't you just tell me about that story? Do you need more proof?" His mouth twisted as if he'd tasted something unpleasant. "But I shouldn't speak that way about her to you. You're working for her."

Spike too. That made it almost unanimous.

"I'm not," I said, tired of repeating it.

"But she's making you read her novel."

"Is that considered a chore?"

"You read it. Is it?"

"I haven't got past the first page yet. What do you think of it?"

"A whip couldn't drive me to read anything she wrote." Spike swung to the door, saying quickly, "I must see Mother," and he was gone.

Reloading my pipe, I reflected that it remained none of my concern that this was a house filled with liars and worried people. I went out to the gay and airy chit-chat on the terrace.

Greta was saying: "I doubt that Elaine will permit Ben to go boating tomorrow morning until he's read her manuscript, and he's hardly started it."

Everybody laughed.

6

Greta did better than I—she was asleep within an hour. The mattress was lumpy, the heat sticky, the blanket heavy. When I kicked the blanket off a breeze swirled in from the Sound and chilled us. When I pulled the blanket up the breeze died.

It was that kind of night.

I decided it was a night for reading in bed. The manuscript was in the desk. From the little I had read of it the prospect was good that it would induce slumber. If it didn't, I would have disposed of the task before morning, leaving me free to go swimming and boating with the others.

I got out to bed. There was moolight in the room and I paused to gaze down at my wife. She looked wonderful in moonlight, with her face in repose amid the splash of black

hair on the pillow and her transparent nylon peach nightgown in charming disarray. I had heard that men grew tired of looking at their wives, but such men were not married to Greta.

With my hand on the doorknob I hesitated. Chances were that Elaine and Thayer, sleeping on the daybed, had no more covering than we. The thing to do was to open the door a crack to see if I could cross the living room without embarrassment. I turned the knob.

"Darling, where are you?"

Greta's voice was shrill with terror.

"I'm right here," I whispered.

Still half-asleep, she didn't hear me or see me. She was clawing at her pillow, moaning as if her heart had broken.

I dropped down on the bed and gathered her in my arms. Trembling, she clung to me.

"Darling, she—she—" By moonlight she peered into my face as if to make sure I was the right man holding her.

"Take it easy, baby," I said. "You had a nightmare."

"A terrible nightmare." Her head sought its accustomed position on my shoulder. "I dreamed that you and Elaine were in a car and she ran it over a cliff and killed you both. It was so real. I was holding you dead in my arms, and then I awoke and you weren't in bed and I had an awful fright."

"That short story of hers," I said. "But why would you dream I was the victim instead of Kathy and Thayer? It's been a long time since that summer in the Manne House."

"Dreams aren't logical."

"Freud says they are."

Her voice got fuzzy. "Let's not talk now. Just hold me and sleep."

I held her and after a while I slept. And in the restless heat I dreamed too, and it was somewhat like Greta's dream.

Greta and Elaine and I were together in an indefinite room. Elaine, spilling out of her halter, held a beer bottle like a club raised to strike. She advanced toward Greta who stood splendidly beautiful in her peach nightgown. I said: "That's not the way to disfigure a woman. First break the bottle." On the table edge Elaine smashed off the bottom of the bottle, then smiling tightly and complaisantly she thrust it into Greta's face. Greta did not draw back. She looked at me sadly, and suddenly her lovely face was no longer there. Only blood. Bright red blood swirling like a vortex into which I was being drawn, in which I was drowning. I cried, "Dear God, what have I done?" but the words were stopped in my throat, for my mouth was filled with blood.

I awoke sweating, panting. The weight of Greta's head

cramped my shoulder. I eased my arm from her and without waking she turned her back to me.

This was a night for bad dreams, for the troubled notions of the day to assert themselves in the sleeping brain. And later, minutes or hours later, I dreamed again.

This time Greta wasn't in it. Elaine and I were there, looking down at Thayer and Kathy Hunter lying side by side on the living room daybed. They slept. I handed Elaine the carving knife with which she had sliced the roast beef we had had for dinner, and I said: "Say it was self-defense and you'll get away with it." Smiling tight-lipped, Elaine drove the knife in among the gray hairs on Thayer's chest. Blood spurted like a fountain. She said: "Should I kill her the same way?" I said: "For the sake of variety cut her throat." Kathy's violet eyes opened as Elaine bent over her. Kathy didn't look at Elaine but at me, and an instant later she had a second mouth, sagging hideously open from ear to ear, and Elaine straightened up. She said: "How did I do?" I said: "Fine." She smiled tight-lipped and said: "I knew, Ben, you'd tell me how. And now, of course, I must kill you too." She came at me with the bloody knife. I didn't care. I didn't want to die, but there was nothing I wanted to do to prevent it. I watched the knife coming. It took a long time to reach me. There were vast distances and the knife dripping blood came on and on—and I awoke.

I left the bed. I shed my pajamas and stood at the window.

The breeze was back, but it didn't cool me. I looked out at the patch of trees fringing the spring. I wished I was out there. After a while I returned to bed.

Chapter Three

ELAINE SAID: "It's ten after nine."

Sluggishly my eyes opened. Sunlight streamed into the room, touched the foot of the bed.

Elaine wasn't speaking to me. Her voice was on the other side of the closed door, in the living room.

"So what?" I heard Thayer mutter drowsily.

"We've guests. You can't sleep here in the living room all morning."

"Well, they're still asleep."

We weren't. Greta, open-eyed, threw an arm across my chest. The morning was hotter than the night, too hot for body contact, but we didn't shift apart. I heard Elaine in the kitchen. The refrigerator door banged shut, a pot rattled, water ran.

"We ought to get up," Greta suggested.

"Uh-huh."

But neither of us stirred. My eyes closed, heavy from the heat and the restless night.

". . . burning," Greta said.

"Uh?" I muttered, waking slowly.

"Don't you smell something burning?"

I brought up my left hand to cover a yawn, then turned the wrist and saw on my watch that it was nine-thirty. That short nap had lasted twenty minutes. The bed was becoming intolerably hot.

"That's us frying," I said.

"I definitely smell—" Greta raised her voice. "Elaine!"

Somewhere in the bungalow springs creaked. No other sound.

Greta crawled over me out of the bed and slipped on the peach nylon robe that matched her nightgown. She left the bedroom door open; through it I saw Thayer sit up on the daybed. A white sheet covered him to his waist. He blinked at Greta.

"Something's burning," she told him.

Now I also smelled it.

"What?" Thayer sniffed. "Sure, in the kitchen. Hey, Elaine!"

Greta hurried into the kitchen. Thayer took a moment to watch the swing of her hips, then go out of the daybed and barefooted in pajamas followed her.

"It's in the stove!" I heard her exclaim. Something banged. "Biscuits! Thayer, hand me that towel."

Time to get up at any rate. I put on pants and a polo shirt and sneakers.

Thayer was coming out of the kitchen. He moved past me without saying good-morning, rapped on the bathroom door. "Elaine?" He turned to me with a puzzled frown, then pushed the door in. I waited. He reappeared shaking his head. "She's not in the house."

I went into the kitchen. Greta was contemplating charred biscuits in a pan resting on the open oven lid.

"Part of our breakfast," she said lightly. "I'll whip up another batch before Elaine gets back."

"But where can she be?" Thayer, long and lean in lightweight pajamas, stood in the kitchen doorway. "She wouldn't go off and leave biscuits baking in the oven."

"Didn't she ask you to watch them?" Greta said.

"No. I was sleeping." He shouted at the top of his voice, "Elaine!" and listened to the silence. He stared at us. "If she's at the spring, she'd hear me."

"What spring?" Greta asked. I hadn't told her about it.

"Behind the house," he said. "We use spring water for drinking. It's so much better than this tap water. But it takes only a minute to fill—"

He spun away from the door. I heard his bare running feet slap the porch floor.

Greta said: "It must be pretty far if she didn't hear him call her."

"It isn't." I looked down at the burned biscuits. "I'd better go too."

By the time I got outside, Thayer was halfway to the spring. I moved briskly after him. His hurrying, loose-jointed figure vanished in the deep shade of the trees.

Suddenly he screamed.

2

Elaine was in the spring. Only half of her was visible, her body from hips to upturned bare heels extending out of the water on the further bank.

The spring wasn't more than knee-deep anywhere and here at its widest about a dozen feet across, but Thayer had floundered in the middle of it. He was pushing himself up with his hands. I ran into the spring.

Now I could see the rest of her in the crystal clear water. The back of her head seemed just under the surface. Her hair floated like seaweed.

Thayer's back came between us. He bent over her.

Frigid water stung my legs, weighed down my sneakers. Rocks strewed the bottom; one of them must have tripped

Thayer in his frenzy to reach her. I picked my way across.

Thayer had lifted her head out of the water. That seemed the limit of his strength. He stood helplessly, hanging onto her jaw with both hands, waiting for me.

I climbed up to the shore and pushed one arm under her belly pressed into the sharp bank and the other under her thighs. I lifted. She was heavy. Thayer wasn't any help. He kept clinging to her jaw as if he didn't realize that it was no longer necessary to hold her face out of water. Crouching, I pivoted with my burden. His hands slipped from her then. I took three or four wobbly steps and put her down on the grass.

Wet hair was pasted to her face. I brushed it away. Her eyes and mouth were closed. There was no sign of respiration. I searched for her pulse.

"She couldn't have been in there long," Thayer said thinly.

Greta's voice uttered my name. I looked up. She stood panting from the run on the opposite bank.

"Call the police," I told her.

Thayer whimpered: "My God, the police! Why not an ambulance?"

"The police will know what to bring. Greta, tell them it's a drowning. Hurry."

She ran.

I turned Elaine over on her stomach. I straddled her thighs and eased her face sideways for her left cheek to rest on the ground. That was when I saw the bruise—high up on the temple and running past the hairline.

"Wh—what about her pulse?" Thayer asked.

"The pulse doesn't mean too much."

"Then you didn't find any?"

I didn't answer. My hands were spread on the fleshy waist. I pressed forward, deflating the lungs, then eased slowly back. There was no problem of having to loosen or remove her clothing. She wore no more than she had yesterday afternoon and evening, except that this morning her shorts and halter were white.

A note of hope touched Thayer's voice. "She couldn't have been under water long. She spoke to me a few minutes ago."

Forward . . . pause . . . back . . . . pause. . . . One . . . . . . two . . . three . . . four.

"It was ten after nine," I said without breaking the pumping rhythm. "I heard her tell you the time."

"Did she? I don't remember. I was hardly awake when she spoke to me. The next thing I knew, Greta said something was burning. What time is it now?"

"Twenty to ten."

"Oh, God!" His legs stood before me; they looked scrawny

because of the wet pajamas plastered to them. "But we don't know how long she was in there. Maybe no more than five minutes."

A little water dribbled past her lips. As I pumped I watched intently. A thimbleful of water and no more.

"Even twenty minutes," Thayer was saying with pathetic eagerness. "People have been revived after they've been in the water for hours."

I didn't tell him that that was a myth cherished by people who didn't know. Five minutes would be bad enough.

Nothing coming out of her mouth. But that wasn't any more conclusive than not being able to find her pulse. Nothing was considered conclusive in an immersion. You kept trying. One . . . two . . . three . . . four.

Thayer had turned to the bank. He stooped and peered and his legs came back.

"It's less than two feet deep there," he said in a tone of wonder. "Why didn't she get up?"

"There's a bruise on her forehead."

He bent. His strained face hovered before me, then rose out of sight.

"You think she fell in the spring and a rock on the bottom knocked her out?"

"It seems so," I said.

Trees shaded off the sun except for bright patches dancing on the water, but the sultry heat was here as elsewhere. Sweat was like glue under my clothes. Thayer stood by, motionless now, very quiet. He didn't suggest relieving me. He wouldn't know how—a man so inept that he hadn't been able to cross a spring without falling.

One . . . two . . . three . . . four. Birds chirped merrily in the trees overhead. Three minutes since Greta had gone to call the police. It would take them no longer than that to cover the two miles from the village. Add another minute for them to get started.

Thayer said: "Is there—is she reviving?"

"It takes time."

"What can I do?"

"Bring blankets."

"On a hot day like this?"

"Yes."

He ran across the spring. He stumbled, but this time he didn't quite fall into the water. As he achieved the opposite bank, Greta returned from the bungalow. She carried a blanket over each arm. Good girl; it hadn't been necessary to instruct her to bring them. Thayer took the blankets from her and managed to recross the spring without getting them wet. This was no time to despise the man, but I couldn't help it.

I rose. Thayer placed a blanket over her bare back. His hand touched her flesh and panic hit him.

"She's cold!" he moaned.

"That's why I wanted blankets." I snatched the second blanket from him and finished covering her, leaving an opening for my hands to pump her lungs.

After watching for a minute, Greta stepped out of her slippers and pulled up her nightgown and robe to her knees and waded across. There were questions in her taut face, but she didn't ask them. She stood beside Thayer, and for a while there was no sound but the singing of birds.

"Where the devil are the police?" Thayer burst out. He looked terribly pathetic in those thin wet pajamas clinging to his long body.

"They said they'd be here right away," Greta told him.

"Then why aren't they?" he demanded.

I was thinking the same thing. Sweat kept dripping into my eyes. I took time off to wipe my brow with a forearm, but every inch of my skin was sweaty.

We heard a car. I sent Thayer to tell them where we were. This time he went across more slowly, avoiding submerged stones. At the bench he stopped.

"It's Hugo Rauch." Thayer slammed his fist into his palm. "Those damn police, why don't they come?"

Greta said: "I phoned the Rauch house too. I thought you might need help and they're so close."

What we needed was an inhalator and a doctor. I had enough audience.

Hugo Rauch and George Duffy appeared. Rauch stopped to speak to Thayer in low, solemn tones. Duffy came to the bank and called: "Need a hand, Sarg?"

"Do you know how to give artificial respiration?"

"Sure thing. How do I get over?"

Limply Thayer waved a hand. "A plank's over there."

Duffy disappeared among the trees; seconds later he came toward me on this side of the spring. He took my place. I stretched my arms, flexed my shoulders. Duffy was doing all right. I knelt and studied Elaine's face. It was empty. I found no pulse.

From the other bank Hugo Rauch and Thayer looked on wordlessly. I gave them no sign. I went to the spot where I had taken Elaine out of the water. A couple of feet out there was a submerged rock the size and shape of a watermelon.

Greta was beside me, like myself down on her haunches. "What do you see?" she asked.

"She could have struck her head on that rock. There's a bruise on her forehead."

"Could have?"

"I didn't see it happen," I said irritably.

She pointed. "That must be the pitcher she came here to fill."

She was closer to it and had noticed it first in the underwater shadows. The green pottery pitcher at a casual glance could have been mistaken for another stone. The handle was turned away from me. It lay to the right of the watermelon shaped rock—perhaps too far out from where she would have dropped it, but it could have swung out of her hand as she fell.

If she did fall.

I straightened up. The three men watched me, and Greta's very grave eyes were tilted up to my face. I walked down the bank.

Trees grew to within a few feet of the spring. There was barely enough room for Greta and me to walk side by side. Water sloshed in my sneakers.

The spring narrowed considerably, trickled now between rounded rocks jutting above the surface. Fifty feet below its greatest width it was some five feet across. A wide plank, resting on two comparatively flat stones, formed a crude bridge. I put a foot on the plank. It wobbled only slightly.

"You're looking for something," Greta declared.

"Am I?"

"Darling, you needn't be mysterious with me. Was it an accident?"

"Why wasn't it?" I said and started back.

She put a hand on my arm. Between trees we saw Duffy sway back and forth above the still woman under the blankets.

"Is there hope?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"You don't believe there is."

I shrugged.

When we were back at the wide part of the spring, the police hadn't yet arrived. But other people had; the useless audience had increased. Laura and Muriel and Spike were there, standing with Hugo Rauch and Thayer between the bench and the spring. And their two weekend guests had come along for the excitement. Quinn Boxhardt and Kathy Hunter were off by themselves as if they didn't quite belong.

Still nothing was coming out of Elaine's mouth. Still nothing had changed.

"Tired?" I asked Duffy.

"Naw."

I looked across the spring at those seven. They were watching with that grim and voiceless silence that grips people at the scene of tragedy.

Greta's thoughts must have kept pace with mine. She said: "You didn't answer my question. Was it an accident?"

Only Duffy could hear her. He paused, crouching over the unresponsive woman.

"I don't know the answer," I said.

Duffy resumed.

Suddenly Spike yelled: "Here they come." He dashed out to the clearing and waved both arms.

The police car bumped over the field and came to a stop almost at the bench. Behind it rolled an emergency truck.

This was their baby now. I searched for my pipe and discovered I had left it in the bungalow.

3

Chief of Police Orton Tremper said he had read my booklet, *The Psychology of Interrogation.* At any rate, he had heard of it and remembered my name.

"Might give my boys some pointers to see you work," he said generously. "But just a drowning."

He disdained just a drowning with a wave of the twig in his hand.

I didn't mention that his boys might learn to cover two miles in less than thirteen minutes. Tremper himself had been well behind them, but it wasn't required that the head man go out on an emergency call until he learned it was serious.

He was plucking leaves off the thumb-thick twig. He worked slowly and methodically—a wide, meaty, unexcited man.

"Any luck, Doc?" he asked.

The completely bald doctor held a stethoscope to Elaine's heart. He pulled out the ear prongs and shrugged. He started to say something to the two men working the inhalator and changed his mind.

"I'll see what adrenalin does," he told Tremper as if he didn't expect it to do anything.

Greta and Thayer, having crossed the plank, came out of the trees on the other bank. She was taking him to the bungalow after Tremper had briefly questioned him.

The crowd was all on the other side. It kept growing. I heard cars maneuvering for parking space on the road; I heard raised voices and sometimes laughter. But when people reached the spring their voices sank to mutters and their faces set themselves into appropriately solemn molds. And they parted to let Greta and Thayer through, gawking at him in those wet, plastered pajamas and her in the bedroomy nylon robe over her nightgown.

Then the crowd closed in again like water over a hole. Except for Hugo Rauch and Duffy there wasn't anybody there

now whom I knew. I wondered what had become of the others.

"About twelve inches," Chief Tremper announced.

He had stuck the twig into the spring and was studying the water mark.

"Her head was at least two feet out from the bank," I said. "It's somewhat deeper there."

He peered into the water. "Say eighteen inches. Unless her head was resting on that rock, then it would be ten-twelve inches. Know if her head was on the rock?"

"No."

"Mr. Lennan doesn't either. You heard me ask him. He said he didn't remember." Tremper tossed the twig into the water and watched it float downstream. "What's the difference how deep? Deep enough. You can drown in a cupful of water. The way I see it, she got a dizzy spell bending over to fill the pitcher—this heat and blood rushing to her head. She fell in and knocked herself out on that rock."

"If she did fall."

His eyelashes flickered. "What's that again?"

I said: "Why would she come over to this side of the spring to fill the pitcher? It's the same water at the other bank."

"Well, now . . ." He plucked his chin. "She didn't have to go all the way to the plank and cross it and come back to get there. She was barefooted, wasn't she? She waded across."

"Why?"

Tremper watched the doctor take a hypodermic needle from a black case. Adrenalin—one of the murder methods Elaine and I had discussed.

"It's hot," Tremper said. The statement reminded him of the heat; he dabbed at his brow with a blue-and-white handkerchief. "She's barefooted. She cooled off by wading across the spring."

"In the spring from which she intended to take drinking water?"

"A spring like this, it cleans up in no time. And some people aren't so finicky."

"Uh-huh," I said. "She wanted to go wading in ice-cold water. She didn't put down the pitcher and wade and come back and fill it, or fill it before she put her feet into the water she would drink. That would be the simple, normal, intelligent way. Instead she carried the pitcher with her. When she reached this side, she started to fill it. She wasn't a complete idiot, but she was going to carry it full and heavy across the rocky bottom of the spring. How does that sound to you?"

All of a sudden Chief Tremper didn't like me. I was trying to complicate a simple drowning, make work and trouble for him, spoil his Sunday.

"It sounds like you're trying to be a bright boy," he said

slowly, working over his face with his handkerchief. "Like maybe you want some publicity by showing everybody how bright you are."

With Thayer Lennan my public relations man?

I said: "That doesn't explain why she came to this side with the pitcher."

"Theory!" Tremper had a plodding man's immense scorn for theory. He moved to the small group about Elaine.

The doctor was again listening to her heart. Looking bored, he folded the stethoscope and stuck it into his black case, through with it.

"What now, Doc?" Tremper asked.

"Keep trying. If for no other reason, to make her family feel we've done all we could."

My arm was plucked. Greta was back without having taken time to dress.

"Darling, Muriel Rauch has made hot coffee in the bungalow. And you ought to put on dry shoes."

I was in the way there, definitely not wanted. That went both ways.

"All right," I said.

We walked to the bungalow against the stream of arriving spectators. Their cars filled the road, spilled over to the fields on either side. There were quite a number of young children.

"Like a picnic," Greta said bitterly.

Near the bungalow Spike was surrounded by three girls his age. They looked very pretty in their summery Sunday best. His back was to us. He didn't realize that we were overhearing him say importantly: "Naturally we administered artificial respiration at once, and it may well be that that will save her."

He was, after all, as much a juvenile as most grown men. We passed on.

As we ascended the bungalow porch steps, we saw through the screen door Laura Canell and Quinn Boxhardt drinking coffee at the living room table.

"Well?" Quinn asked when we came in.

Kathy Hunter sat on the daybed. She turned her head slowly, as if she had to force it into animation, and her violet eyes held no more in them than a doll's.

"Nothing yet," I said.

Kathy resumed staring out of the window. I thought that now she and Thayer could have each other completely, but I didn't like myself for the thought. It was the way a cop's mind would run.

"Thayer's in the bedroom dressing," Laura said. "We

hadn't had our breakfast yet, and Muriel decided to make coffee for Thayer and you."

"And we're the ones who're drinking it," Quinn said. "Muriel, anything left in the pot?"

Muriel appeared in the kitchen doorway. She looked particularly frail in a flowered housecoat, and particularly pale. She held a loaf of bread in its wrapper.

"I'm putting up more, and toast too." She stepped back into the kitchen.

"That's what I admire about Muriel," Quinn said. "She's got loads of servants, but doesn't object to demeaning herself in a kitchen."

"Darling," Laura said, "did you ever eat my fried eggs?"

"I did," Quinn said, "and the edges were definitely not crisp. There is not one person in a thousand who can properly fry an egg, and though I love you dearly, you are not that one."

They were back to their mindless chit-chat, even here and now. Fortunately it didn't last. Thayer came out of the bedroom, and suddenly there was nothing anybody had to say, however trivial.

He had put on white ducks and a white shirt and white-and-brown sport shoes. He didn't ask me the question—just looked dully at me.

"They're still working on her," I told him.

"I ought to be out there," he muttered.

"Nonsense," Laura said crisply. "You can't do anything. Sit down and have another cup of coffee."

Disregarding her, he wandered toward the daybed. Kathy Hunter shrank sideways, as if afraid that he would sit beside her. Over her head he gazed at the people in the field, then down at her hair, then he moved on to the desk chair. He sat with his head in his hands.

Greta and I went into the bedroom to dress.

I took a guess at what she would say, and she said it as she pulled her nightgown over her head. "Was that one of the murder methods you suggested to Elaine?"

"No."

"It's a very good one, isn't it?" She bore nightgown and robe to the bag on the dresser. "Practically fool-proof."

"Uh-huh."

"And it has all the requirements Elaine demanded. A murder that's assumed to be an accident."

I said irritably: "Or an accident that's assumed to be a murder."

"That's what makes it perfect. There's no telling which, is there?"

I peeled off my wet socks. Greta stood with brassiere in

her hand, waiting for me to develop the theme. I didn't, and she let the silence hold while we dressed.

One of the things that made it very easy to live with her was that she knew when not to chatter.

4

I was called away from my second cup of coffee. Police Chief Tremper lounged on the bungalow porch with an intense young man.

"Shake hands with Jerry Hodgson," Tremper drawled. "Assistant D.A."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Helm." Hodgson was quite respectful, but not glad. When our hands parted, he complained: "I don't want trouble."

"From me?" I said.

"Well—" Hodgson frowned at the people he saw in the bungalow through the screen door; he frowned at the crowded field. "Where can we speak in private?"

I led them around the far corner of the bungalow, away from the spring and the crowd. As we walked, I asked: "How's Howard Raphael?"

That brought Hodgson close to panic. He said, "He's vacationing in Maine," and then let go with the vital question. "Do you know my chief?"

I said uh-huh and didn't add that I had met District Attorney Raphael only once, briefly. Let Hodgson believe that I had the ear of his boss; it would keep him on his toes.

We stopped walking because we were far enough for private talk and there was no shade ahead. We stood in the sun.

Hodgson wore a starched collar and necktie and jacket, but it wasn't the heat that harassed him. He massaged his lips with his thumb knuckle and spoke. "Tremper here has been telling me you have—ah—ideas about this drowning. I can't see it at all, and neither can anybody else in authority."

"What can't you see before you've made a thorough investigation?" I said.

Tremper mopped his face and chuckled lazily. "Know the trouble with you, Helm? You're an expert on murder. Anyway, that's what people pay you to be. So everything's murder to you. Like a doctor who specializes in a certain disease. The only people he examines are people who have the disease, so he starts believing everybody has it. You have murder on the brain."

"I didn't say she was murdered."

"You didn't?" Hodgson said. "But Tremper told me . . ."

Tremper flushed. "You didn't say it in words, Helm, but I'm no dope."

"I simply raised a question: why did she cross the spring to fill the pitcher?"

"Answer it," Tremper challenged.

"All I can do is speculate. Somebody was on the other side of the spring. That other person was wearing shoes and stockings. Mrs. Lennan wasn't. She waded across."

"With the pitcher in her hand?" Tremper mocked.

"It was empty," I said. "She didn't think of putting it down when she started to cross to that other person."

Tremper grinned. "Is that the simple, intelligent way, taking the pitcher along with her?"

I didn't mind him pulling my leg, repeating my own arguments against me. When you were guessing, you got nowhere unless all the objections to your guesses were raised.

"There's a difference between deliberately setting out to return with a full pitcher and neglecting to put down an empty pitcher," I said. "Maybe she did put down the pitcher before crossing the spring. Later that other person came over for it by way of the plank and dropped it into the water close to where Mrs. Lennan lay."

Aimlessly Hodgson wandered a few feet from us. A drowning was a drowning; an assistant district attorney wrote a very brief report and was finished with it. I was being mean. I was trying to thrust on him distressing responsibility while his boss was away.

He came back and demanded: "Mr. Helm, how do you come in on this professionally?"

"I don't professionally. Naturally I'm concerned with what happened to my hostess."

Tremper employed his handkerchief to blow his nose. "You show me one bit of real evidence, just one bit."

"There may never be." Then I added pointlessly: "Unless she recovers."

"But you stand up and say it's murder." Tremper's tone sharpened with slowly rousing anger.

"No. I say that investigation is indicated. I'd like the water pitcher gone over for fingerprints. I'd like a thorough internal examination of the bruise on her forehead. I'd like to know if there's water in her lungs. In short, the postmortem works."

"You'd like!" Tremper exploded. I knew from experience how official police felt about meddling private investigators; I was surprised that the detonation hadn't come sooner. "Who the hell are you? A New York shamus telling me how to run my job. A guy who wrote a book and thinks he knows all the answers." Snorting, he wiped his sweaty brow.

"I recall," I said gently, "that I'm discussing this at your request."

Hodgson put in quickly, appeasingly: "There's no need

for any of us to get excited. We're all reasonable men anxious to do the right thing."

The right thing was a matter of perspective. To Hodgson it meant not endangering his job and his career. If he sent for his boss and it turned out to be a drowning after all—or what couldn't be proved to be not a drowning—Raphael would resent having his vacation interrupted. If the case developed into something that got into headlines, Raphael would be sore because he hadn't been sent for at once. Whatever poor Hodgson did involved risk.

I said: "I'm sure you gentlemen know your business. That's why I expect a post-mortem."

"Well, sure," Tremper drawled. His anger evaporated in the atmosphere of amiability. "Soon as I saw how shallow that water was, I figured the drowning needed more looking into."

"Exactly my thought," Hodgson declared with spirit. "I arrived only a few minutes ago, Mr. Helm, and officially she is not even dead. What really do you expect?"

They were easing me out, excluding me. If I shot off my mouth to the district attorney or to the press, they could counter they had been on the ball from the first.

That was all right. I had won my point.

I accompanied them to the spring. The movement of the crowd had reversed. People were trickling back to their cars; nothing was developing to keep them from their Sunday paper or church or the water. Hugo Rauch passed me. He asked me if I had seen Muriel and I told him she was in the bungalow. I passed Spike. Only one pretty girl remained with him.

When we reached the spring, I found Thayer Lennan on the far side. Dully he watched them work on his wife.

They kept it up for a while longer. Two hours after she had been taken out of the water, she was declared dead.

5

They were all gone, the spectators and the neighbors and the officials. Elaine remained beside the spring, her face now also covered by the blanket, abandoned except by her husband and a uniformed cop who would watch over her until she was taken away.

From the bungalow we couldn't see the cop, but Thayer's white shirt was visible against shadowy green. He kept vigil from the bench.

Greta said: "Why would her death hit him so hard?"

She sat at the table, running a burned match through the

ashes and cigarette stubs in the ashtray. Muriel and Laura had washed the coffee dishes before leaving.

"She was his wife," I said.

"But he loved Kathy Hunter."

"Love?" I turned from the window. "Love hasn't a definition. It can mean physical passion for a young woman, and it can mean the habit of living with the same woman for many years. He didn't divorce Elaine, didn't leave her for Kathy."

"Perhaps because Kathy didn't want to set up permanent housekeeping with a man twice her age who couldn't support her."

"Possibly."

"Probably."

"All right," I said. "But he kept living with Elaine, and a man doesn't just shrug off the death of a woman whose bed he'd shared for so long. He'd feel lost and bewildered like Thayer."

"Or put on an act to make people think he felt lost and bewildered," Greta said.

Under the noonday sun the bungalow was becoming unbearably hot. It would be somewhat cooler beside the spring, but they shouldn't leave her there so long in this weather. Nothing was hurried on a Sunday morning in New Rod.

"I don't give a damn how he feels," I said.

She discarded the match, raised somber black eyes. "Did you notice how Kathy cringed when she was sitting on the daybed and he came near her? How does she think Elaine died?"

"I'm not a mind reader and I don't propose to become one." I licked salt sweat from my upper lip. "Let's let it alone."

"Can you let it alone, darling? You had a conference with the police. You snap at me, which means something is troubling you."

I said: "What troubles me is that I left a cool apartment to be near water into which I never got a chance to swim. Let's go home."

"We can't leave Thayer at a time like this."

We were stuck. We had been stuck from the moment I had consented to meet Elaine Coyle Lennan in that midtown bar, and there was no telling how long it would be and what would happen before we could shake ourselves loose.

I lit my pipe. I wandered about the cramped, roasting room, and after a minute I found myself seated at Elaine's desk. I opened one drawer and found a mare's nest of pencils and paper clips and hair pins. I opened another.

"What are you looking for, darling?"

Cigarette smoke floated down to the desk. Greta stood beside the chair.

"Elaine's novel," I said.

"You're going to read it now?"

"Uh-huh."

Greta retreated a couple of steps and watched me search the three remaining drawers. She didn't have to put words to what was on her mind. I wasn't letting it alone after all.

Steps sounded on the porch. Thayer Lennan entered as I closed a drawer.

"You're still here," he muttered without interest. He stopped at the table and pressed one fist down on it, standing tall and stoop-shouldered and no longer younger than his years.

"It's time for lunch," Greta said. "I'll see what's in the refrigerator."

"I'm not hungry." Thayer moved on to the daybed and sat and looked at me on the desk chair.

There was a heat-choked silence. Then I asked him where Elaine kept her novel.

"Her books are in the bookcase," he muttered.

"I mean the one she was working on—the one she wanted me to read."

He laughed through his nostrils. "She no longer cares if you read it."

"But where is it? I can't find it in the desk."

