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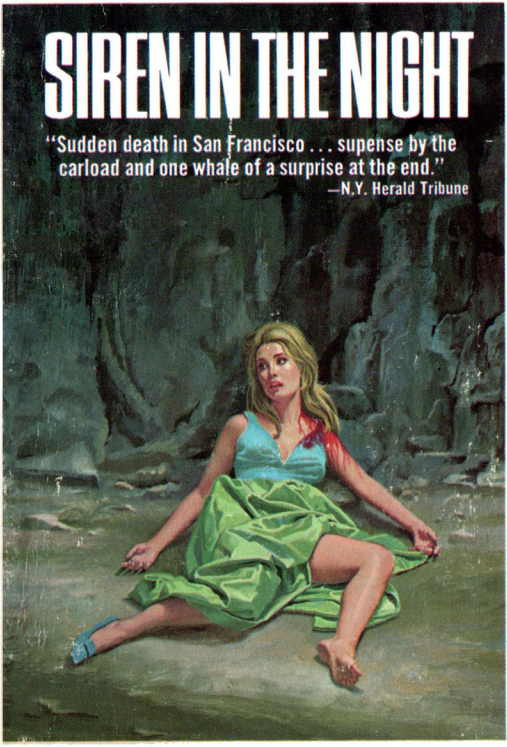
LESLIE FORD

SIREN IN THE NIGHT

"Sudden death in San Francisco . . . supense by the carload and one whale of a surprise at the end."
—N.Y. Herald Tribune



WHAT DOES THE SIREN IN THE NIGHT FORETELL?

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DATE WITH DEATH
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LESLIE FORD

SIREN IN THE NIGHT

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1

THE best laid plans of mice and men have a long and discouraging history, but not until Pearl Harbor were blackouts part of it in San Francisco. In a city where thousands of placards—large white arrows against bold red moons—point the way to air raid shelters, men and mice making plans might be expected to consider them. But I doubt if they think very much, even now, of the probability of the sudden rising wail of the alert siren, and the lights of that Golden City fading like a million synchronized fireflies dying in the night. Whoever planned Loring Kimball's death—and it was apparently very carefully planned—certainly did not.

On any ordinary night the light in Loring Kimball's study, off the library in that 1870 monstrosity of a house he'd moved bodily up onto San Joaquin Terrace, would have passed unnoticed until the next morning; and if they hadn't found him until then, no one would ever have known his death was other than it seemed. Colonel John Primrose might have suspected it, since that's the kind of mind he has, but he could never have proved it. It was inconceivable, on the face of it, that anyone would want to murder Loring Kimball. Nobody outside of San Joaquin Terrace would have believed it, and only one person, waiting there that night with what must have been a sense of complete security, would ever have known. The low long wail of the siren crescending up the cliff must have seemed like the sudden appalling voice of fate, just then, and the lone shaft of light from the garden

window piercing the pitchy blackness through the eucalyptus trees the inexorable finger of God.

Fate it was, in a sense, it seems to me. Otherwise it wouldn't have been Nat Donahue who barged in to turn off the light. Nat was post warden, and should have been in his own house, down from the horseshoe bend of the Terrace. Freddie Butts was block warden, and it was his job to do . . . except that Freddie was nowhere to be found that night, until after the blackout was over and the all clear sounded. It had the sort of irony you come to expect of fate. Loring Kimball had been kinder to Nat Donahue than to anyone else in the world, they said, except possibly his second wife and her daughter Thorne. Everyone in San Francisco knew that. Three days after his death, if Nat Donahue had walked down Montgomery Street . . . well, I don't know what would have happened now, but in the days of the Argonouts he'd have had to be cut down from a lamp post, if the Argonauts had lamp posts. One of the most surprising things about the whole affair was how quickly the police turned on him . . . and on Thorne Kimball. It's surprising too how that age-old conflict between love and duty could so completely have trapped two people like Nat Donahue and Thorne.

Perhaps I'd better explain, before I go any further with this, how and why I, Grace Latham, was spending the early spring in San Francisco. I'd only been there a week when I got a letter from Lilac, my colored cook back home in Georgetown, District of Columbia, enclosing a ragged clipping from one of the Washington gossip columns. It was headed, "Another Cave Dweller Deserts the Parasite Troops."

"Since the President made his now classical remark about parasites and the space they take up in this overcrowded metropolis on the Potomac, there have been more of them than you'd think folding their social tents and quietly stealing away—first renting their houses for prices the OPA had requisitioned a strato-liner to find the ceiling for. Grace Latham is the latest. She's the charming widow who lives in one of the really good Colonial houses in Georgetown—her family owned it before it became the fashion to live there. She's rented it to a tycoon in the Maritime Commission and gone to San Francisco for the duration. They say a certain retired Army officer doing his bit in mufti offered her a job (when she refused his hand) so she'd be one of the indispensables entitled to space, but she refused that too. It won't surprise this column to see another Colonial house on P

Street with its shutters up any day now, Army G2 having decided it needs another man in the western theater of war —preferably San Francisco."

Lilac, who was staying on in my house, added a phonetic postscript to her account of its new tenants.

"Kernel Primros been comin in ever day to see what I here from you. He make pretense he come to see why the man from storag dont come to colek the barels of brick brak. He say he being sent some place out where you is and ain there somethin you forgot he can take out to you. I am lettin him take your rubbers and ombrella becaus they tell me it rain all time out there where you is and rubber is froze out there jus like it is froze here. Sargen Buck ain been here but I see him this mornin nailin up the shuters lookin blood mad. He ack like he dont want to go no place sep where he now am."

Between the gossip and Lilac's contribution was a comprehensive, if inaccurate, picture of what happened on P Street in Georgetown in late February. I hadn't left Washington because the President called me—among others—a parasite. Even a parasite can have pretty inalienable squatter's rights, and I'd lived in Georgetown almost forty years, having been born, married and produced two children there. It was Bill, the older of my two boys, who called up from New York one morning and said was it okay for him to sign up as a Naval Air Cadet. I don't think I hesitated more than the natural moment it took me to try not to remember that his father had been killed in a plane crash when he was hardly more than a baby, or longer than it takes any parent to realize a kid has grown up and has a job to do.

Even then, when I said, "Yes, of course," it was a little of a shock to hear him say, "Atta girl, mom. Because I just did, and don't forget I'm twenty if anybody asks you, will you?" It wouldn't have been the first time we'd collaborated that way, but it had never been important before. And I was glad when he 'phoned again one night and said he was being stationed near San Francisco and wouldn't it be fun if I came out. I'd love it out there and the hills would be swell for my figure.

Furthermore I didn't rent the house on P Street for a stratospheric sum. I traded it, complete with Lilac, for the house on San Joaquin Terrace, complete with an ancient Chinaman named John, that belonged to the distant cousin who'd been sent to Washington with what Colonel Prim-

rose's guard, philosopher and friend Sergeant Phineas T. Buck calls the Marital Commission. I don't know who got the better of the bargain. Their plumbing was more modern than mine, and their Chinaman never muttered or grumbled the way Lilac does. In fact he never did anything but grin, except the day he came back from watching the Japs being evacuated, and then he laughed all afternoon. But life is made up of more than glass-enclosed showers and placid servants, and there was more than one time on San Joaquin Terrace when I'd gladly have abandoned both if it hadn't been for an occasional glimpse of my son's coat tails, and his "Hi, mom, I've got a date with a pip—lend me a couple of bucks, will you?"—Just to mention one slight instance, having a sturdy, tousle-headed boy of four, whose nursemaid I hadn't bargained on becoming when I left Washington, look me solemnly in the face and say, "But there is too ghostses. There's a lady ghost at night under the 'lyptus tree. She's all white like the moon in Maui. But she wouldn't hurt anybody. She thinks little boys is nice and she's nice too."

I could have put up with the lady ghost under the eucaeyptus tree. I couldn't with another lady, or I'll call her that, who was very much alive and spent her time hurting everybody she could. Her name was Ilya, and she was married to Nat Donahue, and as far as I'm concerned she was complete poison, as sweet as honey and absolutely deadly. It seemed to me that if anyone on San Joaquin Terrace had to be murdered on the night of my first blackout there, it would just automatically have been Ilya Donahue. It would have saved everybody *so* much trouble. But it wasn't Ilya, it was Loring Kimball. And that was so unbelievable that even the newspapers ignored the possibility—even the hint—of murder, and rushed to print with unanimous tributes to him as a citizen whose death the whole community would mourn.

2

I've wondered a lot, since then, whether that wasn't so much a part of the original plan that even with the blackout coming suddenly and unexpectedly as it did, the murder of Loring Kimball mightn't still have been utterly successful, if somebody—from Los Angeles, no doubt—hadn't told Lilac it rained all the time in San Francisco. For it was bringing me my rubbers and umbrella that Colonel Primrose passed the Kimball house. He'd walked over from his hotel on Nob Hill, after telephoning, and was going around the curved end of the Terrace trying to find my place. It seemed to me it took him quite a time, and I went out on the porch to see if he'd had a heart attack getting up there. It would be quite easy, because one way to come was up a perfectly ghastly flight of steps from the cable line on the street below, up the cliff through the narrow lane between the Kimball's Victorian grandeur and the stark modernity of the Prentiss Vales' house. A car was standing in front of the Kimballs', and before its headlights flicked off I saw a man carrying an umbrella come out of the lane. I lost sight of him then in the shadow of the eucalyptus tree at the corner, and it wasn't until the car door slammed that I saw him come out again and around toward my house. I heard the iron gate into the Kimballs' garden click shut.

The monstrous house was ablaze with lights, through the shaggy drooping foliage of the eucalyptus trees. It always was, and I'd wondered about it. Their light bill must have

been terrific. Even very late at night, long after most of San Joaquin Terrace was dark and the clanking rumble of the cable cars had stopped, there was a light in the room I later learned was Loring Kimball's study; and the lights in the big corner room upstairs overlooking Dr. Norton's place on the Kimballs' left apparently just burned all night. I finally got so I had to keep my own blinds drawn; I was so fascinated I couldn't get to sleep.

Colonel Primrose's coming along there just then may have been entirely accidental, unless you believe as I do that nothing in this world is ever really just chance. In spite of the gossip-writer and Lilac, I knew he had a real reason for being in San Francisco, having suspected for some time that his retirement—he was wounded in the Argonne—was a myth. His iron henchman Sergeant Buck—also 92nd Engineers, U. S. A., also retired, ostensibly—certainly retains all his non-retired obedience to authority. If he sometimes confuses his duties as dog-robber—if I may say so without bitterness—with those of keeper of an especially rare and valuable specimen in a zoo, I'm the only person it seems to annoy. And I suppose that's because of Sergeant Buck's unfaltering and unflattering assumption that it's me that wants to marry his Colonel.

I can still see the Sergeant the morning I went into their hotel on Nob Hill not even thinking about Colonel Primrose. He was sitting in a red plush chair in front of a gold-floriated marble column, at a kind of granite-visaged peace with the world. He saw me. He got up. He looked as bleak as Mt. Tamalpais on a summer's day, as grim as the Mint off Market Street, as fishy-eyed as a morning's catch on Fisherman's Wharf. Out of the corner of his ironbound mouth he said:

"The Marital Commission's having a confab, ma'am. The Colonel don't want to be compromised. We got assigned out here to work."

He couldn't turn his head and spit, as he usually does, not in all that Italian Renaissance, but the effect was the same. Then his face suffused to the slow brassy tarnish it does as he said, "No offense meant, ma'am."

That was my cue to say, "And none taken, Sergeant." We carefully observe what he once called the "anenmities" . . . and I've wondered if that was as much of a malapropism as I first thought.

In any case, Colonel Primrose's routing out an enemy

alien who knew too much about a uranium bomb and the cyclotron at Berkeley had nothing to do with the business on San Joaquin Terrace. We were purely incidental. It was just the old war horse sniffing powder and not being able to stay out of it. He had the light in his black sparkling eyes, as bright as a parrot's, as he came up on my porch that night.

"Who lives in that fantastic house over there?" he asked, almost before we'd shaken hands. "—Behind the blue gum trees?"

I looked up past the Prentiss Vales' and the lane. The house was fantastic, of course. It looked like a huge indescribable something that a manic-depressive with a scroll saw had carved out of a Victorian nightmare. How they had ever managed to move it across the town and up the cliff to San Joaquin Terrace without all the cupolas and gingerbread gimcracks toppling off it, I couldn't imagine. They certainly could never have found anyone to think them up again.

"The Kimballs," I said.

"The Loring Kimballs?"

I nodded.

He looked at it with a kind of quickened interest.

"Then that must be the light."

"The one up on the right, that's always on? How did you know about it?"

It was chilly out on the porch, though with Washington knee-deep in snow when I left home it should have seemed practically sub-tropical, with masses of gorgeous white calla lilies blooming like weeds, and the Terrace fragrant with stock and feathery yellow acacia above the slightly pharmaceutical pungency of the eucalyptus. He didn't answer until we'd gone inside and he'd found a chair he'd feel at home in. It wasn't too easy. There was an awful lot of the French marquetry and ormolu that must have been a phase of San Francisco's rise from gold dust, along with the alabaster and the red plush.

"They were talking about it at a meeting this afternoon," he said. "Pilots say they can see it from the Farralones. Kimball is a very leading citizen, and like most people out here, pretty much of an individualist. It seems he has personal reasons for keeping it on, and he's damned if anybody's going to make him put it out."

"What are they, did you hear?" I asked.

"Something to do with his first wife. The local people seem to know about it. A tragic experience of some sort. I

take it he's supposed to be dealt with . . . well, tactfully, or sympathetically."

"I don't know any more than that," I said. "He seems to be very kind and public-spirited, and highly respected. He married a younger woman with one child, about fifteen years ago. That's when he moved up here, I understand. House and all."

"Would the daughter's name be Thorne?"

I nodded. "I've just seen her dashing in and out. She's lovely to look at."

Colonel Primrose smiled.

"I couldn't see her, just now, but she has a lovely voice. She was in the car out there—and pulling out, for good."

I looked at him.

"I heard her say, 'Mother, I can't, I can't! I've got to go, I can't stand it any longer!' I was standing there to get my breath, at the end of the lane. Apparently her stepfather has brought somebody back here, in a way that's . . . wrong, somehow. Some woman. She finally burst out, 'I've got to go, something dreadful's going to happen if I don't!' "

I shook my head. I didn't know Thorne Kimball then, but I'd seen her swing the big green Red Cross ambulance around the narrow corners of the Terrace, and if she could drive an ambulance like that in San Francisco she could take the Burma Road in her stride. It seemed odd, and I said so.

Colonel Primrose nodded. "You don't know any woman who's coming back here?"

I stared at him blankly.

"Your intelligence service is losing its grip, Mrs. Latham," he said. "You might see what you can find out about that household for me. I'm interested in that light—and that girl's voice. I'm worried about her. Her mother kept saying she was being unfair, she couldn't act this way. She said, 'I know it's hard, Thorne, but for my sake!—I'll do something about it.' It was very tragic, some way. If that light is connected with a first wife and an unhappy experience, it might be hard to live with. And I'd say Thorne Kimball is a pretty high-spirited young person."

"She went back to the house?"

Colonel Primrose nodded.

"She couldn't have done anything else. I saw her get her bag out of the car. She . . . wasn't a free agent, if you see what I mean."

It was all very curious. I had a vague memory of a lunch

conversation the second day I was in San Francisco, at the Francesca Club. When I said I was living in San Joaquin Terrace someone mentioned the Kimballs. I gathered Loring Kimball had married a woman all of them had known, and they thought it was wonderful. She'd been left with a five-year-old daughter and an avalanche of debts, and was completely untrained and up against it. Her husband had been a charming scapegrace who'd run his car off the road coming back from a week-end skiing in the Sugar Bowl of the High Sierras. That, I gathered, was regarded as a lucky break for everybody, and Loring Kimball had been magnificent. As for who the woman who was coming back could be, I hadn't the foggiest idea—not until the next day.

3

MY doorbell rang a few minutes before nine, that next day, just as I was coming downstairs. The most amazing woman was standing on the porch. She was tall and thin, in a grey suit, with a virulent green felt hat perched up on top of enough coarse grey hair to overstuff a sofa. She had fey grey eyes and a long grey nose and long white teeth. The sides of her face, not just her cheeks, were plastered with what I suppose was actually rouge but certainly looked like brick dust to me.

"I'm Mrs. Butts," she said.

It was one of those final definitive statements that stop everything for a moment. At least it stopped me.

"You're Mrs. Latham."

I managed to say, "Yes."

"That's straight then," Mrs. Butts said. She didn't look as if she was selling anything, but if she had been I'm certain I would have bought it instantly. I thought she was marvelous.

"Will you come in, Mrs. Butts?" I asked.

"No," she said. "I just came to tell you we're having a block party tonight, over at our house. It's over there."

She pointed an arm as long as a windmill's across to a yellow stucco house that in some odd disintegrated way looked not unlike herself.

"You've heard of block parties. You're supposed to know your neighbors. So if the Japs drop bombs on us we won't

trample each other to death and everybody'll help put out everybody else's fires. You know."

I said I knew. I'd read about block parties in the papers.

"I heard a man say last night," Mrs. Butts said, "that people all over town are beginning to know they're neighbors. He said it was a good thing for San Francisco. He said it was just the upper economic brackets that weren't cooperating, and I said maybe that was because the lower economic brackets don't have the kind of neighbors we have. He said that didn't make any difference, they don't bracket bombs. Reasonable?"

"Very,' I agreed.

"All right then. I said to Mr. Butts, my mother's mother ran a boarding house south of the Slot, but I'm married to you and that puts me in the upper economic bracket they're talking about. Mr. Butts said, all right, why don't you get everybody together and have a block party. So I am. Tonight, eight o'clock. Mr. Butts said, you've got to ask everybody. But that's silly. I mean, there are a couple of places up here I wouldn't put a teaspoonful of sand on to put out a fire in."

As she turned and looked about the Terrace her nostrils distended and she gave a kind of snort. Then suddenly her voice was warm and friendly.

"There's that sweet child. I'll go and tell her.—No, I won't. Not right now."

Thorne Kimball was coming out of the gate between the eucalyptus trees in front of the Kimballs' Prince Albert Gothic. She had on her Motor Corps uniform and was drawing on her black leather gauntlets. I didn't see what had deterred Mrs. Butts until I saw Thorne glance up and stop, her hand still on the iron latch.

A man in a grey flannel suit was coming out of the house next to mine. I'd noticed him before. He was in his early thirties, probably, tall and leanfaced and casual looking, with a pipe in the corner of his mouth—a typical American sort of person, and attractive in a reassuring kind of way. His face and hair were sunburned, so that one was much darker and the other much lighter than they'd normally have been. The kind of buoyance I'd noticed before in him seemed absent this morning as he crossed the patch of lawn in front of his house and went toward the girl at the gate.

She walked slowly to her car and waited. When he came up they didn't speak. They just stood there, looking at each

other. Then abruptly she held out her hand. He took it, and they stood for a moment, looking at each other. She seemed to say something before she turned quickly and got into her car. She shot away from the curb, not looking back, her motor wide open, and he stood there watching her until she was gone, and then took his pipe out of his mouth, knocked it out against the iron gate post, went slowly inside and along to the house.

"—And that, my dear," said Mrs. Butts, "is a sin and a shame."

I looked at her blankly.

"Nat Donahue is one of the finest boys I've ever known. I'd trade two of my Freddie, though thank God I've only got one of him, for Nat any day. And Thorne is an *angel.* Why Lucy didn't insist on those two getting married I've never been able to fathom. I have no patience with sacrifice. I never have had."

She turned abruptly and started down the steps. "I'll see you tonight. Don't dress. I've got to meet a convoy."

She waved across the Terrace. A huge car moved slowly around to meet her. The last I saw of her she was going into the Prentiss Vales', her hat a brilliant bobbing spot against the gleaming white planes of concrete and glass in front of her. The Vales' was a lovely house, but there was something very funny about it and the Kimballs' wooden anachronism sitting there cheek by jowl, up at the bend of the Terrace, perfect examples of the eras of shorts and bare legs, bustles and diamond dog collars. If Loring Kimball had spent a fabulous sum moving his house there just for that reason, it would have seemed to me quite in keeping with the practical joking that's still a part of San Francisco's individual and special sense of humor.

Because Mrs. Butts had said she was going to meet a convoy, I went back to the big parlor that looks out over the roof tops to the broad blue sweep of the Bay. Coming from Washington, where yachts and coal barges and a few river boats make up maritime life on the Potomac, I was always fascinated watching this harbor. Two great blue battleships lay on either side of Telegraph Hill. Four ships were lying in Dynamite Row, and a submarine, long and sleek and low, was moving from Treasure Island out toward the Golden Gate. A flight of heavy bombers with interceptor planes roaring around it was zooming toward Angel Island, in war games that aren't games any more. A huge old liner that had

come through the net just this side of the Golden Gate was maneuvering into her berth in the Embarcadero. I recognized her four slanting stacks, even though she was battered and dirty grey, with no tubbed palms to roll down into the salon as there'd been when I crossed the Atlantic on her one winter. Another passenger ship, smoky black where once she'd been gleaming white and the pride of the Island run, was moving slowly under the Oakland Bridge. A destroyer that hadn't been there the night before was docked alongside one of the battleships. Up the Bay six freighters were moving in together to form another convoy going out on the long voyage. There was a sense of drama and excitement, a grim realization that men and materials were moving to far battlefronts, that only coastal cities can know. It had come as a kind of shock to me, after crossing the continent where life seemed much the same and people were saying why doesn't Washington *do* something instead of talking so much. It was being done here. The ships were coming in, bringing women and children home, to go out again with troops and with all the masses of material I could see lined up on the Embarcadero one day and gone the next, and the next day piled up again waiting for the next convoy going out.

I picked up the glasses on the window seat and focussed them on the old transatlantic liner trying to nose her way into the pier, her decks jammed with evacuées hanging over the rails, looking at first sight like a summer holiday crowd gaily returning home. I wouldn't have put the glasses down and turned away casually if I'd realized what that ship was going to mean to me, and I didn't realize it completely even when a Red Cross station wagon pulled up at my door just after I'd come back from lunch at the Town and Country Club in Union Square.

Thorne Kimball jumped out, went quickly around and opened the door. A tow-headed youngster in a cotton play suit, with a toy plane in one fist and a tiny suitcase in the other, climbed soberly out and stood there on the grass looking up at the house. A girl who looked about sixteen, in a rather bedraggled gingham dress, no hat on her fuzzy yellow head or stockings on her sun-browned legs, got out after him. She stood looking up at the house too—woebegone and tired, and very pathetic some way. Thorne Kimball was pulling her bag—not much bigger than the child's —out of the back of the car.

There was another girl in the car who just sat there as the

three—the boy, the girl and Thorne Kimball—came up toward my house. She was blonde and smartly dressed and soignée, with what I thought was a look of sullen discontent on her extremely pretty face.

I opened the door. In spite of the brilliant sunshine, a chill wind was whipping up the Terrace. I saw two bluish little knees shaking together, and a pair of wide blue eyes not very far from tears.

"You'll freeze," I said. "Come in, quickly."

"Go on, darling, you can explain inside," Thorne said. "I've got to get my other passenger delivered. I'll be right back."

She smiled at me. It was the first time I'd seen her close up. She was really lovely. Her face was perfectly oval, and pale except for two flushed spots burning in her cheeks that obviously weren't natural. Under the greyish-blue of her uniform cap her eyes were blue as the deepest sapphire, and the instant she smiled they lighted up as if they had stars in them, the way sapphires sometimes do have.

"You must think this is awfully queer," the girl said, when she'd gone. "You've probably never heard of me. I'm . . . I'm Molly McIntyre."

"Oh, of course," I said. I should have recognized her. John the Chinaman had her picture framed in bamboo over the icebox in his pantry. Her mother had had another one, of the son-in-law and Molly and this child, on her dressing table in my guest room in Georgetown before I turned the house over to them and came out here to theirs.

"But your mother said you were staying in Honolulu."

"We were," she said. "But we thought maybe it would be better for Little Joe to be here—if anything happened to Big Joe. He's a naval aviator, you know. We didn't want to come."

"No, we didn't want to come," Little Joe said solemnly. "We wanted to stay in Maui."

Molly McIntyre nodded. "Mother cabled that she and Dad had taken your house and you had ours. And I'm not going to bother you. It's just that we didn't have any winter clothes out there, and what we wore out got burned up when the Japs bombed us."

She was as matter-of-fact as if cockroaches had got into them.

"I thought you wouldn't mind if I got the things we left here with Mother. I hate to barge in like this, but you see—"

Little Joe looked up when she hesitated.

"Aren't we going to stay here, mum?"

"No, darling."

"Why don't we stay here?"

"Why don't you?" I asked.

"Oh, no. You see—"

"Don't be silly," I said. "I'd love to have you. I don't need all this house. It would be fun, really."

Molly McIntyre sat rigidly on the sofa staring into the fire for a moment. I saw that her eyes were drowned in tears and she was fighting desperately to keep them back.

"I . . . guess I'm just awfully tired," she managed to say before she turned and buried her head in the cushion and began to cry like a child.

Little Joe went over to her and took her hand. "I guess my mum's just awful tired," he said. "If you'll let us stay we'll be very quiet."

That was all settled when Thorne Kimball came back a few minutes later. The spots on her cheeks were burning brighter.

She looked at Molly for an instant. "Do you know," she said steadily, "that her ankle was not sprained?"

"Ilya's?"

Thorne nodded. "I started to help her out of the car. She said, 'Oh, don't be hysterical, darling! I just didn't want to have to stand around and wait for a taxi. I've been contributing my dollar to the Red Cross for years!"

Molly's face was set. "I could have told you that," she said evenly. "I was in the same stateroom coming over."

The spots in Thorne Kimball's cheeks burned still more. She jerked the leather gauntlets out of her belt and drew them on.

"I've got to go. There are a couple of hundred people down there that really do need help. Bye—I'll be seeing you. Goodbye, Mrs. Latham. You're an angel."

As the door closed Molly looked over at me, her face a little blank, her lips parted.

"She's still . . ."

She stopped. "Oh, dear. That's too bad."

She went to the window, looked out for a moment and turned back.

"I know just how she feels," she said slowly. "The only quarrel Big Joe and I ever had was about Ilya Donahue. I don't know what would have happened if the Japs hadn't come over. I guess I'd be in Reno now instead of here."

She sat down again. "You know, I wonder why Ilya decided to come back. I put up with a lot from her, coming over, because I was glad she wasn't staying where Big Joe was. But it's funny. She always said she wasn't coming until she could come by Clipper, even if she had to pretend she was going to have a baby to get a place on it.—You don't know her, do you?"

I shook my head.

"Well, I don't like her." She smiled quickly. "Or did you gather that already?"

4

ONE result of Molly McIntyre's coming was that I knew a lot more about everybody in San Joaquin Terrace before we went to the block party than I normally would have. It was just eight when she and I set out.

"I think Mrs. Butts's getting in all the neighbors for this is wonderful!" she said. "You don't *know* our Magic Mountain."

She took my arm and steered me to the left. "Let's go round the end, and I'll tell you where everybody lives.—Now this rose-covered thatched cottage here, where the Donahues live, is insult added to injury."

She pointed to a large and handsome stark white rectangle with sun decks cantilevered over the rocky face of the cliff, its exterior walls practically solid sheets of crystal-clear glass. It was separated from my house by an elaborately landscaped rock garden, glowing with color in the brilliantly clear moonlit night.

I looked at her inquiringly.

"Prentis Vale's an architect," she said. "They live where you can see the wrought-iron stairs through the glass brick."

She pointed on to the modern house around where the horseshoe started to bend.

"Loring Kimball retained him to draw the plans for his house. It was high modern—all functional, no waste motion. But Mr. Kimball was old-fashioned. The first thing we knew, that 1870 mausoleum he lives in was moving up the hill. It

was too funny. We used to race home from school to watch it come up, inch by inch. Prentiss Vale was fit to be tied. Well, then *this* year Loring Kimball hires a rival architect and puts up this little ultra-modern number on the other side of Prentiss Vale. So that the Vales' house that was ultra-modern ten years ago is practically mediaeval."

She became serious all of a sudden.

"Of course then Loring Kimball gives it to Nat Donahue —and Ilya—rent free."

"Why?" I asked. I was getting more and more puzzled.

"He's been awfully kind to Nat," she said slowly. "Nat was just a kid from the Telegraph Hill Settlement House. Mr. Kimball gave him a job, fifteen years ago, and now he's general manager of the Coral Island Sugar Company that Mr. Kimball owns. Nat's a grand person."

"Why didn't Thorne marry him?" I asked.

We'd passed the Prentiss Vales' and were crossing the narrow lane that led up from the cliff stairs, between their place and the Kimballs'. Molly dropped my arm and pointed out over the Bay.

"Look—isn't it beautiful!"

The lighted garland of the white bridge streaming across the Bay cast broad rippling walls of orange down into the dark water. Beyond Yerba Buena, where it stopped to pick up again to the inland shore, the Berkeley Hills lay like sable embroidered with millions of sparkling golden sequins. Below us I could see the harsh red glow of neon signs and the headlights of cars moving around the circle under the grey shaft of the Coit Tower on Telegraph Hill, with people watching the battleships along the Embarcadero below. All the rumble and clatter of traffic, the blare of juke boxes and the clang of the cable cars seemed to diffuse into an overtone that became just a part of the remote silence of the hilltop where we stood.

"I always miss it when I'm away," Molly said. Then she laughed. "We've got to get on.—And this is Mr. Kimball's contribution to the preservation of antiquity. He even had the eucalyptus trees transplanted."

I looked across the iron palings through the shaggy branches of the trees. The multiform architectural protuberances of the old house were silhouetted against the evening sky. The light from the bay window of the second floor room shone out brilliantly. The rest of the house was

dark. Only a faint rainbow glimmer showed through the yellow, blue and red stained octagonal panes of the front door and the gothic arched windows on either side of it. By contrast the room upstairs was beacon-bright.

"What *is* that for?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know, really. It was his first wife's room. They say she was simply beautiful. I suppose he must have adored her. She went out the morning of the Fire and took the little girl with her—her family's house was on Nob Hill, right in the path of it. They'd got out, but she didn't know it. They found the child wandering around, a couple of days later. Mr. Kimball never got over it. He keeps the room just as it was. Her nightdress and robe are hanging over the rocking chair just the way she left them. Thorne and I peeked in once when we were kids. He still goes in there, every day."

She gave an involuntary little shiver.

"I don't think dead people ought to . . . to destroy the living. Do you?"

"No, I don't," I said. The whole thing seemed extraordinary to me.

"It gives everybody on the Terrace the jitters—the light, I mean," she said. "The Nortons here don't have to bother to have one on their proch."

We'd gone on to where a high beautifully tended cypress hedge completely secluded the garden and the quiet square wood building that I could see from my upstairs windows. It was a house of peace and dignity, with flowering vines trailing densely over its Spanish galleries. It had an octagonal cupola, but with blackout curtains and with the Kimballs' house alongside it, its view must have been pretty well confined to the back windows toward the head of the Bay.

"Dr. Norton's an angel," Molly said. "I came clear back from Guantanamo when Little Joe was born so I could have him. His wife's an invalid, has been for years, and he's wonderful—he almost never goes anywhere, except to the Bohemian Club Thursday nights. He doesn't practise much now, except for a few old patients, but there was a time when if he wasn't your doctor you didn't belong to the Best People. It's still a small town in some ways. Everybody who's anybody knows everybody else. It's funny, in a city as big and cosmopolitan as this."

