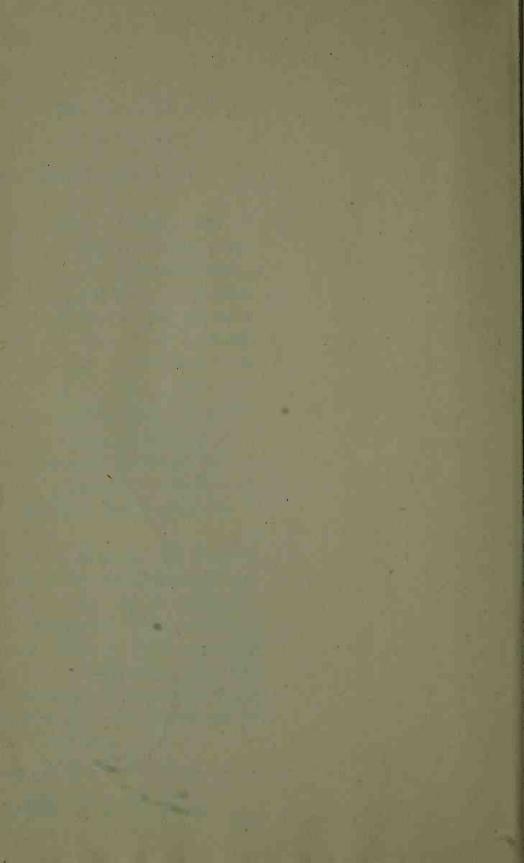
A CRIME CLUB SELECTION
By CHRISTOPHER HALE

RUMOR & BATE





Rumor Hath It

CRIME CLUB SELECTION

MR. IZENGA knew all the secrets of Lawnsdale. He knew how much everybody made, who was in love with whom, what they were all doing at any particular time. When someone had the nerve to murder his oldest and wealthiest friend he was angry that he hadn't been consulted, and unbelieving that anyone in Lawnsdale's august community could commit such a crime. He couldn't convince Lieutenant Bill French that an outsider was responsible for the murder, but he could give him a great deal of information.

The search proceeds with amusing duels between the straightforwardness of Lieutenant French and the deviousness of Mr. Izenga, who was interested in protecting Erica, the highly polished apple of his eye. Christopher Hale adds his gift of gentle satire and subtle humor to this story of a male gossip and his search for a criminal.

Serialized in Chicago Tribune Syndicate.

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RUMOR HATH IT: MIDSUMMER NIGHTMARE
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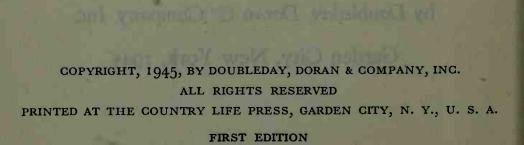
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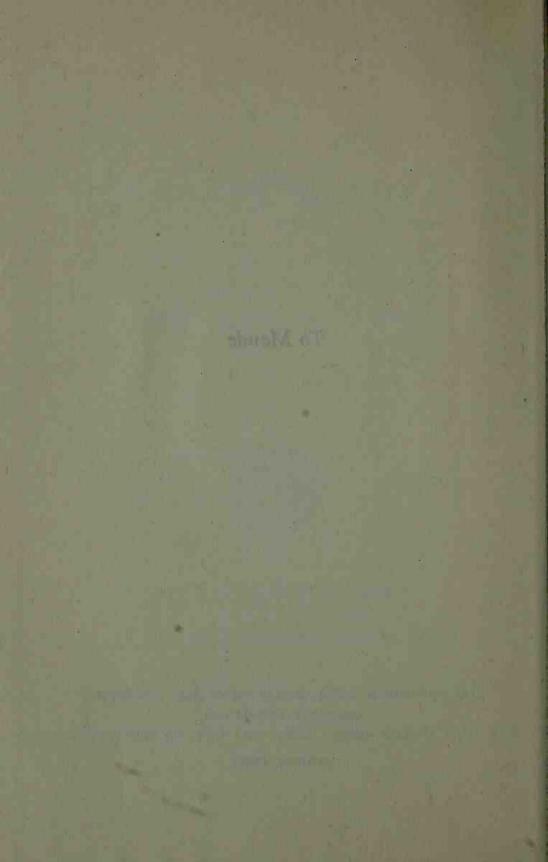
by Christopher Hale



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To Maude



Chapter One

THE TELEPHONE on Mr. Cornelius den hof Izenga's beautiful Chippendale desk rang respectfully. This meant that Harrison had answered it below and passed the call as worthy of the master's attention. Mr. Izenga pattered across the bedroom in his socks and underwear and took up the receiver.

"Yes?"

"Hello. Mr. Izenga? It's Huntley Price. I just got in five minutes ago. Mind if I pop over for a second?" The young voice was urgent.

"But I'll be seeing you at your great-aunt's tonight, won't I, Huntley?"

"Yes. But I have to see you alone first. This won't wait."

Mr. Izenga hesitated. "Is it about Erica?"

"Uh-yes."

"Very well. But I can give you only fifteen minutes."

"I'll be right over."

Mr. Izenga hung up. He turned this item over in his mind. He hoped Huntley was going to announce his official engagement to Erica. Everyone had rather taken it for granted since they were children, including Huntley and Erica themselves, that they would be married someday. But someday never seemed to come. Mr. Izenga was becoming alarmed. Huntley had not sounded happy over the phone. "Desperate" would have described his voice better. But perhaps that was only what living in New York did to one.

Mr. Izenga went on with his dressing. Every detail, however small, had to be perfect. Especially when dining at Mrs. Enright Dawson Pomeroy's handsome estate, Westerly.

And, too, when you've been told you look like a supercilious little egg (even though the speaker was drunk) and you angrily suspect

it is true, you need all the dignity you can get. It was spiteful of nature, after giving Mr. Izenga a high bald forehead with permanently lifted brows, to add a teeny squint to one eye.

But there was nothing comic about him. On the contrary, an air of sinister importance emanated from his small, pompous figure at all times. For Mr. Izenga was like a war relic, known to be loaded, which everyone handles with great care and prays will not explode in his presence.

What Mr. Izenga was loaded with was secrets.

He knew almost everything about almost everybody in the county and was insatiable about learning more. He wasn't a gossip. He talked little. He was more like a sponge whose holes are furnished with ears. All his childhood he had been an invalid. People had entertained him by talking about other people. They hadn't bothered to be discreet, thinking he would soon be dead. But he fooled them.

He often tingled with grim glee over the things he knew. But only on rare occasions when he had been offended or slighted did he toss out a verbal hand grenade. If treated with proper respect he could be of great help, as his many importunate visitors proved.

It was rather like entertaining a little cobra to have Mr. Izenga to tea. He curled in one corner, affecting modest retirement, but woe to the hostess who did not keep him charmed!

2

The doorbell rang. Mr. Izenga put on an imperial Chinese silk robe which hid his matchstick legs. Then the house phone rang and the low voice of Harrison announced Huntley. Mr. Izenga told him to send the young man up.

Nobody crashed into that house and ran about unheralded. None of his young friends called him uncle, and only the chosen of his contemporaries Cornelius. It was said he had been born with a white tie in his mouth, and many were sorry it hadn't choked him.

The young man who entered the room was very pleasant-looking, in spite of his distraught expression. His clear skin, shining brown

eyes, and slightly wavy dark hair made him seem even younger than twenty-seven. There was a friendly air about everything he did. Sincerity rang in his voice. Mr. Izenga was proud and fond of him.

"Well, Huntley, I'm glad to see New York agrees with you. I hear glowing tales from your great-aunt Letitia."

His progress had been admirable indeed. He seemed to have inherited that spectacular knack of making money that a few of the clan possessed. And luckily the heart condition that kept him out of the services was not bad enough to interfere with his career.

Mrs. Pomeroy's relation to Huntley was lost in the mazes of cousin-hood. She herself had established the great-aunt formula to draw Huntley nearer to her and hold him for Erica.

"Oh, Aunt Letty's prejudiced," Huntley said perfunctorily. He could never bear to discuss his exploits. Mr. Izenga approved of modesty in his old-fashioned way.

"I've done all right," Huntley said, "but what does it matter now? Ought to have stayed home here. I see it now, too late."

Mr. Izenga blinked. There was real suffering in Huntley's face and voice.

"But, my dear boy, you never could have shown Letitia that you were capable of managing Erica's fortune if you hadn't gone where there was a field for your talents. There's nothing in this village."

Huntley's smile was bitter. "Is that how it looks to everyone, Mr. Izenga? That I just wanted to prove I could manage her money? I've been a worse fool than I thought, then."

Mr. Izenga said nothing. A handy habit.

"I wanted to make Erica proud of me," Huntley went on unsteadily. "But all I've done is—lose her." He sprang up and went to the window, turning his back.

Mr. Izenga could feel the full symphony of disaster tuning up now in his narrow breast. He knew only too well how Huntley felt. His own heart was a series of compartments ever dwindling in size. In the inmost one were only two people, himself and Erica Pomeroy. And a picture of Erica's long-dead mother. Mr. Izenga had loved her mother with an aching violence which he had hidden from everyone. He had looked into the mirror and chosen rather to dream it might have been yes than to put it to the test and hear the probable no. He had gone to her wedding to Mrs. Pomeroy's adored eldest son, Enright Junior, and put up a brave front.

When Erica was eight both her parents were killed in a train wreck, leaving her nearly half a million. Mrs. Pomeroy invited Mr. Izenga to share with her the upbringing of the orphan. Mr. Izenga had accepted with tremulous joy and had done a very sound job. He had concentrated on Erica while Mrs. Pomeroy had made financial hay while the sun shone. Erica was grateful to her grandmother, but it was Mr. Izenga whom she loved.

But if only he could love Erica a little less! At the least hint of anything wrong with her he could feel himself tighten all over.

"What do you mean, Huntley? How could you lose her?"

Huntley only shook his head, without turning.

"Erica would never do anything serious without consulting me." Mr. Izenga's shrill voice was a little unsteady.

"Oh, she's going to tell you before she broadcasts it." Huntley sat down again. His facial muscles twitched. "She wrote me. She's engaged."

"Engaged!" It was an outraged whisper.

"Or thinks she is. I'm not supposed to tell anyone, but of course you are always excepted. She wanted me to be the first to know." He mimicked her voice harshly. "You know why."

Erica, engaged! Mr. Izenga refused to believe it.

Huntley dragged his hands down his face. "O God, what a fool I was. If I'd stayed here I might have persuaded her to stay too. Why did we let her go off to Albany, alone, to take that secretarial job?"

Mr. Izenga didn't answer that. Not only was he deeply disturbed on several other counts, but he was still licking the wounds of that test of wills. Erica had been such a sweet, amenable little girl. And all of a sudden it seemed she wasn't. He had used all the ammunition he possessed without effect. Erica had wanted a career. Erica

had gone off to have a career. It rankled even after sixteen months.

Huntley said, "The trouble was I already had my job waiting for me in New York and she wouldn't have her damned career there. No. It had to be Albany. I wonder if she could have known this fellow then?"

"What fellow? Who is the man?"

"Oh, some nobody. Toby something. Newman, Newstrom, something like that. What does it matter? She thinks she loves him, and you know her. Stubborn as steel." He put his face down in his hands again. "I don't see how I can face her. How I can pretend. But I've got to, somehow."

"She's coming to the dinner, of course?"

"Oh my, yes. Aunt Letty's birthday dinners are always command performances. I don't know if this is her third sixty-fifth anniversary or her fourth sixty-third."

Mr. Izenga did not think that a nice way to refer to a fascinating lady of seventy-one, especially when she owned more than two million dollars. But this was no time to quibble.

"Just wait till Aunt Letty hears the glad news," Huntley said grimly. "Hell will certainly pop."

"You mean—Erica hasn't even—didn't ask——" Mr. Izenga was too shocked to go on. Shocked, yet relieved too. He hated to think anyone was ahead of him in Erica's confidences.

"She's not asking anyone. She's telling us all."

"Now, Huntley, let's not despair." Mr. Izenga's tone was brisk, heartening. "Erica isn't married yet. She couldn't do that to us. She is fair. And there are ways to influence her, in spite of her obstinacy. You may be sure I'll do all I can to help you."

"You're my only hope." Huntley's smile twisted Mr. Izenga's heart. "I won't stay any longer. You see how it is. I think I'll go home and get plastered. Maybe I could take it better then."

"Now don't antagonize your great-aunt," Mr. Izenga said in alarm. "You know how she hates liquor. And she's all on your side. So am I. It's always been our dearest wish that you and Erica should marry. Just sit tight and we'll see."

"Okay. I'll try." Huntley gave another jerky smile and went out.

He ran down the back stairs. Mr. Izenga watched him go through the gate. Poor boy. Erica had no right to do this to him.

3

Mr. Izenga was completely dressed and descending the stairs when a long maroon coupé slid through the front gates and circled the drive. It parked behind some bushes, and the man and girl in it took time out for a rapturous embrace. They thought they were hidden. But from the landing window Mr. Izenga saw them. Things usually worked out this way for him. Providence, looking out for one of its valued agents.

The top was down. The compartment behind the seat was filled with a quantity of expensive luggage.

Mr. Izenga went on down the stairs and into the library, where he had decided to receive his callers.

In a few minutes he heard Harrison's deliberate footsteps in the hall. Harrison was a tall, well-built colored man of imposing appearance and considerable mental equipment. Several of Mr. Izenga's loving friends had attempted to woo Harrison away. But he was not even tempted. He and Mr. Izenga suited each other to perfection.

There was a spatter of greetings in the hall. Then a girl burst into the library and ran to kiss Mr. Izenga and give him a hearty hug.

Even in the subdued light Erica looked fresh and exquisitely cared for. Her golden-brown hair shone and her skin was infantile. She wore a very suave little suit of natural linen, an intricately tucked blouse of creamy silk, slim linen shoes, and pigskin gloves. She usually skipped hats.

Some people were annoyed by the gracious air with which Erica moved or spoke. But she was unconscious of it. It was the natural result of all that money. But her friendliness and simplicity disarmed most objectors. She wasn't beautiful. She didn't have to be. When you met her you knew you were meeting someone.

Beneath her heavy-browed hazel eyes, a firm mouth and square

little jaw suggested she was able to take care of herself. She knew, already, that the way of the heiress is tough.

She drew back and gestured to the man who had followed her. Mr. Izenga looked on Toby Newcomb and hated him at sight.

He was presentable-looking enough. Just under six feet, rather slender, with receding light brown hair and mere slits of burning blue eyes in a permanently tanned face. His small mustache was like Mr. Izenga's, but the mouth beneath it was straight, almost grim. He looked about forty and as hard as a marine tank driver.

But the worst, most unforgivable thing about him was his mocking air. It announced that he never asked advice of anyone and particularly not of men like Mr. Izenga, if there were another such.

"This is Toby, Mr. Izenga," said Erica proudly. Even she, his darling, had never called him anything more intimate. "Toby Newcomb. I'm going to marry him."

"How do you do, Mr. Newcomb." Mr. Izenga was frosty. He noticed she didn't say, "We're going to be married," and it looked as if she had put it right. "I want this and I'm going to have it."

Mr. Toby Newcomb put out his hand and let Mr. Izenga have a quick pressure. He said he was glad to meet Mr. Izenga. It did not sound likely.

"In fact"—Erica was talking briskly on—"we should have been married in Albany except that I couldn't hurt you or Grandmother like that. And besides, I've always promised dear old Dr. Baird that nobody should marry me but him."

Mr. Izenga tried to throttle down his consternation. He'd have to control himself if he were to save Erica.

"Won't you sit down?"

"We can't stay. We have to get out to Westerly in time to break the news to Grandmother before dinner." Erica gazed up into Toby's face in a way that made Mr. Izenga's heart roll over and turn up its paws. She was maudlin about this stranger. And the man just stood there and took it, condescendingly it seemed, to Mr. Izenga's anguished eyes.

"You haven't told her anything about this, Erica?"

"No." She was on the defensive. "I was hoping you would be

on our side and help us. Toby thinks we don't need anyone to help, but he doesn't know this family."

Mr. Izenga counted ten, then said, "Well, to be perfectly frank, Erica, I thought you were engaged to Huntley."

She tossed her head. "I can't understand how that rumor got about. It's terribly embarrassing. I admit I've always been fond of him. He's really a lamb. And I suppose we really did have a child-ish affair when we were growing up. But it wasn't permanent. Not like this." And she gave the stranger another look that seared Mr. Izenga.

"But, my dear girl, can't you give us a little time to—to get acquainted with your—with Mr. Newcomb?" Mr. Izenga wasn't used to pleading. This was what loving someone did to you.

"No." Erica unhooked her arm from Toby's so she could make impatient gestures. "We can't wait. You know how Gran is. She takes a stand almost at once and then sticks to it to save her face. She wants me to marry Huntley. I'm not going to. But it would take eons to convince her of that and make her like Toby, ordinarily. That's why I want you to help us persuade her." She paused, flicking a speculative glance back and forth between the two men.

A grim, brief smile bent Newcomb's lips for a moment. He gave an ironic chuckle. For a second he looked years younger and easy to like. Then his face stiffened again. Mr. Izenga was annoyed. What was so funny?

Erica came to rub her cheek against Mr. Izenga's shoulder, a heart-melting gesture. "Please, darling, you'll help us, won't you?" she whispered.

He made a heroic effort. "Suppose we sit down for just a few moments, my dear, and let Mr. Newcomb tell me a little about himself."

Erica glanced in dismay at her beloved. His face was turning several shades redder. A muscle near his mouth rippled.

"I'm sorry, sir. I have told Erica my short and simple annals. I'm a normal male human being. No bad habits. No relatives. No diseases, no previous wives or incumbrances. She is the one who is going to marry me, I hope. And she is satisfied. I am sorry I

can't go into particulars with each of the people who care about her. Perhaps I should hire a hall and address a meeting of you all in my behalf."

Mr. Izenga breathed deeply. His words came out iced. "I presume you are aware that Miss Pomeroy is a very rich young woman and will be even richer when her grandmother dies?"

"I've been told that, but I've consented to overlook it." His tone couldn't have been nastier.

In fact, even Erica said, "Toby dearest. Please."

"Sorry!"

"Am I allowed to ask your occupation?"

"Certainly. I'm unemployed at the moment. The last job for which I was paid was waiting on table."

"A-a waiter? You're not serious?"

"Is there anything wrong with that?"

Newcomb's tone was so irate that Erica put out a hand. With a look he silenced any words she might have. There was no doubt who had the upper hand. Mr. Izenga gazed in speechless horror at them. His wits seemed to have gone AWOL. He did not see how a strong, healthy-looking young man could avoid having a job, preferably with a uniform connected with it. Was this another 4F? Was Erica specializing in them? But he kept his patriotic indignation to himself. Better go slow.

"It's ten of six, Erica," Newcomb said. "We're late."

Erica obediently moved toward the door. "I'll be over to see you soon," she told Mr. Izenga. His heart was silently imploring her to give him a minute alone now. But his head told it to shut up.

4

At a quarter of seven the telephone asked if Mr. Ridge Dawson, Mrs. Pomeroy's brother, could not pick up Mr. Izenga in his car and take him on to dinner at seven-thirty.

Mr. Izenga agreed. This would save Harrison trouble. And Ridge seemed determined not to take no for an answer.

"Fine. I'll be right over, Izenga. We can have a little chat before

we leave. Shall I bring something to take the curse off the coming drought?"

"I shall have Harrison make some cocktails," said Mr. Izenga chillily. He wasn't very fond of Ridge Dawson, but after all he was Mrs. Pomeroy's brother and a member of the lodge.

He was fairly sure he knew what was on Ridge's mind. It was always the same thing.

Before he could rise from the telephone it rang again. He answered it without waiting for Harrison. A peremptory, cultured, familiar feminine voice said:

"Cornelius?"

"Yes, Letitia."

"Cornelius, I have had a terrific shock. Have you seen Erica?"
"Yes."

"I thought so. And that—that man?"

"Yes."

"Cornelius, I must see you alone as soon after dinner as we can manage it. When I give you the signal meet me in my study."

"Very well."

"I feel shaken! Hurt to the quick. Tonight I feel every one of my sixty-five years, my dear."

"Poor girl!" He was glad Mrs. Pomeroy had let him know what age she'd decided to be for this event. She must be taking it hard. She had never been more than sixty-four before.

He hung up, sighing deeply. Walking to the window, he gazed pensively at the shadows of late afternoon crawling across the lawn. From his window he could see the roofs of most of the exclusive section of the haughty little suburban village.

His handsome house with its extensive grounds was on a hill. It was far too large for one small man and a colored factorum. Several maids-by-the-day came and went, and there were often changes in gardeners. But under the smooth supervision of Harrison no tempest was ever allowed to outgrow the kitchen teapot.

Cornelius Izenga was the final twig on what had been, years ago, the flourishing tree of a proud Netherlands family. As an ailing child he had been pampered and indulged.

One by one his sturdy, solvent relatives had died, until at last everything was his. Even after keeping up his house with its luxurious grounds, his ever-new Lincoln sedan, and settling with the sublime Harrison, there was an excess.

Mr. Izenga quietly let his left hand dispense this without informing his right one.

5

There were two distinct strains in the Dawson-Pomeroy interrelated clans. One was a driving, forceful, money-making type. The other was lazy, charming, and unreliable.

Mr. Ridge Dawson, Mrs. Pomeroy's only brother, was regrettably of the latter school. He was a very handsome man with a highly colored face, roving dark eyes, thickly lashed, and curly dark hair. The general effect was a gay and exuberant masculinity. He had been a member of the most important firm of attorneys in the near-by city for forty years and had done well.

He had tried hard to find a congenial wife. In fact, he had tried too hard. He had not even stopped looking while he was trying out each of the three successful contestants for the job. This had annoyed these ladies to the point of alimony. Mr. Dawson found an income with a four-way stretch was quite cramping. It was no wonder that he thought fondly of his sister, Mrs. Pomeroy, or, more specifically, of her million or so dollars.

"Hi there, old man, how's your arteries?" Mr. Dawson breezed into the living room eight minutes after he had telephoned.

"Good afternoon, Ridge." Mr. Izenga's keen eye detected strain under the genial surface. Ridge had had himself an afternoon, if that high color and giggle meant anything. It would not affect his sister favorably.

Harrison brought cocktails and Mr. Dawson partook. Mr. Izenga merely sipped to be polite.

"How's the weather out at Westerly, old boy?" Mr. Dawson tried to be casual as he poured his second cocktail from the frosty silver shaker. "Fair and warmer? Festive birthday spirit? Softening of the purse strings? That sort of thing?"

Mr. Izenga put on his celebrated feline smile and quietly sipped. Ridge got it.

"Blast 'n' blazes! She's worse than any of my wives. If I had a million I shouldn't hang onto it to the bitter end, make people glad to see me go. I'd like to share it. Make others happy." He looked over his glass at Mr. Izenga and giggled sarcastically. "You're knowing how I wouldn't hang onto it, aren't you? You have such an expressive face, Cornelius. Well, so what? Life's to enjoy."

"Your sister enjoys it."

"Yes. Grinding down the souls of her relatives. Making them go through hell to get a few sordid pennies out of her." He made a melodramatic gesture and spilled some of the cocktail on the jade Chinese rug.

Mr. Izenga eyed the spot coldly. Considering all that Mrs. Pomeroy had done for her brother, this was most unfair. But no use trying to make selfish Ridge see it.

"How much?"

"Fifty thousand would help." Ridge Dawson kept an appraising eye on Mr. Izenga's mobile face. "But a hundred would be better. Don't wince like that, Cornelius. That is only chicken feed to Letty. This is the last time I'll ask. Positively. I know I've said that before, but this time I mean it. This really is serious. Don't you suppose she'd rather give it to me now—what she'd be leaving me anyway—than see me behind the bars as an embezzler?"

Mr. Izenga was not impressed. It was Ridge's custom to throw on as much agony as was necessary to get what he wanted. He had a gift for exaggeration and melodrama.

"You don't mean that, Ridge. Not an embezzler."

Mr. Dawson finished his drink. He shook the shaker in which ice rattled emptily and cast a pathetic glance toward the dining room. Then he came back to Mr. Izenga's superior, stony face. There wasn't going to be any more.

"Hmmm? What? Why, yes, I do mean it. I suppose the police would put it crudely, like that, if they found me out. But I consider it mere borrowing."

There was a ribald gleam in his eye that made Mr. Izenga steam.

He didn't believe a word of it. One of Ridge's ex-wives or ladyloves was needling him for a new mink coat, no doubt. He always needed money and he always asked for twice what he expected to get, following a famous precedent.

"But I'm hoping Letty won't let it come to that," Mr. Dawson

said lightly. "The dear old girl loathes scandal so, you know."

"I should think you could let her alone, at least on her birthday!"

"But, blast it, that's all the more reason I need it. Now don't be hard, Cornelius. You can always get around her. You must help me. Tust put in a word for me."

Mr. Izenga said nothing. He wished Ridge would get over that extravagant habit of speech. And his reckless use of money made Mr. Izenga's Dutch soul cringe. He knew Ridge would wheedle and fret and coax his sister all evening, every chance he got.

Mr. Izenga sighed. Poor, dear Letitia. Happy birthday!

Chapter Two

AWNSDALE was a very affluent community in the lower half of Michigan. It was called a village in the same manner in which a millionaire refers to his twenty-roomed summer home as a cottage.

Only fifty years ago it had been farmland with rolling hills, brooks, and ponds. To offset this recency, the business center had gone Olde English with stained oak beams, stucco, and aged red brick. There was even Ye Olde Inn, whose lower floor was dominated by a determinedly quaint Tea Shoppe.

From this center radiated cross highways, and from them winding lanes led through a region of luxurious country estates. Very

feudal and proper to the residents thereof.

Ridge Dawson twisted his big Cadillac through these lanes with a casual left hand, leaving his right free to gesture. Ridge was off on his favorite subject. His sister's astounding luck.

Ridge and Letitia had been left equal shares of their father's

money. Dawson Senior was a man who was always making or losing fortunes. He couldn't act in timid, prudent ways. His very taking off was in keeping. He was pitched over a ravine by a wild-spirited horse he would ride, despite all entreaties. Luckily it happened at a time when he was temporarily on the up, so his orphaned son and daughter were left quite well off.

Letitia had been snapped up quickly by Enright Dawson Pomeroy, a thirty-seventh cousin. He had put her money into his banking business. She had never thought of it again until he died, leaving her five hundred thousand. He left an equal sum to be divided among his three children, Enright (Erica's father, now dead), Hester, and Bennet.

Mrs. Pomeroy had been prayerfully implored by friends and family to put her money into a trust fund, an annuity, or some other safe haven for widows.

But an amazing dormant instinct suddenly came to life in her. She began to investigate all manner of wild-appearing, harebrained propositions, exactly as her father had once done. Worse, she made lightning decisions and acted upon them. In no time the bulk of her capital was placed in this or that mad scheme. According to all the copybooks, she should have lost every cent.

Instead, almost everything she touched turned to platinum. The money came rolling in and rolling out and in again, leaving an affluent deposit of luxuries. Nobody knew exactly how much she had, but it was known she had passed the two-million mark.

Her male relatives were divided between the hope that she would lose it all, for the salutary effect it would have on her, and the hope that she would not, in case they would inherit. Meanwhile, she could tell everyone how to run his business and, with that record behind her, no man could shut her up.

Ridge Dawson's habit of referring to her activities as "Letitia's diabolical luck" was not only unsound but silly. It did not endear him to his sister, who regarded herself as a judicious blend of Hetty Green and Cleopatra.

Mr. Izenga tried tactfully to get him off the subject before they should reach Westerly. The birthday party had heavy enough seas to buck without Ridge's little squall.

Westerly had been a pleasant red brick box of a house on two acres of land when Mrs. Pomeroy had inherited it. Now it stretched wings on either side with innumerable arched terraces, screened verandas, huge windows, the whole a glittering white with green shutters and roof.

Mrs. Pomeroy had added ten acres of land and had sunk half of it under water in creating a small lake in which she could see the sunsets reflected. That was when she had decided on its name.

The expanses of rolling lawn stretched to endless flower borders and were kept closely shaved. The sound of the power lawn mower was hardly ever absent. There were always workers moving about with rakes and hoes at a vigorous clip when Mrs. Pomeroy was visible and otherwise at a graceful WPA rate.

Even now as Ridge Dawson drove up the long curve of cement to the front entrance the third assistant gardener in charge of precipitation was turning off the sprinkling system.

"My God, the way she blows money is sickening," Ridge remarked, watching the man. "If there was an insurrection she could raise her own battalion without going off the place."

"Don't forget, it's her birthday, and if you're hoping for a favorable reaction to your request you'd be wise to change your mood." Mr. Izenga spoke quietly as he got out.

"My pal." Ridge smiled brilliantly. "Thanks. I get it. Her birthday. Blast 'n' blazes, her birthday! And I forgot her present. It's lying on my dresser. Pretty little thing. I charged it at the finest jewelry shop in town." He began to slap his pockets. Then his face cleared. "No. Here it is. I haven't any remembrance of putting it there. Instinct of self-preservation, no doubt."

They mounted steps to the impressive entrance. Two great pillars soared to a roof over the second-story windows. The original door had been replaced by a grouping of fanlights, glass panels, and three-inch oak. The brass knocker weighed two pounds.

A very small, dignified colored man with sparse white hair, wearing a spotless white jacket, came to open the door.

"Good evening, Pliny." Mr. Izenga and Mr. Dawson spoke almost in chorus.

"Good evenin', Mr. Izenga," said Pliny pointedly.

He took their hats and gloves and went off down the white hall with its wide, curving staircase. Various pieces of exquisite dark furniture cut the wall spaces. On a table was a vast bouquet of delphiniums and rose and cream snapdragons.

From the arched doorway on the right came the imperious voice of Mrs. Pomeroy talking rather gaily, as both gentlemen were relieved to note. Mr. Izenga was glad she had suppressed her alarm about Erica for the time being.

He could see her now, reflected in one of the many mirrors of the white-paneled living room.

Letitia Pomeroy was extraordinary indeed for seventy-one. The driving force of her energy and her superb health had kept her figure lithe and young. She carried her small head with its fine profile and hardly wrinkled skin at a proud angle. Her brown-white hair was arranged in a soft, flattering fashion.

In spite of the blaze of diamonds against her shell-pink lace dress, her personality overpowered their glitter. You saw, first and last, her flashing gray eyes, the subtle changes of her lips.

She asked only one little favor of life—her own way.

2

The other two people in the room were Mrs. Pomeroy's only daughter, Hester, and her husband, Harry Duke. Hester's expensive green gown was exactly the right shade to emphasize her sallow coloring. And it was far too low, considering the results. On a scrawny neck, her thin, petulant face was forever turning suspiciously to listen to everyone's conversation at once, lest she miss something with which she might disagree, or hear someone else wheedling something she might want out of her mother.

Her husband, Harry, was a heavy middle-aged man with a perpetually anxious aspect. He had received a hundred thousand with Hester to put into his real-estate business and also the benefit of his mother-in-law's unceasing advice. The most corroding feature of this was her invariably being right. It was a bad bargain, but Duke,

being one of the majority who overvalued money, didn't know it. "Oh, Cornelius!" Mrs. Pomeroy exclaimed with a nod on the side to her brother. "Isn't it splendid? Everything is coming out so well for Harry, just as I predicted. The Auto-body Corporation got that contract and they do need the old Burger and Witters factory. I had an appraiser go over it six months ago, and he said it was in excellent condition in spite of standing vacant. The Burger estate kept it up. I was thinking of taking an option on it myself, but it seemed more in Harry's line. So I gave it up to him. And now he's going to cash in." She laughed happily and patted Duke on the arm.

His bleak twitch of a smile did not resemble the happy glow of a casher-in, but Mrs. Pomeroy did not appear to notice anything amiss. She was too busy being kissed by Huntley Price, who had walked in

from one of the side porches.

Mr. Izenga gazed at Harry Duke with his best eye. Harry had confided in him recently.

For years he had fallen farther and farther behind in his obligations, concealing the fact from Mrs. Pomeroy. When she suggested the option deal he didn't dare admit he hadn't funds to take it. He had borrowed the money, then had been afraid to risk it.

Instead, he had put the borrowed cash into what seemed a safe investment, one which any conservative banker would have preferred to the risky option. The safe investment was still good, but temporarily it had sunk in value so that his money was frozen, or at least chilled.

So was he, when he thought of his mother-in-law learning the facts, as of course she would. Her disgust would be terrific. Not as much at his cowardice as at his not admitting it in time for her to act. She was always threatening to leave the Dukes an annuity instead of the large sum on which Harry was counting to pay all his creditors. No wonder his smile was synthetic.

Huntley crossed the room to greet Mr. Izenga. He was looking his usual handsome, pleasant self. He had simply run through the hedge from the large old house next door where he lived with his uncle and aunt. Mr. and Mrs. Galt spent most of their time traveling. They were glad to supply a housekeeper to look after Huntley, who in turn kept an eye on the house. Now and then the Galts stopped off at home to plan another trip. They were away now.

Mr. Izenga was glad to see Huntley had a good grip on himself. He would need it, for Erica came into the room almost at once with Toby Newcomb. Erica's soft, floating, golden-brown dress was almost the same shade as her hair and ruinously becoming. She wore topazes.

Toby Newcomb's dinner clothes did not smell of moth balls or benzene, and he did not seem to be taking them out for an airing. Mr. Izenga was annoyed and relieved.

Erica paused to introduce Newcomb to her uncle and aunt. Harry Duke shook hands in a very friendly way, but Mrs. Duke was barely civil. Erica passed on quickly to her great-uncle Ridge, who was humorously affable, as if to offset Hester Duke's rudeness. Erica gave him a grateful little smile but did not linger. She brought Toby Newcomb boldly, directly, to Huntley.

Huntley paled but said the right things. Newcomb was civil and cold. They shook hands. Everyone in the room stopped talking, then began again, all together.

Erica, like most A-card owners, seemed to be under a guilt complex which forced her to explain any mysterious seeming use of gasoline. She said she had saved all her A coupons from last term. Albany was only three hundred miles from Buffalo, where they had taken the lake boat. Once in Detroit, they were practically home. The fact that no one seemed interested did not deter her.

Mrs. Pomeroy stopped the conversation by touching a bell near the mantel. In a moment the old colored man appeared.

"Pliny, hasn't my son arrived yet?"

"No'm, Miss Letty. I been watchin' fo' de cah."

Mrs. Pomeroy glanced at the clock on the mantel.

"Very well. Serve the cocktails."

This, as the guests well knew, meant their choice of tomato juice, pineapple juice, or apricot nectar. But the canapés were delicious.

"Where is Bennet, Mother?" Hester asked plaintively.

"He drove to Ann Arbor to fetch Lucianna. Her niece is gradu-

ating from some sort of course. Summer school, I suppose." Mrs. Pomeroy spoke chillingly. "But he left at one. He should have been back hours ago."

Mr. Izenga thought Toby and Erica and Huntley were like three actors with roles in a poor play in which they were doing their best. It was painful, even to watch. Huntley so careful not to look at her as he longed to, Erica so feverishly determined to make the two men accept each other, at least on the surface. And Toby Newcomb, too casual, too at ease, for Mr. Izenga's taste. He accepted Erica's devotion without, apparently, being awed by his luck.

Pliny went to answer the telephone in the library and came back in a few minutes. "It Mr. Bennet, ma'am. He been havin' trouble wid de cah. He say he be 'bout hour late. You want to talk to him?"

"Certainly not," said Mrs. Pomeroy serenely. "Just tell him to get dinner wherever he is, and then you serve ours at once."

"Yassum." Pliny hesitated. "He say he way out in de country, ain' no nice place to eat, Miss Letty. He say, please ma'am, save him an' Miss Duprez some dinnah."

"That will not be necessary, Pliny. He can find food if he is hungry. There will be no dinner for them here tonight, understand?" Her mouth was sweetly curved, but her eyes had a steely glint.

"Yassum." The old man withdrew. He mumbled over the telephone in a tone too low to be overheard.

Mr. Izenga surmised that Bennet, or more probably Lucianna, had planned to miss the happy fete. It was not a wise idea.

3

Dinner went off surprisingly well. For one thing, the food was superb, as usual. For another, Mrs. Pomeroy was being gracious lady with a vengeance. She was determined to enjoy her own birthday party. She liked to have a fuss made over her, and everyone was sufficiently eager for peace to oblige.

Ridge was in the gay, amusing stage of having had too many cocktails. He was building up, too, for his touch. He told several

good stories which Mrs. Pomeroy enjoyed. Hester always had a fund of gossip, entertaining, if seldom based on fact.

Erica and Huntley went on playing their roles of being just good friends. But Toby Newcomb's silent sarcastic mood rather spoiled it. Newcomb was awkward about eating too. He knocked over a glass of water with his clumsy left hand.

They had coffee in the living room. As they were finishing a car door slammed. Footsteps in the hall were followed by the appearance of a rounded, very pretty woman, fortyish, with dark curling hair. She wore a thin dress flowered in huge lavender irises and carried a straw hat.

At first meeting people were inclined to consider Lucianna Duprez a sweet little woman. She had an arch, confiding air and pleasant curves to her mouth, when she chose, and seldom contradicted and argued. Later their opinions were revised.

Bennet Pomeroy strolled in behind her in white trousers and blue jacket. He and his uncle Ridge and Huntley Price were basically much alike. The same large, heavily lashed dark eyes, very dark hair, and ruddy skin. The same lazy softness of character too.

"Happy birthday!" Lucianna cried, tossing down her hat, which Pliny carried away. "Awfully sorry Bennet's car broke down. We had a perfectly wretched supper at a horrid little hamburger stand. I expect to die of ptomaine before morning."

Mrs. Pomeroy did not take this welcome opening. She gladly would have fed Lucianna strychnine, herself, if she could have gotten away with it safely.

"Thank you," Mrs. Pomeroy replied to the first two words. She accepted Bennet's birthday kiss resignedly. Her younger son had always been a trial to her. His elder brother, Enright, had been her favorite, and at his death she had transferred her affections to Erica, to be followed in more solid form by the bulk of her fortune, in time.

"Here's our present." Bennet drew from his pocket a package wrapped in cheap green paper. "We bought it on the way. Didn't have time to wrap it up. It's from both of us. Lucianna picked it out."

"How lovely," Mrs. Pomeroy said angrily. She made her hands slowly take off the wrappings. In a lurid pink plush box was a plated pie server, of which she had six, all sterling. She smiled loftily at the bland face of Miss Duprez. "Thank you so much, Lucianna. It's just like you."

Lucianna also smiled, wickedly and appreciatively. She seemed to enjoy making trouble more than any woman Mr. Izenga had ever known.

He could still recall vividly when Bennet had calmly but definitely refused to marry her and she had threatened to sue him for breach of promise, with all too good cause. No amount of arguing with him had any effect. Bennet stated he was not the marrying sort, he had never intended to marry her or anyone, and had told her so when she started working on him.

All threats, bribes, and arguments led only to this impasse. Bennet's sue-and-be-damned stand was basic. So, as always, the person who cared had to pay. Mr. Izenga and Mrs. Pomeroy drove the bargain with Lucianna and it was a hard one. She had emerged with an income which was to stop only at her marriage to some other man.

As her sweet, feline air seemed fascinating to a number of prospects, Mrs. Pomeroy was always hoping to get rid of the woman. But these affairs always tapered off in a few months. Mr. Izenga, who hated her fervently, suspected that she deliberately tormented Mrs. Pomeroy with these false hopes. Bennet seemed perfectly willing to escort her indefinitely, as long as he did not have to marry her.

4

It was nearly ten before Mr. Izenga received his signal and met Mrs. Pomeroy in her rose-tinted sitting room upstairs. It was charming and comfortable, with a white fireplace, a mahogany desk, and small portable typewriter and telephone.

Mrs. Pomeroy sank into the chaise longue and sighed. "What did you think of him?"

"I hardly met him. Erica stopped to introduce him and said she

was engaged to him." Mr. Izenga was being cautious. "I can't say more till I know something about him."

"There's very little to know, apparently." Mrs. Pomeroy was disdainful. "He comes from some small Michigan town. I forget the name of it. His father was a bookkeeper in a lumber company. He died when this son was ten. His mother supported him by working as a saleswoman in a dress shop. She died when he was eighteen. He put himself through college—three years of it, I think—by various menial jobs of which he hasn't the grace to feel ashamed. I mean it's quite all right, very admirable, I suppose. A worthy young man. But not the gentleman of breeding and distinction Erica should want for her children's father." Mrs. Pomeroy was being tolerant, though it hurt.

"Not Huntley, in short."

"Exactly. You always are so understanding, Cornelius. Not Huntley. Oh, he looked so handsome, so fine, and so important tonight. Did you notice how he kept his temper, no matter how rude that stranger was? Oh, how can Erica be so wrong, so foolish? Huntley would be the ideal husband for her, and she knows it has always been my dearest wish. But does that matter to her? Not a whiff. Isn't there anything we can do to save her?"

Mrs. Pomeroy's tapping fingers could not be seen behind the scintillating fire of her diamonds.

"Perhaps, Letitia, if we give her a little time . . ."

"Time! Time?" Mrs. Pomeroy shrilled. "My dear, she wants to be married at once. Next week! Didn't she tell you? And when I protested I could not possibly arrange for a proper wedding sooner than a month (I was just trying to gain time, you see) why, this insufferable young man says they can simply go to the minister's house some afternoon and that he'd rather not have what he called a fuss! Imagine! My granddaughter. My lovely Erica married like some common working girl."

Mrs. Pomeroy had worked herself into a tremble. She applied a lace handkerchief. Mr. Izenga did a little thinking.

It occurred to him, and not for the first time, that a spot of bad luck would be remedial for Letitia's attitude toward life. In spite of his own foibles he had a streak of strong common sense. After all, the Dawsons and Pomeroys were nice people, but they weren't sacred. Much as he longed to, Mr. Izenga could not see anything so damning in Toby Newcomb's short and simple annals, if true. And if Erica was not a working girl, with that job in Albany, what was she? In fact, he was just a trifle relieved that things weren't any worse, though he suspected Newcomb wasn't telling all.

"So how did you leave it?" Mr. Izenga asked.

"In a mess, I'm afraid. I started with the vow to be calm and not make an issue. But this hasty-wedding idea threw me off. I tried my best to postpone it and when I couldn't, then really I became provoked. But one good feature, Erica promised dear old Dr. Baird she would be married in the church here and no one but him should officiate. So at least she won't be running off somewhere. She does keep her promises, and of course he'd be heart-broken. My heart doesn't count, nor yours." Mrs. Pomeroy sniffed. "But we had a rather sordid scene. I told this young man that he would be the means of defrauding Erica of the fortune I was planning to leave her. I swore I wouldn't leave her a cent if they married against my wishes."

"Did it have any effect?" Mr. Izenga was rather abstracted. He was giving birth to an idea.

"Not a feather's weight. He is so insolent. He said he would prefer Erica without any more money. Thought it would do her harm. He said he didn't approve of having favorites and leaving all the money to one person. He said it should be divided among all the family, evenly. As if Erica wouldn't get it all anyway when everyone dies! I could hardly believe my ears when he read me this lecture, Cornelius!"

Mr. Izenga could well believe that. Either the Newcomb fellow must be a very poor judge of character or a brave and reckless man.

"I suppose," Mrs. Pomeroy blazed, "he thought he'd get credit for all these noble sentiments and that after all I wouldn't be able to leave it away from her because I'm such a doting fool. Well, he will see. I'm going to talk to Mr. Ellinger tomorrow about changing my will."

"Now, Letitia, don't act hastily."

"I shan't. There are several changes I've in mind. I shall probably want to talk to you about it when I decide what to do. I hate to go into all that again, but I don't see how I can avoid it." She sat up and didn't try very hard to conceal a yawn. Mr. Izenga stood up.

"Very well, Letitia. Call me when you're ready. Uh—I presume you know Ridge is in difficulties again?"

"Again? Or still?"

"He needs money very badly."

She sighed. "That's how he always needs it. He laid it on thick to me half an hour ago. Pure fiction, of course."

"But, Letitia-"

"Oh, don't bother, I'll take care of him." She let another yawn get out of control.

Mr. Izenga was relieved. Usually she did not capitulate so easily. It must be her birthday's influence. He took his leave. It was only ten forty-five, but he had an idea that might be carried out at once if he hurried.

5

Four hours later he struggled out of the smothering embrace of slumber. His bedroom was pitch-black. The telephone was ringing insistently. He switched on the light and sat up, alarmed. Who could want him at this hour? Three o'clock. Why hadn't Harrison answered this?

The telephone went on ringing.

His hand shook a little as he picked up the bar. Harrison said urgently:

"Mr. Izenga? This call sounds important." There was a little click.

Erica's voice cried, "Mr. Izenga?"

He swung his feet out of bed. "Yes, Erica?" He was shivering.

"Now please don't ask a lot of questions." Her voice was hardly

recognizable in its anguish. "Something too terrible has happened out here. I need you." The last words, in that tone, were enough to pull him to his feet.

"But, my dear-"

"Oh, please hurry."

"But if you tell me what is wrong I can be thinking how to help you on the way over."

"Oh. Oh yes. It's—well—Grandmother insists that Toby has just tried to kill her. It's some ghastly mistake. But come quick—before she—does something."

The last word cracked in two and the receiver banged down to finish it.

Chapter Three

R. IZENGA put down the telephone with a traitorous smile of satisfaction. Thank heaven that fellow had shown himself in his true colors before it was too late.

In fumbling haste he got into a slack suit and huaraches. By the time he reached the front door Harrison had the car waiting.

The sweet-scented dark folded coolly about Mr. Izenga as he went down the steps. Moths fluttered in the glow of the headlights.

The motor softly purred. There was something mysteriously lovely about three o'clock of a summer morning, if you weren't bound for a near murder.

Mr. Izenga reminded himself that he must be fair, tolerant. He mustn't judge the fellow without knowing the facts. But he could not suppress a quiet elation as the car sped through the mild night. They did not discuss the disaster, although Erica had confided in Harrison, too, when she had called.

"Well, at least we've beat the police here," Harrison said as he swung the car up the curving drive to Westerly's entrance. Only the Dukes' long Packard coupé was parked there.

All the upstairs windows were ablaze with light. The front door stood open. Erica pranced with impatience on the porch. Her pale blue quilted robe flew back from her yellow pajamas. Her amber hair had been tucked behind her ears.