"It's around somewhere. Elaine leaves—left—her things all over the place." He rose in abrupt anger. "Everybody else went home. Why don't you?"

Greta assumed the conciliating manner you use with an unreasonable child. "We're all hungry. There must be some cold roast beef left. I'll make sandwiches." She turned to the kitchen.

"I can make my own meals," Thayer snapped. He swayed a little, a pathetic, aging man with a cracked voice. "I never asked you here. I don't know you. Let me alone."

There was nothing I would like better than to get out of there.

I went into the bedroom and packed whatever wasn't already in our bag and closed it and brought it out. Thayer was again slumped on the daybed. Greta looked at me with a question in her eyes. I shook my head.

"Good-bye, Thayer," she said, and I echoed her.

He mumbled good-bye.

On the way up Kinder Lane we passed an undertaker's car come to fetch Elaine.

Chapter Four

LABOR DAY MORNING it rained intermittently. From Central Park a breeze swirled into our bedroom, making it delightfully cozy to snuggle together in bed under a thin blanket.

A jangling bell jarred my drowsy contentment. The clock said twenty to twelve. I ignored the intrusion.

"Darling, answer it," Greta muttered against my shoulder.

The table was on my side of the bed. Reluctantly I reached for the phone.

"Mr. Helm?"

"Uh-huh."

"Jerry Hodgson speaking. I thought you'd be interested in the post-mortem findings." The assistant district attorney sounded crisp, business-like, and pleased. "Elaine Lennan died of suffocation. Water in her lungs."

He paused as if expecting me to be surprised. I told him I wasn't.

"The bruise on her forehead caused a slight concussion," he continued. "Everything in the report corroborates the fact that she fell into the spring while filling the pitcher and knocked herself out on an underwater rock."

"What about the pitcher?"

"You mean fingerprints? Well, now, Mr. Helm, that pitcher was fished out of the water."

"I've found fingerprints on a jar which had been immersed for days."

"Was it running water? A bubbling spring?"

"In other words," I said, "not even Mrs. Lennan's prints were found on the pitcher. It was wiped clean."

"Washed clean," Hodgson corrected me. "By the water, naturally." Anxiety tinged his voice. "I don't see how you can contend that fingerprints were removed from the pitcher in any other way."

"I'm not contending anything. I'm raising questions to make your job more uncomfortable."

He chuckled politely as if at an unfunny joke. "It would seem so. The reason I called you, Mr. Helm: I thought you'd want to hear that we've officially closed the case."

The reason Hodgson called me was to learn if I intended to act up over the case being closed.

"That's about all you can do under the circumstances," I said. "Thanks for calling."

"Glad to cooperate any time." Cheerfully he said good-bye.

I hung up and lay back on the pillow. The sun had burst forth; the rain was tapering off. I closed my eyes.

"Darling," Greta said between her teeth, "save the mysterious detective act for your clients. Who was it and what did he say?"

"It was the scared young assistant D.A., and he didn't say anything startling. Elaine was drowned."

"You mentioned fingerprints."

"The fingerprints that weren't on the pitcher. There's no way to dispute Hodgson's assertion that the water washed them off."

"Did it?"

"That's one way they could have been removed." I pushed an arm under her waist. "Baby, I agree with Hodgson. The case is closed."

Greta was silent for a minute. Then she said: "So Elaine did find her perfect murder method."

I considered expounding on the dangers of intuition and the requirements of evidence, but there was no need to make the effort. She didn't expect an answer; she seemed to have fallen abruptly asleep. After a couple of minutes I discovered that bed had lost its lure. I got up and went to a window. Rain clouds were gone from the sky over the park. The sun was drying the sidewalks eleven stories below and the heat was back.

Greta, who wasn't asleep after all, said: "Will there be a baseball game?"

"Most likely. It didn't rain hard."

"Then let's go."

While she showered, I put on water for coffee and fetched the milk and *The Times* from the hall. Elaine rated several inches on the obituary page.

NEW ROD, L.I., Sept. 4—Elaine Coyle Lennan, fiction writer, was drowned here yesterday at her summer home on Kinder Lane. Her age was 40.

Born in Diby Hill, Ind., Mrs. Lennan was married to Thayer W. Lennan, of Bridgeport, Conn., an advertising writer.

Mrs. Lennan was the author of two novels, "Built for Two" and "Satan in a Tuxedo," as well as short stories in many magazines. She was a member of the Authors' Guild.

Surviving are her husband and a sister, Mrs. Ida Deitz, of Digby Hill.

I turned to the scores of yesterday's baseball games.

The Labor Day doubleheader was scheduled to start at one-thirty. By the time we sat down to the breakfast of pan-

cakes and sausages Greta had whipped up, I gave up hope to watching batting practice which I enjoyed as much as the game. By the time she dressed, I doubted that we would see the opening pitch. And as we were about to leave, Spike Rauch rang the doorbell.

His hair was slicked back and his random freckles were polished. With the solemn shyness of a young boy he shook my hand and Greta's, and then he proceeded to make himself at home. He sat in the wingchair and crossed his legs and lit a cigarette.

"I don't smoke at home," he explained with a man-of-the-world air. "Mother cherishes the superstition that it stunts growth. It's easier to restrain myself in her presence than to argue with her."

I said desperately: "We were just starting for the Polo Grounds."

"Are you Giant fans? That dates you. The younger generation favors the Yankees or even the Dodgers."

Spike talked baseball. He knew players and batting averages and the standing of every club in the majors. He knew everything about everything except to go when it was obvious we wanted him to. When he stopped speaking for a moment, Greta asked him how his family was.

That was a mistake, because he went off on a new tack. "Only Mother and Dad are left in New Rod, and they're moving back to the city tomorrow. Laura and Quinn left last night and haven't been heard of since. Ah, romance! I came into town for a date with an empty-headed but luscious little thing on Madison Avenue. I'm some two hours early, so I looked you up."

Two hours! My eyes appealed to Greta to find a mannerly way to get rid of him. She ignored my signal; she sat curled on her legs on the couch and contemplated the boy wonder with a kind of scientific fascination.

Relentlessly Spike chattered on. "I'd like to thank you, Ben, for saving my reputation, such as it is. I followed your advice Saturday night. I told Mother and Dad that Kathy Hunter was the sister of a friend and that I had invited her specifically to meet Laura and Quinn. They seemed somewhat dubious, but my story was fairly reasonable and no more was said. Kathy left yesterday afternoon. She was considerably upset. I'm afraid it was partly my fault." He flicked ashes on the rug. "I asked her if she had a theory as to how Elaine had happened to drown."

He looked brightly at me for comment.

Greta's lips parted and remained that way. I moved to the humidor on the desk and loaded my pipe. Spike's voice was

stilled; for the moment he'd said all he intended to.

I turned back to him. "Did she have a theory?"

"She said all she knew was what she'd heard—that Elaine had fallen and struck a rock. But she was upset and soon left for New York."

"Do you have a theory?"

"I hardly gave it a thought until after lunch yesterday when I strolled over to Thayer's bungalow and found our chief of police cross-examining Thayer."

"In your presence?"

"I eavesdropped," Spike said blandly. "I heard voices and stopped beside an open window. Chief Tremper was asking Thayer if Elaine had had enemies and how much insurance she had carried and so on. Thayer seemed to assume that such questions were the usual routine in an accidental drowning."

"But you were smarter."

My sarcasm didn't touch him. "I should imagine I'm a good deal smarter than Thayer," he admitted. "By the way, Elaine carried no insurance, according to Thayer. Does that interest you?"

"Should it?"

"I wouldn't know. You're the sleuth, aren't you? And I noticed that while they were trying to revive Elaine you were deep in conference with Chief Tremper and other officials. And Chief Tremper told me that he was becoming increasingly convinced that all you had was a bee in your bonnet."

I stared. "You mean to say Tremper took you into his confidence?"

Spike leaned back and yawned—a ham actor like every kid. "I had a talk with him when he came out of the bungalow. The disadvantage of being young in years is that adults are disinclined to take one seriously. I had difficulty getting him into conversation until I hinted that you are working for my father." He grinned disarmingly. "I trust you don't object to that small lie."

Greta gasped.

I said: "Were you ever spanked?"

Blood drained from his face. His mouth twitched. "This is the second time you've raised that obscene notion," he said shrilly. "I'd kill anybody who touched me."

I believed he would.

Spike's hand shook a little as he touched an expensive gold lighter to a fresh cigarette. When he blew out smoke, his small-boy's grin was back. "After all, I'm making atonement by confessing what I told Chief Tremper."

"You're confessing," I said, "because you know Tremper

will mention it to me when I speak to him."

"The private eye who reads the souls of men." Deliberately he blew smoke at me. "I went home and it was then I asked Kathy if she had a theory."

"Why Kathy?"

"To see her reaction. After all, Elaine's death leaves her free to marry Thayer."

I looked at my watch. The game would start in ten minutes, and it would take a lot longer than that to get uptown.

"What's your theory?" I asked.

"I'm afraid I'm confused."

"Uh-huh."

He didn't hide his disappointment. He had been priming me to straighten him out, to hand him whatever was on my mind.

"What does uh-huh mean?" he demanded.

"What does your prying mean?"

His cigarette ash was precariously long. He glanced about, and Greta rose to bring him an ashtray. Before she could reach him the ash dropped off.

"The world's my oyster," he said, dusting his crossed knee. "That's from Shakespeare. Why do you resent a normal intellectual curiosity?"

"What I resent," I said, "is being kept from a ball game."

He sprang up. "Oh, I'm sorry. By all means don't let me keep you."

He had managed to make me feel that his manners were better than my own.

Greta took his arm, and on the way to the door she said that he must come and visit us some other time soon.

"You don't mean it," he told her wryly and went through the door.

When eventually we settled down in seats behind third base, it was the top of the fourth inning and the Giants were leading the Phillies 4-2. But that was the first of two games and there was plenty of action remaining, though not the kind we cared for, as it turned out. At the top of the ninth, with the Giants leading 7-5, the Phillies scored four times, and there was the ball game. In the second game the Phillies got off to a two run lead and made the Giants look particularly futile in losing 4-2.

Dispirited and fatigued from five hours of unsatisfactory baseball, we rode all the way downtown on the subway and had dinner in a seafood restaurant. At ten o'clock we entered our apartment building, anxious to call it the end of a highly imperfect holiday weekend. Spike Rauch sat in the foyer.

Greta sighed.

Grinning cheerfully, he came over to us. "My date had a

headache and sent me away early. I had nowhere else to go, and you did ask me to visit."

He hadn't lost any time.

"It's late," Greta said weakly, "and you have a long trip."

"Don't worry about me. I'm spending the night in our city apartment."

Past his shoulder she looked to me for help. I shook my head. She assumed a most gracious smile and told him that we'd love to have him come up, but that we were tired and yearned to go right to bed.

"A brush-off," Spike said. "Very well." He stepped toward the double doors presided over by a uniformed doorman; then he came back and wasn't at all offended. "Ben, you're working on this case, aren't you?"

"What case?" I said.

He grimaced peevishly. "It's merely that I'm curious, as I told you. I've never before known a detective, much less observed one work. I know you think me impudent, but I can't resist the fun of participating in a new experience."

"Murder isn't fun," I said.

Nothing in his gray eyes changed. "Then you believe it wasn't an accident?"

"I believe she was drowned in the spring. Good-night, Spike."

He wheeled and strode out of the building.

Greta and I ascended three imitation marble steps and went up a hall to the automatic elevator. As we shot up to our floor, she declared: "He didn't come to the city because he had a date."

"Maybe not."

"What is he after?"

"He explained," I said. "One of the things he hasn't excelled in yet is being a detective. It's time he started."

The elevator reached our floor. I held the door open, but Greta remained thoughtfully in the cage.

"Darling," she said, "he scares me."

"Now it's a boy who's making you see ghosts."

"Because he is a boy. A young boy who thinks and acts like an adult."

"That ought to scare his girl friends," I said. "Me it merely irritates."

She came out of the elevator and we crossed the hall to our apartment.

2

In a bottom drawer of my desk there were five hundred business cards that read:

BEN HELM
Consulting Criminologist

I had had them printed up after I been retained on a murder case by the Board of Supervisors of a county which had no more police department than an inexperienced and blundering sheriff and two green deputies. Since then I had advised other small community law enforcement agencies, but I had never had the nerve to pass out to anybody one of those consulting criminologist cards.

Though in effect I had set myself up along those lines. I did little legwork. I chose cases and cases chose me. I was exclusive, a specialist, meaning that I could charge what the traffic would bear. I had time for considerable lecturing and occasional writing, and I didn't have to maintain an outside office.

The smaller of the apartment's two bedrooms had been converted by us—that is, by Greta—into what we somewhat superciliously referred to as my study. With me tagging along for company, she had bought for it a desk, a bookcase and a letter file, all in matching limed oak, and a couple of masculine leather chairs. On one wall was a pretty good reproduction of Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* and on another a reproduction of a piece of a Diego Rivera mural, both, needless to say, in oak frames.

Almost the only time I went in there was when I had to use the typewriter.

Tuesday morning I was at the desk, trying to get started on a magazine piece that had been on my mind for some time: Freud's contribution to criminology. An editor was interested provided my touch was light and there was a liberal sprinkling of wisecracks and anecdotes.

Writing always seemed to me the hardest work there was, and that morning it didn't go at all. Elaine Coyle Lennan kept coming between myself and the yellow sheet of paper in the typewriter.

After half an hour I had pecked out exactly nine words: "When is a drowning not a drowning and why?"

That had nothing to do with the article on Freud. That had, in fact, nothing to do with me.

I ripped out the paper, crumpled it into a hard ball, pitched it with some vehemence into the wastebasket. I rolled a clean sheet into the typewriter.

The doorbell rang. Thankful for any diversion, I went out to answer it. Thayer Lennan was at the door.

He had shed years since Sunday. He was as young for his age as on Saturday afternoon, the first time I'd laid eyes on him, and was a snappy sight in a rakish gray suit. His shirt

was a shade darker gray than the suit and his hat a shade lighter gray. His mustache was the width of a matchstick. He lacked a cane and a leer to complete the portrait of a middle-aged city slicker on the make for innocent maidens.

He accompanied a limp handshake with the statement that he had come to apologize. I waved him to the couch, offered him Greta's cigarettes and lit my pipe.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

"Greta is rehearsing."

"Please tell her I realize how shabbily I treated you two." Thayer's manner was a lot less chipper than his appearance. "After all you'd done that morning, I practically threw you out of the house. I hardly knew what I was doing or saying."

"We understood."

"You did your best to save Elaine, and Greta was kind. Others were kind too—Muriel, Laura. Then there was no more hope for Elaine, and suddenly everybody was gone. I don't know why that hurt so much, but it did. I walked across the field. A few minutes ago it had been crowded, but now it was empty. And I found you and Greta in the bungalow. You were nobody to me—I mean, I'd known you for only a few hours, and my real friends had deserted me."

I said: "By your real friends, you mean Kathy Hunter."

He started to scowl and turned it into a tragic smile. "That's right, you know about Kathy. You'd read Elaine's story in *The Eternal Woman*."

"When did you find out about that story?"

"Not until yesterday. Frankly, I'd got out of the habit of reading Elaine's stuff—anyway, not until it was around the house for a while, and sometimes not even then. I prefer rousing adventures or detective stories. Then yesterday morning as I was closing up the bungalow and getting ready to leave for the city, Spike Rauch came over and mentioned the story."

"Is there anything that kid doesn't stick his nose into?"

"I had a right to know." Thayer shook his head, as much in anger as in sorrow. "It was like Elaine to do something like that. I don't know how she found out, but it must have been almost at the beginning, last winter. Thirteen years I was married to her, and I never understood her. I think she kept quiet about Kathy to see how it developed. For story material. A story was more important to her than love or pride or anything."

"Why complicate it?" I said. "Many a wife overlooks her husband's extra-marital activities because she's afraid to lose him."

"Elaine didn't overlook it." He played with his cigarette as if he didn't know what to do with his hands. "Maybe her stories were more real to her than reality. She killed us in that

story. Maybe that was her way of killing us." He spread upturned hands. "I hated her when I read it. I never hated her when she was alive. We got along in our way. I wasn't an angel. There were sometimes other women on the side, but only on the side. Nothing serious. Until Kathy."

Thayer reached for his hat beside him on the couch. He scowled at the floor and said: "Kathy refuses to see me. In my hour of greatest need Sunday she walked off without even saying good-bye, and now she won't speak to me even on the phone. That's women for you. They're all the same."

I wished he would go. I wanted no part of the man or his sticky problems or his self-pity; I had work to do, an article to write, a luncheon date with Greta, a prospective client to see.

He stood up, hat in hand, but when he moved it wasn't toward the door. He went as far as the wingchair and turned.

"I don't know why I'm telling you this," he complained. "It just poured out of me. I came here to apologize, as I said, but also to ask you about the manuscript of Elaine's new novel. It seems to be missing."

My pipe held little more than ashes, but I applied a match to it anyway. There was no hiding from whatever had happened Sunday; it kept coming to me.

"I can't find it," he said. "It's not in the bungalow. You were reading it. Did you by any chance take it with you?"

"No. I asked you where it was just before we left."

"So you did. But she'd stayed home Saturday night to work on the manuscript. What could have happened to it?"

"Did you make a thorough search?"

"I ransacked the bungalow. The manuscript of a long novel is pretty bulky; it isn't easily mislaid." The hat brim rolled between his fingers. "That novel is valuable property. At the least it's worth a few thousand dollars. Then there are the chances of big money—magazine serialization, book club, movies. It can be worth tens of thousands of dollars. Do you think somebody stole it?"

"Why?"

"For its value. The thief could change the title and say he had written it."

"Too far-fetched," I said. "It couldn't work if anybody had read it in manuscript and testified that Elaine had written it."

"Did you read it?"

"Only the first couple of pages."

Thayer nodded glumly. "You see. I don't even know the plot. Elaine made it a practice not to discuss anything she was writing or to show the manuscript around. Maybe the thief was somebody who knew that."

"Did she make a carbon copy?"

"Of course, but I can't find the carbon either. That's what makes me afraid it was stolen. A thief would take both copies to leave no proof that Elaine had written it."

"I don't believe there was a carbon copy in your bungalow," I told him. "Elaine was anxious for me to read the manuscript. Saturday after dinner I offered to, but she was making corrections. You remember we played chess instead. If she'd had the carbon at hand, she would have let me have that. That carbon might be in your city apartment."

"I ransacked the apartment too." His lower lip quivered; a possible fortune was involved.

I said: "Let's attack the problem logically. Nobody could risk appropriating the novel as his own work unless it couldn't possibly be identified as Elaine's. The carbon would do that, or if she had discussed the plot with her publisher or with anybody else."

"But both copies are gone."

"So far you merely can't find them. Where is your mailbox?"

"At the head of Kinder Lane. An R.F.D. box."

"Mail is picked up from the box, isn't it?"

"At the same time it's delivered."

"Then let's try this," I said. "Saturday night, while Greta and you and I were at the Rauch house, Elaine changed her mind about wanting me to read the manuscript, and she mailed it to her publisher. She had told me she had promised to have it in his office by Tuesday morning."

"But it was a holiday weekend. The mail wasn't picked up till this morning, and today's Tuesday."

"If she sent it special delivery, it will be delivered this afternoon. Who's her publisher?"

"Waterman and Teem." Thayer put on his hat and nodded. "There's no use getting hysterical when I haven't exhausted all possibilities. I'll drop around to Waterman and Teem after lunch."

I accompanied him to the door. "Let me know if it turns up. For that matter, let me know if it doesn't."

He paused with a hand on the doorknob. "You're a detective, and I might need—" With a thumbnail he traced what there was of his mustache. "Well, we'll see. Thanks a lot."

I closed the door after Thayer and went back into the study. The article on Freud didn't go any better. At twenty to one I left to meet Greta for lunch.

3

Greta and Quinn Boxhardt were waiting for me at the restaurant bar. I hadn't known until then that he would be

in on the lunch. He asked me what I was drinking.

"Nothing this early," I said.

"Darling," he said to Greta, "how can you endure the man's depressing virtue?"

"Oh, he has his vices," she said. "His pipes smell up the apartment and sometimes he falls asleep at gay parties."

I suggested that we eat. Greta and Quinn carried their cocktails to the table the headwaiter was saving for us.

"Quite a bit of excitement Sunday," Quinn said as we waited for food. "Marred our weekend. I had met Elaine Lennan only once and Laura definitely disliked her, but her manner of death was quite depressing. Laura and I left for a more sprightly atmosphere. I hear tell, Ben, that you were rather intimate with the woman some years ago."

"Not intimate," I said.

"I'm told it was when she and Muriel were both waitresses and you a dashing lifeguard." Quinn broke a roll in two and spread a pat of butter on one of the halves. "Muriel a waitress and now married to a million dollars. That's what comes when a girl maintains a sense of proportion. Pass by the clean-living hard-working boys for the racketeer."

"How can you make a million dollars without a racket?" I said.

Quinn nodded, grinning, and bit into the roll. Shrimp cocktails arrived. We ate.

They discussed the morning rehearsal. Greta thought Quinn shouldn't leer at her so crudely when he was introduced to her. He contended that the audience would miss it if he was too subtle, and anyway it was the director's idea. Over the meat course they tore apart somebody named Janey who flounced.

I hadn't a thing to say. Quinn Boxhardt wasn't the third at this luncheon. I was.

With the coming of dessert and coffee, I managed to slip in words through a momentary lull.

"Quinn, when you said Hugo Rauch was a racketeer, was that an ethical criticism of wealth in general?"

He raised one eyebrow in a gesture familiar to theater goers. "My dear Ben, I leave ethics to those who go in for hobbies. Your comment led me to believe you knew, so I dropped the subject."

"I don't."

"I made a literal statement of fact. Of course Hugo is reasonably honest now that he has made his pile, but his original stake was raised on the shady side of the street. That was in the early 1930's when he operated a chain of gambling hells in the midwest. After that other variations of crime, though I'm vague on details."

"When did he reform?"

"At the beginning of the war when a man with money could pyramid it through this and that. He became rich enough to afford to be respectable, and as he has decent manners and a fair control over grammar he can carry it off. He has something to do with finances at present—stocks and bonds, I believe. I really don't know; I'm a complete dud when it comes to those matters."

I said: "What do you know about George Duffy?"

"Who?"

"The Rauch chauffeur."

"Merely that he's a somewhat mangy looking customer. I wonder why they keep him on."

"Duffy is an ex-crook."

Quinn sipped coffee. He was enjoying himself. This was as fascinating as theatrical gossip.

"I see," he said. "A holdover from the bad days. A sentimental attachment. Perhaps a body guard."

And Muriel would have known Duffy from the old days. Saturday night Spike, who knew because he knew everything, had started to tell me as much and then had broken off. What then had been Rauch's point in asking me not to disclose Duffy's criminal record to Muriel? Trying to answer that would lead along the road to other questions, and I wasn't bent on going anywhere.

I set to work on my pipe.

But Greta, who had listened wide-eyed, wouldn't let it go. "Quinn, how did you find all this out?"

"Well, I'm rather close to his sister Laura."

"I don't believe that Laura would tell you that about her brother," Greta said.

"I didn't say she did." Quinn tossed off his coffee. Concentrating on Greta, he gave me full advantage of his virile profile. "Darling, you and I know how insecure the acting profession is. I'm too fond of Laura to dream of letting her become the wife of a poor man. Consequently I had her financial standing privately investigated."

"Quinn, you didn't!" Greta said, more amused than outraged.

"You underestimate me, darling. I'm a realist. I've known ostensibly wealthy people who hadn't a button. I couldn't take this chance on Laura's happiness. But I resolved to be decent about it. If it turned out that she couldn't afford to support herself in style—"

"And incidentally you," Greta put in.

"And incidentally me. I was perfectly willing to wed Laura poor if her brother was as rich as he appeared. So I had his, as well as her, financial life looked into. Laura, poor

thing, is down to the pittance Will Canell sends her monthly as alimony, and that will stop if she marries. Her brother, however, is an admirable candidate financially for brother-in-law. During these investigations, some of his dark and devious past came to light."

"Darling," Greta said, "you're absolutely shameless."

"Darling," Quinn said, "of course I am."

The waiter left the check. Quinn didn't struggle for it. When the waiter brought my change, Greta and Quinn had to rush back to rehearsal. I lingered on for another cup of coffee, and then went off to keep an appointment with a prospective client suitably located off Park Avenue.

4

The prospective client was a willowy woman in her early thirties. She conducted me to a remote nook of her penthouse and said that she wanted me to investigate her husband. I had been afraid of that. I told her I didn't take divorce cases.

"But a divorce is the very thing I don't want," she said. "I have two wonderful children and I enjoy my home. Your duty will be to find out if my husband—eh—suspects that I'm—eh—seeing another man."

I was entranced. It was rarely that one came across something really brand new.

"Uh-huh," I said.

"Something happened recently that makes me feel my husband guesses. He'd never forgive me. He'd break up our family, our home."

"Then stop seeing the other man."

"Mr. Helm, I don't ask for advice. I ask for service at your usual fee."

"Why not go to a detective agency?"

"I don't dare take the risk. Just any private detective might sell me out to my husband or blackmail me. You have been highly recommended for honesty."

"I'm flattered," I said, "but this isn't my line. All I can do is wish you luck."

"Luck?"

"In eating your cake and having it too."

I was shown to the door by a servant.

I walked west to Madison Avenue. On the corner I stopped to debate whether to continue to Central Park and across it to my apartment. I happened to be in front of a drugstore. That diverted me. I went in to the phone booths and looked in the Manhattan directory. No number was listed under Thayer Lennan. I started to close the directory and had an inspiration

and looked a few lines higher in that column and found Elaine Coyle Lennan's name. I should have known who had been head of that family.

There was no answer at that number. I returned to the directory and looked up Waterman and Teem, publishers.

I went through two crisp female voices before I learned that a Mr. Laurence Jacoby was the fiction editor who handled Elaine Coyle Lennan's novels, and then had to wait another nickel's worth before his voice came on.

"Who did you say you are?" he asked.

"Ben Helm. I was a friend of Elaine Lennan."

"Have you heard of the unfortunate—"

"I was visiting her when it happened."

"You were?" Jacoby said. "It must have been grisly. The first I heard of it was when I read it in yesterday's *Times*. In only a few inches of water. Her husband was here this afternoon and told me the details. Shocking. While her previous books hadn't spectacular sales, she was developing as a writer. I had high hopes for her. Tragic."

"Did her manuscript of *A Handful of Ashes* arrive in today's mail?"

"Why, she brought it in herself Friday afternoon."

"Wait a minute," I said. "You mean the carbon?"

"A yellow carbon. I detest carbons. They're generally too light. Authors have a fiendish habit of using the same sheet of carbon paper until it falls apart. I protested, but Elaine insisted on leaving it."

"So it's at your office."

"Mr. Lennan took it away with him when he was here an hour ago. He said he wanted it for his files and assured me that the white copy would arrive in the mail today or tomorrow. You haven't told me why you called, Mr. Helm."

"This morning Thayer Lennan feared the carbon was lost. I phoned you to check."

"Well, he was here and took it."

I said: "How did you like the novel?"

"I wouldn't know because I haven't read it."

"Thanks," I said. "Good-bye."

I continued to the park, but when I reached it I didn't go across. All that waited for me at home was my typewriter and an idea for an article in which I couldn't regain interest. I put a match to my pipe and strolled down Fifth Avenue to Forty-fifth Street and over to Seventh Avenue and went into a newsreel theater.

Some time during the display of diplomats and disasters I told myself that if I had a nickel in my pocket I would go out to the lobby and use the phone. My smallest coin turned out to be a dime. I watched two bear cubs roll on a lawn and

then I broke my bargain with myself and made the call with the dime, letting the phone company have the extra five cents.

This time Thayer Lennan was in and he sounded chipper.

"Well, the carbon showed up," he said. "Waterman and Teem had it."

"I phoned them and they told me you took it with you."

"You phoned them? I hope you didn't get the impression that I retained you to locate it."

"No."

"I intend to do a personal promotion job on the book," he said. "Waterman and Teem are pretty stodgy. No enterprise. Never seem to have heard of modern promotion. They sold fewer than ten thousand copies each of Elaine's two other novels. They ought to have a man like me on their staff."

"In return for letting them publish the book?"

"They hold an option, but I can throw some weight around. That's why I took the carbon. I'll read it to find out the possibilities."

I said: "Elaine had asked me to give technical advice on the story."

"I'll have finished reading it by this evening. Will you be home?"

"Probably."

"I'll give you a ring and you can come over and pick it up. Might as well have it as accurate as possible. I'm hoping for big things from this novel."

I said good-bye and went back to watch the rest of the newsreel.

5

Mrs. Albert's Daughter was to open on Friday without any out-of-town tryout. When the great Kane Warren had consented to come east from Hollywood, he had stipulated that he couldn't be bothered revealing his sensational physiognomy in the sticks. And Kane Warren was the whole thing.

He wasn't the author or the director or the producer or by any means the best actor in the play. He was a moving picture star and pretty close to being the nation's hero. He hadn't a bad profile and he could deliver lines without stumbling over them, but those weren't the reasons for his greatness. Quinn Boxhardt, for example, was handsomer. What Kane Warren had on the screen was a particularly lascivious way of regarding women and a bedroomy drawl that was a mating call to the inhibited females of the world.

Even the director listened when he spoke, and it was because of him that the play was opening cold on Broadway. That brought it down to the wire in insanity and chaos com-

pounded, and Greta had put some vile-tasting stuff on her fingernails to keep herself from biting them off.

Wednesday afternoon I called for her at the theater and learned that nobody would go out to lunch. Food was brought in and consumed on the run. The director objected to anybody hanging around who hadn't business there, but I had once done him a favor when he had become drunk and half-strangled one of his mistresses. Thus I was not only permitted to remain, but came in on the roast beef sandwiches and coffee brought in for the cast. When the rehearsal resumed, I sat in a back row with Laura Canell, who as an angel was also privileged, and we watched Quinn Boxhardt make love to Greta.

"He does it very well," Laura commented dryly.

"He's not a bad actor," I said.

"Is he acting?" she said.

This was Greta's one big scene. She was neither Mrs. Albert nor Mrs. Albert's daughter, the two juicy female parts. She had observed that she was too young for one and too old for the other, but she knew her limitations. She was the kind of actress who did well in secondary roles, and that was what she got, when she got them.

In the play she was Mrs. Albert's sister who was in love with Mrs. Albert's daughter's second husband, played by Quinn Boxhardt. Kane Warren, who had most of the fat lines, played Mrs. Albert's daughter's first husband, who, it turned out, was really in love with Mrs. Albert, his ex-mother-in-law. Within two hours almost everybody in the play loved—at any rate, lusted—for everybody else, and on the billboard in front of the theater it was called a comedy in two acts.

If I hadn't been so conspicuous in the empty theater, I could have had a good nap—and if Greta hadn't been in it.

On the stage Greta and Quinn had broken their embrace and were receiving instructions from the director. He said that Greta should be less ardent and more tender. "Stroke his cheek," he said.

They kissed again, and during the kiss Greta stroked his cheek the way she often stroked mine. Quinn's hands were quite affectionate.

"Darling," Laura whispered to me, "Quinn has a crush on her."

I didn't know whether or not that was true, but I wouldn't have been surprised. I found it hard to see how a normal man could help being affected by Greta.

I said: "He has a crush on you."

"I suppose so. But he's big-hearted; he can give a piece

of his heart to any number of women." Laura leaned against my shoulder. "Ben, I want him."

"You don't have to worry about Greta."

"You're sure of her, aren't you?"

"Uh-huh."

Laura sat back primly. "Smug men," she declared, "always get it in the neck."

I had no desire to argue with her. I lit my pipe. Greta had made her exit and others held the stage, so there was nothing up there to interest me.

Thayer hadn't phoned me last night as he had promised, or this morning either. I had a small argument with myself, and once again I lost it. I stood up.

"Are you leaving?" Laura asked.

"I'm going to make a phone call."

The pay phone was downstairs in the men's lounge. I had two nickels. I used the first to call Waterman and Teem. Laurence Jacoby was out to lunch, but his secretary spoke to me. She said that the manuscript of *A Handful of Ashes* had not arrived that morning.