We passed the wrought-iron gate set in the clipped hedge.

A sheet of iron was set behind it so you couldn't see through. A dingy sign said "Please Ring the Bell." Under it a locker door was marked "Deliveries."

"And this," Molly said, "is the Buttses. The Buttses are wonderful. All but Freddie. Freddie's a drip. Still he's rather sweet."

She laughed suddenly as we started up the Buttses' front steps. "You really don't know how funny this block party is. I wonder how many of them will come."

Mr. Freddie Butts opened the door. "Drip" may not have been an elegant word for him, but there was something in it. Compared with his mother he was as the palest China tea to the throat-searing brew that sits in the pot on the back of a Welsh miner's stove. He was tall, thin and hollow-chested, with pale blond hair and a pale blond little moustache, and he was not terribly bright looking.

"I wish somebody would explain all this," he said dolefully. "One of mother's iron whims. They're down in the so-called play room. I've got to stand by. They took our Jap today. Mother gave him my golf clubs and tennis rackets. I hope the Government furnishes balls."

The so-called play room in the Buttses' basement looked to my startled eyes like the life-work of a beach-comber who'd taken a year off to go on safari . . . and a long time ago, because it would have taken an army of moths years to do the job they'd done on the lioness with cubs snarling off the papier-mâché rock at the end of the bar. The jaguar striding along a narrow shelf above a door marked "Freddie's Dark Room—Danger, Keep Out" had definitely been picked off at the height of the molting season. Hung around the redwood-panelled walls in the most crazy fashion were native cooking pots, grass skirts, fish nets, parts of ships and chunks of brain coral, straw-covered glass balls and parts of fishes. Over the stone fireplace was a native drum and above it a tarred rope from which dangled half a dozen tiny shrivelled Mori heads. And over and above and around and beside everything were bottles, of every description, form and age. The bar itself I had never seen anything remotely like. It was complete with brass rail and a brass plaque that said "Shanghai Mike's, Destroyed by Fire April 1906," and collected on and behind it was every brand of liquid distillation I'd ever heard of and scores I hadn't, in containers ranging from the old-fashioned demijohn to the most elegant long-throated carafes.

And at the end of it, under a great molting eagle perched on a taxidermist's idea of a tree limb, and just as bald, a roly-poly little man was holding a fat cordial bottle up to the light. I heard him saying, "Now this little bottle of cherry brandy . . ." He was talking to a large fine-looking man of about sixty whose snow-white hair just grazed the stiff whiskers of a hyena grinning on the wall.

Mrs. Butts strode up. She had on a violent orchid lace dress and her masses of hair kept catching on various trophies.

"Mr. B!" she said. "*Will* you put that down? Here's Molly, and this is Mrs. Latham."

The roly-poly little man put his cherry brandy down, and came toward us, beaming. I had no doubt he regarded his wife as the best piece he'd collected.

"Mrs. B. said you were coming," he said. "I hope you like San Francisco?"

"I love it," I said.

"You'll do, then—that's all we ask!" he exclaimed. "Oh, here's the Doctor. Glad you got in, Norton. Don't want Mrs. B. doing any first aid on me. Rather take a chance on the Japs, myself."

He held out his hand to a tall slender man with crisp curly grey hair and a quiet self-contained face who had just come in.

"This is Mrs. Latham, our new neighbor. Dr. Norton."

Dr. Norton smiled as he said, "How do you do, Mrs. Latham," and I saw why people would want him when they were dying, or thought they were. He had an unassuming, sustaining strength you felt the moment he looked at you. Perhaps it was because Molly McIntyre had told me he had an invalid wife, but I had an impression not so much of tragedy in his face as of a deep human understanding, as if he'd seen pretty much everything in life and knew its proper value.

He said something I didn't hear, because Mr. Butts had hold of my elbow. "And this, my dear, . . ." he said.

The big man with the white hair under the hyena's head had turned around. For an instant, or a fraction of one actually, we stood looking at each other. He was very handsome, and he had the most extraordinary dark eyes, deep-set and full of movement, and with something else in them that was definitely arresting if not startling. It's hard to say precisely what it was, because it was gone at once. Whether he'd been

off guard, or even if I'd imagined the whole thing, I couldn't say. He must have realized what was going on in my mind, however, because his smile was a little subrisive. Before Mr. Butts could tell me who he was he said:

"Kimball is my name, Mrs. Latham. And this is my daughter, Miss Kimball."

I turned expecting to see Thorne there. Instead it was a woman in her late thirties. She must have been there all the time, but she was the kind of person you might very well not notice. I realized suddenly that this must be the daughter of the beautiful first wife for whom the light burned, the child they'd found wandering around alone in the Fire, over thirty-five years before.

"—Mrs. Latham, Amelia."

Amelia Kimball put her hand out timidly. It was cold and rough, and she took it away quickly as if conscious of it. She didn't smile, and her "How do you do?" wasn't audible in the steadily rising confusion. Thorne and Freddie had come in, and some other people, and Mr. Butts had retired behind the bar. On the whole, I thought, Mrs. Butts's version of the block party was very like any other party of the upper economic brackets.

"Mrs. Latham."

Thorne Kimball's voice was one you wouldn't mistake. I turned around.

"Hello," she said. "This is my mother Mrs. Kimball, Mrs. Latham."

I don't know why I should have been aware of Amelia Kimball as I turned. I hadn't been so much so even when I was shaking her hand. It may have been the contrast between her and her stepmother, for certainly they were about as unlike as two women could be. Mrs. Kimball must have been ten years older but looked younger, her eyes were black where Amelia's were mouse-brown, her hair had two sharp snow-white wings sweeping smartly up from her temples where Amelia Kimball's was streaked with nondescript grey, and she had on a cherry-red tweed suit and cherry-red lipstick. What Amelia was wearing I wouldn't know, except that it was colorless, and she'd powdered her nose with too light powder.

"Thorne told me she'd met you," Mrs. Kimball said. "I hope we'll see a lot of you. I'm so glad you're keeping Molly —she's sweet. You must—"

She stopped abruptly, in one of those unexpected silences

that happen in crowded places and at dinners and frequently leave someone awfully out on a limb. It was Mrs. Butts's voice that rang out now, high-pitched and clear as a fire bell:

"—wish somebody would poison her with it."

The silence elongated, over what seemed minutes and minutes. Then Mr. Butts, quite unperturbed, pressed the trigger on the syphon of Shasta water in his hand.

"Poison who, Mrs. B?" he inquired cheerfully.

"I was just talking to Molly," Mrs. Butts said calmly. "I was telling her we've got cockroaches. She said Ilya brought home a can of the stuff they use in the Islands. I said I wished somebody would poison her with it."

"—Mother's wonderful, isn't she?" Freddie Butts said to me. He was as placid as a summer's day. "Why somebody doesn't poison *her* I'll never know.—Oh, my God!"

It wasn't until that sudden exclamation that I, or anybody, had realized that Ilya Donahue was standing in the doorway, looking very calmly around. Her ash-blond hair was rolled in a smooth pompadour almost like a halo around her head. She was certainly pretty, and the expression in her face was certainly not the sullen discontent I'd seen there when she didn't know anyone was looking at her. A blond martin jacket hung loosely around her shoulders. She let it slip down and stood there with it in her hand, her perfectly arched brows raised a little and an odd kind of half-smile on her red lips—as well there might have been.

5

"DID I hear someone say they'd like to poison me?" she asked coolly.

There was a little silence.

"Just . . . Mother," Freddie Butts said easily. "She's gone democratic. She's expressing the will of the people. What about a drink, darling?"

Ilya Donahue smiled at him. I've never had a clear idea of what a basilisk smile is, but I think hers just then must have been like it.

"Really?" she said. "Don't tell me everybody wants my husband. I thought it was just . . ."

Her dark eyes moved until they rested on Thorne Kimball. Thorne's face was chalk-white under her soft black pageboy bob. Her eyes were almost aquamarine, except that aquamarine is cool and they were like steady blue flames.

Ilya Donahue looked slowly from her to Molly McIntyre.

"—Unless, of course, anyone else has another reason," she said.

Molly's cheeks flushed scarlet. As she made a quick move forward Mrs. Butts put a hand sharply on her arm.

"I said it, Ilya. And if I were you, my dear, and really had any poison around the house, I'd go home immediately and throw it out."

She stopped abruptly. Nat Donahue was coming down the basement stairs, whistling lightly. As he got to the bot-

tom of the steps he stopped short in the silent and motionless room. He looked at Ilya, then at Thorne.

It was the first time I'd seen him close up. He was tall, sun-browned, clean-cut and as tensile as steel. His jaw was hard and his lips tight. The steady grey eyes that moved from his wife to Thorne and back were very clear, and not very happy.

Ilya raised a wide-eyed face to his.

"Oh, darling, I'm so glad you've come! Nobody seems to want me at the party. If you'll give me the key I'll go back home. You stay—I don't want to take you away from your friends."

As she put out her hand Loring Kimball moved forward.

"If you really want to go, Ilya, I'll go back with you," he said. "Nat's going to show the bomb movie."

"Freddie can show it, Mr. Kimball," Nat said quietly. "Thanks just the same."

He put a box of metal reels down on the table.

"Good night, everybody."

He took Ilya's jacket out of her hand and put it around her shoulders. She smiled at Thorne, standing motionless between her mother and Amelia Kimball at the other end of the room.

"I'm awfully sorry if I spoiled the party. I hope you'll—"

"Let's go," Nat Donahue said. He took her arm, they went up the steps.

Dr. Norton moved over to the bar, a faint smile on his lips. A bored female voice from somewhere at the other end of the room said, "Will somebody tell me why he married that gal in the first place?"

"Yes," Freddie Butts said. He was sorting out the films. "I'll tell you. I was in the Islands when it happened. He didn't have a dog's chance."

I glanced at Thorne. Her face was still white, but the two bright spots were burning in her cheeks again.

"If Thorne hadn't—"

"Shut up, Freddie," Molly McIntyre said quickly. "Let's see the incendiary bombs, darling—without the sound track."

It was Thorne she had in mind, I thought; and then suddenly I realized it wasn't. There was something in the room, a kind of undercurrent of hostility or hatred or fear, that had risen so sharply that the thin surface tension that kept it down was quivering with static. It seemed to flow from all sides of the room, and it was real and tangible and electric.

No one was looking at Thorne. In fact no one seemed to be looking at anybody else at all. Except for Loring Kimball, who went over to the bar beside Dr. Norton, no one moved, or spoke. They were all like a lot of little self-contained islands, each seething in its own volcano. . . . Mrs. Butts and Freddie, even Mr. Butts, Mrs. Kimball and Amelia Kimball, Molly, the bored-voiced woman and the young-looking middle-aged man beside her. Their faces were blank, and their eyes seemed suddenly shuttered and expressionless. It was as if a delayed action bomb had been dropped there in the middle of the room, and they knew it was going to go off in just a moment and were waiting for it.

Dr. Norton, as if he must have been conscious of something, turned slowly. His eyes met Loring Kimball's. Mr. Kimball's smile was a little mocking. As he turned around, poised and assured, I thought he was aware of all this too.

"All right, Freddie," he said. "On with the show. Let's see what we do when an incendiary bomb lands in the attic."

He turned to Dr. Norton again.

"One more spot of cherry brandy won't kill me, Doctor?"

Dr. Norton smiled. "I'm afraid not," he said pleasantly.

"—He looks healthy enough to drink anything he wants," I remarked to Freddie. I was helping him get the reel started on the machine.

He looked at me oddly. The sound he made might have been a laugh if it hadn't been so entirely mirthless.

"Yeah," he said. "He certainly does."

"Don't you like him?" I asked. "I thought he was one of the local archangels."

I looked up from the machine with a smile. His eyes met mine for an instant. He wasn't smiling. I thought he was going to say something, but he turned without a word.

"Okay, we're ready," he announced. "Lights, please."

Mrs. Butts's block party was Tuesday night. I went down to Burlingame for lunch the next day, and didn't get back to San Joaquin Terrace until almost seven o'clock.

The woman who dropped me at my door said, "Really, my dear, you're terribly lucky. Isn't this the most tranquil spot?"

At that moment it was, outwardly at any rate. The banging of cable cars and the roar of North Beach traffic seemed very far away. The great dirigible from the coast patrol was just sinking slowly to her moorings on Treasure Island,

gleaming silver. The sun setting beyond the Golden Gate flooded the City and blazed back flashing gold from every window on the Berkeley side. The hills were deepening mauve to purple, and stray white clouds caught in the day's last salute burned pink and flaming orange.

But it was only a moment's illusion that died quietly as I started into the house. I don't know whether Ilya Donahue thought she couldn't be seen standing behind the silk gauze curtain at the end of the great plate glass window that made up the front wall of her living-room, or not. If she did she was wrong. Nor do I know how I got the impression that she'd been standing there for a long time, her eyes fixed on my front steps. But I did, and I was disturbed.

I was more disturbed when I opened the door and went inside. Nat Donahue was just coming out of the living-room with some papers in his hand.

"Hello, Mrs. Latham," he said. "I'm your air raid warden. I was checking up on personnel and equipment."

He grinned cheerfully.

"Molly's going to be daytime lady warden, so everything's under control."

He looked at the form he had in his hand.

"The Buttses' play room's going to be headquarters. They've opened up the side door so you don't have to go through the house. You'd better check up on it, in case you need first aid."

"If I can do anything, let me know," I said. "I've had a lot of courses."

"That's swell," he said. He wrote it down. "Thanks a lot. Good-bye."

"So we've only got one child and one invalid on our block," Molly was saying as I went into the living-room. I looked over at the sofa. Thorne Kimball was sitting there with a straw between her lips and a glass in her hand. There was another glass on the table and three empty Coca-Cola bottles. It was hardly what you could call a debauched scene, but I was worried about it, with Ilya crouched behind her curtain next door, imagining heaven knows what.

Thorne got up. "I'm afraid I'm being an awful nuisance," she said with a smile.

I tried then, as I tried later, to decide what kind of quality she had that made her so different from Molly or from anyone else I'd known. Exotic certainly wasn't the word, though her hair and skin and eyes, and her voice that was low-

pitched and as soft as dark velvet made her that outwardly. She was as simple and direct and forthright as Molly herself, and yet she had some almost fairy-tale quality. The enchanted princess, I thought, living in her 1870 castle, waiting for her prince to come.

She put down her glass. "I've got to go. I'll run up and get my things. Don't bother, Molly. I'll be seeing you."

I wish one of us had gone with her now, but it's too late to think about that. When she came down, waved through the doorway and hurried off, Molly said, "Nat didn't know she was here, Mrs. Latham."

"I'm sure he didn't," I said.

"None of us realized how the time went. We just got to talking. He'll get hell when he goes home, and he's had plenty of it all day—both he and Thorne. That's why she came over here just after lunch. In fact, you ought to be darn glad you went to Burlingame. This place has been a shambles all day. It's all so stupid, really . . ."

San Joaquin Terrace wasn't much in my mind that evening. I went to dinner at a night spot in Chinatown with some friends, all very gay and amusing, and got home about half-past eleven. The Terrace was quite dark except for the glaring light from the Kimballs' second floor, and a light in the little room just below it. The shades were drawn in the other houses, and the two street lights near the entrance to the Terrace were hidden in flowering trees. Across the low foliage between the Kimballs and the Nortons I could see the red lights on top of the bridge, flashing on and off in their silent minuet above the steady orange glow underneath.

I stood a moment watching them. It was a gorgeous night, as clear and sparkling as crystal. A white glow rose up all around the dark rim of the Terrace. Far out at sea, I thought, the tip of the Peninsula must shine like the Northern Lights . . . the City is so white, almost tropically white, and so proudly ablaze with light. After the noise and murky dimness and heavy odor of the Yellow Dragon, and the pallid tastelessness of sweet pea soup it all seemed wonderfully cool and exhilarating.

I was standing there thinking that when I heard a soft slithering sound, and a very quiet metallic click, both the kind of furtive sound that makes little shivers creep through your spine. I glanced over at the Kimballs'. The only iron gates I could think of on the Terrace were theirs and the Nortons'.

I couldn't see anyone. The shadows of the Kimballs' eucalyptus trees and the Nortons' cypress hedge lay like a thick sable moat around the horseshoe bend of the road.

Suddenly a little breeze swept through the open plaza, swaying the shaggy drooping branches of the trees. An arabesque of light from the Kimballs' windows played over the shadowy moat, and moving across it I could see something, something pale and eerie, and moving as if it were floating, without sound or substance. It was gone almost at once. It may have been the breeze again, but I had the sensation of something cold and soft brushing against my face.

I turned and started quickly into the house; and just as I touched the door I stopped, frozen in my tracks. Through the quietly peaceful night the long low wail of the blackout siren came moaning, rising, gathering sound and authority until it was everywhere, like a compelling eye rather than a voice. I stood there for an instant unable to move. Planes were roaring somewhere up in the distance above that insistent commanding cry. The street lights at the end of the Terrace were gone, and all the dim lights in the houses. I saw the gleaming red above the Bridges go off. The glow under them died, and slowly the white glow over the whole City died too, and it was dark. It was dark everywhere.

Except at Loring Kimball's house. The lights blazed out from that second floor room white and strong. I stood watching them, fascinated. There are no practice blackouts in San Francisco—there are blackouts only when something unknown is in the sky. Then that light was gone suddenly, the second floor light; and I thought everything was dark, until I saw the single small oblong of light in the little room on the first floor.

Then just as suddenly everything was silent. The wail of the siren was gone, and there was a moment that was as soundless as the sea. Then out of it and out of the darkness, somewhere on the Terrace, a woman's voice rosé in a sharp bloodcurdling scream of terror. It was outside, it wasn't in anybody's house. And it wasn't anywhere near the single light that still burned in Loring Kimball's garden study.

6

THE sound of that terrifying scream, from somewhere across the bend of the Terrace, stopped so sharply that the silence following it was more intense than any silence I'd ever known. In the same way the sightless yellow oblong across the Kimballs' gardens intensified the solid darkness all around it. Across the pitchy blackness of the night four long white fingers stretched suddenly up, sweeping the sky, out over the Golden Gate, and converged, and parted again and were gone. It could only have been an instant, all of it, though it seemed hours long, that everything in San Joaquin Terrace was held in a kind of suspended animation, before it broke out into a strange new kind of life. Doors and windows opened, people were shouting down under the hill. Somewhere a motor horn stuck and screamed steadily on. I heard the Donahues' door open, and a man running. I ran down the steps too.

"Molly!" somebody shouted. It was Nat Donahue's voice.

"It's Grace Latham," I called back. I was fishing around in my bag for a small pencil flashlight Colonel Primrose had left with me.

"See if you can wake up the Kimballs and get that light out!" he shouted. "Where the hell's Freddie?"

As I started running along the sidewalk I was still thinking in terms of the practice blackouts we had in Washington, and it wasn't till I was almost to the Kimball gate and a sudden band of light shot across the sky from the battery on Alca-

traz that it flashed with a kind of paralyzing terror through my mind that this might be the real thing, that fire and death might suddenly in reality start raining down from the sky. It's strange and terrifying when you first have that sensation. I felt my knees go to water and a sickening cowardly fear gnawing at my stomach. I must have stopped altogether, I suppose, because just then somebody ran past me through the Kimballs' gate. I heard the pounding feet leave the cement walk and thud across the grass. And I just stood there, half petrified, for a moment, and then I was so frightened that I had to find shelter. It was a strange thing. I'd never had that kind of fear before, and I'd never been in the Kimballs' grounds. I didn't know what kind of a sixth sense it was that guided my feet across the garden, or told me there was a door on the little porch at the side of the house, there by the still lighted window. I may have noticed it without being conscious of it, or perhaps I was just following the running feet that had passed me at the gate. None of it is very clear in my mind, except that the panic I had no control of was propelling me on, and that just light in itself was a familiar thing.

I don't know either just when it was that I remembered the woman who had screamed, and remembered that that was why I'd run down the steps. I was almost to the corner of the house. Perhaps all my senses were quickened and I heard something, or perhaps it was only chance that made me turn and glance quickly over my shoulder just then. The rectangular patch of light from the study window stretched across the grass to the foot of an elaborate leaden urn filled with flowers. I must have passed close enough to it to touch it, but I hadn't noticed it. And somebody was standing behind it, concealed in the shadow. All that was showing was about six inches of silk-stockinged leg, and something that sparkled an instant before it moved slowly behind the urn into the deeper shadows.

It flashed into my mind, just as quickly as that happened, that the woman who was hiding there was the woman who had screamed. I got around the corner of the house faster than I'd moved before. Nat Donahue was on the little porch, fumbling with a key in the lock, the light through the glassed door making his face look drawn and pale. As I got up the steps the door gave and he burst in. He stood there stock-still for just an instant, and made a dive across the room. I heard something fall, and then the room was plunged into darkness.

The shortest instant is long enough for an image to fix itself indelibly on the retina of the human eye . . . and I can still see Loring Kimball sitting at his desk in that tiny room. His papers were all around, and there was a fat-bellied bottle and a wine glass on a candle stand beside him. His head was slumped forward on his chest. He might have been asleep, sitting there like that, except that there's no sleep so silent, no other stillness so profound, as death . . . and death was in the picture printed on my mind's retina, so vividly printed there that the crash and the darkness as Nat leaped across to the switch by the inner door didn't change it or blot it out. I could still see it, even though I was aware of the other things, and of Nat trying to open the other door.

"This is locked."

His voice, curt, tense and controlled, brought me sharply to my senses.

"—Run around to the front and call the police. There's a phone on the desk in the library. To the right from the front hall. Careful of your light."

I didn't stop to be afraid then, or to think that the Japs might be up there raining fire out of the sky. I remember wondering why none of the other Kimballs were up, and why Nat had said police instead of a doctor. And I was aware too of an old paradox. Now that the light from the window was gone, it wasn't as dark as it had been. There was a luminousness from the sky that made shrubs and trees and houses have a dark substance of their own, different from non-solid space. The tiny pencil of blue light from my flash, as I turned it on the wide wood steps up to the porch, had the sudden eerie authority of a mercury arc light.

I switched it off quickly, felt my way across to the coco mat I'd spotted in the second it was on, and felt for the door. There was nothing there. I put my foot out and touched the lintel, put my hand out again—into space. The door was open. I switched on my light again. The elaborate polished rosewood of the trim and the red and gold figured wall paper and the parquet floor leaped out at me. The door to my right was open too. I kept my flash slipping on and off, the little blue ball of light bobbing across the oriental rugs, and went over to the huge mahogany desk in the middle of the room. From outside came brief sporadic bursts of unintelligible sound, of people shouting and dogs barking. Inside the house it was as silent as the grave; all I could hear was the sound of my own breathing, and my own heart pounding against my

ribs. I found the telephone, put my flash down on the pad and dialled the operator. I said, "This is Loring Kimball's house on San Joaquin Terrace. Will you send the police at once—he's dead."

It was just as I put the phone down that I realized a terrifying thing—that I wasn't alone in the room. It wasn't my own breathing that I heard, it was someone else's. I don't know just how I knew that, at first. It was the same feeling you have when you walk into a spider web in a murky cellar, and the fine gossamer dust creeps clinging to your skin. I felt it all over me in the pitchy blackness of that room. Someone was just behind me, and coming closer. I held my breath and listened. I could hear the muted rise and fall of another breath, very soft, and consciously controlled. I didn't dare move or make a sound—I couldn't have done either, not if my life depended on it. And perhaps it did—I still don't know. I just stood there, frozen with terror. It was all so dreadfully silent, and so horribly, horribly dark. There wasn't a sound from the little room; Nat Donahue must have gone.

I leaned against the edge of the desk to steady myself, trembling all over, my hands icy. It was then that I caught the soft sweet fragrance of gardenia, just beside me there by the desk. And the knowledge that it was a woman there steadied me more than the hard pressure of the mahogany against my body. I reached my hand out for my flashlight. Something filmy and soft brushed across it, so lightly and intangibly that I drew it back, frozen to the marrow. Then I put it out again. It closed on emptiness. There was nothing there, and my flash was gone from the desk pad.

Then the scent of gardenia was gone too, and I could hear the soft whisper of something brushing across the rugs. I thought it came from the side of the room toward the hall, and I turned to look through the darkness that way, and then turned sharply back. A key clicked in the lock, there was the soft squeak of a hinge. It was the door into the room where Loring Kimball sat . . . and it was opening—someone was going in.

I should have stayed where I was, but I didn't. Nothing on earth could have kept me in that inky room for another instant. I started for the hall, ran into a shelf of books, felt around till I'd found the door frame, made a dash for the front door, and stopped just in time. It had been open when I came, and I hadn't closed it, but it was closed now, closed

and the latch sprung. I hadn't heard it close, but the dead could have heard me getting it open and slamming it shut. I felt my way around the wood gingerbread of the porch rail to the stairs, started cautiously down them in the dark, and stopped. A sudden sharp blast of the siren shattered the night, and again and again. Almost before I realized what it meant, that all was clear and for the moment danger was past, I saw the street lights at the end of the Terrace come slowly on. Other lights came on too, in the tall apartment houses on Russian Hill and Nob Hill. All around me the white glow rose like phosphorescent mist seeping up to the sky again. It was like life returning to a city of the dead. The cable cars' clang-clang, the roar of traffic below us, of juke boxes and honking horns, all came up the hill again.

I turned back to the Kimball's door, the crazy idea coming into my head that nothing real had happened. Loring Kimball wasn't really dead. Life would return to him just the way it had to everything else. He would raise his head, push back his chair and go on just as before, just as everything else was doing.

And when I opened the door and went into the hall, there was a light coming through the library from the little room. My heart gave a startled jump. I hadn't actually believed he wasn't dead, or that he'd get up and put on the light. Then I stopped again. Loring Kimball's light was on . . . but he hadn't put it on. He was still sitting motionless there, and a woman was standing in the doorway, her hand still on the switch. I could see her profile as she stared down at him, and the sleeve of her woolen dressing gown. It was Amelia Kimball, his daughter by the lovely first wife whom the light upstairs had burned for. But it wasn't Amelia Kimball that shocked me as much as it was the other girl standing there, as white as death, her back to the outside door as if she'd just come in from the garden porch. She was staring at her stepfather too, from him to his daughter and back again, her eyes wide with dread. I said her face was white as death. I should have said it was as white as the white gardenia she had pinned in her glossy black hair . . . or as the white chiffon evening frock that floated around her like the phosphorescent mist that lighted the sky.

"Thorne! Thorne! Did you—"

Amelia Kimball's voice was hushed and frightened. She stopped, staring at her young stepsister. "Oh, how awful! What shall we do?"

They hadn't heard me come in, either of them, and I don't think they heard me go out. I closed the door softly. The smell of gardenias seemed to follow me out into the cool night, and I could feel again the touch of a trailing wisp of chiffon on my hand in the dark. I felt dizzy, and sick somewhere inside me. I couldn't forget Amelia Kimball's unfinished question. What *could* she be asking? And I couldn't just write off the gardenias or the chiffon, or the sound of the key in the lock and the opening door. It may have been the Americanized Chinese food I'd eaten lying heavily on my stomach, I thought . . . or it may be that I really did have a foreboding sense of a kind of doom settling down over San Joaquin Terrace and the people who lived on it. People pay for what they get, Mrs. Butts had said the first time I met her, and I suppose it's true. At the moment it was a little hard for me to see just how it was working out. By and large it would seem that Loring Kimball was doing the paying, though what his debt was, or how long due, I had no idea.

7

As I started down to the gate, Nat Donahue and Dr. Norton came running up. It came to me as an abrupt shock that very little time could actually have elapsed in all this. It had the timeless quality of a dream when you find you've just dropped off to sleep for a minute or two before you waked again. Seeing the two of them running and realizing that they were alone and that the police I'd called hadn't yet come, it all telescoped sharply back into reality again.

"You'd better come along, Mrs. Latham," Nat called out. "The police . . ."

I didn't hear the rest of it, if indeed he bothered to finish it. I went slowly along the lawn. As I came to the light from Loring Kimball's window, lying like a yellow rug on the dark grass, I turned and looked at the leaden urn. It was full of pink geraniums and trailing periwinkle, with nothing sinister or disturbing about it. I went over behind it and looked around toward the corner of the house, wondering. The steps up to the little side porch were quite visible, and the porch itself. I saw Nat and Dr. Norton stop on it for an instant befor they went in. I could also see the back of Loring Kimball's chair, and his head as Dr. Norton lifted it, and Dr. Norton himself I could see very easily. And I wondered again. I'd been sure it was the woman whose foot I'd seen there who'd screamed—sure, without being able to recall now what it was that had made me think so, or whether it was just a kind of intuitive conviction. And perhaps she had seen . . .

I stopped and looked around quickly, with the most curious sense of anxiety. It was almost as if someone had touched me sharply on the shoulder and whispered, "Don't tread there."

I moved instantly, and I was a little breathless as I hurried up those steps of the side porch. Dr. Norton had put a white handkerchief over Loring Kimball's face, but hadn't moved him from the chair. He glanced at me as I came in.

"You'd better go in the library with the girls, Mrs. Latham, and sit down. You look a little pale to me."

Nat Donahue was standing by the green and rose marble-tiled fireplace. In the mirror of the overmantel I could see the deep lines in his face, and the almost startling pain in his eyes. He bent his head forward in his hands and rubbed them back, tense and taut, through his hair. Then he straightened his shoulders and turned, looking slowly about the room, as I crossed in front of him to go to the library. I wondered if he was thinking what I was thinking. The tiny room was not the way we'd left it. The candle table that had crashed over was back in place beside the desk. The bottle was not on it, or on the desk, and the glass was gone too. I'd seen that from the door before I stepped inside.

Thorne and Amelia Kimball were in the library, Thorne standing by the window looking out, one of the long green wool curtains partly concealing her. She turned as I came in. Her eyes were stone dry, and her face under the square sleek cut of her hair was as white as paper. The gardenias were gone. I saw them lying wilting and yellow on the table beside her. Neither of them spoke. Amelia was huddled up in the corner of the sofa by the gas fire. It was the only concession to modern times in the whole room—without it, it might have been the library of the Little Old Widow of Windsor, in one of her smaller houses. Amelia Kimball fitted in it. Tears were streaming down her pallid cheeks, her face moved in convulsive grief as she sat there holding her dressing gown tight up around her neck.

Thorne moved over and put her hand on Amelia's shoulder.

"I'm so sorry," she said quietly.

"I know, Thorne. Don't try to . . ."

"Oh, I wish mother would come," Thorne cried suddenly. "—She didn't say where she was going?"

Amelia shook her head. "There's a car now. Maybe she's . . ."

She hesitated. "Thorne—why did they call the police?"

"I don't know."

The door from the little study opened. Nat Donahue came in.

"It's the police, Thorne."

She nodded.

He started to go back, stopped and looked at her, the lines of his face softening. He went over to her and put his hands on her shoulders.

"It's going to be all right, Thorne. Don't worry, my dear."

He bent down and pressed his lips on her hair, closing his hands on her shoulders for an instant, and went out.

