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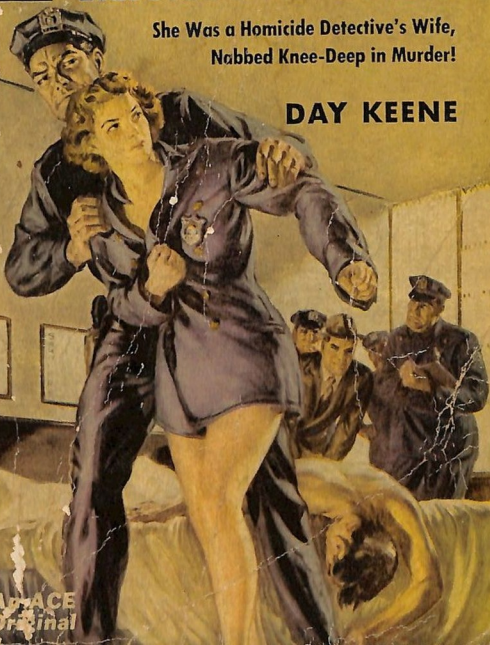
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Mrs. HOMICIDE

She Was a Homicide Detective's Wife,
Nabbed Knee-Deep in Murder!

DAY KEENE



an ACE
Original



The whole homicide squad knew their toughest sergeant's wife was cheating on him. They'd seen her themselves, jazzing around the hot spots with a notorious underworld character. But Herman himself didn't know until the moment they picked up "Mrs. Homicide" drunk and naked in her murdered boy friend's apartment.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

HERMAN STONE—Hard-hitting detective sergeant, he was on his way up until someone decided to open his eyes to treachery.

CONNIE STONE—They said she wasn't the type, but that was long before she ended up next to a dead man.

RAGS HANLON—A rich trickster who decided to invest his money in sex.

JIM PURVIS—He was a friend, but his duty as a good cop came first.

MYRA WELLS—She was tops at a switchboard, but she was better at something else.

LYLE CARY—In the game of love, it looked as if he was going to be a sure loser.

ABE FIETZEL—A nose for news gave him some unsuspected revelations.

MRS. HOMICIDE

by Day Keene

ACE BOOKS, INC.

23 West 47th Street,

New York 36, N. Y.

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DEAD AHEAD (*The Dead Lie Still*)

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Chapter One

When it happens to you, it's different.

Connie sat very still, her hands folded in her lap. Only her eyes moved. From time to time, she looked at me, and beyond me, at the wall of night outside the barred window of the precinct station. So she had cheated on me. It didn't show. Her hair was just as red. Her eyes were just as blue. Both of us kept right on breathing. She was still the big beautiful doll I'd waltzed out of a dime-a-dance palace when she was eighteen and I was the cop on the beat.

Forever and ever, we'd promised.

Only now her lipstick was smeared. Her lips were loose and working. Her red hair was disordered. Her eyes were puffed with crying.

You bitch, I ought to beat in your face, I thought.

More men crowded into Captain Carver's office. Policemen, plainclothes men, assistant district attorneys, minor brass. Most of them sorry for me. A few with a smirk on their faces. The dead man I could take. Dead men were my business. The thought that Connie had dirtied her wedding ring made me sick to my stomach. I turned and looked out the window.

Even at one o'clock in the morning, young couples

were still strolling through narrow Charles Street or sitting on the worn stone steps with their arms around each other. Like Connie and I had sat. On a stone stoop in Brooklyn. Here and there, a window was lighted. Men were winding alarm clocks, making love to their wives, getting their kids a drink of water. Sharp-eyed punks padded by, alone and in packs, hunting trouble. A drunk. A late-closing delicatessen that looked like it might be a push-over. A buck here, a buck there, bought a babe, a jug and perhaps a few capsules of white stuff.

I watched a young couple kiss, thinking that being a homicide detective was a hell of a way to make a living. Being any kind of a cop. A man spent his life looking in gutters. He went along year after year, seeing only the underside of life. He never met any decent dolls or guys unless they were in trouble. He walked through a world peopled by two-timers and whores, by sodomites and catamites, drug addicts, pimps and killers. Wives offered you their bodies. Men offered you their sisters and their daughters. For a pass.

"Give me a break. Just this one time, officer."

So you gave them a break. And what happened? They pooped all over you. In time you grew hard and unbelieving. White was white. Black was black. What it said on the complaint sheet was so. In nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of nine hundred and ninety-nine.

I took a deep breath. Then, suddenly, with everything that mattered at stake, you walked into a situation where only faith, the one thing you didn't have left, would help you.

I turned around and sat on the sill of the window. A pink-cheeked, rah-rah boy from Harvard, with a pair of rimless eyeglasses balanced precariously on his patrician nose, Assistant District Attorney Havers looked like a pompous little ass. He talked like one.

He said, "Now understand our position, Mrs. Stone. Our office is deeply sympathetic."

And that was a laugh. I knew. Havers was an eager

beaver, bucking for the big time. He was honest. He'd play it square. But he'd send his own mother up the river to build up his string of convictions.

Havers continued, "We know, as most of official New York knows, that Lyle Cary made his living by having affairs with and then blackmailing married women. His death isn't much loss to the community." Havers polished his eyeglasses. "So if you'll sign a statement admitting you shot him, I think I can assure you, on behalf of the District Attorney's office, that we will waive the death penalty and ask for second degree conviction."

Connie shook her head. "No."

"No what?" Havers asked her.

Connie repeated her previous statement. "I didn't shoot Cary. I wasn't having an affair with him. And I don't know how I got into his apartment."

Havers looked over her head at Captain Carver. "Do you happen to know, Captain, if the radio car men who made the arrest are still in the station?"

Jim Purvis answered for Carver. "Yeah. I told them to stick around." He sent Monte to see if Gilly and Mack were in the squad room.

Her eyes filled with tears, Connie looked at me. I looked back. Cold. Without emotion. Wishing I could feel something. Anything. She wasn't my wife any more. She was just a dame in a jam. A red-haired dame who'd slept in my arms a long, long time ago—last night. I pretended interest in the gun Jim was examining. It was a cheap nickel-plated mail order affair.

Jim picked it up, inserting a pencil in its barrel. "There ought," he said "to be a law."

I said, "As I recall, there is."

I lit a cigarette. So Connie had been having an affair with Cary. So he had tried to blackmail her. Why hadn't she told me? Why hadn't she told Jim? I was her husband. Jim was her friend. But I was also a homicide dick. And Jim was in charge of Manhattan Homicide West. Anyway I looked at it, it was a hell of a situation.

Abe Fietzel, the lad on the *Daily Mirror* who'd first nicknamed me "Herman The Great", on account he said I could pull killers out of thin air, came over to where Jim and I were standing. "What do you think, Herman?" he asked me.

I sucked smoke into my lungs. "What can I think?"

"You going to stand by Connie?"

"I don't know yet," I told him.

I stole another look at Connie. She'd managed to comb her hair, after a fashion. It hung in long auburn curls around her shoulders, almost like one of the page boy bobs some of the kids were wearing. Whatever Connie did to her hair, it would always be pretty. But her face looked puffy. Her eyes were red-rimmed and swollen. Her lipstick was smeared all over her mouth. Her smart dress no longer fitted her. Her breasts weren't firm and full as I remembered them. She looked somehow deflated. She looked like the hungry, frightened kid I'd met in a dime-a-dance joint.

"Hi, beautiful," I'd named her.

"Well, the Law," she'd said. "*The cop on the beat in plain clothes.*"

Funny. The things a man remembered. Little things. A walk through Washington Square. A window-shopping tour up Fifth Avenue. Cherry cheese cake and coffee in Lindy's. A slap in the mouth, a good one, the first night I'd tried to get fresh. Then Connie had cried because she'd hurt my feelings and I wouldn't ask her for another date. But still no monkey business.

I knew how she must feel. She was alone, in a crowd. A crowd of strangers she knew by their first names, men with whom she'd laughed and talked and joked a hundred times during the ten years we'd been married. Men who had eaten her cooking. Strangers now. While she waited, scared, alone, on the wrong side of the law in the same office in which she'd called for me time and time again, when I'd been driving a radio car out of Charles Street.

Monte came back with Gilly and Mack. Havers looked at the growing stack of reports on the clipboard in his hand. "You're officers Gilly and Mack?"

Gilly talked for the team. "Yes, sir."

"You investigated a report of a woman screaming at 2205 o'clock?"

"Yes, sir."

"On the top floor of a three apartment building back of the Buccaneer Club on Grove Street?"

Gilly noted the brass in the office and took off his cap. "That is correct, sir."

"Where you found Mrs. Herman Stone?"

Gilly looked out the window, then at the floor, anywhere but at me. "Yes, sir."

"She was the woman who was screaming?"

"Yes, sir."

"In what sort of condition was she?"

Gilly looked at me. I said. "The District Attorney asked you a question, Gilly."

Gilly said, "She was unclothed and in an intoxicated condition."

"She was naked? She was drunk?"

"Yes, sir."

Havers glanced at the clipboard. "It says here you had to break down the door."

"That is correct, sir. The door was locked and bolted on the inside." Gilly indicated his partner. "So Pete and me talked it over and we decided we better bust it down and see why the dame was screaming."

"What did Mrs. Stone say when you broke in? What was her reaction?"

Gilly ran a finger around the sweatband of his cap. "She was what I'd call hysterical, sir. She keeps on yelling for Herman. 'Herman, please help me,' she yells. 'Please get me out of here.' Then she tries to run down the stairs even naked like she is."

"So?"

"So Pete took off his coat and wrapped it around her and held her while I gave the apartment the once-over. And that's when I find the dead guy in the bedroom."

"In what condition was the apartment?"

Gilly would make a good cop! He wouldn't be riding a radio car long. He hadn't missed a thing. "Well, there's been a party. For two. There's an empty bottle of Scotch and two glasses on a little coffee table by a couch. The couch is rumpled some. And while the living room is quite neat otherwise, Mrs. Stone's pants and garter belt and one of her shoes and her dress are scattered all over the floor. Not torn, see? But like she peeled them off in a hurry."

Connie shouted the words. "That's a lie. I wouldn't, I couldn't do that to Herman." She looked at me. "You know that, don't you, Herman?"

I didn't say anything. Mrs. Anders, the matron, patted her shoulder and gave her a fresh handkerchief. "Easy does it, dearie," she told her. Like Connie was some cheap five-dollar tart who'd been picked up for soliciting.

"In what condition was the bedroom?" Havers asked Gilly.

"It was a mess," Gilly said. He returned his cap to his head, remembered the brass present and took it off again. "There is blood all over the bed. The bed is rumpled. Like it's taken a hell of a beating, see? All the dead guy has on is his socks. He's lying half on, half off, the bed. A silver fox fur is on the floor by the window. And the wall on the inside of the bed, between the bed and the wall, is all splattered with, well—like someone has tossed their cookies."

"I did," Connie sobbed. "I was sick when I came to. I was deathly sick."

"You took a specimen of that?" Havers asked Purvis.

"It's at the lab now," Jim said.

Havers picked a framed picture of Connie from Captain Carver's desk. It was one of a half-dozen prints she'd

had taken at Macy's, as a birthday present for me. But this one was inscribed—

To Lyle
All My Love
Forever and Always
Connie

"No," Connie said, sharply. "No."

Havers ignored her. "Where did you find this picture, Officer —?"

"Gilly, sir," Gilly identified himself. "It was on a mantel over the fireplace. But I didn't touch it, or anything else in the apartment. As soon as I spotted the dead guy I drop down to the floor below and call the station and the Sergeant says he will call the squad."

"Did you talk to any of the neighbors while you waited?"

"Yes, sir. The guy where I used the phone." Gilly took his note book from his pocket. "An elderly man by the name of Charles A. Swanson. I talked to both him and his wife."

"What did they say?"

"They said they'd expected something like this to happen for some time."

"Why?"

"He says on account of he and Mrs. Swanson figure the red-haired girl to be married and she had been sneaking into Cary's apartment two or three times a week for the last six months."

"This Mr. Swanson identified the girl as Mrs. Stone?"

"He didn't know her name. But I had him go upstairs with me to where Pete is holding Mrs. Stone, her still screaming at the top of her lungs, and he identified her as the girl he and Mrs. Swanson had seen going up to Cary's apartment countless times."

Assistant District Attorney Havers looked at Connie. "What do you say to that, Mrs. Stone?"

"He's lying," Connie said. "He has to be." She put the same record on the Capehart. "I don't even know a Lyle Cary. And I never saw the man before I came to, naked and sick in his apartment."

"You make the contention, despite the physical evidence to the contrary?"

"I do."

Connie looked at me again, through tears. I was god-damned if I knew what to think. The evidence was all against her. Still, Connie wasn't that kind of people. Or was she? I felt the back of my neck get hot. How did I know what she did with her afternoons or on the evenings that I worked? Connie's lower lip began to quiver again. She looked away. Her breasts rose and fell with her breathing."

Havers lighted a cigar. "Just one more question, Officer. How did Mrs. Stone act while you were waiting for the squad?"

Gilly returned his note book to his pocket. "How does any drunk dame act? Part of the time she's in a stupor. Whenever she snaps out of it, she tries to get away from me and Pete, claiming she's got to go home and get Herman's supper. I will say, though, she didn't use any bad language."

"Thank you," Havers said. "That's all, Officer—?"

"Gilly," Gilly said, patiently.

Havers crossed the office to where Purvis and I were standing. "She's all yours," he told Jim. "Keep it as clean as you can, for the good of the department." He transferred his attention to me. "I'm sorry, Stone. In my opinion, there's no doubt of her guilt. I think you'd be wise to persuade her to plead guilty. That way she won't have to risk a jury."

I didn't say anything. Havers left the office.

Jim looked at me. "You want to talk to her, Herman?"

I shook my head at him. "No."

Chapter Two

The smoke in the office grew thicker. Phones rang and were answered. The teletype continued to chatter. The minor brass left with Assistant District Attorney Havers. So a two-timing wife had killed her lover. So?

Jim swung a chair around and straddled it, facing Connie. "How you feeling, Red?"

Connie tried to smile. "Not so good, Jim."

"A drink help you any?"

Connie shook her head. "No."

A lean man, prematurely gray, a cop who'd come up the hard way, Jim Purvis ran his tobacco-stained fingers through his hair. I had an idea what was going on in his mind. He liked me. He liked Connie. He wished anyone else in the world had scragged Cary. He wished he was a traffic cop, a bailiff, a turnkey, anything but what he was, the head of Manhattan Homicide West. "How's for going over it again, Red?" he asked Connie.

Connie wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. "Whatever you say, Jim." Scared as she was, she tried to smile. "After all, you're the law."

"That's right," Purvis said, gently. He reached the clipboard from Captain Carver's desk. "Now according to your statement, you went to the blood bank yesterday

afternoon. You gave a pint of blood. Then you went shopping. For groceries."

"That's right."

"After purchasing your groceries, you started home, stopping en route at Meyer's Pharmacy for cigarettes for Herman."

"Yes."

"Meyers was out of Camels, but he told you the tobacco man was due any minute. You decided to wait. While you were waiting you had a coke at the fountain." He glanced at the clipboard. "A cherry coke, it says here. And the next thing you know you were in Cary's apartment, stripped. And Cary was dead on the bed."

Connie swallowed the fear in her throat. "Yes."

"You drove your car to Cary's apartment?"

"No," Connie said, hotly. "How could I?"

"Oh, yes. Of course," Jim said. "The last you remember you were sitting at the fountain in Meyer's Pharmacy."

"It's the truth."

"Tonight was the first time you'd ever been in Cary's apartment?"

"Yes."

Purvis looked at the framed picture.

"I can't explain it," Connie admitted. "I don't know how he got my picture."

"But the inscription is in your handwriting?"

Connie studied it through tears. "It looks like my handwriting."

"And the stockings, negligees, housecoat, underthings, comb, brush, powder, perfume that we found in the apartment that have been definitely identified as yours?"

Connie was near the breaking point. "I don't know," she sobbed. "I don't know how they got there."

Jim patted her knee. "Look, Red. Stop torturing yourself. We all make mistakes. I want to help you. Herman wants to help you. There isn't a man in this office who

isn't your friend. But you've got to help us help you, Connie. You've got to tell the truth."

Connie looked at me. "I'm telling the truth. I don't know how my things got in that man's apartment. I don't know how he got my picture. And I wasn't having an affair with him. I was a virgin when I married Herman. And there's never been any man in my life but Herman."

Jim was gentle with her. "But, Connie." He found the medical examiner's report and read an excerpt from it "Blood on her right thigh, hand and abdomen. The young lady says not, but my examination revealed definite evidence that she had relations with a man recently, possibly more than once. I'd say within the last two hours. No external sign of force."

Connie stood up and brushed her hair out of her eyes. Her small chin jutted. "I don't give a goddamn about the medical report." A small sob became a big one. "I haven't been unfaithful to Herman. I wouldn't. I couldn't. I'd rather die first. And if I was violated, it was done while I was unconscious."

"Watch her," Mrs. Anders said. "She's going to faint."

I crossed the office and caught her as she fell. Her body felt warm and familiar in my arms. One thing was for sure—whatever Connie had done to me, I was still in love with her.

"So—?" Abe Fietzel asked.

I blew my top. "Goddamn it, stop asking that and go write your goddamn story. I don't know what I'm going to do."

Fietzel looked hurt.

One of the phones on Carver's desk rang. He answered it and handed the phone to Jim. "For you. The M.E.'s office."

"Purvis speaking," Jim said. "I see." He nodded at Monte. "Take this down. Once through the head at close range. Back of the left ear. You think a .25. Slug pretty badly damaged. Around eight o'clock, give or take an

hour. Okay. Thanks a lot, Bob. Yeah. That checks with the gun we found."

He hung up and dialed a number. I realized I was still holding Connie. I sat her back on the chair. Mrs. Anders applied a cold towel to the back of Connie's neck. "You know," the matron told me, "sometimes I'm glad I'm not pretty."

So she wasn't. Connie was. More, she was my wife.

"I see," Purvis said into the phone. "No trace of chloral in the regurgitation but point one seven milligrams of alcohol in her blood. And her hand was lousy with powder specks, huh? Yeah. I expected that. It was one of those cheap mail order guns."