I hung up and dialed Thayer Lennan's number.

"Hello," he muttered indifferently when I identified myself, and he waited for me to get on with whatever business I could conceivably have with him.

I didn't remind him that he had promised to let me know when I could read the novel. I said: "Elaine's manuscript wasn't received by Waterman and Teem today. That means it disappeared over the weekend."

"That not tragic. I have the carbon."

"Have you read it yet?"

"Skimmed through it. A lot of sticky romance—Elaine's usual stuff. A man would find it dull."

"Can I come up now and read it?"

There was a silence. Then Thayer said: "I was about to leave."

"I can be there in fifteen minutes."

"Well—" Thayer uttered a sound that might have been a laugh, but was more like a hoarse quiver over the wire. "I didn't know you were one of Elaine's fans."

"I'm wondering why the original copy is missing."

"You're wondering! What are you trying to do, make a job for yourself? I'm not in the market for a detective."

"I'm not speaking as a detective."

His tone changed to friendliness. "Look, Ben, I have the carbon. That's all I need."

"Why do you object to me reading it?"

He repeated his uncertain laugh. "I hope millions of people

read it when it's in print. It's just that I can't spare the time to have you come up now. Well, good-bye."

Thayer hung up.

For a long moment I stood with the receiver in my hand. Then I placed it on the hook and went upstairs. Greta wasn't on the stage. I left the theater.

6

At eight o'clock Greta phoned me at the apartment.

"The rehearsal's over," she said. "I can't budge an inch under my own power. Come and fetch me in the car, darling."

I did, and we drove north out of the city. When she was worn and jittery from work and tension, driving relaxed her. We stopped off in Tarrytown for our first real meal of the day. We ate leisurely on a terrace overlooking the moonlit Hudson, and on the way back she sat snuggled up to me with her head on my shoulder.

The phone was ringing as I unlocked the apartment door. I hurried in ahead of Greta.

"Ben?" The woman's voice was familiar, but so thin and unsteady that I couldn't place it. "Is this Ben Helm?"

"Uh-huh."

"This is Muriel Rauch. I've been trying to get you. Ben, something terrible has happened. Spike is being accused of murder."

I took my pipe out of my mouth. Greta was moving about in the bedroom.

"What's the evidence?" I asked.

"Ben, it's fantastic. Just because Spike was seen coming out of Thayer's apartment—"

"Wait a minute. What murder are you talking about?"

Muriel couldn't reply at once. She was weeping.

I said: "Are you trying to tell me that Thayer Lennan was murdered?"

"Yes—Thayer," she sobbed. "And they're saying my boy did it. Ben, I need your help."

"Are you in New Rod?"

"No, we're here in the city." She gave me an address near the East River. "Hugo sent for his lawyer, but I feel you can do so much more. Ben, please, you've got to help me."

"I'll be right over."

I hung up and knocked out my pipe and refilled it. Then I went into the bedroom to tell Greta that I might be out all night.

Chapter Five

LAURA CANELL ADMITTED me. The butler had been on the way to answer the door, but she beat him to it. He had to content himself by taking my hat.

"Darling," she said, "I told Muriel you'd drop everything and come."

A plainclothes man was there in the foyer. He sat on a settee with a newspaper. There wasn't anything special about his clothes or his build or his feet. What identified him was that he had refused to surrender his hat to the butler. It lay beside him.

Laura steered me through a door. This was a duplex apartment, with the living room the height of both floors. There was enough space to pole vault, including all the running start necessary. A balcony ran along the two inner walls that had no windows. Doors from upstairs rooms opened onto it and a staircase ran down from it. The furniture was honey maple, ostentatiously early American.

Muriel Rauch was a small, pale, huddled thing in the midst of all that space. She sat on a couch backed up against a long table. She held a cigarette in one hand and a crumpled lace handkerchief in the other.

"Ben, thank God you came," she said without rising, without moving her body or the handkerchief or the cigarette.

They expected too much, but I didn't say it. I asked where Spike was.

Muriel stirred then. Limply she flapped the handkerchief toward a door beneath the balcony. "In the dining room with the police. Hugo is there too."

"What happened?"

Muriel drew on her cigarette. She opened her mouth as if gasping and smoke rolled out thickly. Then she managed to speak.

"Thayer Lennan was killed, and because Spike called on him they're saying—" She shivered. "How can they even think that of a boy his age?"

I turned to Laura. "You tell me."

Her clasped hands tightened. "We've been told so little. Thayer's head was bashed in with something—a bookend, I think. Spike called on him this afternoon. Nobody answered and he went away. Then that Kathy Hunter—" Laura's expressive mouth twisted with distaste. "Do you know that she and Thayer were having an affair?"

"Uh-huh."

"How disgraceful!" Muriel burst out. "Thayer used Spike to bring his mistress to New Rod. To my house. She killed him." The shrillness of her voice pricked my nerves. "She's the one!"

"Easy," I said. "We'll get nowhere with wild accusations."

"It's not wild," Laura said. "Kathy Hunter found the body."

"The idiots!" Muriel said. An ashtray had appeared on her knee; viciously she stabbed out her cigarette. "His mistress was found there with him, with his dead body, and they dare say that my boy did it."

"The police must have something to back it up," I suggested.

Muriel brought her lace handkerchief up to her face. There was a brittle silence.

Then Laura unclasped her hands and said: "There's some nonsense about Spike having been seen going into Thayer's apartment."

"Nonsense?" I said.

"Ben!" Muriel was disappointed in me. "I thought you'd be on our side."

"There's only one side in murder," I told her, "and so far I know almost nothing about this one."

"Be reasonable," Laura said. "You can't imagine that a young boy like Spike—"

"The police won't be interested in my imagination," I cut in. "Or in me either—I mean as a private investigator. I've no legitimate standing in a police investigation."

"Oh," Muriel whispered and blew her nose.

I had failed her. I didn't know what she had expected, and probably she didn't know herself, but it hadn't been to hear me say that I couldn't do anything. I added, "Of course I'll try," but that didn't change the atmosphere.

Muriel sank lower on the couch, as pale and tragic as any mother whose son is in danger. Laura moved about aimlessly. Through a window only some fifteen feet away I saw the lights of the Queensboro Bridge converging toward us. Though the bridge was several blocks north, it gave the effect of running into the next building.

I lit my pipe as a preliminary to going through that door beneath the balcony when it opened and Hugo Rauch appeared.

"Where the devil is Walton?" he snapped.

His rimless glasses swung from his hand. That ingrained tiredness was deep in his ascetic face. I thought of what Quinn Boxhardt had told me about his past. He didn't look like a man who had been in the rackets. He came out from under the balcony.

"What the devil does Walton do to earn his retainer?"

he complained. "When you need a lawyer, you can't get him. Laura, call Walton's house."

"Ten minutes ago they told me they were still trying to locate him," Laura said.

"Call again."

Laura left the room.

"Dear," Muriel said, "Ben Helm is here."

"So I noticed." He tossed me a curt nod, which I promptly returned. "What I need is my lawyer."

Muriel put two fingers to her mouth and spoke through them. "Dear, what's happening?"

"That damn fool kid!" He replaced his glasses and examined me through them. "What do you think you can do, Helm?"

"I'd like to go in there with you."

"Well, why not?"

Rauch waited for me and together we went through the door into the dining room.

2

Spike Rauch was saying: "She was mistaken, that's all. There is considerable distinction between a mistake and a lie."

He was sitting halfway up the massive oak table. As he spoke he watched the police stenographer at the far end of the table make rapid symbols in his notebook. Spike's chin rested on his fists propped up by the elbows. The side of his mouth visible in his profile twitched.

Detective-lieutenant Herbert Flood stood across the table from him. His meaty hands clutched the top of one of the substantial oak chairs that ran around the table. Age was piling up on his jowls and paunch, but his blue eyes were quick and bright in fleshy sockets. At the moment those eyes were disgusted.

He opened his mouth to speak to Spike and noticed then that Hugo Rauch hadn't come in alone. "Well, look who's here," he said.

Spike turned his head. At the sight of me he worked hard at bringing up a grin meant to be cocky. It didn't come off. His mouth had stopped twitching, but he was just a very scared boy.

"Hello, Spike," I said. "Hello, Herb."

Herb Flood and I had met way back when I had been on the Coast City force and he had been a first-grade detective. He had come down from New York to extradite a rapist, and because the hotels had been jammed I had invited him to bunk with me. He had stayed three days, and when I had moved to New York I had looked him up. While

we never became exactly friends, we liked and respected each other.

But right now he wasn't glad to see me.

"What's the pitch, Herb?" I asked, beating him to the punch.

"Ben," he said, "when I'm on a case I don't let a shamus within a block of where I'm working."

"I asked Helm in," Rauch told him crisply.

"Then ask him out. The only reason I let you listen in, Mr. Rauch, is the kid's a minor."

"See here." Rauch took off his glasses. He possessed enough money so that he didn't have to take anything from anybody, much less from a cop. "I know my rights. Helm represents me. That is, he represents my son."

"He's not a lawyer," Flood drawled, holding his temper in check. "A shamus doesn't rate." He appealed to me. "Be smart, Ben, and don't make me get tough. Beat it."

I took time to put a match to my pipe. Then I said: "I thought you'd like to know that I spoke to Thayer Lennan this afternoon at about two-fifteen on the phone."

"Yeah!" Flood let go of the chair. "Keep talking."

"It's a long story."

"I listen to long stories."

"I spent last Saturday and Sunday in New Rod with Thayer Lennan and his wife. Did you hear what happened?"

"Yeah. She was drowned. I didn't know you were there."

"She was murdered," I said.

Light from the chandelier glinted on the glasses swinging from Hugo Rauch's fingers. Spike bored his chin deeper into his fists.

"What's this?" Flood was saying. "Why didn't anybody tell me?"

I said: "It looked like an accident, but now I know it wasn't. That's the long story. You'd prefer to hear it in private."

"Okay," Flood said. "We'll find privacy."

I turned to the table and put one hand flat on the oak top. "Spike, will you take my advice?"

Somber gray eyes rested unblinkingly on my face. He was a terrified boy trying not to show it, but he was also a bright boy.

"That depends," he said.

"Not good enough," I said. "After I've been told what happened this afternoon, I want you to follow my advice. Yes or no?"

"Just a minute." Briskly Hugo Rauch asserted himself. "My lawyer is on the way. He'll do the advising."

Spike took his chin off his fists. "Dad, I prefer Ben to your

bumbling shyster. All right, Ben, my fate is in your hands."

Herb Flood was walking. With his hands deep in his pants pockets, he had wandered to the far end of the room. Now he was striding back. When he passed the stenographer, he said, "Skip this, Milt," and came on until he could have reached out and knocked me down. "Cunning lad, aren't you, Ben? If it was anybody I didn't think as much of . . ." Abruptly he smiled. "What've you heard about this killing?"

"Nothing."

"Was Lennan expecting company when you spoke to him? Anything like that?"

"He said he was on the way out, but he didn't say where."

"Yeah? If he went out, he was back in a couple hours to get himself knocked off. You ever been in that apartment?"

"No."

"There are a couple of bookends on the living room table. One's a lad with a beard and one's a dame. Bronze. Heavy enough to kill a man. That's what one of them did—killed Thayer Lennan. Caved in the back of his skull. That happened around four this afternoon, take or leave half an hour, though maybe we'll know a little closer after the autopsy. Around seven-thirty a dame came up to the apartment. Name of Kathy Hunter. You know her if you were in New Rod Saturday and Sunday because she was there too."

"Uh-huh."

"What can you give on her?"

"Later, Herb, along with the rest."

"Yeah. I've done some adding already. I got a dirty mind. Well, Kathy Hunter rings the doorbell. When nobody answers she turns the knob and finds the door unlocked and goes right in. Perfectly at home." He leered half-heartedly. "She goes through the foyer and into the living room and finds him on the floor. He's dead."

Hugo Rauch said: "And yet you jump all over my son."

"I jumped over her plenty, too," Flood retorted. "But when she got there Lennan was dead a few hours already, and right off she called the police. She told a straight story and answered questions straight. That's a lot more than your kid is doing."

Sitting very erect, Spike stared off at a window on his left. On this side of the house all you could see was another building across the street.

"Lennan lived in one of these apartment houses divided into two sections," Flood resumed. "Each section has three apartments to a floor off a small, square hall and its own self-service elevator. Lennan's apartment is on the left of the elevator, and on the right lives a lady name of Noble. Around half-past four Mrs. Noble goes out. She sees a boy enter the

Lennan apartment. She goes down the elevator and walks over to Broadway and buys cigarettes and an afternoon paper and stops to talk to somebody and comes back. She's gone ten-fifteen minutes. The elevator comes down and the boy she'd seen going into the Lennan apartment steps out. Mrs. Noble doesn't give him a thought till the body is found and we're questioning everybody around. Then she tells me about him. Kathy Hunter is still there and I ask her if she knows a kind of slim boy sixteen or maybe younger. She says yeah, a kid name of Shelley Rauch."

As if suddenly tired, Flood pulled a chair from the table and dropped into it.

"So there it is, Ben," he said. "I come here and first he denies he was at Lennan's at all. When I say I'll confront him with Mrs. Noble, he admits he was there all right, but says he didn't go in when Lennan didn't answer the doorbell."

Spike said: "It's my word against that woman's. Why should she be believed and not I?"

"I'll tell you why." Glumly Flood studied Spike across the table before telling him why. "Because she's got no reason to lie and you have. You were in that apartment at least ten minutes."

"She's mistaken," Spike persisted, and looked defiantly at the lieutenant.

Spike wasn't being particularly bright now. He was like any boy who had had a terrific shock and was resorting to bluff in the face of reason.

I said: "Cut it out, Spike."

His mouth had resumed its twitching, but his jaw was obstinate. "Cut what out?" he said with contrived naivete.

"Lying," I said. "You have the brains to know that nothing can be as bad for you as a clearly demonstrable lie. You said you'd take my advice. Tell the truth."

"The whole truth and nothing but the truth?" He tried to bring mockery into his voice, to make a joke of it.

"Uh-huh."

Flood gave a sign to the stenographer to take this down. Rauch leaned tiredly against the massive oak buffet, his gaze fixed on his son, and said nothing, not even warning him to wait for the lawyer.

"All right, I was in Thayer's apartment," Spike said. "I found the door unlocked. I went in and there he was on the floor." He sat back with his hands out of sight under the table and bowed his head. His voice became small. "I—I was stunned and frightened. I hardly knew what I was doing until I found myself in the street."

"What frightened you?" Flood demanded.

"I found, Lieutenant, that I am far from tough-skinned. I

have learned that walking in on a murdered man can be considerably upsetting."

"Yeah. But you weren't so scared that you didn't spend at least ten minutes with the murdered man."

"I—I can explain that." Spike's hands reappeared on the table. He pushed them out and stared at the knuckles. "He lay there so still and there was blood and I saw the bust of Beatrice on the floor near him."

"Beatrice?" Flood said.

"The bronze bookend. One is in the form of the bust of Dante, the Italian poet, and the other of Beatrice, his girl friend. It was obvious that he had been struck with the bookend, but I couldn't be sure he was dead. I hadn't the nerve to touch him. I seemed to be waiting for him to revive. Then all at once I had no doubt that he was dead, and I regret to say I became panicky. I didn't know what to do. If I called the police, they might believe I had killed him. I stood there trying to decide. More time than I thought must have passed. Then I made up my mind that the smart thing was simply to leave and say nothing."

He dropped his face on his hands and maybe he wept soundlessly. Genius or not, he was human and very young.

Flood cleared his throat. He had children of his own.

"Why'd you go to see Lennan in the first place?" he asked.

There were no tears after all in Spike's gray eyes when he lifted his head. "We were old friends. We played chess together."

"Was he expecting you?"

"No. I stopped in on the chance that he would be home."

"Yeah," Flood said. "So why didn't you tell me this right off when you found out Mrs. Noble had seen you come and go?"

"I felt a fool for the way I'd let panic overwhelm me." Spike kept trying to revive his cocky smile and kept making a mess of it. "I don't like to be considered a fool."

Flood's eyelids drooped halfway; through the remaining slits he contemplated Spike. He was, I thought, standing up well under his experience with genius.

"Now let's go over it again," he said.

He went over it thoroughly while Hugo Rauch appeared to be asleep open-eyed against the buffet and I smoked a pipeful. Spike had ready answers now and occasionally he tossed in one of his supercilious wisecracks. Flood was running out of questions when the door opened to admit a gray-haired, thick-set man in tuxedo.

"You the lawyer?" Flood asked him.

Rauch didn't give the newcomer a chance to reply. "He was," he told Flood and then looked the lawyer over from

head to foot as if he'd never seen anything like it before.

It wasn't nice. Rauch's face had stopped being the face I had known. Features like rock and eyes like flint couldn't be ascetic or weary or anything but deadly. That was the way a racketeer would look at one of his mugs who hadn't jumped when the boss had called.

The lawyer flushed. He opened his mouth, but again Rauch didn't let him speak.

"You're fired," he snapped and turned to Flood. "How long is this going on? You have nothing on my son."

"I'm finished." Flood pushed back his chair, lumbered up to his feet. "For now, anyway." He touched my arm. "You come with me, Ben."

Spike was the first out of the dining room. I heard Muriel cry, "My poor boy!" and then I was through the door and saw her enclose him in her arms. From deep in the vast room Laura was moving rapidly toward them.

Nobody paid attention to me but Flood. We got our hats from the butler.

3

We walked looking for coffee, and Herb Flood was saying: "I've got two boys, eighteen and twenty-one. Both in college. I thought they were bright boys—till tonight. They're dummies. They don't even know the English language, let alone the whole encyclopedia forward and backward, and they don't act ten times older than their age."

"Don't let Spike Rauch get you down," I said.

"I acted a little rough with you up there at first, Ben, but I guess I owe you thanks. I don't know if his story is still straight, but you took me off a spot. I'd close my eyes and think: Yeah, here's a full-grown man, a wise guy at that, who'd just knocked off somebody and was lying cool as a cucumber. I know how to handle those kind. Take 'em to the station and sweat 'em. Then I'd open my eyes and see a mighty scared fourteen-year-old kid, and for a kid his story made sense. I mean later it did—after you'd got him to admit he'd gone into Lennan's apartment and then went to pieces. A kid will act like that. I remember years ago, when I'd just got into plainclothes out in Queens, a girl his age came across a murdered dame in a lot and ran home and hid herself in a closet all day. Yeah! But what's this Shelley Rauch—a kid or a man?"

"Both," I said.

On Third Avenue we found an all night lunchroom. We ordered coffee and Danish pastry at the counter and carried the food to one of the three tables.

"Okay," Flood said when we were settled. "The long story."

It took fifty minutes to tell. Flood pulled out a black pocket notebook and a fountain pen and whenever I mentioned a name he wrote it down. Twice he got up for more coffee and pastry. The first time he brought back the same for me, but on the second trip I told him I had no desire to emulate his paunch.

When I'd said all there was to say, he gathered what crumbs remained on his plate and shoveled them into his mouth.

"You can't blame the New Rod police chief and the assistant D.A.," he said. "I'd have acted the same way."

"I don't blame them. I blame myself. I was a lot closer to it."

"Don't go getting a swelled head, Ben. There was no way being sure it was murder till her husband was murdered too. Look, last year a guy dropped nine stories from his office window to the sidewalk. Fell or jumped—the official verdict. Well, I couldn't see how he could've fallen without help over that ledge and we didn't find a thing in his life to make him want to jump. So maybe it wasn't fell or jumped. Maybe it was pushed. But how'll we ever know?"

"Another perfect murder," I muttered.

"Yeah. If you'd told Elaine Lennan how to commit a murder and she'd gone out and done it—all right, you should kick yourself. But it was the other way around. She was knocked off."

My pipe tasted bitter. I took out my other one and said: "But one of the murder methods I suggested was used. I told her the more complicated a murder, the more mistakes were likely. I said that the simplest and safest method was to knock your victim on the head and walk away."

"Was anybody there when you said it?"

"Only Elaine."

"Did she write it down?"

"I doubt it."

"Anyway, so what? It's a common way of killing somebody. Goes all the way back to the cave men. What did she think of it?"

"She said the flaw was that the police would recognize it as murder and go looking for motive and suspects."

"Yeah." He captured the last crumb between two fingers, popped it into his mouth. "Always something new in this game. Never heard of people being murdered because they wrote a book, though some of the books I've read, it would be a good idea. If it was because of her book."

"It was."

"Well," Flood said, "let's go looking for it."

We took a cab uptown to a street between Riverside Drive and West End Avenue. The apartment house wasn't nearly as glittering as those on either side; it hadn't a doorman and it wasn't on Riverside Drive at all, but two buildings east.

The apartment was on the fourth floor. A plainclothes man let us in. He said, "Evening, Lieutenant," and retreated up a hall that stretched from the foyer. Flood didn't go that way. He led me to his left into a long narrow living room crowded with green overstuffed furniture and incongruously modern paintings in sleek modern frames.

Except for the plainclothes man on duty, the place didn't look as if anybody had been murdered in it some eight hours ago.

Flood walked toward a pair of gloomily draped windows and stopped between a fat armchair against one wall and a mahogany table against the other wall.

"Here's where he fell," he said. "Some blood spurted when he was hit, but we don't know if it spattered the killer. Mrs. Noble says she didn't notice blood on Shelley's clothes. Lennan bled plenty after he was on the floor. The bookend came from the table."

The rug was a muddy brown; you had to bend low to distinguish the blood stains. One of the bronze bookends remained on the table—the bust of Dante. Two books, all of Elaine Coyle Lennan's published novels, rested against it. The other prop, Beatrice, having done murder, had been taken away for laboratory inspection.

"The bookend of the dame was on the floor, near Lennan's feet," Flood said. "It was half-wrapped in one of those doilies you see on the arms of the chairs, and there was blood on the doily. The killer wiped his prints off the bookend, then left it on the floor because he was scared he'd get a print on it if he put it back on the table. These days everybody gets ulcers worrying over fingerprints. Know what I'd do if I wanted to destroy my prints? I'd run my hands over everything and there'd be nothing but smudges. That's all we found in this apartment anyway, like in every house you'll go into—smudges. Couldn't even get a decent print of Lennan, and he lived here."

I picked up the Dante bookend. It didn't weigh a ton, but its mate had sufficed.

"A weapon of impulse," I said.

Flood nodded. "The killer is talking to Lennan and gets the idea this guy must be killed. Grabs up the bookend and conks him when his back is turned. That's why the first murder was so neat and careful and this one so sloppy. Yeah! But like you said, Ben, these kind are the toughest to crack."

I replaced Dante on the table and straightened the two novels against it.

"The murder methods weren't so different," I said. "Both Elaine and Thayer were struck on the head. The blow didn't kill Elaine, but it made her unconscious so that she could be dragged to the spring and left to drown in eighteen inches of water."

"You think that was impulse too?"

"I think we know very little about anything yet."

"Well, let's look for the manuscript and see if we get to know a little more," Flood said. "We went over the apartment but it was just routine. For letters and such. A pile of typewritten stuff in a file, but we weren't looking for a novel. Hey, Jed."

The plainclothes man appeared. I told him that what we were after was several hundred typewritten pages on yellow paper. Flood and I went into the foyer and up the hall. We passed a kitchen and dinette on the left and a bathroom on the right and straight ahead was the only bedroom in the apartment.

They had slept in an old-fashioned poster bed, the kind that should dominate a room, especially one that small; but to make space for the rest of the stuff it was pushed against a corner, and a bulky dresser was lined up with the headboard. What was left of the room was devoted to a desk, a typewriter table, a chair, a three-drawer wooden filing cabinet. The effect was that of an overcrowded second-hand furniture store.

I attacked the filing cabinet while Flood searched the other furniture. In a few minutes he went out to give Jed a hand with the other rooms.

The top drawer of the filing cabinet contained well over fifty typewritten short stories. Actually there turned out to be half that number; each story on white paper had a yellow carbon. These would be her unsold stories—the unrequited labor and heart-break of a minor free-lance writer.

The second drawer had very little in it: two folders of business mail, mostly from editors, going back five years. Evidently she didn't save personal letters or carbons of her own correspondence.

Herb Flood returned. He shook his head and sat on the bed and watched me.

I opened the bottom drawer. It was filled with magazines —quite a variety, from the small circulation, purely literary to the sleek, advertisement-loaded jobs. Each contained an Elaine Coyle Lennan story, but there were half a dozen or more copies of each issue. Covering a period of eleven years, there were less than two dozen stories.

I straightened up.

"Well," Flood said, "you didn't expect to find it, did you?"

"No."

"Can't say I'm sorry it's not here. Gives us the motive. One copy is gone after Elaine is murdered, the second copy is gone after the husband is murdered. A shame, though, that you hadn't read it."

"Uh-huh."

"Now what've we got?" Flood said. "It begins with a dame who makes stories out of dirt she knows about people."

"Not necessarily."

"You told me about the magazine story where she spread out all about her husband carrying on with Kathy Hunter. If she did it once, she did it other times. And why else would somebody kill for it?"

"I wish I knew."

The bed creaked as Flood rose. He was somewhat annoyed with me.

"Ben, you're an old hand at reconstructions yourself. We use what we have. She took the carbon copy to her publisher Friday, though the editor there told you he wouldn't read a carbon. She left it all the same. Why? For safe-keeping. Like putting it in a vault. The killer found out what she was writing in her book, and Elaine knew he knew and was afraid he'd swipe it. But he had to do more than get his hands on it. She could write it again. He had to get rid of her too. Didn't you say nobody else had read that manuscript?"

"As far as I know."

"So you would've been the first one outside of Elaine and the killer." Flood sat down at the desk and took out his black notebook. "Ben, how many people knew you were going to read it?"

"It could have been anybody in the neighborhood."

"Meaning the people in the Rauch house?"

"Uh-huh. Muriel Rauch and Laura Canell appeared as I was reading the first page at the spring. That was what stopped me; I went off with them. And later there was a joke that Elaine was slavedriving me, so no doubt it was discussed." I paused and then added: "Everybody seemed convinced that I was in New Rod because Elaine had hired me as a private detective."

"Anybody in particular?"

"It was a general belief. I had a feeling that there was a kind of tension, especially whenever the manuscript was mentioned."

"How about names? Who was tense?"

"I've been trying to put my finger on it. There was an atmosphere. I had a feeling." I shook my head. "I distrust

feelings. You can't tell me what gives rise to them. You see, even before we reached New Rod, Greta and I had a notion that Elaine might be after a perfect murder method to use outside a story. I thought at the time that whatever I sensed was colored by that notion. Greta started to worry more and more that Thayer had all the qualifications to be Elaine's victim, particularly after she'd read that short story. But actually what was there? Notions breeding from notions." I spread my hand. "And it turned out it wasn't Elaine who murdered anybody."

"Yeah, but there was murder, so your notions weren't so far off, only rearend front. And the notion she got you to New Rod because you were a detective was straight. She wanted you to protect her."

"Maybe."

"Look at it this way, Ben. She knew somebody was after that manuscript. That's why she came all the way to New York on a hot Friday to leave the carbon with her publisher. But was the person she was scared of only a thief? Maybe a killer too. So she wanted you in her house." He frowned. "No, that's no good. She would've told you she needed protection."

"By not telling me, she saved herself a fee," I said.

"That kind of dame?"

"I think so. There's no doubt she set out to exploit me. In return for giving Greta and me room and board, she had plenty of jobs lined up for me." My mouth twisted. "If one of them was to discourage a killer by my presence, she flattered me."

"How's it your fault? She tried to be too smart, that's all. Chances are she wasn't too worried about being killed. Figured if there was a chance, you being there would be enough to discourage the killer. Turned out she was wrong. She wanted too much for nothing, I guess. What were the other jobs she had for you?"

"The one I mentioned—a perfect murder for a short story. Another was to go over the crime sections of her manuscript."

"About crime, eh?"

"All I know is that there was a murder in the plot."

"Now that's something," Flood said. "Can't think of a better reason to murder somebody than to cover up another murder."

"A fiction story isn't evidence."

He unscrewed the cap of his fountain pen. "We're getting off the track. Maybe we'll never find out what was in the novel, but the way I look at it somebody didn't want it known what was in it. Now who knew you hadn't read it yet by Sunday morning?"

"About everybody."

"How was that?"

"Saturday night on the Rauch terrace Greta mentioned that because I hadn't yet started to read Elaine's new novel Elaine probably wouldn't let me go boating with the others next morning. It was supposed to be a joke. Everybody laughed, maybe including the killer. It was about eleven-thirty when she said that, and we left an hour later. There was little chance I'd read it that night, though because it was so hot and I couldn't sleep I almost did; and the killer could be sure that I wouldn't get up at dawn next morning to read it."

"Who heard Greta on the terrace?"

"Everybody on your list was outside, except Hugo Rauch, and he could have heard from the house."

Flood leafed through the notebook, found the page he was after. "First of all, you and your wife and Thayer Lennan. Then Mr. and Mrs. Rauch, Shelley Rauch, Laura Canell, Kathy Hunter, Quinn Boxhardt. That all?"

"Uh-huh. I noticed four or five servants. And I'd add to that list George Duffy, the chauffeur."

"What'd he do?"

"He was another one who assumed I was working as a detective for Elaine." And I told him the rest of what I knew about Duffy.

Flood wrote it in the book. "Okay, so it was known by all of these you hadn't read the book yet, and early Sunday morning she was knocked off before you could get at it. What's the chance the manuscript was swiped during the night?"

"Unlikely. It was in the desk, and Elaine and Thayer slept in that room within a few feet of it."

"Then let's say next morning, right after the murder. The killer figures you'll miss Elaine pretty soon and find her body in the spring, and for a little while anyway the bungalow will be empty. He hides near there, and when he has his chance he takes only a few seconds to slip in and get his hands on the manuscript."

I noticed a paper clip on the desk. I straightened it out and ran it through the shank of the pipe.

"Greta phoned the Rauch house right after she phoned the police," I said. "They came rushing over in a very few minutes. It would be cutting it too fine for the killer to hang around to steal the manuscript and return to the Rauch house quickly enough to drive back with the others."

Flood tapped his teeth with his fountain pen. "Then later?"

"Uh-huh." The straightened clip had cleaned the shank. The pipe drew well. "Hugo Rauch and George Duffy arrived first. One of them or both of them could have stopped off

at the bungalow. Then the others arrived together, and after a while Muriel and Laura went to the bungalow to make coffee. Some time later I found Quinn Boxhardt and Kathy Hunter also there."

"You left out one name—Shelley Rauch."

"I didn't see him in the bungalow, but he might have been inside when I wasn't. People came and went. You know how these drownings are—crowds and confusion."

"Yeah. The killer is alone in the room for a moment and takes the manuscript out of the desk and hides it somewhere else. Nobody's going to miss it for a while or search for it. Later, when everybody's gone, the killer comes back and gets it from the hiding place." He raised his head from the notebook. "I've been calling the killer a he, but that's just a way of speaking. Could be a she just as easy."

I said: "But none of what he did would be any good without the carbon?"

"Could be the killer didn't even figure on a carbon. I wouldn't think of it. A manuscript is a manuscript, and you got to be in the writing game to know writers make two copies."

"Not necessarily."

"Okay, let's say he knew he needed the carbon too. But then he finds it's not there. The thing is done: he's knocked off the dame. All he can do is hope for the best. Then a few days later the best happens—anyway, for the killer. Thayer Lennan gets his hands on the carbon and reads it and finds out from it who must've killed his wife. How does the killer find out? Only one way I can see. Thayer tells him. Why? Most of the people on this list have lots of dough. The answer is blackmail."

"Is it? Thayer wasn't much, but I can't see him sinking so low that he would blackmail his wife's murderer instead of turning him over to the police."

"Well, look, Ben. After Thayer read the novel, didn't he suddenly change his mind about letting you read it? What other answer have you got?"

"I haven't got a damn thing," I said, and clamped my teeth on the pipe stem.

It was close to three o'clock. I should have phoned Greta. She wouldn't be able to fall asleep until she had heard from me, and perhaps not then either. There was no phone in the bedroom.