Amelia Kimball was watching them, a strange, almost startled look in her eyes . . . although how I happened to be aware of that I don't know. I was myself staring with startled eyes at the door into the hall. If somebody had tied a stone around my heart and tossed it off the Golden Gate Bridge, it couldn't have sunk with a more sickening plop. I might have known it, of course. Where Sergeant Phineas T. Buck is, Colonel Primrose is not far off . . . and Sergeant Buck was standing there now, four-square, smack in the middle of the doorway. Furthermore, he had seen the whole thing. I knew that because that iron face had the gelatinous consistency of fish glue before it sets, or molten lava running down a precipice. I'd bet anything that Sergeant Buck cries in the movies. Only a boy and girl obviously in love and in trouble can thaw the glacial deposit he's coated with . . . and nobody but me can congeal it again so quickly. The lava hardened now, the fish glue set.

"Where's the body, ma'am?" he said, out of the corner of his mouth.

The implication was definite and clear. My only consolation is that the day they do hang me, Sergeant Buck will not be there to see it—which is why they will be hanging me.

I probably flushed in spite of myself. "It's in there," I said.

Sergeant Buck turned that brassy color that I'd like to think indicates remorse.

"No offense meant, ma'am," he said.

"None taken, Sergeant," I answered. "But just you wait," I added to myself.

"She's in there, sir," I heard him say as he opened the door, and I saw Colonel Primrose. I went over obediently, feeling like a spaniel that's been caught up on the dining table. I was also disturbed. I didn't like the sharpened light in his black parrot's eyes.

He must have gathered that. "Everything seems to be all right," he said. He smiled a little, but I knew he was counting the toll in added grey hairs that the last half hour had taken on me.

"—I've expected something of the sort to happen." Dr. Norton was saying. "He had a coronary condition. We did an electro-cardiogram on him six months ago."

"Heart block, you call it, Doctor?" a professional voice said. I could almost see him writing it down.

"Coronary thrombosis."

"Too bad," the policeman said. "He was an all right guy. —You don't want an autopsy, do you, Doc?"

That, I thought, would be the coroner. I couldn't see anyone in the room except Nat Donahue, standing by the door.

Another voice answered. "You attended him, didn't you, Dr. Norton? That's enough for me, Moran."

"Okay," the policeman said. "You'll take charge, then, Mr. Donahue."

Nat nodded. I felt my hand tremble a little. It was all so simple, then. There was nothing to be disturbed about. I glanced quickly back at Thorne. She was standing by the desk, her body resting lightly against it, looking fixedly into the fireplace. Amelia Kimball was still huddled up in the corner of the sofa. Neither of them moved, though they must have heard too. I turned back. Colonel Primrose was watching me, as quietly as a cat watches a mouse. He smiled and looked away again. The police officers were getting ready to leave. Two plainclothes men—so called, I imagine, because it's perfectly plain they're detectives—moved down from the porch.

"What is that under the desk there, Moran?" Colonel Primrose asked. His question sounded casual and unobtrusive . . . and I knew it was—like a PT zooming through a quiet harbor onto a sleeping battleship, or a rattlesnake lying under a bed of roadside violets. My heart went a notch lower in my stomach and stayed there, heavily.

Inspector Moran's broad back was already in the outside door. He turned around.

"What do you mean, Colonel?"

"There's a glass under the desk," Colonel Primrose said. "I was just wondering."

Inspector Moran came back and got down on his hands and knees. "Funny place for a glass," he said. He reached in the gothic arched kneehole of the rosewood desk and

brought his hand out. In it was a stemmed sherry glass. It was the glass I'd seen by the bottle on the candle stand at the side of the desk, that brief moment before Nat had barged across the room to turn off the light, catching the stand with his foot and sending it crashing to the floor.

Inspector Moran held it gingerly by the heel and got to his feet. I could see a rosy stain in the bottom where a few drops of the liquor still remained. He held it to his nose and sniffed, and sniffed again, his face sobering.

He glanced at Dr. Norton. "What kind of medicine were you giving him, Doctor?"

"None," Dr. Norton said. "He wouldn't take medicine. All I did was advise him not to drink. He was allergic to alcohol."

Inspector Moran looked puzzled.

"I just mean that at one time he drank too much, and he couldn't take it. Otherwise, and except for the arterial block, he was strong as an ox."

Moran held the glass out to him. "Then what do you think this is?"

Dr. Norton held it to his nose. There wasn't a sound in the room just then. He sniffed it again, looked across the desk at the figure of Loring Kimball, his face concealed by the white handkerchief, and without a word held the glass out to the small man with sandy hair and rimless pince-nez standing in the doorway. The coroner sniffed at it. He looked silently at Dr. Norton.

"I think you'd better do an autopsy," Dr. Norton said. "Just to make sure."

I glanced at Colonel Primrose. His eyes were sharp and bright. I don't think I'd ever actively disliked him before, but I did then.

Inspector Moran moved uneasily. "We don't want to make a stink if we don't have to," he said.

"Better now than later," the coroner said. "It won't hurt anything to make sure, is the way I look at it."

"Okay," Moran said. "All right, boys. Get going."

He turned to Nat. "Maybe we'd better check up here again. Who'd you say the lady was?"

8

UNTIL I knew Colonel Primrose, the only policeman I ever knew was one from Precinct Seven in Georgetown who liked dogs and used to bring my Irish setter Sheila home when she wandered over to Wisconsin Avenue to see a friend of hers who was a butcher. It's all different now. I know more policemen than I do members of the State Department, and they're much more serious people. Maybe it's just as well, and maybe, of course, they have their lighter moments, and conceal them in the interest of public policy. And the thing that endeared Inspector Moran of the Homicide Detail of San Francisco police to me was the fact that he didn't act as if murder was a horrible sordid business that nice people shouldn't have any interest in. And he could actually smile.

He was not smiling there in the Kimballs' library, getting down the preliminary facts about Loring Kimball. In the little study the routine business of photographing and fingerprinting was going on. Dr. Norton had stayed—he was going with the coroner to assist at the autopsy—and Colonel Primrose, Inspector Moran and a man with a shorthand pad were in the library with Thorne, Amelia Kimball, Nat and myself. Amelia still hadn't moved. I introduced Thorne to the Colonel, who introduced Inspector Moran. She sat down by Amelia. When I saw her looking at her watch I knew she was disturbed about her mother. It did seem odd she wasn't home. It was almost one o'clock.

"About that glass on the floor, Mr. Donahue," Inspector

Moran said. "When you got in . . . you say you have a key?"

"Mr. Kimball gave me one when I came back from Honolulu, at Christmas," Nat said. "I'm in and out a lot. He'd quit going to the office until afternoon. I came over before I went down every morning. I've taken over a lot of the business he used to do himself."

"You didn't see the glass?"

"I didn't see anything, except Mr. Kimball sitting there. My job was to get the light off."

Inspector Moran nodded agreement.

"Then you went out?"

"Yes. I'm warden here, and I had to get to my post while the blackout was on. I missed the yellow light. I'd turned in. If the phone rang I didn't hear it. The first thing I knew about it was when the siren went off. I felt funny about leaving Mrs. Latham here, but I thought there'd be somebody in the house. She came around to get in here and phone the police. I figured that was the thing to do until I could get Dr. Norton over here."

"Where was Dr. Norton?"

"At the Buttses. Unless there's an actual raid he goes over there, because his wife's an invalid and he doesn't want to get too far away. He was on his way over when the all clear sounded. I caught up with him on the way."

He hunched forward with his head between his hands.

"This sounds so damned casual," he said. "But if the Japs are over, you can't think of just one person. Neither of us was . . . I don't mean not surprised, but it wasn't as if he hadn't expected it would happen some time. He talked to me about it. It was one of the reasons he called me back."

Inspector Moran turned to me. "What about you, Mrs. Latham?"

Maybe I was committing perjury. I don't know.

"Mr. Donahue got the light off before I was in the door an instant," I said. "I was dreadfully shocked at seeing Mr. Kimball. When Mr. Donahue shouted at me to come here and phone, I did."

It was all true . . . however f from the whole truth. I didn't look at Colonel Primrose.

"Why didn't you just come through the door here, Mrs. Latham? What did you have to go around for?"

"The door was locked," Nat said. "I didn't want to break it down."

Inspector Moran looked at me. "Did you open it?"

"No," I said. "I didn't."

"Who did?"

I tried not to look at Thorne, or at Colonel Primrose. For want of a better place I looked up at the mantelpiece. I don't know why I hadn't before, conscious as I'd been of the rest of the decoration in the room. Hanging there was the portrait of a perfectly exquisite woman with bare shoulders and a pink camellia at the deep V of the white gown she wore. Her hair was gold, and piled high on top of her head. She was very young, and very lovely, with dancing blue eyes and a merry red mouth that seemed ready to break into pealing laughter. It was the first Mrs. Kimball, of course; I knew that immediately . . . the girl—she couldn't have been more than twenty when it was done—whose daughter was sitting there huddled unhappily in the corner of the sofa. Loring Kimball suddenly became much clearer to me than he'd been before. I could understand him. No one could ever have forgotten her. And to think of her in that roaring hell of fire. . . . No wonder he'd been a little odd, or that her memory had meant so much.

"Well, somebody must have unlocked it," Inspector Moran said.

He looked from one of us to the other. It was the first time he'd included Thorne or Amelia in his scrutiny. And it was definitely that, not baleful-eyed but searching. I got the idea that Inspector Moran probably would not miss very much that went on. How good he would be at interpreting it was still to be seen.

"What about you, Miss Kimball?"

He was looking at Thorne. She glanced around at her stepsister. Amelia Kimball shook her head.

"It wasn't locked when I went in," she said. "I was in bed when the siren blew. I got up and turned out the light—upstairs. An Army officer was here again yesterday, asking my father to keep it off, but . . . he wouldn't. He . . . wanted it to stay on. But I turned it off."

"Who turned the study light on after the blackout?"

"I did," Amelia said. "I was coming down when the all clear sounded. I couldn't find a flashlight anywhere, and I was frightened. I thought I heard someone go out the door just as I was on the landing."

She looked up.

"I'm not brave in the dark. I didn't know whether you

were supposed to turn on the lights right away or wait a few minutes. Anyway, I thought I'd go in and ask my father. I did, and I saw the lights on the bridge go on, so I turned on the light in there. That's when I saw him."

She turned her head quickly, her distress pathetically real. Thorne gripped her hand, looking at Inspector Moran with blue eyes smoldering with resentment. I was puzzled at the relation between the two stepsisters. I couldn't quite make it out.

"I'm sorry, Miss Kimball," Moran said. "Can you answer one more question? —Did you see anybody around, outside or anywhere?"

"Somebody was going out, but I couldn't see them. I just heard the door close. It was pitch black."

It was me that was going out. She must have just got the study light on when I came back in. I couldn't have been out more than a moment or two when the all clear sounded.

"—You saw me, darling."

I should have been saying that, I suppose, but I wasn't. It was Thorne.

Amelia looked around at her. "Yes, but you were just coming in. You weren't in the room yet."

I realized suddenly what was putting me off about those two. They *liked* each other. It was against all laws of nature, society and the fairy tales. They were stepsisters, and one was old, the other young, one drab and the other vivid, one not very attractive and the other as lovely as the moon. It didn't make sense, but that was the way it was, and here each was trying to protect the other.

Inspector Moran waited for Thorne to go on. I could see the tensing of the muscles in Nat's jaw.

"Yes. I'd just got to the top of the steps when my sister turned on the light."

She said it as if she hadn't thought an answer necessary.

Moran looked at her long chiffon skirt falling in soft white ripples to the floor, and at her silver shoes.

"You'd been out some place?"

"I was out to dinner, and then we went up to the sky room for a few minutes. I left alone, before the others, because . . . well, because I didn't want to stay any longer. I was in a taxi when the siren went off. I got out and walked down the hill and up the stairs."

"How did you happen to come in that way, instead of the front door? Do you remember?"

It sounded to me very much as if Inspector Moran was tying a honeyed cord across the steps for her to trip over. Nat must have thought so too. He moved in his chair and began fishing in his pocket for a cigarette.

"No, I don't, frankly," Thorne said.

"You don't ordinarily go in that way, do you?"

"I don't think I've ever come in that way before."

"Then why did you tonight?"

"I don't know. I just did. I started up the front walk, and all of a sudden I went across the grass."

She said it so calmly that if it hadn't been for the gardenias —I thought—I could have believed her. It was clear that Inspector Moran did not.

"You didn't go that way to . . . to get anything, did you?"

I thought Inspector Moran had come to the conclusion, at that point, that the scene in the little room had been at least partly shifted. If you have a glass, if probably implies a bottle.

"I suppose it would seem silly if I said . . ."

She stopped, and went on again slowly, apparently without getting his implication at all.

"I don't quite know just how to put it. I just had a feeling. I wasn't even conscious I was going that way, until after I'd started. Really that's true."

—If it hadn't been for those gardenias turning limp and brown on the table by the window, I thought.

Inspector Moran got up, his face expressionless. He didn't *know*, of course, I reminded myself, that Loring Kimball hadn't died from heart block. He had no reason, so far, not to believe the simple and straightforward testimony of the girl who sat looking at him clear-eyed and serious, apparently making no attempt to conceal anything, no matter how inexplicable or even damning it might seem.

Colonel Primrose got up too. "I'd like to have another look around the study, if Miss Kimball doesn't feel it's . . ."

Amelia shook her head. "Not at all."

"And I think both of you young women ought to go to bed. If you have anything else to say, Moran, you can say it in the morning, can't you?"

Inspector Moran nodded, but neither Thorne nor Amelia moved. They seemed numbed. Nat Donahue was watching Thorne, his feeling about her not very well disguised. I don't know why men are as transparent as they are.

"If you don't mind, Mrs. Latham," Colonel Primrose said, "I'd like to have you take a look around here, too."

I minded very much, but I couldn't very well say so. If it had been a heart block, it was all utterly inexcusable. If it hadn't been . . . then I really did mind.

"And you too, Donahue," Colonel Primrose said.

Nat got up. "Certainly, sir."

We followed into the little study. Loring Kimball was gone. The chair seemed much emptier than if he'd gone from it to come back another time. The whole room with its glaring unshaded light had the same almost tangible emptiness.

"You're familiar with everything here, Donahue?"

Nat nodded.

"Is anything missing?"

Nat looked around. He shook his head.

"Not that I notice."

He looked about carefully. "Yes—I don't see his engagement book. It's green leather with gold tooling. It's usually there on the side of the desk. Maybe it's in one of the drawers."

"What is in that cabinet?"

Colonel Primrose pointed to a rosewood corner cupboard about four feet high set in the angle of the library and front garden wall.

"Usually a bottle of scotch—or sherry, or rock and rye. He liked sweet things."

Inspector Moran leaned over the desk and opened the two polished wood panels. It had shelves with places for bottles and glasses carved out of them. On the bottom there was a blown glass sherry decanter on a silver tray with stemmed glasses set around it. A space that would have held two glasses was empty. The bottles were all there. With the exception of the darkish sherry and a practically full bottle of twelve-year-old scotch, the small stock was made up of heavy sweet things, drambouie and benedictine and apricot brandy. It seemed a strange taste for anyone so obviously a man of the world as Loring Kimball had been.

"You're going to leave a man here?" Colonel Primrose asked.

Moran nodded. "I'll let you know as soon as I hear anything."

I looked back into the library. Thorne had got up and gone to the hall door. Amelia still sat where we'd left her.

"You live across the Terrace, Donahue?" Colonel Primrose

said. "I'll walk along with you and Mrs. Latham. Good night, Moran."

We went out the garden door and across the grass without any of us speaking. I was trying to figure out what he had in his mind that so obviously had caused him not to leave Nat and Thorne and Amelia and me there together. And that, I suddenly thought, was why he'd taken Nat and me into the study with him.

At the gate I glanced back. It seemed strange to see the windows in the second floor room dark and lights in the other parts of the house. It must have seemed stranger still to the long-time residents of the Terrace, except that they'd be in bed. Or that was what I thought for a moment as we started to the right, around the bend, toward Nat's house and mine. I was wrong. We'd got to the narrow lane leading from the steps up the hill, between the Kimballs' and the Prentiss Vales', when the metallic click of an iron latch, sharp and distinct this time, with no attempt to soften it, made me start. It was followed instantly by the equally sharp and almost as metallic sound of Mrs. Butts's never-to-be-mistaken voice.

9

"VERY well!" she was saying. "But *somebody* screamed, and I'm going to find out who it was." She was speaking flatly and with great determination. "It was just after the siren stopped. You couldn't possibly not have heard it unless you're stone deaf, Prentiss Vale."

—The Prentiss Vales, I thought quickly. I'd forgotten about the wrought-iron gate leading into a sort of terrace vestibule at their entrance door. When I'd heard the subdued click, before I'd seen the misty white . . . I stopped abruptly. Even my feet stopped.

"What's the matter, Mrs. Latham?" Colonel Primrose asked placidly. "Did you hear somebody scream too?"

"Yes," I said. "No. I mean no."

I pulled myself together. "What I mean is," I said more calmly, "that I was thinking about something else."

I didn't have to explain any further, because Mrs. Butts had got to the end of the garden walk from the Vales, with Prentiss Vale following along behind like a skiff in tow behind the Admiral's barge, and was squarely in our path. The gardenia, I thought—the trailing wisp of chiffon on my hand, and now the other. I'd forgotten the white figure in the sudden arabeseque of light filtering through the eucalyptus trees. It meant that Thorne Kimball hadn't come up the steps after the blackout had begun. She'd been on the Terrace before. It must have been her white floating figure that had . . .

"I heard someone scream," Mrs. Butts repeated flatly, to Colonel Primrose this time.

I was scarcely aware of having stopped and spoken, or that Nat had introduced Colonel Primrose.

"—I can't have imagined it. I don't imagine that sort of thing. It came from over this way. I was putting the window up, just going to bed, when the siren started. It stopped, and somebody screamed."

"Well, what of it, Mrs. B.?" Prentiss Vale said.

I looked at him with interest, then, and realized for the first time that he was the young-looking middle-aged man who'd been with the bored-voiced woman at the Buttses' block party.

"What of it indeed," Mrs. Butts said vigorously. "I declare, Prentiss. First I tell you Loring Kimball's dead and you say what of it, and now!"

"There's no reason to get me out of bed to tell me Loring Kimball's dead," Mr. Vale said calmly. "I never liked him when he was alive, and I'm damned if I'm going to pretend I did now he's dead. I mean, what the hell."

Oh dear, I thought wretchedly.

"I'll admit he was swell to you, Nat, but look at . . . Oh, well, skip it. Come on, Mrs. B.—it's time you were home. I think you're hearing things, myself. Night, Nat. Night, Mrs. Latham. Good night, sir."

He looked up through the trees at the Kimball house.

"It's a break to have that light off at last. Funny to think he had to die to do it. The mills of the gods grind slow, all right."

We started along again.

"But they grind exceeding small," Colonel Primrose said evenly.

Nat said nothing, and neither did I. We came to his house. It was dark except for a light in the hall. I looked at the front window, wondering if Ilya was standing waiting behind the curtain.

Nat said good night to us. "I'll be over first thing in the morning." He hesitated a moment. "I wonder what happened to Mrs. Kimball. Do you know if she went out of town?"

"Thorne seemed to expect her back any minute," I said. "I don't know."

Next door I held my hand out to Colonel Primrose.

"Good night," I said.

He held it for a moment.

"Listen to me, my dear," he said, very seriously. "I don't like any of this. There's something queer about it. I'm going to ask you for two things. The first is, be careful—very careful. The second is this. If there's anything you don't want to tell the police—anything that doesn't make you accessory, that is—don't tell them. But don't tell them anything that isn't true—either them or me."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You did hear someone scream, didn't you?"

"Yes," I said. "I did."

He nodded. "Thank you. Good night . . . and you will be careful, won't you? I don't want anything to happen to you. Loring Kimball's death was very quick. He didn't have time to move."

"How do you know?"

"There was a spot of syrupy stuff on the desk where the glass turned over before it rolled off. It hit his trouser leg and rolled under the desk."

He hesitated an instant. "—The bottle doesn't matter. Except that it's not empty. That matters. Good night, my dear."

I'd just opened the paper on my breakfast tray the next morning and was looking at the picture of Loring Kimball on the front page when the telephone rang. As I reached for it from the table by my bed I read across the top of the picture "As it must be to all men . . . ," and under it, "Death came last night to a beloved and distinguished—" That's as far as I got.

"Hello," I said.

It was Colonel Primrose. The paper slipped off the silk blanket cover onto the floor.

"I told you last night I wanted you to be careful, Mrs. Latham," he said. "I'm in a hurry now, but I want to repeat it. I mean it most seriously."

"You mean it was . . ."

"It was cyanide of potassium. I told you it was quick—it was very quick. Goodbye. I'll see you a little later. You'd better stay home till I do."

I put the phone down and sat there a few minutes. I'd really forgotten most of it. It's odd how sleep and the sun streaming in the windows with almost tropical clarity takes meaning out of unhappy things and things that happen in the dark. They all came back now with startling intensity, but with the intensity of a nightmare, not of reality actually. The sun in the windows, the fragrance of the coffee I'd poured in

the spode cup, and all the ordinary normal daytime things around me made it seem unreal.

I listened a moment. I could hear the swish of water and Molly whistling in her shower in the bathroom at the end of the hall. I heard the soft pad-pad of John the Chinaman's slippered feet as he came upstairs with Little Joe's breakfast, and Little Joe shouting "John, did you hear the siren?"

The swish of water stopped. In a moment Molly came out. I could hear her calling from her room: "Orange juice and cereal first—no cheating, Big Boy!"

I wondered how much she knew about what had happened. I put the tray on the foot of the bed, reached for my dressing gown, got up and picked up the paper. She was just coming out of her room when I opened the door. Through the open door into the room that had once been hers I could see Joe sitting at his table, downing his cereal like a soldier. He pushed his chair back and got up, a very sober small person intent on his own affairs.

Molly turned around. "Good morning! How did you like the—"

She stopped. "Oh," she said. "Is it . . . in the paper?"

She took it and looked at Loring Kimball's picture. As it must be to all men . . . She handed it back to me, shaking her head.

"Well, it's one of those things I can bear without too much grief."

She took a step toward Joe's room. He held up his glass and cereal bowl. "See, mum? Okay?"

"Okay, darling."

"I'm afraid it's not that simple," I said. And that's as far as I got. Without the slightest warning her body suddenly stiffened, rigid, and she screamed:

"Joe! Drop it! Drop it! *Drop it!*"

Then she was at the door and in the room and his little table was winding across the rug in a clatter of dishes and silver and breaking glass. The boy was sitting there, his mouth open, his eyes wide with surprise and fright. He was holding a blue talcum powder can turned top down in one small fist. Molly snatched it from him and held it to her breast, her eyes staring with terror.

"It's . . . just salt, mum," he said unsteadily. "John didn't bring the salt."

She couldn't speak for a minute.

"Oh no, darling, it's not salt. It's . . . something else."

Her voice came in choking gasps.

"Go down and tell John to cook another egg. I'll clean this up. Go quickly, dear."

He pulled on his slippers, picked up the trailing end of his bathrobe cord and went out. Molly waiting until he was trudging down the back stairs, walked unsteadily to the bed and slipped down on it, shaking all over. I went over to her, took the can out of her hand and put my arms around her to steady her. She clung to me desperately, like a child.

"I might have killed him—I might have killed him!" she whispered.

I sat down beside her on the bed.

"Now stop, Molly," I said. "Stop it. —What is it?"

"It's the poison. The poison Ilya brought."

I stared at her blankly.

"Whatever are you talking about?"

"She had it in the cabin. The ship was crowded and she said there'd be cockroaches. She didn't want them to eat her things. She put it around the corners. I was always afraid of it. I was going to throw it away before we landed, but I forgot."

I looked at the blue can in my hand.

"What is it, Molly?" I asked. "Do you know?"

"The vet gave it to her. It's cyanide of potassium. It's absolutely deadly. Just a few grains . . ."

She looked at the mess of bacon and egg and broken porcelain on the floor and shuddered convulsively.

My voice seemed to come from so far away that I hardly recognized it.

"Molly—did Thorne know you had this?"

She looked up. "Why, yes. I showed it to her the other day. I was telling her about Ilya on the ship. I got it out to throw it away, and Nat came just then and we went downstairs. Why?"

She had to know sooner or later.

"Listen, Molly. The police were at the Kimballs' last night, and Colonel Primrose, who's an old friend of mine from Washington. He called me a few minutes ago. They found poison in Loring Kimball's body."

Her face was still whiter.

"Not . . . potassium cyanide?"

She had to moisten her lips with the tip of her tongue before she could speak.

"Yes," I said.

Her eyes moved slowly to the blue talcum powder can. She reached out slowly, took it and opened it, her fingers trembling. As she looked in it her eyes widened sharply for an instant.

"Molly!" I said.

"It's all here, if that's what you mean. There isn't any of it gone."

She looked me squarely in the face. She wasn't telling the truth, and I knew it and she knew I did. She got up quickly.

"I made a mistake before. I said I told Thorne. But I forgot. I didn't tell her. She . . . she didn't know I had it."

Then she turned suddenly, her blue eyes flashing.

"Thorne didn't do it!" she cried passionately. "She wouldn't do a thing like that! But if she had done it I wouldn't blame her! I'd have done it . . . and I told her so that day! I hated him! —He was so generous, so kind, so public-spirited! Well, he wasn't. That was all a front. He was obsessed—he was cruel, dreadful! That's what he was! Ask anyone . . . anyone on San Joaquin Terrace!"

10

I KNEW Colonel Primrose would be over that morning, but I didn't expect him as soon as he came. It was Joe who let him in. I finished dressing quickly, definitely anxious about having the two of them down in the living-room together. What Little Joe might be saying, in his capacity of host putting his guest at ease, heaven only knew. Not, of course, that Colonel Primrose would be base enough to take advantage of a four-year-old child . . . though according to Sergeant Buck he would hang his own grandmother, if necessary, and I myself wouldn't trust him as far as I could see him. Moreover, he's one of those people that dogs and children like, just as dogs like hamburger with or without ground glass, and children don't always know when guns are loaded.

I hurried out of my room. As I got to the head of the stairs I glanced in at the unlovely mess of milk, egg and broken china that Molly had only partly cleaned up from the pale blue rug on the floor. She was standing by the window, the flowered chintz curtain drawn a little way across it. She didn't look around, but raised her hand and beckoned to me.

"Come here," she said quietly. "Quick!"

I looked more anxiously than ever down the stairs. Colonel Primrose was laughing. I tried to detect a hollow note in it. Then my heart sank. Little Joe's voice came up the stairwell, excited and clear. "—Then it went crash-bang!" he was saying. "And my mother . . ."

He lowered his voice, and that was all I got. It was plenty.

I hadn't got dressed fast enough, and it was too late now. I went in by Molly.

"Don't let her see you," she whispered. "Look!"

I looked. Perhaps I'd better explain a little more clearly about the back of our houses. The one I was in was built away from the edge of the cliff that went less steeply down, but still steep enough, on our side of the Terrace's horseshoe. We had a small garden about level with the roof of the house below us. The Donahues' house extended clear back to the ledge, being largely of structural steel and glass, cantilevered so that the lowest sundeck actually extended beyond the end of our garden. Two other decks were graduated back about six feet or so, and there was a flat roof garden on top. The second deck was a little lower than the bedroom window Molly and I stood at. And we were looking down on Ilya Donahue.

She had on a black satin Chinese-looking house suit with a short tunic tied with a turquoise-blue sash.

Molly's voice was puzzled. "What do you suppose she's doing that for?"

She was cleaning a black patent leather pump, prying off bits of dirt caked on the high spiked heel. She put the nail file she was using down on the ledge of the deck rail, dipped a handkerchief in a glass of water, washed the heel off and looked at it carefully.

"I never saw her do anything that useful before," Molly said. She looked at me. "—What is it, Mrs. Latham?"

"Nothing," I said.

But it was something. Ilya Donahue had set the shoe on the ledge to dry. A cut steel buckle gleamed and flashed in the sunlight. It had gleamed the same way in the light from the window of Loring Kimball's study, on the foot I'd seen for an instant before it was drawn back behind the urn.

She picked up the other shoe and scraped the caked mud off it, working quickly and every once in a while glancing back of her at the house.

"There's something funny about that," Molly said.

And there was. The whole scene had a curious quality of furtive watchfulness.

"She's scheming something. Look at her smile. You know, sometimes I'm . . . well, I'm sort of afraid of her. Have you heard the way she got Nat?"

She stepped quickly back from the window. "I'll bet she saw us. She's moved her shoe and she's reading the paper."

Ilya was sitting down there cross-legged, the newspaper opened full in front of her, covering up her shoes and the water glass on the floor. But it wasn't us she'd seen, it was Nat. She looked up and smiled as he came out of the house. He wasn't smiling, and he was telling her something. It was very brief. He turned quickly and went back into the house. She sat there cross-legged on the sun bath mat, her head, gleaming blonde as strained honey, bent forward a little, watching him over her shoulder. Then suddenly she put the paper aside, picked up the shoe and scrubbed vigorously at it with her forefinger. She wiped it off, got up quickly, emptied the glass into a flower box and went inside, leaving the paper lying there. Loring Kimball's picture looked up at the sky.

Molly looked at me. "Where do you suppose she's been that she doesn't want Nat to know about?"

"I wouldn't know," I said. "And I wouldn't ask. I'd just be careful of that gal, if I were you or Thorne."

"Shall I tell Thorne about this?"

"No." I said it so quickly I was startled at myself. "I wouldn't. Not yet, anyway."

As I started across the room she said, "Grace—you don't really think that Thorne . . ."

"I don't know what I think, Molly," I answered, without her having to put it into intelligible words. "I think the less anybody says the better. Especially about Ilya. I'm a little afraid of her myself."

I went on downstairs, not knowing why I'd said that, exactly. In fact everything was all so mixed up in my mind just then that I felt like a centrifugal pump. If my mind and the things in it would quit going around in circles maybe they'd precipitate, and I could examine them and decide what it was I really did think.

When I came into the living-room Colonel Primrose got up, and Little Joe, sitting on the rug at his feet, scrambled up and came over to me.

"He's in the Army," he said. "He was wounded in the other war, in France. He's been to Maui too. He was at Pearl Harbor once, near where Hickam Field is now. A long time ago when he was just as old as my father. My father's an aviator, only he's in the Navy. He says the Army's got good flyers too. Maybe he'll come here some time. I'd like to see him up in the sky in one of those P 38's. Wouldn't you, sir?"

"I would indeed," Colonel Primrose said.

"Well, I'll go now," Little Joe said. "I'll tell my mum what you told me to, sir."

My heart settled down in my shoes. He went out, his bathrobe cord trailing behind him.

"Nice kid," Colonel Primrose said.

"You're sending his mother messages?" I said, even at the risk of seeming a little green-eyed. I wanted very much to know how much Joe had told him.

"He was telling me about December 7th," he replied blandly. "His mother saved his toy plane for him. She must have been cool and intelligent, to get him out without any fear at all. He talks about it without any left-over terrors."

"She's a grand person," I said.

It seemed strange, after what had happened upstairs, that she'd have been cool enough to remember a toy airplane with death raining from a Sunday sky in Honolulu. Still death had been much nearer Little Joe upstairs an hour before than it had been on December 7th, and if she hadn't acted in a split second it would have been too late. My first impression of her as a blue-eyed curly-haired sixteen-year-old had changed a lot in the last two days.

"We were just two old military men talking about the relative merits of the several branches of our armed forces," Colonel Primrose said. "—While waiting for a lady to get dressed."

I hope so, I thought. I wasn't at all sure.

"And now I'd like to talk about Loring Kimball."

I sat down. When I think of the excellent advice I've given other people about saying nothing, it surprises me that I don't take it to heart myself more often than I do. Just then I definitely decided I would.