Connie opened her eyes. "I didn't," she said, weakly. "I wouldn't do that to Herman."

Mrs. Anders patted her shoulder. "Easy makes it, dearie." She sounded like a goddamn parrot. Her concern was as phony as a lead dime.

Purvis set the phone back on Carver's desk and pointed to a white-haired man sitting in a chair near the door. "You."

The white-haired man stood up. "Yes, sir."

"You're Swanson?" Purvis asked.

The old man fiddled with the power dial of a hearing aid. "Yes, sir. Charles A. Swanson."

"That a good aid?" Purvis asked. "You hear all right with it?"

"Fine. Just fine," Swanson said.

"You reported a screaming woman in Cary's apartment?"

"Yes, sir. And I said to Jane—that's my wife—when we heard the very first scream, 'it's happened. Something awful has happened in that apartment and I'm going to phone the police.' And I did."

"You heard the shot?"

"No, sir. All we heard was the screaming."

"What made you think something awful had happened?"

Mr. Swanson spread his thin hands. "It was bound to, sooner or later. That is, living as Mr. Cary did. Having women in his apartment at all hours. And then boasting about it."

Purvis indicated Connie. "Ever see this girl before, Mr. Swanson?"

Swanson adjusted his bifocals. "Yes, sir. Entering Mr. Cary's apartment. Many times." The old man was fair. "Well, not exactly entering it, but going up the stairs to the third floor."

"You saw her on the stairs this afternoon?"

"Yes, sir."

"With Cary?"

"No, sir. She was alone."

"Did she appear to be in her normal mind? I mean, she didn't appear to be either drugged or intoxicated?"

Mr. Swanson shook his head. "No, sir. I'd say she seemed much as she always did." The old man was apologetic. "It wasn't any of our affair. But Mrs. Swanson and I couldn't help but see her frequently. She had to pass our door to get to the next flight of stairs."

"How often did she visit Cary?"

"I'd say two or three times a week."

Purvis fingered through the reports on the clipboard until he found the one he wanted. "You told Officer Gilly you and Mrs. Swanson had her figured for a married woman, who was cheating on her husband. How did you deduce that, Mr. Swanson?"

Swanson told him. "Well, she was wearing a wedding ring. And once when she was kissing Cary goodbye in the hall, our door happened to be open and we heard her say she wished she could stay longer, but if she didn't get home and have Herman's supper ready by the time he got home, he would be apt to be suspicious."

Connie's voice was shrill. "You lie! You lie! You nasty old man. You lie!"

Mr. Swanson adjusted the volume of his hearing aid. Please, miss. Why should I lie?"

Purvis dismissed the old man. "Thank you, Mr. Swanson. We'll want to talk to you, again. But that will be all for now. I'll have one of you boys drive you home."

"Thank *you*," Mr. Swanson said. He looked timidly out the window at the wall of night. "I don't like to be out so late, alone."

Jim left the office with him. He had been fair. For my sake. For Connie's sake. Jim had bent over backwards trying to be fair. Now there was only one thing he could do. He should have done it hours before. Take Connie down to Centre Street and book her on suspicion of homicide. But Jim had wanted me to be satisfied.

Fietzel was eager to phone his paper, but he wanted his story straight. "Well—?" he asked again.

I knelt on the floor beside Connie's chair and tilted her chin with one finger. She tried to smile, but all that happened was her lips working. She touched them, her tear-stained cheeks, her disordered hair with the trembling fingers of one hand. Scared as she was, she wanted to be beautiful for me.

I lit a cigarette and put it between her lips. It made her look delightfully wanton. If Connie could look wanton. And she could look wanton, for me. You married a dame. Then what? Then all your troubles began. All of your happiness, too. Until something like this happened.

"You do it, Connie?" I asked her. "You kill Cary?"

She shook her head at me. "No."

"You sleep with the guy?"

The cigarette bobbed as she talked. "You know better than that, Herman." More tears trickled down her cheeks. "How could I stay with any other man, feeling the way I do about you?"

"The last thing you remember, you were sitting at Meyer's fountain, having a cherry coke?"

"The last thing I remember I was sitting at Meyer's fountain having a cherry coke."

"You'd never been in Cary's apartment before to-night?"

The smoke was getting in her eyes. I took the cigarette out of her mouth. Her look begged me to believe her.

"I'd never been in Cary's apartment before tonight."

"You didn't give him your picture?"

"No."

"You don't know how your clothes got in his apartment?"

"No."

I sucked smoke into my lungs and blew it back at her, gently, never taking my eyes from hers. If Connie was lying she was better at it than anyone I'd ever met.

"*Hi, beautiful,*" I'd named her.

"*Well, the Law,*" she'd said. "*The cop on the beat in plain clothes.*"

For better or for worse, I'd promised. And now was one of the times. A time when only the one thing I didn't have left would help us, faith. A time when I had to believe in my love with the same blind faith with which I believed in God.

"Tell me," I told Connie.

She touched my cheek with her fingertips. "I didn't," she told me. "I didn't. Believe me, Herman."

Jim Purvis returned to the office. "So—?" he asked.

I got to my feet. "I'm standing by Connie," I told him.

Purvis said, "But the evidence, Herman—"

I stopped him there. "To hell with the evidence. Connie hasn't been having an affair with Cary. She didn't kill him. This whole thing has been rigged."

"By whom?"

"I don't know."

"Why? Why should anyone frame Connie?"

I admitted, "I don't know that either."

"And her signed picture?"

"I don't know how he got it."

Jim Purvis persisted, impersonal, cold, the Law. "And the testimony of an unbiased witness that she has visited

Cary three or four times a week for the past six months?"

I said, "I don't believe she has. And I don't give a damn who says so."

Purvis snuffed his cigarette, "I'm going to have to book her, Herman."

"Yeah. Sure. I know," I said.

I helped Connie to her feet. Gently. With love. Not like a cop. Like a husband. Her eyes continued to search mine.

I gave it to her straight. "Let's face it, Red. You're in a bad spot. Jim is going to have to take you down to Centre Street. There's nothing I can do to save you that."

I tilted her chin and kissed her. "Things are tough. They're going to get a lot tougher. Smart cops are going to dig into every corner of your life and mine. You're going to be questioned for hours. The District Attorney's office is going to indict you for murder. You're going to be a headline in the newspapers—for days. *Detective's Wife Kills Boy Friend in Greenwich Village Love Nest.*" I looked at Abe Fietzel. "Every newspaper in town is going to try you and find you guilty. Guilty of being unfaithful to me. Guilty of killing Cary. But you haven't been and you didn't. You say so. I believe you."

Abe said, "For God sake, Herman—"

"Shut up and go write your story," I told him. I kissed Connie's hair. "Jim's going to have to take you now, honey. It's Jim's job. But I want you to remember two things."

Connie's fingers dug into my back. "Yes—?"

"While you're going through what you're going to have to go through, I'll be working to bring you home. And you're not to worry, see?"

Connie's fingers dug even deeper. Her breasts thrust out until her smart dress fitted her again. Her lower lip still quivered but the dull light was gone from her eyes. They glowed like stars, wet sea-blue in the white of her face.

"I see," Connie breathed. The tips of her fingers but-

terfled across my cheek. "I see," she repeated. "And I won't worry now."

So I was being a fool. I was her husband.
I'd made a promise.

Chapter Three

I rode with Connie in the squad car, the tires making a soft sucking sound on the pavement. The young couples were gone from the walks. The punks had holed up for the night. The kids had gotten their drinks of water, the husbands what they wanted. Lower Manhattan lay sodden with sleep.

Neither Connie nor I spoke on the way down to Centre Street. I stood with one arm around her, while she was being booked. Jim felt like hell about it. It showed in his face.

"Take good care of her, fellow," I told him.

"You know I will, Herman," he said.

Connie was worried because she didn't have a nightgown. I told her I'd pack a bag with the things she'd

need, and what they would let her have, and bring it down to the Tombs in the morning. Then I kissed her goodbye and walked out into the hall. I was damned if I could watch a steel door close on her.

Jim called after me, "Herman."

I ignored him and went on.

Old man Hanson was on the cage. "Working late, eh, Herman?" he asked me. "How come? Some dame kill her sweetie, or something?"

I looked at the old man, sharp. All he was doing was asking a question. He evidently hadn't heard, or, if he had, he hadn't connected Connie with me. And that was a laugh. If so, he was the only man in the building, perhaps in the entire section of the Force who didn't know that "Herman The Great" had tripped over a pair of horns. The guys who liked me were sorry. The bastards who didn't were gloating.

"Yeah. So they say," I told Hanson.

Inspector Grady was standing on the worn stone stoop. Filling his lungs with spring. As I passed between the twin green lights, he lifted his cigar at me. "Hi, son."

I stopped. To be polite. Out of respect to the brass. Because I didn't know just what I was going to do. Telling Connie not to worry was one thing. Doing something about it was another matter. What evidence there was, was all against her. I'd sent men to the chair on less.

Grady returned his cigar to his mouth. "Tough about your wife, Herman."

"Yeah. Tough," I agreed with him. I took my winter-worn Borsalino from my head and examined it critically. It could stand a good cleaning and blocking job. On the other hand, it wouldn't be long before I'd have to buy a straw hat.

"It happens," Inspector Grady said. "Like the fellow says, in the best of families. A shame there ain't some kind of a meter a guy can put on a wife to tell if she's running up mileage on him."

I said I would take Connie's word.

Grady talked around his cigar. "She's still got you fooled, eh, Herman?"

I returned my hat to my head. "Just what do you mean by that?" I remembered who he was and added, tardily, "Inspector."

"Just what I said," Grady told me.

I put my hands in my pockets. To keep from cuffing the brass and maybe winding up in front of a trial board. "Okay. Let it go at that. She still has me fooled."

I started on down the stairs. Grady caught my arm. "You still believe the song and dance she gave Jim, huh?" Grady mimicked a woman's voice. "The last thing I knew I was drinking a coke at the fountain." He resumed his cracked baritone. "You ever hear of anyone passing out on Coca Cola?"

"No," I admitted.

Grady released my arm. "I know. It hurts, son. Deep down where you live. To think a woman could do such a thing to you. But forget her. She isn't worth blowing your top about. No cheating wife is. Take a couple of days off. Take a week. Get drunk and raise hell with some broad. Dames are all alike. Believe me, Herman. I know."

I spat my cigarette at the stone steps. It died in a shower of sparks. "Connie wasn't cheating," I said. "And she didn't kill Cary. She was framed."

"Why?" Grady asked.

"I don't know," I admitted.

"By whom was she framed?"

"You have me there."

"What was their motive?"

"I don't know."

Grady pushed his hat back on his head. "Oh, for God's sake, Herman. Don't be like that. People will think you aren't bright." The old man included all of greater Manhattan in the arc his arm described. "It happens out there every night. A thousand times a night. In good hotels and cheap ones. In the back seats of cars. In bushes. In offices.

In hallways. In cold water walk-ups. On Central Park South. And the husband is never the wiser until something happens, like happened to Connie tonight. She quarreled with Cary and shot him."

I walked on down the steps.

"Okay," Grady called after me. "Make a fool of yourself. But don't expect the department to help you. Hell. Every man on Manhattan West knew what was going on—except you."

I turned on the stairs. "That's a goddamn lie."

Grady answered as hotly. "It's the truth. I could have told you five months ago that something like this was going to happen. Look. I know just how you younger men feel about me. You think I'm a dried up old Irish bastard with vinegar in my veins. But if my blood is vinegar, forty years of dealing with tarts and cheats and killers have turned it. Look, my boy, I was an inspector while you were still herding nanny goats out in Canarsie. And while you, undoubtedly, have heard a lot of things about me in every squad room in the borough, none of them good, did you ever hear anyone ever say I was a liar?"

"No," I admitted.

The old man returned his hat to his head and his cigar to his mouth. "Okay. On at least six separate occasions, I saw Connie and Cary together. Me. Myself. With my own eyes. And I still have twenty-twenty vision. Check with Lindy. At the Brass Rail. At the High Hat Club. With Eddie Guinness."

Grady turned and re-entered the building. I stood on the stairs a moment, then crossed the walk to the curb. One of the boys had driven my car to the Bureau from its parking spot near Cary's Grove Street address. It was standing in a zone reserved for official cars. Some eager beaver had tied a parking violation ticket to the steering wheel. I ripped the ticket from the spindle and dropped it to the pavement. The wheel was still filmed with dusting powder. As I recalled the report, the fingerprint men

had been unable to find any print but Connie's on the wheel.

I climbed in and sat down in back of the wheel. My throat felt sore. My head ached. My eyes burned. I felt like I had Virus X. Only it was Virus Connie. When I closed my eyes to rest them, I could still see Connie's smeared, moving lips, red against her white face, as she screamed:

"I don't give a goddamn about the medical report. I haven't been unfaithful to Herman. I wouldn't. I couldn't. I'd rather die first. And if I was violated, it was done while I was unconscious."

A likely story. Fresh out of a lying dame's mouth. Sweat beaded on my cheeks and forehead. I patted at it with my breast pocket handkerchief. How big a fool could a man six-feet-two, weighing two-hundred pounds be? How blind? How dumb? No wonder Jim and Cork and Abe and Monte and Assistant District Attorney Havers had acted as they had. They knew the score. They'd known it all the time. Afternoons and nights when I'd been working, Connie had been playing house with Cary. For the last six months.

Like Inspector Grady had said. It happened every night, three hundred and sixty-five nights a year. In good hotels and cheap ones. To guys who lived in cold water walk-ups and guys who paid a thousand a month for a suite on Central Park South. Why should a homicide detective living on upper Riverside Drive be any exception?

The sick feeling went away. I began to get sore, thinking how I'd been chumped. And I'd told Connie not to worry, that I loved and trusted her. I opened the door of the car to go back and confront her with what Grady had told me. I thought better of it. What good would it do? All she would do, would be to lie some more.

I thought, *The hell with it.* The thing for me to do was take Inspector Grady's advice. I'd take a few days off. I'd go somewhere and get boiled. I'd phone one of the dames who were always throwing themselves at my bulk and

check into a hotel with her. And I wouldn't get out of the sack for a week. So Connie had made a chump of me. So what?

The early morning wind was soft on my cheek. Like the touch of Connie's fingertips. So what? The answer to that was elemental. So plenty. I didn't want to get drunk. I didn't want to check into a hotel with some hot-tongued little push-over. I didn't want to check into a hotel with anyone. All I wanted was to be alone somewhere. Some place where I could put my head in my arms and bawl.

I looked in the rear vision mirror. Me, "Herman The Great," bawling. *And would I look silly*, I thought.

I started the car and drove automatically, not knowing where I was going, not caring and wound up in the market section. Here the new day was old. Trucks filled with produce rumbled over the cobbles. There were lights and movement and sound. Men were bargaining over sacks of potatoes, onions, crates of lettuce, tomatoes, artichokes. Restaurant men and storekeepers looked at barrels of frozen chickens or squatted on the walk to examine squawking crates of live ones. There was a hole in the line of cars and trucks, in front of a Coffee Pot. I backed into it, my mind on a cup of coffee.

I slid over on the seat and opened the car door on the curb side. As I did, a big paper sack of groceries spilled out on the walk. Annoyed, I picked them up and put them back in the sack. There was a veal steak, a beef heart, a head of lettuce, some potatoes, a cauliflower, along with an assortment of canned goods.

I put the rest of it back in the sack, but stood holding the unwrapped beef heart in one hand, ignoring the blood that smeared my coat and dripped down my pants leg.

Boiled or baked with stuffing, beef heart was one of my favorite dishes. But Connie couldn't go it. She had to gag it down. She said it was because it was cheap and filling that they had served beef heart at the orphanage in which she had been raised. They'd served it so often

that, even as a little girl, she had sworn if she ever had a home of her own, she would never have beef heart in her kitchen. Still, because I liked it, Connie served it often.

The big veins in my temples beginning to pound, I reconstructed Connie's afternoon. After leaving the blood bank where she'd given a pint of blood, on her way to two-time me with another man, Connie had stopped to shop and had purchased, among other things, a beef heart.

It didn't make sense. It wasn't logical. Two-timing dames just didn't do such things. A dame on her way to grow horns on her husband would be much more apt to stop at the beauty parlor. To make herself pretty for the boy friend.

I shook my head from side to side. "Uh, uh," I told myself. "Oh, no."

Water on Inspector Grady. It just couldn't be, no matter how many times Grady thought he had seen Connie with Cary. No matter how much evidence there was against her.

Connie was a beautiful, passionate girl. With flaming natural red hair. What she did, she did to the best of her physical ability. Not once in the ten years we'd been married had I ever heard her say no to me. There were no half measures with Connie. She went the whole hog or none. If Connie had wanted to sleep with Lyle Cary, she wouldn't have sneaked up to his apartment during the afternoon, after she shopped for my supper. She would have slept with him every night, all night long and to hell with Herman Stone.

Somewhere in the market, in the gray of dawn, a crated rooster crowed. I looked over my shoulder at the sound.

Me and another guy, I thought.

Who was I, to doubt?

I re-wrapped the beef heart carefully and put it on top of the other groceries. Then, sliding behind the wheel, I ground the starter of the car.

To hell with what Inspector Grady had seen or thought he had seen. To hell with the evidence against Connie. There were times in a man's life when he had to go it blind. There were times when he had to believe.

This was one of the times.

Chapter Four

The wind off the Hudson was cool. Standing on his front stoop with his old-fashioned white night shirt flapping around his ankles, Meyers looked more like an owl than a man. An owl wearing thick-lensed silver-rimmed glasses.

"Yes. That's right, Officer Stone," he admitted. "Just like I told the other officers, Mrs. Stone was in my store yesterday afternoon."

"What time was this?" I asked him.

The druggist thought a moment. "I would say about four o'clock." He bobbed his bald head. "Yes. I remember now. It was five minutes of four. I remember I looked at the clock. She wanted a carton of Camels and we

didn't have them on account the tobacco man was late, but I told her I expected him any minute. So Mrs. Stone said she would wait."

"Who else was in the store?"

Meyers spread his hands in apology. "How should I remember, Mr. Stone? All day long, in and out, people are coming and going. How else should I make a living?"