She dashed down the steps and almost dragged Mr. Izenga from his seat. She was breathless. Her hand on his arm was hot.

"Look, darling Mr. Izenga, you must help me. You've got to help me. I know you didn't like Toby when you met him this afternoon. I don't blame you. But he's not really that way. You wouldn't blame him if you knew what he's been through. But he is wonderful. You must believe me."

She took him by the shoulders and looked vehemently into his eyes, as if she would brand her words on his mind: "I am going to marry him, no matter who or what tries to stop me."

It was the high, wild voice of unreason.

Mr. Izenga longed to take her in his arms and comfort her, but this was not the moment for it.

Erica raced on, "I'm counting on you to help us. But there isn't time to discuss it. I can hear someone on the stairs. The whole family is against us. You've got to be on our side. Grandmother has made some awful mistake, but you know how she is; she won't back down once she's taken a stand. Don't let her prejudice you. Please, please keep an open mind. That's all I ask."

The last words were rather soggy. She suddenly let him go and dug into her pocket for a handkerchief.

Mr. Izenga gave her a wry smile which she didn't see. This was going to be most unpleasant, no matter how it came out.

"You haven't promised," she gasped.

"I'll try. I'll do my best."

"Erica! Is that you?" Hester Duke's petulant voice came from the hall. She walked out on the porch in high, tapping heels. The bottoms of pink pajamas flapped under her white wool coat. Her frizzy hair was wild. Evidently she had leaped out of bed and into the car at once, on being summoned. She'd even forgotten rouge and lipstick.

"Yes," said Erica. "And Mr. Izenga is here."

Mrs. Duke said shrilly, "Oh lord! Can't we ever have a private family squabble without dragging him into it?"

Mr. Izenga came up the steps into the light. He eyed Mrs. Duke calmly. "Apparently not, Hester. And I can think of one in which I was present at your request."

Mrs. Duke drew back a step. She pulled her coat closer about her thin body, her eyes remaining fixed on his. A sickly smile tried to stay in place on her mouth.

"Oh. I was just—— I mean it's a shame to drag you out of bed in the middle of night this way." She was stammering.

"No trouble at all, my dear," Mr. Izenga said blandly. He held open the door for both ladies.

As they entered the hall Mrs. Pomeroy's voice could be heard from upstairs. It was top-heavy with emotion.

"Will you kindly keep still, Harry? I tell you I will not have the police. I know what I'm doing. I'll settle this my own way. Isn't Cornelius here yet?"

2

Mr. Izenga paused in the doorway of Mrs. Pomeroy's roseate sitting room. It had been designed to shed a pink glow on its occupants. But it had gone too far this time. The faces of all three people were nearly scarlet.

Toby Newcomb sat near the door, fully dressed in the tweeds in which he had arrived. His mouth made a tight line. His eyes were steely points of light. And they never left Mrs. Pomeroy as she strode up and down the room.

She wore a white silk Chinese robe, embroidered in great scarlet, purple, and gold flowers. It flew back, as she paced up and down in her purple slippers, to disclose a white silk gown. Her face matched the reddest of the flowers much too well. Now and then she thrust thin, sinewy fingers into her disordered hair and threw back her head, revealing her throat on which were some mauve bruises.

Near her bedroom door lounged Harry Duke. He'd slipped a tan gabardine coat over striped pajamas. On his feet were brown

slippers. Occasionally he opened the mouth that was only a shade more scarlet than his cheeks. No words came out. They didn't have a chance.

"Cornelius!" Mrs. Pomeroy stopped short with a tragic gesture. "Have you heard what happened?"

Her voice hit the same high note as Erica's. It was a good thing they had sent for him, Mr. Izenga thought with quiet confidence. He alone was able to handle this sort of thing.

Mrs. Pomeroy raced on: "This young man, this friend of Erica's, tried to strangle me just a short while ago. And Erica, my own adored granddaughter, seems to think it is nothing to get disturbed about."

"That's not true," Erica cried indignantly. "I'm horribly sorry about it. I hate to have you scared and hurt. But I can't agree that Toby touched you. It wasn't Toby. That's all I say."

"Look at these bruises on my throat," Mrs. Pomeroy raged. "Do you think I dreamed them?"

"Of course not. Someone made them, but it doesn't have to be Toby. It could have been a thief, a burglar. After all, you had thousands of dollars' worth of jewelry on all evening. Some passing tramp might have looked in."

"Passing tramp!" Mrs. Pomeroy flung the words as far away as her voice would reach. "Erica, you've got to face this. It was that man!"

"Just a minute. Just one minute. Please." Mr. Izenga's voice was not raised, but everyone stopped talking. "If you want my advice you'll have to tell me what happened, Letitia."

Mrs. Pomeroy thrust back her hair exasperatedly.

"My dear, I was wakened out of sound sleep because someone had me by the throat and was trying to choke the life out of me. I grabbed his hands—— Why, good heavens! I even felt that ring on his little finger!" She paused on a horrified shriek. "That proves it." She pointed to Newcomb's thin hands in his lap, the right one folded over the left. He did not change expression.

"Go on, Letitia."

"Well, I simply fought him off and screamed, and that alarmed

the man and he ran into my sitting room. I tried to pull on the bed light, but it wouldn't work! I had to lie there for a minute or two to get enough strength to stagger out into the hall, trying to call for help. All this time I could hear someone rapping on some door. When I unlocked my bedroom door I found the hall light on. And there was this man, fully dressed, at three in the morning, knocking on my sitting-room door a few feet down the hall. He had the effrontery to ask if anything was wrong—if he could help me—when I had practically caught him red-handed."

"But how can you say that, Grandmother," Erica demanded, "when both your sitting-room and bedroom doors were locked, with the keys inside? How could Toby get back into the hall from your room through a locked door?"

"How do I know how he worked it? I thought I heard someone getting out of the sitting-room window and creeping across the porch roof. No doubt he dropped to the ground and ran into the house again. Easy enough for an agile young man."

"Oh, but—" Erica began excitedly. An odd sound from Toby's throat made her look his way. His eyes were on her. She closed her mouth, so much against her will that it was painful.

"You see, there's nothing to say." Mrs. Pomeroy smiled scornfully. "Of course I went on screaming till Erica came and telephoned you, Cornelius, and Harry and Hester."

Mr. Izenga turned to the defendant, who had not moved an eyelash at the indictment. Guilty, Mr. Izenga thought and hoped. And was going to brazen it out too.

"What have you to say for yourself, Mr. Newcomb?"

"I never strangle women with my ring on."

"Oh!" Mrs. Pomeroy's eyes blazed.

"Toby, really!" Erica snapped.

"Is that your answer?" Mr. Izenga was almost white. He glared at Newcomb with his good right eye, though both of them smoldered. He knew nothing about this stranger. How could Erica love him after this?

"I don't know who constituted you judge and jury of my alleged actions," Toby Newcomb drawled. "If Mrs. Pomeroy really thinks

I tried to kill her she should call the police and hand me over. I'll tell them my story."

"A very good idea," said Mr. Izenga. "I agree with you, Mr. Newcomb."

Erica moved so she could block the telephone if necessary. She said fiercely, "Toby already has said, over and over, that he did not do it. He told me all about it. Someone knocked on his door, and when he woke up and turned on the light he saw a note on the carpet. It was typed. It asked him to come down to Gran's room to talk to her."

"At three o'clock in the morning," Mrs. Pomeroy cut in hysterically. "Can you imagine! Erica believes I would do a thing like that. Goodness knows, why? I've told her I had nothing to do with that fairy tale. But she'll believe anything rather than give up this stranger she's so infatuated with."

"But, Gran, he's got the note. It's on your paper."

"And the desk full of it for anyone to take, and three typewriters in the house! It could even have been typed here at some time in the evening. This room is sound proof. That proves nothing." Mrs. Pomeroy rubbed her throat again and groaned. "No, Erica. If you love me, if you care that I have been attacked, you will send this man packing at once and never see or speak or write to him again." Mrs. Pomeroy's voice was charged with all the force of her dominating will.

"But, Letitia," Mr. Izenga repeated, "I tell you, my advice is to call the police. At once."

"No. I am going to give him a chance. If he will promise to go away at once and never communi——"

"Nothing doing," Newcomb interrupted crisply. "Call the cops." Mrs. Pomeroy's bloodshot eyes flashed mayhem and murder at him. Her breast rose and fell agitatedly and her lips were tense.

"Very well then, Mr. Newcomb. I must ask you to leave this house at once and take your bags. And I shall do everything in the world to keep Erica from you, and if you think you will ever get a cent of my money you are much mistaken."

"But, Letitia." Mr. Izenga was not used to having his opinions disregarded, even by her. He spoke with cold force. "Let me handle

this. Let me call the police. You must. It's your duty. I'll attend to everything."

Mrs. Pomeroy flung off the hand he had laid on her arm. "No!" She sank down on the chaise longue and leaned back.

"But it's your duty as a law-abid---"

"No, no, no, no, I tell you. Don't anyone dare call the police. I will not have a horrid scandal. It is my affair and I'll handle it." She turned her face against a tiny white pillow. Her shoulders drew together, then relaxed, in little jerks.

Mr. Izenga watched her shrewdly. An uncomfortable suspicion was sniffing under the threshold of his mind. Was it possible . . . But no, it couldn't be. Even Letitia had her limits—he hoped. But then he recalled their conversation in this very room only a few hours ago. "I will do anything to save Erica from that fortune hunter," she had said, and meant it. Anything?

For example, was she capable of typing that note, staging that scene as she heard her victim at the door, faking those bruises on her neck—all that just to save Erica? Mr. Izenga looked into his own knowledge of her and did not care for the answer.

On the other hand, he might be doing her a shocking injustice. This stranger might well be guilty. He could have typed the note, attacked her, and slipped out of the window just as she described. But why should he not have completed the job? If he had her by the throat when she first wakened, how could she have uttered a single cry? His young strength was equal to much more than any defense she could put up. Mr. Izenga was puzzled.

This was going to be one of his toughest assignments in years. But he knew if he could not solve it no one else need try.

3

The argument went on until they seemed wound into a cocoon by the threads of useless talk. Mrs. Pomeroy would not compromise an inch. Toby Newcomb refused to make any concessions. If she accused him, he demanded the police. If not, he would see Erica as often as he could and most certainly would marry her. At last Mrs. Pomeroy was too exhausted to argue further. They left her to the ministrations of her middle-aged maid, Angie, who had been summoned. Everyone else thankfully escaped.

Mrs. Duke was about to follow her husband down the stairs when Mr. Izenga asked in a startled way:

"Where is Bennet all this time?"

"Sh-sh." Mrs. Duke glanced over her shoulder. "Don't get Mother started again. He chose this night, of all others, to go to bed with a couple of bottles."

Mr. Izenga clucked testily. "Dear me. I thought he'd gotten over that dreadful habit, Hester."

"Does one ever?" Mrs. Duke sighed. "I know he said he had and he's been quite noble about taking so little."

"But we had quite a talk about it. A very serious talk." Mr. Izenga spoke angrily. "After that last accident he had. And he swore to me that he would never take more than one glass after dinner."

Mr. Izenga bristled and glared at Mrs. Duke with his right eye. It wasn't Bennet's fall from grace that annoyed him as much as Bennet's breaking his promise.

"Well, you can see for yourself," Mrs. Duke said. "Of course Mother loathes the demon rum and never serves a drop. But Bennet keeps a private supply in his room. He says he takes only one small nightcap. If that's what is in him now, he must take it in a bucket."

With the liberty of a friend of the family, Mr. Izenga opened one of the doors. A strip of light illumined Bennet's dark head on his pillow. The light glowed in two amber sparks in bottles on the floor by the head of the bed.

Bennet was breathing heavily in a sodden sleep. Mr. Izenga stood beside him. Bennet's breath could have been lit and used as a blowtorch.

Mr. Izenga's nose wrinkled. He set his lips in a tight line while violent phrases prepared themselves for the dressing down Bennet would get tomorrow. After all those promises! Disheartening!

Mr. Izenga shut the door with a little bang. You couldn't wake that up.

"Disgusting! Simply disgusting!"

Mrs. Duke drew her coat tighter about her.

"The whole thing's disgusting, if you ask me. Our night's sleep ruined just because Mother wanted to stage one of her scenes. She makes me sick. I can't see why on earth she got us all over here as witnesses if she won't do anything about it. It seems so senseless." She gave a despairing glance into a mirror. "Oh lord, what a hag!"

Erica said, "Aunt Hester, you don't believe Toby could have done that to Grandmother, do you?"

Mrs. Duke glanced at Erica with a weary smile. Then she looked at Newcomb. He was standing beside Erica, very cool and self-possessed. He was not placating anyone.

Mrs. Duke yawned. "Oh, my dear, I don't know what to think except that I'm dead and want to go home. There have been times when I'd gladly have throttled her myself. But as I say, why make all that fuss and then refuse to call the police. Nuts! It's absurd. Yes, yes, Harry, I'm coming."

She went slowly down the stairs. Rather unconcerned about her mother's narrow escape, Mr. Izenga thought, unless she, too, had doubts of its authenticity.

Toby Newcomb said, "I'll pack at once, Erica. But I'm not running away. I'll take a room at that little inn we passed in the village. I'll be there when you want me."

"I suppose that's best." Erica sighed. "We can talk it over on the way to Muskegon." She waited till Toby's door had closed, then she said to Mr. Izenga, "Why did you insist on calling the police?"

Looking into her eyes, hearing the undertone in her voice, he knew this was no time to be realistic unless he wanted to lose her forever. He paused in time for inspiration to catch up with him.

"But, my dear child, he should be cleared from this accusation. The police would have done it. He wanted them himself."

The pleasure in Erica's smile was worth that statement. "Then you think there was some mistake too? You don't believe he did it?"

Mr. Izenga looked her in the eye. To believe something one has to be sure. And he was far from sure. He was able to answer in a ringing tone, "No. I do not."

Erica kissed him impulsively and left a hot little tear to run down

into his collar. "You darling! I knew I could count on you. I'll see you Wednesday. Toby and I are driving to Muskegon as soon as it's light, to see his cousin. We'll be gone till late."

Mr. Izenga was relieved. It would postpone her discovery of a little scheme he had put in motion a few hours earlier. When she discovered it she was likely to be annoyed, to put it mildly.

Mrs. Pomeroy's maid opened her bedroom door. "Could we see you for a few moments, Mr. Izenga?"

Mrs. Pomeroy was lying in bed. A sickroom atmosphere pervaded the air. She put out a thin, hot hand and whispered:

"Cornelius, do something, my dear. Help me. Think of something to save her. My poor misguided darling." Tears rolled down her cheeks. Those bruises on her neck were rather horrid.

If they had been put there by Newcomb . . . But Mr. Izenga pulled up short. He couldn't go chasing around in circles. Everyone was depending upon him.

"Letitia, I'll do everything in my power to settle this unhappy situation properly. But I still think you should——"

"Don't mention police to me again!" Her voice went up a couple of notches. "Can't you see he is determined to be a martyr? He knows how that would appeal to Erica's warm, generous nature. She'd be even more determined to defend him. Oh, he's a shrewd, clever man. It's not going to be easy to save her. When I think of darling Huntley—such a gentleman, so charming and pleasant—who adores her . . . They belong to each other. Oh, I can't bear it." Her breath caught in a sob.

"But how could Erica go on caring for Newcomb if he were proved guilty, Letitia?"

Mrs. Pomeroy tossed her head impatiently. "Oh, it would be only my word against his. Nothing could be proved, and she's all ready to take his word against mine. I don't care to prove it to anyone but Erica. Nothing matters but her. How can she be so stubborn and blind about that brute?" Her eyes blazed. She pressed her handkerchief to her mouth again.

Mr. Izenga thought she had a point in that martyr idea, but the whole argument had an impromptu air about it that he could not overlook. He could not help wondering. Of course he might be wronging her; one could never tell with Letitia. She adored disconcerting even her dearest friends. Nothing pleased her more than to be called unpredictable.

"And now, my dear," she was saying exhaustedly, "I'm going to save the rest of my strength to talk to Howard Ellinger."

He smiled smugly. "I have a hunch it may not be necessary to change your will, my dear."

Mrs. Pomeroy's eyes flew open. "Cornelius, you have an idea?" He smiled on, without speaking.

"Tell me," she coaxed.

"It's much better you shouldn't know. Then when you are asked about it, or accused, you can be quite honest in your protestations."

"I suppose you're right. Cornelius, you really are wonderful. But just the same, I think I shall see Howard Ellinger. There are things I want to discuss with him."

4

When he got down to the car it was nearly daybreak. The sky overhead was a pale, even gray, and a thick bank of dark clouds stretched across the eastern horizon. The smell of coming rain was in the coolish wind that tossed the flowers in the garden.

He thought, Dr. Baird will have a wet day for his trip. But he wouldn't mind that. He'd be so glad to see his grandchildren, and Mr. Izenga's car was snug and comfortable.

Mr. Izenga found Huntley talking to Harrison. Huntley said he had run through the hedge to see what was going on. The loud starting up of the Dukes' motor had wakened him. And he had seen all the lights on in the Pomeroy house.

Huntley wore nothing but shorts under a pongee silk robe. His beautiful, sleek skin was almost the same shade. His cheeks, flushed from sleep, and his blinking eyes and tousled hair made him look so young and lovable. Mr. Izenga sighed. How on earth could Erica be such a fool as to prefer that hard stranger?

"What goes on over here?" Huntley asked.

Mr. Izenga told him. Huntley lost some of his color. A defeated, sick look came into his face as he heard how Erica stood up for Newcomb.

"Well, you can't be surprised. You know how Erica is." He tried to be fair and reasonable, but his hand on the door was trembling. "If only it was somebody worthy of her. I'd hate like hell to lose her to the finest man on earth. But that fellow . . . I guess what gets me most is that she could prefer him to me." He turned away.

"Don't forget, Huntley," Mr. Izenga said quietly, "I am not

through yet."

Suddenly Erica's maroon coupé zinged past the corner of the house on its way to the street. Erica was at the wheel. She was more or less dressed in a yellow tailored frock, but her hair blew back in a tousled mass. She looked like the end of a night out.

Beside her lounged Toby Newcomb, smoke streaming from his

cigarette. The back of the car held luggage.

"My God," Huntley gasped. "They aren't eloping, are they?

Harrison, quick."

"No, no." Mr. Izenga was pettish. "I have everything under control. I know where they are going." He got into the car. "I'm going home to get a little sleep and to think. Leave it to me."

5

While Mr. Izenga cat-napped Harrison drove to the parsonage and carried out the luggage of the old white-haired minister to the car. Already the painters and decorators were busy carrying ladders into the ivy-covered stone church. The long-talked-of redecorating was about to take place. A neat notice on the bulletin board in front announced the fact and that the adjoining village's church would be glad to welcome St. Mark's congregation for the next two Sundays while the work was being done.

Dr. Baird, who was never mentioned except as dear-old, had never been brilliant. His dotage was not proving an exception. He saw nothing overt in his head vestryman's decision at eleven at night to have the church decorating start the next morning. And it was merely Providence that saw that Mr. Izenga's car was available to deliver the doctor to his son's house in Bay City for a nice fortnight's visit.

Erica, of course, would not be so gullible. She would take careful handling. But Mr. Izenga had it.

He was wakened from his nap by Mrs. Lawson Leeds's arrival. Her son would come into the money from his grandfather's estate in three months. He was determined to share it equally with his frat brothers, who had worked themselves into a socialistic lather over the winter. He must be deterred.

Mrs. Leeds was followed by other callers with woes. Some of these necessitated dipping into what Mr. Izenga called "the fund." But nobody believed his tale of receiving contributions for it from his wealthy friends. Mr. Izenga sometimes grew quite acid about it.

He always had inspirations about his friends' problems. He had a code of sorts and a few principles. But he leaned daringly toward the theory that the end justified the means. Some of the means took his admirers' breaths away.

Ridge Dawson telephoned in the afternoon to thank Mr. Izenga for interceding for him with Mrs. Pomeroy.

"But I didn't do a thing. She was all ready to take care of you before I spoke."

"Maybe. But your mentioning it was what finally turned the trick."

Well, if that was what he wanted to think. Mr. Izenga didn't argue the point. And possibly his word had helped.

"By the way," Ridge was going on to ask, "what is this rumor about Letty being attacked last night? I heard she was hit over the head with a gun. I suppose she couldn't have been badly hurt or I'd have been called."

"Where did you hear that?"

"It's all over town."

Mr. Izenga clucked. "Pity! She wanted to keep it quiet."

"Well, she can't be badly hurt. I ran over to Westerly this morning when I heard about it and she'd gone to some meeting." Ridge dismissed the whole thing by dropping the telephone on its hooks.

Harrison got back in time to drive Mr. Izenga to dinner at the E. Gordon Joneses'. Ridge was there looking as if he hadn't a care in the world, very handsome in a new dinner jacket.

Letitia was wearing beige lace and her amethysts. She was in a gay, brilliant mood with a circle of admirers. Mr. Izenga carefully avoided her. He did not inquire about the state of her bruises. Letitia was quite capable of saying airily, "What bruises?" and staring him rudely out of countenance, or trying to. He knew her far too well to put out his neck.

Everyone was talking about the church decorating. Such a relief to have it done at last. So wonderful that someone had the force to just push it through. And how lovely that dear old Dr. Baird was going to get to visit that silly son on whom he doted and those five demon grandchildren. No one hinted at any ulterior motive, or that Mr. Izenga was behind these scenes. Their turn would come and the conspiracy of silence would work for them too.

Mrs. Pomeroy got the chance to whisper, "You marvelous person!" as they went in to dinner. It wasn't much, but the words glowed in Mr. Izenga's breast. The idea often occurred to him, and he always liked to have his judgments confirmed.

6

The next morning, just as Mr. Izenga was dipping into a bowl of red raspberries, Harrison came to the doorway. His dark face was very grave and his eyes looked rather frightened.

"Mr. Izenga, I'm sorry to interrupt your breakfast-"

Mr. Izenga dropped his spoon and cast aside his napkin. His meals were sacred, an offering on the altar of the testy goddess of indigestion. Nothing but rank disaster was allowed to disturb them. And Harrison, of all people, kept this unwritten law.

"Mrs. Pomeroy," Harrison said. "She is dead. They just found her. In bed."

"Not—not—you don't mean——" Mr. Izenga's monkey-paw hands touched his scrawny throat in pantomime.

Harrison nodded sadly. "Yes. Strangled."

Mr. Izenga sank down in his chair again. He pushed the food away with blind motions, shaking his head in a sort of palsy. His friend, his dear, confiding friend, whom he had fiendishly misjudged. He would never forgive himself. Never!

He did not even hear Harrison at the telephone saying quietly, "He can't talk just now, Miss Erica. You know how it is. But I'll bring him over as soon as he's able to come."

Chapter Four

Izenga's car turned into the drive. The lawns were brilliant green, the flowers washed into vivid shades. The indifference of material things to human tragedy struck him afresh.

Erica met Mr. Izenga in the drive, ignoring the rain. She wore a yellow sweater and brown linen skirt and a tear-streaked face. She could hardly wait for him to climb out, to weep on his shoulder.

"Poor Grandmother. She looks so awful. I can't bear it. Oh, why didn't we make her call the police yesterday?"

He recalled her very different view on this point then but said nothing. Between the rain and Erica he was getting damp.

"Let's go into the house, my dear." He put his hand through her arm. "Whose are all these cars?" The ground seemed to have sprouted black mushrooms of sedans. Some had broad gold stripes, spotlights overhead, and gold printing:

MICHIGAN STATE POLICE

There was also a handsome dark blue Rolls coupé that he did not recognize. A tiny gold insignia on the door looked official.

"That's Lieutenant French's car," Erica hiccuped. "He's state police. We're lousy with them. Toby called him. And Uncle Ridge called the village chief and Uncle Harry called the sheriff's office."

"Toby! Is he here?" Mr. Izenga asked as they went up the steps. He felt Erica stiffen and draw away.

"Of course. I called him at once at the inn."

"Why didn't Bennet call the police in the first place?"

"Oh—" She stopped short. "I forgot. That's part of it. We can't seem to waken him. The doctors are with him."

"Good heavens, he isn't dead too?"

"No. At least I hope not. Someone said he was drunk, but one of the doctors said he thought Uncle Bennet was drugged."

"But that was the night before," Mr. Izenga muttered. "Or am I crazy?"

"That's just how I feel. I can't believe any of this is really happening. Gran will walk in in a minute and everything will come back to normal." Erica sighed.

But Mr. Izenga was busy thinking. It had been the night before that he had found Bennet drunk in bed. Was that an every-night habit? Or had Bennet lain there, unnoticed for a whole day?

He asked her, "When did Bennet get up yesterday morning?" She gave him a startled look. "Oh. I don't know. I went off in the car with Toby as soon as it was light."

"Did you see him when you came home?"

"No, it was nearly one. Heavens, you don't think—— But he couldn't have been in bed all day. Pliny would have known it and done something about it. He's crazy about Uncle Bennet. Ask Pliny."

Mr. Izenga sighed. He could see that lights were on in the wide front hall. The place was as packed with uniforms as a peace conference. He drew Erica closer.

"Tell me what happened, quickly. When did you discover this terrible thing, my dear?"

She drew in a hiccuping breath. "I was eating breakfast in the dining room. Pliny was with me. And Angeline came and said she couldn't waken Grandmother. She'd taken her breakfast tray to her room and knocked and knocked, but the door was locked. So Pliny and I went up and tried. You know she never oversleeps. We got scared. Then I tried to waken Uncle Bennet, but he just grunted. So then I was really frightened, and while Pliny got a stepladder I called Toby at the inn."

It was on the tip of Mr. Izenga's tongue to ask why she hadn't called him. But he knew the answer and did not want to hear her say it. She thought of Toby first. That's the way it would be now. Perhaps forever. He'd have to take it.

"Didn't you call any of the family, Erica?"

"Not yet. I thought first I'd see what was wrong. Toby came fast. He's using my car, you know. He was running up the front stairs by the time Pliny had the ladder up to her window. And when Pliny opened the door from the inside Angeline and Toby and I sort of burst into the room together. Pliny was crying. And Grandmother was lying on the bed. Oh, she looked so awful, poor darling. I was going to faint, but Toby said I couldn't."

Toby, Toby! thought Mr. Izenga furiously. She certainly was mesmerized by that fellow. If he were behind this crime he had everything arranged perfectly. With Bennet unavailable, Erica would turn first to Toby. He could have cleared up any overlooked clues, being on the scene first. Neither the terrified old colored man nor the almost fainting girl would have noticed him. It was bad!

"Hurry," Mr. Izenga urged her. "What next after you didn't faint?"

"Oh. Well, while I was pulling myself together Toby called Lieutenant French of the state police. Then Toby said I ought to notify the family and call the doctor for Uncle Bennet, so I did all that. I told Uncle Ridge we had called the state police, but he insisted on calling the village chief. But I told you that. They're all here."

"Did you hear any sound in the night, Erica?"

"Not a thing. I'm an awfully sound sleeper."

"When did you see your grandmother last?"

"Last night about one. She had just come home from the Joneses' dinner a few minutes before Toby brought me. We'd just gotten in from Muskegon."

Then she hadn't had time to hear about the church yet, Mr. Izenga thought thankfully.

"Did your grandmother see Toby?"

"No. He didn't come in. He drove back to the inn in my car.

But of course she knew I'd been with him. She tried to work on me a little, to give him up. But we didn't have a fight. She said she knew I'd be sorry. She said Huntley's heart was broken."

Erica began to cry again quietly. "I don't want to hurt Huntley or anyone. I hate to do it. But how can I help it? It's Toby that I love. I kept still. I thought in time she'd get used to the idea and see how fine Toby was."

"Did you lock up, Erica?"

"Pliny stayed up to do it. Grandmother had given up trying to make the old dear go to bed when she was out late."

A man in uniform came out of the door, and Mr. Izenga steered Erica toward it. In the hall Toby Newcomb stepped forward and drew Erica aside with a possessive, almost defiant air. He whispered to her rather roughly. In a moment Erica straightened, put up her chin, and dried her eyes.

Newcomb himself was as coldly self-assured as ever. There was an air of authority about the fellow, probably due to a wild past. You could tell he'd been through plenty, Mr. Izenga thought. Just the sort of thing a girl like Erica would think was romantic!

Huntley, on the contrary, was dazed by the blow. His eyes were red and he kept them on Erica, following her when she moved, with such anguish that Mr. Izenga was alarmed. He must make a chance to talk to Huntley, talk him out of the extremity of his despair. Why, he might do anything in that state.

Huntley had lost his best friend, his champion, in Mrs. Pomeroy, and had lost Erica, too, irrevocably now.

Across the hall Mr. Izenga saw Ridge Dawson looking his full age. All his dapper gaiety was gone. He was haggard and frightened. Deep olive bags hung under his bloodshot eyes. No doubt there was a bit of hang-over mixed with his grief, which didn't help.

He pushed his way through the crowd of police and reporters to Mr. Izenga's side. His voice was hoarse.

"I'd give my right arm for a drink. Wonder where's the nearest oasis. D'y' think Huntley'd have anything to save an old man's life?"

"Better stick around," Mr. Izenga said curtly. "The police like company."

"You're telling me? Have you seen her? God, she looks ghastly. They made me look at her. To identify her, they said. Now I've got to remember her like that. Blast 'n' blazes, somebody's going to sweat for this." It was chilling to hear the menace in that usually casual voice.

"What do you know about Bennet?" Mr. Izenga whispered.

"Looks drunk to me. But the police always want to make something of everything. Letty's doctor is here. That stuffed stethoscope, Harmon. Thinks Bennet is drugged. The whole thing's a foul mess. How she'd have hated it." He shuddered.

Mr. Izenga hated it for her. Poor, dear Letitia, so immaculate, so shielded. This was out of character for her. A dirty deal. She should have died gracefully of something easy and painless and lain under a robe of white lilies in the church.

And with a stab of horror Mr. Izenga remembered the condition of that sanctuary, smelling to heaven of paint, shrouded in canvas, and the workmen told to make the job last as long as possible. As if they needed such orders! But he had closer things to worry him.

2

Another car roared up the drive to the door. Hester Duke flung herself out, followed by her husband. She blew into the hall like one of the Valkyrie. Her thin face was haggard without any make-up and wearing an unbecoming expression of terrified grief. Her chartreuse-and-violet-printed silk dress was heinously unflattering at the best of times. Her thin hands made involuntary jerks.

Erica hurried to meet her at the door, but Mrs. Duke shoved her aside. Her voice was pure hysteria.

"You get away from me. Don't you touch me! I'm through with you, Erica. I wonder how you dare face the rest of the family after bringing home that stranger to murder your own grand-mother."

"Aunt Hester!"

"Get away, I tell you." Mrs. Duke was in a frenzy. "I am going to tell the police the truth." She whirled and directed her fire toward

Newcomb. "And as for you—how can you have the gall to come into this house again after being ordered out—after my mother was merciful enough to spare you?"

"I invited him in," Erica blazed.

"And you can just send him packing too."

"You seem to forget, Aunt Hester, this isn't your house."

"You don't think it's yours now, do you?"

Mrs. Duke, swelling with rage, was going on to develop her retort, but Mr. Izenga moved to her side. He laid a hand on her arm. When she flung it off he gripped her with his steely claw. He looked into her eyes. Looked and looked. It was a strange sight to see her deflate.

"I'd go easy, Hester," he said.

She cringed away and pulled her arm from his grasp. But she said nothing more. As Mr. Izenga looked up he saw a man coming slowly down the stairs, watching him.

He was a youngish man with smooth, light brown hair and very dark blue eyes. There was authority and discipline in every inch of him—in his resourceful face, in his lithe body. And the way his handsome tweeds fitted him aroused Mr. Izenga's approval.

This, Mr. Izenga divined, must be the celebrated Lieutenant French of the state police. He had heard a good deal about French, whose father owned great tracts of forest in the upper peninsula. French was one of those career cops. And quite a career it had been!

Mr. Izenga girded himself to meet a challenge.

The lieutenant paused on the next to the bottom step and said: "The sheriff and your village chief have asked me to take charge of this investigation. Who is the head of the house here—while Mrs. Pomeroy's son is—incapacitated?"

That's a good question all right, thought Mr. Izenga. He watched Hester and Erica measure swordlike glances.

Ridge Dawson cleared his throat and stepped forward. "I am Mrs. Pomeroy's brother, Ridge Dawson, Lieutenant. I'm pretty well knocked out by this blow, but if I can help——"

"Oh, don't stick your neck out, Uncle Ridge," Hester Duke cried shrilly. "Erica doesn't need you. She will settle everything.

She thinks it's all hers now. So lucky Mother's new will wasn't signed yet."

Erica turned rather white, but she said quietly:

"I'm sure we all want to help all we can, Lieutenant. But we're so dazed by this, why don't you let our dear friend, Mr. Cornelius Izenga, represent us? He's really almost one of the family."

The lieutenant inspected the small, dignified man beside her. The high, bald forehead, arching brows, and tight mouth were arrogant, in spite of the slight squint. There was a sort of sinister competence about him which commanded respect. Izenga! Cornelius Izenga! French wondered where he had heard that name before. As one of the state's crack detectives he made it his business to know of the local great in each community. In a moment it came to him. This was the noted curator of Lawnsdale's private life. What luck!

"Mr. Cornelius Izenga?" French put out a cordial hand. "Mrs. Lawson Leeds' friend? I've wanted to meet you for years."

Mr. Izenga's prim, tight petals began to unfurl in the respectful warmth of French's smile. "I've heard of you, too, Lieutenant."

"I think we could work together well, Mr. Izenga."

Mr. Izenga gave an affable but noncommittal smile.

"First," French said, "I want everyone to come upstairs and look at the body before it is removed."

Ridge Dawson groaned. "Must I go through that again, Lieutenant? I've had all the look I need."

"Oh, I guess we won't need you this time," French agreed. "But please don't leave the house. I want to talk to everyone later."

"I think it's your duty to come upstairs again, Uncle Ridge," Hester said spitefully. "We all have to take it."

The elegant Ridge gave his scrawny niece a look of dislike.

"Sorry to disappoint you, my dear Hester, but I know nothing whatever about this nasty business. I was not even called into the family conclave the first night when she was hit on the head."

"She wasn't hit. Someone tried to strangle her. You saw Mother at the Joneses' dinner. Didn't she tell you about it?"

Ridge's lip curled. "You knew your mother. One waited for her to introduce the topics to be discussed. We had a pleasant little chat, suitable for the occasion. If she had wished to discuss her experiences she'd have mentioned it. And after all, is it any of your little business?"

Mr. Izenga hid a smile. Ridge certainly knew his sister. Mrs. Pomeroy loathed condolence or pity. Mr. Izenga had seen the handsome pair chatting gaily at the Joneses' party and was sure the subjects had been agreeable ones. And it was pleasant to see acidulous Hester set back on her heels so masterfully.

3

In the upper hall troopers were bustling in and out of bedrooms, too much at home for everyone's taste.

A small, dignified man who did not need the black bag he carried to proclaim he was a doctor spoke to French.

"We're through with what we can do here. We'll take the body with us as soon as you've finished, Bill."

"Okay. I shan't be long. How about Pomeroy?" He jerked his head toward Bennet's bedroom.

"He'll come out of it all right, I think. I've left a man with him to report any change." The doctor went on toward the stairs.

French walked to the door of Mrs. Pomeroy's bedroom. The two troopers guarding it stepped aside as he went in. Everyone else very reluctantly followed. French watched their faces.

Mr. Izenga's scant breakfast heaved within him as he looked down at the gray face and staring eyes of his dear old friend. Mrs. Pomeroy was wearing a white silk gown, and the sheet was drawn up to her shoulders. She lay on her back. There was no sign of any struggle in the room. She was very, very dead.

"I shan't keep you long," French said soberly. "I want you to tell me if everything in the room is as it was the first time she was attacked."

Nobody spoke. Erica stood with tears rolling down her cheeks, pulling in her lips, trying not to break down. Hester Duke made choking noises behind the handkerchief held to her mouth. Harry Duke's small eyes roamed everywhere as if hunting for something.

Mr. Izenga asked huskily, "Is the bed-light cord pulled out of the base plug?"

One of the troopers promptly answered, "Yes sir."

"That's the way it was the other time," Mr. Izenga said. "She mentioned that the light wouldn't go on, and I saw that it had been pulled away." He glanced away from the terrible stillness of the bed and hoped he could get out of the room without being sick. Poor, darling Letitia, what a fiendish end!

"Anyone think of anything else?" French asked.

If they did they kept still. In another minute they were allowed to leave. Some men were waiting at the bottom of the stairs with a rather horrid long wicker basket. Mr. Izenga escaped into the lavatory in the hall and gave up his last meal.

When he came out a trooper told him the lieutenant was expecting him in the library. Mr. Izenga glanced into the living room as he passed. Erica and Toby were talking earnestly together by the bay window. Huntley watched them from across the room, where he stood with Ridge Dawson. The Dukes were whispering together feverishly.

4

In the handsome library with its rows of books on creamy shelves and delft-blue hangings the air was heavily official.

Lieutenant French sat behind a dainty kneehole desk. A trooper with pad and pencil awaited the next pearl from the thick lips of Angeline. The gray-and-white-striped uniform did nothing for her dour, middle-aged face. She was more concerned with establishing her own innocence than with pretending to grieve. It was only a lost job to her.

"I never seen Mrs. Pomeroy from the moment she went out the front door and got into the car, the evening before, to go to them Joneses' dinner, till I see her cold and dead on the bed." Angeline glanced toward Mr. Izenga.

"Yes. You've said that enough times." French was curt. "But didn't you hear anything in the night?"

"No."

"Or see anything this morning that might help discover her murderer?"

"I ain't no detective." Angeline put her right hand into her apron pocket. "Besides, I was too shocked." She carefully drew out a handkerchief and held it to her dry right eye.

French and Izenga exchanged glances.

French said sternly, "Are you sure there is nothing—not one little thing-you can tell us? There's a penalty for withholding evidence. Now is the time to speak up."

Angeline pouted. She folded her handkerchief into small squares.

"No. Nothing."

"Very well, you can go. I'll see you again later."

As soon as she was out of the room French said, "She's holding out on us."

Mr. Izenga nodded decisively.

French said, "I could crack down on her, but it might take a long time to wear her down. Do you think you could do anything with her alone?"

Mr. Izenga said softly, "I will see." The door closed behind him. In a surprisingly short time he was back. His supercilious face was smug. Opening his small, clawlike hand, he exhibited a large gold ring set with one of those unpleasant red-flecked green gems known as bloodstones.

"She had this ring. She found it on the floor beside the bed, poor Letitia Pomeroy's bed, this morning. You know she was one of the first people in the room."

French turned the ring over with a pencil, examining it. "Did

she give any reason for holding out on it?"

"Yes. She said she was trying to protect the family interests. Pure bosh, of course. She seems to think it belongs to Mr. Newcomb. Perhaps she hoped Erica would pay her for hiding it. No doubt you've been told about that first attempt on Mrs. Pomeroy? She insisted there was a ring on the little finger of one of the hands on her throat. It was one of the reasons she suspected Newcomb."

"Does this look like his ring, Mr. Izenga?"

"Yes, it does."

French turned to a trooper. "Get Newcomb in here."

Toby Newcomb entered in a few seconds, apparently undisturbed. There was no ring on his hands.

"Sit down, Newcomb." The lieutenant poked the ring with a pencil. "That your property?"

A gleam of interest lit the slitlike blue eyes, and a sardonic smile twisted the tight lips as Toby Newcomb bent forward. His right hand picked up the ring, examined it. It was a nice hand, capable and brown.

"No, it isn't. And I've been expecting something like this, Lieutenant. You'll recall that I told you that when I woke this morning my ring was gone from the dresser. I have a first-floor room at the inn. It's all pretty amateurish. Anyone could have walked in and taken—"

"Walked in and taken your ring without waking you?" Mr. Izenga interposed. Could anyone believe that?

Toby reddened. "Must have been that way. I'd have said it couldn't be done too. But the ring is gone. I recall dropping it on the dresser."

Mr. Izenga turned burning eyes on French. If he believed that he could swallow anything. But French's face was blank.

He was saying, "Are you sure this isn't your ring?"

"Absolutely," Newcomb said. "I don't like rings, but my mother gave me this and asked me to wear it. It had belonged to my father. I wore it to please her. But the set was chrysoprase, all green. This one has red flecks in it. I admit the ring is very like mine."

He was entirely at ease, sure of his innocence.

"You can prove your ring was chrysoprase?" French asked pleasantly.

"Oh, why, yes. Of course Erica will remember."

Erica, oh yes, drag her into it, fretted Mr. Izenga angrily. She'll remember it all right, and anything else you want her to.

French said, "It would be better if you had a more disinterested witness, Newcomb. But—get Miss Pomeroy in here."

The trooper went out.

"I'll ask the questions, Newcomb. You keep still."

"Okay," said Toby curtly. "But give me credit for a grain of common sense, won't you? Do you suppose I'd have lost a heavy

ring like that off my hand after killing someone and not hunted for it till I found it? As far as I can find out, the killer wasn't disturbed. Nobody heard anything. It wasn't discovered till after ten."

French stopped him with a look.

An uneasy silence filled the room until Erica entered with the trooper. She was very white, wide-eyed. Her frightened glance flashed from face to face, seeking comfort and not finding it.

"Miss Pomeroy," began French, "do you recall a ring Mr. New-comb wore on his little finger?"

"Oh." She was eager to help. "Yes. He told me it was stolen from him in the night. Have you—"

"Just a minute. Describe it, please."

A gray cloud of horror crossed her face. She put up the fingers of both hands involuntarily to her chin. Then she said:

"It—it was gold. Heavy. And there was some sort of chased design. And it was set with something—some stone. Green, I think." Her eyes agonizingly searched Toby's face for a clue.

"Look at me, please, Miss Pomeroy." French was hard. "Was the stone all green or did it have red flecks in it?"

Erica's lips were drawn in whitely. Her eyes again made a forbidden circuit of the other faces. Twice she opened her lips and closed them. Suddenly she blurted out, "It had red flecks."

Toby grunted involuntarily.

"Oh no, no," Erica cried. "I honestly don't know. I never notice things. I j-just guessed. Toby darling, did I say the wrong thing? Oh, please believe me, Lieutenant. I don't know, really."

Chapter Five

A FTER Toby was taken away by the troopers Mr. Izenga followed Erica out into the hall. He longed to comfort her, but Erica only shook her head, put her hand on his arm for a second, and dashed upstairs.

As he turned away despairingly, Ridge Dawson stopped him. Ridge's handsome face was carefully blank, but his eyes were alarmed. He spoke just above a whisper.

"Izenga. A moment, please."

"I'm extremely busy."

"I know it. But this is vital. Blast 'n' blazes, I shall be called into the library in a few minutes and that damned French will want my alibi for last night. It's not enough to lose my sister——" His voice broke for a minute.

Mr. Izenga softened. He'd thought Ridge was being rather hardboiled about it all. Now he suspected it was only self-control putting up a front. "I know, Ridge," he said. "It's hard."

Mr. Dawson's straight, taut lips shook a little.

"Yes. But that's not the worst." He spoke huskily. "See here, Cornelius, could I say I spent last night at your house?"

Mr. Izenga gave a little lurch.

"Good heavens! How can you ask such a thing? Where were you, Ridge?"

"Not out murdering my sister, I suppose I need not assure you." Mr. Dawson was his haughtiest. "Use your head, old boy. I was innocently visiting—well, anyway, it wasn't murder. Can't you oblige one of your oldest friends? Hurry. Yes or no?"

"But, Ridge, you, of all people, an attorney, should know you can't lie to the police!"

Mr. Dawson put on the weary smile which worked such wonders with his juries. "Really, Cornelius! At your age! Come, come. Will you or won't you? I'll promise not to drag you into any trouble. You can always manage Harrison—and if fifty would help——"

"Preposterous!"

Ridge's face darkened angrily. "Can't you put yourself out a little to save a lady's reputation, you damned old maid? It isn't for myself I'm asking. I don't want to get someone else in trouble."

Mr. Izenga said, "Are you sure the lady has a reputation to lose?" "Why, you dirty little——"

Mr. Izenga only stared at him. But there was something in that oblique, upward gleam that cut off any further words in that vein.

Mr. Izenga said coldly, "The lieutenant isn't the ordinary flatfoot, Ridge. You can trust him to be discreet. My advice to you is to be frank."

"Oh, it is, is it?" Ridge paused and added quietly, "And my advice to you, Cornelius, is to get yourself a bodyguard, P.D.Q. You know too blasted much."

Mr. Izenga was not impressed. He'd known too much for many years and he had Harrison. Ridge's melodramatics had removed him out of the range of Mr. Izenga's sympathy.

2

Returning to the library, Mr. Izenga found the lieutenant questioning Pliny. The old colored man seemed dazed by the collapse of his pleasant world.

"There's just one thing I want to know, Pliny. What time did Mr. Bennet Pomeroy get up yesterday morning?"

Pliny's hand wavered up to his wrinkled black forehead.

"Yassuh, Mr. Bennet, let me see. . . . Mr. Bennet, he didn't get up till noon, suh, an' he feel mighty queer. All floaty-like, he say. I have to bring big pot coffee 'fo' he could git down de stairs. But he wasn't drunk last night or de night befo', Mr. Izenga, please suh. 'Deed he wasn't. He sho 'nuff promise you and he kepp'at promise."

"Why are you so sure, Pliny?"

"'Cause I look at de bottles in his room. Wasn't on'y same little half inch gone outen 'em boff times."

"Did he try to explain it to you?"

"Mr. Bennet say huccome 'at little bitsy drink was so po'ful all of a sudden, when he been taken it out de same bottle ev'y night? He say him an' Miss Lucy have drink at some old joint on de way heah an' it didn't taste good. He lay it to dat. But he wasn't drunk. No suh."

"He may have been drugged both times," French said. "We're having the bottles analyzed. That will tell. Did you notice anything about the house that was out of place? Any clues to help us?"

"Well, somebody must-a climb up dat po'ch roof under Miss Letty's sittin'-room window las' night. Dat trellis is broken, and dey's muddy han'prints on her window sill. When I clumb up dis mawnin' I used a stepladdeh, an' ain' no mud on my hands."

"Yes, we saw that."

"Wasn't any broke lattice yest'day. Must be some old tramp clumb up 'at way last night," Pliny reiterated.