He looked at me with a faint smile . . . the kind of smile a cat reserves for a mouse it's become inexplicably attached to and doesn't want to eat quite yet.

"I wish, Mrs. Latham," he said, "that you had a more objective attitude toward life. Why must you always take sides before you have the slightest supporting evidence—or in spite of all the evidence to the contrary?"

"I didn't know I did."

He chuckled.

"You know, my dear, the reason you and Buck don't get along is that you're exactly alike."

"You remember the man who said, 'When you say that, smile,' " I remarked, with commendable self-control.

"It's true. Buck said this morning that irregardless it was his opinion the young lady in the white dress was a sweet young lady and young Donahue was a mighty fine young man. You're in precisely the same position. You're both totally devoid of moral sense. Neither of you cares a tinker's damn if this fine upstanding young man has a wife, or if the sweet young lady in the white dress has put cyanide in her stepfather's cherry brandy. What's that to you—"

He stopped. I was staring at him, I suppose, mouth open, in spite of my resolution to keep it shut.

"Cherry brandy!" I couldn't help say it.

"Cherry brandy," he repeated patiently. "Why?"

It was too late then, of course, but I said, "I was just surprised, that's all."

Colonel Primrose got up and walked acrosss the room. I could see him visibly taking a deep breath. He came back.

"Do you know, Mrs. Latham," he said deliberately, "at times you are the most charming and delightful woman I've ever known. And at others you're so maddening that it's only great self-control that keeps me from wringing your lovely neck."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"And some day I'm going to. Listen, my dear. The only reason I'm concerned with this at all is because of you."

I was genuinely surprised at that.

"Because I don't want anybody loose with a lot of cyanide of potassium any place where you are. The temptation to use it might be just too strong."

He didn't smile when he said that either.

"You see, I knew the look on your face last night while Thorne Kimball was talking. Moran thought it was just blank. I knew it wasn't. Furthermore, Moran wasn't in the study with you when you first saw Kimball."

"Nobody was but Nat," I protested.

"That's the point, Mrs. Latham. Nat Donahue knows what you saw and aren't telling—he saw it himself and he's not telling. Why did he send you around to the front door? He could have broken that flimsy lock with no trouble at all. He's so much in love with Thorne Kimball he doesn't know which end he's on."

He stopped abruptly. "But what's the use of trying to tell you anything. I'm wasting my breath."

"You know," I said, "I wish very much you hadn't come out here. And how did you get in on this anyway?"

"I was at the Communication Center with General Blanton and the Chief Air Warden when the report came in. And it came twice. Once from you, once from the Sector Warden who'd got it from the Post Warden, about five minutes later."

"Nat's Post Warden," I said.

He nodded. "He put in a call from the Buttses' play room. It was his job to do. And he shouldn't have sent you to do it. You were just cluttering up the wires. However."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Look, Mrs. Latham. I have an official interest in this—because of that light on the Kimballs' second floor. They've asked me to help investigate the death of Loring Kimball. I want to know about the cherry brandy."

He'd never spoken to me that way before, and it was a little frightening somehow.

"It may have nothing to do with it at all," I said. "The other night at the block neighbor party Mrs. Butts had in the play room, Mr. Butts had a bottle of cherry brandy, and Mr. Kimball was drinking it. That's the sort of thing he seems to like. And that's all."

I realized then that I'd been going to tell him about Ilya Donahue's shoes, and her hiding behind the urn the night before. I was afraid to, now.

"Thank you," he said. "Now about that scream. You heard it?"

I nodded.

"What was it like? Was it a woman?"

I nodded again.

"Did anyone run out? Where did it seem to come from?"

"Nobody ran out of any place," I said. "It was just a single, high-pitched scream. It sounded terrified, and it broke off very sharply. I just don't know any more."

"Over in the Kimballs' garden," he said quietly, "the earth is soft under the eucalyptus tree and on the turf behind the big lead urn. There are deep holes that look as if they were made by the heels of—"

He was interrupted by the staccato clack of another pair of heels on the porch and the simultaneous ringing of the doorbell and violent rapping on the door. And the door opened without any further formalities, and Mrs. Butts stuck her head into the hall.

11

"MRS. LATHAM!" she called. "Mrs. Latham!"

"Yes," I said. "Come in, won't you?"

She was already in, planted firmly in the double doors, hatless, her grey hair blown every which way, her hands thrust down in the pockets of her grey tweed suit. The fey look in her eye reminded me of a horse named Ginger that we'd had when I was a child. It was exactly the expression he always had just before he sent whoever was in the saddle over his head, usually into the stream at the bottom of the corn field behind the white barn.

"That's Colonel Primrose, isn't it?"

She pointed abruptly at him.

I nodded. "This is Mrs. Butts, Colonel. You met her—"

"Jim Brodie just called up," Mrs. Butts said vigorously. "He's a feature writer Freddie knows. He said he was supposed to come up here last night for an interview—the low-down on Pearl Harbor—with Ilya Donahue! But the blackout tied him up downtown. Jim Brodie only does the low-down on things. He came to our house for a drink one night and next Sunday the paper had the low-down on Mr. B.'s bar. Sounded like an illicit hell-hole with everybody lying around stiff. And he told Freddie it was cherry brandy killed Loring Kimball and wanted to know if it was Mr. B.'s cherry brandy. Freddie said of course it was, what did he think we'd been saving it for."

Mrs. Butts stopped for a brief instant for breath. I think

even Colonel Primrose, usually quite imperturbable, was looking a little surprised.

"Now, it must have been ours. We had a bottle, and it's gone. I went downstairs and looked just as soon as Freddie told me about it. And don't be so absurd as to say it was somebody else's bottle. Nobody keeps cherry brandy around any more."

"And I suppose," Colonel Primrose said patiently, "that everybody knew Mr. Butts had it."

"Everybody. Mr. B. collects things. He started collecting liquor during Prohibition. I thought it was better in bottles on shelves than in his stomach. He was showing off that cherry brandy the other night. He got it in Paris. It was the only French he knew, it used to drive me mad. Le cherie de mon cherie est Cherry Rocher—something like that. But that's neither here nor there.—Who put the poison in it?"

"Well," Colonel Primrose said, "that's what we're trying to find out. We'd also like to know why."

"Why is simple," Mrs. Butts said caustically. "There is no one on San Joaquin Terrace, except Mrs. Latham so far as I know, who hasn't had the idea at one time or another, or steadily. I said to Mr. B. myself not ten minutes ago, 'My God, you don't suppose *I* did it walking in my sleep!' Every person on the Terrace has probably thought that too. If they haven't it's because their consciences are completely atrophied."

I thought Colonel Primrose's face was slightly a study.

"My dear madam!" he began. "You mustn't—"

"I'm just telling you the plain truth. *You've* heard about Loring Kimball letting his good works shine before men. I've *known* him . . . a long time. What applies to leopards applies to men, in my opinion."

I don't know whether Colonel Primrose was really interested or just resigned. I imagine King Canute settled back in his chair in Southampton in much the same way when he found out the Channel tide was still coming in. Mrs. Butts was certainly still going on.

"I knew his first wife, the perfectly lovely girl who was killed in the Fire. I know Amelia. If anyone tells you Amelia was found wandering around in the ashes on Nob Hill, it's nonsense—complete nonsense. The child wasn't even at home. He was pathologically jealous of her. He sent her to his sister in San Mateo when she was two, and he didn't bring her back until after her mother was killled. Then he kept her

a virtual prisoner for years. She couldn't go to school or have any friends, and when she fell in love with a boy who worked for him he wouldn't let her marry—just the way he wouldn't let Thorne marry Nat."

"My dear Mrs. Butts," Colonel Primrose said. "This is the twentieth centu—"

"That's what you think, Colonel. Loring Kimball knew better. He was as smooth as owl's grease."

Her grey eyes were flashing fire.

"I'm just telling you a few things you ought to know before you compose another lament like the one in the morning papers. Take Nat Donahue. Just take him. The reputation Loring Kimball built up by making gifts—if somebody else raised the other half—is all right . . . except it was always Loring Kimball's name on the bronze plaque. Nat might just as well have had a plaque on him too. Everybody says, 'Nat Donahue? Oh yes, Loring Kimball.' "

She took out her handkerchief and blew her nose. It was the sound Ginger used to make too.

"Loring Kimball rescued Nat from Telegraph Hill, but Nat didn't need rescuing. He would have gone just as far or farther without it. Kimball sent him to school, but the schools of California are free and he could have gone anyway. Nat signed notes for every cent Loring Kimball ever spent on him. Just a formality, Kimball said. A formality bearing six per cent interest. They were to be torn up when he graduated. But they weren't. They were to be torn up when he married. And they weren't. He brings Nat here, gives him the house—if he does—and when Nat realized he can't stay here with Thorne at the end of the Terrace, and tells Loring Kimball so, what does Loring Kimball do?"

She looked from one of us to the other.

"He presents the notes!" she snapped. "If Nat won't do as he's told he can pay for it. But not in those words! It was the owl's grease technique. This hurst me more than it does you, my boy. It infuriates me—I was simply livid!"

Colonel Primrose hadn't stirred, bodily, but my heart sank still lower, because I could see the quietly sharpened intentness in his eyes. How he made his voice as casual as it was then I don't know.

"How do you know this, Mrs. Butts?"

If I'd dared I would have tried to stop her. She didn't know what she was doing to Nat Donahue; she thought she was talking about Loring Kimball.

"I know because Nat came to Mr. B. and me. He wasn't complaining. He was willing to pay back, but he simply didn't have the money. Loring Kimball had seen to that. He insisted Nat live in a style suitable to the Kimball interests and it took every cent he made. He came to us because we're old friends of his. He had to borrow more than any bank would lend him. He wanted us to go on his note."

"And did you?"

"We would have. I was willing to then. Mr. B. said he was going to get it out of Loring Kimball's hide first. And don't think he wouldn't have. Don't let his looks deceive you. It's a mistake a lot of people have made."

As Colonel Primrose nodded politely my heart sank still another notch.

"Mr. B. will be furious at my telling you this," Mrs. Butts continued. "The next murder on the Terrace will probably be me. I wouldn't put it past him. But I think it's something everybody should know. In times like these everybody has a right to know a whited sepulchre when they see one."

It was a little hard for me to know, at that point, whether she meant Loring Kimball or Mr. Butts. If what she'd said about the cherubic roly-poly little man who'd collected the bar and the assorted wild life in the big-game room across the Terrace was true, then he was certainly a whited sepulchre of monumental proportions.

"I don't know anybody on the Terrace who doesn't feel the same way. Some of them are more outspoken than others, that's all. Nobody can tell me a man like Dr. Norton could have any use for Loring Kimball. He's known him for years. I don't know why he kept on attending him, unless he felt sorry for the girls and Lucy Kimball.—And the Prentiss Vales."

She stopped long enough to get her breath, but not long enough to get the look I was trying to give her.

"He ruined Prentiss Vale. He made Prentiss Vale's house a laughing stock by moving that thing of his nest door to it. It took Prentiss years to get recognition, because everybody laughed when his name was mentioned. If you want to ruin anybody in San Francisco, just make people laugh at him. —There was a law here on the Terrace; nobody could build a house more than so high—it spoiled everybody else's view. What did Loring Kimball do? He got around it by moving that thing he lived in up here, lock, stock and barrel. And the eucalyptus trees."

I'd been on the point of relaxing until I saw Colonel Primrose move very slightly in his chair, and his black eyes snap in a quiet sort of way. If Mrs. Butts, I was thinking, managed in her magnificent inclusiveness to tar absolutely everybody on the Terrace, maybe the police might just call it a day and go quietly back to Portsmouth Square.

"He wanted that house because his first wife had lived in it my eye!" Mrs. Butts said. "He hadn't lived in it for fifteen years. He lived in an apartment on Nob Hill. That house was closed up tighter than a drum. Nobody would live in it and it cost more to tear it down than pay the taxes. And all the stuff about having Prentiss Vale draw plans for his new house . . . a patron of the modern. The house he tore down over there was a perfectly good modern house."

Colonel Primrose nodded again, with the politest interest.

"You think he moved it for spite?"

I was surprised to see Mrs. Butts hesitate. I wouldn't have thought it was a thing she ever did. Furthermore, when she spoke there was a hesitant and even puzzled note in her voice.

"I . . . don't know. He did have a row with Prentiss Vale. I've always suspected it was something else. It wasn't till he married the second time that he decided to build at all, though he'd been trying to buy the property. I think he did it to spite Lucy Kimball."

Colonel Primrose looked puzzled.

"She's Thorne's mother, the present Mrs. Kimball. She was engaged to Prentiss Vale before she married Thorne's father. She made the mistake of taking Prentiss's side in the row about the plans. I think Loring Kimball . . . resurrected his dead past, and made her live in it, just to show his power. She's lived there with the ghost of his first wife ever since the day she married him. Her picture is all over the house, the silver is marked with her initials, her dressing gown still hangs over her chair and the light burns in her room. When he spoke of his wife it was always his first wife he meant, not Lucy. I don't see how she stood it."

Colonel Primrose's face showed nothing but a purely courteous interest, but I could see him slowly ticking off about everybody in his mind. Thorne Kimball, Amelia, Mrs. Kimball, Nat Donahue, Prentiss Vale, Mr. Butts and the redoubtable Mrs. Butts herself. Dr. Norton was—so far—only pale grey where they were black, but the fact that he'd never said much somehow seemed to make him just a little subtler

than the rest. The only people Mrs. Butts had left out of her catalogue of murderers at heart if not in deed were Molly McIntyre, Freddie Butts, Ilya Donahue, and the bored-voiced woman who was Prentiss Vale's wife. Myself and Mrs. Norton and Little Joe appeared to be fairly well exonerated—though certainly Little Joe had come within an ace of poisoning himself an hour ago.

12

WHAT more Mrs. Butts might have said, other than what she had so incredibly managed to say in the last five minutes, if Colonel Primrose hadn't been called by John the Chinaman to the telephone, I'm sure I don't know. He left the two of us standing in a sea of wreckage of Mrs. Butts's own torpedoing, and she was entirely unconscious of it, as far as I could tell, and even pleased, apparently, that she'd set him right on things. It was unbelievable . . . but not so unbelievable as what she did next. He couldn't have got more than two steps out into the hall when she leaned forward and whispered to me. And when I say whispered I mean whispered. It could have been heard from the stage door to the topmost gallery.

"My dear! Did you tell him about the other night? About Ilya and the poison?"

I shook my head helplessly.

"She'll probably tell him herself."

I am not exaggerating when I say that she sounded like a high-pressure fire hose with the water released full force.

"—I don't see any use telling him more than we have to."

And then, as if he might think this profound silence of ours was conspiracy, she said, casually, and presumably on the theory that he was quite deaf:

"I must run along now, my dear. I've got to give Freddie a talking to. He's supposed to leave his phone number where he can be reached in case of a blackout. Nobody at the num-

ber he did leave last night had ever heard of a person called Freddie Butts. If he's going to be block warden, he's got to do it seriously. Don't you agree with me?"

I nodded mechanically. It was wonderful. In less than one additional minute she'd landed Ilya Donahue and Freddie in the net with everybody else. My only hope was that she'd go before she got Molly and Mrs. Prentiss Vale and Little Joe and me in it too.

"Good-bye, Colonel," she said, with hearty cheeriness, as she passed him in the hall. "Come see us when you're through all this."

Colonel Primrose came back in. We looked at each other for an instant. There was nothing to do but laugh, though I could have wept just as easily.

"What a woman," he said. "It begins to sound like a lynching party. Or you can go on the detective-story theory and take for granted it must be Molly McIntyre or Joe or the Doctor's invalid wife."

"What about me and Mrs. Prentiss Vale?" I asked. "Have you forgotten us?"

He looked at me for an instant.

"You, my dear, were at the scene of the crime," he said dryly. "And Mrs. Vale. . . . We'll skip her, if you don't mind."

He didn't explain.

"I don't see how you can get Mrs. Kimball in," I said. "She was certainly away."

"That's the nice thing about poison, Mrs. Latham. You can be as far away as you please, if you've left it in the proper place. Mrs. Kimball went to Palo Alto yesterday afternoon to see her sister. She says her husband insisted she go and stay all night."

"Why didn't she tell Thorne or Amelia?"

"They were both out. Mr. Kimball was to tell them, and didn't. She told the servants."

He took his hat off the table. "However, that's not as important as many other things. Moran wants me to bring you over with me.—And you can tell me about the other night and Mrs. Donahue and the poison on the way."

I was spared that. Mrs. Butts was certainly right in one thing she'd said. Llya Donahue must have been waiting at that window of hers, because no sooner had Colonel Primrose and I come out of my door than she came tripping down her steps, complete with hat, gloves and bag, appar-

ently on her way downtown. I looked at her feet. She had on other shoes. I think she saw me . . . and if she did, then I thought I saw something calculating move behind her smile, as if that was what she'd been waiting for.

We met at the end of their garden walk.

"Isn't it dreadful about Mr. Kimball?" she said. Her smile was replaced by rather too much distress, I thought. "He was so marvelous. It seems unbelievable, doesn't it?"

—Not to me or Colonel Primrose after our session with Mrs. Butts, I wanted to say. But I said, "It does, doesn't it? This is Colonel Primrose, Mrs. Donahue."

"Not *the* Colonel Primrose?" she asked, a little breathlessly.

I could have slapped her. He's bad enough as it is. And of course he was pleased and flattered. She was even prettier than I'd remembered, with lovely apricot-smooth skin and honey-colored hair and sort of upslanting dark eyes. Her eyes were carefully made up with greenish brown eyeshadow, and not a touch of mascara under them . . . which is what happens to me when I use it. I look like the pictures of hollow-eyed and starving natives the relief societies send out.

"Then you're just the man I want to see." A shadow dimmed the radiance of the face she held up to his. "Or maybe Mrs. Latham told you?" She looked at me. "About the other night?"

Colonel Primrose shook his head. The helpless confiding air with which she managed to hand herself over to him—she was weak and confused and he was strong and she knew she could depend on him—was very well done, I must admit. And he loved it.

"I'm sure it was all just a joke, and I'm so afraid if Captain Moran hears about it he won't understand. Mrs. Butts wouldn't poison anybody. I know I'm really dreadful sometimes, and women never like me, no matter how hard I try. I shouldn't have lost my temper. And I shouldn't have brought the poison from the Islands. But I'm terrified of things that crawl. It would never have occurred to me that anybody . . . Anyway, nobody knew where I put it, nobody except Nat, and you know how he adored Mr. Kimball."

I looked at her blankly.

"Is any of it gone?" Colonel Primrose asked.

"I don't know. I looked at it just now, but I don't seem to

remember. And I can't imagine anybody else having any of it around. Unless—"

She turned to me, a puzzled little frown etched on the petal smooth skin between her brows.

"I don't suppose Molly saved what she had, did she?"

I knew then that she was perfectly conscious of what she was doing. She couldn't entirely conceal a faintly triumphant malice when she looked at me.

"Did Mrs. McIntyre have some too?" Colonel Primrose asked, very urbanely.

"Maybe I shouldn't have said anything. I—"

"I haven't seen her," Colonel Primrose said. "I'm sure she—"

"Oh, heavens," Ilya said, "I didn't mean that. She's one of the sweetest people in the world. I just . . . I mean, I hadn't realized how dangerous it could be, in the cabin, with Little Joe around, and I remember seeing her a couple of times scooping it up with a spoon. She probably threw it out the port. Will you forget it?"

Colonel Primrose nodded. "How did you like the blackout last night, Mrs. Donahue? I suppose you're used to them."

She glanced sideways at me for a lightning instant. She was smiling, but there was still that calculating appraisal behind her eyes. And I knew what she was thinking. She wasn't quite sure in spite of my glance at her shoes if I'd seen her or not, or if I'd known it was her foot before she moved it back. It must have been a precarious moment in her mind, and she must have come to a quick decision or she wouldn't have taken the chance she did.

"I was in bed," she said without any very apparent hesitation. "I got up and went out in back on the deck. It was really a thrilling sight."

She held out her hand, smiling.

"You can't imagine how nice it is to meet you, in the flesh. I've heard so much about you. Goodbye!—Oh, would you like the powder I've got, or shall I throw it away?"

"I'll get it sometime," Colonel Primrose said. "Will you be at home later?"

"Of course. Come in and have a cocktail with us this afternoon. Goodbye. Goodbye, Mrs. Latham."

Colonel Primrose didn't say anything as we went on toward the Kimballs'. And I didn't either. I was seething with indecision. She'd seen me. And if she'd seen me she'd seen Thorne. It was undoubtedly Thorne's white dress that had

startled her and made her scream. Why, I wondered, had she told a story about being in bed and then out on the deck? What was she planning, why wasn't she telling? I tried to decide whether or not to tell Colonel Primrose.

We got to the lane between the Prentiss Vales' and the Kimballs' that leads down the hill, the way Thorne said she'd come back the night before.

Colonel Primrose chuckled suddenly. "What's the matter with her, Mrs. Latham? And why don't you like her?"

"I don't even know her," I said. "I never spoke to her before in my life."

"You don't like her, just the same. You're an open book, my dear, printed in Braille for the blind. You smile, but when you like people the temperature's at least sixty degrees higher."

If I'd been honest I'd have said something unpleasant about the way she'd taken him into camp with her open and barefaced flattery. But after all and in spite of Sergeant Buck, I have no excuse for being annoyed at his obvious response to another woman's charm. I was annoyed anyway.

"I suppose you know she wasn't in bed or on the back deck at all," I said. "She was behind the urn in the Kimballs' garden. Her heels made the holes in the turf you were talking about."

"I knew that when you looked at her feet," Colonel Primrose said maddeningly. "I'm neither blind, deaf nor simple, my dear."

"Nevertheless," I retorted, "I'd be careful this afternoon that my cocktail didn't have the faint odor of bitter almonds."

He chuckled again as he opened the Kimballs' gate and waited for me to go in.

"Do you suppose she knows about the notes, and Nat's going to the Buttses?" I asked.

"I was wondering. Also why he didn't go to her."

"To Ilya?"

He nodded. "She's quite well off, you know."

I didn't at all.

"She's been married twice before, and got a pretty handsome settlement each time. Her people were well-to-do to begin with."

He smiled at the look on my face. "I haven't been doing nothing, Mrs. Latham."

I don't know why I'd got the idea that she hadn't come from very much. It explained her much better. It also, I

thought, made her potential harm to Molly and little Joe rather more real, in spite of Pearl Harbor and what had happened there to Molly and Big Joe. I found myself wishing she didn't live next door.

"Furthermore, I think she's a dangerous woman to have around," Colonel Primrose said.

We went up the front steps. The door was open. A woman's voice, quiet but very determined, was coming through the half-opened door of the room to the left, opposite the library.

"I don't care," she was saying. "It's got to come down. The one in the library too. I can't stand it, Richard. I've lived under that woman's eyes. Every meal I've eaten, every guest I've entertained, she's always watching me, looking at me, laughing. I just literally cannot stand it another moment."

"You can't blame her, Lucy."

It was Dr. Norton speaking. His voice was patient, and very tired—as if it was an argument that had been going on a long time.

"I don't blame her," Mrs. Kimball said. "It's not her fault. But I've had to hate something or somebody, and it's her I've hated. Sometimes I've wanted to take a knife and slash these canvases to ribbons. I'm . . . I'm trying not to be hysterical, but I've got to get rid of them!"

Dr. Norton spoke again, just as patiently. "You'll have to let them stay till the police have gone, Lucy. Then I'll take them away for you. I have a place they can be put. You can't start ripping the house to pieces right now. If you can't stand it, take Amelia and Thorne and go to a hotel.—There's the doorbell. For the love of God, Lucy, take hold of yourself!"

Colonel Primrose had pulled the old-fashioned bell knob. We stepped back a little. Dr. Norton came out of the drawing-room. I looked at him in a surprise that I tried to conceal. His telling Mrs. Kimball to brace up seemed extraordinary just then. He should have seen himself in the mirror over the pink-tiled marble mantel strewn with carved rosebuds that I could see through the door behind him. He looked a hundred. His face was grey and his eyes haggard. His slender body had bent as if an invisible burden had been put on his shoulders.

"How do you do, Mrs. Latham, Colonel," he said. His voice was terribly tired. "Go right in. Inspector Moran is in the library."

We went in.

"You might come too, Doctor," Colonel Primrose said.

Dr. Norton glanced back toward the drawing-room. I did too, and got a glimpse of a green carpet with great clusters of pink roses and white lilies festooned in a border around it and an elaborate medallion in the center. I could also see part of a set of lovely Belter parlour furniture with its solid backs and horsehair. And in the mirror over the mantel I could see Mrs. Lucy Kimball. She wore a black dress and her face was ashen-white. She was pressing a handkerchief to her lips as she looked toward the hall, listening intently.

Inspector Moran came out of the study as we went into the library. He seemed obviously exasperated about something.

"You see the spot I'm on, Dr. Norton," he said. "If everybody's going to stand on their rights what am I going to do? I'm not trying to make trouble."

"I've spoken to Mrs. Kimball," Dr. Norton said. "She's willing for you to go upstairs if you feel you have to. I think you ought to make an effort to understand the way they feel, however."

Moran turned to Colonel Primrose. "I want to have a look at that room upstairs where the light burned. Mrs. Kimball—"

"She's quite willing for you to go up there," Dr. Norton repeated. He turned to Colonel Primrose. "Her position is very difficult. She's never been in that room herself. She—"

"I think I understand all that," Colonel Primrose said.

"You don't have to go on. I agree with Moran, however. I would like to have a look at it."

13

NAT DONAHUE had come through the door of the study and was waiting there, tight-lipped and tense. He looked to me like a man who was having a foretaste of hell. I thought suddenly that it would be fascinating to have a cross-section of his whole thinking and emotional mechanism just then. I wondered if he knew that Ilya hadn't been home the night before, or if he'd guessed she was concealing something under the newspaper when he'd come out to talk to her on the sun deck. Was she able to deceive him? Or if she wasn't, how much of the hell he was going through was concerned with his obligation to her as his wife . . . as well as with Thorne's position, to say nothing of his own.

Colonel Primrose was looking at him with a kind of steady detachment that, well as I knew him, I'd never seen before.

"There is a matter I'd like settled in my own mind before we go up," he said.

I didn't like the casual tone in his voice. I didn't like it at all.

"I understand you weren't on the job last night, Donahue."

I looked blankly at him. It was Freddie Butts who wasn't on the job.

"I didn't get the yellow light, if that's what you mean," Nat said quietly. "I was at home. I turned in around a quarter to eleven. The siren woke me up. I found out that one of

the other phones in the house hadn't been put back properly, so they were all dead."

"What room was that phone in?"

Nat flushed a little. "In my wife's room. She'd been talking earlier. When she put it back it got caught. The connecting bar didn't go down."

"Did the siren wake Mrs. Donahue too?"

The flush deepened in Nat's cheeks.

"I didn't even think about her," he said shortly. "She's been through all this in the Islands. All I was thinking about was that I'd missed the yellow light and I'd better get on the job. My wife's able to look after herself, better than most of the people on the Terrace."

I wondered if he realized that he either had to sound pretty callous or say that Ilya Donahue wasn't in her room . . . and whether to say that was tantamount to saying she'd left the phone purposely disconnected, so that it couldn't ring and wake him to find she wasn't there.

"She says she was in bed," Colonel Primrose remarked. "And got up and went out on deck."

"Then that's what she was doing. She was asleep when I got back from here."

Colonel Primrose looked at him for a moment.

"—How well did she know Kimball?"

"Fairly well."

"After your marriage?"

The muscles were playing in white ribs along Nat Donahue's jaws.

"Mr. Kimball introduced us."

"She knew him before she did you?"

Nat looked at him without saying anything for an instant.

"I don't know what the hell you're getting at, sir," he said very quietly. "If it concerns you at all, she met him on the ship going out to the Islands. She was on cruise, and he was coming out on business. Their luggage was under 'K' on the dock. I went to meet him, and he introduced us."

"She didn't go on with the cruise, I take it?"

"No. She decided to stay on in Honolulu."

Colonel Primrose nodded.

"There's one other point, if you don't mind, Donahue."

"If it isn't concerned with my wife I'll be glad to answer it, Colonel."

"It's concerned with yourself—and your wife insofar as you have common interests," Colonel primrose said calmly.

"It's about the notes you signed that Loring Kimball held."

The flush on Nat Donahue's face that had receded came back.

"Go ahead," he said.

"I understand Kimball decided to collect."

"May I ask who told you that?" Nat said.

"You probably know. How many people did you tell?"

"Two."

"One of them told me," Colonel Primrose said placidly. "It was bound to come out. No use in your getting upset about it. How much money was involved?"

"That's my business, Colonel."

"I'm afraid it's ours too, Donahue. Where are those notes now? You're familiar with Kimball's affairs?"

"I am," Nat said, more quietly. "They're in the safe in his bedroom. They'll be paid in full to his estate, by the way, if that concerns you."

"I understand that when you signed them, you didn't expect to be called on for them? It was a formality?"

"That was a misunderstanding on my part. I'm more than willing to pay them."

"But you hadn't expected to be called for them at this time?—When did Mr. Kimball present them?"

Nat hesitated for an instant. "Last Thursday morning."

"Why?"

"That's my business too, if you don't mind, Colonel."

Colonel Primrose's eyes were fixed steadily on his.

"Perhaps you'll answer this," he said politely. "Did you discuss the matter with your wife?"

"No. I didn't."

"Did Kimball?"

"I don't know. I told him I hadn't discussed it with her."

"—Or with Thorne Kimball?"

There was a sharp silence, and I held my breath. It seemed to me that that was the moment, if ever, that Colonel Primrose needed the granite shape of his guard, philosopher and friend standing rigidly behind him.

"I . . . don't know what you're talking about, Colonel. Primrose," Nat said. His voice was very quiet.

Colonel Primrose nodded. "I think we might have a look upstairs, Moran. I'm interested in that room. After that I'd like a look at Kimball's safe."

Inspector Moran looked at Dr. Norton.

"Mrs. Kimball has agreed about the room upstairs," Dr.

Norton said. It sounded like something on a treadmill, as if he'd been saying it over and over.

"After making a guy feel like a heel," Moran said.

I went along. Maybe I should have felt like a heel myself, and I did, a little. I suppose Nat and Dr. Norton were the only ones who really felt the significance of what we were doing—except, in a different sense, as I learned later, Colonel Primrose himself. That light shining out over the garden through the dark trees, all night, year after year, summer and winter, from dusk till dawn, couldn't have helped having some kind of cumulative meaning for them, knowing Loring Kimball and the three women who lived under its spell, that it couldn't have for the rest of us.

The door of the hall was closed as we filed out of the library. Dr. Norton stopped an instant in front of it, his face alive and moving with compassion. Physician and friend, he knew better than anyone else the psychological significance that that locked room with its brazen glaring light shining out all night, every night, had had in the tragic drama of Loring Kimball's second marriage. I had a vague sense of something of the kind on a different level. Once in a house, overgrown with jasmine and roses, deep in the bayous of Louisiana, a girl I was visiting took me into a room. It was dim and old. The gilt was peeling from the mirror frames and the mirrors were old and blind. Outside the moss from a great live oak hung in grey wisps at the windows, moving like pale dead fingers across the glass. There was a great four-poster in the room that hadn't been used, as the room hadn't, since an early and lovely mistress of the house had died there a hundred and more years ago. Her husband had let no one touch her. She lay there for two days, and he never left the room. On the third day the old colored woman coming to bring him food found that he no longer needed food. The neighbors took them both away, to a chapel in the bayou, shielded by the moss from the magnolias. But the room in the house was still their tomb, and it and the bed with its tattered coverlet and curtains slowly falling apart with age seemed living entities.