"Anyway," Flood said, putting up pen and notebook, "we got ourselves a reconstruction."

"You mean guesses from limited information."

"What don't you like about it?"

"You made a lot of fuss over the fact that the killer found

out I hadn't read the manuscript," I said. "But how could he have been sure that somebody else hadn't read it. like an editor, or that Elaine hadn't discussed the plot with somebody in detail?"

"Most killers don't show too much sense. They get kind of crazy."

"This was deliberate, planned, cold-blooded murder," I said.

"Sure, there are pieces missing. There's going to be plenty of work for me and my boys."

He rose from the desk. The two of us took up almost all the available standing room. He turned his face to his right shoulder, and our eyes weren't twelve inches apart.

"Ben, I been saving this for last," he said gravely. "Rauch called you in tonight. Said you represented him. I've been on my toes. I've been watching and listening, but as far as I can tell you didn't try to steer me away from your client's family."

"I haven't any client. Muriel asked me to get her son out of your clutches. You didn't jail him, so that leaves me out."

"Yeah." Flood yawned expansively. "I see a tough day tomorrow. Let's go."

4

Greta was in bed, but not asleep. The bedside lamp went on as I entered the bedroom. She lay flat on her back; her wide-awake black eyes followed me to the closet where I hung up my jacket.

"Darling, I spoke to Laura on the phone," she said to my back. "She told me you proved to the police that they had made a mistake about Spike."

"Was that what I did?" My voice was too toneless for irony. "There's no mistake that Thayer was murdered."

"Does that definitely mean that Elaine's death was murder too?"

I told her that the carbon of the novel was also missing and about the guesses and theories and reconstructions. Her lovely face was framed by the spread of her loose black hair on the white pillow, and her eyes were deep and large with a kind of terror.

When I finished she said: "I felt from the moment we entered the bungalow Saturday afternoon that something would happen."

"Uh-huh. And as soon as Elaine was found in the spring you felt she was murdered. You were way ahead of me all the time. I tried to rely on common sense, but you had fem-

inine intuition. Baby, the wrong member of the family is the detective."

"Darling, don't be bitter."

I untied my necktie and stood with it hanging over my hand. "I could have prevented Thayer's murder. When I found Elaine's manuscript had disappeared, I went through mental gymnastics to prove to myself that it didn't mean what it seemed to mean. I ignored cause and effect. I kidded myself that Elaine had mailed the manuscript Saturday night in the R.F.D. box, though mail wouldn't be picked up until Tuesday and though she'd been anxious for me to read it. I knew better, but I wanted no part of it."

"Why torture yourself, darling? Come to bed."

"Yesterday afternoon I phoned the publisher and learned that the manuscript hadn't arrived in the mail. That made it definite. It had been stolen—stolen about the time of Elaine's death. I phoned Thayer and he brushed me off. Now that he had read it, he suddenly didn't want me to know what was in it. I'm not a complete idiot, so there's no excuse for me. I didn't rush up to his apartment and demand to see the carbon copy. I didn't do the one thing that would have saved his life."

Greta was sitting up now. She held the blanket to her throat as if suddenly and fantastically modest.

"I think you're the most wonderful detective in the world," she said, "but you're not supposed to know every single thing."

"Laugh at me. I deserve it."

"I'm not laughing at you, darling. I know how upset you are. But you can't expect to be a superman like a book detective."

I was prowling the room with the necktie in my hand. "The fact remains that it was reasonable by then that the manuscript had some sort of bearing on Elaine's death. At least that. And I didn't do a damn thing. Nobody had hired me to do a job of investigating, so I kept telling myself it was none of my business."

"But was it really?" she said.

I found myself at the closet. I hung the necktie on the door rack and turned to her.

"It was," I said woodenly.

Greta slipped down on the bed and lay flat on her back, eyes wide but not looking at anything. "And I suppose it still is," she muttered.

It wasn't a question. It didn't require an answer. I started to unbutton my shirt.

Chapter Six

THE WOMAN BEHIND the semicircular desk in the Waterman and Teem reception room was reading a letter. Her plump, middle-aged face didn't lift at my entrance. I told her that I would like to see Mr. Laurence Jacoby.

She glanced up. I was nobody she knew. If I was an author, I wasn't a best-seller. Her gaze returned to the letter; as she read she asked me if I had an appointment. I said no.

"Mr. Jacoby has an important visitor," she said without interrupting her reading, I was dismissed.

"I'm not impressed," I said. "Send in my name."

Evidently she decided that I wasn't humble enough to be an aspiring author peddling a manuscript. She put down the letter and picked up a pencil. I told her my name.

You could see her resentment as she wrote it down. I was still nobody. But she plugged in the switchboard.

"Mr. Ben Helm to see you. He has no appoint—" She stopped, listened. "Yes, Mr. Jacoby." She turned to me. "Go right in," she said respectfully. I was a rare personage who was permitted into an editor's office without a preliminary period of cooling his heels outside. "It's room seven, Mr. Helm."

I walked up a corridor to room seven and went in.

The office was like any editor's office I had ever seen. You couldn't turn around in it with your arms outstretched. There were two desks and one extra chair, occupied at the moment by Lieutenant Herbert Flood, the important visitor.

"Good-morning, Herb," I said disarmingly.

Flood had an arm flung over the back of a chair. He was the one cop I knew who had the ability to lounge while on duty.

"I see you're on the job bright and early," he said dryly.

Laurence Jacoby was on his feet. From my phone conversation with him I had pictured him as fussy and nearsighted and probably effeminate. He was ten years younger than I and built like a football guard. He had a broad, pleasant face and wisps of thick brown hair dangling over his brow.

"We were just speaking about you, Mr. Helm," he said as he shook my hand across the desk. "I was telling Lieutenant Flood of a man who phoned me Tuesday and yesterday spoke to my secretary concerning Elaine's manuscript. For a moment I believed I had a clue, but Lieutenant Flood

ruined it by telling me who you were. Have my secretary's chair. I sent the child out so that we could talk in private."

I sat at the second desk and took out my pipe and waited for Flood to resume where he had left off. He seemed absorbed in gay book jackets framed on the wall.

"Fantastic," Jacoby said. "Tragedy compounded by tragedy. In a way Elaine suffered a double death. To lose not only her life but at the same time a completed novel—it's like dying twice. A novel is part of an author. Do you understand me, Mr. Helm?"

"Uh-huh."

Flood removed his gaze from the wall. His heavy body slouched in the wooden chair. He looked bored.

"It's a blank, Ben," he said. "Nothing here that'll help."

"Didn't you even glance through the carbon?" I asked Jacoby.

"As a matter of fact, it was never out of the envelope in which Elaine brought it Friday. Within an hour after she left my wife picked me up in the car and we drove out to Connecticut for the weekend. I was resolved to have a genuine vacation for a change; I took no work with me. Not, mind you, that I would have taken a carbon copy in any case. I detest carbons." Jacoby ran a pencil through his fingers. "Although, of course, I would gladly read it now if I could. Elaine was hardly a world-beater, but I had faith that eventually she would come through with something big. This may have been it."

Flood said glumly: "You and me both."

Jacoby beamed. "You are acquainted with Elaine Coyle Lennan's work?"

"Naw. I meant you and me both would like to read that carbon."

"Oh. Yes, I can see that." Jacoby started to extend a pack of cigarettes to me, noticed my pipe, shifted the pack to Flood who accepted. "Fantastic," he said. He snapped on a lighter and held the flame across the desk for Flood.

"But look," I said. "She must have discussed the plot with you."

"Only in the vaguest terms. I had lunch with her twice last spring. Her central character was a strong and ruthless man who through crooked means achieved a position of financial power. The book dealt with his impact on the lives of various people."

Flood leaned sideways to flick ashes into the desk ashtray. "Sort of about people she knew, eh?"

"Autobiographical?" Jacoby shrugged. "I wouldn't be surprised. Many writers exploit their friends for material."

"What about the other characters?" I asked.

"I wish I could help you out. Lieutenant Flood has made it clear that the contents of the book may provide an essential clue. Incredible. And yet I find murder incredible." Jacoby paused as if to think over what he was going to say. "Some authors—indeed most—insist on chewing your ear off about their plots. Elaine was the opposite. She was among the few who contend that discussing a work in progress destroys the fine creative edge. It becomes sterile, they maintain, like a story already written. On the other hand, a story that has not yet been plucked from the inner recesses of the consciousness retains its fresh excitement when transferred to paper. Do you follow me, Lieutenant?"

"Yeah," Flood grunted. "Anyway, enough to catch on that likely nobody knows what she wrote in that book and maybe never will. Except the killer, and I'd give a lot to know how he found out." He stood up. "Thanks for giving us your time, Mr. Jacoby. You coming too, Ben?"

I said I was. Jacoby accompanied us to the door. Standing, he was as big as Flood, but without Flood's conspicuous fat.

"If you happen to locate the manuscript," Jacoby said, "bear in mind that Waterman and Teem has an option on it. We're entitled to it."

"Well, don't go planning that you'll have it to publish," Flood said. "The killer would be a lot dumber than I think if he didn't destroy both copies."

Jacoby shook his head. "Tragic," he said.

Flood and I walked down the corridor and through the reception room and out to the elevators. He punched the button and tugged at his nose and said reflectively: "So the book was about a guy who made his dough being crooked. That's Hugo Rauch, if you got your facts straight from Boxhardt."

"And the people on whom he had an impact," I added.

"That mean his family and friends?"

"Among others."

"Well, it's something to know," he said.

We jammed the already crowded elevator and dropped seventeen floors. We strode down half a block of lobby, and then we were out on Fourth Avenue, facing each other, and Flood was saying dourly what I had expected him to say the moment we were alone.

"Last night you had no client, Ben, but here you are working at it bright and early."

"It's ten-thirty," I said, "and I wished I felt brighter."

"Ben, don't you go mocking me." His thick forefinger jabbed my chest. "Last night you worked for Rauch. Then you said you didn't. Who you working for this morning—Rauch again?"

"It's a free country," I said.

"Yeah, but it doesn't give you the right to an inside track in a police investigation. I can't make you tell me who your client is, but I don't have to make it easy for you to work against the law. I think you're a decent kind of guy. Yeah. But a job is a job. I'll slap you down good if I find you're trying to work close to me while all the time you're representing one of the suspects."

"I expect you to, Herb."

"Okay, so we understand each other. You got a client?"

"Uh-huh."

"Who?"

"Me," I said.

Flood watched a traffic tie-up at the corner as a huge trailer truck tried to make a right turn. Then he said softly: "A personal matter, eh, Ben?"

"Uh-huh."

He didn't say he believed me. He simply dropped the subject and looked at his watch and said he guessed he'd go back to his office to see if his boys had come up with anything. At the corner we drifted apart.

I walked to Broadway and took the subway to Times Square and changed to a Seventh Avenue local. Kathy Hunter lived off Columbus Avenue, only six blocks from my apartment. I was quite a detective. I had learned her address by looking in the morning paper, where in a brief and uninformative story of Thayer Lennan's murder her name and address were mentioned because she had discovered the body.

2

Inevitably a rooming house in that section of town was brownstone. Kathy Hunter lived on the third floor rear.

When I knocked, she called out, "Come in," and I went in.

At the sight of me she yanked together a quilted robe over a nightgown. That still left a couple of lacy inches showing below the hem of the robe.

"I thought you were the cleaning woman," she said. Her hand fluttered in a distressed gesture toward the unmade box-spring bed. "I just got up."

"I won't stay long," I said.

"Oh, that's all right. I'll be with you as soon as I straighten up. Sit there."

I sat in a red plush armchair. A broken spring jabbed my thigh. I got my pipe going while Kathy gathered up a discolored spread that had been flung on the couch and arranged it over the bed.

Her home might have been a lot worse, like those con-

stricted, smelly midtown theatrical boarding houses Greta had sometimes lived in before we were married. This was almost cozy. The chair in which I sat was matched by a red plush couch, neither of which was particularly moth-eaten, and there was a floorlamp with a new parchment shade. No private bath, but a tiny alcove held a miniature refrigerator and a wash basin and a table gas burner. A window at my left provided a dynamic view of backyard clotheslines.

Kathy Hunter spoke apologetically as she patted down the bedspread. "I never sleep so late. This is the second time I made the bed this morning. A police officer woke me at eight o'clock. Lieutenant Flood. He said he had a long talk with you about me last night."

"Not only about you."

"My clothes were all over the place. He sat on my brassiere." She uttered a brief giggle; it was nervous rather than mirthful. "He blushed. Really he did. I put my clothes away and made the bed, but after he left I went back to sleep. You can imagine how exhausted I was after finding poor Thayer last night and then the police asking so many questions." She took a nip at her right thumbnail. "At home I was always up by seven o'clock."

Overnight the paint had worn off her oval face; she hadn't got around to renewing it. That perpetually startled look of violet eyes and small, soft mouth now had a lot of worry in it. Young, I thought. Not eighteen, by any means, but not nearly as deep in her twenties as Laura Canell would have her.

"Where's home?" I asked. "Kansas?"

"South Dakota," she said and smiled demurely. "Spike asked me the same thing. He said everybody who comes to New York to act or paint or write comes from Kansas. Do they really?"

"It only seems so. Folks sending you money?"

"Mother's been dead for years and Daddy died last summer. He was a carpenter. All he left was a two-thousand-dollar life insurance policy and it's almost all gone." She held her head high. "I never took a cent from Thayer. You're wrong in what you think. Thayer and I were just good friends."

I sucked my pipe.

Chewing her thumbnail, she watched me peevishly. Then she said: "I don't care if you don't believe me. And I don't care what his wife wrote about me in that dreadful magazine story."

"When did you read it?"

"Sunday afternoon just before I left New Rod. Spike showed it to me. I never in my life saw Elaine Lennan until—until—"

She flung herself on the couch and put her hands firmly on her knees and looked down at them. Her fingernails also

needed redoing; the dark-pink was flaking, and she had eaten most of it off her right thumb.

"Until when?" I prompted.

"I never in my life saw her until Sunday morning at the spring."

"Before or after we pulled her out?"

Kathy's violet eyes were capable of blazing. "I don't know what you mean. This morning the police officer said the same thing. You told him awful things about me."

"Only what I heard and what Elaine wrote in the form of fiction."

"Gracious, you don't imagine her magazine story was true! Thayer and I were only good friends."

"All right," I said. "But how did Elaine find out about you?"

"That's exactly what the police officer asked me."

"What did you tell him?"

"I thought and thought, and then I remembered I'd written Thayer three or four letters last winter reminding him of his promise. She must have read them."

"If she never saw you, how could she have described you so accurately in her story?"

"In one of my letters to Thayer I sent pictures of myself. I spent thirty dollars to have them taken. Thayer wanted them to show to some important theatrical people."

"Uh-huh. Was that the promise you reminded him of in the letters—that he would get you on the stage?"

She thrust her feet from the couch and pouted at the yellow bows of her slippers. Her bare legs were long and hairless and slim.

"I didn't know a soul in New York," she said. "Everybody at home told me I ought to be an actress. I had loads of experience. Of course there weren't any important dramatics at home, but there was an amateur group that met every Friday night in the school building, and twice a year we put on a three-act play, and I was always the star. People came for hundreds of miles. There was a lawyer, Lee Patterson; he'd had dramatic experience in the east and he was our director. He said he knew important people in New York and gave me a letter to a theatrical agent."

She uttered a sound between a snort and a sob. "I've learned a lot since I came to New York. Everybody says he has influence until you get right down to it. Lee Patterson had gone to college with the agent, but the agent hardly remembered him. He saw me for five minutes and said he'd get in touch with me if anything came up. He never did, and I couldn't get in to see him again. Nobody would see me. No casting. Sorry, nothing today. That's all I ever heard. Then I met Thayer."

"Where?"

Kathy's teeth worked on her thumbnail.

"In a restaurant," she said after a pause. "He was one of the most charming men I ever knew. So cosmopolitan."

"Uh-huh. And he said he could get you on the stage."

"He said he knew the right people." Bitterness hardened her small mouth. "But he turned out like Lee Patterson. Except worse. All Thayer wanted—" She broke off and made a fresh start. "Thayer sent me to somebody he knew who did publicity for shows, but all the man said was I should go back to South Dakota. Then Thayer said that an important producer friend of his was in Hollywood and we would have to wait until he got back. And I believed him. Gracious, Thayer even wanted me to marry him."

"Didn't you know he had a wife?"

"He told me. That was the only true thing he ever told me. He said he'd divorce her if I would marry him. But I—well, after all, he was too old."

"Uh-huh. But not too old to be used to get you on the stage if he could."

"That sounds insulting."

"Isn't that why you kept seeing him?"

"He was really charming," she said, "and I was lonely." Moodily she nipped the thumbnail. "And he was always coming up with another scheme to make me think he could do something for me. I told him I didn't want to have another thing to do with him."

"When was that?"

"Two or three weeks ago. Then last week—it was Wednesday—he brought Spike Rauch up here to meet me. Thayer told me that Spike had an aunt who used to be married to Will Canell, the famous producer, and that she backed Broadway shows and knew everybody and had lots of influence. They had it all arranged that Spike would invite me to New Rod for the weekend. Quinn Boxhardt, the actor, would be there too. That seemed something real at last. I wouldn't just be going up to somebody's office and saying somebody sent me. I'd become personally friendly with these people, and you can't get anywhere except by having the right friends."

"So you hardly knew Spike when you reached New Rod Saturday afternoon?"

"Well, I had spent quite a while with him on Wednesday. Thayer had to leave to see about a job, and Spike took me out to dinner and then to a show."

"Did you like him?"

"Spike? Why, he's only a child."

"He doesn't think so," I said.

"He's a funny boy. He's supposed to be very brilliant, but sometimes he's silly."

"I see. He made a pass at you."

"Gracious, no."

Kathy pulled her bare legs up under her and examined her thumb. Evidently she concentrated only on that one finger; the rest of her nails were in fine shape. There didn't seem to be enough of the thumbnail left to get her teeth into, but she managed.

"What do you know about the novel Elaine Lennan was writing?" I asked.

"The first I heard of it was when somebody mentioned it on the terrace Saturday night. I think it was your wife."

I loaded my pipe.

After half a minute she said peevishly: "I've cooperated with the police. I've told them everything I could last night and this morning. Now you're asking me the same questions."

"I might have new ones. What scared you when you learned Elaine was dead?"

"Anybody would get upset at a drowning."

"You were upset about Thayer. In his bungalow Sunday morning you cringed when he came near you."

"I don't remember," she said to her thumb.

"Were you thinking that he'd killed his wife to be free to marry you?"

"Why, what a thing to say! I hadn't the least idea it was murder until the police officer told me this morning. I'd assumed it was just an accident."

"Did you?"

"You have no right to look at me like that. You think you're smart, you can see right through me. Well, there's nothing to see." She dug her thumb into her uppermost knee. "Oh, I don't know. I was just sick of everything. All those months of trying to get somewhere and not even a tryout, and my money nearly gone, and everything a mess. Then when we got back to the house Spike gave me that magazine. *The Eternal Woman,* and said there was a story in it about me. And as I sat reading it, he stood watching me, like I was under a microscope. That dreadful woman! I asked Spike if anybody else in the house had read it, and he said he didn't think so, but I couldn't face them. I felt so awful. I never wanted to see Thayer again. I took the next train home."

"But he was anxious to see you."

"Yes," she said. "Next day—that was Monday, Labor Day —he came here. I wouldn't let him in. I closed the door in his face. Tuesday he phoned me. He phoned me three times in one hour in the morning. Every time I had to run downstairs to the first floor hall where the phone is, and every time I

hung up on him. I went out and when I came back in the evening the landlady told me a man had phoned twice. I told her that if he called again to say I was still out. Then next morning when I left the house he was waiting for me in the street. I turned right around and went back up to my room and locked the door."

She pushed her legs out from under her and noticed that her nightgown showed below the robe. Unsuccessfully she tried to pull the robe down over it.

"Every word is the truth," she said pugnaciously. "You can ask my landlady."

"I believe you. Tuesday morning Thayer complained to me that you refused to see him. But the fact remains that early Wednesday evening you went up to his apartment."

"He tricked me again." Kathy pouted. "You must think I'm just a hick always fooled by men."

"How did he fool you that time?"

"He phoned and told the landlady that he was Morgan Stritt, the theatrical agent, so of course she called me down."

"What time was that?"

"About three o'clock. You can imagine how angry I was when I heard Thayer's voice. He said he could really do something for me at last. I said he was lying. He didn't beg me the way he usually did. He said very well, if I didn't care about my future he didn't either, and he said good-bye. I said wait, what was it about? He sounded cold, almost indifferent. He said if I wanted to find out I should come up to his apartment that evening." She snorted. "And I fell for it and got myself into this terrible mess."

"Uh-huh," I said. "He may have had something that time."

"Thayer?" Her soft mouth expressed contempt. "All he had was another one of his schemes."

"But you went."

"There was just a chance. He sounded so different over the phone—take it or leave it—and I was curious. So I did go, and I—I found him dead."

Absently she plucked at the lacy hem of her nightgown. She used her left hand because her right thumb was at her teeth.

I said: "And you never found out what his latest scheme was?"

"No. But it would have been a lie like all the others—to trick me up to his apartment to—well . . ."

"I understand," I said. "For you two to resume being just good friends."

Kathy stood up. Her oval face was closed tight; her violet eyes were narrowed. She stood with hands clasped and shoulders back. The pose was strictly amateur theater.

"I don't have to let you insult me," she said. "I cooperated with the police. I called them as soon as I found Thayer. I identified Spike Rauch for them when the woman next door said she saw a boy go into the apartment. I didn't mean Spike harm; I'm glad they didn't arrest him. But I did cooperate, and all I get are insults."

"Look," I said. "Your life is your own. All I'm after is the truth."

"That's all you got, every word of it."

"Uh-huh." I picked up my hat.

She followed me to the door, and when I turned to say good-bye she had restored her demure smile.

"Mr. Helm, all I need is a break. The nearest I came to a stage since I arrived in New York was in the audience. I haven't read a single line in a tryout. That's all I ask—a chance. You know important people in the theater."

"No more than Thayer Lennan did."

"But your wife . . ."

"My wife," I said, "hasn't an easy time getting parts for herself, and she's been in it for years. It's a crummy, heart-breaking racket. I bet South Dakota is more fun."

Kathy drew away from me. "That's what they all say—go home. Well, I won't.

She had her back turned to me when I left.

3

The black sedan was parked at a fire hydrant in front of the brownstone rooming house. I went up to the driver's window and said: "You're a busy man, Herb."

"Yeah, so are you, Ben."

"I'm not in your class. At eight this morning when you were questioning Kathy Hunter I was still in bed. Don't you sleep?"

"You know how they say: the law never sleeps. And on the side I have to keep hopping after you."

"You must have slapped a shadow on Kathy."

"Ben, you'll make a detective yet. My man sees you go into this house. The landlady is cooperating. Tips him that Kathy Hunter has company. He phones me. 'Some mug's with her,' he says. 'What'll I do?' he says. He gives me a description and I say: 'That ain't no mug, that's the great shamus who's been breathing down my neck since last night.' So here I am, and I hope you got more out of her than I did."

"I doubt it. Her story fortifies our theory that Thayer tried to use the carbon to blackmail."

"Yeah. Figured he had it all set and could hand Kathy something to make her like him again when she came around

in the evening. Only the killer didn't approve of being blackmailed. Anyway, this is Kathy's story. Could be she tells it to take the heat off herself. We don't know it's true."

"That makes one more thing we don't know," I said.

"Go on, rub it in. The manuscripts could tell us plenty, but I'd be mighty surprised if both of them haven't been burned. Ashes to ashes and dust to dust. That covers everything—the manuscripts and the two murdered people."

"Silent dust," I said. "There's a line from Thomas Gray's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* that fits perfectly. It goes:

"Can Honor's voice provoke the silent dust?"

Flood nodded. "I like it. The dust doesn't talk. But this case is too damn literary already." He fingered his jowls. "You been thinking of paying another visit to New Rod?"

"It entered my mind."

"I bet. I'm heading there now. Might as well come with me. I feel better when I can keep an eye on you. We'll stop off on the way for lunch."

I sauntered around the hood of the car and got in beside him.

4

We parked the car at the bungalow and walked to the spring. I went over the whole thing again, briefly, while Herb Flood stood in front of the bench and surveyed the scene. We crossed the plank to the other side, and there he did two things. He took the temperature of the water and made measurements from the bank to the submerged melon-shaped rock. I doubted that that information would be of any use, but he had been trained for details.

"What's the shortest distance from here to the Rauch house?" he wanted to know.

I led him through the fringe of trees. A hundred yards across a field high with grass the road ran diagonally away from us. The bungalow was closer, but blocked out by the trees. We cut across the field and walked up the road to the gates of the Rauch estate. They were locked.

"Four minutes if you don't hurry," Flood said. "Say another minute from here to the house." He wrote it down in his notebook.

"What are you working up to?"

Shrugging, he peered through the high wire gates.

"Some layout," he commented. "The wages of sin."

"Quinn Boxhardt may have exaggerated Hugo's past."

"No. I got a quick preliminary report on Hugo Rauch this

morning. More's coming. Boxhardt didn't know the half of it."

We returned to the bungalow. On the porch Police Chief Orton Tremper and Aassistant District Attorney Jerry Hodgson were waiting for us. Flood had spoken to each of them on the phone, but he had never met them. I made the introductions. After a round of handshaking, Tremper unlocked the door and we entered the bungalow.

"I got the key from the owner," Tremper said. "It's an extra key. The Lennans had the right to the place till the end of the month."

Tuesday morning Thayer had told me that he had closed up the place, but I saw now that he hadn't moved the larger personal possessions back to the city. The typewriter was on the desk; the books and magazines were in the bookcase. I wandered into the bedroom. He hadn't bothered to make the bed before leaving.

"What do you expect?" Hodgson said in the other room. "We had no reason to check alibis. In our book it was an accident until we heard from you this morning."

"Yeah," Flood said. "Not that you would've got anything if you'd checked alibis right away. I had my boys do it this morning in the city, along with alibis for yesterday afternoon when Lennan got the business. Seems Sunday morning between nine and nine-thirty everybody in the Rauch house was still in bed or shaving or taking a walk by themselves on the grounds. The servants couldn't help. Breakfast hadn't been served yet, and you know how it is when there's a crowded house Sunday morning—everybody all over the place or in their rooms."

Tremper said: "Why should we believe them?"

"That's a good question," Flood agreed. "All but two of them are related, and the way I hear it Quinn Boxhardt wants to be a member of the family and Kathy Hunter wants Laura Canell to like her. So maybe they're all playing dumb, or some of them anyway."

I closed the closet door and looked through the dresser. Thayer's clothes were gone, but Elaine's were still there.

I went back into the living room. Flood was sitting at the desk, pulling out drawers, while Tremper and Hodgson watched him.

"It's a waste of time, Herb," I said. "Thayer has searched thoroughly."

"Yeah," Flood grunted and pulled out another drawer. Detail and method were his gods.

"I'm trying to get in touch with my chief," Hodgson told me. "Mr. Raphael is hunting in Maine, you know, and he can't be easily reached." He gave me an appealing glance. "You

understand that anybody in my position would have acted the same way."

"Ben!" Flood said sharply.

He had pulled a wastepaper basket out from under the desk, and he was straightening up on the chair with two sheets of white bond paper in his hands. "What was the name of her novel?"

"*A Handful of Ashes,*" I said.

"Yeah. Looks like I got a couple of pages of it."

The three of us closed in on him. He said, "Give me a chance," and started to read.

The pages had been creased the long way, no doubt folded without pressure before having been thrust into the basket. I moved closer to Flood's side. Over his shoulder I saw typed in lower case at the top of the page starting from the left-hand margin, "a handful of ashes," and on the right side "page 88." Writers generally put the title or their name on every page in case it became separated from the rest of the manuscript. Elaine had been a title writer, I myself used simply my last name.

Flood had finished the first page. He extended it to me, then drew it back and handed it to Tremper instead. After all, protocol must be observed. I was nobody and this was Tremper's preserve.

I moved over to the table and lit my pipe and waited. Flood gave the second page to Tremper who in turn gave the first page to Hodgson.

"Ben, why'd they be in the basket?" Flood asked.

"She was revising the manuscript Saturday night. She must have thrown those two pages away after having rewritten them. I'm surprised there aren't more. Anything useful in them?"

"You read and see." Flood had a policeman's cautious habit of being non-committal.

I was a little that way myself.

Hodgson now had both pages in his possession. Tremper, with nothing to keep him occupied, tried to look thoughtful. He asked no questions because he didn't want to show that he had no idea what was supposed to impress him. Hodgson, however, had no restraint over revealing his perplexity. His hand holding the papers dipped.

"I don't get it, Lieutenant. It reads like fiction to me."

"Maybe it is and maybe it isn't," Flood said. "Ben's been closest to the literary end of this business. Let's get his opinion."

I took the papers from Hodgson and sat at the table. Flood began to explain to the other two about the manuscript in more detail than he had over the phone. I spread the pages side by

side. They were very crowded—scrimpy margins and almost no white space at top and bottom. Page 88 began in the middle of a sentence and page 89 ended the same way; these were pages plucked from the early portion of the novel. I read:

minutes after one," he said.

"But it can't be so late."

"Time flies when you're in love, honey. I should have left half an hour ago."

Marcia rose with him from the porch glider and fluttered against his chest. "Hubert, I hate having you always leave."

"Like I told you, honey, I need a few weeks to straighten out a thing or two before we're married. Then we'll be together always." He stroked her hair. "Now where's that good-night kiss?"

As their lips clung, there was a curiously remote expression on his leanly handsome face. He enjoyed the taste of her mouth, but at the moment he had something else on his mind. Patiently he held the kiss until she withdrew from him.

"You'll see me tomorrow, Hubert?"

"Sure thing." On the way off the porch he glanced again at his watch. "Twenty-five after one," he said as if to himself. But he said it loud enough for her to hear.

Hubert Ranch strode briskly up the sleeping street. Three blocks from Marcia's house a nondescript coupe was parked beside an empty field. He glanced about, then climbed in beside Dudley who was at the wheel.

"He's still there, Boss," Dudley informed him.

"Good. It's twelve thirty-five. He won't stay much longer."

Dudley's wizened face smirked. "If I know Vince Bart, he'll cut it fine. You ever see that dame, Boss?"

"No."

"What a looker! But Vince will have to tear himself away by one because that's when her husband knocks off work. Takes him ten-fifteen minutes to get home. That gives Vince thirty minutes more. I cased the set-up good."

"And you talk too much. He might have left already. Get going."

They drove in silence. After two miles Dudley slowed the car down. They crawled through a quiet, tree-lined street. At that hour few houses were not completely dark.

"That's it, Boss," Dudlley said, pointing to a green-shingled house with white trim. "Lights on upstairs, like it was half an hour ago."

"Drive around the corner and stop."

Hubert took a revolver out from under the seat. He broke it open.

"All set for action," Dudley told him. He stopped the coupe around the corner and pulled up the handbrake. "Do I wait here, Boss?"

"With the motor running."

Hubert Ranch got out of the car. He pulled up the collar of his suit coat and pulled down the brim of his slouch hat. With a hand closed about the revolver in his pocket, he strode toward the green-shingled house. A hundred feet from there he took up his post against the trunk of a maple tree, merging in its shadow.

It was not until five minutes to one that a figure left the green-shingled house. Dudley had correctly judged Vince Bart. Hubert

took the revolver out of his pocket and held it against his right thigh.

Vince Bart, his slight form completely relaxed, sauntered up the street—a man who had just terminated a satisfying evening with a lustful married woman. He was savoring the memory of the pleasurable experience when a shape stepped out from behind the maple tree.

Vince Bart's mouth opened. His hands stirred vaguely. Then the night was filled with the overlapping reports of a revolver.

Abruptly silence closed in on the street. Without a glance at the man who lay motionless on the sidewalk, Hubert Ranch wheeled and head down hurried back to

They had stopped speaking. Their eyes were on me when I raised my head. I put a fresh light to my pipe.

"Hubert Ranch," Flood said. "Sounds a lot like Hugo Rauch, eh?"