"Are you sure it wasn't that way yesterday?"

"Yassuh! Miss Letty mighty p'ticklah. She walk all ovah de place most ev'y mawnin' an' ain't nothin' she miss what's wrong. An' she want it fix, quick as scat. Wasn't nothin' broke yest'day."

"Well, let us hear of anything else you notice, Pliny. That's all for now."

Mr. Izenga was puzzled at the peculiar smile French gave the old man's back. It seemed irritated, yet tolerant.

3

Lieutenant French sent for the Dukes, one at a time.

While the trooper went to fetch one Mr. Izenga took the opportunity to make a suggestion.

"I suppose, Lieutenant, that you've considered that Toby New-comb could have bought that bloodstone ring in Muskegon yester-day? He might have committed the crime, left the false ring there, and hidden his own. Maybe he trusted Erica to identify the false ring as not his own and thus suggest that someone was trying to frame him. Did you see his face when she failed him? Flabber-gasted!"

The lieutenant shook his head. "I shouldn't waste time trying to pin this crime on Newcomb, Mr. Izenga. I am convinced he had nothing to do with it."

What could Newcomb have said or done that proved his innocence so quickly and conclusively? Mr. Izenga wondered. He was silenced but not convinced. Perhaps even the police could make a mistake, for all French's air of omniscience.

The sharp rattle of heels in the hall announced Hester Duke's

arrival. She quickly suppressed her annoyance at the sight of Mr. Izenga kibitzing on the interview.

Mrs. Duke had smartened up considerably. She looked more like her many portraits in the society section of the papers. Rouge, powder, and lipstick made the most of her thin, shrewish face. Her hair had had the sulky Angeline's expert attention. The violet-and-chartreuse frock had come from a good shop and showed it.

But wearing two of her mother's diamond bracelets seemed rotten taste to Mr. Izenga. Moreover, it was jumping the gun rather foolishly.

Mrs. Duke was one of the many women who vest their composure in cigarettes. Even in such a moment she could not sit still until she had lit one.

"Now, Lieutenant," she began with the glib air of a lady treasurer about to explain away a deficit in the club funds, "there is no need for all this heavy police business at all."

"Do you mean you don't care to have your mother's murderer found, Mrs. Duke?" French asked.

"Of course not that. Will you kindly let me finish? I mean nobody in our family connection could possibly be suspected of this repulsive crime. But there is one stranger here. A stranger whom my poor mother accused of trying to kill her. The second time he succeeded. It's sickeningly obvious. Take him away and let the rest of us grieve in peace."

She was trembling now. The jewels on her arm flamed and danced. She caught Mr. Izenga's good eye fixed on them and turned a little pink. "Mother wanted me to have these."

"Did she?" Mr. Izenga was cold. "There is a list of her jewelry attached to her will, and I have a signed carbon copy. I shall be glad to check those items for you. No. No. No trouble at all."

French suppressed a smile at Mrs. Duke's startled ire at this interpretation of her gesture. He was also interested to notice how well the little man controlled her.

French said, "Mrs. Duke, are you formally accusing Toby Newcomb of the murder of your mother?"

"Certainly."

"You will be willing, then, to sign a statement to that effect? A statement that could be used to obtain a warrant for his arrest?"

Mrs. Duke took the cigarette from her lips. "But I thought he was under arrest now. Just take him away and leave us alone. That's all I'm asking."

French smiled at that. A hard, grim sort of smile.

"Will you please answer my question? Will you appear on the witness stand as the principal witness accusing him? Have you evidence to prove what you claim?"

"But why should I have to bother with that? Isn't it the business of the police to detect criminals, arrest them, and get evidence?"

"And witnesses, Mrs. Duke. Have you proof?"

His voice was low but rather deadly. Hester Duke paled and fumbled in stabbing out her cigarette butt. She took another and lit it. French waited, never removing his eyes from her.

"I don't see why any more proof is needed than that attack on my mother," she said at length.

"Let's hear your story of that attack."

She began, very haltingly and very spitefully, her version of that scene. She was not made any less nervous by the trooper taking it all down.

"So," she wound up, "it's no wonder it is obvious to all of us that Toby Newcomb succeeded in his second attempt."

"Why didn't you notify the police the first night?"

"My mother wouldn't let us. She hated scandal."

"Didn't you think it was your duty, anyway?"

Mrs. Duke said sullenly, "You didn't know her."

"And now," French said, "I'd like a statement on your and your husband's movements last night from six o'clock on."

"Good heavens! You aren't asking me for an alibi? An alibi for my own mother's murder?"

"Mrs. Duke, will you please just answer the questions?"

Mr. Izenga could see her trembling. The diamonds on her arm made a rainbow shimmer of indignation.

"I consider that an insult, but to be released from this persecution, I'll tell you. We, Harry and I, played bridge with our friends,

the Jack Marsdens, till eleven. We came home, had drinks, and went to bed."

"Did either of you leave the house during the night?"

Mrs. Duke lifted her chin. "Of course not!"

Mr. Izenga didn't know why, but he didn't believe her. French let her go and questioned her husband at once. He told the same story. It rang truer from him. Perhaps he was a more practiced liar. As soon as the door closed on Harry Duke the lieutenant looked soberly into Mr. Izenga's right eye.

"Why will people try to lie?" he asked wearily. "They can't all be guilty, and it doubles the work!"

Mr. Izenga was rather dismayed. He must be very careful. He wasn't sure he liked the cool, too-polite lieutenant.

4

Mr. Ridge Dawson entered, distinguished and grave. It seemed an effrontery to go through the farce of questioning him. But he was being very reasonable and helpful.

Mr. Izenga was hard put to it to control his irritation at Ridge's story. He told the lieutenant he had gone to his apartment at ten and slept, more or less, until awakened by Erica's tragic phone call in the morning.

His manner was perfect. Serious, sincere, decisive. Mr. Izenga thought he himself would have been entirely deceived by it, had he not known otherwise. French was his usual civil self.

"What do you mean by more or less, Mr. Dawson?"

Ridge Dawson smiled urbanely. "Well, the fact is I really have no satisfactory alibi, if one wants to suspect me of killing my own sister. If I'd known what was happening I'd not have chosen last night to have indigestion. I waked about two with pretty bad cramps. I took some soda, but that didn't help, so I went down to the drugstore in the building. It was closed. I walked to the other three in the village, and all of them were closed. By that time I felt better, so I went home. I didn't meet anything but two cats."

"Did anyone see you leave or enter your apartment house?" French asked affably with a glance at Mr. Izenga.

Mr. Dawson shrugged. "I couldn't say. I tried to be quiet so as not to disturb anyone else. But there are a couple of women there who seem to belong to a private Watch and Ward Society. Maybe they heard me. But I, with my training, can assure you I'd have had time to do the crime—if that was when it happened—and if, as I say, anyone thinks me capable of it."

The possibility seemed preposterous. The well-dressed, composed gentleman lounging in the blue chair with smoke drifting from his cigarette was hardly to be imagined in the killer's role. Mr. Izenga could fancy Ridge as a poisoner, perhaps, or the arranger of some booby trap where he would not have to be pained by his victim's dying. But strangling was out of his line.

"Thank you for being frank, Mr. Dawson," French said. "It always saves time and trouble."

But the lieutenant's smile did not seem to match his words. Mr. Izenga watched with the keenest interest. People were his medium. He suspected that these two men were well matched.

Occasionally Ridge's eyes rested contentedly on Mr. Izenga's. He knew he would not be given away to this stranger. Mr. Izenga seethed in frustration and knew he was showing it. He was not going to play stool pigeon, but he did not like to have red-hot secrets thrust into his arms to hold.

At last French let Mr. Dawson go. The door had hardly shut before he said:

"Mr. Izenga, have you any comment to make on what we have just heard?"

Mr. Izenga's neck felt warm. He thought fast. Was a hint, a mere insinuation, a fact? Did he really know anything about Ridge's night? Would Ridge be apt to back up any statement he might make? Mr. Izenga's face was very expressive.

At last he said, "There's nothing I can say."

French smiled. "Confidences, Mr. Izenga?"

But he did not push the point. Mr. Izenga thought, This fellow French is really a gentleman, in spite of being a policeman. It made one want to be helpful, make concessions. He murmured:

"Of course Mr. Dawson had nothing to do with this dreadful

crime, Lieutenant. But he is a gentleman and—uh—rather fascinating. I often think a lot of innocent reputations are ruined in these cases where a little discretion would have saved them."

The lieutenant agreed heartily. He exchanged a very cordial smile with that bland, lofty face. Then he stepped into the hall and called one of the troopers.

"Check on Mr. Ridge Dawson's alibi for last night, Jim. It's not according to Izenga. And you can start by cherchezing his femmes."

5

Huntley Price looked harder hit by the disaster than anyone else, except Erica. That was no wonder, considering what he had lost. His fine white sweater had been soaked by the rain and his dark hair curled damply over his forehead. His white trousers clung to his legs.

There was almost no color in his face. It was a pale yellow. His lips kept trembling in spite of his efforts to hold them rigid.

Mr. Izenga yearned to help him. He vowed to take poor, dear Letitia Pomeroy's place and oust that cowbird, Newcomb, from Huntley's peaceful nest.

Huntley's voice was a brittle whisper, but he was very earnest about trying to answer each question truthfully.

"Just what was your relation to Mrs. Pomeroy, Mr. Price?" French began.

"Well, I always called her aunt, and she called herself my greataunt, but I guess we were really cousins."

"Third cousins, once removed," Mr. Izenga said waspishly. What in the world did that matter? It was a wicked waste of time to question Huntley. The last person on earth to have killed his doting relative, even if he had not been so kind and gentle-mannered.

But Huntley was earnestly telling how he had spent the evening with the John Lungers and had come back to the big silent house next door at eleven. He had not noticed any activity or any noise over here at Westerly during the night.

He had gone to bed at eleven. The old housekeeper who tended

his wants and looked after the house in the Galts' absences slept too far away to corroborate anything he might say. He might have come in and gone out half a dozen times in the night without her knowing it.

". . . though why I should want to harm Aunt Letty, I wouldn't know," he added brokenly. "She was the best friend I had—almost like a mother to me." He pressed his lips tightly together.

French did not keep him long.

Mr. Izenga followed Huntley out on the terrace. They sat down on a white bench facing the long, luscious sweep of lawn toward the little lake. For a while neither spoke. Then Huntley sighed.

"I can say this to you, Mr. Izenga. Nobody else would understand. But I love this place. I helped Aunt Letty plan most of it. She said it would be mine someday. She said I was the only one who loved it as much as she did. And she was right. Of course I—I care for Erica more—and in a different way. But to lose them both to this hard, crude stranger—it's just a little more than I can bear." He turned away on the bench.

Mr. Izenga grasped his arm.

"Don't bear it, then. Don't let him have her, Huntley," he urged fiercely. "And of course he won't get the place in any event. I know that."

"But I won't, either. And there's nothing I can do. I can't get even a minute to talk to her alone. She knows what I want to say and she doesn't want to hear it."

"Of course she thinks she doesn't want to hear it," Mr. Izenga raced on eagerly. "But don't you see? The very fact that she is afraid to listen to your side, Huntley, shows she isn't sure of herself. She's afraid she'll be influenced by your pleading and persuasion."

Huntley was gazing at him now in anxious doubt. Mr. Izenga was encouraged. He was like a fierce little terrier after a rat.

"Don't give up, my boy. That hard-boiled fortune hunter is taking advantage of your decency. He thinks you are handicapped by being a gentleman. Show him you're a man first. Get Erica aside——"

"Yes, try and do it."

"Remember what Napoleon said," Mr. Izenga declaimed. "'Circumstances? I make circumstances!'"

Huntley's mild brown eyes began to show a few reflected sparks from Mr. Izenga's furnace.

"Make an opportunity. Keep your eyes open. Anything worth having is worth fighting for," Mr. Izenga surged on, forgetting his own record in the loved-and-lost department.

"God, I wish I could," Huntley groaned.

Mr. Izenga went on whispering to him for some time. It was nearly noon when one of the head gardeners came up and asked:

"Would you think it was disrespectful, Mr. Izenga, if we cut the grass over on the farther lawns? She always wanted things done on time, poor lady. But we don't know what is right. We don't even know if we'll still be wanted here, sir."

Mr. Izenga said, "I think it would be all right to cut the grass, Fred, if it needs it badly. And you needn't worry. I shall look out for you."

A sort of gasp of relief came from the man's throat. "Yes sir. We'll try not to make too much noise. And I knew you'd look after us here, sir. I told the other boys, I says, 'Mr. Izenga will fix things.' And I surely am grateful to you and so are all of us."

Mr. Izenga brushed away the tributes and sent the man off springy-stepped with the good news.

Erica came across the grass to the bench.

"Lunch is ready," she said. "It won't help anything not to eat. Won't you two stay?"

"Thank you, I'd like to," Mr. Izenga said. "French seems to want me to be available."

"I—I guess I must be running along," Huntley stammered. "Thanks, but I——"

"Huntley!" Mr. Izenga said.

Erica put out her hand. "Huntley dear, let's be good friends as we've always been. Grandmother would have liked that."

He took her hand tightly. "Erica, you know what she'd really have liked. Can't you——"

Oh dear, oh dear. Mr. Izenga fairly pranced. Not here. Not now, you goop, he groaned to himself. Spoiling everything!

Erica pulled her hand away. "Please!"

The three went across the lawn to the dining-room door in awkward silence. Mr. Izenga was relieved to see the Dukes were not lunching there, nor any of the police. At least not with the gentry.

Ridge Dawson was waiting for them with, surprisingly, Toby Newcomb. They seemed to be getting on well together, Mr. Izenga noted sourly. Well, Ridge always took the easiest, most comfortable way. You couldn't blame him for being himself.

As they were sitting down the hall door flew open.

Bennet Pomeroy entered, leaning on Pliny's arm. He looked like a marine who has sighted a Jap sniper's nest.

"Why the hell can't anyone tell me when lunch is ready?"

Chapter Six

TE THOUGHT you weren't well enough to come down, Uncle Bennet," Erica said with obvious patience.

Bennet Pomeroy was not in a state to inspire sympathy. His halfclosed bleary eyes, his sulky mouth and general air of truculence were too reminiscent of his former sprees. He had pulled on crumpled slacks and shirt.

Mr. Izenga reminded himself that Bennet was ill. He had been drugged. He must have large allowances made for him. But it didn't work. You can't sympathize with a person who won't have it.

"I'm not sick. I was doped. Poisoned." Bennet's words blurred and ran together. He slid into his usual seat with Pliny's help.

Erica quietly took her grandmother's place at the head of the table. Even Mr. Izenga was jolted a little by that. It seemed a bit too quick. But then someone had to preside, to pour tea from the big silver pot. Meals went on just the same.

Erica filled the place well. Her face had lost its distracted air. The

hazel eyes under her heavy brows were steady. Her whole aspect was of resolution. There was good stuff in the Pomeroys. In some of them, anyway, Mr. Izenga thought.

But Bennet stared venomously at Erica's new position.

"Didn't lose any time, did you?"

Erica made no response except to turn a little pink. But Toby Newcomb's lips drew still tighter, and the look he gave Bennet was not pleasant.

But Bennet did not even see it. He was too busy looking for trouble. He tried to drink from his water glass, and half of it spilled down his front. Even while he was softly cursing and mopping at himself Mr. Izenga wondered if it weren't a little overdone. But why?

"Why was it left to a p'leece off'cer to tell me about Mother's death?" Bennet demanded.

Ridge Dawson gave him a contemptuous look that took in the soaked shirt. "You were told half a dozen times. You were too groggy to take it in."

"I was doped," Bennet snarled. "I'm not sick. Why was she taken away before I could see her? What's going on around here, anyway?"

"Why don't you go back to bed? You're not fit to be up," Ridge said curtly. He helped himself to the delicate brown filet of sole Pliny was passing. "Ask the police if you want to know anything."

Filet of sole had been one of Letitia's favorite foods, Mr. Izenga remembered sadly as he tasted it. Very delicious. She had written out the menu for this luncheon in her bold hand, never dreaming she would not be here to eat it. And here they all were, sitting in this pretty white-and-rose dining room with the summer breeze puffing in the curtains, the lawn mower buzzing far away, eating Letty's lunch. Mr. Izenga shivered a little and took a dry bite. It was hard enough to stand without Bennet, who kept grumbling and spilling his food.

"Poisoned. I was poisoned. That's what happened to me. Somebody doped my liquor. And I know who it was too. Thought I wouldn't guess. But I know, all right." Erica sighed and censored a remark. Why bother?

Mr. Izenga asked, "Does anyone know if the police analyst's report on the liquor has come back?"

"I don't." Ridge shrugged. He was making an excellent lunch in a quiet way. His loss certainly hadn't affected his appetite, Mr. Izenga observed disdainfully. But then Ridge had always been charmingly, affably selfish.

He and Mr. Izenga and Erica kept up a feeble attempt at conversation above Bennet's mumblings, Huntley's silence, and Toby Newcomb's monosyllabic contributions.

Mr. Izenga was puzzled about Newcomb. He had been haled away by a couple of troopers as if to durance vile, yet here he was, apparently at large again. Able to sit and gaze at Erica with critical possessiveness while his fork found its own way to his mouth. It was far different from Huntley's unswerving adoration.

Mr. Izenga wondered if Newcomb had been able to explain that ring business satisfactorily, in private, to French. Or was French more gullible than he looked? He seemed determined to give Newcomb the benefit of every doubt. Why? Mr. Izenga detested not knowing things. It was like a pain to him.

They were finishing the frozen pudding when Bennet reared in his seat and shoved away his plate. The gesture upset a silver epergne of roses, and the water spread in a circle over the embroidered mats and shining wood of the table. Pliny sprang to mop it up with a napkin.

"Tastes funny," Bennet was shouting. "Somebody's trying to poison me. Pliny, did you put anything in that pudding?"

"Co'se not, Mr. Bennet." The old man was outraged. "It out de same dish as ev'ybody's."

Mr. Izenga calmly took a spoonful of Bennet's serving, tasted, and swallowed it. Bennet watched him with bleary, half-shut eyes. Mr. Izenga said, "There is nothing wrong with this pudding."

Bennet blinked. He believed it.

"Well, she put something in my drink, anyway. Police doctor said so. Coral—coral— What's the damn stuff? Knockout drops." "Chloral hydrate," Mr. Izenga supplied.

"That's it." Bennet gazed in a childlike way at the little man whose authority he had always accepted.

"Whom do you mean by she?" Mr. Izenga asked casually.

"Who would I mean? That damned Lucianna."

A tingling glance ran around the table. But everyone was careful not to move or look at Bennet lest they break the spell.

"Did Lucianna put something in your liquor? Did you see her do it?" Mr. Izenga tried to pin down that jellylike intellect.

"I didn't see her do it. But who else would it be? I was always finding her in my room, poking around my things. Even after I got a new lock on the door she got a key somehow. She'd get into hell if you tried to keep her out." His words tottered drunkenly.

"You'd better keep your mouth shut to the police," Ridge said curtly. "Leave your girl friend out of this. We've got enough grief."

"Leave her out? Leave Lucianna out? Why, damn it, she did it, you fool. Why're you trying to protect her? She was always saying how much happier everybody'd be with Mother dead and her money divided up. She told me a million times she'd kill her, herself, for two cents, if she could think of a good slick way. And this was it."

Ridge Dawson took a sip of water, wiped his lips, and tossed down his napkin. He turned to Mr. Izenga.

"Let's get him up to bed again. He doesn't know what he's doing. Things are bad enough without stirring up that hellcat, Lucianna."

"No, you don't," Bennet snarled. "Where's my lunch? Why wasn't I served too?"

Everyone stood up. Erica said quietly to Pliny, "Bring him something to keep him quiet. I suppose we've got to humor him. And will you try to get him back upstairs to bed?"

Pliny cast a doubtful glance at the problem, who was almost twice his size. He scratched his head. Mr. Izenga stepped closer.

"I'll see to him, my dear."

Erica took his hand and looked into his eyes. They were almost the same height. Behind the serenity she showed to others, he saw unacknowledged fear and the old dependence on him. She didn't say anything, but the warm pressure of her fingers lingered for a long time after the door had closed.

2

Mr. Izenga was coming downstairs at two-thirty from seeing Bennet into his room, when he met a trooper sent to get him.

"They're waiting for you, sir, in the library."

Mr. Izenga went on down. He was troubled. He hadn't realized how much Bennet had hated Lucianna. The drug in his drink seemed to have acted almost as a truth serum, loosening his tongue and his discretion.

Bennet insisted he had continued seeing Lucianna solely because she threatened to annoy his mother if he didn't. Mr. Izenga had not known Bennet was so devoted to his mother as all that. He wasn't sure he knew it now. Somehow, talking to Bennet had made him feel very uneasy.

Bennet was exulting that he was now rid of Lucianna forever. She could do her worst and he wouldn't care. Talk like that was bad, Mr. Izenga felt. He had told Bennet so. Bennet must be kept away from the police until he had enough sense to keep still.

Perhaps Dr. Harmon could be persuaded to certify that Bennet was too ill to be interviewed. Dr. Harmon would not like to be mixed up in any but the most exclusive murders. But Mr. Izenga had ways of bringing things to pass. He would see, later.

3

In the library Lieutenant French was waiting with Ridge Dawson and Howard Ellinger, Mrs. Pomeroy's lawyer.

Mr. Ellinger came of a race of large, blond, pink-faced men with Churchillian heads. He had an affable, smooth manner and a genius for avoiding trouble. He and Ridge Dawson were very pally off and on. This was one of the on times.

Mr. Izenga suspected that Ridge had crashed the conference in Howard's wake and that French did not know how to get rid of him easily. For, at this stage of the case, he did not know Bill French very well.

Mr. Ellinger passed his own personal brand of cigars, but only he and Ridge Dawson accepted. Mr. Izenga had no time for minor vices. He concentrated on curiosity.

The lieutenant deftly took control of the meeting. Both of the big attorneys, handsome in their own ways, were used to dominating their own circles. Each had tried in a quiet way to head this small group.

But the lieutenant with the pleasant, grave face had set them back on their heels. With what? Mr. Izenga did not know, and he was avidly interested. French's smooth, fine-skinned face and light brown hair were almost boyish. He did not have even the glamour of a uniform to back him up. Yet, undeniably, authority spoke with his quiet voice and gleamed from his dark blue eyes. This was The Law.

French said, "Mr. Izenga, Mr. Ellinger has very kindly come out to tell me the terms of Mrs. Pomeroy's will. I thought it might be a good thing to have you sit in on this. I believe Mrs. Pomeroy consulted you in making her will?"

Mr. Izenga nodded modestly. He had practically dictated it. Quite a battle they'd had, but in the end she saw he was right.

Ridge Dawson leaned back in his favorite blue chair with smoke drifting from his cigar. He might have appeared unconcerned to an outsider, but Mr. Izenga knew it was only veneer. Underneath, Ridge's emotional, dramatic nature was beginning to realize the ugly fact of murder. Murder in his most private, intimate family. It couldn't be side-stepped as most of his other troubles had been.

But Howard Ellinger was giving himself a build-up for his act. He charged staggering fees and always tried to give his clients their money's worth, at least in scenic effects. He put on a pair of eye-glasses with a flowing black ribbon. He tossed back the flap and zipped open the inner compartment of a fifty-dollar brief case. With a flourish he brought out a sheaf of exquisitely typed white sheets bound in blue. Each sheet was signed with Mrs. Pomeroy's masterful black scrawl.

Mr. Ellinger ran his eye down the first page, mumbling a word here and there: "... funeral expenses paid ... just debts ...

"You don't want anything but the essentials, do you, French?" He looked over his glasses, then flipped the page. "Ah. Here we are. She leaves this place, Westerly, and five hundred thousand dollars in cash, to her granddaughter, Erica Pomeroy, and Huntley Price, jointly, if they are married within one year after her death." "Whee!" Ridge Dawson whistled. "There goes Newcomb's

chance!"

French gave him a sardonic glance, then met Mr. Izenga's eyes, in which was the same thought. It had not taken French long to size up Erica.

Ridge Dawson, watching this, said, "But maybe she'll eat her cake and have it. She can marry Huntley and divorce him."

"Not for ten years," Mr. Izenga retorted with an author's pride.

Mr. Ellinger rattled the paper impatiently. "But-if Erica does not marry Huntley she gets the income from a two-hundred-thousand-dollar trust fund for life. Huntley gets fifty thousand dollars in cash. The house will be turned into a memorial hospital."

"Damned shame," Ridge said with seeming carelessness. But Mr. Izenga saw how tensely he was awaiting his turn.

"You, Ridge, get the income from a one-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar trust fund," Ellinger read, and looked over his glasses.

"Damned decent of her. Poor old girl. She's done a lot for me. She could have skipped this." All very proper words, but Mr. Izenga longed to know how he really felt about it. Had Ridge known this was what he'd get? Or was it a surprise?

Ellinger glanced at page three again. "Hester Duke gets the income from a two-hundred-thousand-dollar trust fund as long as she lives. After that it reverts to the estate."

"Poor Harry." Ridge sighed. "And he hates her so already."

Mr. Izenga said tartly, "Don't talk nonsense."

Ridge Dawson only smiled lazily. "You married, French? No? Congratulations."

"You, Izenga," Ellinger went on, "get fifty thousand dollars in cash."

"Yes, I know," Mr. Izenga said testily. "She would do it. I told her I didn't want it. But you knew her. The government will get most of it in taxes, anyway."

"How about Bennet?" Ridge asked.

"Two-hundred-thousand-dollar trust fund. Nice pension to old Pliny. Small sums to other servants. Lot of bequests to charitable funds—that's about all. The bulk of the estate will go to support this hospital, and the trust funds will come to it later."

Ridge Dawson took the cigar out of his mouth and glanced quizzically at Mr. Izenga. "Was the hospital your idea, Cornelius?"

"No. It was hers, but it seemed a good idea to me." Mr. Izenga believed in distributing wealth in wiser ways than most of Mrs. Pomeroy's heirs would have done it.

"Well, well!" Ridge drawled. Then he exclaimed, "Lucianna Duprez! Blast 'n' blazes! Isn't she mentioned?"

"Certainly not." Howard Ellinger was exasperated. The fool! Now the police would have to know about that!

Mr. Izenga swelled with quiet satisfaction. What a pleasure it had been to make sure Lucianna got nothing and to keep the fact from her all these years. If it should turn out that Bennet was right and Lucianna had done the killing, she would certainly have a Pyrrhic victory.

"And who is Miss Duprez?" French put the inevitable.

Ridge Dawson sighed, glanced at Izenga wryly and at Ellinger. The large pink lawyer scowled. He didn't approve of committing the great American sin of being found out. He did not propose to sit in on this autopsy on the Duprez character. He gathered his papers together.

"You're through with me, aren't you, French? I'll have my stenographer mail you a copy of the essentials, and there are some minor bequests that may interest you. For instance, Miss Pomeroy gets the furnishings of this house, in any case. She's to divide with any of the other heirs as she sees fit. May cause a little friction. Call me if you want me."

Ellinger edged toward the door with each word and at the last he skipped out and closed it. There was an odd half-smile about French's lips. He glanced at the other two under raised eyebrows.

"You tell him, Cornelius." Ridge Dawson heaved himself up. "I want to see Howard for a moment before he goes."

They let him escape. Mr. Izenga drew a long breath and began to let it out, fraught with the odoriferous tale of Lucianna Duprez. Before he was through he had added Bennet's suspicions of her complicity in the crime. Why not? More power to French if he could pin it on her and make it stick.

4

Mr. Izenga was also awarded the task of telling Erica the terms of the will. She looked a little pale as she gazed out of the morning-room windows at the delphiniums, columbines, and Canterbury bells that lined the paved walks below the terrace.

A summer robin, freed of family cares, was picking up a late lunch. Its manner implied it did not care who the hell thought they owned this piece of ground, Mr. Izenga mused with glum whimsey. Its offspring would be living here for a hundred years to come, whatever humans did. It didn't care that there were tears in Erica's eyes. Tears too hot to shed, that simply steamed into nothing.

"How could she have done that to me?" Erica said in a bitter whisper. "Trying to force her own way on me even after she is dead."

"It was for your own good," Mr. Izenga said.

"Why couldn't she have trusted me to live my own life? She had her way always. Why not let me make my own mistakes? I'll make them anyway. I love this place. But not that much."

"Don't be hasty, my dear child. You don't know how Huntley loves you."

"Oh yes, I do. I don't want to be loved that way." Erica's brows drew down in a heavy V.

"You don't know. You won't listen to him."

She gave him a smile, mischievous and grim. "Don't advise him any more, please, darling Mr. Izenga. It won't help."

He didn't answer that. After a long silence she sighed again and said, "Would you help me see about the funeral? She wanted it in church, but you know how that is." Her eyes flicked his face.

He thought, She knows all about that. She knows who did it. But she wasn't going to make trouble about it. A rush of grateful love almost overcame him. Erica was such a darling. If only she would listen to reason on Newcomb. If only she could be kept from marrying him until his guilt was proved.

"Of course I will. But Hester should be consulted—and Ridge." It was going to be a lot of trouble.

"No. That's just it. Aunt Hester called up and asked me to ask you to do it. She has such a silly morbid fear of death. She won't even make her will. And Uncle Ridge says he doesn't believe in funerals. Says he's going to only one. His own. Uncle Ridge is really a pig, isn't he?" Erica said with dispassionate weariness.

"Yes. Well, I'll do my best." Mr. Izenga was tired, too, and he didn't care for funerals either, but he shouldered this new responsibility. "When shall we——"

Erica said, "The sheriff is determined to hold an inquest Friday morning. So we'd better have the funeral Friday afternoon."

"An inquest! But why is that necessary? If the state police are handling it they shouldn't have an inquest, at least not so soon."

"Oh, you know Joe MacDonald. He's so self-righteous about what he thinks is his duty." Erica gave a sob of weariness. "If he'd been an early Christian he'd have given the lions ptomaine."

"Hmmm! I'll see MacDonald," Mr. Izenga said. "And I'll look after everything, my dear."

Erica put her arms around him and cried for a few seconds on his shoulder. Then she produced a rather damp smile.

"Oh, darling, if only you could like Toby!" she whispered so endearingly that Mr. Izenga's heart was wrung. He would almost try to do it when she looked like that. He might even pretend, up to the time the fellow was dragged away to prison!

Chapter Seven

R. IZENGA'S FORMULA for keeping his paragon, Harrison, was a revolutionary one. He treated him as a human being with rights and privileges. And backed it up with a whopping salary.

As a result Mr. Izenga received not only superservice but friendship. Harrison insisted upon arranging all the details of the Pomeroy funeral, subject to Mr. Izenga's approval.

He was out on this mission when the doorbell rang at ten Wednesday night. Mr. Izenga pushed on the entrance lights and peered out a window.

The light shone on the petulant face of Hester Duke. Her hair was elaborately arranged in upswept curls and she clutched a white wool cape about her thin shoulders. On her arms glittered the two diamond bracelets she had confiscated. To Mr. Izenga's disappointment, they proved to have been intended for her, as she claimed.

Mrs. Duke was breathless, prancing with nervous haste on her spiked-heeled white slippers. She kept glancing over her shoulder at the lights of the car in which she had come.

Mr. Izenga did not want to hear any more troubles, but of course, after turning on the lights, he had to let her in. He opened the door and pushed the screen ajar.

She darted in. "Are you alone?"

"At present, yes."

He noticed as her cape fell open that she was wearing a white embroidered evening dress.

"I must see you alone where we won't be interrupted," she cried agitatedly.

"In here." He lit three red-shaded lamps in the pine-paneled den next to the library.

"Oh, I'm so worried I'm almost sick. I can't stand it." She spoke

in a shrill whisper. "We're over at Jane Hasty's dinner for Ann. I just ran out on it for a few minutes."

Mr. Izenga said, "You are at a dinner party when your mother has just been killed the day before? Did I hear you right?"

Mrs. Duke pressed her thin lips together.

"Good heavens, don't be so archaic, Mr. Izenga. Jane's dinner is to announce Ann's engagement. People have come from hundreds of miles. She actually offered to put it off, but I told her that Mother never put off her own dinners for anyone. She'd be the last person to want——"

"I can see all that. But how could you want to go to it?" He surveyed her finery scornfully.

"But I had to go. It was my duty. I'm managing Ann's rehearsal," Mrs. Duke shrilled. "They're to be married in two weeks! And I did not come here to have my manners criticized. Everyone thought it was very kind of me to suppress my own grief and bear up for Jane's sake." She was trembling now.

"All right. All right." Mr. Izenga leaned his weary head against the cushioned top of his chair and closed his eyes. Perhaps he was old-fashioned. Perhaps respect and mourning were passé.

He heard her heels make a path of irritation up and down the room, now on the rugs, now on the polished floor. At last she spoke in a new tone, cajoling and intended to appease.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Izenga. I'm so wrought up I don't know what I'm saying half the time. What worries me now is that horrid maid of ours. I've done everything for that girl, and still she hates me."

He knew some of the things she had done. He did not blame the maid for any reprisals she might take.

Mrs. Duke went on: "She got a summons, or whatever it is, to appear before Lieutenant French tomorrow morning for questioning. And I had everything fixed so nicely. I know she'll spoil it all. She'll tell him Harry and I weren't home last night."

Mr. Izenga's prominent blue eyes flew open. The right one glared savagely at her. "I wish to God people would stop lying to the police and telling me about it. I have enough on my mind. Why did you do it?"

"I couldn't help myself," she wailed. "It's just the most foul coincidence. Harry has been having an affair with another woman. He thought I didn't know about it. I tried to find out who it was, but either nobody knew or they wouldn't tell me. So I decided to follow him."

"Dear, dear." Mr. Izenga sighed gustily.

"I know. Isn't it the most fiendish luck?"

Mr. Izenga said, "Why didn't you come to me in the first place?" She began to weep a little. "Because I was a fool." She added, "I didn't want to bother you."

He didn't care for wilted bouquets. He and Hester had always been antagonistic. He knew she would not bring herself to apply for his help except in dire need when all else failed.

"Go on," he said dryly.

"So I would choose the night my poor, dear mother was killed to follow him. Oh, Mr. Izenga, please don't think I'm not sick about her, just because I try to be brave and think of others. I knew she would not want me to sit at home grieving." She dropped tears on the diamond bracelets, which made them glitter even more.

"Stick to your story," he said unsympathetically. "Someone may come. Where did you go and when? Tell it quickly and don't waste time in emotion."

She didn't like it, but she took it. "I went to bed at eleven, and so did Harry, as I told the lieutenant. I mean we both went to our rooms. I waited and listened. It seemed hours, but it was only a little after one that I heard him start down the hall. And I followed. When we got out in the yard I expected him to take his coupé. I'd left mine parked in the drive on purpose. But he didn't. He started to walk. I had a flashlight and I was so mad I wasn't afraid of the dark. Besides, after a while I could see quite well."

Mr. Izenga listened resignedly. What fools women were! And men! She could not have chosen a worse time. The medical experts had set the time of Mrs. Pomeroy's death between two and four o'clock. How French would love to hear this story from the Dukes' maid.

Hester was continuing plaintively: "I trailed him down the drive

and through the path that crossed all those vacant lots. And where do you suppose he wound up? In that open field at the north end of Westerly, where Mother once wanted a golf course. He met some woman there, out in the middle of that space."

"Who?" Mr. Izenga spat out the word.

"But that's what I don't know." Hester was shrill with baffled ire. "I couldn't get near enough to hear a thing except that they were having a raging quarrel, but they had sense enough to keep their voices down."

"But couldn't you even guess who she was? Couldn't you see anything characteristic or hear a word or——"

"No, no. I tell you I did everything to try to identify her. Naturally, after all that trouble I wanted something to show for it. But they kept moving away from me, and I didn't want Harry to know I'd followed him."

"Moving toward the house?"

"Why, yes, they were." Mrs. Duke looked rather alarmed, as if she hadn't thought of that before.

"Could the woman have been your mother?"

"Mother! Good heavens, she wouldn't look at Harry even if—oh—you don't mean—oh——" Her one-track mind seemed to have had a wreck. Her lips remained open.

"Your mother was the last person in the world to have had a clandestine affair with anyone," Mr. Izenga snapped. "Let's keep this thing in the realm of common sense, Hester. Could your mother have summoned Harry to talk to him in private?"

Mrs. Duke searched his face in fearful doubt. "I—I don't know. It seems fantastic, at that hour of night. She could easily have stopped at his office, I should think. It never entered my head that it was anything but an affair. I suppose it could have been Mother. They went toward the house."

"And you followed?"

"No. I couldn't. I'd have had to cross that open field. They might have looked back and seen at least my outline. No. I thought, If they've reached the quarreling stage it's almost over. Even I don't fight with him like that. So I decided to go home and not let him know I was out at all."

"When did he get in?"

"About three-thirty."

"How do you know the maid knows you were out?"

"She knows, all right," Mrs. Duke said acidly. "She always knows everything she shouldn't. It's like having Frau What's-hername quartered on you. Hitler's ladies' aide."

"But, my dear-"

Hester leaned forward. "Why, she's already tried to get money out of me to keep her still. I mean she hinted around. Sounded me out. That was tonight, just before I left the house! You can imagine how I've enjoyed the party!" She took out a compact and surveyed her ravished face despairingly. Then she began to repair it.

Mr. Izenga's distaste fought with his lust to run other people's affairs. She was so inconsistent in her attitude toward the dinner. She'd forgotten that bearing-up-bravely line already. How could she dare fence with French? He asked her:

"Then you and Harry lied independently of each other?"

"Yes. He still doesn't know I followed him. And I don't want him to. How can I keep up a front if he thinks I'll just overlook his having affairs?"

Mr. Izenga sourly pondered this scrap of female logic. "But if it was your mother he saw last night——"

Mrs. Duke snapped shut her compact. "I tell you, he was and is interested in some other woman, whether he saw her that night or not. I've played the dumb wife for ten years. I know what I'm talking about. I'm sure that wasn't Mother."

"Yet you still want him?" Mr. Izenga marveled.

"I still want my home and my friends and I don't want the trouble and scandal of having a divorce and baiting the trap for some other fool as bad as Harry. Men are all alike. I'm used to him and I've got him trained. Besides, now that I've got more money, perhaps he'll think it's worth his while to behave."

Mr. Izenga concealed his distaste for this gash in the veil of romance. He had never cared for Hester, and this view of the arid wastes of her mind was not changing his.

"I can't see what you want me to do," he said at length. "You've

done nothing but make out a really bad case against Harry. He looks like the best suspect so far, and certainly, if he killed your——"

Mrs. Duke shuddered. "No. He didn't kill her. He couldn't. He hasn't got it in him. Besides, he has no motive."

Mr. Izenga could see plenty of motive and a really alarming opportunity. In fact, the possibilities of the situation kept him silent.

What appalled him was the thought that her whole story might be fiction. Suppose Hester and Harry had gone together to the house? Suppose she had been the woman who crossed the field with him? Hester had keys to her mother's house. Suppose she had told him this fairy tale to forestall the maid's story, because the real reason was even worse? He felt the skin on his back draw together in patches.

She was searching his face. She said shrilly, "You must not tell the lieutenant a single word of this. It was in confidence. I came to you for help. I didn't think I had to force you to promise."

"Please. Not so loud. I have no intention of telling. I don't want to hear any more."

"But you'll help me, won't you?"

The hand she put on his arm shook. She was in a bad state of nerves. Her voice quavered.

"I don't see how I can help you. What do you want me to do?"

"Why—see this disgusting maid of ours. Find out what she wants and pay it. Pay as little as you can. I'll stand quite a shakedown if I have to. But get rid of her."

"But French will talk to her in the morning and-"

"No, no. He mustn't." She dug in her handbag and produced a long, narrow green strip of paper. "Here's a ticket to Los Angeles. She's been saving her money to get out there. Give her the money and the ticket and have Harrison see she gets on that train. It leaves in two hours."

Mr. Izenga gazed at the green strip as if it were a snake. Hester really was too stupid. She must have gone to the station in her evening clothes on the spur of the moment. It would not take the state police half an hour to trace the maid's disappearance to her.

But what scared him most of all was her reckless expenditure of money, so unlike Hester unless she were personally in danger.

He drew a long breath and tried to explain things to her. As she listened her face hardened. Her thin nostrils dilated and her eyes glowed. She reminded him of a cornered vixen shaken with fear and fury. Capable of almost anything. Murderous, in fact. He wondered if he should not warn the maid to leave.

All Mrs. Duke got was the fact that he refused to play the role she assigned him. She sprang up, whipping her cape about her.

"I might have known it was folly to come to you. You've always hated me. You don't care what happens to me."

"Hester, is that fair? Have you forgotten—" He saw he did not need to go on.

She backed away from his reproachful eyes. Her hand was pressed palm outward against her teeth.

"No. No. I forgot—for only a minute. But—you wouldn't tell—that?"

His scornful smile was answer enough. He would not dignify her lapse by any response in words. In a babble of apologies she backed to the door and let herself out, still distracted and terrified.

Mr. Izenga gave a little shudder, as if to shake off that distasteful memory. When Hester was sixteen she had flown into one of her almost insane rages and attacked one of the maids. Her mother had tried to interfere and been hurt too. She had sent out a wild call for Mr. Izenga, who managed to subdue Hester with difficulty.

By that time the maid required hospitalization. They had made up a tale about a burglar to which the maid agreed. Shortly after Mary Shoemaker recovered she married and went away. A very comfortable annuity made up for the scar on her cheek.

The job of persuading the maid and setting the price had been Mr. Izenga's. Mrs. Pomeroy had been too ill to take part.

It was hoped that the shock would be a lifelong lesson to Hester. A jail sentence would have finished her socially. But Mr. Izenga wondered if the effect had not worn off. Certainly her rage of the past half-hour had been rather frightening.

Mr. Izenga had hardly finished breakfast the next morning when Lieutenant French's long Rolls coupé curved in between the ivy-covered brick gateposts of the drive.

The lieutenant was brisk, businesslike. Mr. Izenga shut the door

of the den so they could be private.

"That was a nasty crime," French began. His dark blue eyes were hard. "I've had plenty of experience with unpleasant deaths. Shooting and stabbing are bad, but they suggest one quick, impulsive act. Strangling a person is different. The killer has time to repent and to relax his hold before life is finally crushed out. It takes cold blood to complete that kind of crime. I hate stranglers."

Mr. Izenga was jolted by the violence of the lieutenant's quiet voice. It wasn't loud. But it made him shrink within his own skin to a size smaller, and prickles played on his spine. Was it necessary to be so graphic? Gruesome pictures came into his mind and wouldn't leave. Suddenly it began to matter a lot more to him that the killer was found than that anyone was protected. Of course there were a few people who could not be suspected.

"Do you know anyone who hated Mrs. Pomeroy?" French asked. After earnest thought Mr. Izenga said, "No, I don't know anyone who hated her that much. But I'm afraid Letitia, for all her gracious ways, had a hard, ruthless streak. You don't get two million dollars off a bush. You take it away from other people. I can give you a list of several who had reason to dislike her. That is, if it's understood that I am not accusing any one of them."

"That's what I want, Mr. Izenga. Just a few leads. I don't want to pin this crime onto just anyone, simply to make an arrest. We don't work that way. And the state police haven't a reputation for making trouble for innocent people. Just trust us a little."

Mr. Izenga nodded, but he was troubled.

French went on, "Let's consider Mrs. Pomeroy's heirs first. Her family and friends."

"Why always pick on the heirs?"

"Because the obvious has a way of being true, Mr. Izenga. For in-

stance, her brother, Mr. Ridge Dawson. Is there any reason why he should want her dead?"

Mr. Izenga thrust down his impatience. French could not know the prominence and sacredness of the Pomeroys and Dawsons. They must be considered as if they were hoi polloi. Mr. Izenga himself could see the resemblance of Pomeroys to ordinary mortals when he was annoyed at them.

"I can see no reason, Lieutenant. Mr. Dawson lives rather extravagantly and has numerous obligations. But he makes a very good income from his law firm, and his sister was most generous with him. They bickered at times, like other families, but they were really devoted."

"And her son, Bennet Pomeroy?"

"Bennet was twenty-three when his father died and left him a hundred and thirty thousand. He put it into an annuity at once and has not done a stroke of work since. Living with his mother, he seldom used half his income. It simply piled up. So he surely doesn't need money. He and his mother got on very well. He did not mind being dominated, and at heart they were quite close to each other."

French gave Mr. Izenga a searching look. But there was no doubt that he was sincere. This was how he saw his friends. It might, or might not, be the way they were.

"And this brings us to Huntley Price."

"Huntley!" Mr. Izenga exclaimed. "You aren't wasting time considering him, I hope."

"We're wasting time considering everyone but one person," French said dryly. "Trouble is, we don't know who is the one yet. Price gets fifty thousand, doesn't he?"

"Yes, but—but——" Mr. Izenga was exasperated. "He is about the last person who would want Letitia dead. She was determined Erica should marry him. In fact, she tried to force it, as you saw by her will. I tried to tell her that would not work. But got nowhere. Huntley and Mrs. Pomeroy were more congenial than any other members of the family, and I think he feels her death more." Mr. Izenga ran out of breath and could only puff annoyance at the lieutenant.

"That leaves the Dukes," French said.

"Yes." Mr. Izenga was firm. "And here's where I leave you. I cannot discuss the Dukes. To be frank, I'm too prejudiced."

French wondered, was it possible he considered he had been unbiased about the rest of the family?

"Then, Mr. Izenga, you think it possible that one of the Dukes could be responsible for this?"

"Please, please! I said nothing of the sort."

"Mrs. Duke paid you a visit last evening, Mr. Izenga. Have you anything to report on that?"

Mr. Izenga's jaw opened a little to let out his indignant amazement. Was he being followed, spied upon? Impossible! It must be Hester who was under guard.

"I've told you I cannot betray confidences."

"Not even to trap a murderer?"

"Mrs. Duke is not in that——" Mr. Izenga's memory cut short his words. The ghost of Mary Shoemaker reared up in his mind.

French was staring at Mr. Izenga as if he had him under a microscope. "Mrs. Duke has a very bad temper."

Mr. Izenga said nothing. Was that simply a fiendishly apt guess? "It's a wonder she has never gotten into trouble through it in the past," French probed. His eyes didn't leave Mr. Izenga's alarmed face.

"Has she ever been in trouble, Mr. Izenga?"