The room in that house had had a gentle influence, some way, because love had been there and left a kind of hallowed enchantment over it. Perhaps it was because everything is different now, but it didn't seem to me that the room we were going to now had had anything gentle about it. It had been strident and glaring. I couldn't think that it was really

love that had kept it there. It could hardly have had the effect it had on Lucy Kimball if it had been. Although perhaps had a second wife come to the house in the bayou, she might have felt that the dead hand closing the door of the room at the end of the gallery was too heavy a burden on her heart.

I don't know about that. I know that there was a mounting sense of tension as we went up the stairs. I caught the sharpened intentness in Colonel Primrose's eyes as he kept looking from Dr. Norton to Nat. And I was suddenly aware that he was centering everything on that room. I looked at him as we turned at the landing. There was a sparkle in his black eyes as they met mine. It was an affirmation—and a warning —to me to keep still and say nothing.

There was a wide hall at the top of the stairs that formed a half-circle off which the bedroom doors opened. One of them closed quietly as we came to the top, as if somebody had been standing at it, listening. Dr. Norton, coming up last, held on to the banister for an instant before he made the last two steps. I thought at first he was ill, and then I realized that he was listening too . . . because, as Colonel Primrose stepped across to the door of the first Mrs. Kimball's room, another door opened.

I looked around. Thorne Kimball was standing in it. Her face was white, and her aquamarine eyes were burning again with icy fire. She looked from Nat to Dr. Norton, and to Colonel Primrose. If Nat could only have said then, I thought, that he hadn't wanted any part of it! But he couldn't. He glanced around only as he heard the door close, and Thorne had gone back into her room without a word. His jaw contracted in a sharp spasm.

"I'll wait here," he said quietly. "I'm not going in there. Here's the key. Mr. Kimball kept it in his desk—and you can take it."

Dr. Norton's lips were tight. If he could have said the same he would have, I knew.

Colonel Primrose took the key. He put it in the lock, turned it, and opened the door.

14

COLONEL PRIMROSE stepped across the threshold of the first Mrs. Kimball's room and stood there for a moment, his eyes darting to every corner and every stick of furniture, and every picture on the faded yellow chrysanthemum wallpaper. I went in behind him, Dr. Norton following me slowly, like a man walking in a reluctant dream.

The sun streamed in through those windows of the semicircular bay around the corner of the house, on the front and side toward the Nortons. Another large double window on the left of the fireplace overlooked a side garden. The lawn to the clipped cypress hedge dividing the two places was green and smooth, and bare except for the stump of an old tree with pink geraniums growing in an urn set in its hollow top. There were no shades at any of the windows, and no curtains, and if there had ever been shutters they'd been taken off. The curtains might have dropped to pieces years ago, of course, though the yellow silk valances were still there, their gold cords and tassels tarnished and blackened.

The carpet, yellow once, with clusters of pale flowers on it, was faded almost white where the sun had beaten in. There was a heavily worn spot among the shadowy flowers in front of the window by the fireplace, and from the door to the fireplace a deeply worn track. Loring Kimball, pacing back and forth there, had written on it a story as if carved in stone.

I suppose some day a long time from now collectors will buy in furniture that was haute mode in 1903. It seems incredible, but my mother's grandmother gave away Chippendale and Sheraton to buy horsehair and rosewood. The first Mrs. Kimball's bedroom must have been a concession to the then modern in an otherwise high Victorian house. Most of the pieces, the bed and tables and the "chiffonier," were pale bird's-eye maple, and the thin speckled veneer had sprung in spots from the sun and laid bare the gumwood skeleton of early Grand Rapids.

Yet in a sense it was a room that must have had a charm and gaiety that golden oak woodwork couldn't entirely dispel. On the table beside the bed was a lovely flowered porcelain oil lamp with a tinted glass shade, as if the lady who read there at night preferred its mellow glow to the glare of electricity, in the days before people learned that it could be softened too. The slipper chair by the center table had the same intimate quality. A quilted satin dressing gown hung over the back of it, its dye deepened where the sun caught it to dark apricot. In the folds in the shadow of the chair it was pale ivory. From under it fell the long ruffled sleeve of a lawn night dress that had once been white and was yellow now. The satin slippers on the floor beside it were turned a little, as if the first Mrs. Kimball had just stepped out of them, and would be back if we waited a little. The nightgown and robe and slippers, her hair brush on the dressing table, the book lying face down on the table beside her bed, all said that. They'd said it the morning of April 14, 1906, and repeated it mutely through the years, themselves waiting for the lady who went out into the roaring furnace of hell that was San Francisco that morning, never to return.

She was looking down at them from the mantelpiece. Colonel Primrose went across the room and stood looking at the old photograph in a tarnished silver frame. I went over and looked too. It was a bridal picture. She was tall and slender, very young and wistful-eyed. The laughter in the portrait downstairs wasn't there. She looked a little frightened, standing beside Loring Kimball in front of a fireplace decked with flowers, ribbons and bridal bells.

I looked at the groom. He was as handsome then as he'd been when I saw him, in spite of his 1906 haircut, his face bold and confident, his lips full and sensuous and arrogant. I hadn't got the impression of arrogance, seeing him at the Buttses' party, but that was the dominating quality of his

face, as he stood there beside his bride. It was in his eyes, his mouth and the way he stood. I didn't wonder she looked a little frightened, standing there with her white-gloved hand on his arm, looking through the misty white veil under the crown of orange blossoms on her hair.

Colonel Primrose turned away slowly. As his eyes met mine I was astonished, and a little frightened, at the look in them. He shook his head, his face graver than I'd ever seen it.

Dr. Norton was looking out of the bay window.

"Have you ever been in here before, Doctor?" Colonel Primrose asked.

He looked around as if he hadn't heard, for an instant.

"I attended her when she had pneumonia, the first year they were married," he said then. "And off and on before Amelia was born. He wouldn't let her have a doctor then. He brought in a midwife. I came in later that night. I didn't think either of them would live."

Colonel Primrose was looking intently at him, and I thought very oddly.

"I take it he was jealous of her?"

Dr. Norton hesitated for a moment, as if choosing the right word. "Insanely," he said.

"The portrait in the library?"

"That was done before her marriage. She didn't laugh much after it."

"He was deeply in love with her?"

Colonel Primrose's glance indicated the whole fantastic setup in that room in the fantastic house.

Dr. Norton looked thoughtfully at him.

"It's hard to say what love is, Colonel Primrose. I don't know whether Kimball loved her. I think probably it was himself he loved, and she was his choicest possession."

They both looked up at the photograph on the golden oak mantel.

"She must have been very lovely," Colonel Primrose said.

"As lovely as the day," Dr. Norton replied.

Colonel Primrose smiled. "I take it you were in love with her yourself."

Dr. Norton smiled too, for the first time I'd seen that day.

"Every man in San Francisco was. That's probably why Kimball wanted her. Her parents hadn't recovered from '97. In those days people had a quaint idea of a daughter's duty.

He was very liberal to them. I've always thought the price was too great for her to pay."

He looked up again at the photograph.

"Perhaps the . . . kind of death she died had its compensations."

Colonel Primrose went over to the wall, switched on the lights, glaring even in the brilliant sunshine, switched them off and turned back.

"What's your explanation for this blaze all night long?"

Norton shrugged.

"You can take your pick. The servants thought he was afraid she'd haunt him. None of them stayed very long. The present Mrs. Kimball thinks he did it because he knew it made her life unbearable. A few people have decided recently he was in cahoots with the enemy. The shipyards and oil tanks across the Bay could be charted from here."

"The yards are a blaze of light all night themselves, of course."

Dr. Norton nodded. "A few people who knew them both think it was a kind of psychopathic expiation. I imagine that's the word. Remorse taking this form of penance as he grew older. They point to his late career as a philanthropist as evidence of reform. The people on the Terrace think it was just plain cussedness."

"What do you think, Doctor?"

Dr. Norton shook his head. "I never discussed it with him."

"Did he ever tell you why he moved this house up here?"

"No. I didn't see him often. I attended him and the family professionally. That was rather surprising. I had a violent run-in with him when Amelia was born. I thought he was criminally responsible, and I told him so. Like most bullies, he didn't hold it against me—or seem to. Professionally, anyway. What he thought about me personally I never cared to speculate about.—I think a psychiatrist could make out a tolerable case about Kimball. It's out of my field. Frustrated desire of some sort—something like that."

Colonel Primrose moved around the room, opening bureau drawers and closet doors. Everything seemed to hang or lay folded the way it had been that morning over thirty-five years ago, when Mrs. Kimball awoke to the convulsive roar of the cracking earth, and dressed and rushed out of the house never to return. He moved from one mute reminder

of her phsyical presence to another, deliberately and with a kind of gentleness, as if not to disturb the peace that seemed finally to have come to her here.

At the fragile golden maple escritoire he stopped, turned the small gilt key and let down the slanting top. He leaned forward so abruptly that I moved so I could see. The desk top was empty. There was nothing on it at all, only a tiny pen with gold mountings and a mother-of-pearl inkwell on a round tarnished silver tray.

"Will you ask Miss Thorne Kimball if she'll step in here, please, Mrs. Latham?" he said.

If he'd asked for Amelia Kimball, whose mother's desk it was, or Mrs. Kimball, I wouldn't have been so surprised. I wasn't sure I'd heard him correctly until he turned and looked at me.

"Surely," I said.

Nat Donahue was still out in the hall. He was sitting on the window seat, a cigarette burning to a long ash in his hand, his shoulders hunched forward, his face a grim mirror of what was going on in his mind. He glanced up as I went to the door Thorne had opened and closed again. I rapped lightly. There was no answer for an instant, but I could hear movement inside, and a drawer open and close.

"Come in," she called.

When I opened the door I had a curious impression of looking at a painting, or a picture in technicolor. She was sitting at a desk in the bow of the window at the end of the room. She had been writing, apparently, and had turned half around in her chair. Beyond her, making a strange dramatic background for a very feminine and charming foreground, was a sweep of the Bay, with four heavy bombers roaring in the blue cloudless sky above the silver towers of the Oakland Bridge, and a battle cruiser in zigzagging stripes of pale blue and grey moving slowly under it.

"Come in," she said. "I thought it was—"

"It is, really," I said. "Colonel Primrose wants to see you."

"What for?"

"I don't know," I said. "It's something about that room, and the desk."

I stopped as it occurred to me that I was being disloyal, possibly, to Colonel Primrose. Not that I minded it particularly, except for possible reprisals.

"They're not reading the poor thing's letters, are they?"

She turned her head away quickly. "Why can't they let

her alone! She'd never been allowed a moment's peace! I hope when I die—"

She got up abruptly. "I'm sorry! But I wonder, sometimes. What if people here really can tie you to the earth through the things you cared about when you were here? Or if you can still see them going through your things, and reading the letters you wrote and never sent. . . . It seems so heartless, doesn't it?"

There seemed no point in my going back and saying there weren't any letters in the desk to read, and that it was better for her the way it was—I mean, not knowing there weren't any.

"I suppose if you're dead it doesn't really matter," I said.

"Oh, it does!" she cried. "You've never lived with a ghost the way we have. And if it doesn't matter to her, it does to the people who're living. It does something terrible to them."

She pushed her chair back and opened the drawer in front of her desk. She took out a letter, folded it and put it in an envelope.

"This is for Nat," she said. She came over to where I was. "Will you give it to him, some time when nobody's around? Something might happen to me, and I don't want anybody else to read it—even if I don't know it."

Her smile wasn't very convincing.

"I just don't want your Colonel or Inspector Moran to see me give it to him. They already think we're both criminals. There's no use proving it to them."

"It's always a bad plan to write letters when you're upset, darling," I said. "Tomorrow morning, or when this is all over . . ."

She shook her head. "I've thought about this a long time. I suppose Molly told you all about it. I always thought it was crazy, and you could just say, 'I'm not going to care any more about somebody,' and stop. But it's not that easy. Not for me, anyway."

I didn't know what to say, so I said, "We'd better go—they're waiting for you." I put the letter in my bag, with misgivings. I knew Colonel Primrose could see through people, and I wasn't sure about leather. But I had no place else to put it. I couldn't just hand it over to Nat out in the hall as we passed . . . though as things finally worked out it would have been better if I had.

15

HE got up abruptly as we came out into the hall.

"What's up?"

"Colonel Primrose wants to see Thorne," I said.

"What for?"

"It's all right, Nat," she said quickly.

"Okay. I'm in on it too, then."

He came along with us. She stopped for an instant as she went in, her eyes fixed on the dressing gown hanging over the back of the slipper chair, and moving to the satin slippers with their curling soles on the carpet beside it. Then she went over to Colonel Primrose, standing beside the closed desk.

"Mrs. Latham said you wanted to see me?"

Nat's eyes moved around the room as Colonel Primrose's had done, resting steadily for a long instant on the worn track in the carpet. He went over beside Thorne, and stood there as if saying they had him to cope with too.

"If you don't mind, Miss Kimball," Colonel Primrose said. "You've been in here before."

"When I was a child," Thorne said. "Twice."

He waited for her to go on.

"It fascinated me. The servants said it was haunted. My mother said I wasn't to think about it, or ever talk about it. I used to look at her portraits downstairs, and make up stories to myself. It didn't frighten me, except sort of—at night when I had to go by the door and the lights were on. They frightened me most, I think."

"When were you in here last?"

"One Fall when I was still in school. Molly McIntyre and I swiped the key one day. My stepfather came home, and we hid in that closet."

She pointed at the door where all the long full-skirted dresses were hanging.

"We were terrified. He stayed for hours, it seemed like. The smell of lavender still makes me sort of panicky, until I remember why. We didn't dare come out."

She looked around the room. "I don't know why it seemed so terrifying, then. It's just . . . very pathetic, now, isn't it?"

Colonel Primrose nodded gravely. "Yes, it is that," he said. "And it is rather terrible, still, I think.—Did Mr. Kimball let you out of the closet?"

Thorne shook her head.

"We stayed a long time after he went out, till Molly's mother began to call her. The lights were on, when we came out, and he'd left the door unlocked. Molly was afraid to go home. I had to go with her—and it was so dark under the trees, with these lights staring at us. Then I realized he knew, or he'd have locked the door, and I tried to get in without him seeing me, but I couldn't."

She looked at Nat.

"It's silly, now, isn't it? You remember? He sent you out of the room, and you didn't want to go, because you knew he was angry. You were a freshman at Berkeley that year."

Nat nodded.

"He didn't raise his voice at all. I don't remember much he said, now, except that I wasn't to tell Molly he knew we were there."

She hesitated for just an instant, and then looked at Colonel Primrose, her eyes clear and unfaltering.

"I do remember one thing . . . and it changed everything. Up to then, it had been like a romantic fairy tale. Molly and I used to make up things about it—when we died, our husbands would grieve that way, and keep our wedding gowns, and press the hem to their lips."

She smiled suddenly. "We were very young, you see."

The smile died from her eyes.

"And after that . . . I knew he didn't love her at all. I don't know whether it was what he said, or the way he looked up at her portrait, but I knew some way that he hated her, he was taking some kind of . . . of awful revenge on her. I couldn't put any words to it then—I was too fright-

ened, but I realized somehow that he wasn't really . . . sane, on that subject. He kept talking about no peace, and never letting her rest. It was . . . terrible. I couldn't walk when I got out into the hall, when he let me go."

She looked at Nat again. "You carried me upstairs—remember? And you came over that night, Dr. Norton."

Dr. Norton nodded. "I'm not likely to forget it," he said slowly. "I stayed with you most of the night."

"It took me a long time to get so I could go where he was without trembling all over," she went on. "He was much nicer to me, after that. He did everything for me—I don't want to seem ungrateful. I had everything I wanted . . . or almost everything."

Colonel Primrose was silent for a moment, looking about the room, his face somber and concerned, and puzzled too, I thought.

"What did your mother do about all that?" he asked then.

"I didn't tell her. I never have—and I don't want her to know. I never told anybody, except Nat, and I only told him a little while ago. Last week, wasn't it?"

Nat nodded again. Colonel Primrose turned to the desk and opened it. Thorne looked down.

"There used to be letters in there," she said. "Molly and I looked at it, that time. There was a piece of paper on the desk with a letter started on it. It began, 'Dearest Mother, They won't ever bring my baby back now, because . . .' and that's all. It struck me and Molly as very funny, because Amelia seemed so old to us."

Colonel Primrose turned to Dr. Norton.

"Why was the child taken away?"

Dr. Norton shrugged. "He didn't want her around. Mrs. Kimball did everything she could to get her back. Then he brought her back himself—afterwards—in a few days. He seemed to transfer all his emotional drive to her. I don't think anyone realized until she was grown up that he was as possessive toward her as he was toward her mother. And she was devoted to him."

"What is this about his not letting her marry?"

"I don't think she wanted to, until Mr. Kimball married my mother," Thorne said. "Then it was too late, I guess. Or she'd got the habit of looking after him. She's an angel, really. And she loved him, though I think she knew he . . . he had a lot of faults."

I think Colonel Primrose knew Amelia Kimball was in the

hall outside. How long she'd been there or how much she'd heard I didn't know. She was standing there by the door, her face pale and her eyes filled with tears.

Thorne turned quickly, her cheeks flushed. "I'm sorry!" she said softly.

"Don't be," Amelia Kimball said. "Everything you said is quite true, except a couple of things, and they don't matter."

She came into the room. "—I heard you ask Thorne about the desk, and the letters."

"Do you know about them, Miss Kimball?" Colonel Primrose asked.

"Nothing except that they haven't been here since the first blackout."

"I don't understand."

"My father wasn't home the night we had the first blackout. Thorne was down at the Red Cross, and Lucy—that's my stepmother—and I were almost beside ourselves. We thought we'd have to get somebody to break down the door. Just then my father phoned and asked for me, and told me where the key was. He said I was the only one he'd trust to go in this room, and I was to promise on my honor not to look at anything."

A faint curious kind of smile moved on her lips.

"I wouldn't have, anyway," she said. "I'd never been in here. It would have been a kind of . . . sacrilege. When I did, the desk was open, and I couldn't help see there were papers there. He gave me a key next day. I promised I wouldn't come in except in case of a blackout when he was away. That's why I didn't come in here right away last night. I thought he was home and would come up himself. When he didn't I came and turned the lights off."

"He wasn't home the third blackout. I came in and saw the desk was empty."

"Was he here himself the other blackouts?"

Amelia Kimball hesitated. "There was one about a month ago when neither of us was here. We went down to San Mateo to see my aunt. It was the first time my father had seen her for years. She had a stroke and sent for us. My stepmother turned the light off then. I gave her my key before we left, without telling my father. He didn't take the idea of bombing here seriously.—And he was all right about it, when I had to tell him."

"This aunt is the one you were with when you were a child?"

Amelia nodded. "Yes. She had another stroke while I was down there and didn't recover. She was . . . very close to me, much closer than the mothers of most girls I know. My own mother was just sort of a dream."

She looked around the room as if feeling some grave unreality.

"You see, this room didn't have the effect on me that it did on Thorne. We didn't live in this house when I was growing up. I was only in it a few times. It didn't have the . . . the quality it got when we came to live in it again, and my father got older, and . . . sort of obsessed by this."

She looked around again, shaking her head.

"It just seemed to grow on him. It was always a part of his life, but not the way it became later, when Nat began doing more and more of the business for him."

Inspector Moran spoke. "—You were pretty well running things for him, then, were you, Donahue?"

His voice was curt and impatient, and watching him it seemed to me that his opinion of Colonel Primrose and the way he tracked down murder was sinking rapidly.

"He'd been training me for it for a long time," Nat said.

"I'd like to have a look at those notes.—If you're through here, Colonel."

Knowing Colonel Primrose very well, I knew he wasn't through. He was also annoyed—and I thought not so much at Inspector Moran as at Colonel John Primrose.

"All right," he said shortly.

Thorne looked at Nat. She knew about the notes, then, I thought. She was obviously disturbed . . . and so was I, to tell the truth.

"They're in the safe," Nat said calmly.

"Can you open it?" Inspector Moran asked.

"Yes. You'd better come and watch me, Inspector."

Inspector Moran nodded with some grimness.

"May I ask what notes you're talking about?" Amelia Kimball said.

Nat grinned suddenly. "No," he said. For an instant I had the impression of him again that I'd had, seeing him before Ilya came back to the Terrace.

There was a painful flush on Amelia's sallow face. "Do you mean that my father—"

Inspector Moran went toward the door. "We'd like to get on, Miss Kimball."

16

LORING KIMBALL'S bedroom across the hall was obviously that of a man who liked to be comfortable and could very well afford it. There wasn't any trace of the horsehair Spartan of 1870 or the spindly pseudo-elegance of 1902. From the deep leather chairs and custom-made bed to the English brushes and silver fittings on the big mahogany chest between the bulbous windows overlooking the Prentiss Vales' house across the narrow lane, it was comfortable to luxuriance. The only bizarre note was the large steel safe in the corner.

I looked at Colonel Primrose, aware of a kind of suspended concern—I suppose that's the word I want—as he stood there watching Nat Donahue's fingers move through the routine on the dial. And my heart sank a little. He didn't expect the notes to be there either. I knew that as plainly as if he'd told me in so many words. And it was the implications he was concerned with, more than the fact itself. Inspector Moran clearly and patently did not expect them to be there, and was not interested in any implications, only that definite and indisputable fact.

Unless Nat was the age's greatest loss to stage and screen, he had no sense of foreboding of any kind. He gave the dial a final twist. There was a smooth whirr of moving mechanism and the sound of tumbling synchronized weights. He stepped back, pulling the thick door open.

"They're in the manila envelope tied with the red cord, in

the pigeonhole at the top," he said. "Or they were two weeks ago when Mr. Kimball had them out."

If he was aware that Inspector Moran's whole attention was focussed on him he didn't show it by a line in his body or a muscle of his face . . . and he could hardly not have been aware, I thought, that since the interview down in the library Moran had been absorbed in building up a case. The How was definitely established, and money and love were the Why and constant proximity the Opportunity.

Moran glanced over the orderly rows of boxes and bundles of papers tied with tapes. If anybody had rifled Loring Kimball's safe the night before, they had certainly left it shipshape.

He took out an envelope. "This?"

"Right."

Moran untied the bow knot and opened the flap. I held my breath for an instant, as I knew Thorne, beside me, was holding hers. Then Moran's hand came out, a whole sheaf of notes in it. Some were old and yellow, others whiter, the signature on them—I could see the "Nathaniel P. Donahue" —not so round and immature. On top was a separate sheet of paper, fresh and crisp and of recent date, that apparently had all the sums involved neatly totted up. It must have been a sizable figure from the way Inspector Moran whistled.

"This . . . seems to be okay," he said shortly.

Nat took the notes and looked through them.

"I thought at the time there were a lot of things I could do without," he said. "Here's eight hundred and fifty bucks for a car I didn't need my junior year. Here's my board bill when I was twelve. I sure ate plenty."

He shrugged his shoulders and grinned. Then he turned to Amelia Kimball as she started to speak.

"Don't think I mean to sound like a heel, Amelia," he said quickly. "I'm not complaining. I mean, it's okay. Don't take on as if he'd done me a dirty trick."

"It was a dirty trick!" Thorne said hotly.

Nat shook his head. "No. You never understood him, either of you."

Thorne's eyes flashed. "I suppose Mother paid for my room and board too!"

She stopped momentarily as if shocked at herself.

"I'm sorry—that was a horrid thing to say. But you were just as much a member of the family as I was, and these notes . . ."

Her eyes were brimming with hot stinging tears.

"—I hated him! I always did! I wouldn't have stayed in this house if it hadn't been for my mother! Every time I tried to go I came back, because I couldn't leave her alone!"

Then she flashed around and ran out of the room, and I heard her door slam. Dr. Norton, standing silently by the door through all this, turned and followed her. I heard him rap on her door, go in and close it quietly behind him. Inspector Moran stared after them.

"I . . . don't like this at all," Colonel Primrose said, still very gravely. "Any of it. There's something very bad going on here. Something quite . . . devilish."

We were back in the room with the faded yellow carpet and the chair with the first Mrs. Kimball's gown hanging over the back and the satin slippers beside it on the floor. He'd closed the door and was standing with his back against it, looking about the room. He went over to the path worn on the carpet and paced back and forth over it, then went to the window to the left of the fireplace and stood looking out for an instant. He shook his head.

"And so far, Mrs. Latham, I don't mind telling you I don't get it—any of it. I can feel it—I *know* there's something . . ."

He hesitated again. "—Something worse than murder, around here. But this is the damndest setup. Look here, for instance."

I went over and looked out.

"They were a leg up on blackout preparations around here long before the war."

"You mean the Nortons," I said.

I'd already noticed from my own house that they had dark shades at all their windows that I could see now, even up in the octagonal cupola from which at one time they must have had a superb view of the harbor, from the head of the Bay clear around to the Golden Gate.

He shook his head. "I was thinking about that, particularly."

He pointed to the window on our left, in the bulbous protuberance at the back corner of the Kimball house, corresponding to the one in the room we were in, at the front, where the lights had blazed out night after night. It had a dark frayed-edged shade half drawn.

"I suppose they had to, if anybody wanted to sleep," I

said. "I used to keep my shade drawn all the time."

He shook his head impatiently. "Whose room is it, do you suppose?"

"It's Amelia's hat in the window seat," I said. "Or I think it is. I can't imagine it on either Thorne or her mother."

"I was wondering if it wasn't. The room, not the hat. But none of it makes the least sense."

"What doesn't?" I demanded.

He took a deep breath, looking around the room again.

"I'm trying to find out the reason for this room," he said, more patiently. "And there's only one thing that's certain about it. Thorne Kimball realized it, that time he caught her and Mrs. McIntyre in here. He didn't love that woman. That was all a build-up—for some secret and very ugly kind of . . ."

He stopped for a moment. "I was going to say sadism, and I think that's right. Norton said the neighbors thought it was just plain cussedness. You don't go to these lengths, for years and years, to be just cussed. Look at that path in the carpet. There's something about this that's genuinely diabolical."

He said it so seriously that my blood chilled.

"Take a few of the things we've learned today. He didn't live in this house until he married again. Until then all the reminders of his first wife were locked up in this house, and nobody lived in it. His Nob Hill apartment didn't even have that lovely portrait of her down in the library. Amelia grew up without any of the terror Thorne grew up with; she didn't live here. And these lights—they weren't burning then. Look at them now."

I looked—blankly, but no more blankly than I felt.

"Look at the lamp by the bed."

I looked at that too.

"I still don't see what you mean," I said.

"That oil lamp by the bed is what she must have liked to read by. The center lights would have been too naked. It was 1906, remember, when they had the old carbon filaments. Look at these. They're nitrogen. Four sixty-watt bulbs burning there. What was he lighting? And why aren't there any shades or shutters in this room? There are shutters in his room, and downstairs. And why is the paper peeling off?"

He shook his head.

"There's not a vestige of love or tenderness—or remorse—in this room. And he didn't have a picture of her in his own

bedroom—did you notice that? Nor of Amelia, nor the present Mrs. Kimball, nor of Donahue or Thorne. But there is a portrait of himself."

"I didn't notice it," I said. "I was too concerned with Nat and the notes."

"And look at the rug here. He walked this floor, back and forth in front of her dressing gown and slippers—for years. If those slippers had meant anything to him, do you think he could watch them disintegrate, and the soles curl up so they look as if deformed feet had been in them? He looked at the photograph of himself and her on their wedding day every time he paced forward, and the slippers every time he came back. Thorne was right. He hated her."

"But—Colonel Primrose," I said. "—She's been dead for thirty-five years. He couldn't hurt her any more."

Colonel Primrose shrugged his shoulders. "He thought he could, Mrs. Latham. Which is what makes it rather terrible." He hesitated again. "This room is a psychological torture chamber, preserved for that sole purpose. He was getting revenge on her, in some way, for some reason. And because she was a woman, he took it out on other women too. I'll have to talk to Mrs. Kimball. And I wonder about that sister of his. I wish she were still alive."

"Amelia said they hadn't been friends for years." I said.

"That's what I was wondering about."

"Look," I asked, "—couldn't he have done it himself, just to—"

He shook his head. "He'd have left evidence pointing directly to someone, if he was getting some other kind of revenge that way. It won't work, my dear. Because if it hadn't been for the blackout—and one other thing—no one would ever have known. The glass would have been gone this morning just as the bottle was gone last night. Dr. Norton would have certified. It was the sheerest fluke that I happened to spot the glass. Even with the blackout, if they'd come across it when they moved him they probably wouldn't have bothered about it. It was a perfect setup. It couldn't go wrong."

"But it did," I said.

"That was the one other thing—that I happened to hear Mrs. Kimball and Thorne the other night when I brought your umbrella. And Mrs. Kimball said, 'Something will happen. I'll do something.' "

"And do you think she did?" I asked.

"I'm going to talk to her now."

17

I HAD a curious sensation as I came out of the Kimballs' house, something like the early settlers must have had coming across the high sierras . . . the sensation of hidden eyes, calculating and inimical, silently watching them, marking every step of their way. I've lived in small towns where there were always people watching from behind their curtains, but this was different. It was disturbing, and even sinister. I was aware of it so sharply that I didn't look back at the room upstairs, as I might have done, or go to have a look at those heel marks between the urn and the hedge, as I'd thought of doing as I came down the stairs.

Yet when Prentiss Vale came out of his door, noisily clicking the iron latch, it didn't seem sinister, even if it wasn't nearly as casual as he was trying to make it seem. I didn't need the dark shadow on the glass brick of their inside staircase, just to the right of the section of glass that opened out for ventilation and was open now for quite another purpose, to tell me our meeting at the end of the walk wasn't really accidental.

It was the first time I'd seen Prentiss Vale close up in the daylight. He wasn't as youthful looking as I'd thought. There were fine lines in his face, and his blond hair had quite a lot of grey showing in it. He must have been extremely handsome, in a sensitive delicate way, when he was in his twenties. At forty-five his face showed signs of the wear and tear, I suppose, of anxiety and frustrated ambition.

"Hello there!" he said. "What are you doing out so early?"

It was quarter to eleven, and the surprised tone wasn't convincing either.

I thought I might as well help him out. "I've been to the Kimballs'," I said.

"Really?"

"Yes."

I must look awfully simple. His face became very serious.

"I wonder if you happened to hear whether they've read the will?"

He added quickly, "Not that it concerns me at all. I was just wondering."

"I haven't," I said. "Why?"

He laughed. "Just good old low-down curiosity, Mrs. Latham. I certainly hope the police realize he was a bit . . ."

He tapped his forehead and shrugged. "You know."

"Really?" I said.

"Good Lord, don't tell me you hadn't realized it."

He took out a pack of cigarettes and lighted one. His fingers were stained brown with chain smoking, and not steady.

"Is his will going to be a strange document?" I asked.

"Not at all—at least I shouldn't think so. He was a canny guy. It's just something he said once that made me curious. Not about me, I don't mean. I didn't know him very well. Well, so long . . . I hope we'll see something of you while you're here."

"I hope so," I said. "Goodbye."

He turned back. "By the way—don't tell the gendarmes I asked, will you? It's nothing, of course, but you know. They need straws to make their bricks."

"All right," I said, crossing my fingers and hardly able to wait till I saw Colonel Primrose.