"In other words, you haven't the least idea who was in the store?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"You didn't see Connie go out?"

Meyers rubbed his nose. "No, I can't say I did. Right about then I was busy with some prescriptions." He thought a minute. "But come to think of it, I believe that Mrs. Stone picked a magazine out of the rack and walked over to the soda fountain." His tone was wistful. "I should sell all the magazines the people are reading at my fountain."

I loosened the knot in my tie. So far so good. Connie didn't smoke. The butts in Cary's apartment had been Murads, even those that were stained with lipstick. The Camels had been for me. Connie admitted drinking a coke at the fountain. So far her story held up.

I asked Meyers the name of his fountain man.

"Simpson," Meyers told me. "By the first name of Carl."

"And his address?"

The little druggist shook his head. "That I couldn't tell you, Officer Stone. Not standing out here on the stoop. And at the store the address I have on his Social Security record is here in the neighborhood somewhere. But only recently he is moving to a hotel. Down in the Times Square district. I don't remember the name."

I asked him how long Simpson had been with him.

Meyers shrugged. "Two months. Maybe nine weeks. Possibly even ten. You know how fountain men are. They come. They go." Meyers had heard the midnight newscast. "But, look, Officer Stone. Mrs. Stone wasn't drugged in my store if that is why you are here, waking me up at

four-thirty in the morning. No drugs are kept back of the fountain. This I will positively swear. Besides —" Meyers shrugged and left it there.

I caught a handful of night shirt. "Keep right on talking, fellow. Besides—what?"

Meyers wet his lips with his tongue. "Well, into my place they never came together. I would have said, 'For shame, Mrs. Stone.' But together with this man I have seen Mrs. Stone many times."

I slapped him with the back of my hand. "You lie."

Meyers stood his ground. "Fight you, I cannot. You are too big. Besides, you are an officer. But lie I will not do. Many times I have seen this man meet Mrs. Stone on the corner by my drug store. And once when Mrs. Meyers and I are having night lunch after we have seen a movie, we are meeting them together in the Brass Rail. Up on the balcony. At a table in the corner, holding hands."

I released his night shirt. "You're positive of that?"

Meyers raised one palm. "As God is my Judge."

I was damned if I knew what to think. I said, "Okay. I'm sorry I slapped you."

Meyers patted my arm. "It's forgotten, Officer Stone. Such things are happening all the time. But I know how you must feel."

He closed the door in my face. I stood a moment looking at the rising mist hanging over the river. It was going to be a hot day. I walked slowly down the stairs and across the yellow puddle formed by the street light to my car. There was something awfully screwy somewhere. For a home-loving girl, who'd never once failed to be home when I returned, Connie, if all the witnesses were to be believed, had certainly found a lot of time for extra-marital adventure. Doubt began to nag at my mind again. Could be I was wrong. Could be Connie was more clever than I gave her credit for being.

I looked at my watch. The Brass Rail and Lindy's were closed. But there was a chance that Eddie Guinness

might still be open. Eddie traded on the fact that he had a lot of police patronage.

I drove back down Riverside Drive, angled into Columbus Circle, then drove down Broadway to Times Square. There was little or no traffic on the streets, with the exception of the sanitation trucks. It was too late for the bar crowd, too early for the morning workers. Nick Casaras, a plainclothes man working out of the 47th Street station, was standing under the marque of the Astor Hotel. I stopped my car and beckoned to him.

"Do me a favor, will you, Nick?"

Casaras leaned on the open window. "I'll be glad to, Herman."

I said, "Put out a wire on a punk named Carl Simpson. As I recall him, he's about five feet nine or ten. In his early twenties. Mouse brown hair. Slicked back. A sharpie. Currently working as fountain man at Meyer's Pharmacy up on One Hundred and Eighty Second. He's supposed to be living in one of the hotels in this district."

Casaras smiled, white-toothed. "Consider him in the bag. You want me to pull him in or just put the arm on him?"

I said, "The arm will be sufficient. I'll call you at home after you go off duty."

"I'll be there," Casaras said. His smile faded slightly. "Everything okay with you, Herman?"

"As right as it can be, under the circumstances."

"Nothing any of us can do?"

I shook my head. "No. But thanks for the thought, Nick. I won't forget it."

I drove on, down deserted Seventh Avenue to the Village and parked a few doors from Eddie Guinness' Club Sixty. The street was red with dawn but three or four cars were still parked in front of the club. I pushed the front door open and walked in. The band was gone. A porter was busily stacking tables. Four men and three women were leaning against the bar in a state of alcoholic suspension.

Two of the women ignored me. They were interested only in each other. One of the men turned around and ran his hand over his hip. The third woman, a pretty kid in her teens, caught at my arm as I passed her.

"Hello, honey," she breathed. She pressed her thigh against mine in drunken persuasion. "How would you like to buy me a drink?"

I shook her hand off my arm. Rags Hanlon and two of his boys were standing a few feet up the bar. A big, good-looking lad who'd misused a college education to make him a lot of dough in this racket and that, Hanlon showed me his teeth.

"Hi, there, Herman," he grinned. "I hear that lovely red-haired wife of yours ran into a little trouble tonight."

I neither liked nor disliked Hanlon. But the department had wanted his hide for a long time, without ever even coming close. I didn't say anything. He added:

"You'd think a dame would be satisfied with a big handsome cop like you. But I guess Cary had something special, huh?"

I hit him so hard he bounced off the bar like a yo yo, then followed his string to the floor, bleeding at the mouth and nose. From back of the bar, Guinness said, "For God's sake, Herman. Rags didn't mean nothing. He's drunk."

I looked at the two punks with Hanlon. "Pay his tab. Then pick him up and get him out of here. And when he comes to, you tell him this for me. When he sees me on his side of street, he's to cross over."

One of the punks started to sound off, thought better of it. "Just as you say, Stone," he said. He laid a bill on the bar and he and the lad with him helped Hanlon out the door, conscious now and cursing.

The good-looking teen-ager sucked in her breath. "Brother, could I go for you," she told me.

I walked on to the end of the bar. A fat man with a double chin, Guinness followed me back of the wood,

the duck boards creaking as he walked. At the round of the bar, we both stopped and looked at each other.

"Look, now," the fat man said. "So you're the law. So you're sore at me, too, Herman. I don't want any trouble with you. Maybe I should have tipped you. But put yourself in my place. I figure she's red-haired and over twenty-one and what she does is her own business."

I said, "In other words, Connie's been in here with Lyle Cary."

"Lots of times."

"How often?"

Guinness' double chin bobbed. "At least two afternoons a week. And an evening or two. Starting as of about five months ago."

"When was the last time?"

Guinness thought a moment. "Two nights ago. They had a big scene in here. She wants to adjourn to his apartment and Cary don't wanna. See?"

I checked back mentally. I'd worked till three o'clock in the morning Tuesday. On about the same kind of deal I'd handed Nick Casaras.

"Why?" I asked Guinness.

"As I get it," Guinness said, "Cary is getting tired of her, see?" He reached a bottle of rye and a shot glass from the back bar and set them convenient to my hand. "Cary has a new interest. The singer with my band. But Mrs. Stone isn't having it that way. She takes aboard maybe eight drinks. Then she picks up a bottle and informs him she will bash in his head if he tries to run out on her."

"You told Jim Purvis that?"

Guinness looked surprised. "Hell, yes. Hours ago. He and Monte were in sometime before midnight."

I poured myself a drink. "What happened then? I mean between her and Cary?"

Guinness said, "He laughed it off. But from what Jim and Monte tell me and from what I read in the morning

paper, I guess that's what she done. Only she used a gun instead of a bottle."

The rye tasted good. I weighted it with a second drink. "You're sure it was my Connie?"

The fat man was apologetic. "Well, I've never been introduced personal by you to your wife. But Inspector Grady is in here one night when they're swapping gum in a corner and he says isn't it a goddamn shame and how you'd probably kill both of them if you knew. And two or three of the other boys who know both of you make almost the same comment."

I poured a third drink. And that would seem to be it. A man could only believe so far. After all, white is white and black is black, and cheating wives are a dime a dozen. In New York, Chicago, San Francisco and all way points in between. Even as far back as the Bible.

I felt heat against my thigh. The little blonde had moved down the bar. She had a nice little body. She wouldn't be bad at all. Perhaps if I could get drunk enough, she could help me forget Connie.

She rubbed her thigh against mine. "Know something, mister. I like you."

"Ixnay," Guinness warned her. "He's the law."

"So?" the girl asked. "Since when don't cops do it?"

I told Guinness to give her a drink.

He poured her an ounce of Bourbon. "Besides," he continued our conversation, "I got eyes and ears of my own. The dame's got red hair. Cary calls her Connie. And one night when he's stinko he boasts to me what a chance he's taking, playing around with a detective's wife, although he doesn't mention any names."

The little blonde continued to rub against me like an amorous alley cat. "Let's go up to my room," she suggested. "I've always wanted to make love to a six-foot-two, two-hundred-pound detective with a broken nose."

Guinness poured her another drink, and returned the Bourbon bottle to the back bar. "Look. While you're here, you can take it with you, Herman. I meant to give it to

Jim Purvis. But we have a convention of queers in here about then, and what with two of the girls getting into a hair-pulling match, I forget all about it."

"All about what?" I asked him.

Guinness opened a door in the back bar and took out a familiar looking white leather purse. "This." He laid it on the bar beside the bottle of rye. "Your wife left it in here Tuesday night. I suppose on account of she's so upset over her scene with Cary." Guinness leaned over the bar and confided, "You know why they say women went for him in such a big way, Herman? You know how they say he did it?"

"No," I said, sharply. "And I don't want to."

I felt as if I were wading in slime. The rye rode uneasily in my stomach. The blonde continued to rub her thigh against mine.

"Well, you know what I mean," Guinness said.

I opened the white leather purse. I'd bought it as an anniversary present for Connie. There was a small rat-tailed comb with red hair in the teeth, a compact, three five dollars bills, six ones and some silver. There were also light and cleaner's bills made out to Mr. Herman Stone. Plus the monthly statement from Macy's.

I returned its contents to the purse and filled my glass again. Having blind faith was fine—in theory. But all cats arched their backs when their fur was stroked the right way, and there were some walls a man couldn't climb.

The girl kept on picking at me. "Why don't we?"

I drank my drink and refilled my glass. Guinness' chins bobbed as he nodded his approval. "That's it. Go ahead, Herman. Get stiff. I know how you must feel. And on account of maybe I should have tipped you, everything's on the house." He looked at the teen-aged drunk on the far side of the bar from him. "Even, if you want it, a chick-a-dee I was saving for myself."

"He means me," she smiled.

"I may take you up," I told Guinness. I raised my glass to my lips and set it down so hard, the false bottom

cracked and rye spilled all over the bar. I brushed the glass aside and caught Guinness by the front of his shirt. "Wait a minute. How many drinks did you say Connie had when she was in here Tuesday night?"

Guinness looked at me, puzzled. "Eight or nine, maybe even more. Why?"

"What was she drinking?"

"Straight rye."

I started to grin and couldn't stop. The grin spread all over my face. I released Guinness' shirt and screwed the cap back on the rye bottle.

"Why?" Guinness repeated. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I told him. "Everything's just swell."

I patted the little blonde where she wanted to be patted and walked down the bar toward the door, alone. For the first time in hours, I felt like Herman Stone. The Herman Stone married to Connie Stone. Now I had more faith to go on. I also had fact.

Inspector Grady and Mr. Meyers had seen a red-haired girl with Cary. Guinness had heard a red-haired girl threaten Cary's life. Mr. Swanson had seen a red-haired girl climb Lyle Cary's stairs. Her resemblance to Connie must be striking. But whoever the girl was, she wasn't Connie. She couldn't be.

I stood on the walk in front of the club, watching dawn sweep up the street. I should have known from the blood test. Gilly had said that Connie was stinking drunk. But almost anyone with a head could carry a point one seven seven. Anyone but Connie. Connie didn't drink. She couldn't. Her lack of physical tolerance for alcohol was such that a full glass of beer made her blind.

There could be only one explanation. Somewhere in New York, there was a red-haired girl who'd been at home on Lyle Cary's mattress. A big girl. A pretty girl. A red-haired girl who looked and walked and talked and acted enough like Connie to pass for Connie.

And who, for some reason, had.

Chapter Five

There was nothing sinister looking about the three-story gray stone front. Once there had been a lawn and trees. That had been a long time ago. Now it stood surrounded by progress. Apartment buildings dwarfed it on three sides. The top floor windows overlooked the cooling system of the two-story Buccaneer Club.

I stood in the brightening sun looking up at the building. The windows of the first and third floor apartments were dark but there was a light in the Swanson apartment.

I climbed the stairs to the third floor. A uniformed patrolman was reading a morning paper in the hallway outside the dead man's rooms. He was sitting balanced on the back legs of one chair, with a steaming cup of coffee and a plate of home-made sugar biscuits on a second chair beside him.

"All the comforts of home, eh?" I said.

The patrolman got to his feet, embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant. I didn't hear you come up the stairs."

I lit a cigarette and leaned against the wall. "How long have you been on the Force, fellow?"

The patrolman was even more embarrassed. "Almost a year, sir."

I said, "The name is Stone. Officer Stone. Mr. Stone. But cut out the lieutenant business or someone will think you're brown-nosing. There are no Homicide lieutenants. Only First Grade Detectives who draw lieutenants' pay."

He buttoned the top button of his tunic. "Yes, sir."

I motioned at the feed on the chair. "Where'd the coffee and biscuits come from?"

"From downstairs, sir," he said. "The old lady brought 'em up. This is the closest they've ever been to a murder, see? And they're so excited they can't sleep. They see the dame come up here time after time. They figure she's a married woman. They know Cary must be laying her. Then when she—" The patrolman realized, tardily, that he was talking about my wife. His face got the color of a May Day rally in Union Square. He tried to think of something to say and couldn't. Apologizing would only make it worse.

I opened the door and walked past him into the apartment. I'd seen two hundred like it but it was the first one to depress me. I switched on the light and studied the living room.

Cary's business had been women. He'd made money at his trade. The living room was large and tastefully furnished. A wood-burning fireplace took up almost half of one wall. There was also a bedroom, a kitchen and a bath.

I walked on into the bedroom. It was more of a mess than it had been the first time I'd seen it. There were used flash bulbs in the basket. All plane surfaces were white with dusting powder. The stained sheets had been removed from the bed. There was a chalked outline where Cary's body had lain. I spat in the middle of the outline.

It was difficult not to see Connie in the room, as I had seen her on my arrival with the squad. We'd gotten a call from Charles Street. A homicide at such and such an address. And what had I found? Connie. Connie wearing one shoe and Pete's uniform coat, exposing herself every

time she moved, her breasts, her person, her legs. And too drunk to know the difference. With her dress and underthings scattered all over the floor, including the silver fox cape I still owed plenty on.

More, Jim had refused to allow her to dress until the M.E. had examined her. Routine procedure, but personal this time.

"Well?" Jim had asked when the M.E. and the matron had come out of the bedroom with Connie sobbing between them.

And the M.E. had told us. Casual. No skin off his nose. While he'd washed his hands in the bathroom—

"Blood on her right thigh, hand, abdomen. The young lady says not, but she's had relations with a man recently. Possibly more than once. I'd say within the last two hours. No external sign of force."

The glow I'd gotten in Guinness' faded. My head began to ache again. Maybe Connie had foxed me on the liquor deal. Maybe she hadn't wanted me to know that she could drink. Her story just didn't hold up. Unless a girl was in a drunken stupor or had been drugged unconscious, she knew when she'd been with a man. I looked at the spot on the wall where Connie admitted being sick. And Connie had not been drugged. At least, according to the lab report. The report had stated there was no trace of chloral.

My cigarette burned my fingers. I lighted a fresh one from the stub. On the other hand, Lyle Cary having an affair with Connie didn't make sense either. Cary made his living off women. And Connie had nothing to give him but her body.

I wished to God I knew what to think. I wished I could stay on one side of the fence or the other.

The beef heart, the alleged wait for cigarettes, her claim of not remembering, could all be part of a clever cover. After all, our car had been parked in front of the building, with only Connie's fingerprints on the wheel.

Gilly and Mack had to break into the apartment. The door had been locked from the inside.

Connie *had* to be guilty. No two women looked that much alike, alike enough to fool a tough cop like Grady. Connie and Cary had come to the apartment. Cary had locked the door so they wouldn't be interrupted. Both of them had stripped. They'd had a party. Maybe a couple of parties, according to the M.E. Then they'd begun to quarrel and Connie had picked up a gun and—

I walked to the open window and sucked in lungful of air, wishing my heart would stop pounding so hard. It was full day now. I stood looking at a rusted fire escape ladder a few inches from the bedroom window. Someone could have used it to kill Cary. Who? It led down to the ground. Anyone could have used it. Anyone in New York. Anyone of eight million people.

I forced myself to breathe normally. I fought for faith. Whoever was behind this would figure I would feel this way, the way any man in love with his wife would feel. They wanted the smoke in my eyes to turn to blood. They wanted me to believe the evidence, not Connie.

Jim Purvis thought she was guilty. Abe Fietzel thought she was guilty. Inspector Grady thought she was guilty. Assistant District Attorney Havers thought she was guilty. Connie was just another cheating wife. It happened every night, three hundred and sixty-five nights a year. Once I withdrew my support, the rest would be routine. It would be the State of New York versus Connie Stone. With the odds nine to two in favor of the State.

I wanted to talk to Connie alone. After she'd had some rest. I wanted to talk to Joey Simpson. If Connie was leveling with me, the soda jerk would seem to be the keynote to the case. Connie had had a coke at the fountain and wound up in Lyle Cary's apartment. Only Joey's first name was Carl. According to Mr. Meyers. I wiped the sweat from my face with a sodden handkerchief, wondering why I thought of the fountain man as Joey.

I found the phone, dialed 47th Street and asked the sergeant on the desk if Nick Casaras had reported out.

"No, he hasn't, Herman," the desk sergeant told me. "Funny, too. Nick usually calls in on the hour and he's fifteen minutes overdue. You want I should have him call you back?"