What could he say? He was no easy liar. And he doubted if he could fool French. Yet he couldn't betray his friends.

To his surprised relief, French did not press the point. He said quite casually, "The maid also says that the Dukes were not home the night of the murder."

"Why believe the maid?" Mr. Izenga protested. He was much shaken. If only he could find a red herring, or even a pink one.

"Lie-detector test."

Mr. Izenga had an inspiration. "Why don't you investigate Lucianna Duprez, Lieutenant? There's a first-class suspect for you. She hated Mrs. Pomeroy and she is capable of anything."

"We aren't forgetting Duprez. She swears she was in her apart-

ment at a few minutes before twelve that night. She doesn't seem interested in a lie-detector test. I don't like to force that till I have something on her. Have you any suggestions?"

Mr. Izenga hesitated. "Let me see. Lucianna lives in the Parker Arms apartment house. Um-humph. Third floor—no, fourth." He began to smile. "Yes. I think I might be able to help you out there." He scribbled a note on a pad lying on the desk.

"By the way, he asked boldly, "I suppose you have checked on

Ridge Dawson?"

French laughed. "I think you and I will get along swell, Mr. Izenga. Yes, I think we know where Mr. Dawson spent the night, though he lies like a gentleman."

Mr. Izenga threw all his curiosity into an eager glance but got no results. Well, he would find out later. He always did.

"And Toby Newcomb?" he went on. "I was rather surprised to see him at large after that ring business."

"I'm looking after Newcomb. You needn't worry about him." French always looked so sarcastic whenever Newcomb was suspected, Mr. Izenga noticed. Perhaps the first person to call the state police got them on his side.

"I don't know about you, Lieutenant, but I'm frank to say I don't know a thing about the man. I understand the only job he ever held was that of a waiter. Yet he must be at least forty."

"Forty? Toby Newcomb forty?"

"Certainly. His hair is retreating, and that hard, tough manner of his may very likely be the result of a life of crime. I can see him killing somebody and not having an atom of remorse."

French openly gaped. "Mr. Izenga, are you sure you have heard nothing about Newcomb? Is this feeling of yours pure intuition?"

Mr. Izenga nodded. "Yes. Of course I'm not accusing him. I don't know anything, as I tell you."

"I see." But French's gaze had a tinge of awe in it.

Mr. Izenga gasped, "Lieutenant-am I right?"

"What? About Newcomb? No. No. Please don't get any wrong impressions about him," French said impatiently. "We'll take care of Newcomb. You look after that Pomeroy-Dawson tribe. Someone in that lot is as guilty as hell."

Trying to throw me off the scent, Mr. Izenga told himself with bloodthirsty exultation. Newcomb's the man and he doesn't want to let it out till he's ready for the kill. What's more, it won't matter so much what I pass on about the Pomeroys if Newcomb is guilty. And a weight seemed to slide off his shoulders.

He said, "We're planning the funeral at two, Friday, after the inquest. Is that all right?"

French sighed. "That inquest. He will have it."

Mr. Izenga inquired, "It might be a good thing not to have an inquest then?"

French only smiled ironically.

"I know the sheriff," Mr. Izenga mused. "Very, very well. I was thinking of seeing him this morning."

"Has anyone ever told you you're remarkable?"

Mr. Izenga only smiled modestly.

French went out to his car and switched on the two-way radio to headquarters. "Bill French speaking. Put a good man onto Mrs. Duke's past, Sergeant. See if there's any old gossip about her temper getting her into trouble. I struck a nerve there. Keep it clean and quiet."

Chapter Eight

JOSEPH MACDOUGALL MACDONALD was a droopy man who took life hard. He kept a worried expression on his sagging face because it was hardly worth while to change it.

A family of six children and an ailing wife seemed enough trouble without taking on the county's crime. But Mr. MacDonald had been sheriff for a dozen years now and was preparing to run again for the office in the fall.

His headquarters were in two small dreary rooms on the second floor of a brick building on Main Street. He greeted most visitors with a suspicious, silent scrutiny, as if comparing them with a mental series of man-wanted pictures. That made it all the more remarkable when he sprang to his feet as Mr. Izenga entered. He even attempted a rusty smile.

"Sit down, sit down, Mr. Izenga. This is an honor. No, don't sit there. This chair is more comfortable. Terrible thing about Mrs. Pomeroy, ain't it?"

"Yes indeed." Mr. Izenga seated himself gingerly on the edge of the seat of honor. It badly wanted dusting. "Very distressing. How she would have hated such an end. It's a mercy she didn't know."

"Oh, but she does know," the sheriff put in vehemently, as one who had a private wire to the beyond. "She is looking down on all this, you may be sure." He rolled up his eyes.

Mr. Izenga coughed. He wished Joe would keep his role as superintendent of the Sunday school out of his sheriffing. They did not mix well, in his opinion. Although the village drunk had been quoted as saying he'd often skipped a spree rather than listen to Joe's pious dribble.

"How is your son getting along?" Mr. Izenga asked.

Mr. MacDonald was like a lamp suddenly lit. "Joseph is doing wonderfully well, considering how hard it is for a young lawyer to get started. And be honest too. He hopes to start paying back the money you loaned him. . . ."

"Joe, please!" Mr. Izenga was angry.

"Now don't always get mad when I mention that, Mr. Izenga. He isn't worrying about it. He promised you he wouldn't. But it's always on his mind. As soon as he gets a real start——"

"He should get into some good, well-established firm of lawyers," Mr. Izenga declared.

Mr. MacDonald shrugged. "Yes, try and do it. He's been to half a dozen places, then he sort of lost heart. Nobody seems to need his kind of help."

"Has he been to Judge Lock?"

"Mercy, no. He's tried the little fellows. There wouldn't be no chance for him in a firm like that." But MacDonald was on the edge of his own chair, too, his pathetic eyes fixed with painful expectancy on Mr. Izenga's supercilious face.

"I've been talking to the judge about Joe. Since the judge left the bench he's been building up his business remarkably. He needs help. You tell Joe to see the judge at eleven-thirty tomorrow morning." Mr. Izenga took out one of his cards and scribbled on the back. It was difficult to keep his mind on the words with MacDonald's gratitude dousing him in an almost incoherent flood.

"And he'll never forget it as long as he lives, and neither will I nor the missus, and if there's anything I can do for you, Mr. Izenga..." MacDonald's knobby hands were shaking as they took the precious card.

"Don't think of it, MacDonald." Mr. Izenga briskly put away his fountain pen. "I understand there is to be an inquest tomorrow at eleven on Mrs. Pomeroy."

"Yes, that's right. I felt it was my duty to try to find out who did it."

"Do you think an inquest does that?"

MacDonald looked disconcerted. It was not his habit to analyze the due processes of law as he had learned them. "That's what it's for, ain't it?"

"Maybe. But it has always seemed to me that all an inquest does is to let the criminal know how much the police have against him. The verdict is almost always 'party unknown.'"

"Yeah, you're right there." The sheriff returned to his habitual gloom. "Don't do much good, and that's a fact."

"Joe, do you really believe Mrs. Pomeroy is looking down on all that is going on now?" Mr. Izenga was most persuasive.

"Uh—uh—yeah, I do," MacDonald said stoutly, but he looked uneasy about it. Why be so realistic?

"Then don't you think that what she would like would be for her murderer to be discovered as quietly as possible, with as little talk? Remember how she hated scandal?"

MacDonald grudgingly began to nod very slowly.

"But I want to do my duty too."

"Your duty is to her. Think how good she was to your family. What higher duty is there than being good to her in return? This is the last and only thing you can do for her, Joe."

The sheriff stared at his ink-stained desk. "But what could I do? People'd talk. They'd laugh at me if I called it off."

"Don't then. Just postpone it."

Joe blinked admiringly. Then he said, "To when?"

Mr. Izenga sighed. But he believed in being kind to dumb animals. "Indefinitely. Till further notice." His gesture indicated "forever."

"Say, I wonder if I couldn't do that." Joe gazed at the card lying on his desk. "Would the state police be sore?"

"I'll fix them."

"Gosh." Joe breathed his awe. "You sure are wonderful, Mr. Izenga. But . . ." His lumbering mind found other obstacles. Mr. Izenga kicked them all aside until at last the sheriff began to grin feebly.

"Okay. And it'll save the taxpayers' money. I'll tell 'em that when I call 'em to say it's all off. I mean postponed."

He even gestured toward the telephone.

"I think that's a very wise decision, Joe." Mr. Izenga got to his feet.

The sheriff swelled with glum importance. It was smart of him, at that. Saved trouble too. And he could maybe go with Joe Junior when he went to see Judge Lock about that job tomorrow.

"Yes sir, I'll fix it all up," the sheriff repeated heartily. "Say, it was a lucky thing you happened to mention the inquest when you come in here about Joe."

Mr. Izenga smiled demurely. "Yes, wasn't it?" He went to telephone Lieutenant French.

2

Mr. Izenga enjoyed the excellent lunch Harrison had ordered. Harrison paid the cook extravagantly and had fascinating ideas about food.

At one Mr. Izenga telephoned his lifelong friend, Miss Eudora Frobisher. If convenient he would like to call on her for a nice long chat about three-thirty.

Miss Frobisher was delighted and added tea to the program.

Mr. Izenga had a little nap, saw three visitors in need of advice, and set out on foot at three-fifteen.

Miss Frobisher's apartment house was only a short walk from his grounds. By a strange coincidence it was the one in which Lucianna Duprez lived too. Miss Frobisher's flat was directly under Miss Duprez's.

Under a luscious green maple tree, near the apartment, Mr. Izenga saw Miss Duprez's car parked. It was a pale grayish blue with lavender upholstery and had cost Mrs. Pomeroy a sad sum. Mr. Izenga tightened his lips and looked the other way. He did not like to see evil prosper.

He poked the right button and was admitted to the empty lobby by the clicking door lock. The automatic elevator stood waiting, and he rose to the third floor, unseen and unheard by anyone. A very discreet arrangement in certain circumstances, he thought. It might be difficult to check on Lucianna.

Miss Frobisher, like Mr. Izenga, was the tag end of a large, prosperous family, and at first glance into her apartment it looked as if they had spent their lives buying furniture and leaving it to her.

Only vessels of very light tonnage could negotiate Miss Frobisher's choked six rooms. The furniture was valuable and handsome, and all her young married friends had been promised various pieces. These young women had written their names on the bottoms of the pieces they preferred. Some pieces had as many as six criss-crossed signatures. Miss Frobisher often sighed with regret that she couldn't enjoy the mad free-for-all that would start at the moment of her passing.

"Hello, hello, Cornelius. It's been ages since you've dropped in." Miss Frobisher was a tall, horsy woman in her late sixties, with as much zest for life as a colt.

"What's that? A new hair-do?" Mr. Izenga exclaimed. Miss Frobisher's abundant gray locks had been whisked to the top of her head, where they had exploded into gray curls. It was hilariously unsuitable.

"Yes. It's rather cute, I think. But come in. Watch out you don't stumble over Coco."

Mr. Izenga took two steps into the room and was stopped by a reddish ball of fur that shot out from under the sofa and began to bound around him with raised paws, flapping ears, and open mouth.

"Dear me, Eudora. I didn't know you had—this." Mr Izenga glanced in dismay at the wild circles the puppy was making around the room and back to him again.

"It's a little cocker. I felt I was getting in a rut. No, no, no, baby. No, Coco. Come here, come here to me."

The puppy paid no more attention than if she'd been a red feather blown by the wind. But at last she stood still. A soulful light came into her topaz eyes. She took up a stance.

"No, no, no," Miss Frobisher shrieked and, snatching up the little thing, she rushed out of the room. Not quite in time, Mr. Izenga observed. There were drops here and there. Served Eudora right. It was ridiculous at her age. But then she was always ridiculous.

Miss Frobisher came back, panting a little and giggling.

"She just can't get the idea," she explained, as if anyone cared, or as if it were a decent subject. "I have papers under the stove, but it's nothing to her."

"Your lovely rugs will be ruined."

"Oh no. And what if they are? Isn't she simply adorable? And such company, my dear. But I won't bore you. Isn't it terrible about poor Letty? Have the police gotten anywhere at all?"

"I don't know. It's rather early to expect results."

"Who is this young man Erica brought home?"

They discussed the Toby-Erica-Huntley angle with much thoroughness. A great deal of other village folklore followed. Then Miss Frobisher's old servant Lizzie bore an enormous silver tray into the room. It was loaded with cakes, sandwiches, and a huge silver tea set. Dresden cups and saucers were stacked at one end.

Coco came, too, and with difficulty was carried squealing and squirming away from the fun. The maid's lips were pressed tightly together. Mr. Izenga said feelingly:

"You have your hands full, Lizzie."

"It's better than the ducks we raised in the pantry last year," she snapped, and let the door bang behind her.

"Poor Lizzie, I'm a trial to her." Miss Frobisher giggled carelessly and served tea. "Lemon? Oh dear, Letty loved lemon in her tea too. And a clove. I can't get used to her being gone." She rolled her eyes upward and said, "I hope that woman wasn't left anything."

"Not a cent."

"Goody." Miss Frobisher ate sandwiches diligently. "I know it's mean, but I wouldn't shed a tear if they found she'd done it. She always hated Letty, and *she* was out all hours the night it happened."

Mr. Izenga stopped nibbling a little cake. He said, "Lucianna told the police she got in at a quarter of twelve that night, my dear."

"Oh! Oh, what a wicked lie!" Miss Frobisher took another group of sandwiches. "Cornelius, you're not eating a thing. You know this apartment house is only thrown together. I can hear every little thing upstairs. She didn't get in till 3 A.M. That shuffling, gliding walk of hers always wakes me up. Such big feet! I heard the hum of the elevator, and her door open, then her feet. I thought, Good heavens, I hope she hasn't brought a man home with her. She loves all-hour parties. Has no consideration at all for other people. But no, thank heaven, she went to bed."

"You're sure it was Lucianna herself? Not a guest or woman visitor?"

"At that hour? And, my dear, she hasn't any women friends as far as I can see. She's man-mad."

"I thought it was just Bennet Pomeroy." Mr. Izenga sipped his tea.

Miss Frobisher's laugh was pitying. "The way she deceives him is disgusting. I can't see why he sticks around. What can he see in her anyway? There are always men sneaking up to her place."

Mr. Izenga's nose wrinkled.

"You know, Eudora, Lieutenant French is a very decent young man. Would you mind if he came to see you—about when Lucianna got home? He'd be discreet, I know."

"Oh, my dear, I'd love it. I can't stand that woman, and it

would be so exciting to be part of a murder trial. I'm always afraid I'm getting in a rut. And I love young men." Miss Frobisher patted her exotic coiffure. "More tea?"

"No, no, thanks."

But she had already rung the bell. The maid came in and the puppy shot past her. Miss Frobisher shrieked.

"Watch out, your napkin! Oh, look, Cornelius, isn't that cunning?"

The little dog bounded off, triumphantly bearing the exquisitely embroidered square of linen she'd snatched from Mr. Izenga's knee. He felt the party had lasted long enough.

"I must be running along."

3

As he walked back toward his house Mr. Izenga met Lieutenant French in his car.

"I was just dropping in to thank you," French said with a friendly smile. "You handled that inquest business very neatly."

Mr. Izenga brushed that aside. French went on:

"I passed Miss Pomeroy a few minutes ago and noticed her left wrist was in a leather cuff. Has she had an accident?"

"Erica? An accident?" Mr. Izenga's voice was shrill. "I haven't seen her. Did she look injured?"

It took a few minutes for French to reassure him. It was only her wrist. Perhaps she had sprained it.

Mr. Izenga was not wholly soothed. He did not like the expression on the lieutenant's face when he referred to her.

"You surely aren't suspecting Erica of any connection with her grandmother's death, are you, Lieutenant?"

"I am not definitely suspecting her, no. But she was alone in that part of the house, with her uncle Bennet Pomeroy unconscious. Her grandmother was planning to change her will and cut her out if she married Newcomb. She may have thought she was to get the house and money without any strings attached to it. . . She is a strong, athletic girl."

"Preposterous, hideous!" Mr. Izenga trembled with the violence of his repudiation. "You can't really believe that of Erica."

"All possibilities have to be considered."

"Including Toby Newcomb," Mr. Izenga said spitefully. "That ring business is pretty bad. You may be able to believe a person could enter his room at the inn, hunt around for that ring on his dresser, and get out with it without waking him—but I can't."

The lieutenant regarded him thoughtfully.

Mr. Izenga went on: "The inference stares one in the eye. He just was not there if his ring was taken in the night. He was out at the very moment the crime was taking place. Or else he lost the ring and can't admit it—or gave it to somebody. In fact, I'm not sure the ring found in Mrs. Pomeroy's room was not his after all."

French said curtly, "It was not."

Mr. Izenga blinked. You had to believe that tone.

"Well, anyway, Erica didn't do it." Mr. Izenga returned to his original stand. "Besides, the murderer got in through the window. I myself saw the broken lattice and the scrape of mud on the window sill where his dirty hands held on to climb in."

"Did you see any mud on the victim's throat or on the pillow or sheet?"

Mr. Izenga shuddered. "I didn't look that well."

"You could have looked forever and not seen any. Because none was there. You surely don't think the killer washed his hands in the bathroom before the crime, do you? And risked the sound of running water awakening her? No. He seized her at once—and never let go."

Mr. Izenga squirmed with distaste. Must he rub it in that way? And he'd said "he," not "she." It was a small crumb, but acceptable.

"But I saw the muddy marks of fingers," he repeated.

"Yes. Very obvious, weren't they? But the zeal that made them was wasted, I fear. That was an inside job, Mr. Izenga. The killer let himself in quietly with a key. And we can't overlook Miss Pomeroy. Miss Pomeroy is a stubborn, determined girl too."

"And a fine, honorable, decent one." Mr. Izenga fired each molten word point-blank.

French suddenly smiled engagingly. "I sincerely hope we can prove that, Mr. Izenga. But I must have your help."

Mr. Izenga let himself be mollified. He remembered the result of his afternoon's call on Miss Frobisher and relayed it to French, who was properly grateful. He promised to see her soon.

"Watch out for the dog," Mr. Izenga called as they parted.

4

When he reached his house he found Erica lying on a chaise longue on the screened side porch. Her left wrist was encased in a long cuff of thick leather, tightly laced. In her right hand she held a frosty glass of pale yellow.

"There's more in the pitcher." She gestured toward the table. "Have some."

"No, thanks." Mr. Izenga threw his hat toward the sofa without removing his eyes from her wrist. He sat down near her, feeling blindly for a chair.

"How did you hurt yourself?"

"It's nothing. Forget it."

"Is it sprained? Did you go to the doctor?"

"Yes. It has had all the attention it needs and is perfectly all right. I simply took a tumble on the stairs. . . ."

"Fell—on the stairs? Erica, how could you be so careless?"

"Oh, it wasn't entirely my fault. Someone had left a heap of magazines there."

"But what a strange place to leave them."

"Please don't try to make something of it, darling Mr. Izenga. I'm tired of mysteries and meannesses."

"But, Erica, this is serious. You must watch where you are going. Couldn't you see them?"

"Of course not. It was the middle of the night."

"Now, Erica-"

"Wait. I'll tell it all, and then we won't discuss it any more. The

telephone rang downstairs last night. The one in the library that has no extension. I let it ring, then thought maybe it was Toby, so ran down to answer it. And I fell over the aforesaid magazines. I sprained my wrist. That's my story." She took a long cool sip.

"And was it Toby?" he asked.

"Humph? The telephone? Why, no, that's the funny part. I picked up the receiver—the bell was still ringing—and said hello. And I distinctly heard someone hang up. Wrong number!"

"Wrong number!" Mr. Izenga echoed explosively. "Erica, someone was deliberately trying to injure you. I think there should be a guard in the house."

"There you go," she jeered.

"But it's so obvious, my dear."

"Look." Erica finished her drink. "If you can get your imagination off my wrist I have something really important to discuss with you." She smiled, fondly teasing, yet serious underneath.

"Very well. What is it?"

He settled back in his chair.

Chapter Nine

Except that horrid leather wristlet. Mr. Izenga doted and gloomed in fond silence. How could she award such a prize to Newcomb?

"I've spent the afternoon—in fact, I lunched too—with Mr. Ellinger," Erica began rather seriously. "He seems to assume he will go right on managing my affairs. I didn't say anything. I don't know what Toby will want me to do."

"Is Newcomb going to be master in your house?"

"Everything is going to be fifty-fifty. I'm going to consult with Toby on everything I do. It will be hard enough to get him to overlook this new money from Grandmother." And she really believes that! he thought. He hitched his chair closer. He had a very appealing way with him when he chose.

"My dear, don't you think you and I could discuss this young man of yours a little without getting into trouble?"

She smiled lovingly. All her life he had guided, soothed, and championed her. She said, "Of course."

"Good. What I don't understand is how Newcomb happens to be unemployed. And apparently not looking for a job, though he's ready to take on a wife."

Erica flushed. "He doesn't need to look. He can have his choice of three jobs when he's ready to take them."

Mr. Izenga thought, Ready. What does that mean? But he didn't ask. "I was wondering, too, if he might not be called up for service."

She gave an odd laugh. "Service! Oh no. I think not."

"Has he been in-in the war?"

"I'm sorry, I can't talk about it. I promised him I wouldn't. Anything else you want to know?"

Mr. Izenga put his lips together tightly. What did anything else matter? Had the fellow been court-martialed or dishonorably discharged or have shot off a toe or something? How could he let this question go? Yet a glance at Erica's face told him he'd have to.

"Yes," he answered her. "How does he stand with French?"

"He was completely frank with the lieutenant. Told him how he'd been wakened by a knock and found that note shoved under his door. He looked out, but the hall was dark. He had one of the third-floor bedrooms. The note asked him to come down to Gran's sitting room to talk. It said she couldn't sleep. So he dressed and went down.

"Toby saved the note. He told French he had only started rapping on Gran's sitting-room door when she dashed out of the bedroom door and started screaming at him. He thought she was crazy at first. Then he thought she was framing him."

Her eyes were like clear water in which sun rays are caught. They were saying other things as she talked, coaxing, cajoling.

"And I remember now distinctly that the stone in Toby's ring

was solid dark green. It wasn't fair to pester me with questions at a time like that. I've told the lieutenant since that I remember the ring. But of course it's too late now."

"But Newcomb is at large, my dear. He isn't under lock and key." Mr. Izenga tried to hide his objection to this fact.

"He might as well be. He says someone follows him night and day," Erica exclaimed indignantly. "It's worse than jail—almost. Oh, but I'm tired! Mr. Ellinger and I spent the afternoon going over Grandmother's six huge safe-deposit boxes in four different banks." (Erica had been appointed an executor along with Mr. Izenga and Ellinger.)

"We checked bonds and stocks and insurance policies and heaven knows what else, till my head ached. Oh yes. We found boxes and boxes of jewelry, besides what she had in the safe in her bedroom. You know she always kept rotating it, in and out. And she was always buying more. Well—we found everything—except one piece. The best. Her diamond-and-sapphire necklace that she left to me."

"Was the other one there? The diamond-and-pearl?"

"Yes. It was in the house safe. Aunt Hester got that. At first she was peeved that I got the best one. But when she finds it's missing she'll change around. But where do you suppose the thing can be? I'm positive Gran didn't have it out. She was always careful to have only one out at a time. But how could it disappear from a safe-deposit box? And surely she wouldn't have disposed of it and not crossed it off the list of what she had."

Mr. Izenga was staring rather malevolently at the floor, lost in his own thoughts.

Erica added, "Mr. Ellinger said we should notify the police at once. It was insured for thirty thousand dollars, so it would have been well worth killing her for, he thinks. Perhaps the whole thing was just robbery for that."

"And did you tell the police?" Mr. Izenga asked sharply.

"I insisted on talking to you first."

He nodded, gratified. "That was very wise, my dear. I have a rather peculiar story to tell you about that necklace. Lucianna

went to your grandmother and asked to 'borrow' it to wear to a rather important dinner dance last winter."

"What colossal nerve!"

"Quite typical, I am sorry to say. You've been away at college and at work so much you haven't realized what a—a vixen that woman is, my dear. But anyway, she did not get it, of course."

"Did she make a fuss about being turned down?"

"Oh my, no. That's not Lucianna's way. She merely laughed in that loathsome fashion of hers and dropped the subject. But two days later your grandmother missed the necklace. She had it out of the bank at the time. And Lucianna had gone on a visit to some friends in Cincinnati."

Erica sat up. Her hazel eyes lost their dreamy look and filled with bright, hot sparks. Her tanned cheeks began to flush.

"Why didn't Grandmother call the police at once?"

"My dear, you know how she loathed scandal. The police were always the last resort to her, after her own resources had been exhausted. First she looked everywhere, then called me in. I know some people in Cincinnati who know Lucianna's friends, so I called them long distance. Sure enough. We got a letter from them in a week's time saying that Lucianna had been seen wearing a very handsome diamond-and-sapphire necklace."

"Oh!" Erica steamed. "That's common thievery."

"Now wait, my dear. When Lucianna got back your grandmother very boldly faced her and accused her of taking the necklace. She said she would not prosecute if it was returned. Lucianna at once took the offensive. She said she was shocked at the accusation. She said she had admired the necklace so much that she had had an imitation one made and paid her own money for it."

"And who believed that?"

"But I saw it. I was there, of course. She trotted out this imitation necklace. It was quite like your grandmother's, but not a replica. But it wouldn't have fooled anyone who knew fine jewelry. I wrote to the Cincinnati people again, and they said they could not swear to its authenticity."

Erica was dismayed. "And so she got away with it?"

"What could we do? We were both certain she had and has the real one. But since she has the imitation to show we can't prove it. Since then I believe she has worn the real necklace a couple of times, but never when any of the family were there to see it. Seldom in this town."

"Do you mean to say Grandmother simply let her get away with that and didn't do a thing? Just gave up? It isn't like her." Erica's eyes burned. It was not like her, either!

The two red dots on Mr. Izenga's cheeks were out now.

"My dear, lying low and giving up are two different things. Your grandmother went straight home and asked Bennet if he had 'lent' the necklace to Lucianna. Bennet was very angry and denied it so feelingly that she believed him. It wouldn't have been easy for Lucianna to have taken it herself, but she could have managed. I recommended a period of masterful inactivity, and that was the state of affairs the last I heard."

Erica sprang to her feet. "Well, I'm not going to just lie back and take it. I've always loathed Lucianna. To me, the lowest form of animal life is a woman who hangs onto a man she knows hates her. That necklace is mine!"

"Erica, Erica, please don't rush off and do something rash," Mr. Izenga cried in terror. After French's recent conversation about her he knew the authorities were in no mood to overlook any further evidence of her impulsiveness. "I—I have a plan."

It was sheer fiction, but it stopped Erica at the door. She came back, doubtful yet expectant. "Well?"

Mr. Izenga's guardian angel had never failed him yet. It arrived, a little out of breath, with words which he promptly spoke.

"There are two or three people who may know about that necklace, my dear. I want to see them first."

"Who are they?"

"I can't tell you, but I will see them at once, I promise that. Then I shall go with you to talk to Lucianna. Is that what you had in mind—to talk to her?"

Erica looked gorgeous when she was angry, Mr. Izenga thought fatuously. Everything about her seemed to radiate fire.

"What I have in mind is to get my own property back, no matter what I have to do. I'd like to choke that woman."

For a moment the words seemed to ricochet about the walls like bullets. Mr. Izenga's gasp was almost too high to be heard. Erica stared down at him. Her eyes widened and she moved both hands up over her mouth, tightly.

Then slowly she sank on the chaise longue. Her hands covered her bowed face. She began to shudder, moving her head from side to side.

For a moment Mr. Izenga was too numb to move. Suppose one of those nasty cat-footed police had been prowling around and overheard his darling's idle words? Erica had always talked rather extravagantly. It didn't mean anything, but they wouldn't know it.

He moved over to the chaise longue and sat with an arm around her. She began to cry desperately.

"There, there, darling." How many thousands of times he had said it in the past. And now he repeated it, over and over. A gentle, soothing murmur.

Erica felt for his hand and her sobs lessened.

"You know I didn't mean it."

"Of course not."

Her fingers curled around his and were comforted.

"But—but how could I say it—after—Oh, poor Grandmother!" A long tremble went over her. "I saw her again—lying there."

"Don't," Mr. Izenga whispered tenderly. "You didn't think, darling. But you must. See what I mean? The police are everywhere. Listening."

Erica nodded jerkily. "Oh yes, yes. I'll wait for you. You go with me and we'll see her."

He let her go on crying brokenheartedly. For the first time, what had happened was becoming a reality to her. Up to now she had been too numb. The tears seemed to be washing out the barriers between them. Nothing mattered to him but Erica and, thank God, she had crept back into his heart again.

Harrison went off to the movies that evening, after exacting from Mr. Izenga a positive statement that he did not intend to use the car. Mr. Izenga knew he had to be firm to be left alone. And his statement was true. He much preferred taking a taxi this time.

He had planned a very busy evening. First, he telephoned Harry Duke and asked him to drop over. Harry was inclined to ask questions and said he was tired, but Mr. Izenga bore down until he submitted.

"Well, what is it?" Mr. Duke demanded as he was admitted to the front hall. "Do you always keep the door locked this way?"

"Why not?" Mr. Izenga led the way to the den.

His visitor reluctantly followed. "What's on your mind, Izenga? Let's make it snappy. We're playing bridge over at the house and I've got to get back or Hester will start yapping."

Mr. Izenga trained his best eye on him.

"I merely want to ask you one question. Did you give—or perhaps we'd better say 'lend'—Mrs. Pomeroy's diamond-and-sapphire necklace to anyone?"

That stopped him. It wiped all the careless irritation off Harry's flabby fifty-year-old face. "Wh-what's that?"

Mr. Izenga was provoked. Harry certainly was dumfounded, but was it at being accused of something utterly unknown to him or was it at being found out? Maybe this hadn't been such a hot idea, after all.

"I didn't even know it was missing," Harry gasped. "And why the hell should I be blamed?"

"You're not being blamed. We have reason to believe it is in the hands of a certain party. We want to find out how it got there."

"Well, good God, I can't help you. I have no idea what you're driving at. You always have some scheme, Izenga. Why don't you keep out of this murder case? Pretty deep water for you, isn't it?"

There was a great deal more, all in the same vein, but in the end Mr. Izenga was fairly well convinced that Harry knew nothing about the necklace.

Undaunted by his lack of success, Mr. Izenga called Ridge Dawson and said he would be right over.

"I'm sick, Cornelius," Ridge groaned.

"Too bad. Just leave the door open, will you? I'll just take a moment. Want to ask you something."

"Ask me now."

"Not over the phone. I'll be over." He hung up. He wanted to watch Ridge's face when he was questioned.

The telephone rang before he could leave. Huntley Price wanted to see him. Mr. Izenga was too busy. But it was important. It would take only a moment. Mr. Izenga said he was running over to see Ridge Dawson and would call Huntley on his return.

Huntley was not pleased. In fact, he seemed aggressively unlike his normal self. Ready to quarrel. Mr. Izenga didn't like it. All the more reason for Huntley to wait his turn.

Mr. Izenga took a taxi to Ridge's flat. It was in another of those wait-on-yourself apartment houses not far from Miss Frobisher's.

Ridge's appearance as he admitted his visitor certainly bore out his contention of being ill. His face was gray. Bags hung under his eyes. A wet towel was wound around his forehead and fastened with an enormous safety pin. He wore a crumpled dark silk slack suit.

"You'll have to talk to me in the bedroom, Cornelius." He led the way down the little hall and into a stuffy, hot room. A small electric fan churned the air around in a warm, futile circle. Ridge crawled between mussy sheets and let himself down, moaning theatrically.

"Sorry you feel bad," Mr. Izenga said, thanking God he did not have to live like this. Radios from the open windows of the other apartments filled the air with auditory hash. From above came music so feverish it sounded like ants in the piano. "How can you stand this racket?"

"What racket?" Ridge snarled. "Blast 'n' blazes! My head!"

"Have you had a doctor?"

"No. Got no use for 'em. I have these blasted headaches, you know. I live through 'em, somehow. Nothing anybody could do for me. I've had enough aspirin to choke a horse." He moaned again.

Mr. Izenga could never tell when Ridge really merited heavy sympathy. He could make more fuss over a nicked finger than many people would give to a major operation.

"What do you want, anyway? Won't it wait?" Ridge said pettishly. "The truth is, I've been knocked out by what happened to poor old Letty. Bad enough to lose your sister normally, not to speak of all this police business. I can't get away from the damned thing. I sit here in my little place and think about it till I've got myself into this state. And the police don't seem to be getting anywhere. As much at sea as the rest of us. I can't take much more, I tell you. And people can talk all they want. I'm not going to her funeral tomorrow. I couldn't. Don't believe in funerals, anyway. Damned barbarisms. I told Erica."

Ridge's voice was a high, nervous squeak. His public would never have believed the suave, drawling, sophisticated Ridge had moments like these.

"Yes, she told me," Mr. Izenga said. "They are not expecting you there. And I won't bother you long. I want to ask just one question. Do you remember Letitia's diamond-and-sapphire necklace?"

Ridge held his hand against the wet bandage and blinked at his caller. "Huh? I don't know. Remember she had a lot of junk. Damned waste of money. Never get it out of that sort of thing. Why?"

"This particular necklace was very beautiful. Insured for thirty thousand dollars," he added, as more apt to impress this materialist.

"Whee-ew! Thir-ty thous-and bucks! Just to hang around a woman's neck. And whole families dying of starvation. There ought to be a law against it."

"You can hunt them up and divide with them when you get your legacy," Mr. Izenga said dryly. "I am not here to go into that. That necklace has disappeared and we think we know where it is."

Ridge Dawson sat up in bed. "Well, don't look at me like that. I haven't got it, if that's what you're building up to."

"No, no. I want to know if you—uh—lent that necklace to any woman. Did someone ask you to let her borrow it to wear for a certain occasion?"

There was no doubt that he had Ridge's full attention now. Also, there was scant doubt that Ridge had not the remotest idea what he was talking about. Mr. Izenga stopped hedging.

"Did you lend Letitia's necklace to Lucianna?"

Mr. Dawson reared up still higher in bed. He shoved his bandage back until it circled the top of his head like the halo he was unlikely to get. The magnificence of the opportunity at first gagged him. Incoherence foamed on his lips for a few seconds.

"Did I—did I give that blankety-blank you-know-what my sister's thirty-thousand-dollar necklace? Cornelius! Do you mean to tell me you have never heard my fulminations on that blood-sucking leech of a—a——" Mr. Dawson was warming to his subject in every way. He had no more time to be sick.

"Have you forgotten how I fought Letty on every cent she allowed that hellcat all these years? If she had money to throw away I could always use it! I know I'm a fool about women, but not the way my nephew is. I saw through that hussy from the start. The only thing I would give her would be leprosy, and I'm sorry as hell I haven't got it." There was a great deal more, and it certainly sounded sincere. Mr. Dawson wound up with:

"Why not tackle Bennet about it? He's the one who's been a fool over her for so long."

Mr. Izenga explained all that. Ridge seemed surprised and pleased to hear the truth about Bennet's apparent infatuation and his suspicions.

"Bennet is right," he agreed. "Lucianna is behind this crime. She's as slick as the devil's wife and, lord, how she hated Letty. I've heard her talk. I hope French can bring it home to her."

Mr. Izenga did not go into that. He was tired of this stuffy bedroom air. He stood up.

"I'll be running along now, Ridge. Speaking of French, did he swallow your tale about the drugstore?"

"What do you mean?" Mr. Dawson was haughty. "I told him the truth and he recognized it."

Mr. Izenga smiled nastily. "Whatever happened to that lady you knew? The one who had the reputation?"

"You're crude, Cornelius. I feel my headache coming back. Go away and leave me to my suffering." Mr. Dawson crawled out of bed and moved toward the door of his bathroom.

"Don't underrate the lieutenant, Ridge," Mr. Izenga warned. "Mind if I use your phone to call a taxi?"

"Help yourself. But it's one of those blasted four-party lines. I seldom find it free." He shut himself into the bathroom.

Mr. Izenga picked up the telephone in the little hall and heard, "So, my dear, I didn't say a word then—but the next night when he came home at two-thirty, I——"

He hung up.

"Guess I'll walk. Hope you're better soon, Ridge," he called. There was no answer, but he heard the water running in the bathroom, so did not linger.

He let himself out the front door and had to wait for the automatic elevator to get rid of its passengers. He surmised that Ridge had overplayed his headache to furnish a good excuse not to attend his sister's funeral the next day. It wouldn't have been necessary. It was annoying how the selfish got away with further selfishnesses as a matter of course.

Mr. Izenga was deep in these musings as he walked out of the front door of the apartment house. The brick walk curved gracefully to the street between clumps of cedars which had grown rather tall. As he passed one of these dark spots he heard a sudden suspicious rustling and a loud swish.

He didn't stop to think. There wasn't time. With instinct left over from some cave-man ancestor he ducked and lunged to the right. The blow missed his head but caught him on the edge of his upper left arm. It burned like fire. It had been meant to be fatal! He uttered no sound. He loathed public scenes.

But as he dashed around the curve of the walk he ran into three women and nearly knocked them over. At once these ladies set up a high-powered screeching that brought heads out of all the windows in the apartment house and passers-by in from the street.

For a few minutes the confusion was fantastic. One of the women fainted and another accused Mr. Izenga of trying to snatch her purse. He was obliged, to save himself from worse

trouble, to exhibit his bruised arm and explain what had happened.

By this time people had poured into the grounds from everywhere. One of the men who ran out of the apartment house was a Dr. Braunwart. The swarthy little man insisted upon examining Mr. Izenga in spite of his refusals. Each time he jerked away the doctor was on him again, like a too-friendly puppy.

"Sir! Will you kindly leave me alone? Please!" Mr. Izenga was seething. He looked around frantically for help. He saw Ridge Dawson's head with its turbanlike towel bandage peering over the fourth-floor window sill, silhouetted against the sky. It drew in just as he saw it. But when he shouted "Ridge!" several times at the top of his lungs it appeared again.

"That you, Cornelius? What's wrong?"

Mr. Izenga asked him to send for Harrison. He should be home by this time. The doctor was determined to take him home in his car and work up at least a case of nervous prostration. To his disappointment he found Mr. Izenga's arm was not broken.

"The nervous shock is worse," he kept repeating. "You may think you are all right at first——"

"Thank you. I can look after myself."

"Then in a few days you go all to pieces," the doctor urged eagerly. "I know just how to treat such cases." The possibility of getting the celebrated Izenga, with his many friends, as a patient made the young doctor feverish.

Mr. Izenga fought off all would-be Samaritans in his quiet, deadly way. The three ladies recovered and, finding out who their assailant was, were almost as annoying with their apologies. They explained to everyone that they had just come from a Humphrey Bogart movie and that this had seemed a continuation of its horrors—being leaped at that way! But of course, knowing it was Mr. Izenga, and so on and so on.

It seemed hours, but it was really only a few minutes before Harrison appeared in the car. He scolded Mr. Izenga all the way home with angry affection. Mr. Izenga took it meekly. It was soothing to know someone cared that much after such painful proof that one person did not.

Harrison bathed and bound up the bruised arm efficiently. He

took away, to be burned, the card of Dr. Braunwart which Mr. Izenga indignantly had discovered in his coat pocket.

Mr. Izenga, warm in bed, recalled Huntley, but he did not bother to call him. He felt too shaken to advise anyone. Let Huntley work on his own problems for a while. Oddly enough, Huntley must have come to the same conclusion, for he did not call again.

Chapter Ten

R. IZENGA was glad to see Friday morning's sullen skies. It would have been too much to sit in the house Letitia had loved so much, listening to her funeral rites, with the sunlight making everything more beautiful outside.

He rubbed his aching bruise. That reminded him of Ridge and his crass selfishness. Mr. Izenga thought he, too, did not like to go to funerals. Nobody did but a few old hoodie crows. But he was obliged to attend every one in the village, high and low. People looked for him and thanked him for coming. It was only right and proper, but it was a bore.

That was a vicious blow he'd received. His arm was an angry purple with red fringes. It ached steadily. Who had tried to kill him? Hester had never liked him and he wasn't sure, after their quarrel, that she didn't hate him. It was Ridge who had said Mr. Izenga knew too much. But you couldn't take any of Ridge's ranting seriously. It was the non-talkers who went off quietly and stuck a knife in someone's ribs or committed suicide.

After breakfast Mr. Izenga saw several people, but not Huntley. He didn't care if Huntley sulked. Huntley was much too phlegmatic anyway. A few healthy emotions would do him good.

On his return home the night before Mr. Izenga had called Lieutenant French and reported the attack. French promised to send men to the apartment house to investigate. But Mr. Izenga had not heard from him this morning.

It was nearly eleven when Harrison came into the den and shut the door. He spoke very low.

"There's a fellow at the door. I don't like his looks. He insists on seeing you."

"What about?"

"Claims he has information about the murder."

"Did you tell him to see the police?"

"Yes. He just laughed. He's an ugly customer, Mr. Izenga. Let me call the lieutenant."

Mr. Izenga hesitated. Prudence urged him to follow Harrison's advice, but curiosity goaded him to find out first what the fellow had to say.

"I'll talk to him first, Harrison. You can leave the library door open a crack and listen in on it. If he gets troublesome I may need your help."

The wizened, pimply youth who was shown into the room did not look formidable. His suit atoned for its lack of quality in elaboration. It was an aggressive blue. He carried a blue hat that had tried hard to match but couldn't quite make it.

His narrow eyes were everywhere at once, taking in the room's luxury, perhaps estimating what his secret would be worth. His manner was wheedling, impudent, yet a bit overawed.

Mr. Izenga stood up. He might not be tall, but his erect pompous figure, arrogant face, and superior stare made an impressive whole. "What do you want?"

The words were like a cold smack.

"Are you Mr. Izenga?"

"I am. Who are you?"

The youth pulled from his pocket the front page of a crumpled newspaper of the lurid type. "Pomeroy Case" was smeared heavily across the headlines.

There were hideous pictures of the family and even of Mr. Izenga himself. He recalled a particularly impudent photographer who daily dogged everyone's heels. Red spots began to appear on his cheeks.

The visitor whined, "I been followin' this case in the papers.

I read every word. I seen pictures of everybody connected with it. The police claim the woman's son was drugged with chloral hydrate, don't they?"

"Yes."

"Yeah. Well, I know the party bought that stuff. I mean one of the parties who their picture was in the papers bought some, and that would interest the police plenty."

"Who was it?" Mr. Izenga tingled.

"That's just what I'm here to tell you—after I and you have had a little talk about what it's worth to you." He seemed to gain a repulsive sort of confidence. "I got a name for sale and I'll sell it to the highest bidder. I've had a lot of bad luck in my life, but now, for once, I got the breaks, and believe me I'm gonna make it pay."

Mr. Izenga's aristocratic lip curled. They let things like this live! "Do you realize I've only to call in the police and your information will be worth nothing?"

The visitor evidently had prepared for this.

"Go ahead. See how far it gets you. I'll say I never seen nobody in the case. I'll say you're nuts. They can beat me and give me the third degree and it won't get them nowheres."

This was obviously absurd. This young thug had seen too many gangster movies. Mr. Izenga doubted that his visitor could stand an endurance test of any kind. Nor did French look like a third-degree artist. No doubt he had methods more effective, though.

Mr. Izenga said, "How do you happen to have this information? Until I know how authentic it is I shan't know if it is worth anything to me."

The reasonable, mild tone misled the young man who dealt in other media. He frowned in thought. Mr. Izenga watched attentively, noting every feature.

He had once read a book about the "portrait-parlez" system of some French detective. He determined to know this young tough if he saw him again.

At last the man spoke cautiously.

"I ain't goin' to say much. I'm a clerk in a certain drugstore and

I sold this party the stuff. I'm willin' to go on the stand and prove everything I say. I remember the day and the time and everything about it. But it's gotta be made worth my while."

"What do you consider your while worth?"

Mr. Izenga's famous tone brought a flush of red to the sallow face of the caller. He threw back his chin. "Twenty-five thousand bucks."

"We're wasting time."

"Well, the old lady was worth over two million, they claim. Wouldn't it be worth that to her estate not to have one of her family accused of killing her?"

"The lady, unfortunately, is not able to care about anything any longer," Mr. Izenga said with icy realism. "You have an exaggerated idea of the value of your information. There would be plenty of police work to be done before the purchaser of the drug could be proved to be the killer—if he is."

"Not with the party I'm gonna name. It'll burn you up."

Mr. Izenga was grievously tempted. He thought fast. But he could not see how this statement could be anything but unfounded sales talk.

"I'll give you one hundred dollars."

"Who's wasting time now?"

Mr. Izenga glanced toward the library door. If only he had arranged with Harrison to call the police while he held the visitor in conversation! If only he could signal a message now, through the crack!

But the visitor was nervous, wary. He jumped to his feet.

"Don't try to pull any funny stuff, mister. I ain't hangin' around here while you call the cops. If you change your mind drop me a line, General Delivery, Oak City. Address it to—D. V. Barker. And don't tell the police or you'll be sorry. And don't take too long, either. I may have another customer interested."

He ran out, slamming the door.

Mr. Izenga called, "Harrison, quick!" But he could already hear two sets of running feet. The outer door banged and then banged again. The footsteps faded away. Mr. Izenga stood in the hall, breathing fast and waiting. It was only a few minutes until Harrison came back, puffing, alone.

"Missed him!" he panted. "Left his car engine running. No license on it." He grasped the telephone and dialed the police.

French was not available. Harrison left a message.

2

Mrs. Pomeroy's funeral rapidly became a standing-room-only affair. The living room, hall, and drawing room were packed with filled chairs. People crowded against the walls and even outside the windows.

She had had scores of friends and hundreds of acquaintances. There were even social climbers present who went to only the better funerals. Mr. Izenga watched them indignantly. Letitia would have made short work of them had she been present in more tangible form than delicate white ashes.

There had been an autopsy, very thorough, conducted by the state's celebrated medicolegal expert. It established only what was known. Mrs. Pomeroy had been cruelly strangled. Death had occurred between two and four in the morning.

Mr. Izenga settled himself to endure the next hour. He did not think young Dr. Musgrove could say anything about either death or Mrs. Pomeroy which he had not known before. Dr. Musgrove was taking Dr. Baird's place. It had been thought inadvisable to bring the old man back from his visit for a job as painful as burying his benefactress.