"You can take it on from there," I said. "Marcia for Muriel. Elvina for Elaine."

"Elvina?" Flood said. "There was only one girl's name mentioned."

"Elvina was in the little I'd read Saturday afternoon. The book opened with a girl named Elvina having met a lad named Hubert the night before, and she'd got quite a crush on him. By page 88, it appears, Marcia had beaten out Elvina for Hubert's affection. It figures. In real life Hugo married Muriel."

"How crudely transparent," Hodgson observed. "The identical initials in each case."

"She intended to be transparent," I pointed out. "She used the same method in her *Eternal Woman* short story. There it was Eleanor for Elaine and Kitty for Kathy and Tom for Thayer. She wanted her characters to be identified."

"Writers!" Flood snorted. "Glad I haven't any friends who're writers."

"As for Dudley," I said, "that's a more far-fetched guess. There's a very brief description." I ran my eyes over the two pages and found what I was after at the bottom of page 88. " 'His wizened face smirked,' " I quoted. "That probably fitted George Duffy even then. But in his day Hugo Rauch likely had a number of mugs with wizened faces working for him, or else Dudley could be a purely fictional character."

Flood was making notes in his little book. He looked up and said: "That leaves what's-his-name who was gunned down by Hubert."

"Vince Bart."

"Yeah. Initials V.B. Don't know what that'll get us. If that was a real killing, V.B. has been dead for a lot of years." He closed the notebook. "Chief, mind if I take those two pieces of paper?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Lieutenant." Tremper stroked his chin as if meditating. "You got your killing and I got mine, and those papers were found here in New Rod."

Likely Tremper had no idea what to do with them, but there was a delicate matter of jurisdiction, which made it impolitic for a small town cop to let a big city cop barge in and take over. Hodgson, whose business it was too, kept quiet; he was anxious not to commit himself to anything while his boss was away.

I closed the hiatus by offering to type then and there additional copies. That pleased everybody.

In the desk I found everything I needed. I slipped two sheets of carbon paper between three sheets of bond paper and made exact copies. When I finished the first page, I compared it with the original.

Flood came to the desk. "What's bothering you, Ben?"

"I want to make sure the originals were typed on this typewriter."

"Any doubt?"

"No. Even without a magnifying glass it's obvious."

I typed the second page and gave the original to Flood and the first sheets to Tremper and carbons to Hodgson. The second carbons I folded and stuck into my pocket.

Flood grinned. "Always one step ahead of everybody, Ben. You offered to do the typing so you could have a copy for yourself."

"Uh-huh," I said. "Chief, can I take home her two published novels and some of these magazines?"

"What for?" Tremper demanded suspiciously.

"Come now," I said. "The Lennan apartment in the city is full of them, but it's more convenient to take these."

"Well, somebody ought to read them," Flood told Tremper, "and it seems Ben is the only literary type around."

"I wouldn't say that," Hodgson protested. "I read a good deal, but not trashy novels. Biography and history and science." He looked at the moment like a particularly intellectual young man.

Tremper contemplated the bookcase. If somebody had come in and thrown its contents out, he would have raised no objection, but a request built up whatever was asked for.

"All right," he gave in, "but you mail them back to me, you hear?"

I promised and gathered up what I wanted.

5

At nine o'clock Greta went to bed. The dress rehearsal that afternoon had gone badly, as it was traditionally sup-

posed to. She was exhausted, and with the show opening tomorrow night—without a hinterland tryout at that—first-night jitters were creeping up on her.

I remained in the living room armchair and read Elaine Coyle Lennan's stuff.

I had been at it, with time out for dinner, since I had returned from New Rod. First I had tackled the short stories. None was anywhere as revealing as the one I had previously read in *The Eternal Woman.* All they told me was that Elaine had been inclined to overwrite. While sometimes perceptive, the yarns were trivial and gushy. Reading them turned out to be an unrequiting chore.

The same was true of her first novel, *Built for Two.*

It concerned a woman of thirty who was in love with a boy of twenty. The book had been copyrighted eight years ago, so it must have been written when Elaine hadn't been much past that age herself. I couldn't tell if it was based on anything that had happened to her. It was full of soul-searching introspection and plushy writing. Nothing much happened, not even a good dose of sex.

Her second novel, *Satan in a Tuxedo,* was the one I had glanced through Saturday afternoon in her bungalow. I already knew that at least the opening pages were set in the Manne House—under a different name—where Elaine and Muriel and I had worked that summer eighteen years ago. If nothing else, placing it in Michigan and the description of the lake left no doubt. And the two major female characters were quickly and easily recognizable, though when she had written this she hadn't yet gone in for giving them names with the same initials as their prototypes.

Nelda, the heroine, a handsome, lusty, ripe-bodied girl, was obviously Elaine herself. Florence, her best friend, pale and frail and shy, had to be Muriel. And they were both waitresses at the summer hotel.

The hero puzzled me for some seventy-five pages. His name was Jim. He came up to the hotel for a couple of days as a guest and promptly seduced Nelda, meaning Elaine. After that he couldn't stay away from her. He was rich and suave and mysterious—typical in that kind of story.

He worried me. That summer I had occupied most of Elaine's free time. Even if I'd been dumb enough not to have found out she had been carrying on with a guest, between me and her job she couldn't have fitted him in so intensively. The lifeguard, who would have been myself, wasn't mentioned at all. I began to fear that Jim was only a fictional character, which would have been pretty frustrating in my literary hunt for clues.

Then the year was mentioned, 1933, and that part was

cleared up. It had been the year before, 1932, that I had worked at the Manne House. I hadn't gone back there the next summer, but evidently Elaine and Muriel had.

As I read on, Jim's identity became less murky. Suspense was worked up through the increasing mystery of his profession. By the time it was dramatically revealed that he was a racketeer, the news hardly startled me.

I still had a hundred pages to go when Greta came out of the bedroom.

I put down the book to look at her move across the room. It was a never-tiring delight for me to watch her flowing and gracefully feminine walk, and I couldn't think of anybody who had a better figure for a transparent nightgown with practically no bodice.

"Darling," she said, "it's after one o'clock."

"Is it?" I discovered that my eyes were tired. I rubbed them with my middle fingers.

"I woke up a while ago and can't fall asleep again." She sat on the couch and snuggled in a corner. "Did you learn anything?"

"Uh-huh. Elaine was in love with Hugo Rauch."

"I can't believe it."

"I don't mean recently, though even that's conceivable. In 1933 she was his mistress."

"That's different. She must have had something in those days if you had gone for her."

"She did. Physically, anyway, and I was quite young at the time."

She lifted her hands to her hair and the result was quite a sight, too. "Now that you're an old man I suppose you're attracted to me because of my brains."

"Baby, let's not make it personal."

"I wouldn't mind."

I tapped the book. "I'm doing a job of work I'd like to finish tonight, and believe me it's work."

"All right, I'll behave. Elaine was Hugo's mistress, but he married Muriel. Does the book say how it happened?"

"I can tell you what happened in the book. It's a guess how much is fact and how much is fiction, but I'll assume it's all fact and call the characters by their real names. Elaine and Muriel, you know, were waitresses at the Manne House. That's where Hugo met them. He had urgent and mysterious business elsewhere, but he kept coming back whenever he could, sometimes for several days, sometimes for just a night. Because of Elaine."

"The summer you were there?"

"No. The next summer."

"It must be a relief to know she hadn't been unfaithful to you."

"Cut it out," I said.

"I'm sorry. Go on."

"At the end of the season the girls went home to their small Indiana town. Hugo lived in a big city several hundred miles away. The book gives it a phony name; we can look at a map and take our choice. He kept up the affair with Elaine the way he had during the summer; she wouldn't see him for weeks or hear from him, then he'd arrive in his expensive car. She practically lived for those occasional hours or nights. Then one day she saw his picture in a newspaper. A new gang war was starting and he was one of the key racketeers involved. She was shocked. She went through a whole chapter of agonizing and at the end decided that she loved him no matter what and would marry him, racket and all. Only he wasn't keen on matrimony."

"What was Muriel doing all this time?"

"That's a shrewd guess. When I knew Muriel she was just background for her best friend. On her own, her fragile good looks and gentle manner might have rated, but Elaine completely overshadowed her.

"I've read a hundred stories like that," Greta said. "Elaine became too much of an easy thing for Hugo, and he turned to the hard-to-get type."

"Muriel wasn't hard to get and Hugo didn't turn to her. She went after him. Those girls compensate for their shyness by determination. She came from a poor family—a lot poorer than Elaine's. She had made up her mind to marry money. Hugo Rauch had money. She had come to know him well through Elaine, and he'd started to look at her in a special way, as if he'd like to get at her except that Elaine was always there. He was a crook, a racketeer, but that was why he had money. She set out to hook him."

"Don't forget Elaine was telling the story. She couldn't be called an unprejudiced observer."

"No. But we can discard the overtones and believe the essentials. Muriel had an aunt who lived in the city where Hugo ran his rackets. She moved in with the aunt on the pretext that in a big town she could get a better job. Her job was to make Hugo. She phoned him just to say hello, and he asked her out to dinner. He kept coming back for more. Meanwhile, Elaine remained out in the sticks, waiting for his visits which became more and more rare, while Muriel was right there in the city, always available. Elaine never had a chance. Up to then the women Hugo had known were sexy tramps, and Elaine wasn't so different from them. Muriel was quiet and refined. Call it a reaction from—"

"Now for the psychology."

"No. The reason doesn't matter. Muriel played her cards right and raked in the chips. He balked, but in the end he married her."

Greta's eyes snapped with excitement. "Darling, that agrees with the two pages you found in the bungalow this afternoon."

"Uh-huh. In those two pages they weren't married yet, but he told her they would be soon. They must have been on her aunt's porch when he said good-night to her and went off to shoot down the lad named Vince Bart. If we can believe it. Elaine couldn't have been there."

"Would an author write two novels using the same plot?"

"If by plot you mean her own life, it's an old literary custom. Some authors, like Thomas Wolfe, found the subject endlessly fascinating. But I think that in her missing manuscript her canvas was much broader and more detailed and probably dealt with other matters and characters. For instance, in *Satan in a Tuxedo* there's not a word about Hugo's sister Laura. And up to where I've read—that's just after Hugo and Muriel's child was born—there's little about his rackets except to make clear what kind of person he was. Hugo isn't mentioned as killing anybody."

"Perhaps she didn't know about the killing when she wrote the book."

"The one I'm reading now?"

"Yes. The Satan thing. I suppose by Satan she meant Hugo Rauch."

I flipped pages in the book. "So it would have been after she wrote this that she found out Hugo had murdered somebody. If he did murder anybody."

"What makes you think she made it up?"

"I didn't say she made it up."

"Then what did you say?"

I shrugged.

"Darling, when you become cryptic I know it's because you're annoyed," she said.

"Not with you."

"All right, I'll shut up and let you read."

I found my place in the book and read a few lines and looked up.

"Why don't you go to bed?" I said. "Tomorrow is your big day."

She stood up and stretched her arms. The sheer nightgown was like a rosy skin. She came to my chair and standing directly in front of me bent over to kiss me good-night for the second time that night.

"Darling," she said against my mouth, "I can't fall asleep without you."

My hands went to her. The book slid to the floor. The hell with reading, I thought.

6

Sometime during the night I was back in the living room, in my pajamas now, and I finished *Satan in a Tuxedo.*

Those last hundred pages concerned the process of Nelda —or Elaine—recovering from her passion for Jim—or Hugo. She had been dabbling at writing fiction; she started to go at it seriously. When she had sold several stories to love pulps, she left the house of her parents and moved to New York. There she met and fell for a man who was on the publicity staff of a manufacturing concern.

They wasted little time getting married. That, as well as his profession, meant he was Thayer, but in the book he never came through as a complete character. He remained wooden, as if the author hadn't been much interested in him. The heroine kept insisting that she loved him, but you had to take her word for it.

In the last chapter she paid a visit to Florence and Jim who had moved to New York City. She felt considerable envy of Florence's affluent existence—anyway, until Jim came home. She had been afraid of the meeting with him, but she discovered with relief that whatever she had felt for him was dead. She recognized him for what he was—hard and ruthless and quite dull. She was glad to get back to her husband.

The end.

From the jacket I had worn that day I fetched the two sheets of carbon typescript I had copied from pages 88 and 89 of *A Handful of Ashes.* With a sheet balanced on each arm of the chair, I reread snatches of the short stories and novels.

The pages in which Hubert Ranch killed Vince Bart were written in a leaner, barer prose than any I found in Elaine's other fiction. And I remembered that the opening page of the manuscript had been positively turgid.

Well, sometimes a writer used a variety of writing styles in the same book. It could depend on the substance. The opening pages had been about a girl awakening after having met a new and exciting man. Cloying, embroidered prose fitted the mood. The only other pages I had read were about murder, cold-blooded gang killing, and the inclination would be to increase the tempo.

Besides, she had told me that there was murder in the book. That was why she had wanted me to read it.

With a still open mind I went back to bed.

Chapter Seven

AT TEN IN THE morning Hugo Rauch phoned me and said he would like to see me. I didn't mention that I had intended to get in touch with him as soon as I had shaved. I asked him where he was.

"At home," he said. "I'll wait here for you if you can make it in twenty minutes."

"Half an hour," I said on principle.

I finished shaving. Greta had left at nine-thirty for a final run-through of the play. I had merely a couple of murders on my mind, but she had an opening in the evening. I resolved that no matter what came up I would spend the afternoon holding her hand.

When I got out of the cab, Spike Rauch detached himself from the East River apartment building. He wore baggy corduroy pants and a faded tan poplin jacket and his hair was mussed. He didn't look richer or brighter than any other boy his age.

"How's sleuthing?" he said.

"My life is just one deduction after another," I said. "There's at least one extension phone in your apartment, and you were listening in on it when your father called me."

"You enthrall me. What was your ratiocination process?"

"Elementary. You were waiting down here for me to arrive."

"I wasn't. I just happened to come out when you—" He grinned engagingly. "You win, mastermind. I told you I was intellectually curious."

"Why qualify it with intellectual?"

Like any small boy, Spike shuffled a foot on the sidewalk and looked down as he spoke. "Yes, it's become quite personal since Thayer's death. I'm now a suspect and the apartment is overrun with coppers. I hoped you'd tell me what's going on."

"Including why your father sent for me?"

"Well, yes."

"Why should I know more than you do?"

"Well, you are a professional snooper."

"As a pro," I said, "I take a back seat to an amateur like you."

And I strode into the building.

The butler took my hat and led me up to the balcony and into what they probably called the den. It was strictly a masculine room, with tweedy wallpaper and a lot of leather to sit on and lie on, but no rack of pipes and no cigar humidor because Hugo Rauch didn't smoke. Appropriately he wore a negligent tweed jacket, though nothing could look quite negligent on him.

Hugo Rauch shook my hand and took a check out of his wallet. "For your services the other night," he explained.

The check was for five hundred dollars.

"No thanks," I told him. "I wasn't working for you. Muriel asked me as a friend, and I doubt that I was needed."

"You did a job," he said. "My wife called you in. When she calls in a doctor or a lawyer who also happens to be a friend, I expect to be charged their regular fee just the same."

"This isn't my regular fee. It's too much."

I extended the check to him. He didn't touch it. He looked at it and then lifted his heavy-lidded eyes to my face, and he was puzzled. This seemed to be a new experience for him; he wasn't used to people turning down money.

"I don't know what your fee is," he said, "so let's call it a retainer. The police keep coming around. Looks like your job wasn't finished the other night."

I couldn't stand there all morning holding the check out to him. I let it flutter down to the table. It was a nice sum, but not enough to make it hard to turn down. Perhaps some day somebody would try to bribe me with quite a lot of money, and then my fortitude would really be tested.

"What have you got to be so snooty about?" he said angrily.

Maybe he had hit it on the head. He wouldn't understand if I told him that was one of my few luxuries.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Rauch, but I'm not sure I could protect your interest as my client."

"In short, you're working for somebody else in this case?"

"Uh-huh," I said, "though I can't quite decide for whom. Let's say for Elaine Lennan."

He didn't go deeper into that. He removed his rimless eyeglasses and said: "Sit down, Helm."

I sat and he sat. The glasses swung from his fingers. For a little while he seemed to forget I was there. The bones of his ascetic face looked very tired. I tried to visualize him as the hero of Elaine's novel—as the hot lover and the ruthless racketeer. It wasn't easy because our folklore went in for types, and he wasn't the type. But that had been quite a few years ago, and wealth and respectability can change a man, and he probably hadn't been a mug to begin with.

I roused him by asking: "Was Lieutenant Flood here last night or this morning?"

"Both." Hugo Rauch adjusted his glasses and looked at me through them. "I see you keep in touch."

"You know I do. That's why you sent for me. That's why you offered me that check. I suppose he showed you those two pages from Elaine's manuscript."

"So?" he said and smiled.

I had blundered. Flood must have played his cards close to the chest; he hadn't mentioned those pages to Rauch. He must have barged in and said he had information about an old killing of his and let Rauch worry about what there was to back it up. But as Flood had already been here since yesterday afternoon it wasn't a serious blunder.

"So that's where he got the idea?" Rauch said. "Something Elaine wrote."

My silence was a form of assent.

"And that's supposed to be evidence?" He chuckled. "I killed Elaine because she wrote about it. Is that the way it runs?"

"You would know better than anybody else."

"I know better, all right. I know what's evidence and what isn't. Something written in a book. Tell me how that can hurt me?"

"It's not only a killing," I said. "It's the whole story of your past. You're respectable now."

"So what? I haven't changed my name. Anybody can do a little digging and find out a little something about me."

The way Quinn Boxhardt had. Rauch had something there.

I said: "But you preferred that nobody would. Saturday night you asked me not to reveal George Duffy's police record to Muriel, though she knew it as well as you did. You weren't worried about what she would learn, but about what I might turn up about you."

"There's one thing Muriel didn't know—that George once stuck a bottle in a girl's face. That could make her nervous having him around."

"Uh-huh. Otherwise he is a safe and decent and gentle lad."

"Look, Helm. My servants are my business. We were talking about knocking off somebody for writing something in a book. Does that make sense to you?"

"I haven't heard you deny that you shot down a man some sixteen years ago."

The eyeglasses came off. That narrow face was bored with me.

"I'll tell you what I told the Lieutenant," he said. "I don't have to deny anything or admit anything. If there's evidence,

bring it around. If there isn't, stop making a fool of yourself because Elaine dreamed up stories for a book. She was always writing damn fool things anyway."

"I didn't imagine you were a fan of hers."

"Me? The only thing I ever read of hers was a book a few years back and it put me to sleep."

"Was it called *Satan in a Tuxedo?*"

"I wouldn't remember. A lot of slop."

"Was the slop about a man like you and two girls like Muriel and Elaine?"

"Guess that's what it was supposed to be about. Spike brought it to me. Said there was something would interest me and grinned in that smart-aleck way of his. He was only about eleven then, but when he was seven he was reading Shakespeare. I don't know where Spike gets it. Muriel is no dummy and I have a high school diploma, but you can't say we're very heavy on the intellect. Spike can tell you what Einstein is talking about. I'm proud of him, of course, only —" He paused. "We don't get together much."

He had rambled on as far as he would go. I couldn't expect him to admit that his son was contemptuous of him.

I said: "By reading that novel, Spike found out about your past."

"It was time he learned the facts of life."

"So you admitted to him the story was true?"

Rauch opened his mouth and closed it and gave me a weary smile. "Don't be so clever. If you want to know if what was in that book was true, ask me directly."

"Was it?"

He shrugged. "I played around with Elaine for a while and then married Muriel. But the way she wrote about it—you know how sloppy sentimental a woman gets. Elaine wasn't worth Muriel's little finger. You want a woman for more than just—" He scowled. "What the devil am I telling you this for?"

"Elaine told the world."

"But how many people knew who she was talking about? The same with this last book of hers. I didn't know she'd been writing one till you told me. What else did she put in it?"

"We found only those two pages."

"That so?" He sounded as if he had pretended interest only to be polite. He rose and glanced at the check on the table. "Suppose I make it a thousand dollars?"

"You'll have to go a lot higher before I start struggling for my soul."

"It isn't worth the trouble finding out your price," he said. "Thanks for coming around."

We shook hands amiably.

Muriel Rauch was waiting for me in the two-story living room. She wore a form-fitting silk housecoat in which her figure looked like a young girl's. But her pale eyes held her age; so did the tiny crawling lines edging her features. Those frail blondes aged quicker from the neck up than from the shoulders down.

"Did you come to an arrangement with Hugo?" she asked.

"I told him I preferred to keep my hands free."

"But that wouldn't mean—" She stopped and pulled her lower lip in petulantly. Her shoulders hunched as she lit a cigarette.

I said: "How did you like Elaine's *Satan in a Tuxedo?*"

"That book!" Muriel spoke with the smoldering cigarette bobbing in a corner of her mouth—a habit Greta also had. "One lie after another."

"What, for instance?"

"It was called fiction and it was."

"But fiction based on fact," I said.

Muriel took a long drag on her cigarette. "She exaggerated everything outrageously. I was furious when I read it, especially when I learned that Spike had read it too. It was my fault; I shouldn't have left the book around the house where he could get it."

"Did it bother Spike?"

"He was quite young then. I told him the book was nonsense, and we never discussed it again."

"You weren't so furious with Elaine that you stopped being her friend."

"Oh, I couldn't really quarrel with her," she said. "After all, it was only a story book, and Elaine and I had been almost inseparable since childhood. I couldn't remain angry."

"Particularly as you had a guilty conscience."

She removed the cigarette from her mouth and stared at me. "Guilty of what?"

"Of having maneuvered to steal Hugo away from her," I told her. "Elaine's novel was small enough revenge. You could concede her that much for what you had and she hadn't."

"What utter nonsense! Do you believe everything you read in books?"

Before I could figure out a reply, a door on the balcony opened. Hugo Rauch glanced down at us and disappeared through another door.

Muriel let the silence ride a bit longer. Then she said: "Ben, why do the police keep annoying us?"

"That's their job."

"But why us?"

I didn't think that worth an answer and she didn't seem to expect one. She frowned in the direction of a window at what may have been a mental image of a beefy detective-lieutenant.

"Their ridiculous questions," she complained. "You'd imagine I committed a crime because I went out to buy Spike a birthday present and couldn't find one that pleased me."

"Was that the afternoon Thayer was murdered?"

"Yes, Wednesday. I went shopping for Spike's present. It's hard to buy a gift for a boy his age, and he has everything he needs or wants. I went to three department stores, and because I came home empty-handed the police acted as if I belonged in jail."

"Aren't you laying it on thick?"

Muriel laughed somewhat. "Of course I am, but it's annoying. Why is it necessary for everybody who ever knew the Lennans to have an alibi?"

"Would you prefer the police to limit their suspects to Spike?"

"But that's over," she said in surprise that I would resurrect a dead subject. "You proved to them Wednesday night that Spike was completely innocent."

That was a mother speaking. I didn't explain that I had done nothing of the sort, and that Spike was still deeper in it than anybody else. Who was I to commit sacrilege on the maternal instinct to confuse the fact with the wish where a son was concerned?

So I said, "Uh-huh," and Muriel accompanied me out to the hall where she fetched my hat for me without calling the butler.

3

George Duffy was coming down from the second floor of the precinct headquarters. His chauffeur's cap was at a cocky angle; his squat face had that try-and-prove-it expression that for a hardened criminal had become a conditioned reflex when in contact with the law.

"Hi, Sarg," he greeted me, stopping two steps above me with a gnarled hand on the banister. "Like old times, meeting you in one of these dumps, huh?"

I said: "Can I buy you a drink when I'm through here?"

"The old liquor treatment, huh? Well, being you're no longer a copper, I'll be waiting in Billy's around the corner."

I went up to the second floor and into Detective-lieutenant Herbert Flood's office. He introduced me to a couple of plain-

clothes men who were there with him. After I had shaken their hands, he sent them out and leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

"How'd your reading of Elaine's stories go?" he asked.

I outlined the plot of *Satan in a Tuxedo.*

Flood didn't open his eyes until I had finished. "So Hugo and Elaine were once sweeties," he muttered. "What'd you find in the other book and the magazines."

"Boredom," I said. "The writing is too rich for my blood. That's why I doubt she wrote those two pages we found yesterday. The style isn't like anything else she'd written."

"Kind of literary detection, Ben?"

"You can call it that."

"What you're getting at is those two pages were planted in the basket for us to find. Somebody made up that Hugo Rauch knocked off a guy named Vince Bart. Is that it, Ben?"

The mocking inflection in that last sentence put me on guard.

"What's up your sleeve, Herb?"

His meaty torso slumped indolently between the wooden arms of his chair. "It so happens that on March 12, 1934, a guy name of Vince Bart was shot on a street in Detroit. Time was a few minutes before one A.M."

He smirked at me.

"Uh-huh, my leg's been properly pulled," I said. "But it wasn't entirely a question of writing style."

"What else?"

"All I have are theories and you have a fact before which I'm humble. Do I understand that his name actually was Vince Bart?"

"Yeah." Flood shuffled papers on his desk. "Yesterday when I got back from New Rod I called the F.B.I. in Washington. Asked them to look in their files for a name that was like Vince Bart but not Vince Bart—the same initials maybe —who was gunned down say between 1933 and 1935 in a city a few hundred miles in any direction from Digby Hill, Indiana. They asked had I anything definite to go on. I said nope. They said I was nuts. I said sure I was but go ahead. When I got in this morning there was a wire on my desk. Some clerk at the F.B.I. with a simple mind started in by looking up the name Vince Bart, and right off he found it and everything in his record fitted. Nobody was more surprised than me."

"Why was his the one name Elaine didn't disguise in her book?"

"Search me," Flood said. "Maybe because he'd been dead for years and couldn't complain, or maybe she wanted to tie in Rauch so good with that killing nobody could mistake it.

What you told me just now, her once having carried the torch for Rauch, could mean she got to hate the guy like poison."

"I think so."

"Let me go on," Flood said—as if anybody could ever stop him. "I got Detroit on the phone. They had plenty on Vince Bart. He was called Pretty Boy Bart, and he was a wow with the ladies. That checks with our two pages—how he'd just left the married dame when he was gunned. Bart and Rauch were both in the rackets in some of the smaller cities around Detroit, but they each had their own stand. Rauch was in gambling and Bart in bootlegging. Then came December, 1933. Prohibition was repealed, and there was a scramble to get in on new rackets. Nobody was repealing gambling, so Rauch was sitting pretty—anyway, till Bart got a hankering to muscle in. So in March Bart caught lead from Rauch's roscoe. Wasn't anybody who wasn't sure Rauch did it."

"And Muriel provided him with an alibi," I said.

"And he married her so she couldn't be a witness against him, eh?" I had amused the good lieutenant. "You been seeing movies. The Detroit police never heard of her. Rauch didn't need her. The police picked him up all right, but what with pull and politics and no evidence he was released quick as a mouthpiece could come running. No, the law didn't worry him, but Bart's mob did. Rauch beat it to South America where the climate had less lead in it."

"With Muriel?"

"I didn't ask. All I know is he stayed in South America till it was safe to return, and now he owns that swanky estate on Long Island and has a duplex apartment on the East River and more dough in the bank than a police lieutenant can earn in two hundred years."

"How did he react when you threw all that dope at him this morning?"

"I see you keep dogging my heels, Ben. Rauch said he'd had it out with the law back in 1934. Did I have anything new? What I had were those two pages, and I didn't mention them. He'd just tell me where to stick 'em."

"I mentioned them to him."

"And he told you where to stick 'em?"

"In effect."

"Yeah," Flood said. "What do they tell the Detroit police didn't know since March 12, 1934? By the way, George Duffy was one of Rauch's gorillas when Bart got the works. Guess that makes Duffy the Dudley in the book—an accessory to the shooting."

"I passed Duffy on the stairs."

"You know how it is, Ben. A public servant like me has

to say yes-sir and no-sir to a prominent citizen like Hugo Rauch who's paying the wages of sin in a duplex apartment. Duffy's only a chauffeur, so it's okay to haul him up here and sweat him. A lot of good it did."

Flood sighed and sat back. I loaded my pipe.

"All this about Bart and Rauch is fascinating," I said, "but what does it get you?"

"Nothing but a question I can answer. Why would Hugo Rauch—or say Duffy—kill a writer to keep her from writing in a book what's spread on the record anyway? The answer is plain and simple. Nuts."

"Those are only two pages from a book that contained hundreds of pages."

"You don't have to remind me." He picked up several sheets of typescript. "Me and my boys have been chasing around getting up a list. We limited it to those we think had the best chance to kill Elaine and could know about the novel she was writing. The theory was to eliminate everybody who had a good alibi for the time of Thayer's murder. We strung the names down on the lefthand side and drew two columns, one headed Motive and the other headed Alibi. It looked very pretty. Then we tried to fill it in and it didn't look so pretty. Yeah!" He laughed morosely. "Want to hear it, Ben?"

"Uh-huh."

"Rauch and Duffy start the parade. I have them paired together because they both have the same alibi and maybe the same motive. Motive: Vince Bart with a question mark. Alibi: perfect. Thayer Lennan was killed in New York between three-thirty and four-thirty. At two o'clock Duffy drove Rauch to New Rod and they got back after seven. Rauch says he went for some papers he'd left in his country house. Anybody see those two in New Rod? No. The house was empty and they didn't stop off anywhere. They alibi each other. Is that a familiar tune, Ben?"

"I've heard it before."

"Yeah. Next is Muriel Rauch. She claims Wednesday afternoon she was shopping for her son's birthday present." Flood stared moodily at the top sheet. "He'll be fifteen a week from Sunday. Fifteen! Ben, is it only me, or do you get the willies too when you talk to him?"

"Geniuses aren't uncommon."

"Not too common, I hope. Okay, Mrs. Rauch went shopping for a present, but she hasn't a sales slip or a charge account purchase to prove it. Did you ever hear of a woman roaming through department stores for two solid hours and not buying a thing?"

"It could happen."

"I wish it would happen to my missus. She steps out for a piece of ribbon and comes back with half the store. So there's no alibi for Mrs. Rauch. Motive? How about her husband having taken up again with Elaine where he'd left off years ago?"

I smiled. "That question shows you never met the lady."

"You can never tell about sex. His wife is skinny. I hear Elaine was meaty; could be he liked 'em that way. Or turn it around. Maybe Muriel was having an affair on the side and Elaine wrote about it in the book."

"Maybe anything," I said.

"You're telling me! Who's next? Laura Canell. Early Wednesday afternoon she was in the theater watching the rehearsal."

"I saw her there."

"So did a dozen other people. She went home at three. The servants didn't see her come in; she used her key. Says she had a headache and went to her room and napped for a couple of hours. Maybe she did and maybe she didn't. Alibi: none. Motive: blank. Do you know she's forty-three years old?"

"She doesn't look a day over forty-two."

"Or a day over thirty-two. If you could tell, Ben, you're a whiz. I couldn't, and likely Quinn Boxhardt couldn't either. He's only thirty-six and she's hot to marry him. Say she didn't want Elaine to give away her age in the book."

"Are you serious, Herb?"

"No. I'm showing you how much this kind of list is worth. Spike's next—written down here Shelley Rauch. He admits where he was soon after Thayer was murdered—in Thayer's apartment. We don't know he wasn't there when Thayer was murdered. Motive? I told you he gives me the willies. A very smart man's brain in a young boy. That combination can scare you. Some of the most cold-blooded killings I've known were done by kids."

"What you're saying is that Spike has a motive because he hasn't a motive."

"Hell, I don't know what a motive is. Some guys wouldn't kill for a million bucks and then they turn around and murder somebody who gypped them out of a dime. I'm making this list just so the deputy captain will think I'm earning my pay."

"Don't take it so hard," I said. "Somewhere in that list there may be a glimmering of the truth."

Flood drew in his breath. "That finishes the Rauch family. We come to Kathy Hunter. She says Wednesday afternoon, after Thayer phoned her to come over in the evening, she

made the round of theatrical agencies. We checked, but nobody in the agencies she mentioned remembered her face."

"They're used to giving a horde of actors the brush-off daily. I doubt if they look at them."