I said that wasn't necessary, that I would give Nick a ring at home, after he went off duty. "But tell me, Paddy—?"

"Yeah?" Paddy said.

I asked, "Why should I connect the first name Joey to the last name Simpson?"

Paddy told me. "On account of Joey Simpson is the slimy little pimp we sneezed about six months ago. You know, Herman. The one who was mixed up in that hundred-dollar-a-night call girl racket."

"Oh, yes," I remembered. "What was the disposition of his case, Paddy?"

"There you have me," Paddy said. "You'll have to check with downtown, Herman."

I hung up and stood holding the phone a moment. Then I set it back on the table and walked out into the hall. I wanted a bath and a change of clothes before I talked to Connie. I'd also have to pack some clothing for her. All the kid had was her dress and her shoes. Jim had sent the rest to the laboratory. She was probably embarrassed as hell. With no slip, and no panties. Or was she? After all, I'd picked her out of a dime-a-dance joint.

"*You're the first man in my life,*" she'd told me. "*And the only one.*"

I tried to hang on to the thought.

The uniformed patrolman was standing stiffly against the wall. I asked him what his name was. He told me, "Pete Mitchell, sir."

I said, "Sit down, Pete. And don't pay any attention to me. I'm not responsible this morning."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," he said. Like I was an inspector or something.

I walked down the stairs. As I reached the second floor landing, the door of the Swanson apartment opened and a prim little old lady looked out.

"Pardon me," she stopped me. "You're Officer Stone, aren't you, sir?"

I turned on the stairs. "That's right."

"The husband of the pretty red-haired girl who killed Mr. Cary?"

I corrected her. "Who is accused of killing Cary."

Her smile was sweet and sad. "Of course," she said. She laid her hand on my arm. "And I just wanted you to know that we're so sorry. If there's anything we can do—"

She left it there. I thought a moment. This was one of the witnesses that the State would call against Connie. I took off my hat and mopped the sweat band with my handkerchief. "Look, Mrs. Swanson," I said. "Over at the Charles Street Station your husband flatly identified my wife as the girl who has been visiting Cary's apartment two or three afternoons a week for almost six months."

Color crept into the old lady's cheeks. "Well, living so close, we couldn't help but meet her on the stairs now and then. And once in awhile, especially now the weather has turned warm, we'd have our door open and she had to pass right by to get to the third floor stairs. But we didn't know who she was. That is, we didn't know her name until last night."

I took a picture from my wallet. "And you'll swear this is the girl you saw?"

The old lady shook her head, still smiling. "Mercy me, I'll have to go get my glasses. Won't you step in, Officer Stone."

The apartment was a duplicate of the one on the floor above only more plainly furnished. Swanson had to work for his money. The bedroom door was ajar. Mrs. Swanson closed it.

"Charlie just dropped off to sleep," she explained. Her

smile grew sadder. "But I can't sleep for thinking of your poor wife." The old lady hunted for her glasses. "What fools women make of themselves. For the life of me I can't see how any girl with a nice husband and a nice home can—" Mrs. Swanson broke off, embarrassed. "But as Charlie would say, I'm talking too much." She found her glasses and looked at the picture I had given her. "Yes," she said, emphatically. "This is the girl we saw."

I said, "It couldn't have been some other red-haired girl who resembled her?"

Mrs. Swanson studied the picture again. "No," she said. "I'm sorry. But this is the girl." She pointed to a tiny mole on the curve of Connie's chin. "I remember that beauty mark, distinctly."

And that was that. I put the picture in my wallet and walked down the stairs. Morning was full in the yard, but the long hall leading through the apartment building in front to Grove Street was dark. I was halfway down the dark hall when it happened. It was at the intersection of an equally dark flight of stairs. The blow came from the right and behind me. I heard the sap before I felt pain. My hat flew from my head. I staggered forward and barked my face on the rough plaster as I hit the opposite wall.

"Wise guy," a man's voice said.

"No. Not so wise," somebody else said.

I was down on all fours in the hall. I threw myself on my side and tried to get at my gun. As I did, both of them kicked me. One foot grazed my jaw. I caught the other foot and rolled my weight against the leg to which it was attached. I distinctly heard the snap of a bone breaking. A man screamed in pain through gritted teeth. Then the sap landed again and again and again, beating my face into the dirt-smeared rubber tile.

When I came to, I was alone in the hall. Alone with an eight-year-old boy carrying a paper carton of milk and a big economy size package of breakfast food. When he saw my eyes open, he said, "You better not lie there,

mister. The cops are hell on drunks. They pinched my old man twice last week."

I got to my feet by leaning against the wall. Nothing seemed to be broken, but my gun, my shield, my wallet were gone. "You see anybody run out of the hall?" I asked the boy.

He shook his head at me. "Naw." He showed his interest. "Geez. You're all over blood. What's the matter? You get mugged or something?"

"Yeah. Or something," I agreed with him. I wove on, down the hall to the street door and fought it open. There were people on the walks now. Seventh Avenue was a steady stream of traffic. Trying to find the two guys who slugged me would be like trying to find a virgin in a marijuana pad. All I had heard was their voices. All I knew about them was that one of them had a broken leg. That much I knew. I'd heard the bone snap.

I staggered across the walk to my car, almost bowling over two work-bound shop girls.

"Whyn't you watch where you're going?" one of them asked.

"Geez. Is he stinko," the other one said.

I slid in back of the wheel and closed the door. There was a package of paper tissues in the glove compartment. I used most of them to mop the blood from my face. It could be I'd been mugged. Still, the accompanying conversation didn't seem to bear that out.

"*Wise guy*," one of the lads had said.

"*No. Not so wise*," his partner had answered.

Then, too, there was the matter of my gun and buzzer. A couple of punks on the prowl would have taken my wallet and let it go at that. Taking my gun and shield made it look more like Rags Hanlon's work. In payment for the punch in the face I'd given him in Eddie Guinness' bar. To embarrass me. To force me to make the toughest report any cop ever has to make:—

"*They took my gun and buzzer.*"

I was damned if I would.

Or could it be connected with Connie? Could it be someone who didn't want me to believe her? Could it be that by now, instead of nosing around asking questions, I was supposed to be getting even by tumbling some other dame, drowning my troubles in rye?

The thought made me feel a little better. Could be, I'd know after I'd talked to Meyer's fountain man. But right now, what I needed was a bath, another gun and some clean clothes.

I pulled out into the traffic and headed home.

Home. That was a laugh. My head began to ache again. I could taste salt and blood in my mouth.

No place would ever be home without Connie.

Chapter Six

A Manhattan muezzin was calling the faithful to prayer on the corner of 182nd Street. It was about what I'd expected, what I'd warned Connie she could expect. The boy was chanting—

"Murder—murder—murder—Waddya read? Read all

about it. City detective's wife kills boy friend in Village love nest."

I had a lone dime in my pocket. I used it to buy a paper. Connie's picture was on the front page, inscribed—

To Lyle

With all my love

Forever and always

Connie

The newsboy didn't know me. "Some babe, eh?" he enthused. "Wow. Just look at those bazooms on her. If I could drive a model like that for a year she could trade me in for a coffin."

I left the car where I'd parked it and walked on to the apartment, skimming through the story. Abe leaned over backwards, out of friendship. But a fact was a fact. And he had enough dope in his lead to send Connie to the chair. Cary had been seeing Connie for six months. Of late, he had begun to show interest in another woman and she had used a gun on him. I patted at the mixed sweat and blood on my face.

There was a black Caddy parked at curb in front of the apartment hotel into which we'd moved when I'd gotten my first big raise in pay. Living room, bedroom, kitchen and bath. With daily maid service. So Connie wouldn't have so much to do. And, brother, was that a laugh. The Caddy looked familiar. It was. Cork Avers was back of the wheel. When he saw me he said:

"For God's sake, what happened to you, Herman?"

I told him I'd run into a little trouble and asked if Jim was inside. Cork said he was. I walked up the three short marble steps into the foyer. Jim Purvis and Monte were talking to Mr. Halper, the manager. Monte repeated Cork Avers' question.

I said, "I ran into some fists down in the Village."

Jim asked, "Whose fists?"

I said, "I think a couple of Rags Hanlon's boys. If one

of his boys turns up with a busted leg, I'll know for sure." I lit a cigarette. "So what are you doing here?"

Jim told me. "Among other things, I want to talk to you. I also want to get a record of the calls Connie made."

I got a little hot. "You're hell to burn her, huh?"

Jim continued calm. "You know better than that, Herman." He turned back to Halper. "When could I talk to this Myra Wells?"

Halper said, "Right now. She has a single hotel room, up on the top floor." He looked at the blood on my face. "How would it be if I asked her to come to Officer Stone's suite?"

"Fine. That will be fine," Jim said.

I asked who Myra Wells was.

Mr. Halper said, "The day PBX operator, Mr. Stone. Miss Wells works the eight-to-four shift but, as she is a little indisposed this morning, she asked if the relief girl could fill in for her."

I led the way to the elevator. "What you want to talk to me about?" I asked Jim.

He told me. "You. I was worried about you, fellow. I know how you feel about Connie. And I was afraid you might do something foolish."

I said, "You mean like believing her story?"

Jim pushed his hat back on his head. "No," he said, quietly. "If you can, you go right on believing in Connie. I kinda like the kid myself. Remember? And I hope to God you're right and all the rest of us are wrong. But I've worked with you for eight years, Herman, and I know what a bull-headed Dutchman you can be. And in trying to pry Connie, I don't want you to get your own ass in a bigger sling than the rest of us can pry you out of."

I said. "I'll tell him when he comes in."

The apartment was on the fourth floor, the long front windows over-looking the Hudson. It was two steps down into the large living room, two steps up into the bedroom. It had taken two years pay to furnish it. It looked like a movie set. So what? It was the kind of a joint both

Connie and I had always wanted. Neither of us had ever had anything pretty before. I'd been raised in a cold-water walk-up in Yorkville. Connie had spent most of her kid days in an orphanage in Brooklyn. For the first time in our lives, we'd felt we were people. Now it was so much ash.

So Jim made a lot of talk. So he was my friend. I knew what he had come for. "Go ahead. Frisk it," I told him. "I won't force you to get a search warrant."

I opened the liquor cabinet, took out a bottle of rye and poured myself a drink.

"There's no use offering you guys one. On account of you're still on duty, working overtime, trying to nail Connie in the chair."

Monte was hurt. "Don't be like that, Herman."

I walked into the bedroom, found Connie's small overnight case and filled it with the things she'd need. Jim followed me into the bedroom and looked halfheartedly through the drawers of the Mr. and Mrs. dresser and Connie's dressing table. Not like he usually looked. Why should he bother? He had all the evidence he needed to fry Connie.

"If I were you, Herman," he told me, "I'd take a bath and get a little shut-eye. Connie won't need the case until night."

I asked him why.

He told me. "She's asleep. After I checked her into a cell I had Doctor Petersen give her a sedative and left strict orders that no one, including the District Attorney's office was to bother her for twelve hours."

He was the law. He was my friend. He was trying to be fair. I thanked him.

Jim continued. "Now about the rhubarb in the Village. Where'd it happen, Herman?"

I said, "In the hallway at the Grove Street address."

"They get any thing off you?"

I lied. "Only a little dough."

"Could be you were mugged," he said. "I'll drop a word

here and there. But how come you went to the Village?"

I said, "To talk to Eddie Guinness."

"And he told you—?"

I answered, "He gave me Connie's purse. One she was supposed to have left behind last Thursday night when she had a big scene with Cary. But Eddie also told me that Connie had eight drinks. And a half bottle of beer makes her blind." I caught his arm. "Look, Jim. You ever see Connie with Cary?"

He shook his head. "No."

I gave it to him straight, what I was hoping. "Now tell me this. Do you think there could be another red-haired dame in New York who looks enough like Connie to pass for her?"

Jim thought it over. "Could be. But why? Why should anyone want to frame the kid?"

I admitted, "I don't know."

"She got any dough?"

"Only what I give her."

"She know anything she shouldn't?"

I shook my head at him. "I doubt it. We were married when she was seventeen. And what she said down at Charles Street is so. I was the first guy to have her. And up until last night there's never been any question in my mind but that I was the only man in her life."

Jim sat on the edge of the bed. "I'll be goddamned if I know what to think."

I peeled off my coat and my shirt and laid them on the bench of Connie's dressing table. On one wing of the table there was the same picture of Connie that we'd found in Cary's apartment. Only this one was inscribed—

To Herman

Always and forever

Connie

I dropped my pants and stood in my shorts and socks. Jim repeated, "I will be. I feel just like you do, Her-

man. That if ever there was a square shooter, it's Connie. That is, up until four or five months ago, when some of the boys begin to tell me they have seen her here and there with Cary."

I reached into the bathroom and turned on the water in the shower. "So why didn't you tell me?"

Jim shrugged. "How do you tell a guy a thing like that?" He played the same record Eddie Guinness had played. "Besides, Connie's over twenty-one. It wasn't any of my business."

I peeled off my socks. "I wish to God you'd made it your business. Anyway, I'm going right on believing in Connie until—"

The door chime tinkled.

"Until what?" Purvis asked.

Before I could tell him, Monte called from the living room, "It's the Wells dame, Jim. The day PBX operator."

Jim walked out into the living room. I took a shower, as hot as I could stand it, then as cold. It made me feel some better but not much. My head still ached. I could still taste blood in my mouth. I started to dress. I got as far as a clean pair of shorts, then I remembered what Jim had said about having Petersen pass Connie out. I couldn't give her the case. I couldn't talk to her until night. And by that time I'd have seen Meyer's fountain man, I hoped.

I put on a robe, found my slippers and scuffed out into the sunken living room where Monte and Jim were talking to the day PBX operator. A big blonde in her middle twenties, if Miss Wells was indisposed, it didn't show in her shape. She was wearing baby blue high-heeled bedroom slippers and baby blue housecoat to match. I doubted there was anything under the housecoat but her. She didn't need anything else. She was a corn-fed babe and no mistake. Her platinum blonde hair hung in a page boy bob, just short of being smart. Her eyes were big and round and as blue as her robe. She even had a bridge of freckles across her nose.

As usual, I lost one of my slippers on the two stair

down. When I'd recovered it, Jim introduced me. "Miss Wells, Mr. Stone."

I said, "I'm glad to meet you. You look vaguely familiar, Miss Wells."

Miss Wells laughed low in her belly, like Connie did when she was amused. She said, "I should. You've passed me every day for a year. Once in a while you even said, 'Good morning.'"

I bought myself a drink. So why should I remember a PBX operator? She was just a dame in a headset back of the manager's desk.

Jim got back to business. "You work the eight-to-four shift, Miss Wells?"

"That's right," the big blonde said. "But there's nothing rigid about the schedule. There are three of us girls on the board. And if one of us is sick or has a date, one of the other girls works her shift."

I sat on the sofa beside Miss Wells and had a fair idea what had brought on her indisposition. There was a faint aroma of good rye about her. I could smell it over her perfume.

Jim consulted his notebook. "You keep a record of all outgoing calls made from the apartments?"

"We do," Miss Wells told him.

"And as head operator, you are in charge of the records?"

"I am."

Jim looked at his notebook again. "How often did Mrs. Stone call Village 7-3646?"

Miss Wells smoothed the silk over her breasts. "I'd rather not say."

"You know that I'm a detective?"

"That's what the manager told me."

"In charge of Manhattan Homicide West?"

Miss Wells looked at me and ran the tip of a pink tongue between her slightly slitted lips. "So I understand."

"All right. Answer my question."

The big blonde shook her head. "I'd rather not."
"Why?"

"For the time being, let's say that's my business."

"But Mrs. Stone did phone Village 7-3646 frequently?"

Miss Wells was amused. "I don't recall saying she did."

Jim hadn't slept all night. He was tired and on edge. He got up from the chair in which he was sitting. "God Almighty," he said. "First Connie and now you happen to me. What's your home town, Miss Wells?"

She told him. "Golden, Colorado."

"Isn't it customary in Golden to co-operate with the police when they are investigating a homicide?"

Miss Wells' eyes grew rounder. "I really wouldn't know," she said. "This is the first time I've ever been involved in one."

"You refuse to tell me then?"

"I do."

"You realize that I can arrest you for not co-operating."

Miss Wells wet her lips again. "In that case, no. Mrs. Stone never called Village 7-3646."

"Then how do you know it so well?"

The big blonde was amused. "Remembering numbers is my business. I run the PBX. Remember? And, believe me, I'm good at it, mister. I can handle two positions."

Jim returned his hat to his head. "Okay. We'll requisition the records." He started for the door with Monte following him. At the door he turned and looked at me. "And you stay out of it, Herman. Take a two weeks' vacation, starting as of now."

I asked if that was an order.

"From Inspector Grady," Jim told me. "I don't want Connie to take a fall any more than you do. But this is bigger than personalities."

The sour taste in my mouth coated my answer. "Sure. It's your job." I took another drink. "But water on Grady. You know what kind. And the same kind on you. Connie didn't kill Cary and I'm going to prove it."

"How?" Jim asked.

I told him. "I've got Nick Casaras looking for Meyer's fountain man right now. If Nick finds him, fine. If he doesn't, I will. To me, the fountain man is the keynote of this whole thing. The last Connie remembers is having a coke at the fountain. Simpson was in a position to dope it. If he did, it could be that Connie is telling the truth. And I'm going to get the truth out of Simpson if I have to tear off one of his legs and beat in his brains with it."

Jim kept his temper with an effort. "Don't," he said, quietly. "For the sake of our friendship, Herman, don't. I'll give Connie every break she has coming. But there never has been and there never will be any rigged evidence in any case I ever worked on."

I asked what he meant by that.

Jim opened the door. "You know what I mean," he said and closed the door softly behind him.

I sat holding the bottle of rye. The big blonde took it out of my hand. She uncorked it, drank from the neck, and put the bottle back in my hand. I looked sideways at her. There was a fine film of perspiration on her upper lip. Her breast rose and fell with her breathing.

"What's the idea?" I asked her.

She told me. "I needed it. Bad. Or, badly, if you prefer that I be grammatical about it."