The family was represented by Erica, Bennet, Hester, and Harry Duke. All very sober and subdued. Mr. Izenga sat next to Erica, where he could console her with tender nudges.

True to his word, Ridge Dawson was not present. But since all his friends knew his views, his absence was considered only his characteristic selfishness.

Mr. Izenga had many nettles to sting him. For instance, at the last minute Lucianna Duprez, all in white, with a white veil over her hat and applying a handkerchief under it, was led gently to

a seat next to the family by an usher who was a newcomer to town. There was a thrilled gasp from the audience. A startled stare flashed from eye to eye.

Lucianna sat down, tragically grief-stricken. She laid it on as thickly as she dared. Mr. Izenga, watching her at first with open mouth, then with clenched jaw, palpitated with ire. The performance was pure spite and mockery. He did not believe in changes of heart.

He thought, She's heard about the will and her conspicuous absence from it. She's retained an attorney, and this is step one in what will wind up in court.

Huntley Price was in the row behind the Pomeroys. He looked pale, almost ill. His dark eyes remained burningly on Erica's tiny white hat. But when for a moment he met Mr. Izenga's glance he gave him a surprisingly friendly nod. Almost placating.

Mr. Izenga analyzed his annoyance at this. He had treated Huntley very unfeelingly for several days, paying no attention to his phone calls. Yet here was Huntley, almost fawning. Huntley simply had no backbone. He couldn't even hold resentment like a man. For the first time Mr. Izenga began to wonder if Huntley was the perfect husband for Erica.

Involuntarily he glanced over the assemblage and found Toby Newcomb near one of the farther doors. Mr. Izenga was forced to admit that was decent of him. He could hardly presume on his position as Erica's fiancé to sit beside her, considering the police's interest in him. Yet it was civil of him to be present.

Several feet away Mr. Izenga noticed two hands, tightly clenched. They were large, very large for a woman, although Hester seldom did any work. In the right one was a handkerchief. On the little finger of her right hand was a large ring of marquisite, very much like Newcomb's in size.

It wasn't the first time he had seen it. It was one of Hester's favorites. But she had not worn it for the past few days. He wondered why.

The suspicions of Hester which he'd had the other night came rushing back, increased. He could not bring himself to believe this slender woman, with everything so perfect about her, could kill her mother in such a revolting way. Yet he could not entirely discard the evidence against her.

3

The services ended with Dr. Musgrove's final burst of oratorical prayer. There was to be no further meeting at the graveside. The undertaker delivered a small silver box to the mausoleum, without escort, and that was that.

So neat, so efficient, Mr. Izenga thought. All planned by Letitia, who no doubt, at this moment, was taking St. Peter to task for those nasty cracks he had made about women some centuries ago.

He actually smiled to himself as he moved slowly along with the crowd. Behind him he could hear the smack of the seats as the undertaker's young men folded up the chairs and whisked them out to the trucks in back.

Erica and Bennet were to have six months more at Westerly, if they wished, before finding other places to live. Mr. Izenga did not know their plans.

Near the outer door he felt a hand on his arm. Howard Ellinger had reached past several people to touch him. With a beckoning head Howard indicated the library. It had not been used for the funeral.

Ellinger shut the door behind them and turned the key in the lock. He went to each window. Those that were open he closed. Mr. Izenga watched with amazement. Ellinger was not given to this sort of thing.

At last he came back to the center of the floor, where Mr. Izenga had been pivoting in silence. Leaning down, he whispered:

"There are certain ethics connected with my profession, Izenga. I've stuck to 'em pretty faithfully. But when you see a fine young woman you've known all her life put a loaded gun to her head, you modify your code a bit. See what I mean?"

Mr. Izenga fired one shot: "Erica!"

"I'm not mentioning any names. I'm not telling you a damn thing,

see? But I can't help it if you guess. You've always been a good guesser. But she may have confided in you already, and I may be sticking my neck out for nothing."

Mr. Izenga's mind was casting about like a hunting dog that sniffs a trail but hasn't located it. His good right eye bored into Ellinger's bland, round face.

"She told me about the missing necklace—the diamond-and-

sapphire one. Is that what you mean?"

"Oh yes, that necklace," Ellinger said. "I'd almost forgotten about it. Queer, wasn't it? I wonder if Mrs. Pomeroy could have been killed for it. Common burglary?"

"I think not."

Ellinger smiled satirically. "Better let the police have a think on that one too."

"I'm rather sure they won't be needed." Mr. Izenga was casual. "I have—a—plan."

"You and your schemes! Don't forget. This is no cat fight among your girl chums, old boy. You're fooling with murder. Think it over."

Mr. Izenga drummed on his knee. "What was it you wanted to tell me? What has Erica done?"

"Tch, tch, tch. No names, please. You can guess it easily if you—uh—will."

"Good heavens, Howard, surely she hasn't changed it? Not this soon?"

Mr. Ellinger sighed.

"Dear, dear," said Mr. Izenga in his soft, deadly way. He tried to read the face of his superethical friend. "But, Howard, that's too fast. You must mean she asked you to draw up a new will. Those things take time."

"Not with a female Pomeroy who wanted something done in a hurry, or else. Have you discovered how to put 'em off? If so, tell me how you do it."

"You mean it's signed, witnessed, everything?"

"Sorry!"

"And she never said one word to me yesterday," Mr. Izenga

said, thinking of the moment he had thought they were so close. He added stiffly, "Who gets it?"

"Who do you suppose?" Ellinger pulled his mouth down and his eyebrows up.

Mr. Izenga's mind raced. So Ellinger disapproved, and he was noted for dissuading clients from leaving money away from the family.

"Newcomb!"

"You certainly hit the mental jack pot, Cornelius, when you get going."

"Dear, dear. This frightens me, Howard. I mean it really does."

"How do you suppose I feel? I couldn't sleep last night. I argued with her till I was hoarse. Laid myself out, and all I got was walked on. She's all set to show a certain party a big vote of confidence. Poor girl. She looked so damned sweet and smart and fine while she was sitting there defending that fellow."

Mr. Izenga shuddered. "Don't! I feel so helpless. Newcomb is so smooth and hard. Does he get everything?" He paused, searching Mr. Ellinger's face. "I suppose the usual dollar to each of the family? And he gets all the rest! That means she's worth three quarters of a million to that scoundrel. Terrible!"

"More!"

"How can there be more?" Mr. Izenga was shrill.

"Insurance."

Mr. Izenga gave a little moan. He could see her lying lovely and cold, or hideously dead like her grandmother, and Newcomb shedding crocodile tears over her. "Did he suggest all this to her?"

"Don't—say—that—again!" Ellinger shuddered out each word. "She nearly scalped me when I hinted at it. She was all for tearing out of my office and taking her business to that damned Bill Raymer who lies in wait across the hall to grab off my pet clients. No. He has no idea what she's doing. If he did he wouldn't let her."

"Oh yes?"

"Me too."

"Dear, dear, this really is bad, Howard."

"And don't forget I didn't tell you a thing." Mr. Ellinger reached

for his hat. "But if you get any bright ideas and I can help, give me a ring." He unlocked the door and sauntered out.

4

Lieutenant French's navy Rolls coupé was parked in Mr. Izenga's drive when his own car drove in. French came to meet him with the air of a man who has been waiting longer than he thinks proper.

"Your housemaid said you intended to come right back from the funeral, Mr. Izenga."

"I did, but—" He hesitated. They were in the front hall now. He tossed down his hat and gloves and led the way into the den. He was on the verge of telling French about Erica's new will when he recalled he couldn't do so without giving Ellinger away. Exasperating!

"What's on your mind, Mr. Izenga?" French asked.

"Plenty! For one thing, I cannot see why Newcomb is not arrested. His guilt seems rather obvious—to some of us."

"I'm responsible for Newcomb."

There was something so hard under that pleasant manner. Mr. Izenga was always forgetting and being drawn up abruptly at that steely core.

"Responsible or not, how can you bring Miss Pomeroy back to life if he murders her? He couldn't die a bad enough death to make up to me for that!" Mr. Izenga's voice trembled.

French said quietly, "Are you thinking of Miss Pomeroy's new will?"

He blinked, dumfounded. "Who told you?"

"We have our methods. I assure you I'm well aware of every move Newcomb makes. You needn't worry about him, believe me. And now I'd like a detailed account of that attack on you last night. We've had a dozen contradictory stories from the people in that apartment house."

Mr. Izenga was annoyed at the change of topic. Last night seemed so far away and unimportant. But he gave a brief account of the entire evening. Then French asked for a description of the caller Mr. Izenga had had that morning. Harrison had described the fellow over the phone, but the police had been unable to locate the youth in any of the Oak City drugstores.

Mr. Izenga again obliged. He seemed to be inextricably wound into this case, no matter how much he disliked it. While they were talking the doorbell rang. Harrison answered it but did not bother Mr. Izenga. Not until the lieutenant had gone did Harrison report that Huntley Price had called. He had lingered around in the garden for some time, then he must have gone away. Harrison had not seen him any more.

Mr. Izenga didn't know why that disturbed him.

Chapter Eleven

R. IZENGA stood on his front porch Saturday morning, waiting for Erica to pick him up. He was annoyed when a lemonyellow Cadillac convertible coupé rolled up his drive and parked. He did not want to be interrupted. But, to his surprise, Erica slid out.

"Sorry to be late, but I had to stop and buy a car. Loud, isn't it?"

"You didn't buy that thing!"

"Certainly. It's all right under the paint. I gave Toby the other one and I had to have a car. Of course it's secondhand, but it hasn't been used much. It was a special order for someone who very considerately died after they'd had it a little while." With the resilience of youth she had recovered from yesterday's funereal gloom.

Mr. Izenga sighed. With no one else but Erica would he have ridden in that monstrosity. He said, "Is there anything you'd like to discuss before we start?"

"Not a thing!" She smiled candidly.

So he wasn't to be told about her will! Or perhaps she'd forgotten it for the moment. He sighed.

She said, "Shall we start? I suppose you know if she's in?"

"Yes. I called Miss Frobisher. She says Lucianna never gets up—permanently up—till eleven. But she has heard her walking about overhead. I thought it best not to call Lucianna herself. I don't want her to be prepared."

"Whatever you say. I hate her so much I'm not smart about trying to manage her. You do the talking. I shall lend my moral—if any—support." She hooked her arm in his and they went gaily down the steps. Erica seemed a part of the sunlight to him. He did not much care where they were going if he could be with her.

The gaudy car rolled down the drive.

"I'll have it painted as soon as I can. Perhaps black would be best." Erica glanced critically at the yellow hood. "I'll see what Toby says."

Toby, Toby! Were they never to be rid of him even for a minute? Mr. Izenga said no more until they reached the apartment house. As they entered the small tiled lobby with its rows of mailboxes and bells he whispered:

"I've arranged with Miss Frobisher to let us into the building." He rang three short and one long peal on her bell. The locked doors clicked at once. The elevator was empty.

As they emerged on Lucianna's floor they could hear a woman's shrill, angry voice coming through the flimsy door on their right.

"Good heavens! Aunt Hester!" Erica whispered.

"Sh." Mr. Izenga stood like a pointer.

". . . and if you don't let him alone you'll be sorry," Mrs. Duke was exclaiming.

Lucianna's drawl was lower but could be heard easily in the silence of the hall. "My dear Hester, your methods are all wrong. So crude. It's no wonder you can't hang onto even such a pitiful specimen as Harry Duke."

"I'm sorry he can't hear your real opinion of him."

Lucianna's celebrated laugh rippled easily through the berry-box door. "Poor Hester. You're so absurd. I don't want your fat, dependent husband. He's a screaming bore. If I wanted him I'd take him. But why, in heaven's name, should I?"

"Why not? You're the type that always has to have a man and you surely aren't kidding yourself you have Bennet any longer, are you?"

"Poor old Bennet," Lucianna purred. "He and I understand each other very well. I'll take care of him when the time comes."

"That's what you think. But stop stalling. I'm still waiting to hear what Harry's glasses case is doing in the crack of your sofa."

"And I've told you six times I haven't the faintest idea. In fact, I've been too patient. It's my worst fault. Has anyone ever told you what an appalling voice you have, Hester? It's like a peacock's. And I am extremely tired of it. Run along now. I'm going to be busy."

The last softly insolent words seemed to hang on the air like pungent smoke. The listeners in the hall held their breaths. Then Hester spoke deliberately.

"You will regret talking to me like this, Lucianna. And—I—mean—that." Nothing could describe the menace of each word.

The door flew open. Hester stood there, her face drawn with passion.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"Really, Hester! We might ask the same thing of you." Mr. Izenga motioned Erica into the flat and followed her.

Mrs. Duke stepped into the public hall. Her eyes glittered wildly. "Oh, I don't mind telling the world my business with this woman." Two doors down the hall quietly opened. Mr. Izenga pointed to them, but she didn't care. "She's after my husband, but she's out of luck. He likes them well heeled."

Lucianna came into her small hall from the living room in one swift, gliding movement, like a supple cat. She wore green silk Chinese pajamas and jacket, richly embroidered in rose dragons.

Seizing the doorknob in a strong white hand, she pulled it shut. Then in her poisonously sweet voice she drawled:

"Dear me, what an honor. Mr. Izenga himself!"

He slowly removed his eyes from a lovely little etching which had mysteriously disappeared two years ago from Mrs. Pomeroy's sitting room. Lucianna laughed.

"Charming, isn't it? I've such good taste and such a wee income. She practically forced it on me." She looked at Erica's expressive young face and laughed again. "I hope you didn't come to intercede for dear old Hester. She's under the delusion that her poor futile spouse is interested in me. So silly."

"We have other things to discuss." Mr. Izenga held himself in tight rein. "And, considering the acoustics of this building, don't you think it might be wise to invite us into your living room?"

"Oh, of course, by all means. Make yourself at home." She strolled ahead of them, insolently swinging her sleek hips.

Mr. Izenga's gaze encircled the attractive room and came back to Erica. Did she see what he saw? Two gold-framed mirrors, a piece of very valuable tapestry, and a fine rose oriental rug, among other items that had vanished without trace from Westerly in the past few years. There were two rose-colored chairs, pets of Mrs. Pomeroy, missed after an absence from home. And there were other things.

Erica sat down in one of the chairs with a little bounce. Her cheeks flushed. "Yes, I feel at home without any trouble at all." She gazed at the tapestry.

Lucianna giggled, selected and lit a cigarette, and curled up on a chaise longue with one slippered foot under her. She leaned back, extremely fascinating, like some lethal tropical flower. Her eyes glowed with wicked amusement.

Mr. Izenga wasted no time. "We have come about Mrs. Pomeroy's diamond-and-sapphire necklace."

"Dear me. Do I have to go into that again?" She yawned prettily. "I explained about it to her and she apologized so beautifully for suspecting me. I thought of it yesterday at her funeral. Always the lady, in spite of hell, wasn't she? Or do you know Mehitabel?"

Mr. Izenga did not intend to drag Don Marquis into this interview. He said crisply, "How much?"

Lucianna played with a jade-handled paper cutter. White rounded arms, very graceful. Long tapering fingers lacquered in rose.

"D'y' know," she said indolently, "I've always been rather lucky

at finding things. I should be glad to help hunt the necklace if the reward was sufficiently tempting."

"How much?" he repeated.

She gave him a sweet, arch glance, then rolled her eyes pensively toward the ceiling. "You're always so full of advice, Mr. Izenga. What would you think would be suitable?"

Mr. Izenga's red spots began to show faintly.

"A thousand dollars."

Lucianna patted another yawn. "Oh, I thought you were really serious. I'm afraid I'm too busy to bother hunting. Besides, it's not at all likely I could find it if a smart young thing like Erica couldn't." She smiled fondly at Erica, who pressed her lips into a pale pink line.

"Three thousand."

"Oh dear. Maybe we're not thinking of the same thing. The necklace I mean was beautiful. I think it was insured for thirty thousand. That means it's worth much more, doesn't it? If I'd lost it I'd think ten or fifteen thousand was little enough to pay to get it back."

"Our ceiling will be ten," Mr. Izenga snapped.

"Well, no doubt it will stimulate a lot of people to hunt for it," Lucianna remarked. She took another cigarette from a carved silver box Mrs. Pomeroy had bought in Teheran. "Have a Chesterfield. I always think of dear Mother Pomeroy when I take one."

Both Mr. Izenga and Erica were practicing deep breathing so heavily it sounded like a car stuck in sand. Lucianna gazed at them blandly, then at the antique china clock she'd had electrified. It was one of the few things Erica wanted. It had belonged to Greatgrandmother Dawson.

"I'm afraid you people are trying to make me out a villain. I'm sure you don't really believe I could have Mrs. Pomeroy's neck-lace—the real one, I mean. But I am good at hunting things and I do want to help you out if I can. Of course there's no reason why Mother Pomeroy shouldn't have left the necklace to me. After all, just between us three, I've been practically her daughter all these years and I should by rights have a share of the family jewels."

Neither of her visitors rose to this bait. Lucianna's long white hands were adorned with two impressive diamond rings and a gorgeous carved jade ring surrounded in pearls. She seemed to be doing all right for herself.

"But, as I say," she went on casually, "I'm for peace if possible, and if I hear of anyone finding the necklace I'll be glad to refer them to you. I shall always feel one of the family in spite of the attempts of some of them to shut me out. After all, Bennet has had the best years of my life, and I'm so fond of all of you."

Erica gaped, as if she expected an avenging angel to strike Lucianna down at this blasphemy. But the little clock clicked on and the air pulsed with braked emotions. Even Lucianna was breathing quickly now under her smooth surface. She seemed to have won the preliminaries. But Mr. Izenga wore an odd expression, far from defeat.

He motioned to Erica and they rose together.

"I have been talking to old Judge Brooks, Lucianna. You remember the dear old judge, I am sure. A wonderful jurist and very persistent in his work. He was connected many years ago with a case that never got into the papers." Mr. Izenga spoke with cool composure. His right eye remained fixed on Lucianna.

Lucianna did not move even an eyelash. He held her gaze as if he were a little coral snake. Bright sparks of terror flickered in her eyes.

"Perhaps you don't remember the case, but it interested me a lot. I'd suspected certain things might be true and I always like to confirm my ideas. The judge had the same suspicions and he never gave up trying to prove them. In the past month he has succeeded. The results are most interesting. He will communicate with you soon."

Lucianna remained rigid except for her breast, which rose and fell, making the embroidered dragons writhe most realistically.

After a long pause Mr. Izenga went on, "I will give you three days to find and bring me that necklace. Three days. I will pay you whatever reward I consider best. Come, Erica."

He waited until she had opened the outer door before he re-

moved his eye from his victim. Lucianna did not move or speak even then. The closing of the outer door was the only sound.

Erica stole furtive glances at him all the way down in the elevator. She was pleased, awed, and just a trifle afraid of him. Mr. Izenga patted her reassuringly, but the spell was still on him and it was rather like the touch of a live wire. She did not dare ask questions. And she was really relieved when he chose to walk. He had business in the village, he said.

2

It was noon before Mr. Izenga finished his errands. He paused meditatively outside the Olde English Tea Shoppe and began to read the menu pasted on the glass.

He heard footsteps. A tidal wave of Quelques Fleurs swamped him and a smooth hand slipped through his arm.

"The chicken pie is always delicious," cooed a soft voice.

He gazed into black-fringed blue eyes only a few inches away under a wide lacy hat.

"Hello, Maribeth. Haven't seen you for a long time."

"Much, much too long," the second Mrs. Ridge Dawson sighed. "My dear, I've been praying for days I'd run into you. I need your advice so badly. I do hope you haven't a luncheon date."

She had a voice like a mourning dove, plaintive, and on two notes. After an hour of hearing it—and it seldom ceased—you wanted to lie on the floor and scream. But Mr. Izenga thought he could stand a lunch period of her. Attractive women who wanted his advice were always hard for him to resist.

Mrs. Dawson led the way through the lamp-shaded tearoom to the farthest booth and entered with a squeal of pleasure.

"So glad this one was vacant. Now we can be cozy."

She drew the cretonne curtain that gave a dangerous illusion of privacy to the small nook. Then she settled herself with much squirming and began to molt accessories. A silver-fox fur, white kid gloves, a small package, and an immense white handbag.

At last she sighed and turned on a thousand-watt smile.

"It's such fun to lunch with you. You're such an understanding person, Mr. Izenga. I don't see how you ever escaped being married."

He reached over and twitched the curtain back from the doorway. His smile was demure.

"Oh, my goodness, you needn't be scared of poor little me!" Mrs. Dawson giggled delightedly. "Everyone knows the one man in my life is Ridge, that horrid wretch. I try and try and I can't seem to love anyone else."

Mr. Izenga's eyebrows were cynical.

"Oh, darling, they were just infatuations," she said gaily. "But let's forget my past. It's the present I'm worrying about. I want you to tell me what to do. I'm afraid I've put my foot into it—rather badly."

Her black-fringed eyes were very appealing across the lamplit table. Her very red lips and even little teeth were charming. Maribeth was feminine to the core. You knew at once she had lace on her step-ins. Mr. Izenga was amused. He liked to see people being themselves.

"This hardly seems the place for confidences, my dear." He glanced toward the open top of the partition.

"Oh, I'll be very careful." She raised her voice to a sibilant whisper. "It's about Ridge, of course. I suppose you know about that crazy alibi he gave the police? I mean walking around hunting drugstores the night poor, dear Letty was killed! Naturally they didn't believe it for a single minute."

The conversation was interrupted while they gave their orders. Mrs. Dawson hovered over the menu like a butterfly over flowers, then she chose shrimp cocktail, chicken livers en casserole, Frenchfried potatoes, new peas, rolls, peach-and-cream-cheese salad, chocolate-fudge sundae with cake, and plenty of coffee. Mr. Izenga had a chicken sandwich and tea.

"I don't see how you men survive on the skimpy little meals you order." Mrs. Dawson sighed. "I'd just waste away if I didn't eat. I'm so energetic."

He had noted her matronly middle and cute little double chin, new in the past year. But he said nothing.

Mrs. Dawson took a sip of water. "You know, everyone is always saying how selfish Ridge is, and of course it's so, to a certain extent. But it never interferes with his being a gentleman. He's always been lovely to me—in that way. I mean of course we fought like cats and dogs, but when it came to something real—something important—he always came up to scratch."

Mr. Izenga quietly enjoyed her choice of clichés. They seemed to go together so neatly. And he was beginning to smell—well, not a rat—but a sweet little white mouse.

She gave him an arch glance through her lashes. "Did you get any hint at all—just a teeny-weeny suspicion—that Ridge might be protecting a—a lady—with that silly alibi of his?"

"Oh, so that's how it was." He was quite matter-of-fact. "He was with you?"

She looked rather startled. "Well—I was going to get to that later. I wanted to tell you first that I just never could feel really divorced from Ridge. I know he's a brute, but I can't help loving him."

"I see." Mr. Izenga was stiff. At this moment the waitress brought food. Mrs. Dawson ate her shrimp cocktail and salad in two minutes with the dainty ferocity of a starved spaniel. Then she exclaimed:

"And you needn't look like that. You're a man of the world."

"Am I? I'm not so sure."

"Well, anyway," Mrs. Dawson said with pretty petulance, "as I told that fascinating young lieutenant——"

"As you did what?"

"If you won't let me talk, how can I tell you? I couldn't bear to have Ridge make a martyr of himself for me, and the lieutenant said they really couldn't be expected to believe that feeble alibi of Ridge's—so I just got up my courage and told them the truth."

"The lieutenant questioned you himself?"

"Oh my, yes. Isn't he the best-looking somebody! If I were

only younger—but I mean— He really is precious. He was so understanding. It's so easy to talk to him." She flushed enchantingly.

"Dear, dear," said Mr. Izenga sourly.

"I didn't want him to think I was just awful, so I told him about our plans. I explained that Ridge and I were planning to get married again."

"What? Really?"

"Yes, but don't breathe it to a soul, my dear. We don't want it to get out."

Considering she had been talking quite normally for the last five minutes and that the room outside was full of people keeping surprisingly still, Mr. Izenga doubted that she had her secret any longer. The waitress brought the rest of their meal, and Mr. Izenga tried to make his sandwich last as long as her extensive order.

It wasn't hard. She ate as fast as she talked. As they came down the home stretch toward finger bowls she lit a cigarette and sighed. "So you see, that makes everything all right."

Did it? He wondered. He also wondered where he came into the picture. She had mentioned wanting his advice. It seemed she hardly needed it. But he didn't intend to speak of it. He had had enough of her plaintive coo.

"I must run along now, Maribeth." He reached for the check.

"Oh, but, darling, you haven't heard what I want you to help me with! This is what I've been getting to all this time. It's Ridge. He doesn't know I—I was obliged to tell the police the truth. And he should know. Because they'll ask him again, and if he tells that old lie about the drugstore the police will be really angry at him."

"Well, call him up. You have a telephone."

"Don't be cross. You've been such a lamb so far. You see we swore we wouldn't tell, either of us, and Ridge will be just wild when he hears what I did. I want some mutual friend to break it to him and persuade him it's for the best. Tell him I did it for him. I don't want this sweet new understanding between us to be wrecked at the start. It means so much to me. Please, Mr. Izenga. Please."

She wept exquisitely. Just a mist over the wide blue eyes and tears trembling and shining on her curled black lashes that luckily needed no mascara.

Mr. Izenga felt his resistance being mined and sapped. It made him cross, but he couldn't help it. In another ten minutes he had committed himself and was escorting her, dewily triumphant, to the cashier's desk.

Chapter Twelve

It was nearly nine before Mr. Izenga tracked down Ridge Dawson in his apartment. Over the telephone his voice crackled with impatience.

"Can't spare a minute to talk to you, Cornelius. Sorry, but I'm on my way to the Webers'. They're waiting to drive me out to the club. Just popped in here to change my clothes."

"You can drop in my place on your way."

"I'll see you tomorrow. No, Monday. Soon, anyway."

"This won't keep that long. I have seen Maribeth. Or rather, she has seen me."

There was a very long pause. Then Mr. Dawson said, "Did you say Maribeth?"

"That's right."

There was an interval of soft cursing. "Oh, all right, blast it. All right. For two minutes only."

Mr. Izenga did not look forward to that job and he did not intend to put it off any longer than possible. He despised himself for being so soft, yet at the same time it was rather pleasing to his masculinity to be won over by feminine wiles. Ridge Dawson's words about his being an old maid still rankled.

Twenty minutes later a car stopped, a door banged, and the doorbell gave two frightened yelps. Mr. Izenga answered it.

Mr. Dawson strode in, tall and very handsome in his evening

clothes and wrath. It was annoying how little his dissipations affected his appearance.

"What's this about Maribeth?"

Mr. Izenga went down the hall to the den. Ridge was not going to follow, but after a moment he strode in. He looked so distinguished, so sophisticated and elegant, that Mr. Izenga did not wonder Maribeth could not get over him. What he did wonder was how Ridge could entangle himself with her again. She was very pretty, very affectionate, but . . .!

"I lunched with Maribeth today," he began, "at her request. I just happened to bump into her."

Mr. Dawson was loftily amused. "Don't bother to explain, old boy. You may lunch with her the rest of your life, and it's okay by me."

Well, well, Mr. Izenga thought.

"She asked me to see you and tell you she's told the police-"

The humor was wiped off Mr. Dawson's handsome face. "She—she told—the police—what?"

"About your real alibi." Mr. Izenga began to wish he had had the sense to say no oftener. "That you were with her the night of the—the night Letty died."

"Oh, she did. She did, huh?" Ridge seemed dazed. "The dirty little——" He sat down as if his knees had given way. Luckily there was a sofa behind him. "Blast her. What else? Go on."

"She said she knew the police weren't believing your first alibi about the drugstore——"

"She's crazy. Where'd she get that idea? They'd swallowed it completely. I was all set."

"I doubt that. Else why did the police question her on the point? I'm afraid you underrate French."

Ridge sat glowering at the floor. "Or French got a tip," he growled, and gave Mr. Izenga an ugly glance.

"I don't think you mean that," Mr. Izenga retorted.

"Oh, don't be so damned touchy," Ridge groaned. "Blast that little fool. I've got to think."

"You can't blame her too much; you were an idiot to trust her.

She was no match for French. He had it out of her in a few minutes that you were protecting her reputation. That you and she had promised each other not to tell and you were too much of a gentleman to break your promise."

Ridge looked up, a little relieved. "Her reputation. Blue sun-flowers." He laughed. "Well, if she thinks it will get her anywhere to make a martyr of herself—let her think again."

"And were you with her that night?"

"Of course I was. I was going to protect her indefinitely if she'd only kept her mouth shut. But that's a woman for you. She's sunk herself and nothing to show for it. Too bad!"

Airily Mr. Dawson shrugged his smart, square shoulders and rose, slapping his gloves across his palm.

"I am not through," Mr. Izenga said.

"All this is very interesting, old boy, but I've got to-"

"I am just getting to the really interesting part, Ridge. Maribeth's reputation. You needn't worry about it. She fixed that very neatly." Ridge stopped, watch in hand. "Did, humph? How?"

"She told French you were merely a little previous in your call. That you and she were planning to be remarried at once."

"Oh, she did?" Ridge's face slowly changed. "Oh, the hell she did!"

He let himself down again on the sofa without removing his startled eyes from Mr. Izenga's face. His consternation visibly increased every second as his mind worked on the news.

"Why—the dirty—little beast," he whispered. "She's as tricky as hell. Made me swear not to tell I was with her. Let me make up that fool yarn about hunting a drugstore. And all the time she was plotting to work this scheme to corner me again. Blast her!"

Mr. Izenga, with detached scientific interest, watched Ridge Dawson suffer. It was his belief that retribution got around a little oftener than people gave it credit.

"And after all," Ridge groaned, "I'll bet French didn't believe a word she said."

Mr. Izenga said quietly, "But I think he did. He told me they

were sure where you spent the night, though you lied like a gentleman."

Ridge's relieved smile quickly soured.

"He did? Blast it, I don't know that I wouldn't rather stand trial for murder than for matrimony—and with her again! God! What a sweet spot she's got me in. You don't know what a devil she is, Cornelius. If I don't marry her she's capable of telling French she made up the whole tale to save me because she knew I was guilty."

He gazed wretchedly at his thoughts. His face drooped and darkened more every minute. He muttered to himself. At last Mr. Izenga said:

"Do you really mean you don't see any way out of remarrying her, Ridge?"

At that tone Mr. Dawson lifted his head like a drowning man sighting a life preserver. "There is no way out."

"But it's so obvious!"

"Good God, don't keep me panting here. What is it?"

Mr. Izenga said quietly, "Why, just let yourself be engaged to her. That won't hurt you, will it?"

"I guess not." Ridge sat still, except for his eyes. They kept searching Mr. Izenga's complacent face. "But how could that——"

"You simply remain engaged until the police find out who killed Letty. Then you will no longer need any alibi and you can tell Maribeth you have changed your mind."

Ridge's gaze rested on Mr. Izenga in stupefaction. After some time he began to nod in a slow, dazed way.

Mr. Izenga said, "Of course she may sue you, but Howard Ellinger can get you off lightly. It'll cost you something, but it's far better than marriage."

Mr. Dawson took out a filmy linen handkerchief and wiped his brow with slow, hypnotic gestures. "My God, Cornelius! Why couldn't I have thought of that myself?"

"You just got in a panic."

"Maybe. But you've got what it takes, old boy. Whew! I've aged five years. What a spot! I suppose it's all over the county?"

"Well, you know Maribeth."

"Don't I! Bla, bla! I'm limp from just the prospect of marrying her again. And now, if I could have a drop or two, you really would finish saving my life."

Mr. Izenga, in an expansive mood, crossed the room and touched a bell. As he passed Mr. Dawson he caught a whiff of the expensive hair tonic Ridge was always recommending. Mr. Izenga did not care for scent in any form for men.

Harrison brought bottles and siphon. Ridge took the first one straight. Over the second, mixed with soda water, he smiled gratefully.

"By the way, old boy, did you get hurt the other night as you left my place? I meant to call and ask, but I was so sick, myself, I guess I didn't think much of anyone else."

Mr. Izenga told him what had happened. When he had finished Ridge said contritely, "I feel damned small not to have taken the trouble to inquire after you, when you've been good enough to lend me a hand like this. But I may be able to reciprocate. You know I was in the bathroom when you left my place. And when I heard yelling, naturally I looked out of the bathroom window. It's toward the rear on the north side of the building."

Mr. Izenga listened eagerly, and when Ridge finished and looked at the bottle Mr. Izenga poured him a third glass and motioned him on.

"I looked down into the side yard. It was rather dark, but there was a little light from the lower windows. And I saw someone running across the lawn toward the alley."

"Could you tell who it was?"

"Lord, no. I could just see a dark figure, bent over and carrying something, a club or stick. The person wore slacks—or pants—but it could have been a woman. Of course I didn't know what had happened then. I went through the hall to my front window. Then I thought I recognized your voice and called down to you."

"Will you tell French that?"

"Bet your life I will. I feel pretty low not to have volunteered this before. But you know, sometimes I wonder if, living by myself so much, I haven't got just a little—well—self-centered."

Mr. Izenga soberly agreed such a thing might happen if one were not careful.

Ridge said with a glance at his watch, "Whew! The Webers will be steaming. Guess I ought to blow. I'll get in touch with French as soon as I can."

He breezed out on this friendly note. Mr. Izenga looked after him meditatively. He spent most of the rest of the evening thinking over what Ridge had said.

2

Mr. Izenga woke to the sound of rain gargling in the downspouts and rattling on the porch roof. Ah, a nice rainy Sunday to stay home and relax, he thought, turning drowsily in bed.

He was just dropping off again when the telephone rang. He sat up. Eight o'clock. It wasn't likely Harrison would disturb him at that hour for anything unimportant. He was getting a little afraid of the telephone. It had caused so much trouble in the last week.

"Lieutenant French calling, Mr. Izenga," Harrison said. "He can't wait. I'll switch him on." In a second came the clipped quiet voice. "Hello, Mr. Izenga. French calling. Can you have your man drive you over to Oak City?"

"Now?" Mr. Izenga wailed sleepily.

"As soon as possible."

"It will take me some time to get dressed and breakfast, and it's almost an hour's drive over there. Is it absolutely necessary? This is Sunday, you know." Mr. Izenga was sitting up in bed now.

"I'm sorry to disturb you. I've told your man where to meet me."

"But can't you give me an inkling of why you want me?"

"Mr. Izenga, I'm in a great hurry. Please don't ask questions. The privacy of the telephone is a myth. This is serious business and I can't discuss it now. I'll look for you at ten."

The line went dead in Mr. Izenga's ear. He hung up with a little bang. He considered not going. After all, he was a private citizen, a taxpayer. He needn't jump when the police whistled. He

had worked up quite a little pet when Harrison entered with a large silver breakfast tray.

"I thought it would save time if you had it in your room, Mr. Izenga." Harrison began to lay out clothing deftly.

"I don't know that I care whether time is saved or not." Mr. Izenga buttered a tiny corn muffin and poured coffee. He lifted the silver dish cover and disclosed two tenderly poached eggs, his favorites. He knew Harrison was pampering him, anticipating his peevish mood. Well, that was what Harrison was for. Mr. Izenga went on eating himself into amiability again.

Half an hour later, as they drove through the rain-dimmed country between towns, Mr. Izenga began to enjoy himself. He liked motoring, the air was refreshingly cool, and there was a melancholy beauty in the mist-shrouded hills and rivers as they passed.

He reminded himself he must tell French what Ridge Dawson had told him about seeing his assailant. There were some interesting aspects that French should know. After all, it was better to prevent murders than to solve them. Particularly when one is the intended victim.

3

But he did not get a chance to talk to the lieutenant when they arrived at the corner of Maple and Cherry streets. A gold-striped troop car was waiting for them. Harrison was told to follow its lead.

They began to circle the city's outskirts. At last they reached a small suburban village, Larraway, which had not been taken into the city, though near it. Larraway was proud of its independence and boasted its own utilities and even a pretty natural park of ten acres.

It was toward this park that the two cars made their way. There was a good-sized crowd at the gates in spite of the rain. Several troopers were preventing people from entering. But Mr. Izenga was wafted through officially.

They drove through leafy lanes with the rain dripping softly on the car roof and the wheels sliding and bumping over hollows in the ground. At a little clearing they parked and got out. Harrison was wanted, too, the troopers said. Tingling with curiosity, Mr. Izenga descended into a gloomy little glen with a brook and ferns. It would have been silent ordinarily, but now it buzzed with men's voices.

Lieutenant French came to meet them. Mr. Izenga, looking past him, saw a heap of dark clothes on the ground. After its first terrified lunge his heart calmed down. This was not a woman. Not Erica.

"I want you to tell me if you have ever seen this man before, Mr. Izenga," French said. He looked pale and was rather stern. "You too, Harrison."

They went forward. The police doctor who had been kneeling by the body stood up and nodded to Mr. Izenga. They were getting to be old friends.

At first Mr. Izenga could only gape in shuddering revulsion. The results of strangling are worse than all other murderous methods and make identification much harder.

But at last he glanced at Harrison, who looked two shades lighter. His brown eyes were bulging with white above and below the irises.

Mr. Izenga gulped. "I—I can't be sure. I think this is the young man who came to see me—the drug clerk. If I could see his right ear—yes—it's the same. And his nose. Yes, it's the same type of nose. I—uh—took particular note of them."

"Why?"

Mr. Izenga was not going to mention that "portrait-parlez" business and have them all laugh at him later.

"Just thought it might come in useful," he said.

Several of the troopers gave him suspicious glances. Mr. Izenga ignored them. French turned to Harrison.

"You saw the drug clerk, I believe?"

"Yes. I let him in. I am positive this is the man."

Mr. Izenga murmured, "I suppose his name is not Barker? That was the one he gave me."

"No. It's Ed Simpkins. He was a clerk in the drugstore in this village. The owner of the drugstore is seldom there. Ed ran it. Unluckily he did not confide in anyone about the buyer of the chloral hydrate. At least no one has come forward with such information. It simply means another person has died and his evidence is lost. What's worse, it must have been the right dope, or Simpkins wouldn't have been killed to keep it quiet."

Mr. Izenga said, "But how could the—uh—criminal know this fellow had called on me and offered to sell me his secret? Nobody was at my house, and I haven't told anyone." He glanced at Harrison.

"You know I never talk about your affairs with anyone, Mr. Izenga." You had to believe him.

French sighed. "Well, it's possible the poor devil got in touch with the criminal himself and tried to raise the ante."

Harrison had been thinking. "Lieutenant, if you find a suit of bright blue clothes and a hat about the same shade in this man's rooms, it's positive he's the fellow we saw. There couldn't be two suits like that, I hope."

The lieutenant glanced at Harrison's own well-tailored quiet clothing and nodded appreciatively. "That's a good point."

The police doctor was of the opinion that the victim had died in the early morning, between the hours of two and four. Just the time of Mrs. Pomeroy's death! It seemed, undoubtedly, the work of the same two hands.

There had been considerable spadework done by the police since seven that morning. The body had been found by a young man out for a stroll in the rain with his dog. He lived on the edge of the park and was used to walking in it in all kinds of weather.

It was decided by the police that there had been a meeting between the victim and his killer somewhere near the gate and that the crime had very likely taken place there. The body had then been taken, perhaps in a car, to this remote spot and tossed down.

The villagers contended the killer must have been a stranger, for any town person would have known that this glen was a favorite

spot for picnics, especially on Sunday. Anyone wishing to postpone discovery would not have picked out that spot, of all others.

4

Mr. Izenga did not get home until three-thirty. As his car turned in his drive he saw Erica's maroon coupé parked near the porch. Its tan top was up, and from one of its windows thin blue smoke curled. Dozens of soaked cigarette stubs littered the drive.

Remembering that this was the car Erica had lent or perhaps given to Newcomb, Mr. Izenga's first throb of pleasure gave way to annoyance. He got out of his car at the steps and went up on the porch out of the rain. Harrison began to open the door with a key rather than summon the housemaid.

The coupé door flew open, banged shut, and Toby Newcomb shot up the porch steps as if fired from a gun. His eyes burned wildly in a face as near white as its tan would allow. He seized Mr. Izenga by his sore arm.

"Where is she? What have you done with her?" he demanded. "Where have you taken her?" His voice was hoarse.

Mr. Izenga began to sway. The pain in his arm was nothing compared with that in his heart.

"Erica! Erica?"

"Of course. Who else could I mean? Tell me where you have taken her."

"But I haven't seen her." Mr. Izenga's teeth jiggled together in terror. "Is she missing?" He gave a little moan. "My arm, please."

Harrison came toward them menacingly. But before he could pull Newcomb's hand from Mr. Izenga's arm it fell of its own accord. Newcomb leaned over and stared into Mr. Izenga's eyes. Then, disconcerted by the slight squint, he concentrated on the right one.

"If you're lying to me, God help you," he whispered.

Mr. Izenga was too far gone to care about quibbling. He said, "Let's not waste time misunderstanding one another, Newcomb. I know nothing about it. Come in. Tell me what happened. Maybe I can think of something."

Chapter Thirteen

R. IZENGA sat in his library while the shelves of books seemed to swim round and round like a whirlpool trying to suck him down. Through a blur he saw Newcomb's drawn face with its anguished eyes. Through a smothering pillow he heard Newcomb's jerky voice.

"She's been gone hours. God knows how long. Pliny has been trained to let anyone sleep late if they want to. Erica is always up early, but he thought this was an exception. I'm not blaming the poor old man. He's about crazy, as it is." He stopped abruptly.

Harrison came in with whisky and soda, but Newcomb waved it aside in that brusque manner of his. "Don't use it."

Mr. Izenga's numb brain regained enough life to be surprised at this. He would have put Newcomb down as a man accustomed to carrying any amount of liquor. Maybe Erica had reformed him. But when Harrison reached the door Newcomb said, "But if I could have a cup of black coffee and a few crackers . . ."

Mr. Izenga wondered when his visitor had eaten last. There was a sort of gaunt ferocity in his face that must be partly due to hunger. And Newcomb would have to be practically starving before he would ask for food in enemy territory.

Newcomb was continuing his account in a voice too tight to be unsteady.

"At eleven-thirty Pliny knocked at Erica's door and went into her room. It wasn't locked. Imagine! All that time! He could have looked into her room hours before. But I can't blame him. I was waiting for her myself. We were to have breakfast together at the inn. Finally Pliny called me. It was twelve. I went out there and tore the place apart. She wasn't in her room. The bed had been slept in. And that poor sap, Bennet, was just getting up. He said we were fools to get in a panic about her. He said she'd just run over to one of the neighbors' and stayed to breakfast."

Newcomb's opinion was further amplified by his brutal expression. He looked like a man who has fought against staggering odds with a confidence for which no one else could see any justification. Harrison came in with a tray of sandwiches, coffee, and sliced peaches.

After a gesture offering it to his host, Newcomb fell on the food and put it down with dispatch. He had reached the place where hunger was interfering with his efficiency. So he satisfied it as one refuels a needed machine.

"We looked over the house from top to bottom. Then we did the garage, outbuildings, and grounds. The gardeners aren't there Sundays, but I got them anyway. We couldn't find any trace of her in the grounds or near-by woods. Her car wasn't gone—that new yellow coupé."

Newcomb swallowed half of a third cup of strong black coffee. He was looking better.

"We went to the neighbors' on either side. No one was home in the Galt house. It was all locked up. Pliny said the housekeeper always went away Saturday night and didn't get back till Monday morning. He said Huntley Price generally got himself invited out over the week end. Anyway, we made a hell of a racket and roused nobody. Then we went home and called Lieutenant French and the sheriff and got them onto it. We called all the people she knew, and nobody knew where she was."

For a moment Newcomb's cast-iron composure cracked a bit. But after a while he said:

"Your housemaid said you and Harrison had gone away in the car early this morning and told her you wouldn't be back to dinner. So then I was positive you'd taken Erica with you. I felt a little better about her—for a time—till you came back. Now I don't know what——"

The telephone rang. Harrison switched it to the library. It was Lieutenant French. He had sent a couple of troopers to answer Newcomb's call for help until he could get a free moment to look into it himself.

Now he wanted to know what they had done so far, so the police

would not duplicate their efforts. Mr. Izenga put Newcomb on the wire. The repetition of the story seemed to grind in how hopeless it was.

Mr. Izenga could see the slow pull of the disciplined muscles in Toby Newcomb's jaw as he talked. No matter what else could be said about the man, one thing was certain. He loved Erica with a fierce devotion that made Mr. Izenga less able to hate him.

Suddenly Toby shouted, "No! No! It can't be that way. . . . No. . . . All right. . . . Go ahead. . . . Yes, I looked—as much as I could. . . . Yes, I will. . . . All right."

He dropped the telephone and shut his eyes. Then Mr. Izenga could see him pull himself together in a mighty rallying of strength. He thought of Huntley telling how he loved Erica—and Westerly. And Westerly had come first. The contrast was enlightening. Again Mr. Izenga wondered if Huntley were the ideal mate for Erica.

He recalled his efforts to instill a fighting spirit into that amiable, docile nature. He had tried to sting his pride, but apparently Huntley had little. He had tried to rouse the cave man in him, but it hadn't worked. There was no way to get at him.

Newcomb said huskily, "French is going out to Westerly. There's only one place they haven't looked there." He paused till he was able to go on. "They're taking—grappling hooks."

"No," Mr. Izenga whispered. "No." And it seemed an echo of Newcomb's own voice a short while before. No wonder he had had to shut his eyes.

"I'm going out there." Newcomb stood up. "Do you want to come?" It was equivalent to peace terms.

Mr. Izenga would have ridden with Hitler's ghost if it were to save Erica. And against his will he was beginning to have great trouble in keeping up his dislike of this brusque stranger.

"Yes."

It was chummy in Erica's maroon coupé in the rain. Chummy with the memories of the good times each man had had in it with Erica. Different sorts of memories, but equally vital. And were memories to be all they were to have of her from now on? Mr. Izenga said tensely:

"Of course you called the Dukes?"

Newcomb said, "Oh my, yes. A swell set of relatives she's got." And kept his eyes on the twisting lane.

"And Ridge Dawson?"

"He was on his way to dinner with some people. He said he was sure she'd turn up. He hung up while I was talking."

Mr. Izenga stole a sidelong glance at him. If Ridge could see that expression he might regret being so perfunctory.