Mr. Vale went back to the house, forgetting to loiter on the way. The woman on the stairs moved quickly down. I followed her shadow until she came to where the stairs turned. If Mr. Prentiss Vale had used a little straw in his own bricks they wouldn't have been quite as revealing as they were. It was quite obvious that he and his wife were not just curious . . . and that he, at least, was scared pea green.

To say that I was curious myself would have been equally understating it . . . and the same was apparently true of Ilya Donahue. A curtain moved just a little as I came toward

her house, and I knew before her door opened she was coming out to intercept me too. I slowed down to give her a chance. She was much better at being casual than Prentiss Vale; she had gardening gloves on and a trowel in her hand.

"Oh, dear, I've got to do something about this stock," she said. She surveyed the white and magenta border with a dissatisfied air. "But I suppose I oughtn't to be worrying about a flower bed with Nat almost out of his mind about that awful business over there. It's ghastly, isn't it?"

I agreed that it was.

"Of course, I don't know," she said. "You probably aren't supposed to tell me what I ought to do."

She looked at me so perplexed and appealing that for an instant I found myself wondering if I'd been doing her an injustice. I checked that sharply.

"I don't know whether you know or not, but there's something awfully funny going on around here. I mean, strange."

"Murder usually is," I said.

"I don't mean that," she said quickly.

She glanced from one side to the other.

"—Do you know who did it?"

"No," I said. "Do you?"

"I've got a pretty good idea."

"Then hadn't you better tell the—"

She interrupted me sharply. "No. I'm not absolutely sure —yet."

Her dark eyes had a curious expression in them as she hesitated, looking at me. The wide-eyed appeal was definitely gone. She was trying to make out how much I knew.

"Did you hear somebody scream, last night?" she asked abruptly.

"Yes, I did," I answered.

"Do you know who it was?"

I wanted to say, "It was you, darling," but something held my tongue. Instead I said, "It was awfully dark. I couldn't see anyone. Do you know?"

"I've got a pretty good idea about that too."

I thought, "I'll bet you have," but I didn't say that either. "I should think in that case you really ought to tell the police."

"I'm not going to," she said shortly. "And if you do, I'll say I don't know what in the world you're talking about."

She opened her eyes so they were wide and guileless. Any

policeman would have believed her without hesitation. Then she laughed.

"—Because I was in bed."

"I know," I said.

She hesitated again. The guilelessness was dropped like a mask she'd picked up and thrown down.

"The whole point is, there's something going on around here. Some first-rate hanky panky. And they're all in on it. The whole pack of them."

"Including Nat?" I asked.

"Nat's a babe in the woods," she said curtly. "I ought to know. *If* he is, it's just because of that little childhood sweetheart of his."

A quick angry flush mounted to her cheeks.

"And that's *one* reason, Mrs. Latham, why I'm not telling that policeman you were with anything he doesn't know. I'm going to make Thorne Kimball wish she'd never crossed my path—I'll tell you that."

There was something unattractive and even frightening about the way her eyes brightened and her lids narrowed to quivering slits. For an instant her face was almost unrecognizable.

"If she thinks she can drive me away from here, then she's wrong!"

I stared at her, really frightened. Angry red splotches stained her throat, and there were two white bloodless triangles from her nostrils down to the corners of her tight hard mouth. She was a livid fury, totally oblivious to everything around her.

"And if she thinks she's going to get Nat, then she's crazy! I don't know just who she thinks she is or who she thinks she's up against. At first I was just going to give her rope and let her hang herself. No man wants to be hit over the head, no matter how blue-and-starry-eyed you are. But *now!*"

There was a triumphant gleam in her eyes, and one corner of her red mouth moved in a smile that had such cruel malice in it that my blood chilled. I stared at her in horror. She knew what she was saying, and she meant it, every word of it.

"But *now!*" she repeated. "Now I've got the rope. And I'm going to use it. I'm hanging her myself! Or is it some lethal chamber arrangement they—"

She stopped short, the color draining absolutely out of her face. Her mouth opened, and fear as stark and terrible as the things she'd been saying to me crept around in her eyes like a living thing trying to find some place to hide. She was staring across my shoulder at someone behind me, her eyes fixed, her body seeming to shrink without the conscious movement of a muscle.

I turned quickly. It was Nat Donahue. How long he'd been there or how much he'd heard I didn't know. The concentrated fury and malice of that outburst had blinded both of us to everything else. And he'd heard enough. He came toward her, his face white and absolutely frozen with anger. His eyes were fastened on hers, and the light in them was something I don't ever want to see again.

18

NAT DONAHUE'S voice was quiet and distinct and as dangerous as cold steel.

"Go in the house, Ilya."

He was only a couple of feet from her. She hadn't moved or taken her eyes off his face, as if anger so intense had paralyzed her. She'd never seen him angry before, I thought; she probably thought he was going to strike her.

He stood there in front of her in the path. "Go in the house," he repeated quietly.

There must have been something in his face, just the contempt there, perhaps, or perhaps something that told her she was physically safe. She took a step toward him, her eyes blazing, the white triangles below her nostrils and the scarlet splotches on her throat flaring out again.

"I won't go in the house!" she cried. "You can sneak around and listen and you'll hear a lot of things you don't like! And you're going to hear a lot before I'm through with you! No man's going to throw me over! I only married you because Loring Kimball said you'd never look at another woman. We made a bet before I ever saw you. You don't think you're so irresistible I fell in love with you on the dock, do you?"

I closed my eyes for an instant, paralyzed myself, because I thought he really was going to strike her—and I wouldn't have blamed him. His face was ashen-white.

"But you're not going to get rid of me to marry her now

Loring Kimball's dead!" she went on passionately. "—Not till I'm through with her. And then . . ."

Her high-pitched laugh was terrible.

"I know what's going on. You can just ask her where she put that bottle. And ask your friend Freddie Butts why he gave it to her! You think it's you she wants to marry. Freddie's got a hundred times more money than you'll ever have! Don't think she doesn't—"

"—That's enough, Ilya," Nat said. His tone was controlled and deadly even. "If you're asking questions, you can answer a few. Where were you last night, and why did you leave the phone disconnected?"

The look that shot through her eyes was so blankly revealing that he broke off abruptly, looked at her for just an instant, and strode past her into the house, leaving her—and me—standing there speechless.

If Ilya was speechless she was thinking, and fast. I could almost see reflected in her face the readjusting process going on at lightning speed in her mind. And I tried to pull myself together too, in a different way. All this had happened so swiftly that I hadn't even moved. It was a little awkward, particularly as I had no idea at all of how to make an exit as if nothing had happened.

"I . . . guess I'd better get along," I said.

She looked at me as if she'd forgotten I was there. A little smile, rather lopsided, moved on her lips.

"I'd better have kept my mouth shut," she remarked coolly.

"It's always a good plan," I said.

"Do you suppose he's told the police?"

She asked it almost as if talking to herself.

"I know he hasn't," I answered. "I heard him purposely not telling them."

For an instant I thought I'd go on and say they knew it just the same, because I'd told Colonel Primrose. I thought I'd better not. If there was rope being passed around for people to hang themselves with, I might leave her a length or two . . . and furthermore I didn't myself want any, personally.

Her voice had a curious sort of sardonic lightness. "He wouldn't, of course. I must say he's awfully decent. I don't see what it's ever got him, frankly."

"I don't either," I agreed, but I don't suppose we were thinking of the same thing.

She shrugged her elegant slim shoulders.

"I guess I'll go in and see what I can do about rebuilding some bridges. —I hope you'll keep this little domestic contretemps under your hat."

I crossed my fingers for the second time within ten minutes as I said, "Of course." It seemed to me, considering what Ilya Donahue was like, the strangest kind of naïveté that would let her think there was a woman alive who wouldn't practically break her neck to tell the first person she could find.

I might even have told Molly McIntyre if it hadn't been for the shock I got as I went into my house. Little Joe was down playing in the back garden. As his toys were scattered over the front porch I supposed it was he who'd left my front door partly open, and the rug in the hall deadened my footsteps. I stopped short there, as little prepared for what I heard as I had been for Ilya Donahue's outburst.

"—see what a spot we're in!" Molly was saying earnestly. And I couldn't for a moment really believe I was hearing straight as she went on.

"—I did have the cyanide, and I did give it to her. I was going to throw it away, and she said she and Freddie could use it. They're practically professional photographers. They use the Buttses' dark room, and they have lots of fun. I was saving this can for her too. I had it in another bag I hadn't unpacked, or I'd have given it to her then. So you see what—"

I stepped quickly back onto the porch. I didn't have any idea who she was talking to, but it was obviously someone she had complete confidence in—like Ilya's certainly unfortunate confidence in me, probably, I thought unhappily. It was equally obvious that she hadn't an idea in the world she was weaving strand after strand around Thorne Kimball. In any case it was too late, and I could only hope it really was a friend she was talking to.

I waited for a moment, then came noisily into the hall. She stopped talking instantly. I heard a heavy object moving, and a sound as of rumbling brasses.

To say that my heart sank would be the most understated of understatements. I don't know how many straws there have to be before you come to the final one, but so far as I was concerned this was it. I was even angry. Molly jumped up as I came to the door.

"Oh, Grace, do you know Sergeant—"

"I know Sergeant Buck very well," I said. I suppose I snapped it, further convincing him—if he needed further conviction—that his Colonel was better off single. "He's told you, I presume, that he's officially investigating Mr. Kimball's death?"

She looked blank and a little pale for an instant, and then, so incredibly that I still don't understand it, her face brightened as if an enormous ray of sunshine had pierced the room.

"Oh, that's wonderful!" she cried. "Then you will help us won't you, Sergeant? Because really Thorne didn't have anything to do with it. I *know* she didn't."

Sergeant Buck's iron face congealed, at the sight of me, into some more than adamantine stuff, and his fish-grey eyes looked as if they'd been on the beach a day or so longer. He cleared his throat again.

"I'll do my best, miss."

He put the blue talcum powder can in his pocket and picked up his hat. His exit was as difficult as mine had been from Ilya. I went to the window and watched him go down the steps. If Molly's confidence in him had surprised me, it was nothing to the surprise I had just then. Little Joe was walking down the path, his hand in Sergeant Buck's massive paw. You would have thought they were friends of forty years' standing.

I turned back to Molly.

"You don't understand, Grace," she said quickly. "In the Service, those are the people you *depend* on!"

"I hope you're right," I said. Personally I'd just as soon have put my head in the jaws of Moloch and expected to come through intact.

It was just after lunch that the idea of how much potential for harm we had just next door to us struck me with new force. I'd been worried about it, and thinking whether under the tense change of circumstances over there, it wouldn't be wiser not to give Nat Donahue Thorne's letter that I still had in my bag. The situation was precarious enough as it was—I suppose the kind of foreboding I had was some kind of second sight, really—and it seemed to me the less Thorne Kimball was in it the better. Ilya might rebuild her bridges, some way, but she could never wipe out of Nat's mind what she'd said about her bet with Mr. Kimball, for instance.

Joe had gone to the dining-room window and was standing there, his nose flattened against the glass, watching a couple of interceptor planes swooping like dragonflies in

and out and around four bombers, lumbering like giant bumblebees through the sky over the Bay. Molly went over by him. She hadn't said much about Big Joe since that first day. I knew she hadn't heard from him for over a month, and I knew the planes always in the sky were a constant reminder to her, as they were to Joe, though without the same high confidence that his father was superior to the hazards of war and chance. Their faces were both shining with a kind of radiance. Molly began to hum softly that song from Snow White—"Some Day My Prince Will Come."

She stopped suddenly and stepped back from the window.

"Look, mum, Mrs. Donahue's got glasses," Joe said. "I wish we had some. You can see way up just as plain."

"I know, dear," Molly said.

I looked out past her. Ilya was perched up on the low wall around the lower deck, far from subdued or contrite about anything, scanning the heavens, her hair glistening in the sun as bright as any other Lorelei's.

"Who's Mrs. Donahue looking for? Mr. Donahue isn't a pilot like daddy, is he?"

"No, darling."

There was a tired look in Molly's face as she came over to the table and picked up Joe's half-finished glass of milk.

"You're not being silly, are you?" I said.

"No, not really." She smiled at me. "I'd just as soon not have it so . . . under foot again, that's all."

She took the milk over.

"Down the hatch!" she ordered.

I saw Ilya Donahue look up at the window, wave her hand and laugh. And that's when I decided to give Thorne's letter to Nat.

When Molly came down stairs from getting Joe up for his rest, she went over to the window again and looked out for a few minutes without saying anything.

"You know, Grace," she said then, "I hope I didn't make a mistake telling Sergeant Buck what I did. He didn't ask me anything at all. I just felt I'd . . . I'd known him a long time, and I blurted it all out. —I think I'll go over and see Thorne and tell her."

19

SHE hadn't been gone two minutes when the doorbell rang. It was Nat Donahue, and something had happened to him. He wasn't gay and debonair, as his wife had been waving up from the deck to Molly and Little Joe. In fact he wasn't gay at all, but his face had lost the haggard look it had over in the Kimball library and that I'd have expected to see still on it. It was clear and determined, as if he'd made up his mind about something at last. His grey eyes were steady and his jaw firm without the bitter tenseness it had had before.

"Are you busy, or can I talk to you a minute?" he asked.

"Come in," I said.

I took my bag off the hall table and opened it. Having made up my own mind, I took the letter out with no qualms or premonitions of any kind.

"Thorne asked me to give you this," I said, handing it to him. "This morning."

That last answered the question in his eyes as he took it. He looked at it with a curious mixture of eagerness and apprehension, went into the living-room and stood for an instant in front of the fireplace, just holding it in his hand. He turned abruptly.

"Do you mind if I read it?"

"No," I said. "And when you have, just put it in there."

I nodded at the fire smoldering in the hearth, went into the library and picked up a magazine that Little Joe had been cutting pictures of planes out of. I put it down and straight-

ened up the table, doing anything until he could get that letter read without me being in the room. He could have read it twenty times when I finally went back, but he was reading it again. He folded it slowly and put it in the envelope. He opened his coat and started to put it in his pocket.

"In the fire, Nat," I said.

He shook his head. "No. Not for anything—or anybody."

As he put it in his pocket I had the impression that if Ilya Donahue had rebuilt her bridges, Nat had quietly and irrevocably burned his. What bearing Thorne's letter had on any or all of it, I couldn't know. I knew that in the state she was in when she wrote it the safest place for it now was in the fire, not in the pocket of a man who lived in the same house as Ilya. But there wasn't any point trying to argue with anyone with Nat's jaw, and the look on his face just then.

"I wanted to tell you I'm sorry about the scene the Donahues put on this noon," he said. He looked over at me, one eyebrow slightly raised and an odd twist to his big mouth. "It's all right. It settled a good many things that needed settling."

"As long as it doesn't settle Thorne Kimball—" I began.

"Don't worry," he said calmly. "Ilya's changed her mind about making any trouble. Even if she could."

That seemed to me one of the most optimistic and starry-eyed statements I'd heard made for a long time, but as I could see neither quality on his face I assumed he had some kind of assurance of it.

"I want to get in touch with Colonel Primrose," he said. "Do you know where he's staying?"

"He's going to be at your house for cocktails at five," I said. "Unless he's changed his plans."

I gathered from his look that that surprised him—or perhaps he was just listening, for he went quickly around the end of the sofa and to the front window. I looked around just in time to see his car disappearing along the street toward town, Ilya at the wheel.

As he came back in to the middle of the room my doubt at whatever assurances she'd given him rose sharply.

"I want to see Primrose—"

He broke off at the sound of voices in the hall. It was Molly, and Thorne Kimball was just behind her. Thorne stopped in the middle of the doorway, looking at Nat, her extraordinary blue eyes widening quickly. It was almost as if she was so used to seeing him in her mind that she wasn't

sure for an instant if he was physically there or not. It seemed to me, too, that the whole emotional content of their relation toward each other had become tremendously intensified by the sudden barriers raised between them. There was something else too. Something had happened to Thorne since I'd seen her a few hours ago. For the first time, she was frightened; I could sense it as definitely as if fear were an outer garment she wore. I wondered what on earth had happened, and when I looked at Molly I saw she was frightened too, even if she was trying to put the best face on it that she could.

Thorne took a quick step forward. "Nat—have the police got in touch with you?"

He shook his head. "Why?"

"They called the house just a minute ago and asked for you. Ilya had told them you were there."

"She knew I was over here," Nat said calmly. "What did they want?"

"They've been down to the bank, and they've read the will."

Nat waited.

"And . . . a lot of things have come up. Mother must know, but she's gone in her rom and locked the door. All I could get out of her was that those . . . notes are back again —and Inspector Moran thinks you knew all the time."

She was so obviously distressed that his voice was very gentle. "—Knew what, Thorne?"

"That if you were still in his employ at the time of his death they were to be cancelled—and you were to get a big share in the firm. You didn't know that, did you?"

Nat shook his head soberly. "I never saw the will, Thorne, and I didn't know it." Then his face broke into an irrepressible grin. "And I won't believe it until the courts sign and seal it."

"But that's not all," she said quickly. "Colonel Primrose called up. I heard him tell Mother not to leave the house. Oh, it's so . . . so incredible!"

He went over to her and took her hands. "Easy does it, old girl," he said gently. "Sit down here and tell me about it."

He sat her down on the sofa and sat on the arm beside her.

"Now let's have it. What's so incredible?"

Her voice was quiet and steady, as if with a great effort of control.

"In the will he says that if he died suddenly there was to

be an . . . autopsy. A very careful and minute one. And that . . . his wife was to be found, and questioned closely. —I don't know where he expected her to be. Except that of course, she wasn't home last night. Oh, Nat—I can't believe it, and it's all my fault!"

She held his hand tightly, like a child.

"What do you mean, Thorne?"

"I made so much trouble all the time. And that . . . cherry brandy. Freddie and I—"

Her hand closed tighter as the telephone rang.

Molly glanced at me. I nodded. She went quickly out into the hall.

"Oh, *no!*" I heard her say sharply, and after a moment, "Okay. Sit tight. Goodbye."

She flashed back into the doorway, her cheeks flushed.

"It's Freddie," she said. It was Nat she was talking to mostly. "He's down at a bar in Chinatown, and Ilya just came in. She's with Inspector Moran, and Freddie says there's dirty work at the crossroads. He just wanted to let Thorne know."

She came on into the room, her eyes shooting sparks of fire.

"You know, Mrs. B. had something. Why somebody doesn't poison that wife of yours, Nat Donahue, is something I've never understood."

Nat got to his feet. He looked at her quietly for a moment and turned to Thorne. "There's just one thing," he said steadily. "This is getting serious. What about the cherry brandy?"

"Freddie and I decided if he liked it we'd give it to him," Thorne said. "We were doing pictures in the dark room—that afternoon after the block party. He gave it to me and I took it home. It was just a kind of joke, really."

"Did you give it to Mr. Kimball?"

Thorne shook her head, started to speak and stopped.

He stood looking down at her a moment.

"Who did give it to him, Thorne?"

She got abruptly to her feet. "I wasn't telling the truth then. I gave it to him myself. I went—"

"You're not telling the truth now. You don't want—"

The phone jangled again.

"I'll answer this," Nat said.

Thorne stood there, Molly and I looking at her—me, at least, rather helplessly. Nat came back immediately.

"It's for you, Thorne."

She went out. I heard her speaking quietly for a moment. When she came back, her finely cut oval face under the sleek smart roll of her black hair had the curiously plastic quality of an ivory mask. Her eyes were strange expressionless aquamarine again.

"It's the District Attorney's office. I've got to go down there. Right away."

"I'll go along," Nat said briefly.

Molly's voice sounded calmer than I knew she felt.

"You'd better go in just the opposite direction, darling. I mean, there's no use in sticking your neck out when it's just what . . . what everybody's waiting for. What do you suppose Ilya told them you were at Thorne's for when she knew you were here? Don't you see?"

"I'm going with Thorne," Nat said.

"All right—then I'm going too," Molly said. "And we ought to take Grace and Little Joe along—just to *prove* we're nice respectable people."

The three of them laughed suddenly . . . to my surprise and also relief, because people who can laugh like that have a special armor all their own.

I suppose it's the crystal clarity of the sunlight and the almost tropical whiteness of their city that make San Franciscans take to holes like moles when they relax. It seemed to me almost every cocktail lounge I was in was in a state of perpetual blackout, except of course the sky room up on Nob Hill that's completely above a world so various, so beautiful, so new that it's really breathtaking. I've never eaten such divine food in darker alleys, or stumbled over so many other people's feet getting to a table, or peered so myopically through such stygian gloom trying to recognize somebody smiling behind a dry martini less than fifteen feet away.

I was doing all that at five-thirty that afternoon, when I went to the Cirque Room with Colonel Primrose. He was waiting in the lobby when I came.

"I thought you were seeing Mrs. Donahue at five o'clock," I said.

He smiled. "She stood me up, I'm afraid. However, it's one of those cases where Mahomet comes to the mountain."

I didn't know which was which until I glanced over and saw Sergeant Phineas T. Buck sitting beside a marbleized

pillar with a gold floriated capital. There was a red and white papier-mâché horse, like a strayed reveller, just behind him. They made a grotesque pair, the horse looking very gay and Sergeant Buck looking as if he'd lunched on pig iron.

"I mean Mrs. Donahue's here," Colonel Primrose explained. "Buck's devoted the afternoon to her. I take it Molly McIntyre has quietly enrolled him on the side of the angels."

He gave me an amused smile.

"It must be a little awkward for both of you, finding yourselves on the same side for once."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said. "And furthermore, you seem awfully cheerful about something."

"It's seeing you, my dear," he said. "It has to be that, because everything else is a mess. Why somebody didn't long ago throttle Mrs. Donahue beats me. But come along."

That's how I came to be peering through the atmospheric gloom, and I was trying to see who the man was with Ilya Donahue. He didn't look worth all the charm she was turning on. He had reddish hair and a lazy uninvolved manner, and it was only from time to time, when he glanced at her out of the corners of his eyes, that he looked even bright. And when he glanced at her it was always when she was looking the other way.

"Who's the man?" I asked.

I suppose the sound Colonel Primrose made was intended to be conventionally polite.

"That," he said, "is a certain Mr. Jim Brodie. He is the smartest sensational newsman in town. Furthermore, he's smart enough to think Mrs. Donahue is selling him a bill of goods. He called me up before he came."

He gave the waiter our order and moved a little, not to face them.

"I wonder what she'd think," he remarked, "if she knew how thick the shadows were."

"What do you mean?"

"There's Buck and myself and Brodie. And over in that corner—you can't see him—is that extraordinary son of that extraordinary mother Mrs. Butts."

"*Freddie?*"

"Freddie," Colonel Primrose replied. "Freddie and Sergeant Buck are working independently. Brodie and I are—well, we're together as long as he thinks there might be a military angle."

He looked at me very seriously.

"I don't want Brodie to get loose. You know these so-called feature stories in Sunday newspaper supplements?"

"Those awful things about people's love lives?" I asked. "With pictures?"

He nodded.

"That's Mr. Brodie's specialty, among other things, and I think that's what Mrs. Donahue has in mind. And I'm trying to keep San Joaquin Terrace from being so glamorized. I may be wrong, but I think Mrs. Donahue is trying to mix blood and dirt and spatter as many of her friends up there as she can. I'd like very much to see her not succeed. And—you see where you come in, Mrs. Latham."

He wasn't looking at Ilya. He was looking at me, intently and impersonally.

"I . . . no, I don't," I said.

"Then I'll tell you," he said patiently. "I want you to tell me everything you saw when you went into Loring Kimball's study that night. I want you to begin before that, when the siren sounded—or earlier if anything happened—and come down to this afternoon, when Freddie Butts phoned the Kimballs' house and then yours. Buck's had his eye on him too. In other words, I want everything you can think of. And objectively, my dear—not what you want or think, what you saw or heard."

I couldn't say anything for an instant.

"There's a story on that hill," he went on earnestly, "that would absolutely blast some innocent and useful people. I don't know quite what it is. It's connected with the Kimball house and Kimball's murder, of course. Ilya Donahue either knows it, or suspects enough of it to get hold of a man whose job is ferreting out scandal and making it sound as lurid as the public prosecutor allows. —Do you want that pitifully tragic room up there, with the dressing gown and those pathetic slippers, and the rest of it, spread over the Sunday supplements, with Thorne and Nat and the rest of them?"

He picked up his glass and put it down again without drinking from it. "—You've got to help, Grace."

It was the first time he'd ever called me by my first name.

"It's just that . . . I think Loring Kimball's better off dead than alive," I said unhappily. "Or everybody else is."

"I agree," he said. "There's more to it than that. I have a strange feeling about all this . . ."

He hesitated.

"I can't explain it until I know more than I do now. And you—"

He stopped as Ilya Donahue got up. She hadn't seen us. I couldn't tell whether she'd seen Freddie Butts or not. She put out her hand to Jim Brodie, who half got up without discommoding himself. I watched her go down the corridor. She moved with a kind of almost triumphant lightness, like a person quite satisfied with what she'd done. Before she reached the end the lank hollow-chested figure of Freddie Butts moved in behind her. He had his hat under his arm, and tossed the Chinese hat-check girl a coin as he followed out.

Mr. Jim Brodie's equally lank figure disengaged itself from behind the table and sauntered over to us, complete with a half-finished scotch and soda and a fresh bowl of yellow popcorn.

He sat down. Colonel Primrose introduced us. Mr. Brodie gave me one disinterested glance.

"She's cagey," he said. I was a little startled until I realized he was talking about Ilya Donahue without preamble.

"I can't get what she's driving at. Sounds like she's got something, but she's going to spill it at her own convenience."

He chewed his popcorn. Colonel Primrose waited.

"I'm supposed to go up, sometime," he said without enthusiasm. "I suppose when the Army gets out?"

"I'll let you know," Colonel Primrose said.

Brodie nodded and finished his drink.

"What's Freddie doing, trailing along?"

Colonel Primrose shook his head. "Did she know he was there?"

"I said she was cagey. I didn't ask her."

Brodie pushed back his chair.

"A sentry wouldn't shoot to kill if I turned up there tonight?"

"I said I'd let you know," Colonel Primrose said. "There's a story at Richmond if you want it."

He took out a card and wrote a few words on it. "Give this to Mitchell."

"Okay, Colonel. Thanks."

He tossed a handful of popcorn in his mouth. "Watch that gal, Colonel. I don't know whether she's got any military secrets, but boy, is she after somebody's vital organs. So long."

Colonel Primrose finished his scotch. I'd never seen him silent for quite so long a time. He glanced at his watch.

"I want to phone, and see Buck for a minute," he said. "Then I'll take you out and feed you, and you can tell me what I want to know. Otherwise . . ."

I don't know whether it was supposed to be a veiled threat or not. If it was, the veil was diaphanously thin.

20

WE walked down California Street. The cable cars clanging up the hill were jammed with people sticking on like caviar on a forty-five degree oblong of toast. The clock on the square dark tower of St. Mary's was striking seven. The gold inscription above it—"Son, Behold the Time and Fly From Evil"—was glistening in the low shafts of sunlight through the Square across the street. The sun shone too on the stainless steel robe of Sun Yat Sen, his rose marble face, benign and placid, gazing out over the green square. Across the cavern between the office buildings at the bottom of the street, a single tower and the supporting ribbons of the Oakland Bridge gleamed silver.

We turned at the corner where the five-tiered pagoda towers stand, green and yellow faded to chartreuse. It was all very real and tangible—the sense of people returning home from work, the noise, the zesty workaday quality of it —so much so that what we'd just left should have seemed remote and not real. But it didn't, curiously; it was someway part of the atmosphere that was complex and rich, with a kind of undertow of mystery as deep and intangible as the surface was hard and obvious.

I was trying to tell Colonel Primrose, as we walked along, what had happened from the time I'd heard that first moan of the siren rising up the hill. I'd got as far as seeing Ilya, and having the sudden conviction that it was she who'd screamed, and that there was something odd about it—it had broken off

so abruptly, and there were no running feet as there would have been if she'd been genuinely frightened. We turned down Sacramento Street through the crowded section where Chinatown streams across it into the deserted stretch toward Montgomery Street. There was a parking lot on either side of the restaurant we were going to. Colonel Primrose looked in both of them before he held the door for me to go in.

"Are we expecting somebody?" I asked. "And friend or foe?"

It seemed an odd place for a rendezvous. It was glaringly light and very bare. At the same time it had the air of intimacy of places where gourmets meet and the proprietor is both personality and host. A man who'd come in just ahead of us was hanging up his hat above a single table. The waiter removed the Reserved sign without a word, the man sat down without a word, as if it had been a ritual for both of them so long that no words were needed. His face was lean and ascetic, with a pair of deep burning eyes, and thick greying brows that he smoothed with long white fingers. He wore a black suit and a black tie that gave the impression of being flamboyant without really being so, and there was a kind of remote detachment about him, as if he really wasn't there at all.

"Is that him?" I asked.

Colonel Primrose smiled and turned to the waiter. I was eating écrevisses au vin blanc, it seemed, followed by broiled squab en crapaudine with fresh asparagus, so I didn't have to think about that.

"You're being dictatorial and exasperating," I said. "I don't mind the first, because it sounds wonderful. But who *is* the man?"

"He is a disbarred lawyer," Colonel Primrose said placidly. "—And don't turn around and stare at him, please, Mrs. Latham."

"What has he got to do—"

"Loring Kimball was responsible for his being disbarred, as a reward for years of . . . service, let's say. What he does now is enigmatical, except that while he appears to know a great deal about people, the police have never been able to prove he makes any evil use of his knowledge."

"You mean it's not quite blackmail, I suppose," I said.

Colonoel Primrose shrugged. "Not proved," he repeated. "He was pointed out to me when I was here before, several years ago. I talked to him on the phone today after I heard

Kimball's will. He was left three hundred a month for life, and it couldn't be for love. I'm wondering if I'm going to get any information from him. However—your écrevisses. And go on."

The waiter moved away.

"I want two things chiefly. I want a picture of the study as you saw it—honestly. And what happened when you went to telephone. That's why you looked so blank when Moran was talking to Thorne and Amelia, wasn't it?"

It wasn't an easy job to reconstruct that pretty ghastly few minutes when I was aware I wasn't alone in the inky blackness of the Kimball library—even when I knew now that it was Thorne. I could still feel the chiffon wisp on my icy hand, and the emptiness where my flashlight had been. The soft whisper of something moving across the rug, the click of the key in the lock, the door that was closed when I'd left it open, without my hearing it being closed . . . all that came back very vividly, intensified by the hard white light on the green painted walls around me now. I could almost hear the bang as I slammed that door shut and got out, just as the all clear sounded and the lights began to creep up and the City to live again.

Colonel Primrose had put down his fork and was looking at me as if he thought I'd taken leave of my senses.

"You were *sure* it was Thorne?"

"—The gardenias, and the white dress," I said. "And there was the brandy bottle there on the candle stand before Nat crashed it over getting across to turn off the light. Ilya said today to ask Thorne what she did with it."

He looked at me in silence for a moment.

"I want to go back over that, in detail," he said then. "But wait a minute."

I watched him blankly as he got up and went toward the entrance. Then I understood, in part at least. The ascetic figure of the disbarred lawyer was moving between the tables in the same direction. For an instant the two of them stood side by side at the cigar counter. The black-clad figure moved on; Colonel Primrose came back to the table, biting off the end of his cigar.

He smiled faintly as he sat down. "He doesn't care for personal interviews—it's a personal vagary. I sometimes think San Francisco is the last stronghold of colorful individualism left in the country."