There was a zipper the length of her baby blue silk housecoat. Right down the front. From the high neck line to the hem. Still breathing hard, she unzipped it part way, so that the hollow between and the rounds of her breasts showed. She wasn't wearing a bra. The only thing under the housecoat was skin. Her breasts were round and firm and fully packed. They reminded me of what the newsboy had said when he'd looked at Connie's picture—

"Wow. Look at those bazooms on her. If I could drive a model like that for a year she could trade me in on a coffin."

Miss Wells was a big girl, as big as Connie. She was also a very pretty one. I tried not to look at what she

was showing. Being male, I failed. "What's the idea?" I repeated.

She took a small oval of tightly rolled papers from between her breasts. "I was afraid Mr. Purvis might search me. And, as he reminded me, this is a homicide investigation."

"So?"

She handed me the rolled papers. There were five of them, all titled Mr. Herman Stone and the number of the apartment. Opposite my name was the month and below the month the daily record of all phone calls made from our apartment. I ran down the list. The sour taste in my mouth increased. Connie had lied to me. She'd claimed she didn't know Cary. She'd sworn she'd never even heard his name until she'd come to, nude, in his apartment. Still, she had phoned Village 7-3646, his number, according to the records, at least twice a day for the past six months.

I looked sideways at Miss Wells. She was leaning back against the sofa, her housecoat still partly unzipped, with plenty of white space showing. "What's the idea?" I asked for the third time.

She licked at the perspiration on her upper lip. "You mean, holding out on Mr. Purvis?"

"Yeah."

She clasped her fingers at the back of her head and sat with her elbows akimbo. "Maybe I like you," she said. "Maybe you're more than vaguely familiar to me. Maybe I've watched a certain six-feet-two, two-hundred-pound, tow-haired, broken-nosed detective walk through the lobby every morning for a year and wished he was mine, instead of being married to a woman who was cheating on him every time his back was turned."

She was breathing even harder than she had been. Her partly covered breasts rose and fell with her breathing. Each time they rose, the zipper slipped another inch. She was as pretty as Connie. She was mine if I wanted her. Not for a pass but because she wanted me. The PBX

operator of an apartment hotel in love with one of the tenants whom she'd watched walking through the lobby for a year.

I took another drink, a big one, sucking the bottle till I gagged and spit rye all over the carpet. In the state of mind I was in, on top of all I'd had before, it hit me hard. The sharp edges of the room began to blur. Miss Wells looked even more familiar. I tried to kid myself that I had noticed her. I liked her platinum blonde hair. I liked the freckles straggling across the bridge of her nose. They gave her a wholesome, yet strangely wanton look. "What's your first name?" I asked her.

She moved closer to me on the sofa. "Myra. Why?"

The rye roaring in my ears, I played with the tab of the zipper, zipping it up and down a way. "So who knows? So maybe I'm pleased to meet you, Miss Wells."

She sucked in her breath, exhaled. As she did her breasts thrust out and the housecoat unzipped all the way to her lap. I could see her stomach muscles move, as she said, "I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Stone." I was sitting slightly off-balance. She pushed me back on the sofa and cupped my face in her hands, her tongue a hot flame trying to burn a way through my lips. "Herman," she panted. "Herman."

Drunk as I was, I felt ashamed. I wanted a woman. I wanted a woman as badly as Myra wanted me. But I didn't want her. I wanted Connie, with everything between us as it had been before I'd entered the Grove Street address with the squad. Before last night had happened. I wanted to believe.

I tried to push Myra away. She grew more amorous. I was lying on the edge of the sofa. We slipped off on the floor, landing with a thud with her on top.

"Now," Myra whispered. "Please."

White fingers twisted in my hair. Myra's other hand fumbled frantically with the zipper of her housecoat. She rolled from side to side and the blue silk fell away from her body with a soft sibilant sound. Like some

young hooker standing on a dark corner and whispering her first shamed 'Phst.'

I tried to squirm free. I couldn't. Perfumed flesh smothered me. I gagged. Then through the roar of the rye in my head, I thought of what Deputy Chief Inspector Grady had said on the worn stone stoop of Centre Street.

"I know. It hurts, son. Deep down where you live. To think a woman could do such a thing to you. But forget her. Go get boiled and forget her."

So? Why not?

I kissed Myra as fiercely as she was kissing me. The chemical reaction was odd. The taste of blood left my mouth. All I could taste was salt.

The salt a man tastes in his own tears.

Chapter Seven

It was after three o'clock. The kids were out of school and yelling on the walks. Ringing their bicycle bells, playing rope and catch, duck-on-rock, sky-blue. Being kids.

I was fairly sober, but still not feeling any pain. I had a small head. Outside of it, I felt fine. There was an open bottle on the bed table. I rinsed the feathers from my mouth, sat up and looked out the bedroom window. It was closer to four o'clock than three. I could tell by the color of the river and the slant of the sun over the New Jersey Palisades.

So I'd taken Inspector Grady's advice. So I'd gotten drunk as a goat and acted like one to boot. With a blonde PBX operator. So?

The silence in the bedroom hurt my ears. So I was on my own. There was no one to bawl me out. No one to tell me what an ass I'd made of myself, then bring me iced tomato juice. Like Connie did every year after the annual Police Ball. I squinted around the bedroom until I found the small overnight case I had packed. As soon as my head cleared I'd call a messenger boy and send it down to her.

I turned my head and looked at the other half of the bed, Connie's half since our marriage ten years ago. Myra was gone but the pillow still showed the imprint of her head. There were several long blonde hairs on the slip. I wound them around one of my fingers. Myra was a good kid. She had been good for me. The emotional tension that had been building in me was gone. I felt cool and relaxed. Now, if only she didn't hope to make a career out of a pleasant interlude. I studied the blonde hair around my finger. So it had been nice. It was over. She'd wanted me. She'd had me. We were quits.

I imagined I smelled coffee. I found my robe and padded out into the kitchen. It wasn't imagination. Myra was perking a pot of coffee. Dressed, she looked more familiar. But not like the girl I'd met that morning, the blonde in the baby blue housecoat with the well-oiled zipper. This was another Myra. Her light hair was slicked back to a neat bun on the back of her neck. Her freckles were more pronounced. She was wearing a plain blue skirt and an inexpensive white blouse. She looked like the head

operator of a fairly good apartment hotel, via Golden, Colorado.

When she saw me, she said, "Well. Another county heard from." I couldn't tell whether she was pleased or annoyed. "I thought you'd be good until midnight."

I sat on a chair at the kitchen table. "I drank that much?"

She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. "You drank plenty. But I wasn't thinking of that."

"I'm Herman The Great," I told her. It wasn't funny. Neither of us laughed.

She poured me a cup of coffee. "But on the chance you might wake up, I stopped on my way down to the board and made you a pot of coffee."

The coffee tasted good. I drank what was in my cup, black, and pushed the cup back for a refill. As Myra filled it, her thigh brushed mine. Just remembering excited me a little. I asked her if she had to go to work.

She sat across from me. "Unfortunately. Mabel worked the eight-to-four for me. And I can't get Gwen to do a double shift." She sounded almost like Connie. "How do you feel, Herman?"

I told her I felt fine.

Myra studied my face. "Well, you don't look so hot." She reached across the table and patted my hand. "I tell you what. You drink your coffee. Then you go back to bed like a good boy."

It wasn't a bad idea. I'd felt fine when I had awakened, but for some reason, the coffee, instead of clearing my head, was making it fuzzy again. Or maybe it was the drink I'd taken. "Could be I will," I told her. "And—"

She crinkled her freckles at me. "And promptly at the stroke of midnight, little Myra will be back."

It was what I'd wanted to know. She meant to make a career of it. There was a package of cigarettes on the table. I lit one. "Just like Cinderella, huh?"

She squeezed my hand. "Something like that. But I've got to run now, honey." She came around the table to

my side and kissed me. "Unless, you, well,—I could be a few minutes late."

The thought gagged me. I patted the most convenient curve. "I think I can get by until midnight."

She kissed me wetly. "Until then."

I watched her down the hall. Myra was a lot of woman. She had nice hips. They were big and round and bobbled enticingly. Like Connie's. I started to pour another cup of coffee and was suddenly sick on the two cups I'd had. I let it go in the sink, then let the water run for a long time. I didn't want coffee. I didn't want to remember. What I wanted to do was blot out all memory of Connie. There was an unopened bottle of Old Overholt in the kitchen cabinet. I'd been saving it for some special occasion. This was the occasion. The rye tasted better than the coffee had.

I walked back into the bedroom carrying the bottle with me. I wasn't proud of Herman Stone. So Connie had done me wrong. Two wrongs didn't make a right. And now I had Myra on my hands.

I sat on the edge of the bed looking at the river. So Myra wanted to play some more. So what?

Forever and ever, we'd promised.

I got up and looked in the dresser to see if my spare gun was still under my shirts. It could be that I couldn't do anything about Connie. But I could drop in and see Hanlon. My gun was under my shirts. I set it and the bottle on the dresser and looked for a clean pair of shorts. There weren't any in the drawer. I found a stack of them on Connie's side of the dresser, in the drawer where she kept her mending. And under them a small red book labeled Five-Year-Diary.

It was the kind with a flap and a lock. I'd seen Connie write in it from time to time, but hadn't paid much attention. It should tell me plenty. I stuck my thumb under the flap and broke the lock.

The first page was dated January 1, 1950. Connie had written—

Saw "South Pacific" last night. Good show. Ate at the Brass Rail after the show and had a few drinks. Herman wanted to take me to a night club but I said no. So home and to bed with the boy friend. Boy friend better than the show. It was after five when we went to sleep. One of the nicest New Years I've ever had . . .

I chuckled, with a lump in my throat. That was how it had been with us. Eight years married then, two years ago.

I turned the pages of the diary to five months before. There was no mention made of Cary anywhere during the month. I was still the boy friend. We'd played poker with Jim and Avis and Abe and Shirley. Connie had lost six dollars and forty-five cents, but I had made eighteen, minus what I'd laid out for the beer and the cold cuts. The next day she and Shirley had gone shopping and Shirley had gotten the *cutest* toque. Whatever a toque was. With *cutest* underscored.

I kept on turning pages. It was all of a kind. Something on every page. The little things that make up a woman's life. But there was no mention of Lyle Cary, no gaps in her daily routine. She'd missed, the eighteenth, and for four days she'd been hopeful. Now I was drawing a lieutenant's pay, it was time that we started a family.

We'd gone here. We'd gone there. We'd seen the "Blue Veil." We'd eaten dinner at Luchow's. We'd taken the ferry to Staten Island. Just for the laugh. To blow the stink off us, before we'd come home. And so to bed.

Even up to two days before, when she'd listed her appointment with the blood bank, I was still the boy friend. It was Herman did this and Herman did that. Like I was Walter Winchell or maybe even Einstein. Like we had been married ten days instead of ten years. Abe had nicknamed me "Herman The Great," more or less as a gag, in his Broadway column. But, according to her diary, Connie believed it. I was the smartest guy in the world. I was the best detective in Manhattan. I was the most considerate husband. I was the best lover.

I closed the book and sat looking at the purpling river. It couldn't be a plant. Connie just wasn't that smart. When it came to brains, she was just another dame.

Cold sweat started on my body. *This* was the girl they said had been playing house with Lyle Cary? When?

I was goddamned if I'd believe it. No matter what evidence there was against her. So I'd seen Connie nude and drunk in Lyle Cary's apartment. With my own eyes. So someone had framed her there and letting me see her had been part of the frame. To burn the smoke out of my eyes. More, somewhere in New York, there was a red-haired girl, who, for some reason of her own, had spent the last five months posing as Connie Stone.

I cradled the diary into the living room and uncradled the phone. "Switchboard," Myra said, crisply.

I asked her if she could talk.

She moved her lips closer to her mouthpiece. "Not too freely. What's the matter, darling?"

I said, "Look, Myra. About those calls Connie made to Village 7-3646. Did you ever actually *hear* her talking to Cary?"

Mr. Halper was obviously hovering near the board. Myra's voice turned crisp again. "The girls on the board never listen in on calls, Mr. Stone. To do so would mean instant dismissal."

I cradled the phone. The calls could have been made while Connie was out of the apartment. But by whom? The small veins in my temples began to pound. Or were the records of the phone calls to Cary's apartment merely a feminine touch that Miss Myra Wells had added? So she could keep them from Jim Purvis. To make me grateful to her. To get what she had gotten. What, according to her own admission, she had wanted for a year.

I uncradled the phone again and gave her Nick Casaras' number. The Casaras' phone rang for a long time. Then Myra came back on the wire. Halper had evidently left the office. Her voice was soft and warm again. "Your number doesn't answer, honey."

I considered calling 47th Street, then decided to drive down. Myra's voice patted my ears. "You go back to bed, Herman. You hear me?" She sucked in her breath. "And keep it nice and warm for mamma."

I cradled the phone. I took a cold shower. I shaved. I put on my best suit of clothes. I didn't look bad. I felt fine. I slipped my spare gun in my holster. I put Connie's dairy in my pocket. Then shaping my Sunday felt to my head, I picked up the case I'd packed for Connie, double-locked the apartment and punched the bell for the elevator.

Myra saw me walk through the lobby. She half rose from her chair at the switchboard as if she were going to call me. But she didn't dare. She had her job to think of and Mr. Halper was standing in the doorway drooling over a brace of jail bait attempting to ride their boy friends' bikes.

Halper started when he saw me. He'd have made a good funeral director. "I'm *so* sorry, Mr. Stone," he intoned.

"Yeah. So am I," I admitted.

I walked the two blocks to where my car was parked, across the street from Meyers' Pharmacy. I crossed the street and walked into the store. There was a new punk at the fountain. At least, I'd never seen him before. Meyers was busy with a customer. I waited until he was through, then asked him if Carl Simpson had shown up for work.

The little man was annoyed. "Officers. Officers. Officers. All the time questions. How is a man supposed to make a living?" Meyers took out his spleen on me. "No. He didn't. And not only do I have to work the fountain myself until I can get another man, but down at the Detective Bureau I must spend another hour, telling what I know about Simpson. Where does he live? Who are his friends? How should I know? For thirty cents I would close the fountain. All I have with fountain men is wages and trouble. Bummers, all of them." Meyers pounded on

the drug counter. "And how much profit is in a cup of coffee?"

He was still spluttering when I left. I crossed with the light and walked to my car whistling—until I saw the boxed sub-head on the newsstand. It read—

Detective Mysteriously
Slain In Times Square

I pushed a would-be buyer aside and read the story. It was only a late squib, boxed to give it importance. But according to the story, First Grade Detective Nick Casaras, assigned to the 47th Street Station, had failed to report out when his tour of duty had ended. A routine check with his home had been made, but a worried Mrs. Casaras had denied any knowledge of her husband's whereabouts. There the matter had ended until just before press time, when the property man of an unnamed theater in the district had opened the door of his prop room to find Detective Casaras lying dead across one of his prop trunks.

I grew conscious that someone was speaking to me.

"Look, please, mister," the lad back of the stand said. "Buy it or leave the live customers in. The library is down on 42nd."

I started to feel in my pocket, remembered I'd spent my last dime for a morning paper and left it. I could get the details at the station. I started to open the door of my car and was sick all over the fender. For the second time in an hour. And it wasn't rye.

"*Do me a favor, will you, Nick?*" I'd asked.

"*I'll be glad to, Herman,*" he'd said.

Now Nick was dead. Possibly because while I'd been shackled up with a blonde PBX operator, proving what a hell of a guy I was, Nick had tried to put the arm on a slimy little fountain punk who went by the name of Carl Simpson. A punk who'd served Connie the coke that was the last thing she'd remembered.

Chapter Eight

The shift had changed at four o'clock, but none of the boys had gone home. The sidewalk in front of the 47th Street Station was blue with cops. So guys died every day. This was a different deal. One of our own had been killed.

The boys opened a path for me: small brass on my way up, if I kept my nose clean. I was lucky Herman Stone, the flatfoot from Brooklyn's Five Corners, currently riding with the gravy squad. The guy who picked murderers out of thin air. Okay. So who killed Nick Casaras, Herman?

Lieutenant Fiaschetti was on the desk. I asked if the squad was around.

He said, "They were, Herman, but I think they've gone back to the Bureau."

"They get anything so far?"

Fiaschetti was trying to be calm but his voice was strained. "I don't think so, Herman."

I walked on back to the squad room. Pedersen, Casaras' partner was there. A big tow-headed Swede who'd been a major in G2, Pedersen looked half sick, half scared, all mad. I knew how he felt, how any cop feels with his partner fresh dead on the slab. So what else can

he think but—*There, but for the Grace of God, lie I?*

I sat in the chair beside him. "What you got on it, so far, Swen?"

Pedersen stopped fingering through the meager reports on his clipboard, the cops' Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. The apparently unrelated statements of the first officer on the scene, the M.E., the lab men, the old lady who couldn't sleep, the guy who just chanced to be passing by, the officer in charge of the investigation, the cop who makes the pinch, the damning pieces of paper that sooner or later become an integral part of the D.A.'s charge to the jury.

"Nothing. Not a goddamn thing," he told me. "Except a lot of meaningless crap. No one heard the shots. No one saw anyone. No one even knew Nick was dead until a few hours ago."

I gave him a cigarette. "Start with this morning, Swen."

He made a torch of the Camel. "I stepped into the Astor Hotel for a minute. To use the john, see? When I came out, Nick told me you'd been by and wanted us to see if we could locate a lad by the name of Carl Simpson who was supposed to be living in the district. The only lad we knew who answered your description was Joey Simpson, a punk we'd pulled out of a 42nd Street Hotel six months ago on a morals charge."

I said, "Could be the lad I want is Joey. What was the disposition of his case?"

Pedersen lighted a fresh cigarette from the one I'd just given him. "He got two to ten. But he's out under five thousand, pending an appeal. Anyway, we've only a half hour or so left of our tour. So we decide to check as many hotels as we can, with Nick taking one side of the street and me the other. I didn't have a bit of luck. A little after eight I went back to the station to sign out. Nick didn't show at the time but I didn't think anything about it then."

I asked him, "Why?"

He told me. "Because Nick said you'd done him a lot of favors, that you'd made his first tour of duty with him, and if he didn't have any luck by eight o'clock he was going to phone in and keep right on working on his own. This Simpson you're looking for is mixed up with the mess your wife is in?"