"But it means no alibi for Kathy. She says she had dinner in a cafeteria and then went up to Thayer's apartment and found him dead. Could be she pulled a fast one; killed him earlier and then came back and pretended she'd just discovered the body. Elaine did a nasty job on her in that short story. Kathy says she didn't read it till Sunday afternoon, when Spike showed it to her after Elaine was dead, but she could've read it the day before."

"Why would she have stolen the manuscript?"

"Let's try it this way," Flood said. "The thief and the killer are two different people. In the excitement of the drowning the thief sees his chance to swipe the manuscript."

"And the theft of the carbon?"

"A red herring. Kathy took it to muddy the waters after she killed Thayer because he knew she'd killed Elaine."

"Muddying the waters with a red herring," I said, getting the taste of it. "That reconstruction is as mixed as your metaphor."

"Yeah, I think it stinks myself," Flood said. "Like the herring. I got nothing to do but sit here and spin fairy tales. Let's see now. Quinn Boxhardt next. His name was Philip Jones before he changed it. That's no crime, but maybe a name like Quinn Boxhardt is. His mother died in a booby hatch and at the present time he has a sister in another one."

"I doubt that would keep Laura Canell from marrying him. She's too old to have children anyway."

"All the same, he wouldn't want the story of all that insanity in his family to get around. He's an actor, a kind of public figure. Maybe he's a bit off his rocker too—runs in the blood—so he doesn't need much excuse for knocking off people."

"What's the point?" I said. "He was rehearsing Wednesday until seven."

"Not all afternoon. Didn't Greta tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"At a quarter to four the director called an hour rest period. Left plenty of time to hop a subway to Thayer's apartment and be back by a quarter to five." Flood fumbled with the papers. "Boxhardt's story is that he and Greta were having coffee in an automat."

"I said: "What's Greta's story?"

"The same."

I held a match to my pipe. Flood scratched his jowls.

"Don't be so damn devious," I told him. "Say what you have to say."

"Ben, for you I don't have to draw pictures. Now the coffee in the automat isn't bad, but it's a place where you serve the coffee to yourself. No waiters there who'd know an actor or actress by sight. Nobody who could say later that Quinn Boxhardt or Greta Murdock or both hadn't sat at a certain table drinking coffee Wednesday afternoon between a quarter to four and a quarter to five. Nobody who could put a crimp in that kind of alibi."

"I see that Laura Canell has been shooting off her mouth," I said disgustedly.

"So it's not news to you, Ben?"

He was trying to show that he was trying not to show that he was sorry for me. An interrogator has to be an actor, often the more ham the better.

I said: "It's not news to me that Laura Canell is jealous of any woman Quinn Boxhardt makes love to on the stage."

"Well, she wasn't anxious to discuss it. I had this talk with her last night when I went up there to see Hugo Rauch. One of my boys, Johnny Silverstein, picked up a couple of things during the day. When I threw them at her, she got into a kind of temper about her boy friend and Greta."

He paused. He was waiting for me to ask him what Johnny Silverstein had picked up. I didn't ask him, so he told me.

"You never met Johnny Silverstein. Bright boy. City College graduate. He was in the theater yesterday while you and I were up in New Rod. If you ask me, he fell for Greta. Can't blame him. I met her only two-three times, but she's got everything. Johnny says if that's the kind of dame a cop marries, he's not sorry he became one instead of a lawyer like his mother wanted him to be, though he thinks maybe it would be better being an actor if you can get on the stage with her five nights a week and two matinees and—"

"Get on with what you're trying to tell me."

"I'm on it. Sure making hot love on the stage doesn't mean a thing. But Johnny talked with everybody in the play."

He stopped. He sat back and his eyes avoided mine.

"Too much ham," I commented.

"What?"

"Look, Herb, I'm in this racket too. I've done it often; I've needled somebody until he burst out with information he intended to hold back. I'll tell you what your Johnny Silverstein heard. He heard gossip. Broadway lives for gossip. It's even become an industry—high-priced scandal mongers running daily columns in the papers. If gossip hasn't anything to feed on, it feeds on itself."

"Take it easy," Flood said. "I'm no scandal monger. But

what would you do in my place? Would you overlook any bet?"

"No. But assuming it's true—it isn't, but I'll assume it for a moment—would Greta lie to alibi Quinn Boxhardt in a murder?"

"Maybe not, but I'd guess that some men would fake an alibi for a woman like Greta." He dropped the papers and spread his hands. "We put everybody and everything in this list, or nobody and nothing. Greta was in it because she was in New Rod along with the others."

"Uh-huh. Even if you have to overlook the small detail that she was in bed with me when Elaine was murdered."

Flood shook his head. "You're not thinking straight because she's your wife. You can't alibi her for Sunday morning. You told me she woke you up and said she smelled something burning. That means you were asleep. If you were sleeping, you can't know if she was in bed with you all the time or if she'd just come back to bed before she woke you."

"I know Greta."

"Yeah, like every husband knows his wife."

I stood up and went to the floor ashtray and knocked out my pipe. I don't know why the stem didn't snap between my fingers.

"I shouldn't have made that crack," Flood apologized. "But I'm not anybody's friend when I'm working at being a cop. Sure this is a guess, likely a pretty far-fetched guess, but what's this list but a lot of guesses?"

"And what's your guess for Greta's motive?"

"Quinn Boxhardt with a question mark after it."

"Thanks for the question mark," I said dryly. "And what do you make of the fact that Elaine had never met Greta before Friday afternoon? How did she get her into the novel that quickly?"

"Elaine knew Quinn Boxhardt. Practically every weekend this summer he was in New Rod visiting Laura Canell. Say Elaine wrote about him and his carryings on, and that's how Greta came into it."

"That would be Greta's motive?" I said scornfully.

"It's as good as any we've got so far. Like I said before, what's motive? It doesn't have to be strong enough for murder. This goes for everybody on the list. Say Elaine got hit on the head in an argument over the book. That made it murder, and once it started it had to go on."

"Elaine wasn't killed by a rock. She was drowned, deliberately and cold-bloodedly."

He shrugged and half-closed his eyes.

I filled my pipe. I stood against the wall and drew in smoke.

"Let's get literary again," he said pensively. "I've been

thinking. How much do the titles of books tell what's inside the books?"

"Sometimes nothing, sometimes a lot."

"This title now, *A Handful of Ashes.* Ashes to ashes, dust to dust—that keeps running through my mind. Yesterday you told me part of a poem about dust—silent dust. The ashes part—it's like she gave the book that title because she knew in advance it would be burned. But that's crazy. The title could be another kind of clue. This is a literary case, so why not a literary clue?"

"You're getting warm."

"You thought of that?"

"I'm bright that way," I said. "With sixty seconds of diligent investigation I traced that title to the poem from which it was taken."

"Okay, Ben, spiel it."

I took the pipe out of my mouth. "I'm a taxpayer in this city. Let's see you do something for yourself except make up a meaningless list."

"You're sore because of what I said about Greta." He sighed. "That's what I get for talking too much. My missus always tells me. I read you my list; I was on the level with you."

"So I'd do your work for you."

His fleshy face flushed. "I figured you wanted to cooperate. Likely I wasted time with this list. But you said it yourself: somewhere in it there's something might count. On this list Greta can't be better than anybody else just because she's your wife."

"All right," I said. "I'll hang around for the last name."

"That's all there is."

"Where's mine?"

"You're mocking me, Ben. You know you're out of it. If not for you, nobody would've guessed Elaine's death wasn't an accidental drowning and that the manuscripts were stolen. That's why I bother talking to you. Yeah!" Angrily he brushed the papers aside. "Sometimes I wish I was a cop in Russia or some other Communist or Fascist country."

He looked up at me to ask why. I asked why.

"A cop's life there must be a snap," he explained. "You don't have to find out who committed a crime. The higher-ups decide who they want to be guilty and of what. You take the suspect down a cellar and they confess to anything you want, and there's your case. No evidence, no headaches, no failures, no nothing. A closed case every time."

"You wouldn't like it, Herb."

"I guess not," he said.

At the far end of the bar George Duffy had a private bottle of bourbon. He was helping himself to it when I went up behind him and said: "Aren't you afraid of your boss?"

Duffy almost dropped the bottle. His red-rimmed eyes looked at me over his left shoulder.

"You, Sarg," he said and turned on the bar stool. "What's that about the boss?"

"He told me he'd fire you if he caught you drinking."

"Now what d'you know!" He picked up the pony glass. "So now I got to get down on my knees and ask him can I have a drink." Defiantly he tossed off the bourbon and coughed.

I said: "Let's sit at a table."

Duffy carried the bottle to a table against the wall. The one waitress in the place came over. She yawned and murmured that a hot lunch was available, but I wasn't hungry enough to risk cooked food in a ginmill. I ordered beer and a couple of sandwiches and asked Duffy what he wanted. He shook his head and refilled his glass.

"What are you trying to drown in whiskey?" I asked him.

"The taste of coppers," he said.

"How about the taste of Hugo Rauch? You two went through a lot together. He got wealth and respectability out of it. The best you could do a few years ago was a jail term, and now you have a crummy chauffeur's job."

"Sarg," he said tiredly, "I wasn't born yesterday. Don't be so smart. That lieutenant didn't get nowhere throwing his weight around, and you don't get nowhere being smart with me."

"You've been waiting here for me nearly an hour. You weren't forced to."

His corrugated features twisted into a sort of grin. "I'm being sociable for old time's sake. The drinks are on you, Sarg."

My beer and sandwiches arrived. Duffy stopped drinking. He lit a cigarette and held it with a gnarled hand spread over his mouth.

"What do you think of Spike?" I said after the first sandwich.

"What do I think of Spike?" he echoed, and gave the question thought. He made up his mind that it couldn't be a trap. "A nice kid. Too much brains, but real democratic. He don't treat me like a chauffeur."

"Do he and his father get along?"

Duffy's spread hand pushed the cigarette back into his mouth. Blowing smoke between his fingers, he watched me

cautiously. Evidently that was a topic he didn't care to discuss. He kept grinning at me over his hand.

I drank beer and tried another approach.

"Shelley," I said. "What a name for a hard guy like Hugo Rauch to pick for a son!"

"He didn't pick the name."

"I guessed as much. Why did he let Muriel pick it?"

"He wasn't around. He didn't have no say."

"That's right, he went to South America. Didn't Muriel want to go with him?"

"How should I know what she wanted? He wouldn't take her. Just me and him went. Things got pretty hot after—"

He broke off and reached for the bottle.

"I wasn't born yesterday either," I said. "You were going to say that things got too hot after Vince Bart was gunned down. Bart was in bootlegging and Hugo in gambling, so Bart would have had a tougher organization. More guns. Bart's mob was out to avenge his death, and also to carrying out Bart's project to muscle in on Hugo's gambling preserve. At that, Hugo must have been a pretty small operator or he wouldn't have had to run out Bart in person."

Duffy lit another cigarette.

"The Bart killing way back in 1934 means nothing to me," I went on. "I'm merely practicing being a detective. Hugo decided that discretion was the better part of valor. He got out of gambling. He did what the few in the rackets who survived did: he put plenty of distance between himself and the heat. He went all the way to South America and you went with him. When was that?"

"Beginning of 1935. January." Duffy didn't mind discussing easily ascertained facts.

"Vince Bart was killed in March," I said. "Did it take all that time for his mob to reorganize?"

"That's a good guess, Sarg."

"And between March and January Hugo had married Muriel."

"June it was. A big wedding in her home town. Cost the boss three grand."

"Did he like leaving his wife only six or seven months after the wedding?"

"Don't ask me what he liked and didn't like. He said it wasn't safe for her to be with him even—" He paused. "What the hell, Sarg, you know the score. The heat got real bad. One time the boss nearly got gunned in his bed. Jumped out a window. And Muriel was in bed with him, so maybe they would've given it to her if they'd plugged him first. The boss got scared he'd be followed all the way to S. A. That's why he didn't want her anywhere near him. He made her go back to

that hick town in Indiana and stay with her folks. He liked her fine, but I don't know. The boss was always a guy with the ladies. Not these days; I'm his chauffeur, so I know. But them days he was younger and I guess he didn't miss her much with all them hot senoritas."

Duffy rolled his eyes.

"While his wife was home having a baby," I said, giving myself a high moral tone.

"Well, she didn't need him, did she? He'd done his part of the job before he left." Duffy simpered, pleased with his wit. "You asked me did he like the name of the kid. First off he did. It was funny. Best story I ever heard. We was in—"

He caught himself. He tilted the bottle over the glass.

I said: "I wonder how a couple of guys from the States on the loose in South America could make a living."

"We was flying ice cream over the Andes."

"I'm fascinated," I said. "From where to where?"

"Places," he said and drank.

The bourbon wasn't affecting his alertness. The only topic he seemed willing to discuss freely was Shelley's name, so I asked him what was so funny about Shelley's name.

"One day we came back to—well, the place we had our mailing address," he said. "It was September, maybe even the middle of October, but man, was it hot. A cable was there for the boss; been waiting for him two-three weeks. It was from Muriel's old man and it said Muriel had a baby. You should've seen the boss. He read it over and over. I asked him what it was, boy or girl. He read the cable again and said Muriel's old man didn't say. He cabled back asking was it a boy or girl and why didn't she let him know she was having one. Then we went out and had a party."

"Evidently he approved of becoming a father."

"Talk of your proud papas! You know what he wanted to do? He wanted to fly right back and see the kid. I talked him out of that all right, but he wouldn't leave town till he heard from her. We had lots to do other places, but the boss he went to the cable office every day. But what came was a letter. He showed it to me. She said she didn't let him know she was pregnant on account of she was scared he'd start right back home and get himself killed. A smart dame, huh? And she wrote she was fine and Shelley was cute and gaining weight. That's when we found out the kid's name. The boss was kind've disappointed. He wanted a son. But anyway we went out and had another party."

"You mean he assumed Shelley was a girl?"

"Wouldn't anybody?" Duffy chuckled. "Imagine a guy like the boss having a son with a sissy name like Shelley. He was plenty sore when he found out, but he didn't find out right

away. We was out of town a lot and mail was slow and Muriel wasn't much on letter writing, so the boss kept talking about his daughter. Then one day he came into my room with a letter in his hand and said: 'My God, Shelley is a boy!' I said: 'A what?' He said: 'Read this.' He gave me the letter and it was full of gush how she hadn't been feeling good but was better now and Shelley was getting cuter every day and he was looking more and more like his old man. He! All of a sudden his kid turned from a girl into a boy. That's why I said it was so funny about Shelley's name."

"Shelley can be either a boy or a girl," I said.

"We found out later. The boss still wasn't sure. He cabled was his kid a he or a she. Muriel wrote saying a boy of course, and what else could Shelley be? She said she picked the name on account of while she was waiting for the baby to be born she read poems and the poems she liked best was by a guy who had the name Shelley. You know what his first name was?"

"Percy Bysshe Shelley."

"Right on the nose, Sarg. Percy! I said to the boss: 'Look, you're lucky she didn't call him Percy.' He smiled and said he guessed that was right and if she liked the name it was okay with him." Duffy simpered. "Trust a dame to make all that trouble over a name. Anyway, everybody started to call him Spike, so it didn't turn out so bad."

I signalled the waitress for another beer. Duffy pulled the bottle toward him and poured. At the last moment he changed his mind about drinking.

"It's an old stunt, Sarg," he told me amiably. "You aim to get me cockeyed so I'll spill my guts to you."

"The bottle was your own idea. And you're not giving anything away by telling me how long you and Hugo stayed in South America."

"I guess not. Around a year and a half in all. Man, was it good getting home."

"And the heat was off?"

"The heat was off. Vince Bart's old mob was in plenty trouble. They got to knocking each other off and on top of that the Federals moved in with income tax raps. So we came back home."

"Rich?" I asked.

"The boss did." He scowled at the glass.

"From the ice cream business?"

"Some of it. Most he'd stashed away before we left. That's when he went legitimate. He had a family, he had dough; he could afford to go legitimate."

"And you couldn't afford to. You had taken all the risks with him, but he had the dough. You were pretty down and

out when I picked you up for that broken bottle assault in Central City."

"I had a stake," he growled. "But I'm a fast guy with a buck."

"What kind of stake? Anything like his?"

"Huh!" he snorted bitterly.

He drank quickly and coughed and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"But Hugo was good to you," I said. "When you were down and out, he gave you a job as his chauffeur."

"Yeah—his chauffeur. I say yes-sir and no-ma'am, and if I use ain't Mrs. Rauch, who used to be Muriel to me, looks at me like I'm dirt and tells me she can't have a chauffeur that uses ain't." He smiled bleakly. "How's my grammar these days? Pretty good, huh?"

"You'd better keep improving it if you want to hang onto that job."

He rose abruptly. He pressed his gnarled fists down on the table and pushed his squat, bleary-eyed face toward me.

"You're giving me the needle, Sarg." He spoke thickly; that last drink had hit him hard. "You figure to get me sore at the boss so I'll spill my guts. The hell with you, shamus!"

He adjusted his chauffeur's cap and left the table. A short distance away he turned his head. "Thanks for the drinks," he sneered and went on with an approximation of dignity.

5

I found Greta trying to calm herself for the opening night ordeal by soaking herself in a hot tub.

"Darling, I expected you to call for me at the theater and take me to lunch," she complained.

The air was steamy. The bathroom walls sweated and I was beginning to.

"I was busy," I said.

"Too busy for me today of all days!" She pouted. "I've been thinking. Elaine wasn't a nice person, and Thayer was worse if he was killed because he was a blackmailer. None of the people who you believe might have done it are nearly as bad."

"Whoever did it is a murderer."

"But why should you take all this time and trouble? Being a detective isn't a hobby with you. It's a profession and nobody is paying you."

Her head and knees were above the surface; the rest of her shimmered in clear water. I stood against the basin.

"Hugo Rauch offered me a fat retainer this morning," I said. "Will you hate me very much for turning it down?"

Greta's black eyes stared widely up at me. Then she said: "Don't mind me being a little bitchy today. I was upset when you didn't call for me. Darling, I need you to be with me every minute till the show opens."

"I suppose Quinn Boxhardt went off with Laura," I said. The words were out; it was too late to recall them.

"You're jealous!" she exclaimed happily. "You're acting like any other husband."

"Quinn will have to be more man than he is before I'm jealous of him."

Again I had said something I at once regretted. That was about the most childish sentence I had uttered in the last twenty years.

"Oh, I like you to be jealous." Luxuriously she stretched in the tub. "Only keep it down, darling. Too much is worse than not enough."

I said: "Why didn't you tell me that the police questioned you yesterday afternoon?"

"Didn't I? It wasn't important, was it?"

"Not particularly, but you might have mentioned it."

"I really don't know why I didn't. Oh, yes, when I came home yesterday you were reading Elaine's stories and you told me about those pages you found in the bungalow and it slipped my mind."

"Uh-huh."

"Darling, spare me that mysterious, all-knowing uh-huh of yours. I'm not a suspect." She laid her head against the sloping green porcelain of the tub. "I certainly meant to tell you because it eliminated Quinn as a suspect. Do you know that we were having a snack together in an automat at the time Thayer was murdered?"

"That was two days ago. I just found it out—from the police."

"But, darling, why all the fuss? There's all the reason why I would have wanted to tell you and none why I wouldn't."

I started to mutter uh-huh and caught myself. I said: "All right, let's forget it."

The bathroom was unbearably hot for somebody wearing clothes. I turned to the door.

"Don't go," Greta said. "Keep me company."

I took off my jacket and loosened my necktie and sat down. She leaned forward to turn on the hot water tap. The overflow drain gurgled. She turned off the tap and lay back.

"Baby," I said, "did I ever tell you that you're lovely?"

Her dimple showed as if she hadn't heard that from me several thousand times. "Thank you, kind sir. May I presume on our connubial bliss by asking you to bring me a cigarette?"

By contrast the air in the rest of the apartment was cool and

fresh and immensely breathable, but at the moment I didn't prefer it. I found cigarettes on the living room table. I was shaking one out of the pack when the phone rang.

"Is this Ben Helm?" Spike Rauch whispered.

"Uh-huh. What's the matter with your voice?"

"I'm at home and I don't want anybody to overhear me. I believe that my father is going to kill George Duffy."

"Is that so?"

"I'm serious. Perhaps he won't exactly kill George, but George is in danger."

"Why?"

"Isn't it obvious that George must have given Elaine Lennan some of the material for her novel?"

"It's possible."

"I stand corrected." Spike's voice was louder and stiffer. "It's not obvious, but possible. Needless to say, I'm not concerned over George, but Dad may get into trouble by a foolish act."

"Go on," I said. "State your case."

"Since you left this morning Dad asked a number of times if George had returned. At breakfast he had said that he was going downtown for the day, but he hasn't left the house. Then I saw a gun in his pocket."

"Saw it?"

"He was bending over a table. His jacket pulled up and I saw it in his hip pocket."

"That wasn't the way it happened."

"I tell you he is carrying a gun."

"Maybe he is, but not in his hip pocket. If you know, it's because you were snooping again."

"I defer to your vested right to do all the snooping. There's no time to quibble. George came back a few minutes ago. Dad was angry, but he didn't ask George where he had been. He looked at George so coldly that—"

"Where were you at the time?"

"Snooping, if you insist," Spike said, and I could visualize his supercilious grin. "Dad just looked at George and said that he wished to be driven somewhere. They left at once."

"Where to?"

"That wasn't mentioned, but I'm wondering if Dad would take him to New Rod."

"Perhaps."

"Then you do believe me?"

I said: "I started guessing yesterday afternoon that your father would have plenty of reason to be sore at Duffy. How long ago did they leave?"

"Five minutes. Are you going to New Rod?"

"Uh-huh."

"And, Ben, please go yourself. Don't tell the police."

"From here on I'll handle it my own way," I said.

I hung up. The cigarette was in my hand. I took it into the bathroom and lit it and stuck it between Greta's lips.

"I'll have to leave," I said.

"Oh, no! Will you be long?"

"I'll try to be back by seven."

"Darling, you can't do this to me. Is it the horrible Lennan thing?"

"In a way, yes."

I knelt on the bathmat and plucked the cigarette from her mouth and kissed her. Her wet arms went around me. I hated to tear myself away, but I had to.

6

After I had crossed the Triborough Bridge and shaken loose from traffic, I kept the speedometer needle at fifty. This wasn't a matter of life and death. If I had thought so, I would have phoned Police Chief Tremper to send one of his men to the Rauch estate.

Whatever else Hugo Rauch planned to do, he wouldn't commit a murder this afternoon that would point directly to him. He was too experienced in such matters to be stupid.

I didn't know that he planned anything. I was making the trip on Spike's guess, which had the merit of corroborating an idea of my own. And that Rauch and Duffy were bound for New Rod was more guesswork. If Rauch wanted privacy, his empty country home was the place for it. I had to act on that assumption or do nothing at all.

During that hour and fifty minute drive I consoled myself with the reflection that, at any rate, I wouldn't completely waste the afternoon. I had been considering going to New Rod for another look at the bungalow. But I wouldn't have chosen a time to go when it meant abandoning Greta to opening day jitters. I was being a better detective than a husband, and I hoped I was being something of a detective.

They were there.

I knew it when at the end of Kinder Lane I saw the high wire gates open. I swung my car through them, and there beside the sprawling stucco-and-glass house stood the black limousine.

All at once I felt foolish. What did I do now that I was here—go in and say: Mr. Rauch, do you propose to do anything I ought to horn in on or can I go back to my wife?

The sound of that outcry was almost a relief.

I heard it as I braked behind the limousine. It wasn't loud; it was more like a strident yelp, followed by moans and then

by broken, gasping speech. Whatever was happening may have been going on for some time.

There was another one of those yelps as I leaped up on the front terrace. The door was unlocked. In the entrance hall I paused; a frustrating silence suddenly prevailed. Then on my right I heard indistinguishable words like sobs. I went through an open door into the living room.

Sunlight glowed through glass walls, and in a pool of it George Duffy sat slumped on the floor. His hands were to his face and through them his sobs sounded as if torn from deep inside him. Blood flowed from his temple.

Hugo Rauch stood over him. In his hand was the gun Spike had seen—a snub-nosed blue automatic. He held it loosely at his side, forgotten, as he stood looking down at Duffy.

They didn't notice me in the doorway. Duffy was intent on his pain and terror, Rauch on his rage. It showed on Rauch's face—not hot but cold. Behind the rimless glasses those eyes were not tired now or anything but frozen, and that narrow, ascetic face was ice too.

Deliberately Rauch drew back his right foot to kick Duffy in the head.

I said: "Haven't you done enough to him?"

Rauch raised his head. He blinked once behind his glasses and slowly put down his raised foot.

"Get out!" he said to me.

He wasn't a man to argue with. I didn't argue. I moved forward.

"Come with me, Duffy," I said.

Duffy had taken his hands from his face. I saw then that his other cheek bled too and that there was blood on his scalp. He had been gun-whipped.

"Get out!" Rauch said again.

His gun was raised, the muzzle focused at my heart. Over Duffy sitting on the floor Rauch and I looked at each other. His face remained rigid, but his tired-looking body shook a little and so did the gun.

"You won't shoot," I told him. "There's no percentage in it for you."

There was another wait. At that moment he wasn't normal, perhaps incapable of rational thought, but something happened inside his head. His gun dipped. Without a word he turned his back.

I helped Duffy up to his feet. He stumbled against me. I put an arm about his waist. He turned his bleeding face to glance at Rauch, then leaning heavily against me he went with me out of the house.

Rauch had remained with his back to us.

In my car Duffy slumped back on his spine. I took facial

tissues from the glove compartment and wiped some of the blood from his face. The cuts weren't deep. Rauch must have raked him several times with the gun muzzle—cold-blooded, calculated punishment.

When I started the car, Duffy said thickly: "Got a drink on you, Sarg?"

"No."

I drove the short distance to the bungalow where the two Lennans had lived and one had died. Leaving Duffy in the car, I went up on the porch and had a look at the lock. In stories a detective observed everything: I'd never paid attention to that lock. I found it an ordinary door lock that a skeleton key could open. Like most summer bungalows, this one offered no problem to anybody anxious to get in. I had no skeleton key on me, so I picked the feeble lock with my pipe-cleaning tool.

The typewriter and books were gone. The landlord, or perhaps a relative of either of the Lennans, must have removed all the personal stuff.

In the bathroom I found that the water hadn't yet been turned off for the winter. I helped Duffy into the bungalow. He cleaned himself up at the basin. When he returned to the car, he could walk under his own power, but unsteadily. He didn't look much uglier than he had earlier that afternoon.

"Thanks, Sarg," he said. "You came in the nick of time, like the Marines, huh?"

"What would he have done to you if I hadn't come?"

"Kept working me over." He shivered. "Jees, can he hate! I remember one time a guy working for him was selling him out. The boss took him down to the cellar. What a mess!"

"Killed him?" I asked casually.

"Damn near." Duffy glanced sideways at me. "Sarg, how'd you know what was happening?"

"I was wondering what he would do about you selling him out?"

"Who told you?"

"Nobody. It seemed likely you were the one who gave Elaine Lennan the story on the Vince Bart killing and whatever other dirt you had. And Saturday afternoon when I spoke to you in the garage you were interested in the novel she was writing. And you hate Rauch. You used to be his sidekick; now you're his chauffeur."

"Sarg," he growled, "I'm no pigeon."

"That means you don't tell the police. Telling Elaine Lennan was different. She was going to put it into a book, disguised as fiction."

"Well, why the hell not?" he said. "Why the hell shouldn't I make a little dough for myself?"

"How much could she have afforded to give you?"

"It wasn't cash. We made a deal. I'd get twenty percent of everything the book made. Say the book made fifty grand. I'd get ten."

"Is that what she told you?"

"Mrs. Lennan said my cut would be anywhere from five grand to twenty grand."

"I hate to disillusion a layman," I said, "but if that novel would have had an average sale, you would have been lucky to clear a thousand dollars on the deal, and maybe a lot less."

"You're kidding me. Is that all a book makes?"

"Uh-huh."

He said bitterly: "So she sold me a bill of goods."

"She had illusions too. Hope springs eternal in an author's breast."

"Ten grand at least, maybe twenty, she said!"

"She's dead and the novel is gone. Nothing of any amount would still leave you nothing."

"I don't like being gypped, that's all," he muttered.

We were passing through a town. I stopped in front of a drugstore and bought court plaster and iodine. When I returned, Duffy was getting out of the car.

"Where do you think you're going?" I said.

"Just for a drink. There's a joint down the block."

"I'm in a hurry to get home."

"I need it bad, Sarg."

"No."

Meekly he obeyed. His wounds were still trickling. Sitting in the car, I patched him up as well as I could. If I had arrived a minute later, after Rauch had driven his foot into Duffy's face, he would have been a hospital case.

"How'd the boss find out?" he asked when we were again rolling.

"Yesterday we found a couple of pages of the novel. They were the ones about the Vince Bart killing. This morning I told him, and he must have put two and two together. No doubt the only way he could see it was that she'd got the details from you. Didn't he say anything before he started to work you over?"

"Him? You never get a word out of him. He said we was going to New Rod. We got to the house and he said, 'Come in with me,' and I came in with him and he slugged me. Then he said, 'That's for your big mouth,' and he slugged me some more. He spoke low. I know him for twenty years and I never heard him raise his voice, but man, what a temper!"

I let a few miles of silence pass before I spoke. "What was in her book beside the Bart killing?"

"I never read it."

"What did you tell her?"

"I'd meet her at that there spring and she'd ask questions and I'd answer them."

"Questions about what?"

"Being I was the chauffeur, everything I heard and saw about the family and the people who visited."

"Including Quinn Boxhardt?"

"I guess so, though I don't know much about him except Mrs. Canell is nuts over him."

"How about the things you didn't want to mention this noon about South America?"

"Sarg, I wasn't born yesterday."

"I thought you don't care for Hugo Rauch," I said.

"What d'you think?"

"Then why try to protect him?"

"The hell with him! But I like myself." He gave me a leer. "Catch on, Sarg?"

"Why be afraid of Rauch? You'll be protected."

"Huh!" he snorted.

"Don't you want to get even with him for the beating he gave you?"

"Me, I never want to be near that guy again," Duffy said fervently. "I'm not even going back to the apartment for my clothes. I'll send for them. You don't know what he's like."

"I'm beginning to."

During the rest of the drive I got nowhere trying to pry more information out of him. He was too old a hand at keeping his mouth shut. When we were passing through Harlem, he asked me to drop him off at a ginmill. I told him to let Lieutenant Flood know where he was staying.

"Thanks, Sarg," he said and wobbled across the sidewalk.

I returned home twelve minutes later than I had told Greta I would.

Chapter Eight

THE PROGRAM READ: "Kane Warren in Mrs. Albert's Daughter." Quinn Boxhardt and a couple of actresses had secondary billing. Though Greta had a fair role, her name appeared only in the cast of characters. By marriage I had become steeped deeply enough in the theater to resent that.

"Hi, Ben," Spike Rauch said.

He and Kathy Hunter stood in the aisle. She was clinging to his arm, and she looked very fresh and rather young in a frilly evening gown, with her light-brown hair fluffy on her bare shoulders. Spike, his shoulders filling out his tuxedo, could have been taken by a stranger as almost her age.

There was something defiant in the way they stood there for me to see them together. I nodded. Kathy fluttered fingers at me and they passed on to their seats on the right.

A few minutes later Muriel Rauch and Laura Canell swept by in a flurry of evening wraps. They didn't notice me or the two who sat on the other side of the aisle. The usher conducted them to the second row center, fitting seats for an angel and a million dollars.

I watched Muriel's golden head. It turned this way and that as she glanced about to see whom she knew in the audience. Because of the angle and the fact that people were standing and moving about, I couldn't see Spike and Kathy, but I could tell exactly when Muriel's eyes lighted on them. Her mouth went wide. She leaned sideways, then her golden head swung the other way and she spoke to Laura who rose in her seat for a convincing look at the two kids.

The lights dimmed. The curtain rose only twenty-five minutes late.