He took an envelope out of his pocket and drew out half

a dozen closely typed sheets of ordinary typewriter paper.

" 'To Whom It May Concern' is good," he said. "Excuse me—do you mind?"

I watched him go quickly through one sheet after another. He chuckled suddenly as he came to the last page.

" 'The Prentiss Vales will leave the end of the week for the six months and a day they spend in Nevada to escape California taxes,' " he read aloud. " 'They shipped china, silver and objects d'art to Colorado on December 12th to escape bombing.' "

"A lot of people have done that," I said. "And don't tell me you went through all this hocus-pocus to find out that the Vales are jittery. I could have told you that."

He gave me a particularly patient glance. "But you haven't, have you. —That's just a part of it. He goes into detail about Kimball's feud with the Butts family. Now don't tell me you thought Mrs. Butts came over and blistered the pants off Loring Kimball just for fun."

"I didn't know it was a feud," I said.

"Dating from pre-Depression days. Let's see. —Dr. Norton was engaged to the first Mrs. Kimball before her family broke it off and announced her engagement to Kimball."

He turned back to the first page, and chuckled again.

"At least I presume he means Kimball. He starts out, 'In reference to the son of a bitch concerning whom inquiry was made this morning, I wish to say . . .' and so refers to him throughout."

He put the notes back in the envelope and put it back in his pocket.

"There's nothing else in here we didn't know. Its chief value is corroboration . . . and heaven knows it's needed in view of the song and dance I've been hearing around the Hall of Justice about what a noble figure is lost to the world."

He shook his head.

"Let's go back, Mrs. Latham. We start with this—Loring Kimball was a monomaniac . . . in some way the full extent of which I don't understand. I don't mean he wasn't sane on every other point. But his life was absolutely dominated by a desire for an insane revenge . . . on someone who had died and escaped. It was a revenge on death, in a sense—or on life, I don't know which. It was a strange and terrible thing. He had to take it out, furthermore, on the living as well . . . and he deliberately built up all his façade to hide what was going on inside."

He stopped, looking at me steadily.

"He was working up to some extraordinary climax . . . and that was why he had to die. I thought for a while that someone might simply have come to the end of the rope. But I don't think that's it."

"Because . . . ?" I asked.

"Because his engagement book is gone. Nobody in the house knows where it is. Everybody knows it was always right there on his desk. Moran's men have searched the house from attic to incinerator."

His voice trailed slowly away as he finished that sentence.

"—For the love of God," he said, as urbanely as ever. "I *am* a fool. Donahue, of course."

I stared at him. "But it was Nat who told—"

"I don't mean Nat. Ilya."

The ask from his cigar landed with a quiet sizzle in his coffee cup. He signalled for the waiter.

"—That's why she was waiting behind the urn. That's why she started to scream and changed her mind. She knew Kimball was dead, and she expected . . ."

He pushed back his chair. "I've got to see Brodie, and Moran. You get a taxi and go home. I'll be back at the hotel in an hour. Don't open your mouth to anybody—do you understand?"

21

I was still in a sort of semi-daze when I walked into the house on San Joaquin Terrace fifteen minutes later, and what I saw when I opened the door increased it considerably. Molly McIntyre was apparently having a kind of party. Wordsworth's verse flashed into my mind instantly. A party in a parlour . . .

> Some sipping punch, some drinking tea,
> All silent, and all damned.

Only it was scotch and coke they were sipping. Whether damned or not, they were certainly all silent when I came in, just sitting or standing, concentrated on something, nobody saying a word.

There was the family Butts—Mr. and Mrs. B. and Freddie—, Molly, Thorne and Amelia Kimball. Nat wasn't there, nor Mrs. Kimball or Dr. Norton. Nor Ilya Donahue, I needn't say. The Prentiss Vales were there, going out or summoned back, I didn't know which, because they were dressed. He had on a dinner jacket, and she was wearing a long filmy chiffon frock, pale mauve pink. Her hair, which I hadn't noticed the night I saw her at the Buttses', was ash-blonde, loosely curled high around the crown of her head. She was sitting with a kind of relaxed elegance in the chair by the fire, as silent and just as troubled as any of the rest of

them. I got the impression that they'd been that way, all of them, for several moments. Freddie was standing in front of the fireplace with a Well-that's-the-story-,what-are-we-going-to-do-about-it air that made him a focal point, vanishing as each one of them returned to his own mind. Even the rubicund shine on Mr. Butts's bald head seemed to have dimmed. There was hardly a bubble in the amber liquid in the glass in his hand. He must have been holding it for some time quite untouched.

Mrs. Butts was the first to acknowledge my presence.

"Come in, it's your house," she said. "Freddie's been doing some detective work this afternoon, and the police have had Thorne down grilling her."

A quick smile shot through Thorne's eyes. She looked as if she'd managed to get through it.

"I don't think we ought to drag Mrs. Latham through all this," Mr. Butts said. "Our affairs can't interest her very much. I think, Mrs. B., we'd better get home."

Mrs. Butts got up with a docility I shouldn't have suspected.

"I still want to know about his will," Prentiss Vale said, apparently, from the looks of exasperation, not for the first time.

Mrs. Butts stopped short. "I think Amelia's the only one who ought to be worried about that."

Amelia Kimball's voice was low and nervous. "I'm not worried at all . . . I told you my aunt left me more than I want. I'm glad Nat and Lucy got most of it. I really am."

Mrs. Butts flushed. "I didn't mean that," she said flatly. "—If you'd let go my arm, Mr. B. It's Prentiss's fault. He provokes me beyond endurance. He acts as if he were the only one around here who's had to put up with anything for the last ten years. People that build glass houses ought to have enough money to buy curtains. If anyone had any influence on Loring Kimball, it was certainly—"

"—Now, Mrs. B." Mr. Butts's interruption was sharp, but it didn't stop her casting Mrs. Prentiss Vale a look nobody could possibly mistake.

And with all I'd learned about the people on San Joaquin Terrace, it was the first time I'd realized there was no love lost between those two. Mrs. Vale straightened her languid form sufficiently to toss her cigarette past Freddie into the fire, and relaxed again without comment. Prentiss Vale got up and poured himself another drink.

"Good night, Mrs. Latham," Mr. Butts said affably. "Don't stay out all night, Freddie. Come, Mrs. B."

The door closed behind them.

"Mother's just upset, Claire," Freddie said to Mrs. Vale. "She didn't mean anything."

Mrs. Prentiss Vale's bored voice drifted out with complete unconcern.

"I don't care what she meant. She's got a memory like an elephant, hasn't she. It's ten years since I had any influence on Loring Kimball—if I ever did. I mean, Prentiss may not be much, but I'd rather have married him if I had to live in the Mission than be in Lucy Kimball's shoes . . . if anybody's interested."

She glanced around at her husband.

"You've had enough to drink, darling. Let's go home. I'm tired and I'm bored and I don't see what all the fuss is about. I mean, what of it? What if Jim Brodie does do a job on us—who can it hurt? I mean, Dr. Norton's reputation's better than Jim Brodie's. What if he was going to give a certificate?"

She looked at Thorne.

"What did the will say beside investigating Lucy?"

Thorne shook her head. "Mother won't say. Just that when he died, they weren't to accept Dr. Norton's certificate. That's all I can get out of her."

She got up and held out her hand to Amelia. "We'd better get back. Thanks, Freddie—you've been swell. I just hope—"

"Skip it," Freddie Butts said. "Come on, let's go. Good night, Molly. Night, Mrs. Latham. Are you guys coming?"

"Yes, we're coming," Mrs. Prentiss Vale said. She took her husband's arm.

"Don't forget this," Molly said.

I glanced around. She'd picked something up from the table and was holding it out to Mrs. Vale. It was a long shoulder spray of gardenias.

Mrs. Vale reached out for it. As she did the end of the chiffon scarf that made a cape for her dress touched my arm, freezing it suddenly to the bone. The odor of the gardenias was heavy and almost nauseating to me.

I stood there dazed and bewildered as they went out . . . I had so taken it for granted it had been Thorne!

Then I sat down limply, trying to readjust myself, and turned at the sound of a shuffling step. It was Little Joe in the hall, in his pajamas and dressing gown, wide-eyed, peer-

ing out through the front door at his mother and the others standing at the end of the path. I went out to him.

"Is that my ghost?" he asked solemnly.

I caught my breath. "No, darling," I said, as calmly as I could. Mrs. Prentiss Vale did look rather like one, standing there luminous and evanescent in the reflection of the Plaza lights through the feathery yellow mimosa. "There aren't any ghosts, really."

"But there is too ghostses," he said stoutly. "There's a lady ghost at night under the 'lyptus tree. She's all white like the moon in Maui. But she wouldn't hurt anybody. She thinks little boys is nice, and she's nice too."

"Perhaps there are, then," I said. "And I'm sure they're very nice. And what about bed?"

He started reluctantly off, looking back for the last glimpse of his ghost.

"Tell mum to come up and tell me good night again. And don't say there isn't ghostses any more, because there is."

It was eleven o'clock when I went to bed. I couldn't sleep. It was like having a jangling carrousel in my head, going round and round, first one way and then the other. I got up and looked out at the Terrace. It seemed to me almost as if a pall of some kind hung over it. That came from Little Joe's ghost story, I suppose, though at my age I shouldn't be as impressionable as all that. I looked out of the side window toward the Prentiss Vales, wishing I'd paid more attention to Mrs. Vale. She'd just seemed a bored and languid woman of forty, not in the least vivid or interesting.

The shadowy glow of lights through their glass brick made a rather ghostly panel now of their stair well. There was no one moving on it, however, though I could see the shadow of the wrought-iron stair rail against it. The Kimballs' house was dark, the eucalyptus trees making a sable mass against it. Next door to me the Donahues were still up. A light in the living-room shone softly through the drawn curtains onto the front garden.

I had just started to turn away and try to get some sleep when a car, moving very slowly and quietly, with lights dimmed, came around the bend of the Terrace horseshoe. It slowed down even more in front of the Kimballs', came on past the Vales' and stopped next door to me. The lights went off. I stood there watching it, fascinated. No one got out; it

seemed to be just standing there. From the light on the Plaza I could see a single dark figure at the wheel, just sitting, waiting. I don't know how long it was before the door opened and a man got out. It was the total silence of the thing that made it seem so strange. Most people slam car doors automatically. This door closed so quietly I could barely hear it. The man stood there, looking up at the Donahues' house.

Something clicked inside me then, and before I was really aware of what I was doing I reached over and got the telephone. I dialled the operator and gave the number of Colonel Primrose's hotel.

I looked back out the window. The man was coming across the sidewalk, so silently that I couldn't hear his footsteps. He stepped over the border of white and magenta stock onto the grass, slipped across to the window and raised himself to look in. I could see his face then, but I already knew who it was.

"I want to speak to Colonel Primrose, please," I said. I turned away from the open window and spoke as quietly as I could.

"It's Grace Latham," I said quickly when he answered. "Jim Brodie is at the Donahues'. He's looking in the front window now."

"Thanks," he said, imperturbably as ever. "I'll be right over. Stay in the house."

I looked back outside. Brodie was coming across to the entrance. He slipped quickly into the shadow that sliced across the doorway. I could hear a bell ring inside the house. I waited, a little amused suddenly. In a moment Nat would come, and Thorne and Freddie would have told him all about it, and Mr. Brodie would find himself out in a tangled heap in the middle of the street. I could almost see him out there already.

The bell rang again, for a long time. Still no one came. The light in the living-room, and one I could see now upstairs in the back, took on the curiously static quality that lights have in empty rooms. Again the bell rang—for minutes, it seemed to me, as if Jim Brodie had decided to lean against it until something happened. It stopped suddenly. He came out of the shadows and looked around him. There was a narrow service entrance between our hedge and the house, coming to a dead end with a door to the basement kitchen. He went down to it and knocked softly, waited an instant and came back, disappearing in the shadow again. I heard the knob turn

as he tried the door. Then a narrow slit of light showed, and widened. Mr. Brodie was going in. The oblong darkened for an instant as he slipped inside, and disappeared as he closed the door.

I looked out into the street. Colonel Primrose I knew couldn't get here that fast. Then I blinked my eyes. A large black figure loomed suddenly, coming rapidly, on velvet soles, from the mimosa trees in the tiny plaza inside the horseshoe. It was Sergeant Buck, and he was across the road, past the car and at the Donahues' door in less time than it takes to say it. The slit of light widened again, his great bulk filled the doorway for an instant, and the door closed. Sergeant Buck was inside the house with Mr. Brodie. I would personally prefer a corner of the cake with Gargantua, I thought, and waited for the sound of crunching bones.

But no sound came until somewhere in the back I heard a door open. I could see the reflection of a light on the white painted walls of the sun deck. Then I looked back up the Terrace. A taxi was coming down the wrong way, its headlights dimmed. It pulled up by Brodie's car. Colonel Primrose got out.

I grabbed my dressing gown, got into it, ran through the hall to the bathroom at the end and pulled up the curtain. Brodie was on the lower deck, prowling silently around. He bent down suddenly by the tub of dwarf flowering peach that Ilya Donahue had emptied the glass of water into, and picked something up. It looked like an envelope as he held it down toward the light from the house. Then he made a startled move, took a step back and started to stuff it in his pocket; but Sergeant Buck was across the deck in two giant strides and his hands came swiftly down on Brodie's arms. The envelope fell to the deck, Brodie fell back sprawling across the deck wall, holding his arm.

Sergeant Buck bent down. In the yellow light of his flash I saw that the envelope had fallen beside a small flat oblong object lying there. Sergeant Buck picked them both up and put them in his pocket.

All that had happened in a silence as complete as if I'd seen it on a screen with the sound track dead. Then Brodie gave a sudden half-stifled shout and scrambled up to his feet, still pointing down over the parapet, down the sheer drop of the rocky cliff.

"Down there!" he said. "It's a woman's body."

Sergeant Buck strode to the wall, leaned over, held his

flashlight down. I pushed the window up and leaned out. I couldn't see anything beyond the end of the deck built over the steep ledge, but I could hear them as plainly as if they were in the room with me.

"For God's sake!" Brodie said. "It's Mrs. Donahue."

I was dizzy and sick. It was sheer rock below there, fifty feet or more down . . . down to sudden death.

Sergeant Buck turned sharply as Colonel Primrose came out on the deck.

"It's her, sir—Mrs. Donahue. Down on the rocks."

Colonel Primrose crossed to the parapet and stood silently looking down. He turned back and looked at Brodie.

Sergeant Buck took the envelope and the other object out of his pocket, and handed them to Colonel Primrose.

"Must have dropped these when she fell, sir."

"Fell, hell!" Brodie said harsly. "What do you mean, fell? She was pushed over. Look at this."

He pointed to the dwarf peach tree in the tub, stepped forward and touched it. It toppled over, a few roots still clinging to the dirt.

"She tried to hang on to that, and somebody put it back so it wouldn't be noticed. And look at that letter you've got. There's been a tug of war over that. Don't pull the old Army game on me, brother. She was shoved. This is murder."

"You ought to know, Brodie," Colonel Primrose said.

He started across the deck toward the door. Brodie started to follow, and stopped quickly as Sergeant Buck's hand descended on his arm again.

"I've got a dead-line to make!"

Sergeant Buck spoke out of one corner of his granite mouth. "—You're going to be one if you don't watch it."

22

MOLLY came into my room the next morning before I'd waked, in dressing gown and slippers, her hair tousled. Her face was pale and shocked. I sat up, the night before flooding back as the barriers of sleep fell away. She put the morning paper in front of me and stood holding on to the bed post, without a word.

The picture in the middle of the front page struck me first. It was Thorne hurrying across the street in front of the Hall of Justice in Portsmouth Square. Her head was down to avoid the camera. Nat was on one side of her, holding her arm, Molly on the other, her head up, mad as a little hornet.

"Socialite Questioned in Death of Stepfather," the caption said.

I read on.

"Thorne Kimball leaving the Hall of Justice yesterday, accompanied by Nathaniel P. Donahue and a friend. Miss Kimball was questioned for an hour in the poison death of her stepfather, Loring Kimball. Donahue, University of California graduate and recently appointed general manager of Kimball Interests, was the dead tycoon's protege. Rumor connected his name with Miss Kimball's persistently before his marriage in the Islands last year."

In a double column at the left—and only the sinking of a Jap cruiser was crowding it from glaring headlines across the top—was the other news.

"Nathaniel Donahue Arrested in Wife's Unexplained Death."

"—I knew he shouldn't go down there with her," Molly said dully.

"The body of Mrs. Ilya Donahue, twice divorced wife of Nathaniel P. Donahue—see picture—general manager of Kimball Interests, was found at the bottom of the cliff at fashionable San Joaquin Terrace late last night. Early this morning the police were still trying to put together the tragic picture of what had happened in the luxurious home recently occupied by Donahue and his wife. They refused to disclose the contents of a letter found near where she took her plunge to instantaneous death, except to say there was no question of suicide. There were indications that the dead woman put up a struggle, though her next-door neighbor, Prentiss Vale, well-known architect, heard no cries or commotion of any kind coming from there. Other residents will be questioned this morning.

"Donahue was taken into custody at a Nob Hill hotel. He refused to comment on why he was not at home. Hotel employees said he engaged a room shortly before seven, arrived around ten-thirty and apparently went to bed. They said he appeared to be laboring under strain.

"Special interest is attached to the case because it is the second time within the week that death has struck at the exclusive terrace that has long been a colorful landmark in a section being rapidly taken over by skyscraper apartment houses. The police insisted that the social and financial prominence of the people involved will have no influence on the investigation."

I put the paper down and looked up at Molly.

"It doesn't say what time it happened, does it?" she asked. "I was so upset when I read it."

I shook my head.

"I heard her phone ring when I was putting Little Joe's curtain up after they all left here. She answered it. I could hear her laughing. That was after ten."

She went over to the dressing table and sat down, looking at herself listlessly in the mirror.

"It's funny," she said, her voice listless too. "I'm sort of sorry. On the ship coming over I had to grit my teeth to keep from . . . from doing something awful. But . . . I guess she was just made that way. She couldn't help it."

She picked up my comb and put it down again.

"I wonder what they'll do to Nat. You know, I've never thought of Ilya being really married to Nat. He and Thorne belonged to each other, just as much as . . . well, as Mr. and Mrs. B. must have been earmarked for each other the day they were born. You can't imagine them with anybody else. I mean, even Freddie's always been in love with Thorne, but he said once, after Ilya married Nat, he knew Thorne wouldn't marry anybody else, so he'd just sit tight, and he and Thorne would totter on year after year to the Spinsters-Bachelors Ball and that would be enough for him."

She laughed suddenly. "Freddie's so crazy," she added affectionately.

"Like a fox," I thought to myself.

She turned to me abruptly. "Who do you suppose did it?"

"I don't know, Molly," I said.

There was something reassuring about her calm conviction that didn't even consider the possibility of Nat's doing it. That letter lying by the dwarf peach stayed in my mind like a millstone. I couldn't have any doubt what letter it was.

She came over and picked the paper up unhappily.

"If there's much more of this, they'll never be able to get married, now," she said. "I think that's what Ilya was counting on—smearing them so they couldn't raise their heads together in public. They'd have to go off and live by themselves, and people can't live hole-in-a-corner lives and keep on loving each other. Ilya was saying something like that to that man. Freddie couldn't get all of it, but he got enough."

It was half-past eight when Colonel Primrose came. When I got downstairs he was in the library, pacing back and forth across by the back windows overlooking the rocky ledge where Ilya had fallen—or was pushed—to her death. He was tired, nervous and irritable. He hadn't shaved, and I doubt if he'd been to bed at all that night.

"That letter," he said abruptly. "What in God's name did you give it to him for? Or why didn't you make him burn it up as soon as he'd read it? Your name is on it even—and that makes everybody in."

I suppose there are times when every woman knows it's best just to keep still. Not that there was very much I could say.

"It's enough to hang both of them," he went on impatiently. "She gets rid of her stepfather because he's in the way. Nat's substantially in the will. Nat gets rid of his wife, and the coast's clear. Moran couldn't help but figure it all out.

Thorne admits she gave the brandy to Kimball. Nat leaves the house and goes to a hotel. Moran roots around and finds another letter. Nat has resigned as of day after tomorrow, the business of the notes is back exactly where Moran thought it was. But that letter! Why in the name of God you didn't have more ordinary common sense I can't for the life of me see."

As I didn't know anything else to say, and I suppose on the theory of the other cheek, I said, meekly, "I guess I may have been wrong about Thorne, and the gardenias and the dress."

He took a deep breath.

"Of course. I knew you were. Anybody could see Thorne Kimball was telling the truth—just as she's not telling it when she says she gave Kimball the brandy. Even if it wasn't the simplest and most routine job in the world to find out she did get out of a taxi at the bottom of the hill in the middle of the blackout. But that has nothing to do with it."

At that point I had no more cheeks to turn, and my own adrenal glands were beginning to function.

"What do you mean, nothing to do with it?" I demanded.

"Kimball was dead!"

It was the first time he'd ever raised his voice at me. It wasn't much, but it was very definite.

"He'd been dead at least two hours! Thorne's coming back, dashing away from a party, right in the middle of it, without any particular reason, refusing to let anybody come with her—that's what Moran's talking about. Instead of staying in the taxi till the all-clear sounds, she races up the steps in the dark. Why? Because she has to get home to get rid of the bottle and cover up before anybody else goes in. She doesn't even bother to go in the front door—she dashes straight around to his study."

He was pacing back and forth again. My adrenalin had subsided as quickly as it had risen, or I'd changed from anger to fear. I sat down. He'd never acted like this before.

"And why?" he went on. "She says something made her do it."

He stopped and looked at me oddly for an instant.

"And I believe it—it's true. Who else is going to believe it? Who's going to teach a policeman or a jury that there are unconscious things that function in terms of people's conduct, that can be expressed by 'Something made me do it'? Moran says Sure, the something was a bottle of cherry

brandy full of cyanide of potassium. Ilya Donahue told him about it first."

"How did she know?"

"Mrs. Donahue," he said evenly, "went over to the Buttses' play room—you remember the side door was unlocked because it was blackout headquarters—hid behind a moulting leopard, no doubt, and listened to Thorne and Freddie working on pictures in the dark room. She told Moran she felt there was some sort of hanky panky going on—something made *her* do it. She was looking for evidence, and she got it."

He shook his head.

"Butts had left the brandy bottle on the bar. Freddie said, 'Let's take it to your step-pa, he seems to like it—and what about putting a shot of prussic acid in it just for fun?' Thorne said 'Fine!' Ilya repeated that verbatim. Of course she didn't think at the time they meant it. It was just sort of a joke, really. And Thorne admits that. It was a joke, just the sort of thing you say. But it isn't the sort of thing Moran says. When the people he knows say they're going to put a shot of prussic acid in a drink, they mean they're going to put a shot of prussic acid in it."

"Particularly when it turns out to be in it," I remarked.

"Precisely. And then last night, the letter."

"Have you got it?"

"It's marked 'Exhibit A,' and preserved with great care," he said grimly. "There isn't a prosecutor living who wouldn't call it an incitement to murder."

I looked at him in dismay.

"She says they were both wrong to think they could ever be free to be together. As soon as she could she and her mother and Amelia would go somewhere else. It's a very sweet letter, really. She loved him, always had, always would, but it was ill-fated. There was nothing to do but make the best of it, and she didn't want to see him any more. It's the letter any girl in love would write to a man when everything was hopeless. And any man reading it would go through hell to keep her, though that wasn't what she was trying to do. It's a very beautiful letter. I hate to think of its being read to a crowded court room with the two of them sitting there."

He shook his head.

"Ilya got it, apparently, when Nat was taking a shower before he packed. He didn't know she was in the house. And you take one look at him and you see he'd gladly have killed

her for that alone. They're a big help. Thorne burst in before the jail was open this morning to tell him she knows he didn't do it. I agree with Moran—they're guilty as hell or innocent as new-born lambs. —Now about last night. Did you hear Mrs. Donahue scream?"

"No," I said. "And if she had I must have heard her. I could hear you talking down there, plainly."

He nodded. "She was a tiger, not a screamer."

He looked at me thoughtfully.

"That's why I'm puzzled about her screaming the other night. She started, for some reason, to do it on purpose—and changed her mind.—When did you decide it wasn't Thorne?"

I told him about Mrs. Prentiss Vale, her pale pink chiffon dress that would look white at night, and the gardenias, the sick heavy odor suddenly striking my nostrils. Then I told him about what Little Joe had said, and about his being so fascinated, looking down the path at her.

Then I stopped, looking at him. He was staring at me with the oddest expression on his face. And he'd changed entirely. He still hadn't shaved, but he looked, all of a sudden, as if he'd had a full and peaceful night's sleep and the morning was very fair, with roses and lilies all abloom.

"Well, well," he said slowly. "This is wonderful. I . . . never thought I'd get to the point where I have to have four-year-olds doing my detecting."

He got up. "I'm going next door. Would you like to come?"

"I'd love to," I said. "And I'm sorry I've been so stupid."

He took my hand.

"I shouldn't have been irritated at you. I ought to be used to you by now—Lord knows you've made me trouble enough. However, you've just said two things . . . In any case, I'm really very—"

"Yes, I know," I said.

He smiled and let my hand go. "I suppose it isn't the best time to tell you I—"

"No, it isn't," I interrupted. "Not if you want Sergeant Buck to keep Mr. Brodie in order. And look . . . was that other thing Sergeant Buck picked up the . . ."

He nodded. "The engagement pad. It was."

"Does it mean anything to you?"

"Very much so, my dear—thanks to you, and Little Joe. Kimball had an engagement down—no name mentioned—for

eleven o'clock that night. I have an idea he'd invited Ilya Donahue to be present. They were pretty much of a kind, those two."

He added, irrelevantly, "Let's see. When is it the Vales leave for their six months and a day in Nevada? Pretty soon, isn't it? Well, well."

23

I suppose the signs of struggle on the lower deck of the Donahue house were plain enough. There was dirt all around the tub where the dwarf peach had been violently torn out. It still held enough so that it might have supported a slim body like Ilya's for an instant, perhaps, till she could have caught hold of the parapet. The faded petals were strewn all around.

One of Inspector Moran's men was looking over the white painted wall. "It's a sure-fire method in this town," he was saying philosophically.

My curiosity stopped short of looking there. I followed Colonel Primrose up to the second deck. We went through Ilya's bedroom. It was a curiously impersonal place, as if she'd just lighted for a brief space and would be gone again shortly to fairer fields. It might have been a room in a luxurious hotel.

Colonel Primrose went over to the table beside her bed and picked up the day pad on it. It was blank except for one telephone number, I supposed, scratched on it five or six times, with circles and triangles drawn around, as if she'd waited a long time trying to get it. He handed it to me.

"Do you know this number?"

I shook my head. "It's not the Kimballs'. Molly calls so many times a day that I'd recognize it."

He took the phone book out of the drawer and ran through it.

"Not the Vales'," he said. "—Nor the Buttses'."

He turned the pages again, and stopped.

"Dr. Norton," he said. "Which is a help, I must say."

"What about Dr. Norton, and the will?" I asked. "I mean, that they weren't to accept his certificate without an autopsy."

Colonel Primrose shrugged his shoulders.

"I think it's fair to assume Kimball thought Norton would try to kill him. If Norton had been the kind of man Kimball was, he probably would have."

"And what about the implication that Dr. Norton and Lucy Kimball . . . I know it's a horrid thing to say, but the way they're juxtaposed in the will . . ."

He shook his head gravely. "The implication has occurred to any number of people. I don't think Loring Kimball meant exactly what you're thinking about. I've seen Lucy Kimball. She's a very charming woman—and at the moment a deeply hurt one. This thing about Norton is a painful and cruel blow to her. She says it's completely inexplicable to her, and I believe her."

It seemed odd to me that I actually hadn't set eyes on Mrs. Kimball except that one night at the Buttses' block party, and the brief glimpse I'd had of her in the mirror when Dr. Norton was trying to calm her, the morning after the blackout and Loring Kimball's death.

"She's had a hard time," Colonel Primrose said. "She says she realized shortly after her marriage that Kimball had no interest in her, and after that their relationship was never intimate. She'd known Amelia, and had the idea she could make both Amelia's and Thorne's life happier."

I heard, just then, a familiar and unmistakable voice.

"Where is Colonel Primrose?"

"He's busy, ma'am," someone said.

"I didn't ask if he was busy," Mrs. Butts said. "I said Where is he?"

"He's upstairs."

Mrs. Butts was upstairs too, the next moment. She had on a woman's service uniform of field blue with a Sam Browne belt and an overseas cap perched at an incredible angle on top of the mass of her grey hair. She looked like an old-time cavalry officer whose horse had just thrown him at the reviewing stand. She fixed wrathful grey eyes on Colonel Primrose.

"What *is* this nonsense I hear about Freddie?"

"What is it?" Colonel Primrose asked patiently.

"There, you see!" Mrs. Butts spoke to an invisible audience. "I said Colonel Primrose knows nothing about this."

"About what, Mrs. Butts?"

"Moran, Freddie," she said. "Moran is over at the house. He wants to see Freddie. Freddie's in bed. Moran wants to see Freddie's dark room and the place where Mr. B.'s brandy stood. I let him in there. But I did *not* let in that man with the camera."

Colonel Primrose's interest sharpened.

"Is he there now?"

"He's there, but he's not inside. Moran is inside, but he can't get out. I locked him in the play room. Look, Colonel. Freddie didn't push Ilya over the cliff, nor did he poison Loring Kimball. Freddie has never done a useful thing in his life. Now if it was Mr. B. they suspected . . ."

"Perhaps we'd better go over," Colonel Primrose said. He had that bright black look in his eyes that always reminded me of a wicked old parrot.

I looked back at them as I got to my front door. Mrs. Butts was striding across the grass, the yellow dust flying in clouds as her head caught the acacia branches, Colonel Primrose trying to shield himself as the branches flew back. It seemed odd to me that he should have so much concern about the Buttses at this point—and more so as I glanced over the other way.

Dr. Norton was coming out of the Kimballs', walking slowly down the path under the eucalyptus trees, his head bent forward. He stopped outside the gate and stood for a moment, and then came on around our side of the bend, moving as if stiffening himself for some unhappy task. I went inside, a kind of vestigial decency, I suppose, keeping my curiosity in check.

I was surprised when the door bell rang just after I'd got in. When I answered it, he was standing there. He looked at me so long without speaking that I thought he didn't recognize me.

"I'm Grace Latham, Dr. Norton," I said. "Will you come in?"

"Yes, I know," he answered. "I will, if I may."

He had aged unbelievably, I thought, just in the last couple of days. He looked very tired, and there was something in his eyes that was not defeat, exactly, but some kind of a

final thing. Or perhaps just weariness, profound and futile—I couldn't tell.

He sat down, again not speaking. I didn't know what to say. Knowing him as little as I did it was difficult to ask how his wife was, and I didn't like to say wasn't it extraordinary about Ilya. So I said nothing at all. At last he looked up at me.

"I thought Colonel Primrose might be here."

"He's just gone over to the Buttses'. He's gone to release Inspector Moran. Mrs. Butts locked him up with the dead wild life."

He laughed a little, and stopped suddenly as if it was painful to laugh.

"Would you like me to call him?"

He seemed to hesitate a moment.

"No. I think not."

He passed his hand across his forehead, and then sat there with his brow resting on it, his elbow on the arm of the chair, his eyes closed. I was alarmed. He looked very ill.