"Yeah," I said. "I think so."

Pedersen snuffed the cigarette he'd just lighted. "Anyway, that was all I knew until Lieutenant Fiaschetti called me a little before three and told me they'd just found Nick's body in the prop room at the 45th Street Theater."

I nailed down a few facts. "What street did you start to work on?"

"45th Street."

"The stage door was open all night?"

"The doorman swears not."

"But he's old?"

"He's old."

"How long had Nick been dead?"

"The M.E. says about seven hours."

"In other words, he was killed a few minutes after you split up."

"That would seem to be it."

"How was he killed?"

"Shot through the back of the head."

I got to my feet. "Well. Thanks."

Pedersen paced the squad room, cracking his knuckles and occasionally banging one fist into the palm of his other hand. He wasn't being dramatic about it. He was just stating a fact. "The bastard. The slimy bastard. Oh God, just let me get my hands on him."

It could be coincidence that Nick Casaras had been killed a few minutes after I'd asked him to locate Simpson. It could be he'd startled a prowler coming out of the theater. But that was stretching the elastic arm of coincidence too far. It was more likely that someone was a guess ahead of us, that I'd been followed from Centre

Street out to Meyers' Pharmacy, then back to Times Square. If Simpson was involved he'd know the heat was on him. He was the jumping off point in Connie's statement of record.

"Then while I waited for the tobacco man I had a coke at the fountain."

I asked Pedersen if he had a picture of Simpson.

He shook his head. "No. I don't need a picture. I know the guy. But Jim Purvis had one sent over from the B. of I."

All I could do at the station was watch the teletype, as the reports of the manhunt trickled in. Going over to the theater would be a waste of time. Besides, I wanted to talk to Jim. Between Nick being killed and the diary, he had to believe me now.

I stopped at the desk again on my way out. "The town is sealed?"

"Herman," Lieutenant Fiaschetti assured me, "a fly couldn't get out of Manhattan."

I took his word and drove on, down to the Tombs, stopping en route at Kramer's the florist shop where I had a charge account, to buy Connie a big bunch of yellow jonquils. The matron to whom I talked asked if I wanted to see Connie. I didn't. Not after making such a fool of myself with Myra. But the germ of an idea was growing in my mind. I took off my hat. "If I may."

She led me to the visiting room and left me. I mopped sweat from my face, hoping Myra didn't show on me. How big a fool could a man be? I'd acted like an adolescent watching a Minsky stripper. Look, maw. Sex.

Connie was still wearing her own dress. That meant she hadn't been indicted, that she was still being held on an open charge. She looked frightened but rested. I'd never realized how beautiful she was. A good many red-haired girls have trouble with their skin. Not Connie. Hers is like a camellia petal, as perfect and as soft; its only flaw, the small mole that Mr. and Mrs. Swanson had mentioned.

The matron was a good sport. She walked over to the window and sat on the sill, looking out into the night.

I took Connie in my arms. Gently. Like she was something precious. "How goes it, baby?"

Her fingers dug into my back. "I'm frightened, Herman. Please. Get me out of here."

"I'm trying to, honey," I told her.

Her wet eyes searched mine. "You still believe me, even after all those horrible things they printed about me in the paper?"

"I still believe you."

"I'm glad," she said simply. "I'm glad."

Her lips were like a little girl's lips. Sweet and soft. But I didn't have to stoop and kiss her. Like Myra, Connie was a lot of woman. The germ of the idea continued to grow. Their shapes were almost identical. Except for the color of their hair and Myra's freckles, they could pass for sisters.

"You know a Miss Wells?" I asked Connie.

Her hair brushed my face as she shook her head. "No."

"One of the PBX operators. A blonde girl."

"I've seen her," Connie said. "A rather pretty girl."

"Yeah. You ever talk to her?"

"No."

"Was she ever in our apartment?"

"Not that I know of. Why, Herman?"

I evaded the question. "It's just an angle I'm working on." I told her the part of the story that I could. "Jim tried to requisition the records of our phone calls and she refused to give them up. And on the list was an average of two calls a day from our apartment to Village 7-3646."

"That's Mr. Cary's apartment?"

"Yes."

"Then I didn't make them, Herman. Believe me. I never saw the man until I came to, in his rooms."

"Now tell me this," I said. "You remember a pastel green silk housecoat you used to wear?"

"Yes."

"What happened to it?"

Connie pressed her fingertips to her forehead. "I can't think, Herman. I'm too scared and confused."

I tightened my fingers on her arm. "You *have* to think." I shook her. "Think."

She said, "I gave it away. Yes. I remember now. Someone came to the place and said they were collecting bundles for Britain. And I gave them the housecoat and some dresses I hardly ever wore."

"Was it a man or a woman?"

"A woman. Yes. I'm certain it was a woman."

"Miss Wells?"

"The girl at the hotel?"

"Yeah."

"No. I'm sure it wasn't her." I remember now. "It was a nice old lady with white hair. And along with the housecoat and dresses, I gave her some lingerie and stockings and my old Camel's hair coat. Because it was warm, and wasn't doing any good hanging in the closet." She fought against tears and failed. "I—I don't like it here, Herman. I try not to be, but I'm awfully afraid."

I slapped her. Lightly. More of a pat than a slap. "Stop that. Did you ever see this old lady again?"

"No. I saw her only the one time."

There was nothing more she could tell me. Except one thing. I said, "This Simpson punk, the lad back of Meyers' fountain. Did he ever try to get fresh with you, Connie?"

"Well, not what you'd call fresh."

"How then?"

She blushed. "Well, about a week ago, he told me I was a very pretty girl and any time I wanted to make a hundred dollars, he could arrange it for me."

"What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything. I slapped his dirty face."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was afraid you'd kill him."

I thought over the information. There seemed little

doubt that Carl was Joey Simpson, working back of the fountain, while he sweated out his appeal, and still making plenty on the side by acting as an agent for high-priced call girls.

"Does that help you?" Connie asked me.

I said, "I think so."

The matron got up from the sill and looked meaningly at me. I took the hint and gave Connie the jonquils I'd laid on the table.

She buried her face in them, then smiled at me through tears. "You *do* still love me, don't you?"

I'd never felt more like a heel. I kissed the tip of her nose. "Baby, the only way I could love you more would be for you to be twins."

Then I got out of there, fast. According to the medical report, Connie'd had relations with a man, possibly more than once. At least she'd been unconscious. I hadn't.

Outside, I called around until I located Jim. The squad was at Centre Street. He gave me the same malarky the blonde had. "I thought you were good until midnight."

I asked him to stay put and burned a few more miles off my trade-in value. Centre Street hadn't changed. It was as shabby as ever. Old man Hanson was still on the night cage. And he'd heard the news. "A terrible thing, Herman," he said. "I mean your wife doing you like she did. I had a wife cheat on me once." He looked back down the years. "That was a long time ago."

"What did you do about it?"

The old man sighed. "I divorced her. But I've often wished to God I hadn't come home when I did. You should see the bag I have now."

I followed the sound of his voice into Chief Deputy Inspector Grady's office. Second Deputy Police Commissioner Reichert was among the also present. In charge of Manhattan East-West, Grady was laying down the law.

"So Mrs. Stone is a personal friend of yours? To the Department, she's just another cheating dame. Get off

the case. Get off your ass and onto this cop killing. I want the punk who killed Casaras. You hear me, Captain?"

"Yeah. Sure. I hear you." Jim said.

He was being respectful to the brass, but at the same time holding his ground. He could. As head of Manhattan Homicide East-West, he was an acting captain. As such, a nod from Grady could bust him. But he also had a Civil Service rating as a lieutenant and without preferring charges, the worst Grady could do to him was to bust him off of Homicide and put him back in uniform, at a lieutenant's pay. With the rest of us, it was different. We were only patrolmen detailed as first grade detectives. A nod from the brass could send me back to trying doors in Five Corners. And goodbye to my lieutenant's five thousand one hundred and fifty a year.

Grady pounded. "Then why keep harping on the Stone case?"

Jim stood his ground. "Because I think the two may be connected."

"Heifer dust," Grady snorted. Then he saw me and his neck began to color his collar. "What you doing here, Herman? I thought I ordered you to take a two weeks' vacation."

"Yes, sir," I said. "You did. I just got back, sir."

Second Deputy Commissioner Reichert folded his well-cared-for hands over his fat belly. "Don't be disrespectful, Officer."

"No, sir," I answered him. "I wouldn't dream of being. But my wife didn't kill Cary, see? And like Captain Purvis said, I think the Casaras and the Cary killing are connected."

"Why?" Grady asked, flatly.

I told him. "Because Nick Casaras lived for thirty-three years, six of them as a cop. But fifteen minutes after I ask him to put the arm on Simpson, the flesh-peddling punk who was back of the fountain at Meyers' Pharmacy, someone shot Casaras in the head."

"Oh, my tired butt," Grady groaned. "Now we're go-

ing back into the coke routine. Grow up, Herman. I tell you I saw your wife with Cary with my own eyes."

I called him a liar as respectfully as I could. "You *thought* you saw Connie, sir. It was some other dame made up to look like Connie."

"Who?"

"I don't know."

"Why?"

"I don't know that either," Before the old man could explode, I tugged Connie's diary from my pocket and laid it on his blotter. "But there's your proof right there. I found Connie's diary this afternoon and nowhere in it does she mention Cary's name once."

Grady fingered through the pages, reading an item here and there. When he spoke his tone was milder than it had been. "So you consider this proof, eh, that Connie didn't kill him?"

"Yes, sir."

Grady closed the book and dropped it in one of the drawers of his desk. "A very interesting exhibit. The D.A.'s office will enjoy going through it. But the only proof is that Mrs. Stone is a very smart woman. She knew she might be caught or get into a jam over what she was doing. So she prepared an alibi in advance. Yes. The D.A.'s office should find it very interesting. This would tend to prove Havers' contention that the murder was premeditated, that Connie had figured on killing Cary for some time."

I hadn't thought of that angle. I protested. "That isn't so." I added, tardily, "Sir. Besides, I know now how Connie's negligee and such got into Cary's apartment."

"I'm breathless," Grady said. "Tell me."

I told him. "Some old lady came around collecting bundles for Britain. And Connie gave her an armful of clothes."

"When did you learn this?"

"Just a few minutes ago."

"From whom?"

"From Connie."

"She told you?"

"Yeah."

"One," Grady counted. "Two." And so on up to ten. Then he stood up behind his desk, his face a bright Molotov red. "Now you listen to me, you bull-headed Dutchman," he said. "There haven't been any bundles for Britain collected for the last five years. Your wife has been definitely indentified as the girl seen climbing the stairs to Cary's apartment. In an undrugged, un-intoxicated condition. Officers Gilly and Mack found her nude and stinking drunk on the wrong side of a locked door. The medical report proved that she'd been with a man, that she and Cary had partied maybe a couple of times. Now goddamn it, get out of my hair, so we can get on with this Casaras business. Grow up. Be a man."

I jammed my hands in my pockets, quick, to keep from swinging on him.

Grady continued, somewhat calmer. "I feel sorry for you, son. I know what you're going through. But don't make me do something I wouldn't like to do. You're a good cop. I like you. You've worked hard to get where you are. So, as a favor to me, take two weeks off. Go back and crawl in bed with your amorous PBX operator. So she likes it to music, turn on the radio."

I felt my own neck get red. "How do you know about Myra?"

Then I realized how. In police work nothing is sacred. While Jim had been talking to me in the bedroom, distracting my attention, Monte and Cork had rigged up a bug. There was a record of everything Myra and I had said and done. The boys just wanted to be sure I had no guilty knowledge, that I wasn't holding out on the Department.

I kept my hands in my pockets, as I looked at Jim. "How about those calls to Village 7-3646?"

He knew what I meant. "They were on the up and up. I got another set from one of the other operators."

I felt he'd let me down. "I thought when I came in, you were standing up for Connie."

Jim moved his head from side to side. "No. Not particularly, Herman. Like I told you this morning, this thing is bigger than personalities. I was merely contending the two killings are connected."

I turned on my heel and started for the door.

Inspector Grady's voice reached out and stopped me. "Where are you going, Herman? Home?"

I faced him. "No. I'm going to find Joey Simpson. And I'm going to make him admit that someone paid him to dope Connie and waltz her up to Lyle Cary's apartment if I have to beat in his goddamned brains."

Grady did what he didn't want to do. "Turn in your badge, Stone," he said, quietly. "Starting as of now, you are suspended for insubordination."

Reichert cleared his throat. "That is official, Stone."

Grady tapped his blotter. "The badge, Stone. The badge."

So what could I tell him? That I'd let a couple of punks take it away from me in the hallway of the Grove Street address? I turned and walked out of the office.

Old man Hanson ran me down to the first floor. As he opened the cage, I asked him, "Was Inspector Grady ever married?"

Hanson nodded. "Yeah. He was. He was married to the prettiest red-haired Irish girl you ever saw. They even had a couple of kids, I think. But that was long ago."

"What happened to her?"

Hanson added a pinch to his chew. "Well, of course, all I know is what I hear and what I read in the papers at the time. But as I remember the story, just like me, Grady came home a little too early one night. And if he hadn't been so mad it affected his shooting, he would be sitting up the river tonight instead of being a Chief Deputy Inspector."

I walked out on the stoop and stood looking up at the stars. I had to have faith. I had it. I had to believe in

my love with the same blind faith I believed in my God.

So Grady and Hanson had gotten a bum deal. So it happened every night, in good hotels and cheap ones, in cold water walk-ups and on upper Riverside Drive. There were millions of decent women. Connie was one. She was fine. She was good. She was true.

I'd stand or fall on it.

Chapter Nine

There was a two-way in my car. I turned it on and drove listening to the police calls criss-crossing Manhattan and reaching out into Brooklyn and Queens. Car 44 go here. Squad such and such go there. Captain so and so call the Bureau.

Radio cars were wailing down narrow streets like angry cats. The airports, the tunnels, the bridges were sealed. There were uniformed and plainclothes cops in the bus and railway stations, on every strategically located subway platform, riding the shuttle from west to east and back again. The station houses were filled with

punks and frightened girls, with pimps and gowsters and vagrants, with perverts, known cons, and lamsters, the rag tag and bobtail of Manhattan, anyone who might know something about who killed Nick Casaras.

Sweat beaded in the hair on the back of my hands. I was glad I hadn't killed a cop. It might or might not be Joey Simpson who had killed Nick. Whoever it was, the boys would get him. This wasn't cops and robbers for pay. Whoever had killed Nick had made it personal. Every cop on the Force from the rookies with stardust still in their eyes to the brass-bound fat asses at Centre Street were thinking the same thing tonight.

"There but for the Grace of God, lie I."

I'd stopped by the B. of I. and picked up a copy of the file picture of Joey. It was probably my last official act before the word spread around that "Herman The Great" was no longer a cop, that the lucky flatfoot from Five Points had been suspended pending charges. It could be I'd be bounced off the Force entirely. Insubordination was a sticky charge.

I parked across the street from Eddie Guinness' bar and looked at the picture of Joey. I wished I could show it to Connie. I wished I could show it to Meyers. But time was running out on me. I wanted to find Joey before Jim Purvis did. Inspector Grady was convinced of Connie's guilt. So was Jim. He hadn't been defending Connie. All he'd been doing was insisting the two cases were connected. And Joey was big time in his own slimy racket. Once he was in custody, he'd know better than to talk. His lawyers would do his talking for him.

If Jim slapped him around, Jim could lose his job. I had no job left to lose. I crossed the street and walked into Guinness'. Early as it was, the joint was jumping. A five-piece combo was beating out an oldie while a horse-faced brunette tried to make herself heard above them.

"... You gotta see mamma every night, or you can't see mamma at all. You gotta see mamma, treat her . . ."

Guinness bellied to the wood on the far side of the bar. "Now what, Herman?"

I jerked my thumb at the band. "Where'd the boys dig up that one? It's as old as I am."

He said, "You came to talk about music?"

I showed him the picture of Joey Simpson. "No. You ever see this guy. He ever come in here?"

Guinness studied the picture. "You're slipping, Herman." He looked at his watch. "In fact, you're about three hours back of the ball. Jim and Monte and Cork were in here around five and asked the same question. And the answer is just the same. He never hung out in here that I know of. But why all the fuss about him? He the guy who killed that cop?"

"I think so."

Guinness bobbled his double chins. "The poor son-of-a-bitch. If I was him I'd be on my way to Rio."

I walked back to the street, thinking, "*If I'd killed a cop, where would I hide?*"

The answer wasn't the Village. I walked across Washington Square. The Square wasn't what it used to be. The long hairs had been replaced by college kids. There were more crew-cuts than starving artists, more amateurs looking for pick-ups than professionals out for the room rent.

Hanlon lived in a tall set-back skyscraper a few doors from Number One Fifth Avenue, proving that crime does pay if you can get away with it. The inner doorman tried to stop me. I brushed him aside. "Manhattan Homicide—West."

He was properly respectful. "Yes, sir. Whom did you wish to see?"

I said that was my business and rode a cage propelled by a pretty little brunette up to the eighteenth floor. I'd called on Rags Hanlon before. For all the good it had done the Department. But this time it would be different. This time I wouldn't have to handle him with kid gloves.

If he had my shield, I wanted it. I also wanted my other gun.

I leaned on the bell of his apartment. There was a tinkling of chimes. Hanlon opened the door himself, expecting someone. But the someone wasn't me. The blood drained from his face. It left his still swollen nose and mouth looking mottled. I was pleased to see him so frightened.

"What do you want?" he asked.

I told him. "In." I pushed past him into the apartment. There was a small foyer and beyond, a huge sunken living room. It made mine look shabby. The drapes and the concert grand alone had cost twice as much as all my furniture. A not bad-looking blonde wearing a smart black faille suit was sitting on the sofa. She looked like she'd been crying.

Hanlon followed me into the sunken living room. "What do you want?" he repeated.

I said, "My shield and my gun."

Some of his color returned. "You're crazy, Stone."