Greta came onstage shortly after the beginning, but she didn't stay long and as soon as she went off my attention wandered. I knew the play; it wasn't anything I would normally want to see twice, or for that matter once. I watched the late-comers arrive; this being opening night there were plenty. Hugo Rauch was one of them. He followed an usher to the second row and sat in the empty seat beside Muriel.

He was late because like myself he had had to take the long drive back from New Rod.

My interest in what was happening on the stage revived when Greta returned toward the end of the act. This was her big love scene with Quinn. She looked stately and quite seductive in a heavy silk amber dinner dress, and Quinn looked rugged and manly, and on the stage anyway it looked very

right and convincing that they should want to make love to each other.

When the curtain fell, I observed three heads in the second row turn as one to where Spike and Kathy were rising from their seats. Grinning with juvenile defiance, Spike waved to his parents and his aunt. Kathy gave them a demure smile and took his arm.

I left my seat. Spike was waiting for me alone at the head of the aisle.

"Was I right about Dad?" he asked me.

"Perfectly, except that he merely beat up Duffy."

"And you stopped it?"

"Uh-huh."

"Where's George now?"

"Licking his wounds," I said.

We were directly in the line of traffic. Spike's mouth was open for further speech when a couple of men swept us apart. When I saw him again, he was moving away. He took up a post near the powder room, no doubt waiting for Kathy. From the rear he looked quite a man of the world, but when he turned his head he was somewhat ridiculous in a man's tuxedo.

I went out to the lobby for a smoke.

The second act dragged its way through dreary wisecracks and contrived situations to some sort of conclusion. Kane Warren, who had not been worse than the worst actor on the stage, flashed his store teeth in a number of curtain calls before the audience was permitted a glimpse of the rest of the cast. I clapped my hands twice when I saw Greta. Even the playwright revealed himself, though I couldn't understand how he had the nerve.

I worked my way backstage. Greta was waiting for me in the crush of humanity in the corridor outside the dressing room she shared with four other actresses. She flew into my arms and I dutifully said she had been wonderful, and then Laura Canell appeared and hugged her and kissed me and said everybody had loved the play and don't forget her party.

That was the first I heard of a party and it was all pretty vague until Greta and I were bound for the Rauch apartment where Laura was throwing it for everybody connected with the play. I very much didn't want to go, but Greta did.

Hugo Rauch greeted the guests at the door. For an ex-gangster and somebody who had gun-whipped a man a few hours ago he was suave and genial and well-mannered. I felt a moment of embarrassment for coming up to his home as his guest after the incident of the afternoon, but he gave no sign that anything unusual had occurred between us. He shook my hand firmly and for the first and only time called me Ben, and he gallantly told Greta that he had had eyes for nobody on

the stage but her. If that was true, he and I had had at least that much in common.

As soon as we entered that high room, Laura pounced on me and bore me off to a small sitting room off the hall. She was grim about it. Muriel was waiting for us, standing and taking agitated puffs on a cigarette she held pinched against her mouth.

"Darling, we're going to ask a tremendous favor of you," Laura told me. "Muriel is afraid Spike will bring that Kathy Hunter up here."

"I'll scratch her eyes out!" Muriel said. She was more than upset; she was vicious.

"For God's sake, Muriel, don't ruin my party!"

"Do you want me to be sweet to her?" Muriel didn't quite spit; she had become too fine a lady for that. "How can he even look at her after she accused him of murder?"

I helpfully offered the information that Kathy had done no such thing, but neither of them paid attention. So I said: "Spike has enough sense not to bring her up here."

"He's a child," Laura said. "If he had the nerve to take her to the theater tonight, there's no telling what he'll do. Ben, darling, could you wait downstairs and prevent him from coming up with her?"

"Why me?"

"Because you're the only one Spike seems to respect."

"Let him bring her up," Muriel said. "I want to scratch her eyes out."

Laura's eyes appealed to me. I said all right.

For forty minutes I took clean, fresh air in front of the building. I would have preferred not to return upstairs, but Greta was there. Ardently I wished I had never met any of that family.

There were now some fifty people in that living room, but they didn't by any means crowd it. From the door I saw Muriel move among her guests slender and straight-backed and composed, a gracious hostess.

Laura detached herself from a group and came over to me. I told her that Spike hadn't shown up.

"What a relief! There's no telling what Muriel would have done." Laura's mobile face writhed. "It's positively sickening. Could that girl have taken the child up to her room?"

"He's a child to her too. They're probably in a nightclub."

"She's insane if she imagines she can get on the stage through Spike."

"She must have given up on that," I said. "She knows she's antagonized anybody who could have helped her."

"Then she's out to make Hugo pay her to let Spike alone."

"Maybe she's just lonely," I said.

Laura laughed harshly and went off to speak to Muriel.

I found Greta sitting on a couch between Quinn Boxhardt and the great Kane Warren. The small mob of women standing around the couch envied her proximity to the idol. I wandered to the portable bar and had my first drink that night and ate sandwiches the size of half-dollars.

After a while somebody brought up morning newspapers. There was a scramble for them. They were torn apart, everything but the drama page discarded, and everybody spoke at once. It was some time before I could get at them.

Like an actor I looked first at the end of the notices where the comments on the minor members of the cast were usually found. One critic called Greta handsome and another called her competent. The third, who was obviously a heel, didn't mention her at all.

After that I read the entire notices, which I used to call reviews until I had married into the theater. Kane Warren got most of the space, and the general opinion was that he could act considering his long period away from the theater while doing movies. The play was also mentioned. It wasn't panned as trivial and dull. It wasn't panned at all. Once again I had the explanation of why I enjoyed staying away from most Broadway successes.

"Darling, it's a hit!" Greta cried.

For the first time in two hours she was with me. She clung to my arm with both hands; her black eyes sparkled. I was happy because she was happy.

"Let's go home," I said.

2

A letter arrived from Hugo Rauch in the morning mail. The envelope contained nothing but a check for fifty dollars. On the back of the check was scrawled: "In full payment for services rendered."

Those were the same services for which yesterday morning I had turned down five hundred dollars.

The postmark read nine o'clock last night. Hugo Rauch must have written out that check immediately after his return from New Rod and had mailed it on the way to the theater—wasting no time after the Duffy incident to free himself from any obligation to me.

Fifty dollars was a fair enough fee. I tucked the check into my wallet. That left us both completely free.

Greta was still in bed. She was facing a Saturday matinee and an evening performance immediately following the opening night. I brought orange juice and coffee to her, and after she drank them I tucked her in and kissed her and went into my study.

That article on Freud's contribution to criminology hung over me. It had to be written, but I couldn't organize my ideas on a general theme when my thoughts and emotions and nerves were constricted by a particular case.

I pecked aimlessly at the typewriter. I wrote: "What I have in my hands keeps trickling through my fingers because I haven't been able to give it enough substance."

And I wrote: "The old argument of the psychoanalysts—what's the dominating drive, sex or fear? Why not both? Fear in this case certainly, fear of Elaine's ability to hurt. But sex too. The Freudian view of sex. Measure off the proper ingredients, shake well, and what have you got? The killer. But how the hell can I be sure?"

That was the way it went until Greta got up and prepared lunch. Not a line of the article had been written.

I drove her downtown to the theater, then I drove myself uptown to a ball game. I had to content myself with the Yankees because the Giants were on the road. Greta got home before I did. She was tired, but happy. The notices in the afternoon papers had been about the same as in the morning papers and one critic had devoted two whole sentences to her and it looked as if the play would run at least all winter.

We ate out and after I had deposited her at the theater I felt completely useless—the kind of husband who escorted his wife to and from work and did nothing else to maintain himself. I went to an Italian movie and got out too early and walked the streets until it was time to pick up Greta. We went straight home and to bed.

Some time during the night I woke up and sleep was finished for me. Presently I fumbled for the phone on the bedside table and called up LaGuardia Airport.

When I hung up, Greta said in the darkness: "Who was it?"

"I made a plane reservation for Indianapolis. I'm leaving tomorrow at noon."

"To that town Elaine and Muriel came from?"

"Uh-huh. Digby Hill."

"But, darling, tomorrow is my one day off."

"I'm sorry."

"Do you have to go?"

"Yes."

"Even though it's not your case?"

"It's my case," I said.

She nestled her head in the hollow of my shoulder. We slept.

3

In the matter of space the Indianapolis airport was some fifty-five miles from Digby Hill. In the matter of time it was halfway between Digby Hill and New York. The remaining

gap after I left the plane meant a two-hour wait at the railroad station for a creeping local that got me there after dark.

The one taxi in the entire county met the train. We rode through a village that showed signs of life on Sunday night only in a drugstore—the modern social center that had replaced the general store. We turned up a dirt road and stopped in front of a gray house behind a white picket fence.

Only one window held light. If nobody was home, I could wait on the porch. There was no hurry; I had the night and part of tomorrow. I paid off the taxi driver and opened the gate.

"Who are you?" a woman said.

Her voice came out of darkness. The house door remained closed. I fumbled my way over a cracked stone walk.

"Who are you?" she said again, sharply.

I was close enough then to the porch to see her. She was silhouetted against the single lighted window, leaning forward in a chair. The taxi had driven off. She was alone at night and I was a stranger.

"I'm a detective," I told her to put her at ease.

"From New York?"

"Yes."

I ascended the porch steps. The woman sat in a wicker rocker. She was wide, wider than Elaine had become, but her face remained in shadow.

"Are you Mrs. Ida Deitz?" I asked.

"Yes. Elaine Coyle Lennan's sister." She pulled a fringed shawl closer about her. "Step in the light so I can see you."

I crossed the porch into the light from the window.

"Do I look like a detective?" I said.

"You look like an honest man. Have you brought my sister's body?"

"Is it supposed to be sent?"

"I spoke to a policeman in New York on the telephone. The place where she was killed—New Rod. I wouldn't let them bury her there. It's a week already. Why don't they send her?"

"It takes time to release a body in a murder."

"Murder," she said and started to rock gently. "We didn't know she was murdered. First we got a telegram from Thayer saying she was drowned. The next thing we hear, the police call me up all the way from New York—New York City this time—and they tell me Thayer was murdered and they'd just found out Elaine was murdered too. You'd think they'd know right away."

"Not always."

Mrs. Deitz turned her face to me, and the plump, shadowy lines showed pain. "Why didn't she stay here? Nobody ever

was murdered in Digby Hill. Why would anybody want to murder poor Elaine?"

"That's what I'm trying to learn."

"You want to ask me questions," she said. "What can I tell you living here in Digby Hill? And I should wait for Deitz to come home."

"Do you mean your husband?"

"Of course I mean my husband. Deitz can tell you nothing, but I would like him to be here. Do you play poker?"

"It's my favorite game."

"For money?" she persisted.

"I'm afraid so."

"I don't hold with card playing, but what can I do? I'm only a woman they all leave alone. Sunday night and he's playing poker, and my younger daughter Janey is I don't know where with what boys. They all leave me. Why does everybody hate Digby Hill? It's a nice, quiet, respectable place. My daughter May went off to teach school in Terre Haute when there's a school needing teachers just two miles from here. My boy Richard went all the way to Flint, Michigan, to marry a girl and work in an auto factory and I've seen my grandchild only once."

I said: "And years ago your sister Elaine went away."

"She was driven away. Her heart was broken by her best friend."

And for a little while Mrs. Deitz was silent, rocking gently, and I still couldn't see enough of her face. Her plump hands, white in the edge of the light, lay static on her lap. They were lonely hands.

"Did you know Muriel Rauch well?" I asked.

"Did I know her! She was in this house more than her own. That was when she was Muriel Gregory—before she married that gangster. Before she stole Elaine's man. It's all in a book Elaine wrote."

"Satan in a Tuxedo," I said. "I read it."

"It's a great book. Elaine was a great writer, Mr.—you didn't tell me your name."

"Helm. Ben Helm."

"Don't you think Elaine Coyle Lennan was a great writer?" She rolled out her sister's full literary name with a pride I didn't think she felt about anything else.

I uttered a polite grunt that could have been taken for agreement.

"Muriel Gregory broke her heart," she said. "I knew what was going on. I was the older sister. I saw this slick looking man come in his flashy car and take Elaine out and not bring her back till nearly morning. I lied for her. I used to tell our parents she came home twelve or one when it was closer to

five. And I saw his picture in the paper where it said he was a gangster, and I helped her keep the paper from our parents. It's all in that book. You say you read it?"

"Uh-huh."

The rocker was the only chair on the porch. I sat on the porch rail and asked if she would mind my pipe.

"I don't hold with smoking," she said. "I don't let Deitz smoke in the parlor. But we're outside and it's your air as well as mine."

I loaded my pipe.

"But why should Muriel make you bitter?" I said. "After all, she prevented Elaine from marrying a gangster by marrying him herself."

Her rocker creaked rhythmically for some time before she spoke. "I just don't know what's right any more. I used to say yes, Elaine was better off without him. But look at Muriel now. I know about her; Elaine used to tell me. That husband of Muriel's, that Hugo Rauch, he's not a gangster any more. They're very rich. Muriel keeps her folks living in comfort in Florida. She has servants. And here I am waiting to bury my sister's murdered body."

"What has Elaine's murder to do with Muriel?"

"Is that what you came all the way from New York to ask me? I can't tell you anything. I'm here in Digby Hill waiting for my husband to come home from playing poker and my daughter from running wild with boys and my other children to get around to visiting their mother. What can I know?"

The house was on a height, and from where I sat on the porch rail I could see a splattering of lights below. Digby Hill's population wasn't over a thousand, yet it was the county seat, which indicated that there was nothing more exciting surrounding it. It was a place from which young people would trickle away as soon as they grew up.

"Oh, Muriel was a conniving thing," Mrs. Deitz resumed, not raising her voice even then—a shadow murmuring of a dead sister's past. "A shy, quiet thing, but those kind are the worst with men. I knew. Elaine didn't put it in her book, how Muriel carried on in her shy, quiet way, but I knew. And then she stole the man away from her best friend and brought him here to marry him. It was the biggest wedding Digby Hill ever saw. Nobody knew what he was—nobody but Elaine and I and Muriel who was marrying him. I didn't ruin the wedding by telling. Everybody went."

"Including Elaine?"

"Elaine was already in New York to live. She went when the wedding invitations were sent out. She didn't come back to Digby Hill except for our mother's funeral and then our

father's funeral and sometimes to visit me. And now she'll come back to be buried."

"But Elaine forgave Muriel, didn't she?"

"They became friends. Elaine married a few years later. I met Thayer once. Four years ago. They stayed here in my house for two days. He was a nice man. A writer too. He wrote for advertising, but of course Elaine was the famous one. Maybe it all turned out for the best." The plump hands stirred on her lap. "Then both of them murdered! What kind of a place is New York?"

"Like any other place," I said. "It's a shame Elaine never had children."

"There wasn't a thing wrong with her. She went to a doctor. It was her husband. They had tests made. He was a nice man, but he couldn't give her children."

"But Muriel had a child."

"It was born hereabouts," she said. "It wasn't in town. They bought a farm over in the Neck Hill section. She came back to Digby Hill after the wedding—I don't know how many months. She came back without her husband and stayed with her folks. Muriel said her husband was away on business, but months passed and more than a year, and nobody believed he hadn't left her. And everybody felt sorry for her when they heard she had a baby."

"Did Elaine visit her then?"

"Elaine was in New York. I told you. Anyway, Muriel and her folks were buried away on Neck Hill. Muriel bought the farm for her father. They were a shiftless lot, those Gregorys. They didn't even own their home. Rented a shack over on Mill Street, and Hal Gregory—he was a common laborer—he never worked regular. You can say she was generous, buying him a farm, but didn't she have money from her gangster husband? But it wasn't much of a farm. I never saw it, it being twenty miles out on Neck Hill; people said it was full of rocks and scrub, and Hal Gregory never farmed it anyway. They just lived there all by themselves, and one day Dr. Hoffman told me she'd had a baby."

"Was the baby born in a hospital?"

"In those days we all had our babies right at home. The hospital was too far. I had my three right upstairs, delivered by Dr. Hoffman like everybody else did. Deitz used to play poker with him. When Dr. Hoffman died, Deitz said: 'Now he'll be cherub-catching in heaven.' He said it vulgar like that, but it's true. Dr. Hoffman was a wonderful man."

"Didn't you visit Muriel when you heard she'd had a baby?"

"It was too far, but I wouldn't have gone if she'd still been on Mill Street. That should have been my sister's baby."

"A gangster's baby," I said.

Gently she rocked in the vague light from the window, and there was loneliness in that wide shadow of her and sorrow. She seldom looked at me as she spoke. She spoke to the night, to herself, to the memory of her dead sister.

"I just don't know," she muttered. "Maybe they were both better off. Muriel's husband came back after a long time and took her and the baby away, and he's been supporting her folks ever since. And now, at the prime of her life, Elaine . . ."

She stifled a sob.

I let a decent interval pass before I said: "Elaine was writing another book, I hear."

"She was always writing."

"Did she tell you anything about her latest book?"

"She was a devoted sister. She sent me a long letter every week. She said she would call the book *A Handful of Ashes*."

"What was it about?"

"It wasn't published yet. She would have sent me a copy. She always sent me her books and the magazines her stories were in. She was a devoted sister."

I tapped my pipe out into my hand and scattered the ashes into the darkness beyond the porch. "Did Elaine come to Digby Hill this summer?"

"June it was. She stayed over for only one night. She said she had to hurry back to that country place they had near New York where she was killed. Her husband couldn't get along without her, she said. She was a good wife. What kind of a world is this where good people are murdered?"

I had nothing to say to that. The woman rocked, broad and quiet and sorrowful, and for a while she seemed to forget that I was there.

"You see, I can't tell you anything," her low voice broke the stillness. "She wrote me every single week, but I don't know anything about murder."

I slipped off the rail. "Thanks, anyway, Mrs. Deitz, for troubling you."

"It was no trouble. I have nobody to talk to with my husband playing poker all night and my children everywhere but home."

I said good-night to the woman who had stayed in Digby Hill.

When I reached the picket fence, night closed in on me. Behind me the rocking chair creaked rhythmically.

4

The taxi driver had told me that there was a tourist house a quarter of a mile up the road. I made my way to it with the dubious aid of a dying fountain pen flashlight, and I spent the night there.

After breakfast in the drugstore, which was the only eating place in Digby Hill, I crossed the street to the County building. It was a reconverted private frame house between a new cement-block post office and an old church. At nine-twenty on a Monday morning the place had as much activity as the churchyard next door, and that included the one-room police station, which I avoided.

Presently a sweet-faced, gray-haired woman entered the foyer. She possessed keys and authority. She was flustered because I was the first private detective she had met in the flesh. I disillusioned her by telling her that nobody had ever socked me on the head.

Leaving Digby Hill was quicker than going to it had been. This time I had a timetable. At ten-thirty I made what was more or less an express train, and in Indianapolis I had time for a light lunch before my plane left.

My appetite was pretty bad and I expected it to become worse.

5

I had phoned Greta from LaGuardia Airport, and when I entered the apartment at six o'clock she had the dinette table set and dinner ready.

"That's to show you I'm a housewife as well as a career woman," she said as she hugged me.

She wore a white plastic apron and her dimpled elbows were bare and her hair was drawn back over her ears. She was a lovely cook. I kissed one of those exposed ears and went to wash up and we sat down at the table.

We didn't talk during the grapefruit, though I wasn't aware of the silence until she broke it. As she was serving the steak, she said: "Darling, you didn't ask me what I did while you were away."

"All right, what did you do?"

"Quinn was here yesterday for cocktails."

"Was he?" I said, reaching for a baked potato.

"Laura was with him, so you needn't worry."

"All right, so I'm not worried."

"They're going to be married in a few weeks."

"Congratulate them for me," I said.

Greta made room on my plate between the steak and the potato for spinach. Then she sat down and said: "You needn't snap at me."

"I'm sorry. I'm not in the mood to play being jealous of Quinn."

I went to the sink for water. When I returned to the table, Greta was watching me solemnly.

"A few hours ago Spike Rauch was here," she said.

I picked up my knife and fork, but I didn't do anything with them.

"Did you tell him where I'd gone?"

"Darling, I'm a detective's wife. I've learned to keep my mouth shut about your coming and going. But I did tell Lieutenant Flood. He phoned this morning and asked for you and I said you were in Indiana. Did I do wrong?"

I shrugged. "What did Spike want?"

"I think he simply wanted to speak to somebody. He was unhappy. He was sorry he took Kathy Hunter to the opening Friday night. He said he doesn't know why he did."

"He knows," I said. "He was out to pump her for information, if any. What he calls intellectual curiosity."

"Well, he confessed it was a mistake. It caused an awful row with his mother and he's very fond of her. Darling, he's a very young and very lonely boy beneath his cynicism and wisecracks and defiant attitude."

"You're becoming a psychologist, baby."

I cut off a small bit of steak. Though it was soft enough, I chewed it quite a while. Then I rose for more water.

"So you found what you looked for in Digby Hill," she said.

"Uh-huh."

"And it's big," she said. "It's the whole thing, isn't it?"

"Probably."

I cut off another piece of steak. I chewed it. Greta wasn't doing much with her food either. Her eyes remained gravely fixed on my face.

"You hardly kissed me when you came home," she said.

"I distinctly remember that I did."

"Pecks. One on the mouth and one on the ear. You snapped at everything I said. You're hardly eating. I've lived with you long enough to recognize the symptoms. You get butterflies in your stomach when you're ready for the kill."

"Kill," I echoed and pushed my plate away. "That's the word. There are psychiatrists who say that a man becomes a detective because he's a killer. It gives him the right to kill within the law and through the law."

She put a hand on mine, thinking that I needed comfort, but that wasn't it at all.

"You're unfair to yourself, darling. You're kind. The murderer is somebody you don't want to hurt."

"The murderer," I said, "is a murderer. The murderer took two lives—took them selfishly and ruthlessly."

"Then there's no problem, is there?"

"There's always a problem."

I dug into my food. I ate some of it and then said, "The hell with it," and Greta cleared the table and served coffee.

The doorbell rang. She went out to answer it and I heard Herb Flood speak. I had been expecting him to be right behind me.

6

Lieutenant Flood's voice said to Greta: "No, thanks, I've just had a bite. Tell Ben to take his time. I can wait."

I was pouring the coffee when Greta returned to the dinette. We drank in silence. I heard Flood move about the living room; he sounded restless. I drank a second cup. Coffee was easier to take than solid food.

"Do you want me to get out of the way?" Greta asked.

"No."

She rose to wash the dishes. I went into the living room.

"Nice place you have here," Flood said cheerfully.

"We like it. Did you have one of your men at La Guardia Field watching for me to get off a plane?"

"Now, Ben, wouldn't that be the hard way to do it?" He dropped into my favorite armchair, stretched his legs relaxingly. "All we had to do was check the passenger list. You better brief your wife and use a phony name next time you want to take a secret trip."

"It wasn't secret."

"You didn't tell me you were going."

"Herb," I said, "this isn't a police state. I don't have to report my movements to anybody."

"I apologize. This case is none of my business; I'm only the cop in charge. Mind if I have thoughts? Plane fare to Indiana and back costs plenty. Who made the money good?"

"Nobody."

"It came out of your own pocket?"

"Uh-huh."

"You know, Ben, if any other shamus told me that I'd call him a damn liar." He looked past me. "Pardon me, Mrs. Helm."

I turned my head. Greta wasn't in the kitchen washing dishes. She stood near the hall door.

She plucked a cigarette from her mouth and said: "Pardon you for what?"

"The word I just used. It slipped out."

"Oh, that." The corners of her mouth lifted. "In our social set that's considered a polite expression."

Flood looked from her to me and scratched his jowls. "Could be, Ben, you flew to Indiana to look for a handful of ashes and a mouthful of mold."

"I see you've been reading Masefield," I said.

"Yeah, this case is making me a regular literary bug. I even

carry pieces of poetry around." He pulled a sheet of paper out of a pocket; his thick fingers unfolded it. "You could call it the clue of the title. You got sore at me Friday and wouldn't tell me, so I put my bright boy, Johnny Silverstein, to work. Being he went to college, he knew where to find a book of quotations and how to read it."

"Probably Bartlett's," I said.

"A fat red book. Has everything. You know where 'ashes to ashes and dust to dust' comes from? Not the Bible, like I thought, but a prayer book. It was like a game. I said: 'Find me something about the silent dust.' By gum, Johnny found it right off, just like you spieled it to me the other day. Johnny told me the guy who wrote it was an Englishman. I forgot his name."

"Thomas Gray."

"Yeah. Well, he showed me he could do it, so I said: 'Okay, now find me a handful of ashes.' In a minute Johnny came up with it." Flood glanced at the paper. "It's from a poem called *A Consecration,* written by an Englishman name of John Masefield. I said: 'My God, doesn't anybody but Englishmen write poems?' Johnny kind of grinned and said: 'There's another English poet tied in with this case. By name, anyway,' he said. Give you one guess, Ben."

"Shelley."

"Seems I can't stump you. Yeah, Shelley—same name as Shelley Rauch's first name. You know, I'm getting wacky. Maybe it's all this literature. I even start wondering if this case couldn't be solved through English poets."

"It's likely," I said.

"Go ahead, ride me," he said bitterly.

"I'm serious."

He regarded me pensively. "Maybe you are and that's why I have to come begging to you. This poem now." He stretched the paper between his hands and hunched over it. "But you've read it, Ben. Maybe I should read it to you, Mrs. Helm."

"I like Masefield," Greta said behind me.

"He sounds good to me too, and I'm not one for poetry except these last few days. I never thought I'd need a literary education to be a cop." He cleared his throat and recited in a schoolboy's sing-song:

"Theirs be the music, the color, the glory, the gold;
Mine be a handful of ashes, a mouthful of mold."

He folded the paper and tucked it back into his pocket.

"Makes you think about what she was writing in that book," he said. "I asked you a few days ago, Ben, and you didn't answer. Was it this poem that sent you flying to Indiana?"

"Only incidentally," I said and loaded my pipe.

Flood sighed. "That's a mighty close-mouthed husband you have here, Mrs. Helm. My missus complains I talk too much. I wish you'd tell her how it feels living with a human clam."

Greta said nothing.

"Okay, poetry class is dismissed for the day." Flood pressed his big fists against his knees. His words came slower with controlled anger. "Ben, you paid money out of your own pocket to fly to Digby Hill. It wasn't to find out about one person getting gold and the other ashes. We knew that already. You could have saved your dough. You were onto something hot—something I didn't have. Is that right?"

I nodded.

"Did you get it?" he demanded.

"I think so."

"Does it finger the killer?"

"I think so."

"Damn it!" he said, and this time he didn't apologize to Greta. "You can't hold out on the police."

"Hold out what?"

He jabbed a meaty finger at me. "Don't you go mocking me. I tried to be a nice guy. I talked about poetry. I gave you all the chance to open up, but you sit there and make sounds that don't tell anything."

"I can't hold out evidence," I said, "but this isn't evidence."

"But it points?"

I rubbed the hot pipe bowl against the side of my nose. "It points, but I'm not sure how reliably."

"How much aren't you sure? One chance in ten that you're wrong? One chance in twenty?"

"Odds around there," I admitted.

The situation was becoming more and more impossible. I occupied myself with my pipe.

Flood lumbered up to his feet. He stood wide-legged, hands on hips; he managed to keep his temper from coming to the surface.

"I know it'll be no use throwing my weight around with you," he said. "I've played along with you because I need you. Yeah, I admit it. You've been on top of it from the beginning. So I'll give you a lesson in evidence."

"I know what evidence is, and we haven't got it."

"When do we ever have it?" he said. "Here in New York we have the most modern police science in the world. They come from all over to learn from us and study our methods and consult our experts. We have all the gadgets, from ultra-violet ray lamps to microphotometers. Yeah! But how many times do all of these experts and all of these gadgets give us

enough evidence to nab a killer and convince a jury? How many times, Ben?"

"Those would be interesting statistics."

"I'm not saying all this science is waste. It helps. But how do we solve most of our cases? By common sense. What these days they call psychology. That's your field, Ben. You're supposed to be an expert. You write on the psychology of criminal investigation and lecture on it. I go along there. Give me psychology and you can have all the gadgets."

I said: "Juries don't go for psychology evidence, and I don't blame them."

"Sure they don't. But there's evidence that points to the criminal and evidence that convicts. The first kind doesn't have to be perfect. It's like what you say you have in this case: a nine in ten idea that you're right. A jury can't convict on those odds because they leave a reasonable doubt. But me, as an investigating officer, I work the other way around. Give me a reasonable idea of who the criminal might be and I can go to work building up a case. And how do we build up a case that will satisfy a jury? Maybe with an eye-witness, maybe with some of those gadgets; but I know only one airtight, foolproof way, and that's by getting a confession."

"When you can."

"Yeah, when I can. And lots of times I can when I have something to go on, and sometimes when I haven't even got that much."

Greta spoke. "Ben doesn't believe in third-degree."

"You think I do?" Flood said. "I know all about how Ben was frozen out of the Coast City force because he didn't like their methods and said so. I've told him he went too far, but that doesn't mean I believe in rough stuff."

He swung back to me. "Listen to this. A couple of months ago an old lady name of Willows was strangled over on Columbus Avenue. The laboratory boys did their stuff and got nowhere. I had a hunch it was an inside job, that the killer must've had a passkey. I went back to that apartment house and said to the janitor: 'Why'd you kill Mrs. Willows?' He looked at me and tears came into his eyes. He started to cry and told me why he killed her. That's the way lots of cases are solved. Ben, you're the guy told me once that most killers want to confess, and all you have to do is get them in the right frame of mind so they'll talk."

"This one won't," I said.

His fingers flexed against his thighs. "They all break if you work them right."

"Not all. Not this one."

"Who the hell are you to decide?" he roared.

And then, as if to compensate for his outburst, there was complete silence.

Greta moved into my line of vision to dispose of a cigarette stub in an ashtray. She remained within sight, sat down on the couch. Flood stood watching me. I wondered, as I had often before, why I hadn't had the good sense to follow my father's advice and become a college teacher like him.

"I don't get it," Flood said, quietly now. "You've no client, but you went to a lot of trouble and expense. Okay, I believe you. A guy sometimes does things because he thinks he has to. So you were your own client and you got hold of something, and now you want to throw it away. What's the matter, Ben—didn't it turn out the way you wanted it to?"

"That's not it."

"Then what's it?"

The butterflies in my stomach didn't care for tobacco smoke. I put up my pipe.

"I can make the killer confess," I said.

On the couch Greta dipped her face to the cigarette lighter in her hand.

Flood drew in his breath and expelled it noisily. "You mean rough stuff, Ben?"

"Not physical rough stuff, of course, but another kind that's just as bad. It's nasty."

"So I'll be nasty. That's what the City of New York pays me to be. You give me what you have and leave the dirty work to me."

That would be too easy.

"No," I said. "I went into this. I knew what I was doing. I can't pull out when it becomes dirty."

"So that's what's been bothering you?"

"Uh-huh."

I stood up. Flood and Greta watched me silently. All I had been doing was trying to put off the inevitable. I had known all along that I would have to face it; I had been kidding myself that something would come up to make it unnecessary.

Nothing would.

"We'll go together, Herb," I said.

"Now?"

I pushed up my sleeve to look at my watch. "It's ten after seven, the time when people are home at dinner."

Greta followed us to the door. She had nothing to say, not even good-bye. She squeezed my arm and I patted her hand.

Flood and I went down the elevator and out to Central Park West where his car was parked. We got in.

"How about doing some talking on the way?" he said.

I started talking.

Chapter Nine

THE BUTLER SAID that Mr. and Mrs. Rauch and Master Rauch were at dinner. "We'll wait," Flood told him, and we wandered into the duplex living room and settled ourselves in a remote corner.

I fooled around with my pipe. I reamed it and ran a cleaner through the shank and loaded the bowl and then found that I had no taste for smoking. I envied Flood's ability to lounge in a chair, relaxed and maybe a little bored with waiting.

Spike came through the dining room door under the balcony. He started jauntily toward us across thirty feet of room. Halfway there he slowed down. Perhaps it was something in our attitudes, in our faces; more likely it was that both of us, the official and the unofficial manhunters, had come to the apartment together.

"Good-evening, gentlemen," he greeted us rather pompously. "On which member of the family are you calling?"