2

They parked in the drive near Westerly's handsome entrance. There were troop cars everywhere and civilian cars. The grounds were full of people. Troopers were busy back at the five-acre pond. There were several quite deep places in it, Mr. Izenga recalled. He fought down a nauseous faintness as he watched Newcomb cross the wet grass in long strides toward Lieutenant French.

Mr. Izenga wondered, for the first time, why Newcomb had had to telephone the police. Wasn't he being guarded? Why did he not simply tell his guard? Or was he supposed not to know he was being tailed? Another of the things Mr. Izenga did not know. Most exasperating!

Newcomb might have the endurance to watch the troopers dragging that pond, but Mr. Izenga knew that he himself did not. He wandered away, avoiding the would-be gossipers and sympathizers alike. He went through the hedge into the Galt grounds, seeking solitude.

It was a gloomy place, even on a bright day. There were many pines and drooping hemlocks mixed with the maples and beeches in the grounds. Mrs. Galt was one of those people who consider trees sacred. She had given orders, on one of her rare trips home, that none was to be touched.

There were more bare places than grassy ones now on the lawn. Mr. Izenga shivered. He was getting damp in the rain. If Harrison had been along he would have been after him with an umbrella. But Harrison wasn't there.

Mr. Izenga wandered miserably around the very old frame house with its crazy turrets and bay windows and cut-off corners. It had been one of the first houses built in the district, when electricity was just a wild idea. Later the house had been wired. The glass-covered meter near the back porch seemed as much of an anachronism as a derby on a bust of Caesar.

Mr. Izenga stopped to listen to the distant hum of horrid activity. He heard no shouts and sighed with relief. All right so far! His eyes, which had been fixed on the meter, blinked. The sight in the right eye was extraordinarily keen. He went closer. Yes, that silvery disk with the marked edge was moving round and round.

Could that be the electric refrigerator? He took out his watch. Five, ten, fifteen minutes went by. No. It must be something else. He went all around the house. The shades were down in most of the rooms, upstairs and down.

Nowhere could he see a faint line of gold that would indicate a light was burning. Yet somewhere in the depths of that huge, silent old house electricity was being used, and Mr. Izenga had to know why. He hurried back to the meter. The disk was still moving round and round.

He almost ran through the thick shrubbery separating the two estates. As he came out on the grounds of Westerly he trotted toward the pond, then stood still. He saw French, busy with his troopers and Newcomb, grimly vigilant. He hugged his secret to his breast like a timid little boy choosing which gang of toughs he would allow to play with his football.

He would like to tell French if he could be sure this hunch would amount to anything. But if it fell flat he would prefer not to have an official audience.

Moreover, the police might not think his suspicion strong enough grounds on which to break into a private citizen's home. Mr. Izenga's scruples were kept starved and properly submissive.

But in Newcomb he discerned a fellow feeling against legal quibbling. If he could get him aside, without French's attention, he was sure he could count on co-operation.

It wasn't easy. The lieutenant was diabolically aware of every-

thing that went on. Several times Mr. Izenga saw French watching him with speculation. It was annoying.

But presently French was called over to the pond's edge by the men in the boat. Mr. Izenga slipped close to Toby Newcomb and whispered:

"Follow me—after a few moments—to the Galt place next door. Rear of the house."

Then he ambled off with apparently aimless steps. He looked back at the hedge entrance. French was watching him again. Mr. Izenga issued one of his potent "oh dears" under his breath and popped through the gate. Was it possible that French didn't trust him to be frank?

3

Mr. Izenga had to wait much longer than he wanted for Newcomb to turn up. He was chilled and very damp. He had hard work not to sneeze. But each time he looked at the meter disk—round and round—his resolution stiffened.

Newcomb came barging through the underbrush with a lot of noise. He wasn't familiar with the paths. He looked around for quite a while before he saw Mr. Izenga huddled under the backdoor hood.

"Couldn't get away any sooner," he whispered. "Had a hard time shaking off those troopers. Suspicious guys. What's up?" He didn't seem impressed with Mr. Izenga's probable news.

Mr. Izenga went out in the rain, pointed to the meter, and explained his theory. Newcomb gazed at it a long time. Then he made a circuit of the house and came back. Of course it was possible that the refrigerator was open or out of order and wouldn't shut off.

"But," Mr. Izenga added, "it makes me very unhappy not to be sure."

Newcomb nodded, growing more fidgety every minute.

"I know how you feel. Of course we could call the police and ask them to break in, but they're funny sometimes. They might think we hadn't enough evidence to risk taking such action. It's serious, you know. Breaking and entering." But he grinned.

Mr. Izenga said, "If you can get anything open—in any way—I will fix it with Imogene Galt. One of my oldest friends. I'm not going to sleep tonight unless I have been through this house."

Newcomb looked down at the pompous little man with his arched brows, haughty air, and completely unarmed state. Something like admiration softened his face for a moment.

"Okay. But I'm vulnerable already. It would be better to let me go alone." He went down off the stoop and began to inspect windows. "There's always one they've missed," he said with the confidence of the expert burglar. He went on around the house. Two minutes later the kitchen door opened softly from within.

The kitchen was quiet and dark. The blinds were down. In the sink was a heap of dishes. A coffee percolator, two plates with toast crumbs and marmalade smears, two cups and saucers, a cream jug, and some silver. There were a number of cigarette stubs on both plates.

Izenga and Newcomb exchanged glances over the mess.

Mr. Izenga pointed to the name on the big refrigerator. "Servel." Which meant it was run by gas! So this was not what was using that electric current.

Toby hissed from the stove. He stabbed his finger downward. Mr. Izenga saw a design of wee blue balls of flame on the burner. Someone had kept the coffee hot and forgotten to turn off the gas. They listened at the cellar steps. Water dripped; that was all.

The blinds were down in all the lower rooms, and the covered furniture looked like sleeping animals in the gloom. Mr. Izenga was glad he wasn't alone. Newcomb radiated strength and determination. This prowling, wary stuff seemed natural to him. Mr. Izenga thought, He has done this sort of thing before, and shivered.

They finished with the first floor and crept up the carpeted stairs without making a sound. In the upper hall, dark as a cave, they stood close enough to touch each other, listening. For some time they heard nothing. Then there was a sort of thump and a muffled voice. These rooms were solidly built. The doors were thick oak. It took some time to locate the voices.

When they did Newcomb grasped the knob and turned it very quietly. Then he put his mouth down to Mr. Izenga's ear.

"Locked!"

He stooped and looked into the keyhole. The key was in it. He stood up. Mr. Izenga took matters into his own hands then. He suddenly thumped with his fist on the door.

"Open up! Open this door at once!"

His voice was shrill and penetrating. They heard a scuffle inside. Newcomb found the switch, and the hall became light. He was looking around frantically for something with which to break down the door. Mr. Izenga repeated his demand.

Then Erica began loudly, "Mr. Izenga, tell——" The rest of it was lost in a mumble, as if a hand was clapped over her mouth.

The sound of her voice drove Newcomb into a frenzy. He snatched up a chair in his right hand, swung it, and banged it against the door. Two legs snapped off the chair and flew past Mr. Izenga's face.

"Here, watch out, Newcomb," he cried. "No use trying that on doors like this." He pounded harder. "Huntley! Huntley! Are you in there? Open at once. This is Mr. Izenga!"

"Get away and leave us alone," Huntley shouted. "Go on. Scram. Both of you."

Erica must have broken away again. "Open the door! For heaven's sake, open the door. Break it down if you have to." She was crying now.

"Huntley, you let us in this instant. How dare you keep me out!" Mr. Izenga raged. "Half the police in the county are outside. We have only to call and——"

"In fact, you don't even need to do that," said Lieutenant Bill French from the stairs.

Mr. Izenga spun about. They had company.

"I rather thought you were holding out on me, Mr. Izenga."

"It wasn't that, Lieutenant. I wasn't sure this was worth your official trouble."

French accepted that stuffed-olive branch. "Would you mind stepping away from that door?"

"Break it down!" Erica was crying.

Very composedly French stooped, took something from his pocket, and fiddled with the keyhole, while one of the troopers banged his huge fist on the door above to distract attention. In a few seconds there was a little ping as the key fell out on the inside. With one quick twist French turned his own key in the lock. The door flew open.

The troopers drew their guns and stood on either side, ready for anything.

One small shaded lamp was lit on the marble-topped dresser. All the blinds were down, and over them were hung thick curtains of some black stuff. Huntley had provided a thorough black-out.

Erica sat in a low rocker. She wore a crumpled yellow tailored dress and a long scratch down one cheek. The floor about her was polka-dotted with cigarette ends. She could almost have lit them from her blazing eyes.

Huntley leaned against the wall, his hands in his pockets. His dark hair hung over his eyes. They were bloodshot and bright with terror. They flicked swiftly from Erica's face to French's, entreating leniency. You couldn't miss it. His handsome mouth shook a little.

Watching this craven exhibition, Mr. Izenga wanted to go quietly away and be sick. It was all the worse with Newcomb standing over Erica so brutal and lowering.

"Erica, if he has hurt you I'll kill him."

"No, no. He didn't." She stood up. She let Toby take her in his arms for a moment. Her voice trembled, but her eyes were too hot for tears. "The great fool! I could almost stand it better if he had!"

"Tell us what happened, Miss Pomeroy," French said.

Two troopers were edging closer to Huntley, their guns still in hand, as if he were a cornered lion. Erica began to laugh hysterically. "Oh heavens, he's harmless. Don't rub it in!" Her contempt was like a whip. Huntley cringed.

"Miss Pomeroy, we must know what happened so we can charge Huntley Price properly," French repeated. Erica lifted her head quickly. She saw the troopers laying hands on Huntley. Saw him shrinking. She said loftily:

"Leave him alone. There's no one to accuse him. I certainly won't."

"But we've been hunting you for hours. We find you here, shut in this house, a prisoner," French began angrily.

"I'm sorry I made so much trouble," Erica said in her grandmother's favorite tone. "As far as anyone knows, I walked over here and stayed. I have said nothing to the contrary and I don't intend to."

Huntley took in a breath, as if to say something. Mr. Izenga, who had slid close to him, whispered fiercely, "Shut up."

French gave one quick jerk of his head. The troopers put back their guns and moved away from Huntley and out of the room.

"Very well, Miss Pomeroy, if that's your story."

But he paused in the doorway. French was far from through with this farce, it was clear. He looked at Mr. Izenga's frantically blank expression. His lips twisted for a moment sardonically.

Then they heard his footsteps follow the troopers' down the stairs.

Chapter Fourteen

H, ERICA—I—I don't know how to thank you," Huntley stammered. "I knew—for old times' sake—you—you——" The rest of the words were melted in the molten glance she flung him.

"Don't you ever come near me again, Huntley. Just the sight of you is going to make me violent. O God, I never was made such a fool in all my life!" She took long-legged strides up and down the carpet, shuddering as she walked.

"What happened?" Toby asked.

"I was walking in the garden this morning, looking at the roses, when Huntley came over. He said Aunt Imogene Galt had a new

rose she'd sent home from Seattle. It was in bloom now. Well, I was willing to be friendly. I've always hated fights and not speaking. So I came over to see it. When we went by the side door Huntley clapped a hand over my mouth and dragged me into the house."

"The dirty louse!" Toby's right fist curled.

"Oh, let him live. I've had enough claptrap for one day. He said he wanted me to listen to his side. He said I wasn't being fair to him. Well, I thought, If he says his say and gets it all out of his system, maybe he'll leave me alone. So I said okay."

She gave Huntley's bowed head a bitter, pitying glance and went on: "We ate breakfast together here. And then he talked. He said everything he wanted to. If he didn't it wasn't my fault. I kept still enough. He talked for two hours. Then I tried to answer and explain how I felt. But he didn't want to hear."

He lifted his head for a moment to give her a tormented, despairing look. He opened his lips and closed them again.

"He didn't want to hear me say anything but yes," Erica cried, more shrilly. "He wouldn't listen to reason. He said he'd keep me here till I'd say I'd give up Toby. As if I ever would. Every minute he made me stay hardened me more."

Huntley said, "This is your work, Mr. Izenga! You told me to put up a fight for her. Why didn't you leave us alone here? Why didn't you go away and not drag him into it?" He glared at Toby.

"Why didn't you tell me what you meant to do?" Mr. Izenga retorted for the defense. "Such an idiotic idea. I've been nearly insane with worry all afternoon."

"I did try to get you. Over and over. You said you didn't have time for me," Huntley whined.

"Oh, don't talk!" Erica shivered. "Don't try to blame it on someone else. Haven't you any guts at all?"

Huntley said, "It's knowing that brute that has made you like this, Erica. He's coarse and rough and he'll drag you down to his level. You didn't used to be like this."

Toby moved toward him with lowered head.

"Don't hit him," Erica said. "I don't think he knows what he's

doing. I never saw him act like this before. He says he hasn't been able to eat for days."

"Baloney!" Toby jeered. "I saw him at the Tea Shoppe yester-day pigging it."

Huntley shot him a look barbed with poisonous hatred. Mr. Izenga was shocked. He was glad they had snatched Erica out of his clutches. He didn't know Huntley could feel like that.

Erica moved toward the door. "Let's get out of here."

Huntley groaned, "Erica!"

"Skip the melodrama, please. I felt sorry for you awhile this morning, but that wore off a long time ago." She gave him a steady, significant look. "Everything will be all right. Buck up."

She followed Newcomb out of the room. Mr. Izenga caught sight of Huntley's face in a mirror. He looked very odd, under the circumstances. Relieved and—yes—almost pleased, Mr. Izenga observed in amazement. Huntley was gazing at the floor, unaware he was not alone.

Mr. Izenga went out noiselessly.

2

All the way down the stairs he pondered on what that expression might mean. How could Huntley be pleased? He puzzled, too, over the cryptic message from Erica to Huntley. What would be all right? Surely she didn't love him still, after the way she had talked about him! But it was obvious there was some secret they shared. What? Mr. Izenga did not like not knowing it.

He followed Erica and Newcomb through the persistent rain across the lawns to Westerly. The troopers and sight-seers were gone, but everything looked trampled down.

Erica flushed. "I could hear all the fuss. I could hear you pounding on the door hours ago, Toby, but he wouldn't let me answer. I loathe to be made ridiculous. He couldn't have done anything to make me detest him more. Oh heavens, but I'm hungry. I hope Pliny has some food."

Mr. Izenga did not look at her. He felt drooping and old. He said sadly, "I'll call Harrison to come for me." They would not want to see him again, after his part in that farce.

Erica put her arms around his neck. She smiled at him lovingly,

teasingly. It was a look that forgave him much.

"No, you won't, you old lamb. You'll come right in and eat with us, won't he, Toby?"

"No, no." Mr. Izenga was flustered. "I must get back."

Toby Newcomb held open the hall door. Pliny was inside in a tremble of tears and smiles and babbled phrases. Yes indeedy, he'd told the cook to start fryin' chicken the minute the police said they'd found her. Everything was all ready.

"Of course you'll come in, Mr. Izenga," Toby said decisively.

"What would we have done without you?"

Mr. Izenga could detect no ambiguity on that well-disciplined face. But there was just a trace of a smile. The right kind.

Erica still had hold of his hand. Her fingers were warm and coaxing. Maybe they didn't want him—too much. But he wanted to stay too badly to resist.

3

Monday was usually a good mail morning. Mr. Izenga always found an interesting heap of letters lying on his desk in the den after breakfast. He knew none were bills. Harrison always sorted them out and wrote checks for Mr. Izenga to sign.

This Monday there was an extra-good bag. Mr. Izenga sorted over the heavy cream envelopes that meant invitations and the blue ones and white ones that probably held fascinating bits of news. Friends were always sending him tidbits as a known quilting expert is showered with scraps of cloth.

He came at last to a soiled tramp of a letter. Its address had been written in pencil and was spelled atrociously. It was a wonder it had ever reached him. He saw it had been mailed yesterday, Sunday, in—in Larraway!

His blood pressure shot up so high it rang a bell in his brain.

Larraway was the town where that drug clerk had lived and horridly died. It was a name that made Mr. Izenga wince.

He rang for Harrison and when he came showed him the envelope. "This may be important, I may need you to witness this."

"Yes sir. That may be. I noticed it, of course. It doesn't look like our usual mail. And of course, being from Larraway, I wondered if it wasn't important."

Mr. Izenga carefully slit the end of the envelope. He even noted the time. Twenty-two minutes after ten.

He drew out a sheet of ruled paper. Rough pencil writing covered both sides of the sheet. With startled eyes he read:

DEAR SIR:

If you get this letter it's because I been killed. I'm leaving it with a person I can trust to mail it if anything happens to me. I wouldn't give away my secret for nothing, if I was alive. But I'm scared he'll get me

first and if he does I want him to suffer for it.

He called me last night, Friday, and says he has changed his mind and he'll pay me \$10,000 to keep still. But I don't trust him. He wants me to meet him Saturday night in the park and get the money. I don't know if I will or not. But if I do and I get bumped off you see they get the guy that did it. They claim a death bed statement is taken as gospell truth and thats what this will be if you get it.

The man who bought that chloral hydrate from me and the man who is threttening me is Bennet Pomroy himself. I seen his picture in the paper and I swear to God it was him. I reconized that suit he wears, too, dark blue with a darker blue and a red stripe through it. You can turn this letter over to the police or anything you want just so he gets his, the dirty

dog.

I'm signing my real name to this,

ED SIMPKINS

Mr. Izenga put down the note with fingers that were shaking too hard to hold it. Bennet! Was it possible that Bennet had committed that revolting crime, doped himself for two nights after each performance, and finished off by luring this blackmailing youth to his death? Mr. Izenga shut his eyes after handing the letter to Harrison.

Harrison had been with him for twenty-five years. He was not only loyal, but he had sound sense. After a few minutes the rustle of paper on the desk indicated he was finished. Mr. Izenga opened despairing eyes.

"It doesn't seem possible," he breathed.

"No sir, it doesn't," Harrison agreed, glancing again at the penciled scrawl. "I'd surely have said Mr. Bennet didn't have it in him to do a thing like that. I can hardly believe it. But the fellow mentions that blue-and-red-striped suit of Mr. Bennet's. It's a nice suit. I never saw another like it. And then the fellow says he identified Mr. Bennet's picture in the paper. It looks bad."

Mr. Izenga drummed on his desk. Confound the wretched youth who'd been so damnably foresighted! What was he to do now?

Could he bear to hand Letitia's son to the police and accuse him of her murder and the murder of this Simpkins too? Why, it was enough to make her rise phoenix-like from her ashes and wither him with her reproach. She would rather die ten deaths, he knew, and bury the secret of each with her, then have such a scandal as this live after her.

But murder wasn't something you could evade. Something had to be done about it. This poor devil had appealed to him with his dying breath, and Mr. Izenga knew, no matter how much he tried to argue with himself, that it would not be in vain.

Harrison's pleasant, low voice came through Mr. Izenga's feverish thoughts.

"Why don't you start by calling Mr. Bennet over here? Maybe if you talked to him he could explain this—somehow."

There wasn't much conviction in his voice, but Mr. Izenga was grateful for anything. "Yes, yes. A sound idea. Get him on the wire."

Harrison picked up the telephone. But after a few minutes he said, "Nobody seems to be home. The housemaid seems to think Mr. Bennet has gone away."

"Gone away!" Mr. Izenga was shrill. "Give me that phone. . . . Hello, Stella. What's this about Mr. Bennet?"

The flat, amiable voice of the maid suggested a mind that was dormant. "It's like I told Harrison, Mr. Izenga. Mr. Bennet's gone away. He went real early this morning. Five o'clock. I got up and cooked breakfast for him. He told me to last night."

"Where did he go?"

"I don't know. I think he was to visit some friends. He said he'd

tell Pliny where to forward his mail. I think he mentioned who they was, but I forget."

Mr. Izenga reeled off half a dozen of the Pomeroy friends, but it seemed only to confuse the girl. "I'm sure I couldn't say," she repeated over and over.

"Put Pliny on the wire."

"He's gone to do the marketing."

"Where's Miss Erica?"

"She's off somewheres with that fella of hers. The new one. That Toby."

Mr. Izenga's sigh was almost a groan. Was it Anatole France who said, "Against stupidity the gods themselves struggle in vain"?

"Tell Pliny to call me instantly when he gets in," he told her, and hung up. "Imbecile! Now I suppose we've got to wait till Pliny gets back from the market." Mr. Izenga flung himself petulantly into a chair and drummed on the arm. "Of course it's only an unhappy coincidence that Bennet goes off to visit some people the night after that poor wretch is killed."

"Of course," said Harrison obligingly.

He and Mr. Izenga avoided each other's eyes.

"Dear, dear, dear, dear!" Mr. Izenga's mumble kept time to his nervous finger tips.

4

Fortunately a caller arrived with a sizzling problem about to boil over, and Mr. Izenga was obliged to put all his wits on it for the next hour. And another visitor was pacing the floor when the first one left.

Mr. Izenga was not free again until twelve-thirty. At that time Harrison called him to the telephone.

"I called Pliny myself, Mr. Izenga. I was sure that girl had forgotten to say anything to him, and I was right."

"That driveling moron! Hello, Pliny? Mr. Izenga speaking. Where has Mr. Bennet gone?"

"He say he goin' to visit de Carltons down in Oxbridge, Ohio, Mr. Izenga. You know dey was heah last spring."

"Oxbridge! That's way down near the south border. How can he drive that far with that big car of his and only an A card?"

"Well, Mr. Izenga, you know dey's ways—ways and means all right—I ain't knowin', so I ain't sayin'—but could be done."

Black-market gas! Mr. Izenga steamed. For all his highhandedness he detested anything that undermined the war effort. But he had to admit it would be too much like the rest of Bennet's record. He would not even consider taking a defense job although his health at fifty was excellent. Mr. Izenga did not know how he managed to evade serving in any way. His conscience must have died of malnutrition years ago.

"Pliny, did Bennet tell you to forward his mail there?"

"Yassuh. He say all dis fussin' and spishionin' about his mama was too much for him. He say he get nervous breakdown if he have to stay heah. He say he be back in couple weeks."

"Dear, dear." Mr. Izenga drew in his lower lip. Then he spoke softly. "Pliny, tell me, has anyone asked for Mr. Bennet lately on the telephone—any strange man? You know most of his friends. Think hard. This is important."

After quite a pause the old man mumbled, "Seems to me dere was somethin' funny. Somebody with a real whiny voice, sorta hoarse too. Ask fo' him three-fo' times befo' dey hit a time he was in. Yassuh, I 'member now."

Mr. Izenga felt cold. "Oh, so he got Bennet? Did he seem pleased to talk to the fellow?"

"No suh. Umph-umph! Mr. Bennet was real mad—scary mad—and he say if 'at fellow call again say he ain't home. He say he don't want to talk to him."

"Do you remember any words of the conversation?"

"No suh. Soon's he take de phone I went away."

Mr. Izenga hung up. Harrison's frightened sympathy was not calming. It looked bad. That clerk must have called Bennet and accused him, and now the clerk was dead and Bennet was gone. It was almost painfully clear. That is what the police would think if he gave them this information.

Harrison made another suggestion. "Why don't we wire the

Carltons to have Mr. Bennet call you the minute he arrives? Then you can talk to him. Surely, if he gave a forwarding address, it isn't like running away. He wouldn't commit a crime and then tell where to find him."

"N-o." Mr. Izenga's dubious tone stretched the word. "I suppose not. Anyway, it's a good idea. Send the wire and we'll see."

5

But Mr. Izenga reckoned without his conscience. All through lunch it nagged him until his food was dry and tasteless. He had promised French to co-operate with him. And French had been so understanding about Mr. Izenga's peculiar position as a confidant. But this piece of news, this double-barreled disaster, was no confidence. He had no excuse for not keeping it to himself.

Mr. Izenga knew, of course, that Bennet Pomeroy wasn't guilty of killing anyone. He told himself he knew it, over and over. Yet the drug clerk had accused Bennet of buying the chloral hydrate, and now the clerk was dead. No matter how you looked at it, French should know these things without any further delay. This couldn't wait until Bennet had made his slow way down the map to the Carltons'.

Benedict Arnold had nothing on him, Mr. Izenga thought as he rang police headquarters and asked French to call on him as soon as possible.

He had hardly hung up when Erica breezed in. In her pale green linen frock with the moss-green jacket she looked as crisp as a salad. She dropped a fragrant kiss on his cheek.

"I've brought you some presents, darling. You know Gran left all the furniture to me, but we're not going to live in that feudal grandeur. I'm giving away a lot of things. I took Miss Frobisher several, including that buhl cabinet from the morning room. Heaven knows where she can put it, but she said she wanted it. I hate that fussy stuff. That's right, Harrison, bring them in here."

Harrison put down a charming little table with a piecrust top and a low rocker, comfortably shaped and padded.

"I thought I remembered your liking these two pieces," Erica said. "But you're welcome to anything else. How about that Chippendale chest from the upper hall? It would look nice in your bedroom."

"But, my dear, that's very valuable."

Erica lit a cigarette. She smiled teasingly through the smoke. "Would you rather have me give it to Lucianna? She's asked for it, among other things."

"No. She couldn't. Even she couldn't."

"Couldn't she?" Erica stretched out in her favorite chair. Her green linen dress was intricately embroidered and matched green linen sandals. Her long, graceful legs were evenly tanned. There was new strength in her face with its square little chin and heavy brows. Her hazel eyes had always looked at one in a candid way that scorned subtleties. Mr. Izenga thought, I must enjoy her while I can. He let himself go and gazed contentedly.

"But you're not going to give it to her?"

"Oh, why not?" She ran her fingers through her heavy bright hair. "Why should I care who gets each little thing? Besides, I think Lucianna is weakening. I detect a possibility that I may get that necklace if I treat her decently."

"She doesn't deserve it."

"Of course not. But I deserve the necklace and you know she has it. Once I leave this town I need never see her again, and how much better to leave it with a minimum of scandal. If I can get the necklace without calling in the police I'll give her the furniture gladly."

"Perhaps you're right. But I'll take the chest, in that case. My dear, did you know Bennet was going on this trip?"

Erica stared at the red tip of her cigarette. "No, and I wish he hadn't gone. The rest of us have to take it. Why shouldn't he? I'm afraid the police will make something of it when they find out."

"Oh, they'll do that, all right. Do you know where Bennet was last night?"

"Last night?" She looked startled. "Is something else wrong? Let's see. No. I got in at twelve. Pliny let me in. He just won't go to

bed. I didn't ask if Uncle Bennet was in. But, darling, it's no use asking Pliny. He'll swear Bennet was home in bed if he thinks it would help him."

Mr. Izenga looked earnestly into her eyes. A great pleasure. So many little flecks of color and indescribable shiftings of light made up their subtle greenish hazel.

"Erica, did it ever cross your mind that Bennet might have put that sedative into his own drink?"

She drew back. A quick, instinctive jerk. She was frightened with the kind of fear one has for the ghostly or inexplicable.

"Why do you say that? Mr. Izenga, you have the strangest way of knowing things—or guessing them. I did think that—several days ago. It came to my mind several times. But I would not think it. I threw it out. But why do you ask?"

He hesitated. Why not tell her? It might be wise. If Bennet really was guilty she should know it and not trust him. If it came to a question of Bennet's or Erica's safety, Mr. Izenga would not need to consider his choice.

Briefly he explained what had happened, from the visit of the clerk to the arrival of the letter. Erica did not interrupt. Her face grew paler. She traced the embroidery on her knee over and over with her finger, staring, spellbound, into Mr. Izenga's face.

"So that's the state of affairs at this moment, Erica. You know Bennet drives at an abnormally slow speed since his accidents. He can't possibly get to the Carltons' till late tomorrow night. And, my dear, I cannot wait that long to show the police this letter."

Erica nodded her head in resigned despair.

"Yes, you've got to tell. Poor Gran, thank heaven she can't know about all this. But Toby says we've got to co-operate with Bill French if we want to get out of this mess."

Oh, that Toby! Mr. Izenga was always being drawn up short by that detested name. He was glad Erica went away before he said something he shouldn't. He heard her speak to someone outside. In another minute Harrison brought in Lieutenant French.

Chapter Fifteen

I DON'T WANT TO TELL YOU this, Lieutenant," Mr. Izenga said. "It goes against everything in me. I'm not giving myself time to think it over."

With rather unsteady fingers he was turning the dial of the little wall safe in his den. In a moment he opened it and drew out the letter that had come that morning. With many misgivings he watched French read the accusing words.

"Looks bad," French admitted at last. "But—we'll see. What about Pomeroy? Do you know where he is?"

Mr. Izenga went into that. French made no comment on the length of time Mr. Izenga had kept the news to himself. He made a few notes and asked for a description of Bennet and his car.

"We'll have to put out a call for Pomeroy at once," he said, "but we'll put it on the basis of developments here that require his return. No use giving away our hand. He may not know we connect the death of the clerk with him at all. And if he does drive as far as Oxbridge he'll have some tall explaining to do to the OPA. I suspect we'll find him somewhere nearer home, but—we'll see."

2

That Monday evening Mr. Izenga came away early from Winnie Burnett's dinner party. He had no heart for festivities. And he kept thinking that if he were home the telephone might be bringing him news of Bennet's discovery or capture. But when he got in at tenfifteen nothing had been heard from the chase. There was no message from French.

Mr. Izenga got into bed with one of his pet books, Eden Phill-potts' The Three Brothers, and lost himself in Devonshire. He was feeling quite calmed when the telephone rang.

Harrison said, "Miss Erica is on the way upstairs, sir. I couldn't stop her. She seems to be in some sort of trouble."

Mr. Izenga banged down his telephone, scrambled into a robe, and unlocked his door. Erica dashed in and closed it. For a while she could only pant.

Her white dress was mussed and dirt-streaked. Her hair was hanging over her flushed face. She pushed it back with an impatient hand. Perspiration gleamed on her forehead and chin.

"I-ran-all—the-way," she puffed. "Something awful has happened. I want to tell you fast, before anyone else can get here."

"But, my dear, if someone is after you we should call the police or——"

"No, no!" She caught his hand reaching for the telephone. Her fingers were icy and tense. "It's the police I'm running from."

That stopped him.

"It was like this. Lucianna called me and said she'd decided to find what I wanted and give it to me since I was so decent about letting her have the furniture. And she said of course she'd take a little reward. We could talk that over when I got there. She asked me to come to her apartment at nine. She said she had to go out and if she was a little late to just go in and wait for her. The door would be unlocked."

"Oh, Erica, how could you trust that woman?"

"But she meant it. I know she did. Wait till I'm through. And here's something I've just remembered. Just as she finished saying she'd see me later I heard her exclaim, 'Well, who let you in?' and some man started to answer, 'I just——' and that's all I heard. She hung up. Don't ask me who it was. I haven't the faintest idea. You can't tell with just two words."

Mr. Izenga tried not to look the way he felt. He could hear cars and voices outside. "Hurry—hurry."

"So I went there—to Lucianna's—at nine—"

"Oh, my dear child, why, why didn't you take me with you?"

"I did call, but you were at Winnie's dinner."

"But I'd gladly have gone if you needed me. But go on."

"I knocked on her door. Nobody answered. So I tried the knob.

The door wasn't locked. I put my head in and called her name. No answer again. I thought it would be better to wait in the hall. I didn't trust her not to pull something funny. So I hung around for quite a while. Several people passed me going to other apartments, and one man stared rather oddly. So I thought it might be better to wait inside her place."

Mr. Izenga sighed. He took her icy hand and rubbed it gently as she talked. Her words came in jerky phrases.

"I sat down in the living room. It was about nine-thirty then, I guess. The phone rang, but I didn't feel it was my business to answer it. It rang and rang and rang. About five minutes after it stopped I heard a lot of heavy footsteps out in the hall, and the sheriff and two men walked in. He said someone in this apartment house had telephoned him that someone was acting suspicious in the hall around Miss Duprez's apartment. I told him it was just me and I was waiting for her. Of course he said at once that it was all right. Joe's known me since I was born, and Gran was always angelic to the MacDonalds. Joe was going away, but he'd brought that horrid deputy of his along—Gruber. Well, he opened Lucianna's bedroom door and stuck his head in. Then he beckoned to Joe, and they both went in and shut the door. I heard them exclaiming, so I thought I'd better have a look too."

Erica was talking in a high, unnatural squeak now. She was trembling all over. Mr. Izenga put his arm around her and patted in time to the tremors. He was a little shaky himself.

"Oh, it was a mess—her bedroom. Drawers dumped on the floor, everything from the closet thrown out. A riot. But that was nothing, darling." She shuddered and closed her eyes. "I can see it now—her bathroom. The door was open and those two men were in it. And she was there. I could see her face. I can see it now. I'll never get it out of my mind. It was all blue—and, oh, vile—vile! She'd been strangled too." Erica caught her breath chokingly.

"Don't-don't." Mr. Izenga held her close. "Don't let go, darling."

"I ran—I ran like crazy—out of the place and down the stairs and out into the street. Then I got back enough sense to realize I

mustn't attract attention. So I dodged between houses and through back yards till I got here." She twisted out of his arms and pushed her face down on the bed. Great convulsive motions shook her, but very little sound came out.

Mr. Izenga could hear someone downstairs, could hear voices arguing. Harrison, low but determined. Another man, high, tenorish, and frantic. Then a scuffle of footsteps on the stairs. In a moment Huntley burst into the bedroom with Harrison at his heels.

3

"I couldn't stop him, Mr. Izenga," Harrison puffed. He glared angrily at the intruder.

"Erica!" Huntley shrieked. He sprang across the room, gripped her shoulder, and jerked her up on the bed. "Quick! They're on their way here. Come on. We can go down the back way. My car is waiting."

"What are you talking about?" Mr. Izenga demanded. "Quit dancing around. Huntley, do you hear me?"

"Leave me alone. Haven't time to argue. Come on, Erica." He tugged at her arm.

Erica sat up, wide-eyed. Her tears were fast drying up. She twisted herself out of his frantic hands.

"For heaven's sake, stop dithering, Huntley, and get out." She waved her hands in exasperation. "Leave me alone."

"But I tell you the police will be here in a few minutes, the whole pack of them. They've been hunting you. The sheriff called me. He thought I'd know where you were." Huntley was bitter. "And he has called the state police. He claimed he didn't think you had killed her, but——"

"But you do, humph?" Erica suddenly laughed without being amused.

She went to the dresser and combed her hair with Mr. Izenga's precious silver-mounted tortoise-shell comb that had to lie six inches from the edge of the mirror and seven inches from the jewelry box. Then she brushed her hair with his two military brushes

till it lay in smooth, shining waves. She flung down the implements, dug in her pocket, found a compact, and made up her face.

Harrison gaped at Mr. Izenga, but he was taking the sacrilege almost calmly. No one else in the universe could have got away with that.

"No." Huntley talked through her hairdressing. "I don't believe you're guilty. But they may put you in jail for a night or two till they prove it to their own satisfaction. Have you ever seen our jail?" He was shouting now. "It's horrible."

Mr. Izenga snarled, "Do you think for one instant that I would let Erica spend five minutes in jail while I've a breath left in my body?"

4

"You said it, Mr. Izenga." Toby Newcomb walked into the room. "I hope this isn't supposed to be private. I heard Price yelling clear down the drive. French has got a couple of troopers in front and back."

"See! If you'd come when I told you to we could be out of this," Huntley growled at Erica. "But you're so cursed stubborn. You'll be sorry when you finish up the night in that stinking hole of a jail."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Price," Toby Newcomb drawled. "I made a deal with French. They're going to hold her in Westerly, in her own room, until they find out the straight of this. I promised she'd co-operate when I found her."

"Why, you dirty traitor!" Huntley took a step forward.

"You didn't think that harebrained scheme of yours was going to help her, did you?" Newcomb hooted. "She would be branded as guilty if she ran off and hid. And darned right too."

"You don't care what she suffers," Huntley said.

"Oh, don't I?" Newcomb's eyes met Erica's in the mirror for a moment. Then she went on reddening her lips.

From the doorway Ridge Dawson said, "This looks like a meeting of the Underground, complete with Gestapo downstairs and a hue and cry going on. What's up? I was called to know if Erica

was hiding in my apartment. Hiding, I thought? Why should my niece's visit, if any, be called hiding? I said I would see and hung up. So I started to hunt for her. What goes on?"

"Do you mean to say it's not all over town by this time?" Mr. Izenga was scornfully incredulous.

"Well, there are rumors that something had happened to Lucianna, but it sounded too good to be true." Ridge looked expectantly from one face to another.

"It's not funny, Uncle Ridge," Erica said over her shoulder. She was still busy at the mirror.

"God, no!" Huntley shuddered. "They're accusing Erica-"

"I'll handle this." Mr. Izenga cut him short. He began the repetition of what Erica had told him earlier. His tense indignation finally wore through Ridge's selfish unconcern.

Ridge let himself down in a chair, looking old and frightened. He put in angry questions, just as Mr. Izenga had done. How could she have been so simple as to make a deal of any kind with that woman? Why had she gone to that apartment alone, without one of the family? And surely she could at least make a guess at the identity of the man to whom Lucianna had spoken.

"I tell you I can't," Erica repeated hotly. "Good heavens, I'm not such a dolt that I don't see the value of identifying him. But I can't do it. Just two words. Please stop pestering me about it."

"But did he sound familiar?"

"Look, Uncle Ridge, I—do—not—know! Please stop it. If you asked me the rest of your life I couldn't say any more than that."

"But the police will want to know," he persisted. His legal zeal hated to give up a vital point.

"Don't I know it? And all they'll get is no, too, a thousand times." "Leave her alone," Mr. Izenga commanded.

Ridge sat glowering at the carpet, looking all of his seventy-odd years. "Don't tell me the police are damn fools enough to think a lovely girl like Erica guilty! Nobody could think her capable of that."

Well, he was right, there, Mr. Izenga agreed. Erica had finished her impromptu toilet. She leaned against the dresser now, facing them. Her white dress was smoothed. Her hair lay in shining, ordered waves, swept back from her wide forehead. A miracle of composure looked out of her hazel eyes. Her mouth was serene.

Then her expression sharpened, as if to meet a challenge. She lifted her chin higher, gazed toward the door. Mr. Izenga followed the dotted line.

There stood Lieutenant French in a tan linen suit very much the shade of his smooth hair. He had an off-duty air, as if he'd been called back to the job from a private moment of his own.

He said, "I suggest this meeting adjourn to the library downstairs. Mr. Izenga might like to get some clothes on."

"Yes, I should and, Lieutenant, wait just a minute. I have something to say to you."

Mr. Izenga watched the others being herded out by two troopers. As soon as the door was shut he said, "There's a little matter that has—uh—slipped my mind. I intended to mention it to you before. It's possible Miss Duprez may have had Mrs. Pomeroy's diamondand-sapphire necklace. Very valuable."

Bill French sat on the edge of the desk and swung his right leg. His smile was a little annoying.

"Do you mean the real one or the imitation, Mr. Izenga?"

"Oh—uh—well—both." Mr. Izenga tried to hide his amazed alarm. How had French discovered that?

"We're covering that." French stood up. "The safe was open and cleaned out, but I'm having my men search every inch of the place. Anything else?"

"No." Mr. Izenga retreated into his dignity. But it was distinctly French's inning.

5

Erica had finished telling her story by the time Mr. Izenga arrived in the library in a beige silk slack suit and sandals. A tray of bottles and used glasses suggested that Harrison had done the honors properly.

The telephone rang as Mr. Izenga shut the door, and French calmly answered it.

"Where'd you find it?" he asked. "I see. . . . Wait a sec." He turned from the mouthpiece. "Can anyone here positively identify Mrs. Pomeroy's diamond-and-sapphire necklace?"

"Yes," said Erica.

"I can," Mr. Izenga added.

"Okay. Bring it over here, to Mr. Izenga's house," French said into the telephone and hung up. "So that's your story, Miss Pomeroy?"

"Yes. I hope you don't think I'd just sit there till somebody came to find her—if I'd done it."

"You might have been waiting for someone else. You might have thought nobody would discover it for hours. You couldn't know some busybody in the apartment house would call the sheriff," the lieutenant said crisply. "Just stick to the facts, please."

Erica reddened, set her lips tightly.

French was turning to Ridge Dawson. "Might as well make a collection of alibis while it's fresh in your minds. Mr. Dawson, let's have your evening."

"Certainly," said Ridge with hauteur. "Feeling there might be a murder tonight, I provided myself with an excellent alibi for once. I had dinner with Huntley at the Tea Shoppe, as a score of worthy citizens will assure you. I reserved a table for six o'clock. The place is so damned popular you have to take second choices as early as six-thirty."

"That's right," Huntley Price said earnestly. "I wanted to ask Uncle Ridge's advice about some things, so he said we'd have dinner together."

French said, "When did you leave the restaurant?"

"Oh, about seven—seven-fifteen." Ridge was airy. "We talked all the way to my apartment, and Huntley came up. We went on talking—or rather he did—for a long time."

Huntley grinned rather sheepishly. "Maybe it just seemed like a long time. But I can tell you, Lieutenant French, that neither of us left the place until I went—at a quarter to ten."

French regarded them both in a pensive, interested way. Presently he asked, "Did you get your advice, Mr. Price?"

Huntley started, reddened, and glanced toward Erica. "Oh—why—yes."

French made a notation in his small notebook. Mr. Izenga thought they were all amazingly casual about the whole thing. And he was annoyed that Huntley had gone to Ridge for his second-class advice instead of waiting his turn at the fount of Izenga wisdom.

Toby Newcomb was next. He'd been with a friend, he said. French nodded. He seemed to know all about it. Perhaps Toby was being tailed. Erica did not seem disturbed. Such trust was dangerous, Mr. Izenga felt.

There was a flurry at the outer door and in the hall.

A crowd of people seemed to explode like a human bomb through the doorway. Two troopers were pushing Hester and Harry Duke before them into the lieutenant's presence.

Mrs. Duke cried hysterically, "Will you order this insolent brute to take his hands off me? I told him what happened, once. Why should I be forced to repeat it?"

At a slight nod from French the stalwart trooper released her. Mrs. Duke smoothed her pale green silk dress with shaking hands and adjusted her shoulder straps.

"What's all this, Preston?" French asked.

"This lady was seen going into the Duprez woman's apartment at eight forty-three," repeated the trooper stoutly. "Nobody saw her come out."

"It's a wicked lie," said Hester Duke. Her eyes were black with pupils. She looked more than ever like an elegant cornered fox. "I couldn't have been seen. I wasn't there."

"The lady who saw her lives across the hall from Miss Duprez. She was hurrying up to her flat from the drugstore so she wouldn't miss a radio program that starts at eight forty-five. She saw Mrs. Duke slipping into Miss Duprez's place just before the program came on."

Hester's lips were a mauve line in her sallow gray face. She got no comfort from her husband. Harry Duke looked even more terrified. The muscles in his chin kept quivering. He would not meet anyone's eyes. "Where were you at eight forty-three, Mrs. Duke?" French asked very politely. Mr. Izenga shivered. He hated French's being like that. It always meant trouble.

He was obliged to repeat the question before she seemed to hear him. At last she wet her lips and said, "I was taking a walk."

Nobody believed her. She hardly seemed to believe herself. When he asked where, she said up and down the road in front of the Duke house. She said she wanted to think. Everyone looked away. It was painful to watch her twisting the scarf of her green dress into a stiff rope.

"And where were you, Duke?" French pounced on him.

"I—I was in my car. I'd gone for some—some Chesterfields; we were all out."

"Check on that, Preston." French nodded toward the telephone. Harry Duke put out a hand.

"Uh—don't bother. I didn't get them. I forgot. I was thinking of something else. And it was just as well. When I got home I found we had some, after all."

The words were futile enough without the hesitating, impromptu manner and unsteady voice. French leaned back in his chair, looking from one to the other of his perspiring victims, saying nothing in a most sardonic way.

Just as the silence was getting ready to explode a trooper came in from the hall. He drew from his pocket a string of flame-and-blue fire.

"There's the necklace, sir. It was behind the sofa, under a rug."

"Anyone recognize this?" French asked. He picked it up and studied it.

"That," said Erica, "is not Grandmother's. In hers the sapphires form little blue forget-me-nots."

French tossed the thing to Mr. Izenga.

"Would you give me twenty-five dollars for it?"

Mr. Izenga needed only one quick look. "I would say fifteen would be ample."

Chapter Sixteen

FRENCH let the gaudy jewels trickle through his fingers.

"This must be the imitation. Jim, ask Lieberwitz if this is the one he made for Duprez."

French tossed the necklace to a trooper, who dropped it into his pocket and went out. They seemed to know a great deal about it, Mr. Izenga thought, dismayed. He wondered what else they'd found out.

Mrs. Duke lit a cigarette and blew out a scornful wand of smoke. "Who says she ever had the real one?"

"I do!" French finished that.

The door opened and a very pleasant-looking white-haired woman walked in. She wore a tan coat over a flowered cotton dress. Her face was far from beautiful, but honesty and character made it attractive.

French said, "Mrs. Vinson lives across the hall from Miss Duprez. Mrs. Vinson, you saw some woman going into Miss Duprez's apartment this evening?"

"Yes, Lieutenant. It was that lady there. Mrs. Duke. She was wearing that same dress. I saw her very plainly. We belong to the same church and have been introduced a couple of times, but I don't think she remembers me."

The words were mildly spoken, but it was obvious that this was one of the times wishful thinking had come true.

Hester said nothing. She fixed her eyes, hard and baleful, on the woman's face. Kept her lips painfully tight.

"I'm sorry to have to tell this," Mrs. Vinson went on primly, "but it's the truth, and I'm sure Mrs. Duke had nothing to do with that dreadful crime."

"And are you sure of the time too?"

Oh my, yes. It was her favorite radio program at eight forty-

five, otherwise she'd have lingered in the hall a little. Just to make sure everything was all right. Why shouldn't it be all right? Well, Mrs. Duke seemed to act a little odd. Like she didn't want to be seen.

Hester Duke's eyes never left the woman's mouth. Even when the door closed behind Mrs. Vinson, Hester did not speak.

"I'll want to talk to Mrs. Duke in a few minutes," French said. "But first there's the matter of that necklace. It's likely that was what was being hunted in Miss Duprez's apartment. The place had been ransacked."

"If I were handling this job," Ridge Dawson said curtly, "I'd search everyone here at once. In fact, as Erica's uncle, I insist she be searched, and Hester too. Although it's asinine to suspect either of them of that woman's death. Lucianna was a strong, husky devil. It would have taken a man to throttle her."