"You've been extremely kind to Thorne and Molly and Nat," he said, after a long time. "They are fine young people. I'm sorry all this has happened. It's strange how people's lives are interrelated. I've known them all since they were children—Molly since she was a baby. I would never have realized that . . . my life would have such terrible repercussions on theirs."

I was astonished, and rather embarrassed. It seemed an extraordinary thing for him to be saying, unless he thought . . . I didn't know what I did think he thought.

"In a sense it may seem inexorable and harsh," he went on, "but it's at least final."

I realized that he was talking to himself actually, not to me at all.

"They can go on from here . . . and forget. Take up, and forget," he repeated. "That's the thing. If none of this had happened they never could have."

I was glad Colonel Primrose wasn't there, and the thought had no more than passed through my mind than he was. The bell rang, he walked in. It was the effect of the great open spaces, I expect, because it's something he'd never done in Georgetown. Or maybe he knew Dr. Norton was there and thought he'd leave by the back door.

"Good morning, Doctor," he said.

As Dr. Norton got up a complete change seemed to have

come over him. He was composed, controlled and entirely recognizable again. I wondered if I'd imagined all the other.

"I wanted to see you about two things, Colonel Primrose," he said. "Nat first. I went with him to his hotel last night. Ilya was alive—I might even say well—when I got back at half-past ten. It's unlikely Nat came back here after the talk I had with him. I'm very certain it was not Nat I saw over there."

Colonel Primrose's black eyes shone.

"Do you mind explaining?"

"That's what I came here to do. She called my house several times between nine o'clock, when I went over to see Mrs. Kimball, and half-past ten. She wanted me to come over—she was ill, in trouble."

"You saw her just after half-past ten?"

"No. She is not a patient, or a friend. I told her I didn't make calls, and I gave her the name of a man who did. She didn't sound ill to me, and I thought other people were in greater trouble. Nevertheless, just before eleven I decided I'd go over."

"Why, Dr. Norton?"

"I thought if I talked to her I could get that letter," Dr. Norton said calmly.

"Nat knew then that she had it?"

"Yes. It was one of the reasons he left the house—to keep from doing what someone finally did."

"You saw her then?"

"No." Dr. Norton stopped, and went on deliberately. "I saw the shadow of her murderer."

Colonel Primrose waited.

"I rang the bell several times. I could hear her—I assumed it was her—moving about inside. I decided she'd changed her mind about being ill, and I certainly didn't want to force myself on her. I went away. When I glanced back, as I did quite unconsciously, I saw the curtains move, and a shadow behind them. I'm told Ilya spent most of the last two days behind those curtains, and I took it it was she, and that she had her own reasons for not letting me in. I realize now that it wasn't. I should have gone in—but I'm afraid even then it was too late."

The silence lengthened in the room. Colonel Primrose sat there, nodding his head slowly, as one who begins to see at last, and looking at Dr. Norton intently. Too intently, and too long, I thought.

"And your second reason for coming, Doctor?" he asked at last.

"Mrs. Kimball is overwrought and under a terrible nervous strain. I want you to let her and Thorne and Amelia go to a hotel at once. It's harmful for her to stay in that house a minute longer than is absolutely necessary."

They both got up.

"I'll see to it immediately, Norton."

Dr. Norton came over to me and held out his hand. "Goodbye," he said. "I'm very grateful to you."

Colonel Primrose closed the door behind him and came back. He went over to the mantel and stood there looking down for a long time. At last he turned around with a strangely unfamiliar expression on his face.

"I don't remember when what I would like to do and what I have to do have been so diametrically opposed," he said.

24

I tried all morning not to think of what he meant by that, or at least of whom he meant. It left me with an unhappy sense of foreboding that I couldn't really suppress. And little things kept happening all morning to keep bringing it sharply to the surface. Downtown I saw Dr. Norton at the flower stand under the big umbrella on Grant Avenue buying an armload of roses and blue iris and jonquils. On Post Street the newsboys were calling the noon edition. I saw "Terrace Murders" in the headlines without wanting to see any more. Some women at the Red Cross Salvage Shop were talking about it when I went in to leave some things. I heard ". . . and he was such a wonderful man. After all he did for Nat Donahue and Thorne and her mother . . ." I left quickly and got a taxi to go back home. The driver hadn't, he said, been driving a cab for fourteen years for nothing. Mrs. Kimball had put away the old man and bumped off the Donahue woman because she knew too much. Either that or Donahue had done it. I didn't tell him I lived there, and got out and walked most of the way. Freddie Butts, I could see, had got out of bed at last, because he was over helping the China boy put the Kimballs' bags in the car. And through lunch Molly sat saying nothing, staring, moody and unhappy, at the lilies in the silver bowl in the middle of the table. Little Joe, deciding sex was more important than race and social status, was lunching in the kitchen with John.

I was glad when Colonel Primrose came again about two

o'clock. It was the business of the Kimball library again, and the night of the blackout.

"I want to know just where you were standing," he said. "Will you come over and do it again, as nearly as you can?"

We didn't go directly inside the house. Two men were in the side garden toward the Nortons'.

"It was rather decent of Moran to wait till they got out," Colonel Primrose remarked as we left the walk and headed toward them.

I had such a sinking feeling in my stomach that I didn't dare ask what he meant. As we came up to the steps to Loring Kimball's study I saw they were digging around the flowers in the hollow tree stump that Colonel Primrose and I had looked down on from that room upstairs. One of the men turned toward us.

"It's here, all right, sir."

The other man was rooting something out of the earth. I waited with a sort of dull fatalism. He brought it over. It was the bottle—the brandy bottle from the bar in the Buttses' play room. And apparently all of them knew it was going to be there.

Colonel Primrose took it, sniffed at it and handed it back.

We started toward the steps.

"One of the kind acts that endeared Ilya Donahue to her friends," he remarked.

"She put it—"

"She told Moran Thorne put it there."

I don't know why that surprised me, or that it did, really.

"And of course," he went on, "she wouldn't have thought of wiping off her fingerprints. Did you notice the bottle is sticky?"

"Does that mean . . . they'll arrest her next?"

I could hardly recognize my own voice.

"If they haven't already. You don't understand, my dear, how powerful the case against them is. There's only one thing that can save them, in my opinion."

He went on up the steps.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Two, really," he said. "The first is whether Thorne's alibi is any good, and Dr. Norton's for Nat. The other . . ."

He shrugged. "The other is one of the great imponderables. I wouldn't venture to predict it."

We went on into the library. The house was terribly si-

lent. The book-lined walls, the grotesque Victorian furniture and the thick soft pile of the dark carpet absorbed the sound so that we moved noiselessly ourselves. It all seemed something that was dead a long time ago. The portrait of its earlier mistress looking so gaily down from above the mantel was part of it too. The sofa was the only modern thing there. I glanced at it and stopped.

"Colonel Primrose!" I said. "What's that?"

There was a hole in the upholstery on the back that I hadn't noticed before, and it's the sort of thing I would notice.

He looked at it indifferently. "Worn out, probably," he said. "Things do, you know. Now you stand over by the telephone and tell me all this again. And about the doors."

We started back to the hall. Just as we got to it there was a sound of quick firm steps coming up the walk and clearing the stairs to the porch.

"Thorne!"

It was Nat Donahue, and his voice echoed through the house.

"Thorne!"

He didn't know they were gone, I realized. And just as I had, and as if his great need of her had brought her suddenly back into that house of ghosts, there were quick light steps, running through the upper hall and down the stairs.

"Nat! Oh, Nat, I knew you'd come! I couldn't leave! They've found it, Nat!"

Colonel Primrose closed the hall door with a swift move of his hand. He turned back to me with an air of annoyed resignation.

"Those fools," he said quietly. "Those young fools."

He went to the window and brushed aside the curtain. He stopped and dropped his hand. I went over. Inspector Moran was coming up the walk.

Colonel Primrose shrugged his shoulders. "That's that," he said. "He can probably see them in each other's arms. I wish to heaven I'd let them keep him in jail. It's just what Moran was waiting for."

I don't know what happened in the Victorian drawing room across the hall. I stayed in the library when Colonel Primrose went over. I could hear Inspector Moran's voice from time to time, and I saw Thorne leaving the house with one of his men a little later. She was walking swiftly, her lithe body erect, her face with that same plastic motionless

quality that concealed so much. After a while Moran went out, and soon Colonel Primrose came in to the library with Nat. He smiled a little when he looked at me.

"Don't be so upset, Mrs. Latham. Thorne's gone to the hotel to stay with her mother and Amelia—with Moran's man sitting outside the door, I imagine. Nat's in my charge until tomorrow. I'm going to lock the doors here, and I'll meet you people outside. I want you to come with me, Nat, and I'll see you this evening, Mrs. Latham. I've got a job to do right now."

I suppose it was shortly after nine o'clock when he and Nat came to my house. Whatever the job they'd done, it had had an extraordinary effect on Nat. The crushing anxiety he'd been under after Thorne left the house was gone. In its place was something else. I couldn't say just what it was, except that it was as if a new kind of maturity had come with some new and deeper knowledge.

"We're going over to the house again," Colonel Primrose said. "I'd like you to come. If something . . . materializes, I'll need you."

I shall never forget going into that house that night, or the infinity that the Dresden clock on the what-not in the drawing room marked as just two hours of solar time. Each time it struck a gay incongruous quarter hour in the silent darkness that clung about us like a pall, it seemed to me it was at the very least another hour it struck. We didn't talk. Nat sat there as still as the marble statue, vaguely luminous, behind his high-backed chair. Colonel Primrose moved around, going to the door into the hall from time to time to listen. We seemed completely insulated from the outside world. The sounds that I knew must be coming up the hill were lost before they came to us. Occasionally the house vibrated from the rumble of traffic or a bomber flying low overhead, but the cause seemed so remote that it was more as if it was shivering at some old memory it held within itself. Even the odor of pot-pourri and polished rosewood and the vague mustiness of carpets and horsehair was of something long dead. From time to time the lustres on the mantel tinkled as if a soft intangible hand had touched them in the darkness.

I felt suddenly a sense of heightened tension. Colonel Primrose, half-way to the door, had stopped. Nat got quickly to his feet and stood there, waiting.

"Mrs. Latham!" Colonel Primrose whispered urgently. I

went over toward him. He took my hand and held it firmly. "Quiet!"

He led me across the hall into the library, Nat coming silently behind. We went over to the corner near the bookcase by the window. I didn't know what we were waiting for, and I could feel myself trembling a little. He held my hand tightly . . . and it's just as well he did, for I would have screamed a moment later if he hadn't.

At first it was just a whisper of movement from the front door, or perhaps not even that, but just the cool air that came creeping in, touching our faces as the door opened. Then a faint soft sound as it closed again. Then it was a whisper of velvet feet moving on the parquet floor, closer to the library door, and stopping so long I wasn't sure they hadn't dissolved, as eerily as they'd come. And then, Colonel Primrose's hand tightened sharply on mine as a small circle of blue light fell suddenly on the carpet, and moved, as slowly as if it had some life of its own . . . so slowly, with such silent feet behind it, that it was almost unbearable. Once as it fell back it touched and illuminated for an instant long pale folds of chiffon and the tip of a satin slipper, pale blue in the periphery of the small center of the deeper blue light.

It moved again then, past the arm of the sofa, toward the fireplace, hesitated for just a moment, and moved up the fireplace to the white marble plaque with the hunters carved on it. There it stopped, and suddenly in the blue light was a woman's hand, and then the light was gone.

Colonel Primrose gripped my hand again. We waited, hardly daring to breathe, as if our breath would blast the silence. I could hear something scrape, as if the plaque was moving, and then I heard something being laid softly on the cushion of the sofa, and another faint sound of something clicking, and the tiny sound of an opening door. There was a quick startled, startling gasp. The blue ball of light sprang out again, frantically searching a cavity where the plaque had been. It was a cavity lined with steel, and it was empty. There was a quick sobbing sound. The hand moved again into the blue light, and closed the metal door . . . and Colonel Primrose moved silently across the deep pile of the carpet. The next instant the room was flooded with light.

25

I stood there blinded with its brilliance, staring painfully, my breath almost dying in my throat. The woman standing there I had never seen, but I knew her, and I knew she was a ghost. She was very beautiful . . . all white like the moon in Maui. Her hair was silver, the chiffon gown she wore was silver-grey. Only her eyes were blue, as blue as cornflowers . . . as blue as the laughing eyes of the golden girl in the white gown looking down at her from the mantel.

"Mrs. Norton, I believe," Colonel Primrose said quietly. "—As the first Mrs. Kimball was legally dead almost thirty years ago."

She didn't speak at first. She stood there with eyes closed, swaying just a little, her face pale and lovely and fragile as a lily.

"Loring Kimball wanted you to come here, Mrs. Norton," Colonel Primrose said, very gently. "He had been trying to get you to come for a long time, hadn't he?"

She opened her eyes then, and looked at him, and us.

"You're Colonel Primrose, aren't you? And you're Nat, and you're Mrs. Latham. My . . . husband has told me about you."

She looked at me again. "I didn't mean to frighten you the other night."

She turned back to Colonel Primrose.

"Mr. Kimball said he'd found some letters," she said, her

voice low and steady. "I left them here, many years ago—before I went away. He said he'd leave them where they were. I could have them if I had the courage to come and get them . . . before the night he died. That was the last night of grace. They were letters Dr. Norton wrote to me before I married Mr. Kimball. I didn't know anyone knew the place but me. He was going to—"

"He was going to pretend he'd just discovered you were still alive, and lived next door?"

She nodded slowly.

"And he'd known . . . how long?"

"He's always known it—from the second day, when I came back a little to my senses and realized what I'd done. I'd left the house when the first shock came and the fire started, to go to my parents' house. They were gone. I couldn't go back to . . . this house. I couldn't. I would rather have died. I went to Dr. Norton, and I wouldn't leave. He tried to tell me what it meant, my coming to him, but I said if he made me go I'd go back into the fire. He let me stay. I loved him very much, and he loved me. The next day he went to Mr. Kimball. I wanted my child. I'd never had her, but I said I'd go back if he'd let her live at home. But he was . . . I don't know what he was. He said I'd taken refuge with Dr. Norton and I could stay with him the rest of my life. I couldn't come back, and the courts would never let me have Amelia after what I'd done. Dr. Norton tried to tell him I hadn't done anything, but he said no one would believe it, and he'd fight through every court to ruin Dr. Norton, and me, and the child. I could stay where I was, and he'd never say anything."

Colonel Primrose and Nat stepped toward her as she swayed a little.

"No—I'm all right, and I'd rather stand, please."

Colonel Primrose motioned around the room. "And why all this, Mrs. Norton, and the lights upstairs?"

"He tried to torture us, in any way he could," she said steadily. "He thought we couldn't stand it, living alone together. He didn't know that two people could find enough in each other for one of them to live a buried life. When he found he couldn't destroy us by letting us destroy ourselves, he decided to do this—to have this house here, and to keep the lights burning in the room I'd left, so I could always see it, and him in it, or sitting downstairs, waiting for us to break under the strain. He cut down the big tree that pro-

tected us, and planted eucalyptus trees. They always frightened me, before, and the odor made me ill. But I didn't mind them and we didn't mind the light. The only thing that frightened me—when I was alone—was knowing that some day he'd break, and destroy . . . Dr. Norton."

"And . . . you thought the breaking point had come?"

She nodded slowly.

"He was very patient. He could wait. He tried for years to buy the house that was here, and then he had to buy it in the name of a lawyer he had, because the people here didn't like him and wouldn't sell. The letters here must have been gone for years. There's dust all over the bottom of the box. But he could wait until everything else failed . . . to break us, or to bring me here, or to make Dr. Norton act against him."

"You knew about his will, Mrs. Norton?"

"Oh yes. He sent me a copy of it. But you see, he didn't understand. He need never have been afraid. We didn't hate him as he hated us. And exposure hadn't the terror for us that he thought it must have. We always knew it was something we might have to face, but we knew we could face it, together."

She held her head gently high. There was a spiritual grace, if I may call it that, about her that cloistered women sometimes have. She seemed to have a soft inner radiance that made her almost luminously lovely.

"He was dead when you came here, Mrs. Norton?" Colonel Primrose asked quietly.

"I didn't know it until I heard Mrs. Latham telephone."

"Then you never saw him . . . ?"

"Oh, I'd seen him many times. He used to stand in the window upstairs by the hour. We put curtains up, and I came to this side of the house as seldom as I could. It used to frighten me, sometimes, when I was alone. But I never saw him close, and I never talked to him. He used to telephone, but I only answered a private wire that Dr. Norton called me on. I never . . ."

Her voice trailed slowly off. She was looking past Colonel Primrose. The expression on her face had changed to one that was infinitely sad. She closed her eyes and bent her head down a little.

I turned and looked at the hall as Colonel Primrose and Nat did. None of us had heard the door open. Even when I looked I wasn't sure that I wasn't under some kind of en-

chanted spell, or that the figure standing motionless there in the hall was actually and physically real. It was Amelia Kimball. Her colorless face had a strange wistful beauty that heightened that sense of unreality. Her eyes were dark and luminous and moist. They were fixed on her mother, intent and oblivious to anything else around her. She moved slowly across the room like a woman walking in her sleep, her steps controlled by some deep consciousness. Mrs. Norton stood there, the tears flowing down her cheeks, glistening in the light.

"Mother!" Amelia whispered softly. "I'm so sorry, Mother."

We all left that room then, Nat and Colonel Primrose and I, and Colonel Primrose switched on the lights in the drawing room across the hall and closed the door.

"The sins of the fathers," I thought I heard him say, but I wasn't quite sure. He moved over to the window and stood there, his hands clasped together behind his back. Nat leaned both elbows on the fireplace and stood there gazing down into the empty grate. He straightened up at last and turned abruptly.

"No jury would ever convict her, Colonel," he said quietly. "She had every right!"

I stared at him. She had broken under the strain at last, then. Evil had triumphed. Loring Kimball and Ilya Donahue . . . the evil that men do lives after them. . . . My mind whirled.

Colonel Primrose turned. His face was very grave. "No," he said. "I don't think they would convict."

"You can't do it, Colonel," Nat said. "You can't!"

There was a sound from the hall. Colonel Primrose opened the door. Mrs. Norton was alone in the library, sitting on the sofa where Amelia had sat so long and quietly that first night. Upstairs I heard the quick light tread of moving feet, and Amelia came down the stairs. She had a faded packet of letters in her hand, and she went straight to where her mother was sitting.

She put the letters in her mother's lap.

"I got them from Ilya Donahue," she said. "She had them, she showed them to me. She called me up last night. She said Dr. Norton was coming over and she had something to tell him that she thought I ought to hear. And she had the letter Thorne wrote to Nat. I tried to get them from her, and she went over. I didn't push her, the way they say, but I could

have saved her and . . . I didn't. The man from the paper was coming. I thought it was him at the door until I saw Dr. Norton going home. I was too frightened to stay to find the pad. It just said, 'Tonight she'll come.' It was gone when I got the bottle. I didn't know he'd sent for Ilya to come and bring Brodie. I didn't know he was so . . . terrible. But don't—please don't! I had to do it, for you and Lucy, and Thorne and Nat. I've loved you all a very long time, and I couldn't let him destroy you. I don't feel I'm wicked . . . and I think God will understand. I'm going now. Goodbye."

She knelt suddenly on the sofa beside her mother, put her arms around her and pressed her lips to her hair. "Goodbye."

Nat moved quickly past me into the hall.

"Amelia!"

She stopped and turned as he caught up with her, looked up at him and smiled. He took her arm. They went down the path together. The gate clicked behind them under the shaggy drooping black mass of the eucalyptus trees.

Colonel Primrose stood there looking after them for some time. Mrs. Norton had not moved or touched the letters. He went in at last. I stood there in the hall.

Mrs. Norton raised her head. "How did you know?" she asked gently.

"The worn spot in the carpet by the window upstairs," he said. "The tree that had been cut down. The business of moving this house up here, and the lights, and the hatred that couldn't have been aimed at a woman who had really been dead thirty-five years. The scent of gardenia—of the perfume, not the real flower, as Mrs. Latham told me without knowing it. And when I heard that a small boy down here had seen a ghost under the eucalyptus trees it was all very clear. The will saying, 'Find my wife.' What Dr. Norton said: 'The kind of death she died has had its compensations.' There were many other things. Mrs. Donahue's attempt to get Brodie out here that night . . . and he would have been here except for the blackout. It was a wicked thing."

"And . . . Amelia?"

Colonel Primrose pointed to the back of the sofa.

"She sat there all the time we were in this room, that night. I wondered about it. There was a stain on the fabric, and when I cut it out and had it analyzed I knew of course that she'd sat there with the bottle behind her. It had to be either

Amelia or Thorne who'd taken it. Nat Donahue didn't have time. And when Thorne buried it late that night Ilya Donahue was still watching."

"Thorne knew?" I said.

He looked around at me. "Thorne knew it was either Amelia or one of the Buttses. She brought the bottle here; her mother had already left. She tried almost tragically to defend them."

He hesitated for a moment, and said deliberately, "How and where Thorne Kimball got the bottle I'm not regarding as part of my duty to investigate. And Moran will agree with me."

He turned back to Mrs. Norton.

"There were many other things about Amelia. It was her window that faced the window Loring Kimball used to stand by. She must have seen him, time and again. It was she who was torn in the ten year feud between her father and her aunt—"

Mrs. Norton interrupted him quietly. "She told me that until he moved the house here she'd believed she was found wandering around in the Fire. Her aunt told her the early story."

"And she had the . . . objectivity to do all this," Colonel Primrose went on. "I had that feeling about her when I first saw her, up in your room. She'd seen everybody else suffer, she'd suffered herself. She seemed colorless, but when I saw her eyes I knew she was capable of great passion. It was all turned toward the memory of you, which was knowledge by then, and toward Thorne and Nat. Did she tell you when she first knew you were . . . next door?"

"She saw me one night, from her window, walking in the garden. I came too far, to pick some roses. I was in the light from the window upstairs. She knew, then—"

"Because you were supposed to be an invalid confined to your room," Colonel Primrose said.

"Yes. With everything else."

"And did you know it was Amelia?"

Mrs. Norton hesitated. "I knew there was someone in the room here before Mrs. Latham. The blackout had started when I came in. I heard someone come in through the hall. Then I was frightened by the crash in the study. I only wanted to get out before the lights came on."

"It was you who closed the front door?"

Mrs. Norton nodded. It was Amelia, then, I thought, that

I heard going into the study, and the whispering sound I thought I heard by the hall was Mrs. Norton slipping out.

"Dr. Norton, by the way, wouldn't have mistaken a woman's shadow behind the curtain as Ilya Donahue's, or the sound of a woman's step for a man's step," Colonel Primrose said. "And one thing more. When Ilya screamed?"

"I was almost to the door," Mrs. Norton said quietly. "I hadn't seen her. I just stood there waiting for a moment. I thought it was all over then. Then I just went on."

Colonel Primrose nodded.

"She changed her mind. Or perhaps she thought someone was sure to come and find you, and only changed her mind when she decided to bring Brodie in herself. I imagine she knew the whole story, even without the letters."

"I'm sure she knew. What Mr. Kimball didn't tell her she could figure out. Dr. Norton says she was very shrewd."

"Too shrewd," Colonel Primrose said.

He got to his feet. Mrs. Norton rose too. "Colonel Primrose—what are we to do? Will a jury . . . I mean, can't we—"

He looked at her for an instant. When he spoke his voice had an unusual quality of gentleness.

"Your story is bound to come out, Mrs. Norton . . ."

"Oh, that's nothing, nothing!" she cried.

"Go home, then, and tell Dr. Norton. And wait before you do anything—either of you. Do you understand that?"

She bowed her head for an instant. "Yes. I understand." She came over to me and held out her hand. "Good night."

I could smell the faint sweet fragrance of gardenia clinging about her like a misty veil as she moved.

Colonel Primrose said nothing until we heard her close the door softly behind her.

"Well, I'll take you home, my dear. I've got to see Moran."

I looked at him unhappily as he switched out the light and locked the front door.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know, quite," he said.

26

FOR the second time Molly McIntyre came into my room before I was awake. She put the paper down on the bed and turned away quickly, staring out of the window at the Terrace. It could have been the morning before, and my hand trembled a little as I picked the paper up. Loring Kimball had said hell would break loose on the Terrace, so somebody had said, and now it was breaking. I could turn my head and see past Molly's slim little figure, drooping dejectedly by the window, to the clipped cypress hedge of the Nortons' house. The house of peace, it had seemed to me—the only one on the Terrace. In a deeper sense it was that. But the peace that had come from within itself was to be blasted now from without.

I closed my eyes for a moment and then opened them . . . and closed them again.

"Loring Kimball's Daughter Suicide" was what I'd seen. It was several moments before I could look again. The notice wasn't long and I read it slowly.

"Suicide Clears Up Exclusive San Joaquin Terrace Mystery," it began.

"The double murder that has had local police and Government experts baffled for several days was solved early this morning. The body of Amelia Kimball, daughter of Loring Kimball, whose death was followed by that of Ilya Donahue, wife of Mr. Kimball's protege and close associate, was found in her room at a fashionable Nob Hill hotel this

morning. A note left by the dead woman, aged 39, was the first inkling authorities had that she was involved in the case. Police refused to divulge the contents of the note, except to say the case was closed.

"Friends of the dead woman were astounded by the news. Miss Kimball was shy and retiring and apparently devoted to her father, whose death removed one of San Francisco's most beloved and public-spirited figures. Police predicted that a verdict of suicide while of an unsound mind will be returned at an early hour today."

I put the paper down and sat looking out of the window a long time. Molly came over, picked up the paper and read it again. She went slowly out and closed the door. The Nortons' house across the Terrace was silent and shuttered. I could see the morning paper sticking in the bars of the iron gate. As I was about to look away a car pulled up, and Colonel Primrose got out. I saw him take the paper and stand there. It was the first time I'd seen anyone at that gate. He stood there a long time before anyone came. Then a Chinaman, old and shrivelled, shuffled down the walk with the peculiar gait they have. He peered through the grill, and opened it. Colonel Primrose disappeared behind the thick curtain of flowering vines over the porch, and the place was silent and lifeless again.

It was about half-past nine that Colonel Primrose came to the house. He sat down in the living room for quite a while without saying anything. I waited.

"I suppose it's best, this way," he said at last. "Nobody knows, and that's what she wanted . . . so much she was willing to sacrifice everything for it. I feel sorry for those people up there. This is really the first time there's been any tragedy at all in the house with them. And Mrs. Norton has to stay there . . . buried. And yet I think they're big enough to take it. Very few human beings could."

"Then you're not . . ."

"Not telling anybody," he said. "Nat knows, and Thorne. You and I know. No one else. Not Mrs. Kimball, or Molly, or any of the rest."

He got up and went to the window. "I've asked Thorne and Nat to come, and I've asked him to tell her first. It's something they've got to have in common, to make it tolerable for either of them."

He turned back with a chuckle.

"I've done one other thing."

"What's that?" I asked.

"I've arranged for Jim Brodie to go to Australia in an Army bomber. He leaves tomorrow, and if he gets yellow fever or typhoid before he gets there, it's just too bad—because he won't have time for his shots before he leaves. Here they come."

Thorne and Nat came in. Thorne's face, as she stood for a moment in the doorway, had something of the same quality that Mrs. Norton's had had, a kind of selflessness that made her almost ethereally beautiful. She came forward quickly and took the hand that Colonel Primrose held out to her.

"I'm sorry," he said simply. "But you knew, didn't you?"

"Not really. I knew she had the bottle. I saw her pick it up and keep it behind her there. And I . . . thought she'd gone to Ilya's, and I heard her crying that night. I was afraid to let her know that I . . . thought anything. She thought I thought it was my mother. That's why I . . . wasn't telling the truth."

She turned away suddenly. Nat came over and took her hand.

"Don't, darling."

"I'm not going to." She batted back the tears. "It's just . . . I don't know what, really. I'm thinking about the Nortons too. I knew he was in love with . . . her. He offered to take the portraits, once, and I wondered what his wife would think of having half a dozen pictures of . . . of an old love in the house."

She smiled suddenly and looked up at Nat.

"He buys her a big armful of flowers at the stand on Grant Avenue every day. Will you do that when . . . when we . . ."

Nat grinned. "I certainly won't. You can go down and do it yourself."

Colonel Primrose glanced out the window. "You two had better go in the library and close the door. Here comes Mrs. Butts."

It was Mrs. Butts indeed. Her green hat was a virulent spot bobbing through the cloud of mimosa dust of her own creating. She looked as if she'd been through a saffron mill as she came in, her grey tweeds powdered with yellow.

"I saw you come in here, Colonel," she said flatly. "It's all settled, is it? It was Amelia?"

Colonel Primrose nodded.

Mrs. Butts went over and sat down on the sofa. Her hands were trembling, and so was her face.

"Thank God," she said, more quietly than I'd ever heard her speak. She rubbed the back of her hand against her eyes and blinked several times.

"I thought it was Freddie," she said. "I thought certainly it was Freddie."

She looked at me abruptly, her fey grey old eyes defiantly earnest. "And I wouldn't have cared. I'd have been glad of it. But now!—What happens to those two poor people? That's what I want to know!"

"Which people, Mrs. Butts?" Colonel Primrose asked.

"The Nortons, of course. Who else?" Mrs. Butts retorted.

He looked at her blankly. "What . . . do you mean?"

"Now, my *dear* man!" said Mrs. Butts. "Don't tell me you didn't *know?*"

Colonel Primrose opened his mouth to speak, and closed it, and opened it again. "I . . . didn't know you knew, Mrs. Butts."

"Of course we knew. My God, we've lived next door to them for thirty-odd years."

"—And . . . you never told anyone?"

I knew of course that as a gentleman he was trying to disguise the incredulity in his voice.

"No," said Mrs. Butts. "I'm a garrulous old woman, Colonel, but there are a good many things I just don't talk about."

Colonel Primrose shook his head silently. It was a great pleasure to me to see him so frankly and completely nonplussed for once.

"Amelia didn't tell?"

Mrs. Butts made it simultaneously question and answer.

"No. She wrote a simple statement of fact. It was only three lines."

"Good girl," Mrs. Butts said. Then she looked up abruptly. "Does Moran know?"

Colonel Primrose shook his head.

"And you're not telling him?"

"No."

Mrs. Butts blew her nose and stuffed her handkerchief violently down in her bag.

"I'm an old fool," she said unsteadily. "I love those people. I think of that house as a sanctuary. I'd do a lot to see them live in peace. I almost wish it had been Freddie."

She got up. "Goodbye, Colonel Primrose. Goodbye, Mrs. Latham."

She started for the door. Half-way there she turned. I could see that fey glint in her old eyes.

"Is there any sound reason why *you* two don't get married?" she demanded.

Colonel Primrose smiled. "None that I know of," he said, looking at me.

"At least one that I know of," I said. "He's out in front right now, looking to see how much rubber's left on his tires."

Mrs. Butts glanced sharply out of the window. As she did Sergeant Buck raised his granite bulk, turned and spat neatly into the street. But I think that comment was entirely on the rubber situation. He couldn't possibly have heard either Mrs. Butts or his Colonel.

THE EERIE WAIL OF A SIREN IN THE NIGHT SPELLED MURDER

The most important man in San Francisco lay, violently murdered, in his huge house on a cliff above the city. Swiftly the mystery deepened, involving a strange light that burned night and day, the lovely step-daughter of the victim—and a man she should never have known.

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