"We're calling on you mostly," Flood said. "But being you're a minor, we'll wait till your parents are present."

"Does this again concern the fact that I happened to visit Thayer Lennan's apartment at the wrong time?"

"Not again," Flood corrected him. "Still. And that's only a small part of it. We'll wait for your father and mother."

The twich came to Spike's mouth. He recognized danger, though not yet fully. "Ben, will you represent me again?"

I shook my head and occupied myself with my pipe.

Spike put his hands in his pockets and pulled them out. He didn't know what to do with them. He tried to grin, and to some extent it came off, but it was oddly sheepish, like the grin of a small boy caught stealing jam.

The silence was unendurable. It was a kind of relief when Flood broke it.

"Going to be fifteen this Sunday, I hear," he drawled. "Did your mother get around to buying your birthday present yet? She was looking for one the other day."

Almost I winced.

"I imagine she intends it as a surprise," Spike said, succeeding in sounding more or less casual.

He was facing us, with his back to the rest of the room, so he couldn't see that his mother had appeared. Her feet made no sound on the carpet. She came toward us slight and straight-backed.

Flood must have noticed her the moment she had entered

the room. His timing was precise. He continued to ignore her presence and said to Spike: "How is it worked when a kid has two birthdays a year? Does he get presents only on the birthday everybody knows about or on the other one too?"

It was crude, it was nasty, but that was the way it had to be.

Spike didn't look at Flood. He looked at me, hurting me with what was in his eyes. I lit the pipe I didn't want to smoke.

Muriel Rauch had faltered beside a couch that stood away from the wall. She gripped the back of it and steadied herself. Her pale face was like an off-color white paper mask.

"What are you talking about?" she whispered.

Spike spun around. "Mother!" He took a step toward her and stopped. "They . . ." That was all he could get past his throat.

"We were discussing your son's two birthdays," Flood told her conversationally. He didn't need anybody to teach him psychology. "His birthday that's coming this Sunday, September 17th, and his real birthday on December 2nd."

Muriel let go of the couch. She clasped her hands in front of her. "Why are you doing this dreadful thing to the boy? Why did you have to tell him?"

"He already knew." Flood had risen from the chair, minding his manners before the lady of the house. "He found out when he had a look at the novel Elaine Lennan was writing. That's what comes of snooping. He's a bright boy; he figured the score. He was the son and heir of a very rich man, but only as long as the man who thought he was his father, Hugo Rauch, didn't find out the truth. The same went for his mother; she'd be kicked out of her duplex apartment and grand country home without a legal chance to collect alimony or a settlement. The way to keep that from happening was not to let anybody read the book."

Muriel twisted her clasped hands. "It's a lie. There's not a word of truth in what you said."

It wasn't clear what she called a lie. She must have known all along that the secret couldn't be buried deep enough once anybody looked in the right place. Her words were no more than stricken sounds of despair.

"Ben Helm just came back from Digby Hill," Flood told her without triumph, with a touch of sadness. "He got the hunch from the name, Shelley, and from something George Duffy told him. He looked up the birth certificate. The credit is his."

I wasn't anxious for the credit.

Spike had gone to his mother's side. He stood with an arm protectively about her, considerably taller than she, and his pasted-on grin twitched.

"Well, so it's come out, Mother. I really don't care." Spike thrust his jaw at us, and this time there was nothing smallboy in his defiance. "Go ahead, tell Dad, tell the world that I'm illegitimate. Mother and I will get along."

"Who gives a hoot about that?" Flood said. "Think I'm running a gossip sheet or something? I'm a cop. I have a little matter of murder on my mind. Yeah! What that birth certificate does is clinch the rest of the evidence. It gives a mighty big motive to back up everything else we have."

Spike continued to stand erect, but within the circle of his arm Muriel cowered.

"You're saying he did it," she whimpered thinly.

"I've got enough for an arrest and plenty to build up a case." He jabbed a finger at Spike. "Trouble with you, all along you thought you were a mighty smart little cookie. Did you think we didn't get wise that after the murder you hung around Thayer Lennan's apartment so you could destroy incriminating fingerprints and make sure there wasn't any other evidence?"

The tip of Spike's tongue appeared between his lips. Muriel shrank against his side. Neither said anything.

"What kind of heels do you think we are?" Flood went on. "Those two pages you wanted us to find in the wastebasket in the Lennan bungalow didn't fool us one bit."

I didn't mind Flood taking the credit for everything.

"Pages?" Muriel muttered. "What pages?"

"Tell her, Ben," Flood said. "Shelley knows already."

I hadn't uttered a word since I had entered that apartment. It could no longer be avoided. I stopped sucking my pipe.

"You were afraid of me, Spike," I said. "Of the police too, of course, but mostly of me because I had been in it from the beginning, and because I wasn't satisfied that Elaine had drowned accidentally, and because I continued to stay close to it. You came up to my apartment to pump me. Intellectual curiosity, you called it, but it was a lot more personal than intellectual."

It wasn't easy to speak to those two pairs of frightened eyes—Muriel's pale-blue and Spike's gray. I took a deep breath.

"Then when Thayer was murdered Wednesday afternoon, you decided that a whooping red herring was needed to divert attention. Thursday morning you went to New Rod. A skeleton key could open the bungalow door. Elaine's typewriter was still there. You'd read the manuscript some days before, and you duplicated a section of it from memory, trying your best to imitate her prose style. Among your other talents, it seems you can write. You did a fair job, even if not good enough. You left the two pages in the wastebasket on

the chance that the police would return for another look and find them. They did."

Muriel shifted from Spike's arm. At that moment she seemed too frail to stand under her own power.

"Mother," Spike warned her shrilly, "don't say anything!"

He was even younger than we had supposed, younger by two and a half months. His precocity now struck me as pretty magnificent. Perhaps it was because I could feel like that that I would never be too much as a manhunter.

Muriel gave her son a ghastly smile. She touched his arm reassuringly and kept her mouth shut.

"Ben didn't give you the whole story of those two pages," Flood said to her. "Do you know why Shelley wrote up and left just those two out of five hundred or so in the manuscript? Because they told how Hugo Rauch shot down Vince Bart back in March, 1934. He was out to dump the Lennan killings and maybe the old Vince Bart killing too on his father —I mean the man he'd found out wasn't his father. Yeah! That's one more thing we have on your son, and there's plenty more. I'm just giving you samples of how much we know and why I'm going to make this arrest."

Muriel drew in a ragged sob.

"Mother," Spike cried. "Don't say anything."

"We'll show our whole hand when we go to trial," Flood went on relentlessly. "We'll start with the motive—how Shelley found out he wasn't Hugo Rauch's son."

He paused, and in the brittle silence there was suddenly another voice in the room.

"Is that true, Muriel?"

Hugo Rauch stood on the balcony. Because it was above us and at the other end of the room three of us hadn't noticed him there. But I was sure that Flood had. Flood had been waiting for him to show up, calculating the effect, timing his words. He had said that it was his job to be nasty, and he did his job without complicating sentimentality.

And so Hugo Rauch had heard enough from the balcony. Both his hands gripped the railing. He leaned forward against it, down toward our upturned faces, and said dully: "Is he my son, Muriel?"

She didn't answer him, and her silence was an answer. She turned back to Flood. Her eyes closed for a moment and opened. I was poised to catch her if she started to crumple.

Spike, his face filled with anguish, stepped to her side.

Limply Muriel lifted a hand. "No, dear, I've hurt you enough. It doesn't matter any more." She drew herself up. "Lieutenant, I killed them."

Flood sighed and shot me a glance. It had worked.

Of course it had worked.

2

We watched Hugo Rauch descend the balcony staircase. He had removed his glasses; they dangled from two fingers of his right hand. He came forward with weary dignity.

Muriel ran to him as if to fling herself into his arms. Something in his eyes checked her. She clasped her hands and said piteously: "Please don't take it out on Spike."

Carefully Rauch put on his glasses. He looked like a professor about to address a class.

"Who was the man?" he said.

"Hugo, it was so long ago."

"Who was he?"

"It was only that one time. I never saw him again. I heard he died." Experimentally she placed a hand on his arm. "Hugo, you can't blame Spike. You can't abandon him."

He looked down at her hand on his arm. "So all along I was raising another man's son, thinking he was mine."

He stepped away from contact with her. Her hand slid from his arm.

There had been no mention of murder between them, as if to him as well as to her Spike's illegitimate birth fifteen years ago transcended the immediate fact of two killings.

Flood and I were completely out of this, even as manhunters.

"Hugo, he has nobody now but you," she pleaded in a hopeless whimper. "He never knew another father. He needs you so terribly. You were always so proud of him. Please, Hugo."

"Another man's bastard," Rauch muttered tiredly.

Then Spike spoke. "To hell with him, Mother! I don't want him or his money." Abruptly he went completely to pieces. He slumped onto the chair Flood occupied and sobbed: "Mother, I would have been just as happy poor!"

She didn't turn to her son. She was watching her husband walk out of the room.

He moved slowly, his slender, hard body erect. Under the balcony he opened a door. It closed behind him.

Flood cleared his throat. "Guess we'd better be going, Mrs. Rauch."

"Yes," Muriel said.

In the room a boy wept.

3

There was the usual narrow, smelly alley along one side of the theater. I waited outside the stage door. I could have gone in, but I preferred the open air—even that air.

Quinn Boxhardt came out with Laura Canell. The smile she gave me told me she didn't know yet. I doubted that any members of that family would ever again look at me or think of me with a smile. Fortunately, after they'd said hello they went on without stopping for conversation.

Greta appeared a minute later. She looked for me as she came through the door, and momentarily she held back when she saw me, as if afraid to hear what I would say.

I went to her. "Muriel Rauch confessed," I said.

"Oh." She sounded relieved.

She tucked a hand through my arm and we were silent as we walked up the alley and turned west. Then I said: "Did you think it was Spike?"

"I was afraid it might be because you hated so much to do anything about the murderer. It would have been horrible if it had been the boy."

"I'm not sure it turned out very much better," I said.

We crossed Seventh Avenue and then Broadway and continued to walk west.

"I've come from the D.A.'s office where Muriel dictated a statement," I told her. "I'd figured out most of it already, so they wanted me to check on whether she told the whole truth. She did. It goes back to when Muriel took Hugo Rauch away from Elaine. The fact that he was a racketeer and a suspected killer didn't seem to bother her; he meant escape from Digby Hill and plenty of money. Maybe on top of that she loved him, but I doubt that she loved him as much as she did Spike's real father, whoever he was."

"So that's it?" Greta said.

"That's it. Not long after their marriage Hugo had to go off to South America and Muriel returned to Digby Hill to stay with her parents. Evidently she didn't exactly pine away for her wandering husband. Who her lover was she refuses to say and it's none of our business. She made the mistake of becoming pregnant too late after her husband left. I don't know why she didn't get rid of it. Maybe she had scruples or had waited too long or wanted this memento from her lover."

"She wasn't the first woman who made that mistake."

"Uh-huh. I've my share of compassion. But not for her. Not for the kind of women who have to have everything there is. Elaine's sister, Mrs. Deitz, called her conniving. Mrs. Deitz knew only part of what she did. Muriel's parents helped her in the deception. They buried themselves for six months in an isolated farm in the hills twenty miles from Digby Hill and discouraged visitors. The local doctor who delivered the baby consented to keep his mouth shut as to the time of the birth. On September 17th, two and a half months before the baby was born, Muriel's father cabled Hugo that he had

become a father. In her letters to Hugo Muriel told him the baby's name, but carefully avoided mentioning its sex—until December 2nd when the baby was actually born and turned out to be a boy."

"Shelley," she muttered. "Was that one of your clues?"

"Uh-huh. I'll tell you more about that and other clues later. Anyway, Hugo was completely fooled and so was the town. But there was one thing that kept the scheme from being perfect, and that was the birth certificate. It presented problems. The sex of the baby wasn't known on September 17th, and suspicion would be roused if the registration was filed two and a half months later. More important, Dr. Hoffman balked at falsifying the date on an official registration. Keeping quiet about the date of birth was one thing; giving a false date was definitely unethical. There would be serious repercussions for him if the fact ever came out. So the real date of birth, December 2nd, appeared on the birth certificate, and who could have guessed that almost fifteen years later it would lead to two murders?"

"But suppose Spike had needed his birth certificate at any time? The danger would always be hanging over her head."

"That was one of the risks she had to take. She minimized it by sending for a copy of the certificate a few years later and doing a simple job of forgery on it. She eradicated the date, December 2nd, and typed in September 17th, and kept the certificate among her papers. If Spike required it for school or anything else, there it was. Another risk had come earlier, at the time of birth. Digby Hill, where everybody knew her, was the county seat, and the clerk who filed the registration might talk about the date. I had a conversation this morning with the present clerk, an amiable elderly woman, and she told me that the county clerk in 1935 had been a taciturn old bachelor who wouldn't give anybody the time of day. He wasn't interested in babies and talking about them, and after the registration was filed it was highly doubtful that anybody would look at it and notice anything peculiar about the date. Muriel overlooked nothing. I'm sure she had every step completely thought out almost as soon as she learned she was pregnant. Eventually Hugo returned and bore his family to New York where he supported them in wealth and respectability and gave her son every advantage a mother could ask for. Let's have coffee."

We had been walking up Eighth Avenue. We went into a restaurant on Columbus Circle and ordered wheatcakes and coffee.

Greta said: "And then Elaine found out."

"Uh-huh."

"But how?"

"I imagine the same way I did. She was pumping George Duffy for dirt for her book of hate. He's a great talker. He must have told her the same story he told me the other day —about how in South America Hugo assumed that a baby named Shelley was a girl and that for some time Muriel in her letters didn't make it clear that it was a boy. Duffy never caught the significance and neither did Hugo. I had the advantage of looking for something like that. Elaine had the advantage of knowing Muriel better than anybody else. Last June Elaine visited her sister in Digby Hill. Probably that was when she checked Spike's birth registration."

"And then she put it in her book. How utterly contemptible!"

"She'd done something like that before, in her short story about Thayer and Kathy. It was becoming a habit. Well, Spike read that manuscript. He likes to stick his nose into everything. He was in the bungalow often to play chess with Thayer. Once he happened to be alone there and saw the manuscript on the desk and glanced through it. He saw enough to make him read more, and one day when both Elaine and Thayer were in New York he slipped in and read it all. Then he confronted his mother with what he had learned about his birth. She denied it, of course, but he wasn't convinced. But he had to let it go at that because he didn't propose to mess up his mother's life and his own as well."

I poured syrup on my wheatcakes. For a while we were occupied with eating, but I resumed speaking before I was finished.

"You can imagine the panic Muriel was in. Hugo might read the book when it was published, or Laura or somebody else would tell him. And the date of Spike's real birth could be checked by merely going to Digby Hill and looking at the birth certificate. There'd be no forgiveness in Hugo. A few hours ago, when Hugo found out, he was less bothered by the fact that his wife was being arrested for murder than that many years ago she had betrayed him. He demanded to know the man's name—maybe to kill him. Call it a gangster's pride. And he turned his back on them, leaving her to the police, leaving Spike in the streets for all he cared."

"I'm not surprised."

"No. Muriel wasn't either. She had expected that if the truth came out. Knowing Hugo, she had expected him to kick her out, and without having to give her a cent because he could prove in a divorce court that she'd had her child with another man while his wife. And he would disown her son. Spike would become a penniless boy with a penniless mother like millions of other boys. She wasn't the kind to take that. She'd contrived too much to get where she and her son were."

"Didn't she beg Elaine to leave it out of her book?"

"Of course. And Elaine refused. In her statement to the D.A. tonight Muriel still couldn't understand why Elaine was set on being so cruel. They'd been friends. It was true that Elaine hadn't been exactly happy when Muriel had married Hugo, but that had seemed to be down the drain. Elaine had her own husband, her own career. Suddenly this —to deliberately want to ruin her and her son. Muriel pleaded and threatened, but Elaine couldn't be moved. She handed Muriel some tripe about being consistent to her art, but what she meant was being consistent to her hate."

"Hate nourished on a handful of ashes," Greta said.

"And a mouthful of mold. Uh-huh. What Elaine feared most was that Muriel would break into the bungalow and steal the manuscript. She made sure both copies wouldn't be destroyed by taking the carbon to her publisher Friday afternoon. I doubt, though, that she completely underestimated a mother's frenzy. Any female animal will kill to protect her child. She inveigled us out to New Rod for the weekend. I was a detective; my presence would be a bar to violence. And if that wouldn't be enough, she let it be known that I was reading the manuscript. That would make a murder attempt futile; having read the manuscript, I would then have a line on why and whom."

Greta put down her fork. "Why didn't Elaine tell Muriel that the carbon copy was at her publisher's? In that case there would be no point in killing her. The book would be published anyway."

"We've got to guess by trying to understand Elaine. This was a plot, a dramatic story; she was an author shifting characters about and juggling emotions. There wouldn't be enough plot if she made it too easy for herself. She'd done that once before that we know of—in *The Eternal Woman* story about Thayer's affair with Kathy Hunter. Maybe she asked me for a perfect murder plot only to make me interested enough to come up to New Rod. More likely I think she was taunting Muriel."

"Playing cat-and mouse with her, torturing her." Greta's mouth quivered with rage.

"All right," I said. "But two things happened to take the plot away from Elaine. The first was that Saturday night on the Rauch terrace you mentioned that I hadn't yet read the manuscript. That led to the second: next morning Muriel murdered her. In her statement Muriel insists that she had no thought of murder. She says she was going to the bungalow to plead once more with Elaine when she saw her going to the spring with a pitcher. What went on in her head is hard to tell and possibly Muriel doesn't remember herself; but the

fact is that instead of meeting Elaine in the field and talking to her, she cut diagonally to the spring and was waiting for her on the opposite bank.

"But Elaine feared her. Why did she cross over to her side?"

"Feared her how much? It was broad daylight; the thin dress Muriel wore couldn't have concealed a weapon and her hands were visibly empty. And Muriel was frail and Elaine, to put it mildly, was husky. Besides, Muriel could have crossed to her side, and Elaine had no intention of running. She must have considered herself safe enough under the circumstances, and maybe she couldn't resist letting Muriel humble herself once more, begging."

Greta shuddered a little. "Or to hear just what Muriel would say or do this time so she could store the scene away to be used in a story."

"Don't put too much emphasis on her having been an author," I said. "Some of the nicest people I know write fiction. Well, Elaine put down the pitcher and waded across the spring. In her statement Muriel says she doesn't remember what they said to each other. There were rocks strewn on the bank. Muriel snatched one up and hit her with it. She says she doesn't remember that either, that she seems to have blacked out until she saw Elaine lying unconscious at her feet. If so, that would have been the first time she hadn't carefully calculated an act to keep herself and her son wealthy. There's no doubt that she was very much aware of what she did then. She took off her shoes and socks and dragged Elaine face down into the water and left her there to drown. She fetched the pitcher from the other bank and wiped off her fingerprints with her dress and dropped the pitcher into the spring and ran home and slipped unseen into the house. In a crisis she could be trusted to keep her head."

"And when she returned to the spring with the others, she stole the manuscript."

"Uh-huh. It was simple. Shortly after they all arrived, Muriel said she'd make coffee. Laura went with her to the bungalow. While Laura was in the kitchen, Muriel took the manuscript from the desk and called to Laura that she was going out to the car to get cigarettes from the glove compartment. She pushed the manuscript under the front seat. That night, when everybody in her house slept, she burned it in the fireplace. So there again she'd connived her way out. Elaine's death was assumed to be an accidental drowning and the manuscript was destroyed."

"But the carbon?"

"Muriel says that the possible existence of a carbon never entered her mind. That's understandable. She'd never worked

in an office; she'd never done any writing. She didn't learn that there was a carbon copy until Wednesday when Thayer phoned and told her he had it and to come to his apartment at once."

"Blackmail?"

"Obviously. Thayer didn't want money. He had another kind of greed—for Kathy—and he thought he could get her back and on a permanent basis if he could maneuver her into a play. He didn't care how big a part, but it was up to Muriel to see that she got one. She could do it through Laura, through her producer and director friends, through persuading her husband to back a play. If she succeeded, she'd get the carbon. If she didn't . . ."

"Poor Muriel," Greta said.

I looked at her.

"I mean it, darling," she said. "I doubt that she ever cared as much about herself as about her son."

"Uh-huh. His easy living would stop; he'd become like most other boys. Spare me sympathy for her."

She didn't argue. She drank coffee.

"So there she was again in the same trap," I said. "Thayer might kid himself about Kathy, but Muriel knew better. No matter what he did for her, Kathy wouldn't stick to him for long. And then what? Mightn't he sell what he knew to Hugo? Even if he gave her the carbon to destroy, he'd remain with the details of Spike's birth. Hugo would pay well for such information. Muriel decided that there was only one way to secure herself and her son definitely—by eliminating Thayer and the carbon at the same time. A second murder comes easier. She picked up the bronze bookend, and you know what she did with it. Later she told the police that at the time she had been shopping in the department store for Spike's birthday present." I paused and added: "For the birthday that wasn't his birthday."

Our plates and cups were empty. I paid the check and we left the restaurant.

4

We made the precarious crossing to the north side of Columbus Circle.

When we were again on the sidewalk, Greta said: "And poor Spike! He'd told Muriel what was in the manuscript. He must have guessed that his mother . . ."

Her voice trailed off. She hugged my arm as we walked up Central Park West.

"Guesses and doubts when Elaine was drowned," I said. "He had to pin them down. He snooped even more than

usual. He tried to learn what I knew when he already knew so much more. Then Wednesday afternoon he walked in on Thayer's murdered body. Maybe he saw Muriel leave the building; he couldn't have been far behind her. But he didn't have to see her to know. That was why he didn't leave the apartment at once. He was dazed and shocked because he'd just fully realized that his mother was a killer."

"It's a wonder he didn't go completely to pieces."

I said dryly: "He didn't inherit his brains from his mother, but he inherited her control. He recovered quickly; he stood up well to police questioning that night. Next day he turned author—two pages worth—because he knew that his mother was vulnerable if anybody dug deeply into the past. But he should have let it alone. Red herrings can sometimes be clues."

We stopped walking while I put a match to my pipe.

"The clues," I said. "Flood wisecracked that the case might be solved with English poets. He wasn't so far off. There was the title from Masefield's poem. Flood isn't much on literature, but he was shrewd enough to suggest that the title ought to tell something about the novel. I'd looked it up already, but it didn't tell me much until Thursday night when I learned something of the past by reading *Satan in a Tuxedo*. From what I knew of the missing manuscript, it was likely that it told the same story. *A Handful of Ashes* as a title became significant. Who had the music, the color, the glory, the gold? Muriel who'd taken away from Elaine the man who'd give her all that. But Elaine had something too: a younger and handsomer husband than Hugo and a career. The book she'd written five years ago about the same events and people had contained more sorrow than bitterness. What had happened since then to Elaine?"

"I'd guess that Kathy Hunter came on the scene."

"Uh-huh. That explained part of it, anyway. Part of her overriding sense of failure and frustration. I doubt if she ever thought much of her husband, but she had him and now she was losing him to a younger and prettier woman. You read her story in *The Eternal Woman*—a story of suicidal hate in which the wife destroyed herself along with her husband and his mistress. So she had not even her husband now, and what else had she ever had? A career? If she faced up to it, she must have realized that she'd never be even a second-rate writer. And she was getting fat and unattractive, and she couldn't have children of her own. It wasn't until yesterday that I learned from her sister that she'd wanted children very much; she'd gone to a doctor and had had tests made. It was Thayer who was sterile. Hugo probably wasn't sterile.

Hugo could have given her everything he had given Muriel, and children too."

"Whom have you got her hating, Kathy or Muriel?"

"Muriel, of course. Kathy was incidental. There would have been no Kathy if not for Muriel. No inconsequential husband, no poverty, no crummy summer bungalow, no handful of ashes and mouthful of mold. Muriel had everything: two fine homes, good looks remaining, a reasonably devoted husband who was successful in the way that counts in our society, and a son any mother would want. Is it any wonder that Elaine couldn't forgive her?"

I paused to knock out my pipe against a lamppost.

"That's the way my thoughts ran Thursday night when I was reading Elaine's fiction, and kept rereading those two pages from the manuscript we'd found in the wastebasket. Next morning I told Herb Flood that I doubted Elaine had written the two pages, but he came back at me with the information that everything in them checked with the murder of Vince Bart. All the same, three things about those two pages continued to bother me. First, the style wasn't like Elaine's. Second, the far-fetched coincidence that of almost five hundred pages only those two, complete within themselves and giving Hugo a motive, were in the basket. Third, the only real name I'd come across in the manuscript was Vince Bart's. Why hadn't he been given a phony name like the others? The answer seemed to be that whoever had rewritten that scene had put in Bart's real name so that the police would be able to tie in Rauch definitely with that old shooting."

"Do you mean to say Spike did that deliberately?"

"Put it another way. He tried to divert suspicion from his mother to the man he had learned wasn't his father."

"I doubt if Hugo meant much to him anyway."

"Uh-huh. Hugo was never his father in more ways than one. But to get back. Friday afternoon Spike phoned me that Hugo was going to kill Duffy or at least beat him up. He had seen Hugo with a gun, and Hugo was impatiently waiting for Duffy. Wasn't it obvious, he added, that Duffy had given Elaine material for her novel? Why obvious to Spike? Had he read the manuscript? Even so, why was it obvious to him that it was obvious to Hugo? I came up with the answer that Spike knew what was in those two pages. Nobody had told him, so he knew because he had written them, and he took for granted they'd been found when Flood came to question Hugo the night before and again that morning."

"Why couldn't it have been that Hugo had read the manuscript?"

"Because he took no action against Duffy until I mentioned the contents of those two pages to him, and then he

didn't waste time. As soon as Duffy showed up, Hugo went with him to New Rod where he beat him up. Hugo was an old-time gangster; he didn't stand for betrayals. And Spike, seeing the effect of his literary forgery backfiring, appealed to me. He didn't want Duffy killed."

"No wonder you had such a bad time. You thought Spike was the murderer."

"No. Thayer was murdered because he tried to blackmail Elaine's murderer. Now whatever Thayer was, I couldn't see him capitalizing on his wife's death for money. But sex being what it is, he'd do it for Kathy Hunter, and the fact that he'd phoned her that he'd have important news for her in the evening proved it. The one thing Kathy wanted was to get on the stage. Spike couldn't help her. He was nobody—a kid. If he could have done anything in that line, he would have long before as a favor to Thayer. Somebody with influence was being blackmailed—Laura or even Quinn. Or somebody who had influence through money, like Muriel. Whoever was blackmailed murdered Thayer. Two different murderers would have been incredible under the circumstances. Well, that more or less eliminated Spike. But there he was trying to mess up the trail. For whom? For his father who could very well take care of himself in such matters and for whom I didn't think he cared for much? Besides, Hugo's reaction to those two pages indicated that he couldn't have read the manuscript. Then for Laura or Kathy or Quinn or Duffy—none of whom could have meant a great deal to him? There was one easy answer when his mother was one of the suspects. Put that together with what I had worked out of the title of the manuscript, and what did I have?"

"Muriel," she responded dutifully.

"An indication of Muriel," I corrected her. "I concentrated on Muriel. A woman like that would have to have an overpowering provocation to kill. If she killed Elaine, it was through fear of what was in the manuscript. Fear for herself? Well, Friday night at the party in her apartment I had a taste of her fierce protective devotion for her son when he was with Kathy Hunter. She shared that with most mothers, but for what seemed to me a minor reason she acted as if she would kill Kathy then and there if she could. How then would she have felt toward Elaine if she could have harmed her son a great deal more than a girl like Kathy?"

"A lioness and her cub," Greta commented. "But how unselfish was she? There was danger to herself too."

"It's tied together. Protect two with one murder, except that it turned out to be two murders. But when I was going over this Saturday, I doubted that Muriel would have killed to protect herself alone. Maybe if her life was in danger, but

the most that Elaine's novel could have contained was scandal. And I'd had a glimpse of the kind of scandal that could do it. Friday afternoon Duffy had told me that he and Hugo were in South America when Spike was born and how they hadn't known for months if the baby was a boy or girl. It could fit. I twisted it and turned it and connected it up with what I had observed of Hugo's ruthless demand for loyalty when he beat up Duffy. He wouldn't be one to overlook a misstep of either a henchman or a wife. He wouldn't accept as son another man's bastard. All day Saturday I worked it over and over, and it fitted. But only if I could prove the premise. So I went to Indiana."

I cleared my throat. I had been talking too much, but there was no pitcher of water on this lecture platform.

"I had little hope of proving it," I said, "but I had to try. Last night Elaine's sister more or less verified, without knowing it, that there was something fishy about Spike's birth. The doctor who had delivered him was dead, so nothing could be done there. I hardly expected to find confirmation in Spike's birth registration, but I did, and that was it. I told you why the real date of the birth appeared on the certificate. Probably it would have made no difference if she'd been able to fake the registration too, because by then I had enough. Not evidence you could take to trial—there would never be—but enough."

We were almost home. There was nothing more to say.

But Greta refused to let it go at that. "You told Lieutenant Flood that you were sure nine chances in ten who it was. Was the tenth chance Spike?"

"There's never certainty," I said sharply. "Death and taxes and nothing else. No, not Spike. If I'm a judge of character, he wouldn't kill to remain a rich man's son. It couldn't mean that much to him."

"Is there certainty in judging character?"

"I deserved that," I conceded wryly. "All right, there was no certainty. I wouldn't have covered up for any killer. A fourteen-year-old killer kills as dead as a forty-year-old killer. That wasn't the problem. I told Flood that this killer wouldn't confess. She'd done it more for her son than for herself. Torture wouldn't make her confess what she'd murdered twice to keep hidden. But she could be induced to confess for the same reason she had murdered—to protect her son."

Greta walked with her head down.

I had to come out with it. "Wednesday night she must have been on the verge of confessing—when Flood was questioning Spike. She might have broken down then if he had been arrested."

"Ben, you didn't go up there tonight and say you were arresting Spike?"

She hadn't called me darling.

"I didn't," I said wearily. "Flood offered to do the dirty work and I tagged along to add the weight of my presence. Oh, he wasn't crude about it. He never said that Spike was being arrested for murder. He only let Muriel believe that was what he meant. Then when he noticed Hugo on the balcony he repeated that Spike was illegitimate. That did it. There was nothing then for Muriel to hide, nothing to fight."

"Oh," Greta said and was silent.

I stopped walking. I seized Greta's upper arms and turned her around to me.

"Listen," I said between my teeth. "I'm a manhunter. That's my profession, my career. What the hell did you expect me to do—let her get away with it?"

"No, darling."

"And what happened to Spike wasn't my fault. I didn't do anything to him. His greedy, conniving, murdering mother did it all."

"Darling, I'm not blaming you. You're blaming yourself."

Across the street two men were watching us. In a moment they would come charging over to protect fair womanhood. I released her. She tucked her hand through my arm and we resumed walking.

"Hugo was a murderer too, long ago, and nothing will happen to him," she muttered.

"Nothing," I said.

We walked the rest of the way without words.

5

Spike was in the apartment house lobby. He sat on one of the imitation marble benches, and he didn't rise when we entered. He watched us dully, his young face empty.

"I—I had nowhere else to go," he said when we reached him.

Greta dropped down on the bench and threw her arms about him. "We're so glad you came. Aren't we, darling?"

"Of course," I said.

He wriggled out of her embrace and stood up, facing me.

"I don't hate you, Ben. I walked and walked. For a while I hated you, and then I made up my mind to tell you I didn't hate you. That's why I'm here. It wasn't your fault. It wasn't even Mother's—"

His lips quivered. He had to stop speaking.

I put my hand on his shoulder. "Stay with us, Spike. Tonight. As long as you want."

He turned his face away. "I had nowhere else to go," he

said again. "I wouldn't have minded being poor. As if that's important. Why did she think—"

Greta said: "Let's not talk. Come up with us, Spike."

She took his arm and my hand slipped down from his shoulder to his other arm. He looked at me and then at her and drew in his breath. He was, after all, such a young and defenseless boy. Together the three of us went to the elevator and up to our home.

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