French, with his quiet smile, glanced at Erica's healthy body, her golf-hardened muscles, her resolute air. Then he looked at Hester, wiry, whiplike, malevolent.

"We'll search everybody," he said.

Mrs. Duke huddled her shoulders and wrapped her arms about her, as if to make a tight search-proof package.

"And who's going to do it?" she shrilled. "Or are we to do a Gypsy Rose Lee? Mr. Izenga, are you going to let us be persecuted this way? It's indecent."

"If you and Miss Pomeroy will step over there," French began in a matter-of-fact voice. Everyone shifted about in the small room. Suddenly the lights went out. There was a scuffle and shuffling of feet. Furniture knocked about.

"Green! Preston! Turn that switch on!" French shouted. "Open the hall door." A strip of light poured in, then the room lights went on again. French was very pink. His dark blue eyes burned. He did not waste time asking who had thrown the switch. He looked at his two troopers as if ordering them to freeze their memories at this point and report to him later. One of the men moved in front of the wall switch.

"We'll get on with the search," French said.

He walked around Ridge Dawson and began to slap his coat pockets. Ridge gazed off toward the ceiling, as if his soul were disassociating itself from this humiliation. He wore a martyred expression. Mr. Izenga, watching sourly, thought how much Ridge was enjoying all this. He should have been an actor, with his sense of theater.

French moved toward Harry Duke, who was almost green. His lower lip sagged. He looked as if he were dying on his feet. But at the very moment French reached out a hand to touch him Toby Newcomb spoke.

"Wait. I can save you a lot of time, Lieutenant."

Toby's right hand was in the pocket of his coat. His eyes were fixed on Huntley Price's face. Huntley stood beside him, chin up, ready to take his turn in this mortifying farce.

"Here you are." Newcomb pulled out of his pocket a string of blinding blue-and-gold-and-orange dazzle. It was a necklace, mostly diamonds, but with small blue flowers every inch of its length composed of clusters of sapphires. It was very beautiful. Almost alive in its glory.

French gazed into Toby's narrowed eyes. Only little points of light showed between the lids.

"Someone planted this on me. Just after the lights went out." Toby spoke composedly. "I think it was Price."

Huntley drew in air audibly. "My God—what nerve you've got, Newcomb. Caught red-handed and you try to brazen it out. No, thanks. I never saw that necklace before, except once on Aunt Letty."

French took the necklace, still dripping fire, from Toby New-comb's steady brown hand. His eyes went slowly from face to face. Ridge Dawson, aloof, handsome, faintly contemptuous. Huntley Price in his outraged innocence, vibrant with denial. Harry Duke, not quite so far gone now that the necklace was found, but still in terror. Hester Duke, disdainful, relieved to the point of being able to smile nastily. And Erica Pomeroy, on her feet, dividing her frightened attention between Toby and French.

French dropped the jewels into his own pocket. He had lost this round, but the fight wasn't over yet.

"I'll talk to Mrs. Duke now. Nobody is to leave the house."

The troopers shouldered out everyone but Mr. Izenga.

French closed the door. "Sit here, please, Mrs. Duke. And, Mr. Izenga, if you stay it is on the condition that this is entirely confidential. Now, Mrs. Duke, I'm going to hear the truth from you. I've been a lot too lenient with all you people and I'm tired of being lied to. Why did you go to Miss Duprez's apartment?"

Hester seemed to burst with resentment. "Why should you be-

lieve that Vinson woman instead of me?"

"Mrs. Duke, I'll give you five minutes to talk." French bent over her, his face twelve inches from hers. "Five minutes. And then I'll put you in the county jail, and Mr. Izenga himself won't be able to get you out. Have you ever seen that jail?"

She swallowed. Her long, sinewy neck stretched in anguish. "But—but I can't—You won't believe me." She threw a terrified appeal for help toward Mr. Izenga. He dropped his eyes.

"Four minutes now."

She writhed for another minute, then cried, "I—I just wanted to—to see her—to talk to her—about something. I can't tell you what. It has nothing to do with her—death. I found the door of her place not quite shut."

"At eight forty-three?"

"I suppose so. About then. Oh, how that woman hates me. The horrid, prim, self-righteous thing! She tried to push into our crowd."

"You went into Miss Duprez's flat," he prodded her.

"Y-yes. Oh, I know I shouldn't be saying this. I went in and no-body was there. The living room was empty. I—I thought she might be in the bedroom."

"Alone?" French asked very quietly.

Mrs. Duke's face turned a swift and violent crimson. "I—I just thought she might be in there," she repeated unsteadily. "So I opened the door. She wasn't there. The place was all upset. Everything dumped out on the floor. I remember especially a cut-glass perfume bottle bound in gold. It was lying on the floor,

broken. It had been my mother's. She stole it. Almost everything in her place was stolen. I remember I looked at that a long time. I was glad it was broken. Then I saw her bathroom door was open. I thought I could see a hand sticking out." She was talking in a high, hysterical voice now, the words tumbling over themselves in their relief to get out into the fresh air.

"I peeked around the door. She—she was there—lying half in the tub. She was dead. You've got to believe she was dead. For a moment I was glad. I was so glad all the blood rushed up to my head, as if it would blow up, then I began to get dizzy. I couldn't' faint there. I ran through the place and out. I found the elevator empty on the third floor and took it to the bottom. Just as I came out of the door I heard someone walking along the street. I hid in the shrubbery and saw Erica go in."

Mr. Izenga lunged forward in his chair. "You saw Erica go in and didn't try to stop her? You knew what was waiting up there—and knew she might get into trouble!"

Hester turned on him with a defiant shriek. "How did I know where she was going? Lots of people live in that building. She's always running in to see Miss Frobisher. Besides, I was nearly dead. I thought every minute I would faint. I wanted to take a taxi but was afraid to. I had to walk home. Just as I got there Harry drove in."

"And where had he been?" French's voice was a whip. "Don't pull that cigarette business again."

"I don't know—I don't know." Hester snatched a handkerchief from her bosom and began to weep. In the midst of it she leaned back in her chair and shut her eyes. Her body slipped down.

French carried her to the couch at the side of the room. He put her feet on the arm and laid her head flat. Mr. Izenga was hardly conscious of this movement. He was thinking, Hester's cleared Erica. Lucianna was dead before Erica got there. But does French believe that? French was saying very curtly:

"Mr. Izenga, will you please ask Harry Duke to step in here alone?"

Mr. Izenga thought, Why make an issue of staying in the room?

It wasn't likely Harry would have anything interesting to say. He wanted to congratulate Erica. He moved toward the door.

"And, Mr. Izenga, please don't forget, this was confidential." Mr. Izenga jumped. Confound the man. That had slipped his mind. "Of course," he replied, and went out.

2

Harry Duke survived his ordeal surprisingly well. He came out of the library half carrying his wife. A trooper supported her on the other side. Together they got her into a car.

A telephone call came through just as the Dukes drove away. A trooper answered it, and French came to Mr. Izenga.

"This is John Carlton on the wire, Mr. Izenga. I've been trying to get hold of him for hours. Will you speak to him as if you had put in the call and wanted to know if Pomeroy is there or expected?"

Mr. Izenga nodded.

Mr. Carlton knew nothing of any expected visit of Bennet Pomeroy and did not appear overjoyed at the possibility. He agreed to have Bennet call the moment he appeared. Mr. Carlton apparently had heard none of the radio calls for Bennet.

"Thanks. Good work," French approved.

Mr. Izenga gave a melancholy nod. It didn't seem quite right for him to be doing this sort of thing.

"At least Bennet cannot be blamed for Lucianna's death," he remarked.

"Why not?"

"Why, he's miles and miles away. He left at five this morning and—"

"We don't know that," French said quietly. "He said he was leaving town, but nobody saw him do it. He could easily have remained for the very purpose of finishing off Miss Duprez. You yourself told me how much he hated her, and with good grounds."

Mr. Izenga shivered. He stared miserably at the floor. He had intended to see Bennet and talk to him. He had had revolutionary news that would have changed Bennet's whole life.

"There's something on your mind, Mr. Izenga," French said gravely.

"Yes, but—I'm afraid it comes too late to do any good—if—if Bennet is involved. But I can't think he is."

"Suppose you let me judge that."

"Well, I found out only a few days ago that all this time—all these years—Lucianna has been drawing a duplicate income from another family in this county—for the same cause as she accused Bennet. She went away, you see, and claimed there was a child. I investigated, and it seemed to be true. She put it in a home somewhere. And we paid—and this other family paid—and we all kept quiet. Dear, dear, what a devil she was! And there was no child at all. She bought that poor infant from its parents. Judge Brooks has never given up investigating the facts. Of course I knew he was handling something for these other people. But I didn't know it concerned Lucianna."

"Did Miss Duprez know, before her death, that she was found out?"

Mr. Izenga's smile was grim. "Thank heaven I had that satisfaction. But you see, this enlarges the field of possible suspects."

"Did Bennet know all this, Mr. Izenga?"

"No. At least not from me." Mr. Izenga groaned. "I'm afraid I was very remiss there. If I'd only told him . . ."

"I wouldn't fret about that," French said. "There's a big field, as you say, and they can't all be guilty. I'm convinced these murders are the work of one man. So it wouldn't have made any difference if you had lowered the score by one."

"Lieutenant"—Mr. Izenga eyed him keenly—"do you think Bennet Pomeroy is capable of committing all these crimes?"

Bill French smiled engagingly.

"Mr. Izenga, since I've been working here with you I've acquired a very healthy respect for your proficiency. I think I know who is guilty. And I think you do too. And I'm one hundred and ten per cent sure it is the same person."

Mr. Izenga's eyes gleamed. He found the lieutenant a man after his own pattern.

"I can't think why Bennet's car hasn't been found." He changed the subject a bit. "That fantastic blue. So conspicuous. And even if the poor fellow is a victim himself, at least his car should be in existence."

"We'll get him," French said crisply.

Mr. Izenga watched him stride so confidently out of the room. He himself was good, but French was more than that. His air of authority had passed far beyond the stage of being temporarily assumed on occasion. It was as much a part of his every act as his breathing.

Chapter Seventeen

LIEUTENANT FRENCH followed the maid through the jungle of Miss Frobisher's living room. There was even more furniture in it now than when he'd been here before. He angled around a table and dodged the cocker puppy bounding at his feet.

"She loves everybody." Miss Frobisher beamed. She looked remarkably like Man o' War when she smiled. "But perhaps you'd better take her out, Lizzie."

With a puppy biscuit the grim-faced maid enticed the little dog into another room and shut the door.

"I've so many things to tell you, Lieutenant. Sit down. No, not there. It's a mite unsteady. One of Letty's antiques. Erica said I could have anything I wanted. Such a darling girl. And I keep thinking of things I'd like."

He didn't see how she could take any more unless she built a mezzanine. But he took a sound chair and glanced at his watch.

"You're in a hurry, aren't you? Well, I'll be as quick as I can. You know the last time you were here you suggested I keep my eyes and ears open. So last night when things started happening I knew you'd want to know every little thing. I've always wanted to be a witness in a murder trial. Life is so tiresome, and I can't bear to be

in a rut. Besides, Lucianna is no loss to anyone, if you know what I mean."

He said he did, and sighed, giving his watch another look.

"Good! Now let me see. Last night. Of course I read every scrap of news in the paper about it and I called Cornelius Izenga on the phone. But he's so afraid he'll let someone else in on something. Silly! Anyway, Erica tells me that Lucianna was talking to her on the phone at eight o'clock. And it was just three minutes after eight that I heard footsteps walk into her living room above. They came from the rear. Heavy steps. It was a man. He came up the fire escape in back. We have the back stairs and the fire escape, you see."

"But how do you know he came that way? Surely you can't hear people in front and back at the same time, Miss Frobisher."

"Mercy, no, though I am blessed with very good hearing. There's mighty little I miss, I can assure you. But no. Lizzie heard him. My maid, you know. I gave her the bedroom near the two back stairs, and she reports to me when she hears anything. I mean we sort of put things together and get a line on what's going on. It keeps things from getting too dull." She beamed confidingly.

"So your maid heard the man come up the fire escape. Did she see him, by any wonderful chance?"

"No. I'm sorry, but there's a sort of chute in the way. Nuisance! Besides, it was pitch-dark."

"Too bad. Are you sure it was a man?"

"Oh dear, yes. Much too heavy for a woman, and plunked down the way a man walks. Lord of creation and all that." Miss Frobisher tossed her head. "And right after he came I heard a scuffle. It lasted quite a while. I thought nothing of it. She's quite kittenish at times. Then I heard the footsteps go into her bedroom. The man's. But here's the point—I didn't hear her feet. I didn't ever hear her footsteps after that. She had a shuffling, gliding step that nearly drove me mad. I could recognize it always."

The lieutenant made a few notes. Miss Frobisher waited, eager, important. When he looked up she said:

"Where was I? Oh yes. Then he went into the bathroom. I heard

water from the lavatory come rushing down the pipe between the walls. This place is just like a sieve. You can hear everything." She rolled her eyes significantly and paused.

"And then?"

"He went. Lizzie heard him tiptoe down the fire escape."

French said, "It certainly is too bad your maid didn't look out of the window and see who it was. Couldn't she see the man after he left the fire escape below? It might have been a burglar."

Miss Frobisher cried excitedly, "But she did. She peeked out of the kitchen window and saw him down there in back. There was just a little light from the first-floor kitchen window."

"Who was it?" The lieutenant half rose from his chair.

"Oh, she couldn't identify him that far away. But she did see it wasn't a burglar. I mean he wasn't carrying anything, and he seemed to be a gentleman—well dressed, you know. So of course she only told me, and we never thought of calling the police. Mercy! We've heard men come down that fire escape so many times it's an old story. We just thought, Well, there's another of Lucianna's boy friends!"

The lieutenant nodded in gloomy agreement. It was all too annoyingly natural. He signaled her to go on.

"Where was I? Oh. I didn't hear another thing after the first man left for about fifteen minutes. Then another person came up the back stairs—very cautiously, Lizzie says—but fortunately they creak. You know it's so amusing. Lucianna picked this apartment house because it has so many stairways, but there isn't a move she makes that Lizzie and I can't piece together. It's such a joke on her!" Miss Frobisher whinnied with glee. Bill French grinned.

"I bet you think I'm just awful," she squealed. "Never mind, don't answer that. And don't keep looking at your watch. I really will try to stick to my little story. These heavy slow steps—they prowled around upstairs very softly. Then suddenly it didn't seem to matter. There was plenty of noise. Things were dumped on the floor, or fell, and the footsteps were fast. That lasted for about five minutes. Then the person went down the back stairs. That was visitor number two!"

She watched French's pencil race down his notebook and waited till it stopped. Then she hurried on:

"Now let me see what was next. Oh yes. Someone came up the front stairs and walked into Lucianna's apartment. This was a woman. She had high heels, but she walked differently from Lucy. Much faster. Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap. Goodness, I was glad she didn't live over me. She was up there only a few minutes, and then she simply ran out of the place and down the front stairs. Dear me, I wish I'd looked out then. I had a big notion to."

"Then you can't be sure that wasn't Miss Pomeroy?"

"Oh yes, I can. I'm coming to her. She wore low-heeled sport shoes and just made little soft pats like a puppy. Besides, the woman, visitor number three, went all over Lucianna's apartment, rubbering into every room. I heard her. But when Erica came she went into the living room and stayed there like a lady. But wait. Don't mix me up. I got this all straight in my mind, because after we heard Lucianna had been killed I knew this would be important. You see, the reason I was extra-interested in all this racket was because I couldn't hear Lucianna's footsteps at all! What has happened to her? I kept wondering."

"It's a good thing you did wonder, Miss Frobisher. This is very hot stuff you're giving me."

"Oh, you just say that." She preened herself. "But anyway, I got more and more interested, so when I heard the elevator start humming I peeked out. I can see through the wire shaft, you know, from my hall door. Well, who should I behold but Erica Pomeroy going up past my floor! She didn't see me, and of course I said nothing. She got out on the fourth floor but didn't go into Lucianna's for a long time, and after she did, as I say, she didn't go poking about. Cornelius and Letty have brought her up nicely. A real lady, though I suppose she'd kill me if she heard that!"

The lieutenant received this testimonial with his usual poker expression. Miss Frobisher sniffed. Hard-boiled!

"The poor child hadn't been there more than five minutes before there was a big rumpus out in front. I leaned out of the front window, and the sheriff's car was below. Men jumped out, and the sheriff and one of his men pounded upstairs to Lucianna's place. I was all a-dither, I can tell you. I kept peeking out, and so did Lizzie, and finally I saw Erica just fly down the front stairs alone. Thank heaven, I thought, she'll go straight to Cornelius, and he won't let anyone touch her. And he didn't!"

Her triumph was too precious to spoil. The lieutenant's pencil caught up with her and stopped.

"Thanks very much," he said, getting to his feet.

"Oh, that's not all," she cried. "There's something very, very important. I've been saving it."

He sat down, not taking his eyes from her face.

"You see, I was the person least surprised when that woman was killed last night. Because I'm sure I know why. And I know that necklace had nothing to do with it. Just yesterday morning Lucianna called and asked if she could come down to see me. I didn't know what to say. I mean to speak to her, but I don't receive her, you know. But she said it was terribly important, and about poor Letty's death, and I felt it was my duty to hear what she had to say."

She said nothing of her own inordinate curiosity, and the lieutenant kept his thoughts to himself.

"So—Lucianna came down, and she certainly looked awful. She said she was scared sick and she looked it. Pasty-white, and she kept picking at things and wriggling and tapping her foot. She said she knew something about someone in the case, and they were threatening her, and she wanted to confide in me in case something happened to her."

Lieutenant French was now stiff with attention. Miss Frobisher's eyes gleamed and bulged with her own excitement.

"I told her at once to go to the police and tell them instead of me. I said it was her duty. I explained that once she had told she would no longer be in danger. But the moment I mentioned police she began to freeze up. I couldn't tell why. She was a tricky one. I couldn't be sure she wasn't trying to work something on me. But anyway, she refused and she said she wouldn't tell me what it was unless I promised not to tell you. Well, I couldn't do that. I'd previously committed myself to you, and I told her so.

"She was very provoked. She sat and tapped and bit her lips and sighed till I wanted to tell her to go. At last she said she would tell me this much. She had bumped into a certain party coming away from Westerly the night Letty was killed—and she knew this person did the crime. She knew it because they were threatening her if she told."

"The reason she knew is that probably she tried to blackmail the person," French said sharply. "Miss Frobisher, do you mean to tell me you didn't find out whom she meant? Couldn't you guess? Wasn't there an inkling?"

"Not a breath!" Miss Frobisher wailed. "Can't you imagine what it would mean to me for a person to tell just that much and then stop? I nearly died. There she sat, just three feet away, knowing what I'd give my right arm to hear. And I couldn't get it out of her. It was maddening. I tried everything to get her to tell, but she wouldn't. She really was terrified. She said by the time the police had got around to proving what she said was true she would have been killed for telling. And maybe she was right."

"But couldn't you have called me, Miss Frobisher, and told me this much as soon as you heard it?"

She sighed. "I've worried a lot about that. Maybe I should have done it. But she begged me so hard not to tell. She said if the guilty person even suspected she'd talked to me she'd be killed—and I'm afraid he did suspect and kill her."

If only there weren't so much discretion and personal judgment exercised in this case! The lieutenant did some sighing of his own. But he thanked her for her quite considerable help and took himself away.

It seemed fairly likely that Lucianna was the woman Hester Duke had seen her husband meet at the north end of Westerly on the night of the crime. That is, of course, assuming that her story to Miss Frobisher was the truth.

But whether it was Harry Duke or someone else whom she accused of killing Mrs. Pomeroy was anybody's guess.

The hunt for Bennet Pomeroy was now in full swing. Wednesday was a muggy gray day. A hot steam blurred the horizon and made the suspense even harder to bear.

The police radios and teletypes blared and clicked with Bennet's description. Many friends and acquaintances had been contacted by wire or telephone. It was strange that as conspicuous a car as his would not be noticed by some gas-station attendant. But hours slid gloomily by and nothing was heard. Would he be found dead too?

Mr. Izenga paced his garden restlessly, and when the mosquitoes tormented him he withdrew to the porch.

He was glad when the telephone rang and Erica begged him to come over to talk to her. She was being kept a prisoner in her own room. French had assured Mr. Izenga it was more for her own safety than anything else. There was a guard in the house continually.

All the water sprinklers were on in the Westerly grounds when Mr. Izenga got out of his car. Gardeners were busily at work in the borders. They greeted him like royalty, and he felt a twinge of guilt. He would have to remember to take care of all of them. No doubt it would take a long time to convert Westerly into a hospital, and meantime he must farm out these men on his friends. Well, he could do it.

Pliny met him at the door.

"Bad news, Mr. Izenga. All de time nuthin' but bad news round dis fam'ly. Look like somebody put a hoodoo on po' Miss Letty's folks."

"Dear me, what's the matter now?"

Mr. Izenga could hear heavy footsteps and much activity overhead and the sound of men's voices.

"A bunch of dem troopers come heah dis mawnin' and dey been searchin' Mr. Bennet's rooms and I speck dey found some'n dey shouldn't. Ain't no use talkin'. Mr. Bennet didn't kill his mama and I know it. Don't care what dey find."

Someone ran downstairs. Mr. Izenga looked up anxiously.

"Oh, hello, Ridge, you here?"

Ridge Dawson, serious, worried, important, came very close. "My God, Cornelius, what do you think has happened now? Those blasted troopers have found that Newcomb's own ring in Bennet's room. At least Newcomb and Erica both claim it is his. It was hidden in a pocket of the wainscoting. Can you beat it?"

Mr. Izenga gazed, thunderstruck.

The gray skies outside seemed symbolic of the clouds of guilt gathering from all directions over Bennet's absence. Why had he run away, and why didn't he come forward? There were only two answers that occurred to Mr. Izenga. Either he was guilty—or dead. A rather unhappy choice.

"It looks bad," Mr. Izenga had to admit.

"You can say that again. Either Bennet must be guilty, or he's been framed by an expert. But blast it, I can't see him having the guts to commit those crimes. It just isn't in him."

"I know what you mean, but---"

"Yes. But! Thank God they haven't got him yet. The call is still going out over the police radio. I don't see how such a car as his could be missed. Dammit, I don't like it, Cornelius. I'm afraid something's happened to him."

Mr. Izenga wretchedly agreed.

Ridge clapped him soothingly on the back. "Well, I've got a good criminal lawyer lined up. Friend of mine. He'll move right in if they get Bennet. You go up and talk to poor Erica. She's in the dumps. Hates to be cooped up, and it seems too silly for words to keep her there. But you know French. He knows it all." He whispered the last few words.

Mr. Izenga started upstairs and to his amazement met Huntley coming down. He was dressed in white, which made his ruddy tanned skin and dark flashing eyes all the more spectacular. Mr. Izenga had never seen him look handsomer.

And he seemed so composed, so at ease. You'd have thought that ghastly Sunday had never happened. Mr. Izenga couldn't help gaping. Huntley smiled at him affectionately.

"I've been up to see Erica. Took her some roses and the morning paper. The poor kid's so bored."

Well, well, thought Mr. Izenga. Young people are funny these days. I guess she didn't mean she never wanted to see him again. Huntley laughed softly.

"Don't worry, Mr. Izenga, it's all right. Erica's the grandest girl in the world. She says we'll just forget that little—uh—rumpus the other Sunday. And at least I can have her friendship if I can't have her."

Mr. Izenga muttered something. His disgust was distracting his mind. He was sorry he'd ever bothered with Huntley. The poor weak sap. And yet you had to like him too.

He went on up the stairs. A trooper sat in the hall reading *Time*. From inside Erica's open door came voices.

Mr. Izenga walked in. Lieutenant French was there and Toby Newcomb. Erica sat on a sofa in the bay window, holding a ring in her fingers. A heavy gold ring set with an engraved chrysoprase stone. She held it out toward him.

"This really is Toby's ring, Mr. Izenga."

He stared at it coldly. Well, was it? Only Erica and Newcomb could identify it, and you certainly could not call them disinterested witnesses. There was nothing to prevent Newcomb from buying another ring and hiding it in Bennet's room. When it was found Newcomb would only have to exclaim it was his to have Erica echo it. She was notoriously unobservant and loyal.

Mr. Izenga glanced toward Lieutenant French. It was impossible to tell whether he was accepting this story or not.

The morning paper was lying on the bed. Mr. Izenga morosely inspected a picture of Bennet Pomeroy with the caption: Wanted By State Police. A Pomeroy! That he should live to see this day!

The picture was terrific. Worse than a defense-plant identification photo. It made Bennet aged and dissipated. Mr. Izenga was glad. Anything that put off the catastrophic moment of his capture or discovery was welcome.

Pliny came quietly into the room and sidled up to Mr. Izenga. "You're wanted on de phone, Mr. Izenga. It's long distance and

kinda conferential, I speck. Yo' housemaid got the operator to call you heah. I took de call on my kitchen line 'cause dem troopers is in de library."

3

Mr. Izenga followed Pliny out of the room after catching the lieutenant's eye and transmitting a message without words. He heard footsteps following him down the back stairs.

"Who's the call from, Pliny?"

"Dey wouldn't say, 'cepten it from Annisburg."

Much puzzled, Mr. Izenga took up the waiting telephone bar. After a moment the operator said to go ahead. A strange masculine voice took over.

"You the party interested in the Pomeroy case?"

"I am, yes. Who is speaking?"

"Is there a reward for the whereabouts of this here Bennet Pomeroy?"

Mr. Izenga's breath sucked in. "What? Have you really found him? Dead or alive?" His mind raced furiously about, wondering why the name Annisburg was familiar. He seemed on the verge of discovering a connection.

"I said how much?"

Mr. Izenga looked up. French was standing in the doorway watching him. Mr. Izenga muttered, "Annisburg. Dear me, whom do we know in that town?" French disappeared.

Mr. Izenga turned again to the telephone. "Wait—wait—don't hang up. I'll pay you a hundred dollars."

Annisburg seemed somehow connected with Bennet's early days. College, perhaps.

"A hundred? A measly hundred bucks? And him a dirty murderer for all his dough? Make it a couple of thousand and I'll come over and talk to you." Horrid persuasive voice.

A light went on in Mr. Izenga's brain. The Lowerys, of course! Bennet's friend and roommate in college. Sam Lowery. That must be where Bennet had taken refuge.

"Don't bother," Mr. Izenga told the telephone crisply. "I've

changed my mind." He hung up, then quickly put in a call of his own. French was back in the doorway again, listening.

Mr. Izenga jiggled the receiver impatiently. "Hello, Leora, this call is very important. It's for me personally. Just clear that line. Tell them Mr. Izenga needs it."

French swallowed a smile. But at least Mr. Izenga's methods got results. The connection was made in a flash. "Hello, is this the Lowerys'? . . . This Mrs. Lowery? . . . This is Cornelius Izenga from Lawnsdale. . . . Oh, you have? . . . Well, I've always wanted to meet you too. Perhaps you can guess why I am calling."

The very sweet feminine voice said, "Uh—why—just a minute, please." Then after a pause it whispered, "I wanted to close the door. I may have to hang up any minute."

Mr. Izenga asked swiftly, "Is Bennet Pomeroy there?"

"Oh! How in the world did you—— I mean—he's asked us not to tell, but of course you're not the police, are you?"

"No. But, Mrs. Lowery, you must urge him to report at once to the local authorities. It makes things worse for him the longer he puts it off. Surely he has heard the radio calls."

French spoke from the doorway. "Don't hang up, Mr. Izenga. String it along." And disappeared.

Mrs. Lowery was saying, "Yes, but-"

"And I'm afraid you, too, will get into trouble if you hold him there."

"Hold him!" squealed Mrs. Lowery. "Don't I know it? We don't want him here at all, but what can we do? He came here the very morning he left home. Arrived about seven. It's only eighty-five miles, you know. And Sam welcomed him, of course. We didn't know anything about his being wanted till the afternoon paper came, and then what could we do? We certainly don't want to go back on a friend."

"But he must surrender for his own sake. It must be voluntary." Mr. Izenga was vehement.

"You're telling me, Mr. Izenga! But you can't make Bennet see it. And the worst thing of all, we have a part-time gardener I don't trust for a minute. He'd do anything for money. And you know how

conspicuous Bennet's car is. I know that man will give him away like a flash the minute a reward is offered."

"I think he has already tried it." Mr. Izenga explained his being called earlier from her town. She agreed it was most probable. "And now, Mrs. Lowery, put Bennet on the telephone and I'll—oh——"

He jumped and pulled the receiver from his ear. A deafening shriek had come over the wire. There were loud noises at the other end. He caught only two words repeated several times: "The police!" The receiver banged down.

Mr. Izenga hung up. He was a trifle appalled at what he'd done. This was what one got, meddling with crime. Bill French came into the pantry. His smile was eloquent.

"Nice going, Mr. Izenga. I contacted a squad car in the Annisburg vicinity by radio and sent it to the Lowerys' while you were talking to them."

Mr. Izenga made a grimace. "I don't feel quite right about it somehow. I'm not used to this sort of thing."

"Cheer up. I fixed it so she wouldn't know you were concerned. And after all, people can't harbor criminals."

"But they didn't want to harbor him. He wouldn't go. And the laws of hospitality——"

"Are repealed when there's a murder." French finished the sentence for him.

Chapter Eighteen

R. IZENGA WAS GLAD to find Erica alone when he went upstairs. A trooper sat in the hall. He let Mr. Izenga go in. Erica's smile was forced, but she put out her hand and pulled him over to a chair beside her. He quickly whispered the news about Bennet, lest someone else come in and spoil his chance.

Erica sighed and gave him an odd look from under her thick

stubby lashes. "Do you think Uncle Bennet killed Grandmother?" "It looks bad for him, but I can't believe it." He watched her intently. There was something on her mind. "Why? Do you?"

She looked out of the window, her fingers playing with the cord of the Venetian blind. Slowly she shook her head. Slowly but inexorably. Even bitterness and fear couldn't destroy her charm.

Mr. Izenga shuddered. "Erica, do you know who did it?"

"How could I?" She could never bear to lie.

He caught her arm with panicky fingers. "Tell me—tell me at once. You know, don't you?"

"No—I don't know." To know, one had to be able to prove things. And she couldn't offer the horror in her heart or the shrinking from a certain touch as anything more than imagination.

"But you suspect. You have strong reason to suspect." Mr. Izenga was shaking her in the extremity of his terror. "Erica, does the—person know you know? You must tell me. You're in awful danger as long as you keep it to yourself."

She pulled away from him. "I don't know a thing. I swear I don't. Everyone is free to have suspicions. And I haven't a shred of proof of mine. I—I hope to heaven they are wrong."

Mr. Izenga could have groaned with exasperation. It was always annoying to him not to know the smallest thing. This was mortal torture. Even though he knew the futility of it, he argued with her for several more minutes. He hardened her obduracy with every pleading, commanding word he spoke.

"At least tell me this, is it someone you love?"

She sighed. "Once, yes." And shivered.

Newcomb! Mr. Izenga felt a cold thrill of pleasure go through him. At last she was seeing the light. And yet his triumph did not last. If Toby were out of the picture Huntley would move in. And Mr. Izenga was dismayed to find how little he now wanted Erica to marry Huntley. Even Westerly wasn't worth it, he told his amazed self.

Erica cut into his thoughts.

"I don't want to talk about it any more. I've some things to say that are a lot more important to me. I never get a chance to see people alone nowadays. Did you know that Grandmother lent some of my securities to somebody?"

Mr. Izenga stiffened. "No. And I'm sure she didn't."

"But she did."

"Did she tell you so? Or leave you a message about it, or a notation in your safe-deposit box?"

She looked a little startled. Her hazel eyes were grayer than usual, with tiny gold flecks. "N-no. But it is so. The person who has them told me. You see, they borrowed money on the securities and couldn't pay it back. But the person's legacy will be enough to cover the loan, and I'll get them back all right. So I don't want any fuss made. I want you to know, so you can forestall any such action if you hear of it."

"But, Erica"—Mr. Izenga's whisper was piercing—"this is terrible. The legacy was needed, you see—the police——" He stopped, bogged down in his own horror.

"Yes, I do see," Erica said in her grandmother's imperious voice. "I see that the police would instantly say this person had a motive to kill her. And I know he didn't. He couldn't do such a thing. I won't have the police told. Should I have made you promise?"

"My dear!" Mr. Izenga was wounded deeply. "But I must remind you—look what happened to your grandmother when she refused to let the police know about that first attack on her."

"I know all that," she said irritably. "I can look out for myself. And if you're going into a decline worrying about me, I'll be sorry I told you."

She's worried herself; she's bored and weary, he told himself to soften the hurt of her crossness. He tried hard to conceal the clammy terror creeping up his legs and arms, numbing him.

"If you could only trust me with the person's name," he whispered humbly.

She turned at his unaccustomed tone, and her face softened. She put her hand on his cheek for a moment.

"Don't mind me, darling. Sorry I snapped at you. But I can't tell. I swore by all that was holy. Please don't say any more."

Nobody knew better than he how final that was. But from now

on he would never have a minute's peace till he knew she was safe. He gazed miserably at a huge bouquet of exquisite rosebuds—creamy white, pink, gold, and rose.

Erica drew out a white bud and sniffed it. "Lovely, isn't it? Huntley brought these over this morning. Peace offering."

"Very pretty."

She thrust the rose back in water. "It's too much trouble to quarrel. Poor Huntley."

"Well, if that's the way you want to look at it." Mr. Izenga was curt. The memory of that horrible Sunday was too fresh for him to be tolerant. "How does Newcomb like your being so broadminded?"

"I didn't ask his opinion."

Aha! thought Mr. Izenga eagerly. And what does that tone mean? Discovering rifts in lutes was one of his specialties.

Erica said, "Another thing I want to talk about is my will."

"Yes?" He waited, full of caution.

She smiled rather bitterly. "You needn't bother to pretend you don't know about my leaving everything to Toby. I'm sure you found out somehow. And Mr. Ellinger was so horrified I'm sure he talked in his sleep."

"Well . . ."

"Anyway, I've changed my mind."

He looked quickly down at the floor lest the exultant gleam in his eye antagonize her. So she was seeing through Newcomb at last! And thanks to his own dirty work with the church decorations it was not too late. Mr. Izenga had difficulty not to preen himself.

"I was mad at everyone when I made that hasty will," she began again. "I wanted to show my confidence in Toby. But I see now that that was wrong. I overdid it. I really hurt him instead of helping him."

"Did you arrive at this conclusion yourself, or did someone suggest it to you?"

"It's funny, but Uncle Harry is the one who started me thinking. He told me Aunt Hester was dreadfully hurt at my cutting out all the family. It wasn't that they expected me to die, but it just looked bad, he said."

"But how did he know about the new will?"

"Oh, I told them. How could they know I trusted Toby so much if they didn't know I'd left him the money? I'd hardly be expected to pass out, just to prove my point." Erica's laugh was hard.

"I simply wondered."

"Don't be peeved, darling. I didn't tell you because—well, just because. I think I wasn't sure myself I'd let it stand. But Uncle Harry pointed out I was really harming Toby. He said now they could call Toby a fortune hunter and say he used undue influence on me. And of course he was entirely right. I never knew Uncle Harry had so much common sense. He made me feel ashamed of myself. So I thought I'd change my will again. I thought I'd ask a few people's advice, you first, of course."

Mr. Izenga was mollified but troubled. He felt there were troubled waters under all this oily surface. He didn't trust Harry Duke, or Hester, or hardly anyone.

"Well, my dear, I certainly think it's wise for you not to leave everything to Newcomb. It does look bad. But, on the other hand, I wouldn't leave too much to the family. They have plenty now. . . ."

"That's exactly what Uncle Ridge says. He says I'll outlive them all and this is just a sop, and he understands all about it, and I don't need to pacify him. He really was sweet, the old realist. He said to leave anything I planned to give him to Huntley."

"To Huntley! Are you crazy? After the way he's acted?"

"Oh, my dear, don't you see? It doesn't mean a thing." Erica was bitter and disillusioned. "Don't take it so hard. It's just a gesture. I'll survive everybody and scoop in the family fortunes for my ten children. So what does it matter if poor old Huntley thinks I forgive him for that silly Sunday? Forgive him to the extent of leaving him a few thousands. He'll never get it."

Wouldn't he? Mr. Izenga looked at her in adoring exasperation. If only she would trust him completely. He was bewildered by her attitude toward Huntley, whatever it was. She'd been so positive she

never wanted to see him again. But now, against the background of that great bouquet of rosebuds, she seemed strangely indulgent.

And now Mr. Izenga was not at all sure he wanted her to marry Huntley. It would be too annoying for her to give in, after all, when he, too, had changed his own mind.

Pliny shoved into the room with an immense tray.

"Miss Erica just been peckin' at her food like a lil dickeybird, Mr. Izenga. I fetched up her lunch early, and some fo' you too. Maybe she'd eat better if she had company."

Mr. Izenga was pleased when Erica seconded the invitation and overrode the demurs he felt it his duty to make.

2

Mr. Izenga was about to leave at two o'clock, when cars began to stream in through Westerly's gate. They wound up the drive to the house. Quite a procession. Most of them were gold-striped police cars with spotlights on top. But among them was an elaborate skyblue Packard coupé.

"Well, they got Bennet." Mr. Izenga sighed.

Erica joined him at the window. Bennet slid out of his car. Even from a distance his face was sullen and obstinate. He looked old and as if he hadn't slept well for a long time. Even in the best of moods he was not obliging, for all his lazy charm.

Mr. Izenga did not envy French the job of questioning Bennet. And he hoped to heaven Bennet knew the answers.

They all passed into the house below. There was a heavy tramping in the front hall, then a door closed. They had taken Bennet into the library, no doubt.

"Well, I must be running along," Mr. Izenga said. He gave Erica a last coaxing look, and she replied with a smile as loving as it was obdurate.

He went into the hall and slowly down the stairs. As he reached the last step the library door opened and French's head stuck out. "Has Mr. Izenga gone? Oh, there you are. Come on in."

The library was laced with long strands of blue smoke. Bennet

and Ridge were both smoking. Bennet was in his shirt sleeves and a sulphurous humor. How did Ridge get there? Mr. Izenga wondered.

French looked up from the chair in which he sat facing Bennet Pomeroy. On the table in front of him were sheets of paper and a pencil. French motioned to a chair beside him.

"Mr. Izenga, I understand you have influence with this family. To save time, will you try to persuade Mr. Bennet Pomeroy to talk to us, and his uncle to lay off advising him to keep still?"

"I'm acting as Bennet's attorney at the present," Ridge informed Mr. Izenga loftily. "I don't think he should answer questions just now. He's exhausted."

Mr. Izenga scrutinized the captive judiciously. Bennet certainly had a sulky hangdog air about him that wasn't doing his case any good. But he looked fully able to answer a few questions.

A weariness of soul came over Mr. Izenga. He was becoming so sick of this suspense and trouble he hardly cared—with one exception—who was guilty. And if it were Bennet, why not get it over with? After all, a murderer is not a person one wants to shield, even if he is a Pomeroy.

"What is it you want to know, Lieutenant?" Mr. Izenga asked.

"First-if he bought any chloral hydrate at any time."

"No, I did not!" Bennet shouted angrily. "I can't see what harm it would do to answer that one. Why should I buy it and give it to myself? I should think I'd be the one person who wasn't suspected of buying it."

Mr. Izenga was irritated. It was stupid of Bennet to talk like that. French got it. So did Ridge Dawson. He looked very cool and aloof in a spotless natural linen suit. He smiled with lazy sarcasm.

"See what I mean, Izenga? Even at the best of times my nephew isn't overly bright. Now he's a pushover."

"But he's got to answer questions sometime," Mr. Izenga said.

"Sometime, sure. Tomorrow. Let him have a night's rest."

Let him have twenty-four hours for you to cram him with the right answers, you mean, Mr. Izenga thought, and probably French did too. But French only said coolly: "He can have plenty of rest now if he'll promise to take a liedetector test tomorrow."

"Not interested," Bennet said curtly.

"But, good heavens, Bennet," Mr. Izenga said, "it's the same as admitting you're guilty not to take one."

"Who says so?" Ridge cut in. "It's not admitted as evidence in any court. Understand, I don't say he shouldn't take it—he's perfectly innocent and it will prove it—but it's not evidence."

"You can save your breath, all of you. I won't have one." Bennet's drawn face turned darker red. "I won't have one, I tell you. I'm all shot as it is. I'm not going to have a nervous breakdown just to let the police experiment with me. I'm no guinea pig."

The lieutenant went on arguing, amazingly patient, yet unrelenting. The cumulative force of it was terrific, Mr. Izenga observed. Like the drop of water forever repeated.

The only result was to drive Bennet to the brink of unreason. The lieutenant let up on him after a while. He gazed at Bennet with cool, appraising, dark blue eyes. Nobody spoke.

Then there was a noise out in the hall. A trooper put his head in. "Steinberg's here, Lieutenant."

"Okay." French nodded. "In a minute." He took from his pocket a wad of paper, unwrapped it, and disclosed a heavy gold ring set with a bloodstone. He laid it on the table beside Bennet.

"Mr. Pomeroy, did you buy that ring?"

Bennet looked at it and cringed away. He was in a bad state. A sort of twitching was going on all over his body. The muscles about his mouth jerked. But Mr. Izenga had known him all his life. He'd always gone to extremes. This did not mean he was guilty. But the police wouldn't know his history. And they were out for the kill.

"No. Of course not. I never saw it before," Bennet said. "What are you trying to do now? Is that Newcomb's?"

"No. It's the ring that was found in your mother's bedroom after her death. The ring that was dropped there to incriminate Newcomb. Newcomb's own ring was stolen from his room later that night."

So Newcomb says, Mr. Izenga thought angrily. There French

went, taking every word Newcomb uttered for gospel! Had he undergone one of those lie-detector tests, or was he just a sacred cow to the state police?

"Got nothing to do with me," Bennet snarled. "I was dead to the world. Somebody doped me. Never saw the damned thing." He gave the ring a flip of the thumb. It spun into French's hand.

"It won't help you to lie, Pomeroy." The lieutenant was stern. "We have someone who swears you bought this ring on the day between the attempt and the killing of your mother."

"I tell you I didn't," Bennet shouted.

Mr. Izenga met Ridge Dawson's alarmed, despairing gaze. What could they do? Was it possible Bennet really was guilty? Mr. Izenga couldn't believe it. When Ridge slid out of his seat and walked to the other end of the room Mr. Izenga followed him.

"Omigawd," Ridge moaned in a whisper. "This is the payoff, Cornelius. They're getting all ready to throw the book at him. And we can't do a blasted thing to stop it."

"Where's that criminal lawyer you were going to have ready?" Mr. Izenga demanded.

"What's the use of trying to get him out here now? But I'll call him anyway. They'll probably lock Bennet up after all this." Ridge went into the den.

Mr. Izenga turned around. A gray-haired, gray-bearded old man in a peculiar black hat and long black coat stood inside the door from the hall. Troopers stood about, hands near guns.

"This is Joseph Steinberg, Mr. Pomeroy. He has a pawnshop in Oak City."

Bennet Pomeroy raised his tormented face. Mr. Izenga could see only his profile, but it was not terrified. Bennet stared at the old man.

"I never saw that man before."

"But I seen you before, Mr. Pomeroy." The voice was low, ingratiating, foreign. "In mine shop at 2256 Washington Street, in Oak City."

Two of the troopers exchanged sober winks.

"Never mind the ad, Mr. Steinberg, get on with it. You remember the day?"

"Certainly. The twenty-fifth of July. That man came into mine shop and looked over all the gents' rings and bought that one. Solid fourteen-carat gold. I gave it to him for twenty dollars. I'm losing money on that ring. He wore a dark blue suit with a fine line, red, and lighter blue in it. My brother's a tailor. High-class. Mannie Steinberg, 2245 Washington Street, upstairs."

"Skip it," nudged the trooper.

"I know good clothes when I see them. Always I notice my customer's clothes. I couldn't be wrong."

A trooper stepped from the back of the group and opened a loosely wrapped parcel. In it was a dark blue suit such as the old man had described. Steinberg nodded eagerly.

"That's the suit. A fine piece of goods. A hundred and fifty uptown and my brother could make it so's you wouldn't know the difference for ninety-five. And tax."

Bennet entered curt, contemptuous denials as often as the old man stopped for breath. The troopers were hiding grins, but French was hard and sober. Bennet Pomeroy's attitude was beginning to rile him.

"What's the use of all this, Mr. Pomeroy? This old man has no reason to lie to us."

"But neither have I, damn it," Bennet cried. "I tell you I never touched my mother, or anybody else. It gripes the hell out of me to even think of it. And I did not buy that ring. I swear to heaven I didn't."

Good God, Mr. Izenga thought, what more do they want? To him Bennet's voice seemed to ring with truth. Why should that old pawnshop owner's word be taken instead of Bennet's? Who knows what he would do for money? Maybe someone bribed him. Maybe he's mistaken. But there was Bennet's unique expensive suit. There wasn't another like it. He must have gone to the old man's shop sometime.

In his despair Mr. Izenga saw someone beckoning to him from the den. Harry Duke was with Ridge. They looked serious and fearful. "Hester heard Bennet had been picked up," Harry told Mr. Izenga. "She sent me over to scout around and see what was going on." "What did French want with that Steinmetz?" Ridge asked.

"Steinberg," Mr. Izenga corrected pettishly. "Oh, the old man identified Bennet as the man who bought that duplicate ring. He's got a pawnshop in Oak City."

"Oh, blast," Ridge groaned.

"Steinberg—yes, I know," Harry began. Then he said quickly, "I've heard of him. What does Bennet say to that?"

Mr. Izenga shrugged wearily. "He denies it, of course. But the old man remembers that damned suit that Letitia wanted to give the Salvation Army. She hated it, poor girl. Thank heaven she can't know what's happening."

"Well, if Bennet says no and the old man says yes and there's no third vote to throw the majority, it looks like a stalemate to me," Harry Duke said.

Mr. Izenga studied him gloomily. For the first time he noticed Harry had quite good features. His profile was excellent. It was his defeated look and vanishing hairline that spoiled the effect. It was queer to think of such trifles now, he thought.

"But they want Bennet to take a lie-detector test," Mr. Izenga told him. "About the chloral hydrate and this ring."

Harry's sallow face turned slowly gray.

"A lie-detector test? Oh no. No. Izenga, you've got to stop it. He can't. It'll tear everything. Especially about the chloral hydrate." Harry Duke was shaking Mr. Izenga by the arm urgently.