"Yeah. Sure. Like a fox," I said. "A fox that was raised in Yorkville. After I punched you in Guinness' this morning, you sicked your boys on me. We played patty-cake in that certain hall on Grove Street. I lost. And I bet they thought it was funny as hell to take my shield and gun. As well as my dough and wallet."

The blonde got to her feet and picked a marten stole from a coffee table. "I think I'll be going," she said.

I looked at her. "Sit down."

She sat. Without protest. It and the fur piece stamped her. As soon as her kind make some money with one end they wrap it around the other. The blonde was one of the girls. She'd bucked the law before. Now she was in the big time, she didn't want to take any chance of having her little white asset thrown in jail for obstructing an officer of the law.

I stood looking at her. She had that certain lax something in her face. The only thing she could be was a

high-class call girl. The veins in my temples began to pound. Joey Simpson had drawn two to ten for handling one-hundred-dollar-a-night party girls. The blonde was in Rags Hanlon's place. It could be the two were connected.

"I don't know what you're taking about," Hanlon said.

I looked back at him. "I'll bet. How deep in this are you, Rags?"

He repeated, "I don't know what you're talking about."

The blonde started to open her purse. I snatched it away from her. There was no gun in it. I gave it back to her, smiling like a wolf. "Know something?"

"What?" she asked me.

I lied, "You're pretty as hell. How much you charge, honey?"

She was as bright as most of them. She fluttered her lashes at me. "Well, I usually get a hundred dollars. But I might go cut-rate for you. If I didn't have to pay commission." She realized what she'd said. Her smile became uncertain.

"You buying or selling?" I asked Hanlon.

The mottled look returned to his face. He stood on his shaky civil rights. "Get out of my apartment, Stone. Right now. I don't care if you are the law. You have no right to force your way in here. Not without a warrant."

I showed him the butt of my gun. "I thought of that and brought one with me. Where's Joey Simpson holed up, Rags?"

"I don't know the name," he said.

A closed door that looked like it might lead into a bedroom faced me. I said, "Let's look in there. You walk ahead of me, Rags."

Hanlon's punched face grew more mottled. "I'll be damned if I will. I'll have you busted for this, Stone."

"The times I've heard that," I said.

The blonde's smile steadied. "Tony's in there," she said. "He's sick. He's got a broken leg."

Hanlon cursed her softly. I began to wonder if she was

dumb or smart. She'd been crying before I came in. It could be she had an axe and was enjoying grinding it.

I pushed Hanlon toward the door. "Now open it. Before I lose my temper."

He opened the door. One of the two lads who had been with him in Guinness' when he had sounded off about Connie was lying on the bed with his left leg in a cast. As I remembered, the name on his record was Bonelli.

I said, "I thought I heard bone break."

Bonelli lied, "I don't know what you're talking about. A mechanic left a jack on the floor of Jensen's garage and I tripped over it."

I pushed Hanlon into the room ahead of me and searched the clothes lying on a chair. "You can prove that?"

Bonelli swore, "By six witnesses."

I said, "Thanks for the info, Tony. We'll have to drop in on Jensen from time to time. I didn't know he was running a drop."

My badge wasn't in Bonelli's clothes. It wasn't on Hanlon. It wasn't in any of the drawers or in any of the suits in the closet. It was a large apartment. It would take a week to search it thoroughly. I slapped Hanlon so hard he spit blood. "All right, goddamn it, where is it?"

Hanlon smirked. "I don't know what you're talking about."

It was the smirk that did it. I lost my head. I hit him. I hit him so hard that he fell across Bonelli's legs, out cold.

Bonelli knew he had me in a spot. He grinned, "I suppose I'm next. But it's sure going to look silly as hell when a tough homicide cop like you is brought into court accused of beating up a guy with one leg in a cast."

I pulled Hanlon to a sitting position. His head lolled. It would be some time before he could talk. I doubted he would then. The big timers didn't talk. They knew

from past experience it was cheaper to take a beating and let their lawyers do the talking. Besides, I had nothing on him. Even if I were still in good standing, I couldn't make a pinch.

I walked back into the living room and went through Hanlon's desk. There was nothing in it to connect him with either the Cary or the Casaras killings. Then I happened to think of something.

The night before Connie had allegedly killed Cary I'd phoned her from a pay station to tell her I was on my way home and had run into a minor domestic tragedy. Shirley had just phoned to say that she and Abe were coming over to play Canasta, and there wasn't a thing in the house for night lunch. I'd searched for a piece of paper and compromised by writing down the things Connie wanted me to buy on one side of a double saw-buck. To the best of my knowledge, it had still been in my wallet when I'd been mugged at the Grove Street house.

I walked back into the bedroom and went through Bonelli's wallet again. There were four twenties in it. On one of them was written:

- 1 lb. chicken salami
- 1 lb. corned beef (Kosher)
- 2 loaves ice box rye
- 1 jar mayonnaise (small)
- 1 jar olives (stuffed)
- 1 jar sweet sour pickles
- 1 pkg. potato chips (large)

I showed the bill to Bonelli. "Ever see this before, fellow?" His smirk suddenly hurt him. His face turned fishbelly white. It looked very much from where I stood as if he was a three-time loser and one more fall would mean he kissed the girls goodbye. I let him sweat while I counted out the fifty-eight bucks I'd had and put the bills in my pants pocket. Then I sat on the bed beside him. "Okay. Where's my shield and gun, Tony?"

He lay just sweating, looking at me.

I got up. "Okay." I gave it back to him. "But are you going to look silly as hell going up the river for life under the habitual criminal act for a lousy fifty-eight bucks and the fun of mugging a copper."

He let me get to the door before he stopped me. "No."

I turned and looked at him. He wasn't so tough now. "No what?"

"Don't turn me in," he pleaded. "It was a gag. Honest, Stone." He looked at the still unconscious Hanlon. "Rags said to rough you up a bit for the punch in the mouth you gave him. We just took the other stuff for kicks. We were going to mail your gun and buzzer to Inspector Grady with some crack about his boys not being so tough."

"Who has my gun and buzzer now?"

It was an effort for Bonelli to move his head from side to side. "I don't know. Pete and I gave 'em to Rags." He made his proposition. "But look—"

"Yeah—?"

He wiped the sweat from his face. "You want Joey Simpson bad, don't you?"

"Let's say I want him."

"I get a pass?"

"If I get Joey."

"You know where Swing Lane pinches out, past Leon and Eddie's and 21, that row of cheap clubs and saloons with rooms and kitchenette apartments above them?"

"I do."

"Well, I'd look there," Bonelli panted.

"And the number?"

"I don't know. But I hear he's somewhere in the block."

I could wait for Hanlon to come out of it, but the chances were he'd already dropped my shield and gun in the mail. And would Grady laugh when he got them. He'd laugh and laugh and laugh—out of the corner of his mouth. I walked back to the living room. The blonde was still sitting on the sofa. She meant what she said. She

liked me. She showed me her gums and her knees to prove it.

I nailed down the germ that had been growing in the clutter of my mind. "Look, honey. Suppose you got a call. There's a client willing to lay out a lot of money."

She had no axe to grind. All she was was dumb. Her vacuous smile widened still more. "How much?"

I said, "A lot. But the point is the caller doesn't want a blonde. Not even a natural one. He's a guy with a yen for redheads. He doesn't care what it costs him, but the girl *has* to have red hair."

The blonde looked at me as if I were simple. "How much time do I have?"

"Say a couple of hours."

She flapped a limp wrist, "That's easy. All I have to do is wash my hair in rust Rit."

"It can be done, then?"

"I've done it. It comes out a gorgeous auburn." She giggled. "And the beauty of it is, it isn't like using dye. All you have to do is take a bath and a shampoo and you're a blonde again. But why should you ask such a question?"

"I just wanted to know," I told her.

Chapter Ten

It was too early for the good spots to be doing much business but the cheaper bistros and swing joints were jumping. And that was all right with me. Joey Simpson wasn't hiding out in Leon and Eddie's or the 21 Club.

I stood a moment on the north side of 52nd Street, orienting myself, looking across at the Standard Oil Building extension of Rockefeller Center. With the full weight of the N.Y.P.D. behind me, it would be easy to comb the street. It could take one suspended cop some time.

I walked on down the block a hundred feet or so and turned in at the Ho Ho Club. The check-room girl reached for my hat. I kept my hat but gave her a buck and showed her the picture of Joey.

"Police Department, honey. You ever see this guy?"

She shook her head. "I doubt it. He looks like a hep cat to me and this joint is strictly for the ickys." She looked at the bill in her hand. "But how come a snatcher is passing out dough for information? You guys usually want it for jelly."

"I'm feeling big-hearted tonight," I told her and walked on to the bar where I went through the same procedure except that I got an ounce of rye for my money.

The barman shook his head. "No. I can't say I have."

Which left me right where I had been, except that I was out two bucks. I thought a moment and called Centre Street and asked for Jim Purvis. Jim wasn't in the office but the lad who answered the phone thought I might be able to catch him at the East 51st Street Precinct Station. Bill Cooney was on the desk at 51st Street. He put me through to the Manhattan-East Homicide squad room.

"What's the idea?" I asked when Jim came on the wire. "Don't tell me that now that I've been suspended, you're going to have to combine Manhattan East and West to catch one killer?"

Jim wasn't overpleased by the sound of my voice. "You fool. You bull-headed Dutchman," he laid me out. "Why didn't you keep your big mouth shut?"

"The old man got a little hot, huh?"

"Hot? He was biting chunks out of his desk when I left. Well, it was nice to have known you, Herman."

I asked if he had made any progress.

Jim said, "Not yet. But you lay off this, Herman. Go on back and shack up with that blonde PBX operator. By trying to work on your own, all you're going to do is foul up the detail."

I thought of my recorded conversation with Myra, complete with grunts and groans and I could feel the back of my neck turn red. I said, "But Connie didn't kill Cary, Jim."

"So you say."

"So she says and I believe her. Simpson doped her at the fountain and someone waltzed her out."

"Who?"

"I don't know that yet."

"But why? Why should anyone possibly want to frame Connie?"

I admitted, "I don't know that either, but they have. And you're right as hell, Jim. The two killings are connected. Cary and Nick Casaras. Solve one and you solve both."

Jim was cagey. "I think they are connected. Where are you calling from, Herman?"

On the chance Rags Hanlon had preferred an assault and battery charge, I played cagey too. I had no time to waste in any precinct station, nor any money to post bond. I said, "From somewhere in New York. You still looking for Simpson, Jim?"

"Every cop in the city is looking for him."

"What if I told you I knew his approximate location?"

"Do you?"

"I haven't said."

Jim turned sarcastic. "Don't tell me you're trying to sell me information or bribe me to go out on a limb for Connie. She was playing house with Cary in her spare time. He tried to give her the gate and she shot him."

"If you had Joey in a squad room and no lawyer within hearing distance, you wouldn't even question him on the Cary kill, huh?"

"No," Jim said. "I'm not even sure he killed Nick. It's just sort of odd that Nick should be killed right after you asked him to look for Joey."

"That's what I mean."

I could sense Jim mentally counting to ten. "Listen, Herman."

"I'm listening."

"Are we friends?"

"We're friends."

"Then do me a favor. I've got a little pull in the Department. You know that. I want you back on the squad. I can't save you at least a thirty-day suspension. Maybe more. But let me handle this and everything will be okay."

"And the favor?"

"Put Connie out of your mind."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"She didn't kill Cary," I told him and hung up.

I'd intended to ask him for Monte and Cork to help

me smoke out Joey. But as long as he felt the way he did, I *had* to get to Joey first. Once he was in custody, Joey wouldn't dare admit that he'd doped Connie. If he did, he automatically helped to indict himself for the Casaras killing.

The hep check-room pigeon smiled as I walked past her. "Find out what you wanted to know, copper?"

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

I took the joints as they came, downstairs and up, cheap clubs and cheaper hotels, cursing the N.Y. law that forbids entertainers to mix with the customers. If anyone had spotted Joey on Swing Lane, the chances were it would be one of the dames he managed or propositioned.

A few desk clerks and rooming-house slatterns asked to see my shield, but for the most part they accepted the fact that I had a right to question them. No one I talked to had seen Joey. Two barmen thought his face looked familiar but didn't remember if it had been a day, a week, a month since they had seen him.

One corseted biddy who looked like she rented rooms by the hour instead of the day or week asked me what he'd done.

I said, "He's under suspicion of having killed a cop."

She blew up at her hennaed hair. "Then I wouldn't tell you the time of day. You're all alike. A bunch of damned mother-loving chiselers." She looked at me a second time. "I make you now. Your name is Stone. Your picture was in the *Mirror*. You're the cop whose wife killed that pea-eye down in the Village."

I corrected her. "Who is *accused* of killing him."

She laughed where the cuff of her sleeve would have been if there were any sleeves in her dress. "Ha. When they find a dame drunk and naked in a dead guy's room with the door locked on the inside, it sure as hell wasn't Truman who killed him."

She closed the door in my face. I walked back down the stairs to the street.

The night was older but still warm. Up the street, the carriage trade had begun to arrive at "21" and Leon and Eddie's. The V.I.P.'s who park their shiny big cars where they want to. Even double park them. And God and Civil Service help the poor cop on the beat who dares to give their liveried chauffeurs tickets. There was something in what the biddy had said. On the other hand, which came first, the chicken or the egg? Was it better to take a folded bill from someone with a political drag to close your eyes to some minor infraction of the law, or wind up policing the bull frogs in Flushing?

I walked on to the joint on the corner of Sixth Avenue. As usual it was crowded with homos and dames with something to sell. It was the last stop on Swing Lane. Beyond it, there was little but parking lots and garages until you came to the Shrimp Cantonese belt working east from Broadway. It could be Bonelli had lied to save his own skin. It could be his tip was a phony. It could be he'd picked 52nd Street at random.

I tried a slightly different approach. Instead of stopping at the bar, I located a door that looked like it might lead back to the chorus dressing room. A tough mug with a white carnation in the button hole of his dinner jacket tried to stop me.

"Now, just a minute, mister," he said. "Where do you think you're going?"

I told him, "Back to talk to one of the girls."

He shook his head. "Oh, no."

I pushed him out of the way. "Don't be silly, chum. I'm Manhattan-West Homicide."

He stood his ground. "Yeah. I know. You're Stone. You're the guy they call 'Herman The Great.' But as we get the story, fellow, you ain't on the squad no more. You been busted and suspended."

I lit a cigarette. "It's out already?"

He nodded. "Yeah. We got it over the ten o'clock newscast."

I pretended interest. "So? What did the broadcast say?"

"It said you were suspended, pending charges. On account of you blew your top and claimed your wife didn't kill that guy down in the Village and to hell with the evidence against her. That you were insubordinate."

"That's how it is," I admitted.

I started on again. He put his hand on my chest. I ground out my cigarette on his forehead and before he could scream, I eased his pain with a short left chop that left him standing with his legs spread, shaking his head like a cat with her head in an empty salmon can.

As I walked down the hall, someone called, "Five minutes, girls."

The door of the chorus dressing room was open. I leaned against the jamb and looked in. There were five pigeons in it, all of them more or less nude, two of them still in their dancing belts and bras.

The girl nearest the door, a kid not more than seventeen or eighteen, was stepping into her costume for the first number. "Well," she said. "The Man. Okay, girls. Everyone hide your chloral hydrate. Some square must have lost a dime note."

The law was nothing new in their lives. They all went right on with what they were doing, getting into their costumes and powdering their backs and noses.

"All right. What's the beef?" the girl nearest the door asked me.

I laid the picture of Joey Simpson on the dressing shelf. Then I laid a twenty on top of the picture. "No beef. I'm looking for this guy and it's worth a double dime note to me to find him."

The girls lifted the twenty in turn and looked at the picture of Joey. None of their expressions changed. Two of them said, "Sorry." Three of them said nothing. Then out in the front of the joint, the sax man tootled a few notes and they all filed out into the hall.

Half way to the door one of them turned and came back. A cute little wren with a pug nose.

"What you want Joey Simpson for?" she asked me.

I tried to keep on breathing normally. "Let's say I want to talk to him."

She picked the twenty off the picture and stuffed it between her lovelies. "Try the Vendig Hotel up the block. I saw him looking out a third floor window when I came to work tonight."

She tried to rejoin the other girls. I caught her arm. "You're positive it was Joey?"

She wet her red lips. "Let's put it this way, mister. If you wanted to be a commercial artist so bad you were willing to dance in the chorus of a dump like this so you could go to art school days and a slimy little pimp slapped you until your face was lumpy because you wouldn't go to work for him as a call girl and you saw his face in a window, would you recognize him?"

I released her arm. She ran after the other girls and fell into line just as the lead girl opened the hall door and danced out into the club. I watched the door close behind them. The Vendig Hotel was a few hundred feet up the street. The clerk had looked at the picture and had sworn that they had no guest who resembled Simpson. I put the picture in my pocket and walked back down the hall.

Chapter Eleven

I crossed with the light on Sixth Avenue and looked at the Vendig Hotel from the south side of the street. It was a former brown stone front, a shabby four-story affair, with a night club called the Reef occupying the first floor. If the pug-nosed chorine was leveling, Joey was in one of the two front rooms on the third floor.

It was the sort of dump a punk like Joey would choose to hole up in. I took the long way round, up to Fifth Avenue and back on the north side of the street. A hustler with a drunken sailor in tow preceded me up the stairs, the sailor carrying a two dollar duffle bag, such as the drug stores sell, in lieu of baggage. I let them get to the desk and walked up after them. The clerk was also the bellboy. He had the sailor sign the register card, then walked on ahead of the couple down the second floor hall, jingling a key in his hand.

While the clerk was gone I thumbed through the registry cards. There was a Mr. and Mrs. Jackson in Room 300, a Jack Stanley in Room 301. The chances were that Joey was alone. In the spot he was in, he couldn't afford company.

I walked on up to the third floor. Some of the rooms were lighted. Some of them were dark. The hall smelled

of dry rot, cheap perfume and Lysol. It was the kind of place I'd thought it was. If someone was to yell "Cop" there'd be a hell of a rush for the door.

I walked to the front of the hall. Joey wasn't Mr. Jackson. Jackson was a muzhik from Jersey, having himself a wonderful time with someone else's wife. I could tell by their conversation. He didn't want to go to a night club. He didn't want any more to drink. He was satisfied with what he was doing.