"Let go, please. What do you know?"

Mr. Izenga's words were drowned out by loud voices from the library. Jerking open the den door a crack, he peered in. The old man, Steinberg, and several of the troopers had gone. Bennet was half out of his chair, writhing and twisting in the grasp of two others.

"I won't take it. I won't take it, I tell you. You can think what you want." His voice was a high shriek. "I did not buy that ring and I was never in that man's shop." He caught sight of the open den door. "Mr. Izenga, make them stop deviling me, can't you?"

Suddenly he relaxed, dropped into his chair, and began to cry. He covered his face with his hands.

Harry Duke whispered in Mr. Izenga's ear. "Help the poor devil. Don't let them force him into that test. He bought that stuff himself—the chloral hydrate."

"No," Mr. Izenga gasped. "No. I've known Bennet since he was born. I know when he's lying."

"Maybe you do. But you'd be wrong that time. I tell you he must not take that test. He bought the stuff. Why, damn it, I was with him. I waited outside in the car. And if French gets that out of him the lid's off."

Mr. Izenga's knees turned to spaghetti. He wobbled. Was this the beginning of the end? He stared into the library and saw Bennet slowly lean sideways and begin to slide out of his chair.

A husky trooper put a hand on his shoulder to hold him.

"Take him away," French said curtly.

Two men carried Bennet out of the room. Pliny was waiting in the hall to lead them upstairs.

Chapter Nineteen

THANK GOD Bennet couldn't take it," Harry Duke whispered, wiping off his forehead. "This'll put off that damned liedetector business for a day at least."

"And I'll get that lawyer busy for Bennet," Ridge said. "Look, Harry, do you really mean that, about being with Bennet when he bought the stuff?"

"Of course I do. I've been sitting on that egg like it was a hand grenade ready to hatch hell for all of us."

"Are you sure? Tell us what you know."

"Oh, Bennet and I were driving home from Oak City one evening and we came through that little village, Larraway, and Bennet asked me to stop near a drugstore. I said I'd go in too. But he said he'd buy whatever I wanted. He made such a fuss about being alone that I was curious. So after he'd gone in I sort of rubbered. I thought it was another blonde. But it wasn't. He came out with a small wrapped-up bottle. He was so fussed about it that he forgot my cigarettes. When I reminded him he wouldn't go back or let me do it. He said he'd get them at the next drugstore we passed. So he did."

"But how did you know what was in the bottle? You said it was wrapped."

Harry turned a little pink. "Well, the paper was stuck together with only half an inch of that Scotch tape. So when Bennet went into the second store—— Must I go on?"

In spite of being pleased, Mr. Izenga asked disdainfully, "And you're sure that was what was on the label? Chloral hydrate? Did you know what he wanted to do with it?"

Harry shook his head sulkily.

"I'll bet I know," Ridge whispered. "I understand Letty asked him if he gave Lucianna that necklace. So Bennet knew she had it and maybe he wanted to dope her and get it back. He was always crazy about his mother, you know."

Mr. Izenga did not respond to this attempt to explain Bennet's action charitably. In his sick, despairing soul Mr. Izenga knew that it didn't need any explanation. He was going to have to admit that Bennet was guilty. That unbalanced emotional nature, fortified with liquid courage, had given away to a momentary insane impulse. Even though he loved his mother, Bennet often fought with her viciously.

But what shook Mr. Izenga to his depths was the fact that Bennet had lied to him and he had not known the difference. It hurt his belief in his invincibility as a character analyst. Murder seemed a mere social error compared with this disaster.

2

Bennet was carried up to bed. The police doctor, to everyone's surprise, arrived and pronounced him exhausted. He said he would give him a sedative and let him sleep. They would see in the morning if Bennet was in a fit state to take the lie-detector test.

But when Ridge thanked French for allowing Bennet to remain out of jail overnight the lieutenant said sternly, "It doesn't mean a thing, Mr. Dawson. If we took Mr. Pomeroy in we'd simply have to have a guard in the hospital. It's simpler for one man to do two jobs here."

"But you're planning to leave extra guards in the house, of course," Mr. Izenga interposed excitedly.

"The usual guard will be here."

"But is one trooper enough to cover this situation?"

"Certainly." French was impatient to be off.

"But Miss Pomeroy has been in danger two or three times and should be protected."

"He has special instructions to look after her."

"And Bennet is expected to take the lie-detector test tomorrow. He should be watched."

"Really, Mr. Izenga, we know our business."

"Oh, I don't doubt that. I'm sure you have a superman to carry out those two jobs. But Miss Pomeroy is much too valuable to me to experiment with. If that's the best you can do I shall remain here tonight myself."

"Oh, I'll stay here if you feel like that, Cornelius," Ridge Dawson offered.

"You needn't bother. I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to her."

"I wouldn't say you'd be much use in a scrap." Ridge did not quite succeed in hiding his amusement.

"You'd be surprised," Mr. Izenga purred.

"Well, I'll leave you to fight it out between you," the lieutenant said crisply. "There's no need of anyone staying, but if you want to it's up to you and Miss Pomeroy."

"Well, there's the police for you," Mr. Izenga snorted as the lieutenant left. "Traditional lockers of stable doors after it's too late." Ridge poured himself a drink from a carafe on a table.

"I think he's right. It's silly for us to stay, but we're in for it now. Look sillier to back out. Besides, I'm all out of liquor."

"They'll be out here, too, if you keep that up," Mr. Izenga snapped. "Go on home if you want to. I can handle this."

Mr. Dawson grinned through his amber glass.

"Why should I want to go home?"

3

To Mr. Izenga's relief and joy Erica appeared in the living room just before dinner. He had thought she was not allowed to leave her room.

"A special dispensation," she whispered.

Her shining gold-tinged hair tickled his cheek. Her embrace left a delicious fragrance. She wore a floating frock of soft yellow, ravishingly becoming. Her grandmother's amethysts glowed with purple fire. And her enforced rest had done her good.

Mr. Izenga settled back to enjoy her. The dull dinner took on a festive air. But his pleasure was brief.

In a few minutes Pliny ushered in Toby Newcomb. His white jacket was masterfully fitted to his broad shoulders. Mr. Izenga had not fully realized Toby's size and strength before. Now he could gloomily observe it as Erica put her arms around him.

Toby's right arm gripped her hard. Mr. Izenga, hunting a bone to pick, was irritated at this trifling discrepancy. Why should Erica's two-armed love be returned with one? She didn't seem to miss anything. Her eyes were rapt, adoring. Yet Mr. Izenga remembered she had spent the afternoon planning to disinherit him. Women were crazy, Mr. Izenga thought disgustedly.

"Cheer up," Ridge mumbled from behind his cocktail glass. "He's not such a bad fellow, Cornelius. And you can see we're going to have to take him."

Mr. Izenga was annoyed at himself. He quickly put on a less legible expression. He disliked being obvious.

4

After dinner Pliny managed to get Mr. Izenga aside. "Somebody wants to talk to you on the back po'ch."

"Who is it?"

"Oh, it's all right, Mr. Izenga. He jus' doan' want anybody else to come. You go see, please, suh."

Mr. Izenga's curiosity carried him back through the kitchen. In the shadow of a honeysuckle vine he found Huntley eating cake the cook had given him.

"I didn't want to butt in," Huntley said. "That damned New-comb is there. Any anyway, I just wanted to talk to you. I'm worried about Erica. Someone's got it in for her. She isn't safe in this house."

Mr. Izenga explained that he and Ridge Dawson were spending the night.

"I don't know that that's such a bad idea. I was thinking of hanging around myself."

It was odd, Mr. Izenga thought, how you couldn't help being fond of Huntley, especially in his presence. Was that charm? he wondered. At any rate, he found himself thinking that perhaps it would be better, after all, if Erica married Huntley. She had moral strength for two, and he was a gentleman and pleasant to live with.

"I don't trust Newcomb around the corner," Huntley was going on in his old sincere way. "And I heard a horrible rumor that Erica had made a will leaving him everything. Is that so?"

"Yes, but she's changing it. She's regretting that willful, impulsive action, Huntley. She's leaving it to the family—and to him, I suppose. And some to you."

"To me!"

Mr. Izenga was a little dismayed and perturbed that he had blurted out that last fact. It had just popped out.

"Yes. She wanted you to know she was still fond of you in spite of everything."

For a moment there was no sound but the crickets out in the grass and the clink of china in the kitchen. Huntley turned his back. Mr. Izenga hovered in spirit over him. Poor Huntley!

"She's wonderful," Huntley said at last. Just a whisper. "And if that devil hadn't hypnotized her she'd be mine, right this minute. She still loves me down under everything, Mr. Izenga."

Does she? Mr. Izenga's mind flashed back a picture of her, as of an hour before, in Toby's arm. He doubted Huntley's statement. But he would not take away his crumb of comfort.

"Of course you won't ever get the money, Huntley. She will live many, many years. She's young." Mr. Izenga sounded as if he were warning the Fates to lay off his darling. "She will change her will, no doubt. . . ."

"Good God, I don't want it. I wouldn't take it," Huntley choked. "But—it's the idea of it. And after all, Mr. Izenga, that will isn't made. The other is in force. And that fellow is not to be trusted. I hope he doesn't know the will is to be changed."

"He doesn't even know about the first one-leaving it all to him."

"The hell he doesn't."

"That's what she says."

"Poor kid. Look, Mr. Izenga, can you take a room on the north side of the house?"

"I have the northwest bedroom."

"Good. I can see the windows of it from my room. If there's any trouble in the night, won't you put on all the lights and pull the blinds up to the top? I'll see it and come over."

It wouldn't be necessary, but Mr. Izenga knew how he felt. After a little more talk about it Huntley went away and Mr. Izenga returned to the living room.

5

They retired early. Erica promised to scream like crazy at the merest whiff of alarm. She locked her door. Her windows were high from the ground.

Bennet was sleeping exhaustedly. Mr. Izenga wondered if Bennet's door should not be locked. But the trooper in the lower hall patrolled the upper one at intervals. No doubt he would be safe.

Ridge Dawson sneaked one of his nephew's last bottles of Haig and Haig up to his bedroom. He wouldn't be much use to anyone in an hour, Mr. Izenga thought with disgust.

Mr. Izenga did not intend to sleep, but he put on his pajamas

and dark silk robe and lay down on the bed with a quilt over him. It was restful, quiet, very comfortable.

6

Mr. Izenga woke with a jolt that brought him to a sitting position in bed. He had slept! How mortifying! And what could have awakened him? It was five minutes of three by his watch. He was about to swing out of bed when there was a resounding crash below, as of overturned furniture. It was followed by a terrific racket. A battle must be in progress.

In trembling haste he pulled his robe together, stepped into slippers, and took his flashlight. He ran to the door, then came back. Feeling under his pillow, he brought out the little revolver Harrison had brought him with his packed bag.

He went out into the hall and poked on the light. The hall was empty. The doors were shut. Mr. Izenga took one step and was stopped dead by a gunshot that echoed through the house downstairs like a robot bomb. The scream that went with it left a wound on the silence. For a minute Mr. Izenga stood motionless.

Why didn't anyone come into the hall? Where was everybody? Surely that uproar had wakened the others. He laid a hand on the knob of Ridge's door. It was not locked. He went in. Ridge was in bed, roused up on one elbow, bleary with sleep and confusion.

Mr. Izenga turned on the light.

"Good God, Cornelius, was that you shooting?" Ridge shrank back from Mr. Izenga's little gun.

"Of course not. Someone's downstairs. Someone's been shot. Did you hear that scream?"

"Was that what it was?" Ridge sat up, swaying a little. The Haig and Haig bottle was on his bedside table, half empty. A used glass was near it. A lot of use Ridge would be!

"At least you can call the police," Mr. Izenga snapped. "Go into Letty's sitting room and——"

"Lissssen," Ridge hissed. He sat on the edge of the bed. Another piece of furniture downstairs had crashed over, and somebody was

running through the house, apparently too frantic to get away to care about noise. In a moment the back screen door banged shut.

"Blast and blazes, what's going on?" Ridge whispered. "Better let

me have that gun."

"I'm quite able to use it myself. Get up. Go and telephone the police. Try to get French."

"Why not call the trooper downstairs?"

"Something must have happened to him. I don't hear any more noise. Anyway, call French, and hurry!"

Ridge fumbled with his robe. Mr. Izenga jerked it on him impa-

tiently. Ridge could just barely navigate.

Mr. Izenga ran next to Erica's door. Locked. He pounded on it and called Erica's name, but nothing happened. While his alarm rose, Ridge joined him, staggering.

"Telephone won't answer. Operator goes off duty at one, I re-

member now."

"Keep trying, there's a night bell over the operator's bed. She'll answer if you persist."

"You know everything, don't you, Izenga?" Ridge laughed in-

anely. There was no doubt he had not slept it off yet.

"See if you can open Erica's door. Break it in or get the key out of the lock someway." Mr. Izenga panted. "I'm going to see if Bennet is all right."

He ran on to Bennet's room. The door was not locked. The first beam of his flashlight showed Bennet's dark head on the pillow. Mr. Izenga hurried over and looked down. Bennet did not wake up. He was breathing exactly as he had the first time Mr. Izenga had seen him thus. For one bad moment Mr. Izenga thought, Am I going crazy? Did this happen before? Or am I imagining it this time? Then he recalled the sedative the police surgeon had given Bennet.

The beam of his light twinkled in the amber depths of a full glass of something on the bedside table. It smelled like whisky. He dipped in a finger and tasted it. Whisky, all right.

To his amazement Ridge had succeeded in getting Erica's door open. He had a bunch of keys in his hand.

"How'd you do it?"

"Just luck." Ridge pushed into the room and snapped on the light. It was a dainty green-and-white room with Venetian blinds. The scent of roses was heavy on the warm air. The bedclothes were tossed back. Erica's charming bits of underwear and stockings were on a brocade chair. But her robe and pajamas were not there. She had gone or had been taken away without dressing.

But how could she have left? Mr. Izenga ran to the window and looked down, pressing his forehead against the screen. It was twenty feet to the cement terrace below. And how could she be downstairs when her door was locked and the key still in it? There was no drainpipe or porch roof. And Erica hadn't wings—yet.

"Good God, what could have happened to her?" Ridge asked. "I didn't hear a thing till this racket below."

"Let's hunt first, talk afterward." The lump of ice that had been exchanged for Mr. Izenga's heart was making him sick. He led the way to the top of the stairs. The lights were out below. Ridge backed away. His face was drawn, fearful.

"I'm not going down there into the dark. Who knows what's laying for us down there? I'll try again to call the police from Letty's study."

"Suit yourself." Mr. Izenga calmly flipped the switch that lit the lights below from the upper hall. Then he went down, gun in hand. He was not at all brave. But he wanted to know that Erica was safe more than he cared about anything else, even death. He reached the landing. At first the hall looked as usual. The delphiniums were fading. A rain of blue petals lay on the floor. But near them he noticed an overturned chair.

It was the chair on which the trooper had been sitting in intervals between his hourly inspection trips. There were magazines on the floor. Cigarette stubs filled the ash tray on the table. But most revealing of all was the fine thread of smoke rising from a newly lit cigarette on the edge of the tray.

"Ridge," Mr. Izenga shouted up the stairs, "come and help me. Quick!"

Ridge crept slowly down to the landing and peered with bulging eyes into the hall below.

"What's the matter now?"

"The trooper's missing. Maybe he's in trouble, or chasing somebody. We must help him."

Ridge didn't move. He shivered a little. "Blast it, Cornelius, I don't like this. I'm going to camp on that telephone line till I get service and—— Hell! What's that?"

There was the sound of a door being forced open. One of the double french doors to the north terrace, Mr. Izenga guessed.

"It must be the trooper coming back," he told Ridge. But the gun in his hand wavered a little.

In another instant Huntley stepped cautiously into the hall. He had pulled a dark blue sweater over dark slacks. His eyes were wide with excitement.

"Hey, what's going on over here?" he whispered. "Heard a shot." Ridge Dawson's face turned a surprising purple.

"My God, Huntley, get out of this. Go on home. We've got enough trouble without you poking your nose into this."

Huntley gaped at the attack. "But, Uncle Ridge, I want to help." "Go on home, I tell you," Ridge shouted. He sounded terrified.

Mr. Izenga watched in sudden sharpened interest. The fingers on his gun tightened. Huntley's bewilderment and Ridge's frantic fury were so revealing.

"But-" Huntley still protested.

"Go on—get out," Ridge squealed. "There's a policeman running all around the place with a gun. He'll shoot you like a flash if he catches you. And if you aren't killed you'll have some tall explaining to do. Now get out."

Huntley turned to Mr. Izenga, who urged, "Yes, he's right, Huntley. We don't need you here. Get home quickly if you can."

At the urgency of the two older men Huntley backed toward the door, hesitated a moment, then ran out. Mr. Izenga hurried out after him into the dark.

There was a shot and a scream.

Mr. Izenga darted back into the house and collided with Ridge Dawson clawing his way toward the door.

"Get out of my way you damned little fool. They've shot Huntley. Oh, my God, why couldn't he have stayed at home? If you put him up to coming over here I'll kill you."

Ridge towered over Mr. Izenga with viselike opened fingers, his face livid with rage.

"Back up—get away from me, Ridge." Mr. Izenga dug his little gun into Ridge Dawson's side.

"It isn't loaded, you poor oaf," Ridge snapped. "I got it away from you when you weren't looking." He tried to pass.

Mr. Izenga noticed with satisfaction the movement of a portiere. There was no wind. He dug deeper into Ridge's ribs.

"Who says I wasn't looking? It's loaded now, I assure you." His voice was deadly. "Get back. I mean it. Who do you suppose fired that shot you just heard?"

Ridge choked. "You—you little beast? You fired at Huntley? You tried to kill him?" He lifted his hands. "Get out of my way till I see if he's hurt. If he is——"

"Oh, cut it, Ridge. I fired up into the air, and that was my voice you heard."

Ridge Dawson glared down at him, breathing audibly. "Are you crazy?"

"No. I just wanted to prove to myself that you really had a father's instincts."

Ridge backed away in sheer stupefaction. "Good God, Cornelius, you don't—you can't know——"

"That Huntley is your son?" Mr. Izenga said. "Certainly I know it. Alicia came to me when she knew a child was on the way. She was terrified. She wanted to know what to do. I advised her. Do nothing. She was afraid her husband would suspect it wasn't his. But I had great faith in Huntley Senior's stupidity and I was right. He never found out the truth, poor fellow. Even Huntley doesn't know unless you told him."

Ridge leaned against a table, both hands gripping it. He was breathing heavily. His face was white.

"Letty—did she know?" he whispered.

"Not from me. And I'm sure she didn't from anyone else. She would not have countenanced the marriage of second cousins. Nor did she care for illegitimacy," Mr. Izenga added deliberately.

"Don't use that word," Ridge snarled. "You are the only person who knows, then. If anything should happen to you—Huntley would be safe—forever." He took a step forward.

Mr. Izenga said, "I should think three murders would be enough for you, Ridge."

"Good God, Cornelius—are you mad? You can't honestly believe I'm guilty."

"Do you suppose I don't know who hit me over the head outside your apartment building? You put some kind of dummy head out of the window to cover the time you were running up the back stairs. Then you drew it in and put out your own head."

"Very interesting. Too bad it's not true."

"Men should never use perfume," Mr. Izenga said. "It was the whiff of that hair oil you use that gave me the right clue."

"You little liar." Ridge laughed roughly. "Don't think I'm going to crack up and entertain you with the tale of my exploits. I'm not going to sanctify your wild guesses by confessing."

"I only want to know one thing," Mr. Izenga said. "When you attacked Letty the second time did she know who was killing her? Did she know it was her brother, to whom she had been so kind and generous, who was proving to be an ungrateful rat?"

"That's enough of that," Ridge snapped.

"Did she know, lying there in the dark, that it was your hands around her throat? Did she say your name——"

"Damn you!" Ridge moved toward him. "What is this supposed to be? A little torture party of your own?"

"Torture because it's true. She did know, didn't she? She spoke your name. That's why you can't rest. That's why you have these headaches. That's why you can't sleep——"

A tormented choking cry came from Dawson's throat. He lunged toward Mr. Izenga, who sprang back with surprising agility.

"Tell me," he demanded. "It's true, isn't it?"

Ridge glanced around quickly, then came back to Mr. Izenga's supercilious face.

"You'll die in torment," he sneered, "not knowing."

Mr. Izenga's famous smile stung Ridge. "You surely don't think I need to be told, do you? You and Letty staged that silly, stupid farce. It had to be someone close to her. Someone she trusted, poor girl. Her own brother. Of course she knew who it was—the first night. And then you took advantage of her, you dirty rat. The second night—it was real. And she knew—and you knew she knew—and it tortures you."

"Damn your nosy soul! You've got yourself one too many secrets now. You can keep 'em all in hell."

Even as he jumped and caught Mr. Izenga by the throat there were men on him from the dark porch and from hiding places in the unlighted rooms. But they weren't needed. Mr. Izenga's gun had gone off at the beginning. And its bullet had found the right place.

They carried Ridge away, but Mr. Izenga knew it was not going to be any use to get a doctor. He took time out now to catch up on his trembling. French was beside him, very stern.

"Was that necessary, Mr. Izenga? That wasn't in our plans."

"Would you rather he'd have choked me?"

"We were right there, as you knew."

"Self-preservation is a powerful instinct. I have plenty of witnesses, including yourself. There was no time to think it over."

Mr. Izenga and the lieutenant measured glances for a few portentous moments. Mr. Izenga's red spots were out and his heart beat very fast. But he kept his chin up.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," he said. "But the state is saved an expensive trial and the county a great deal of horrid slander. And you haven't forgotten you promised to keep any secrets that could be suppressed. Huntley's, for instance. No good can come of dragging that out."

"Yes. I see no need of publicizing that." French looked tired. He shouldn't have trusted Mr. Izenga quite so far. "Of course I appre-

ciate the way you got Ridge Dawson to spend the night here, and all your other help."

"Well, I knew you wanted to give him a chance to attack Bennet. I wasn't sure why. But it seemed easier if he was on the premises. But when I went into his room he was in bed, asleep."

"Yes. He probably trusted that glass of poisoned whisky he took

Bennet to do the trick. We had to get him up again."

"Oh, so you staged those shots and racket downstairs?" Mr. Izenga nodded. "I wasn't at all sure what was going on. If I could have been told more of the plans——"

"But I didn't have any exact plans. We stirred up the hornets' nest and hoped for the worst. We expected Ridge to look into Bennet's room and see he hadn't drunk the whisky—and perhaps try to throttle him."

"Rather dangerous, wasn't it?"

"Not with a trooper hidden in the closet."

"And instead he tried to throttle me," Mr. Izenga said. "And I wasn't having any. But there's one thing still missing. We don't know Ridge's motive for killing his sister. There's something missing in the picture."

A trooper from the library down the hall where Ridge had been carried beckoned the lieutenant.

French said, "That's right, Mr. Izenga, see what you can dig up, will you?"

Chapter Twenty

RENCH DISAPPEARED down the hall.

Mr. Izenga, with a shudder, laid down his gun. All this time he had been gripping it unconsciously. His fingers ached and were moist. He thought, I've killed a man. And I don't feel a twinge of remorse. I feel I've done my duty.

His mind was busy with what French had said. The motive. Mr.

Izenga had known Ridge Dawson many, many years. He knew him for a charter member of the me-first society. He could not believe Ridge would go as far as murder for anyone but his own precious self.

There was no doubt Ridge had many of a father's feelings for Huntley. He had had Huntley dine with him the night Lucianna was killed as much to provide the boy with an alibi as for his own sake. But how had he managed to kill Lucianna under those circumstances? Surely Huntley had not been persuaded to lie about it. Mr. Izenga knew he was incapable of sustaining a good deception for long.

Well, all that would have to come out. And Mr. Izenga knew who was the man to get at the truth. He pulled the cord of his robe tighter.

Toby Newcomb came out of the library. He gave Mr. Izenga an odd smile. Almost chummy. Mr. Izenga cried, "Wait," and caught Toby by the left arm. Toby jerked angrily away, as if his privacy had been invaded.

"Where's Erica?" Mr. Izenga demanded.

"Oh, somewhere about."

"You mean she's safe? All right?"

"Sure. She came in with me just a minute ago. I think she's in the sunroom."

"How did she get out of her room?"

"I took her out. Stepladder to her window. I wasn't going to leave her in French's damned trap. He said Ridge would only try to murder Bennet, but I wasn't going to risk it."

"Thank heaven for that. Does Erica know—who was caught? Who was guilty?"

"Yes."

"Does she know he's dead?"

"Better not spread that around, Mr. Izenga, because he isn't."

"What!" Mr. Izenga turned a sickly gray.

"No. There's a chance for him—one in a thousand—if the doctor gets to him in time."

"Dear, dear," Mr. Izenga groaned. "What loathsome zeal. Toby,

don't go yet. I want to know why Ridge tried to throw the guilt on Bennet."

"I suppose because Ridge saw French wasn't going to accept me as the goat. He had to look around for another. Bennet was the next most likely. It was 'anybody but me' with Ridge."

"Toby"—Mr. Izenga spoke very low—"were you in your room the night your ring was taken from it? I can't see how that could have been managed."

Toby grinned. He looked much younger. "You win, Mr. Izenga. I went to bed that night but couldn't sleep. So I got into my clothes again and walked over to watch Erica's room. I was in that grove on the north side of the house. But I'm ashamed to admit I didn't hear a damned thing. When I went to bed again at dawn I thought everything was okay. I told Bill French about it, of course."

"You and French seem to know each other quite well," Mr. Izenga remarked.

"Do we?" Toby grinned again. "Got to run along. I've been given a job to do."

2

Mr. Izenga heard voices in the sunroom. Stopping in the doorway, he saw Erica in white pajamas under a pale blue quilted robe. A blue ribbon tied her bright hair back behind her ears.

Huntley was refilling her coffee cup and offering her sandwiches.

"Oh, it's Mr. Izenga," Erica said. "Come on in, darling."

Mr. Izenga's hand shook a little as he took the cup of coffee she poured for him.

"Let's ask him what to do, Erica," Huntley said.

Surely there was only one question, and he was not at all sure he knew what he ought to answer.

"No," Erica said, "my mind is made up."

Huntley said impulsively, "She wants to take over the note the bank gave me on her securities."

"He borrowed them," Erica put in.

"Let's be honest," Huntley blurted. "I took-"

"No." Erica drowned him out. "I lent you the securities. That's my story and I'm going to be sticky about it. I'll pay the note and take them, and that will be that."

"Good lord, no. It's enough for you to—uh—overlook my taking them. It's a lot. Fifty thousand I owe on them."

Huntley's voice shook as he forced himself to be honest at last. That sum would exactly cancel his legacy. It would change his life, poor fool. Mr. Izenga listened in appalled silence. He knew Letitia had often used Huntley as a bank messenger. He had been given entrance to the family safe-deposit boxes many times. And he hadn't been able to resist temptation.

"All right, now you've said it," Erica told him. "You've got it off your chest. I'm glad you were frank with me, Huntley. But don't say it again, please. It's hard enough for Toby to swallow the money I'll have left. He's afraid of a rich wife. So—I'll pay the note. Period." It was as final as a pulled tooth.

Huntley gave her a worshiping, reluctant look. Mr. Izenga wondered how he had ever imagined that that weak charm was worthy of Erica. She might have had sons like that. Dreadful! Newcomb was hard. He was tough. He was a man.

"Mr. Izenga," Huntley began, "she doesn't realize--"

"I'd just drop the whole thing, Huntley, if I were you," Mr. Izenga said wearily. He was sick of fussing too. He saw that all of Huntley's supposed financial acumen was a farce. It had fooled him and Letitia, both of whom thought themselves so shrewd. Perhaps Erica should be left alone to run her own life.

"Uncle Ridge helped me pay the interest on the note when I lost the money I invested," Huntley said. "He paid the interest three times. It was kind of him. I was sort of surprised." It was clear that Huntley had no suspicion of the truth. Nor did it seem at all odd to him that a notoriously selfish man should make an exception in his case. Ignorance was a great buffer against unpleasant facts, Mr. Izenga thought, watching him.

Huntley added, "He was going to wait till Aunt Letty died to have me pay him back. But I can't believe he killed her. Why should he? Why, she'd just loaned him some more money."

Erica said softly, "I think I know. It's made me afraid for a long time. Afraid he was guilty. Gran did lend him the money, just half of what he asked for. But she told him it'd be the last cent he ever got. She told him she'd kept track of every penny he'd got out of her and was going to change her will so that he'd have to pay back the loans out of his legacy. It would have left him scarcely any income at all. I know he had counted on living on the legacy in his old age. He hadn't saved a cent of his own. So it simply knocked the props out from under him. It was cruel. I told her so."

Mr. Izenga's eyes gleamed. Here it was at last. The real reason Ridge had killed Letty—for his own sake, just as Mr. Izenga had surmised. The idea of using Toby as a scapegoat and thus helping Huntley's cause had been a mere by-product.

"Gran talked it over with me the day after she was attacked," Erica went on. "I tried to argue her out of it, but you know how she was. She said something else—she hinted that she might leave me Westerly, no matter whom I married. I don't know if she told him that. I don't suppose it would matter to him."

She doesn't know about Huntley and Ridge, Mr. Izenga told himself. For it would certainly have mattered quite a lot to Ridge if Huntley was not to be included with the house. It would have strengthened his motive to kill Letty considerably.

Someone tapped on the outside door. Huntley let in the Dukes, very sketchily dressed. Hester tiptoed to a chair and whispered, "Lieutenant French ordered us to come over. Do you know what time it is? Nearly 5 A.M. How does he get that way? What's up now? I hope to heaven nobody else has been killed. I can't take any more. Is that coffee hot?"

Huntley poured two cups.

Harry Duke said nothing, but his eyes were everywhere at once, seeking a clue to what was happening. His cup rattled in his saucer.

"They've got Uncle Ridge," Huntley said. "They're going to pin it all on him, I'm afraid."

"Oh lord, what a scandal." Hester took a sip of coffee.

"Thank God they got him," Harry said earnestly.

"What do you know about it?" Mr. Izenga asked.

"Well—the night Mrs. Pomeroy was killed—I met Lucianna over here. We had something to discuss."

"That necklace you 'lent' her." Mr. Izenga had an inspiration.

Harry Duke started. "I did my damnedest to get it back. She promised she only wanted to wear it once, the dirty double-crosser. Anyway, after we'd separated and she was running toward her car down the drive, someone crashed into her, coming from the house. I heard only three words, but I was pretty sure who the fellow was."

"What were they?"

Harry smiled grimly. "'Blast and blazes."

That could be nobody but Ridge. Mr. Izenga shuddered a little. He said, "Then Maribeth was lying too. I suppose the police only pretended to believe her."

Hester took a tongue sandwich. "That little slut! She thought she had Ridge in a jam. He simply asked her to say she was with him if the worst came to the worst. They gave her a lie-detector test yesterday and had to take her to a hospital afterward. She had hysterics."

"Where did you get all this?" Mr. Izenga demanded.

"Toby, of course. He's an old pal of Lieutenant French's." Hester smiled affectionately at Erica. "He's a lamb."

So that's how it was going to be, Mr. Izenga thought morosely. They were all hurrying to co-operate with the inevitable. And anything farther from a lamb than Newcomb he had yet to see.

"And a hero too," Hester went on through bites of her sandwich. "He was one of the first commandos, or whatever you call our men, to land on the Normandy coast. He won all kinds of medals. That's where his left arm was injured. Heavens, Erica, don't look at me like that. Didn't you know it?"

"Aunt Hester, where did you hear all this?" Erica blazed.

"The Gordon Joneses' nephew from the East is visiting them. He knew all about it—about Captain Newcomb—that's what we should have been calling him."

"He doesn't want to be called that. He's out of the Army now—at least for a while."

"But," Mr. Izenga exclaimed, "his left hand looks perfectly all right to me. I've taken particular notice of it. I would swear it isn't artificial."

"Of course it's not," Erica said, exasperated and hesitant. "He—he doesn't want people to talk about it—but I suppose I'll have to explain. It's very much better now, in appearance, but he still can't use it at all. While he was lying wounded a jeep ran over his arm. It's called a wringer injury, and it's similar to that produced by running your hand through a wringer. I forget the medical terms, but it usually isn't permanent. It lasts from six months to two years. Toby hopes to regain the use of it and get back into action. He can move one finger just a bit."

"But, my dear," Hester cried shrilly, "why not talk about it? Why not explain to everyone? Surely you aren't ashamed of it!"

"Ashamed! Don't be silly. But I promised not to tell. He loathes talking about it. It makes him sick. I mean literally sick. He was in a hospital a long time, suffering with war shock besides his injuries. He enlisted in his third year in college and went straight into the job of killing people. It did things to him. You don't know what war is like, actually. You can't talk about it. Promise not to mention it."

"Well, of course, my dear." Hester was annoyed but resigned. "If that's the way you want it. But it seems rather silly. A hero in the family, or almost, and one can't brag about it."

Mr. Izenga was learning things fast. No wonder that prowling, man-hunting stuff had seemed natural to Newcomb. But it was hard to realize the fellow was only twenty-six. That was what war did to one.

Mr. Izenga saw, too, that the method of killing Mrs. Pomeroy had instantly disqualified Toby Newcomb with his injury. Throttling called for two strong hands in perfect condition. Toby could have spoken up, but he didn't. He knew his silence would be a help to Lieutenant French and would help to trap the criminal.

Harry Duke was passing the sandwich tray again. Mr. Izenga asked him: "Why didn't you tell the police that Lucianna bumped into Ridge the night of the crime?"

Harry grunted. "Use your head, Izenga. What was I doing there myself? That's what the police would have wanted to know. And who would come bravely forward and swear I hadn't touched the old girl? Nobody! So I kept my trap shut like a sensible guy. But Lucianna didn't. She tried to sell Ridge on the idea of her keeping still. The fool. As if he'd stick at a second murder!"

Mr. Izenga regarded Hester speculatively. She was making a very good lunch on tongue sandwiches and coffee. Fortifying herself for her talk with the lieutenant.

She said softly, "Harry's told me about meeting Lucianna that night. He's told me everything. We're starting again. No runs, no hits, no errors."

And had Hester reciprocated? Mr. Izenga wasn't sure of that. He asked, "Was it you, Harry, who took the necklace from Lucianna's apartment after she was killed?"

"Yes. She'd made a date with me for eight-fifteen. I was a few minutes late. I went in and found her dead. So I took the neck-lace out of the safe and beat it."

"And you were following Harry, weren't you, Hester?" Mr. Izenga turned toward her.

"What if I was?" Hester bit into a little cake. "That wasn't a crime."

Erica had been staring fixedly at Harry Duke. He flushed but managed to avoid her eyes. Mr. Izenga recalled that the necklace had been slipped into Toby Newcomb's pocket in the dark. Had Harry done that? Was it malice toward Toby or pure panic and the nearest pocket? It would be hard to prove. He was glad Erica was not going to bring that into the open again. Instead, she changed the subject.

"Huntley, you said you were with Uncle Ridge the night Lucianna was killed, and you said he hadn't left the apartment. Is that the truth?"

"I thought it was when I said it. I honestly did."

Huntley's face at once took on its familiar candid aspect. He faced Erica earnestly. Mr. Izenga gloomily surmised that that was the result of simple stupidity. Huntley believed what he said he

believed. When he was evasive it was not from modesty (as Mr. Izenga had fatuously thought) but from inability to lie successfully.

He went on: "Of course I never dreamed Uncle Ridge could have killed Aunt Letty. You just don't think such things, you know, about people you've loved and trusted all your life. But I've been thinking over our evening together. I remember now that about eight o'clock he said he'd make some cocktails. I said I'd help, but he said they were to be a surprise. He wanted me to guess what was in them."

Mr. Izenga rolled his eyes despairingly. Poor stupid Huntley. Even getting his legacy wasn't going to make life any easier for him.

Huntley continued, "He went into the kitchen alone. He said it would take him quite a while. And he didn't come back with the cocktails till about eight-twenty."

And twenty minutes, Mr. Izenga knew, would give Ridge plenty of time to go half a block to Lucianna's apartment, run up the rear fire escape, and finish her off. He asked Huntley:

"Did you hear Ridge in the kitchen all that time?"

"Well—no. You see, the radio was on rather loud. There was a program he said he wanted me to hear. Naturally I never dreamed he'd left the place. And I don't know it now."

"What was in the cocktails?" Erica asked.

Huntley blinked at her. "Why—I don't know. We didn't discuss them at all. We talked about other things. I mean Uncle Ridge did. He's a very entertaining talker, you know."

Erica looked at Mr. Izenga and the Dukes. Eyebrows went up and came down again. What was the use?

3

Toby Newcomb came to the door of the sunroom. He looked tired. His mouth was its usual tight line. Mr. Izenga looked at him with new eyes. Victory comes high. Some men give their lives, and others give a part of themselves more precious than flesh and bone. No wonder Erica had stuck to him so valiantly. Mr. Izenga's red spots glowed faintly.

"The lieutenant wants you in the library." Toby spoke to the Dukes. He glanced at Huntley. "You're next."

Hester smiled radiantly up at him. "Have some coffee, Toby, and a sandwich. You look all in, my dear." She fussed over the urn and the tray, preparing a plate of tidbits.

He'll refuse, Mr. Izenga thought. But to his surprise Toby produced a rusty jerk of a smile. He accepted the plate awkwardly and sat down beside Erica. He used only his right hand. Mr. Izenga, in one quick, keen glance, saw now that his left hand did not look quite normal.

Huntley got to his feet. He shifted his weight from one to the other, looking down at Erica and Toby. He said diffidently, "Erica, I think you should tell him——"

Mr. Izenga grasped Huntley's arm. He nodded toward the door. "Didn't you hear him, Huntley? You're wanted in the library."

Reluctantly Huntley followed the Dukes out of the room.

"My God." Toby sighed. "Thanks."

Mr. Izenga got to his slippered feet. He pulled his robe around him and retied the belt.

"Don't go," Toby Newcomb said.

Mr. Izenga sat down from sheer amazement. He wouldn't have been surprised to hear it from Erica. But this was Toby. And he meant it. He didn't just say things to be polite. Erica put out a hand and locked fingers with Mr. Izenga.

Toby ate four sandwiches, two bites apiece. Then he turned pink. He took a fifth and nibbled at it.

"I'll never get onto this tea-party stuff, Erica. Maybe Mr. Izenga is right. I'm not good enough for you."

"I've changed my mind," Mr. Izenga said.

Toby turned an angry face. "Why?"

"Darling!" Erica said.

"He's been hearing things," Toby snarled.

"Will you overlook my approving your marriage?" Mr. Izenga remarked acidly.

Toby glanced at Erica. Her face was pink and gay. She began to laugh and he joined in. Mr. Izenga smiled ironically. They were

much too ecstatic to remember tragedy. But Mr. Izenga wasn't. "Have they taken Ridge away?" he asked.

Toby nodded. Then laughter went out of Erica's face.

"Poor Gran. I wonder if she knew. I was sure she didn't really believe it was Toby the first time. She just took advantage of that note that brought Toby to her door at 3 A.M."

Toby said pensively, "You know, while I waited there I was positive I heard somebody tiptoe across her sitting room, push up the window, and get out onto the porch roof. Just what she said she heard too. But I knew everyone would say I made it up. So I kept still. I knew Bill French would believe me."

"And somebody else," Erica said meekly.

"You don't count." He grinned at her. "You couldn't even remember the stone in my ring. I've got a good notion to jilt you. What do you think? They found keys to the whole Pomeroy house in Ridge's pockets, and a gadget that slipped over a key to turn it from the other side of the door. That's how he got in and out the night he killed her."

Erica cringed. "Don't."

"It's not nice," Toby admitted. "Ridge thought he had a won-derful plan. He'd make an attempt and get the victim to accuse me. Then when he really killed her the second night, I'd surely be stuck with the crime. He didn't know it was impossible." Toby reddened.

Mr. Izenga was grimly content. He was glad Toby saw things that way, and Erica too. He wasn't going to have her find out, ever, what part her grandmother had played. Mrs. Pomeroy had paid dearly enough for her folly.

Someone stumbled down the hall. Bennet appeared in the doorway, clinging to it and weaving about dizzily.

"Why doesn't anybody ever tell me when there's things going on in this house?" he mumbled. "Is that coffee?"

"Yes."

"Is it safe to drink? The police told me not to drink or eat anything till they said it was safe. Uncle Ridge brought me a glass of whisky, but I was afraid to touch it. Why do I feel so goofy?"

Erica went over and took his arm. She led him to a chair and gave him the coffee Toby poured. Bennet seemed more useless and futile than ever before, to Mr. Izenga, comparing him with Toby. But there were people like that in the world and they were somehow allowed to live.

"You're all right, Uncle Bennet. You were given a sedative by the police. You'll be swell in the morning. Cheer up, Lucianna's gone."

"That's right." Bennet smiled peacefully. "I forgot." He sipped coffee and seemed to wake up. Turning abruptly on Toby, he said, "I didn't buy that damned ring, you know. I was dead to the world the day after Mother was attacked. I slept till noon. Uncle Ridge was in and out of the room. He must have swiped my suit and worn it. He was the one who put me up to buying the chloral hydrate. He said I could dope Lucianna and get back the necklace for Mother. But after I bought it I never had the nerve to try it. And when that drug clerk called me up and tried to make something of it I got in a panic."

"But why run away?" Mr. Izenga asked.

"I talked it over with Uncle Ridge. He advised me to hide out somewhere for a week or two till the police found the real criminal."

Mr. Izenga sighed. "That was foolish."

"Let's talk about something else." Bennet winced. "Pinch me, Erica, and tell me again that Lucianna is dead. I can't believe it."

"Why don't you go back to bed? You can sleep till noon again. You need it."

"I'll take that advice myself." Mr. Izenga got to his feet. "I'll call Harrison. Don't disturb yourselves."

Toby said, "We're going to be married tomorrow, Mr. Izenga. In spite of churches, ministers, funerals, and crime. You're invited. Details later."

"Unless he changes his mind," Erica said with a rueful glance at Toby's face. "Better think it over, darling. Your children will have a pretty dark limb on this side of the family tree."

"I'll chance it," Toby said crisply. Anything less loverlike Mr.

Izenga thought he had never heard, until he looked up and saw the glance that went with the words.

Erica seemed to have forgotten about everything else but Toby, so Mr. Izenga quietly left the room. He wanted his own bed and a lot of sleep.

As he went toward the telephone to call Harrison, French came out of the library. His expression was most peculiar.

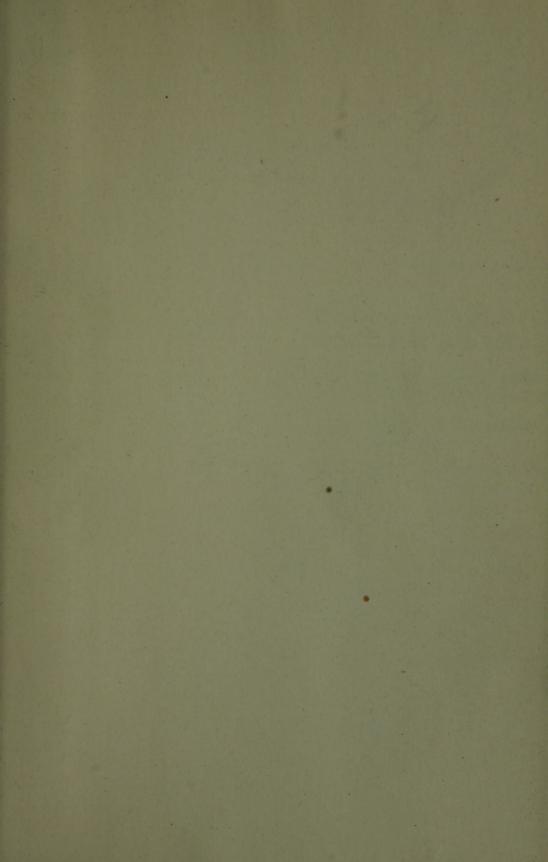
"You'll be glad to know, Mr. Izenga, that the doctor will get to Ridge Dawson too late."

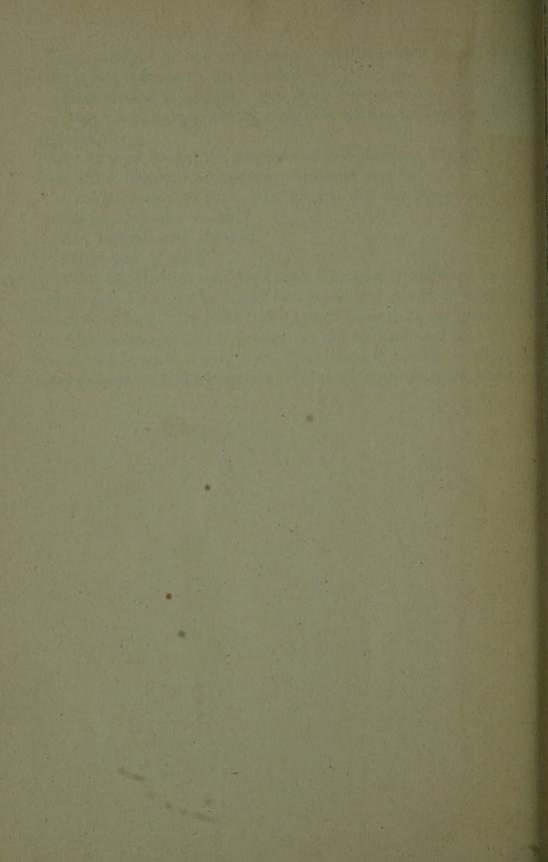
Mr. Izenga's eyes gleamed.

"How sure is that?"

"One hundred per cent. He's dead. The trooper neglected to call the doctor. He claims he wasn't told to call him. A mix-up in orders —or something." He looked Mr. Izenga straight in the good eye.

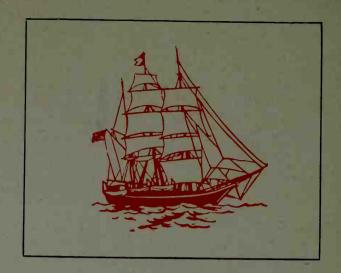
After quite a pause Mr. Izenga put out his hand and they stood as if sealing some sort of pact. Then without another word Mr. Izenga went on to the telephone and French returned to the library.







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