I put my ear to the panel of the door across the hall. Whoever was in the room was snoring soddenly. I looked at the open transom. It was dark. I tried the door. It was locked. I turned the knob to slip the spring bolt out of the counter-sunk staple and eased my weight against the door. It gave with a faint rasp of metal pulling out of wood.

The dark room smelled of stale reefer smoke and whiskey. The figure on the bed didn't move. I returned my gun to its holster. Then I closed the door behind me and stood with my back to it.

"Joey," I called softly.

The only answer was a snore. I crossed the room with my hand on the butt of my gun. The man on the bed was Joey. He was also the lad I remembered seeing back of the fountain at Meyers' Pharmacy. His coat and pants lay wadded on a chair by the bed. I went through his pockets, looking at the contents in the faint light from the neon sign showing under the drawn shade. If he'd had a gun, he'd stashed it. There was a plane ticket for Acapulco and five crisp one thousand dollar bills in his wallet, plus two hundred dollars in smaller bills. For all the good the ticket and money were doing him. A cop was dead. A fly couldn't get out of Manhattan. Unless the fly could prove it had been elsewhere at the time Nick Casaras had been killed. I put the bills and ticket back in his wallet and shook him.

"Joey."

Simpson snored on, unconcerned.

I shook him harder. "You, Joey. Wake up. It's the law."

The bed springs creaked as I shook him. It was the only sound in the room with the exception of Simpson's sodden snoring. I caught a tuft of the hair on his chest between my thumb and the joint of my second finger and pulled it out by the roots. He moaned in pain. But the pain was in his sub-conscious. I was going to have trouble with Joey.

I named him. "You son-of-a-bitch, I'll bring you to."

I turned to locate the bathroom. As I did, a deeper blob of black moved away from the wall. Blued steel knifed through the dark and the barrel of a gun made contact with my forehead. The blow knocked me to my knees.

In the slash of light knifing through the slit under the shade I could see a man's legs. That was all. Well-polished shoes and dark trousers. I thought:

Like a sucker, I walked right into it. Like a probie on his first tour.

I tried to wrap my arms around the legs in front of me, but the blow had partially paralyzed my arms. I clutched the legs but couldn't exert any pressure. The gun barrel lifted and smashed down again. On the back of my head this time. The lad handling the gun knew his business. More, he enjoyed what he was doing. The room tilted suddenly to one side and I slid down the floor into darkness.

I sat up to a wailing of sirens. They sounded like a horde of starving cats converging on Fulton Fish Market. Only I was the tidbit they were after. Groggy as I was, I knew.

I hadn't been smart. I'd been dumb. I knew what I'd find when I looked at Joey. Joey was all mine. I got to my feet, panting. I found the bed lamp and lighted it. Simpson had been literally beaten to death. The assumption would be, by one suspended first-grade detective, Herman Stone. I was on record. Grady had asked me where I was going. I'd told him. In front of witnesses I'd sworn:

"I'm going to find Joey Simpson. And I'm going to make him admit that someone paid him to dope Connie and waltz her up to Lyle Cary's apartment. If I have to beat in his goddamn brains."

That was my statement of record. I'd sworn it in front of Inspector Grady. In front of Second Deputy Police Commissioner Reichert. In front of Jim Purvis and Monte and Cork. In front of Myra Wells, for that matter.

Joey was mine. I was tagged. Like an over-parked car. Only my violation read—murder.

This would be strictly a Departmental matter. I was a cop. I'd been one for fifteen years. I knew how the Department would reason. Joey was wanted for questioning on the Nick Casaras killing. I'd made talk that he'd doped Connie. The brass-bound fat asses at Centre Street would reason I'd tried to make Joey admit both charges. In the hope of clearing Connie. In the hope of being reinstated without facing a trial board. And when Joey had refused to talk, I'd lost my head and—

"... beat in his goddamn brains."

I felt the lump on my forehead, then the one on the back of my head. There was blood on my hands and coat but neither blow had broken the skin. It wasn't my blood. It was Joey's. I stood with my legs spraddled, shaking my head to clear it. Then I saw the gun, my gun, the one Tony Bonelli and his pal had lifted along with my shield and wallet.

I'd been right about one thing. Hanlon was in this thing up to his hips. Bonelli hadn't been frightened. He'd been acting. They'd wanted me to find Joey. And to keep the rabbit from bolting before I found him, they'd put him on ice via the reefer and whiskey route.

I tried to pick up my bloodied gun and almost fell on my face. The toe of my shoe kicked the gun under the bed. I was thinking and moving in slow motion, with everything going wrong. I knelt down on the bloody carpet with an effort and swept the floor under the bed with one arm. I'd kicked the gun just out of arm's reach. I

could feel it with the tips of my fingers, but couldn't pick it up.

I lay flat on the carpet, still sweeping. But the bed was a double Hollywood model set on six-inch legs, too low to the floor for me to get my bulk under the wooden frame box spring. I thought—to hell with the gun—and got back to my feet.

The gun wasn't too important. It was just additional evidence for the D. A. to present to the jury. He had plenty without it. Every barman and hat-room chick and hotel clerk on 52nd Street would testify I had been looking for Joey Simpson. Now Joey was dead. With the lock of his room broken, my fingerprints on a dozen objects and me caught dead to rights in the room.

I wove toward the door. Getting out of the Vendig before the first radio car arrived was more important than getting the gun. If they locked me up, Connie was through.

I staggered out into the hall. It hadn't been the Jacksons who had turned in the alarm. They were still engaged in the amatory exercise that had brought them to the Vendig, although Jackson was beginning to worry about the wailing sirens.

"What if the hotel should be raided?" he panted.

His distaff partner in passion scoffed at him. "Don't be so silly."

You should know, sister, I thought. I wove down the hall to the stair head and started down. As I did, the street door opened and heavy feet clomped up the first flight of stairs to the desk. Official feet. It had been the clerk who'd phoned the alarm. And the frame was not only tight, it was subtle.

"You the guy who phoned in that tip on Joey Simpson?" one of the raido car men demanded.

"Yes, sir," the clerk said.

"What makes you think it's Simpson?" the other officer asked.

The clerk said, "Well, I got to thinking. There was

another officer here, not too long ago. A big, blond plainclothes man with a broken nose. From Homicide."

"That was 'Herman The Great'," one of the radio men informed the clerk. "Otherwise known as Herman Stone. Only he ain't a cop right now. He's been suspended pending charges."

"Anyway," the clerk continued, "he showed me a picture of a young man and wanted to know if he was a guest in the hotel. He said the name was Joey Simpson and he was wanted for questioning in the death of that officer who was killed in Times Square this morning. I told him we had no such guest."

"So—?"

The desk clerk confided, "Well, after he'd gone I'd got to thinking. I didn't register the man, understand? But when I came on duty tonight the day clerk advised me to keep my eye on the guest in 301. That's the room in front, on the right."

"Why did the man advise you to keep your eye on him?"

"Because he said the guest in 301 acted very furtively, like he was afraid of something. That he kept looking over his shoulder even when he was registering."

The officer was disgusted. "That makes him Joey Simpson?"

"No," the clerk admitted. "But—"

The officer continued, "Geez. Every free car in the district on its way here and all you have is a feeling. You know what the guy looks like?"

"No," the clerk said. "I don't. Except the day clerk said he was young and rather flashily dressed." He played his trump ace. "More, look at this registration card. He's registered as Jack Stanley. J. S., see? And I read in a true crime magazine that even when crooks change their names they frequently keep the same initials."

The radio car man was more disgusted. "He read it in a true crime magazine."

His partner said, "Well, while we're here, we might as well look at the guy. But I don't blame a guy for looking

over his shoulder when he's checking into this dump. He was probably afraid his wife was having him tailed."

The ground floor door opened again. A new voice called, "What gives? It's Simpson?"

A fourth voice asked, "You're sure?"

Both men sounded as if they'd been running. More feet pounded up the street flight of stairs.

One of the first arrivals said, "Naw. We're not sure about anything. Could be it's another falsie. It probably is. All the clerk is is suspicious."

I gripped the rail so hard my hand ached. Whatever it was, this thing was big. Hanlon had gone to a lot of trouble and expense to paint his picture. First Connie. Now me. Both of us tagged for the big one. Only I had regained consciousness a few minutes too soon. The arriving police were supposed to find me groggy on the floor, or perhaps just leaving the room, exhausted after my battle with Joey. He'd put up a hell of a fight for his life. At least, that would be the deduction.

I backed up the few steps I'd descended. I couldn't go down the stairs. One of the four officers would recognize me and stop me. All would ask personal questions. "Where'd you get those lumps, Stone? What are you doing here? How come that blood on your coat?"

Then they would find Joey's body. Sweat zigzagged down my back. I looked for the familiar red fire escape exit light. There wasn't any. When the old brownstone front had been remodeled into a hotel someone had dropped plenty in the pot.

"Well, let's go see," one of the four officers said.

I backed down the hall, away from Room 301, trying the doors of the rooms with unlighted transoms as I backed. The knob of the door at the far end of the hall turned under my hand. I opened it and slipped inside just as the first radio car man reached the third floor stairhead.

"Which room did he say?" he asked his partner.

The cap, then the head and shoulders of a second uni-

formed man grew out of the stairs. "Room 301. In front. On the right hand side of the hall."

They strode down the hall toward the front of the hotel. I closed the cracked door gently and stood with my back against it, trying to control my breathing. I felt for my hat. It was gone. I'd left it in the room with Joey, along with my service revolver and God only knew what else. Rags Hanlon had me right where he wanted me now. But why?

The dark room reeked of cheap perfume, washed flesh and bath powder. The smell got in my throat and gagged me. I cleared my throat. As I did, bed springs creaked. A dim bedlight winked on. I wasn't alone in the room. There was a rather fat girl in the bed wearing a sheer nightgown. The Frenchy kind advertised in the cheaper magazines with the come-on, 'She'll love you for it'.

The girl sat up, rubbing sleep from her eyes. "You took your time about getting here," she said, crossly, in German. "We were to meet at nine and I have been waiting for two hours."

I chased my Yorkville German through my mind; the only word I tracked down being *liebchen*. And she certainly wasn't my love.

The last of the sleep rubbed out of her eyes, she looked at me and the corners of her mouth turned down. "Who are you? What do you want?" she demanded in English.

I tried to answer. I couldn't. The lump in my throat was too big. The pounding in the hall had stopped. They were shouting now. The radio men had found Joey.

"It's Simpson," one of them called. "At least he answers the general description and that's the name on the cards in his wallet."

I waited for him to whistle when he found the five one thousand dollar bills in Joey's wallet. There was no whistle.

One of the officers who had waited at the desk, called up the stairs. "What does he say?"

"He can't say," the radio car man answered. "He's dead."

Fresh dead. Not over five minutes, I'd say. One of you fellows phone the station, will you?"

The girl sitting up in bed opened her mouth to scream.

Before she could, my hand so slippery with sweat I almost dropped it, I slipped my gun from its holster.

"Uh, uh. Nix, sister," I warned her.

She was breathing as hard as I was. Her large breasts rose and fell under their film of sheer black nylon like twin white balloons being alternately inflated and deflated. She spat, frightened, beside the bed. Her accent was so thick it was difficult to understand her.

"Those are the police in the hall. You are a killer. You have killed a man. You came in here to hide."

I pressed my aching back to the door to help support my knees against the growing clamor in the hall.

"Yeah. Sure. That's right," I lied.

So she thought I was a killer. At least, she wouldn't dare to scream.

Chapter Twelve

The clamor in the hall grew. More officers arrived. Those who had stayed at the desk came up to look at Joey. Doors opened and closed. Feminine voices were shrill with inquiry. A man said, pompously:

"You can't stop us. We haven't done anything wrong."

"I'm sorry," one of the officers said. "But no one leaves the hotel until Homicide gets here. What's your name, mister?"

"Jackson. Sam Jackson," the man said.

The woman with him was bordering on hysteria. "But we can't be arrested. We can't be."

One of the officers told her. "You aren't being arrested, lady. You're just being detained for questioning. But while we're on the subject, how come you didn't hear it happen? It seems awful funny to me that a man could be beaten to death in the room right across the hall from you and neither of you hear a thing."

"But we didn't," she wailed. "We didn't."

I cracked the door and looked down the hall. Jackson was a portly man somewhere in his late forties. But if his right name was Jackson there'd been a Kelly in some bed in his family. He looked like he might be a small-town merchant or perhaps an insurance broker. The

woman was in her early thirties, with mouse brown hair and frightened eyes. She'd dressed so hurriedly that a dollop of slip showed under the hem of her dress. She had the usual rings on the third finger of her left hand. And probably a trusting husband waiting for her in Passaic. I felt sorry for them. The "Jacksons" would have a lot of explaining to do before and after they got back to Jersey.

I closed the door and looked at the girl on the bed. She spat on the floor again. "Get out of here."

She pronounced it *oudt*. I couldn't stay where I was. I couldn't leave. The radio car men might or might not make a room to room search, but it was a cinch Jim would. And his search would be thorough. I walked to the window and looked out and down. There was a rusted fire escape ladder a few feet from the window, leading up over the roof and down to a cement courtyard. I doubted it would hold my weight.

Leaving the door was a mistake. The girl swung her feet to the floor and padded swiftly toward it, looking at me over one bare shoulder. I pointed the gun at her again. "No," I warned her. "Nix, liebchen."

It was the term of endearment rather than the gun that stopped her. She turned and faced me. "You speak German?"

I got between her and the door. "A little."

She fired a stream of German at me. I caught a word here and there, but not enough to know what she was talking about. "You lie," she panted in English. "You are just, what is it you say, trying to make me sympathetic." She realized her state of near nudity and attempted to cover herself with her hands. "Get out. Get out of my room. If Hans should come in now, he would kill both of us."

I leaned against the door and listened to the sounds and voices in the hall. Manhattan-West had arrived. From the floor below Jim Purvis called to someone. "No. Keep those reporters out. I don't care what paper they're

from." His voice grew louder as he climbed the stairs. "The fool. The crazy fool. Herman said he would. And he did."

Cork was with him. He said, "Now, don't blow your top, Jim. All we know for certain is that Herman has been asking for the guy along the street."

"Yeah," Jim said. "And now Joey Simpson is dead."

I tried to think through the pain in my head. The smart thing for me to do would be to open the door, walk out into the hall and say, "Here I am, boys."

But if I did, Connie was through. So was I. The law didn't believe her story. It wouldn't believe mine. She would be convicted of killing Lyle Cary. I would be tagged with Joey. And Rags Hanlon and the red-haired girl who had spent five months posing as Connie Stone would get away with whatever they were trying to pull.

Jim and Cork's feet thudded on down the hall toward Room 301. After them would come the medical examiner, and because of the importance of the case, probably Chief Deputy Inspector Grady and Assistant District Attorney Havers. I felt even sorrier for the Jacksons. They'd picked one hell of a night to bite into the apple.

Ordering me out of her room had gotten the German girl nowhere. She moved closer to me, thoughtful speculation in her eyes. She wet her full lips with her tongue. She felt of her twin braids with both hands. Her breasts rose with her arms. "You think I am pretty, yah?"

I lied that she was very pretty.

She said something that sounded like, "Ich dankay einen."

That much I knew. That much I remembered. That was, I thank you. "Why thank me?" I asked her.

She was pleased. She smiled in accented English. "You do speak German." She took a step closer to me, standing so close I could smell her washed and powdered flesh. "Maybe I should try to help you."

I wiped the sweat from my cheeks with the back of my hand. "That's up to you."

She came even closer, until our bodies were almost touching. "What is your name?"

I told her, "Herman."

She nodded soberly. "Is a good German name." She sucked at her teeth, pretending a suddenly acquired passion she certainly didn't feel. "Would you want, when they rap on the door, I should say there is no one in my room?"

I wondered what her game was. She rested her left hand on my right arm and pressed me back against the door with her body. What I'd taken for fat was muscle. There wasn't an ounce of fat the length of her sheerly clad body. Her fingers traveled down my arm lightly.

She whispered, "Then when the police go away we can have a good time."

Her fingers were almost to my wrist. I got it then. She was after my gun. "What about Hans?" I asked her.

Her fingers encircled my wrist. She was surprisingly strong for a woman. No longer smiling, she called me a bastard in German. Then holding my gun hand immobile, she opened her mouth to scream.

I dug the fingers of my free hand into the pit of her stomach. She forgot about screaming and gasped. Her nails raked down my cheeks, leaving deep bloody gashes behind them. She stepped back a few feet and kicked with a bare foot, where she hoped it would do the most good. I sidestepped the kick and catching her heel, tipped her backwards. She fell, a scream forming in her throat. Before it could reach her mouth, I clamped a palm over it and wrestled her toward the bathroom.

The strength I'd noticed before was now more evident. More. She knew all the tricks of the trade. She kneed me with better success. Then she bit the palm of my hand. Trying to hold her was like trying to wrestle a greased pig in a nightmare. A greased pig with two blonde braids, who didn't want to be held.

I lifted my palm from her mouth and punched her with the heel of my hand, more of a shove than a punch. Her

head struck the jamb of the bathroom door. Her muscular body relaxed and became a dead weight in my arms. I sat her on the lid of the stool. Then, snatching a wash rag from the rack, I stuffed part of it into her mouth and tied the gag in place with a towel.

She toppled sideways toward the floor. I eased her down to the tile and used a bath towel to fasten her wrists, another to secure her bare ankles.

My shirt and coat were wet with sweat when I'd finished. Sweat ran down into my eyes and blinded me. I wiped them with the back of my hand and looked in the bathroom mirror. I didn't look much like Herman Stone, the lucky flatfoot from Five Points. There were deep circles under my eyes. Blood mixed with the sweat on my face. I washed off the blood and sweat but I couldn't do anything about the scratches.

I looked at the still unconscious girl on the floor. I wasn't proud of myself. She'd been minding her own business, sleeping, waiting for her lover, when I'd broken into her room. Her sheer nightgown was disordered, I straightened it. "I'm sorry, kid," I told her and walked back to the hall door.

Jim had begun his room by room search, starting with the rooms closest to 301. There was an official sounding rap on the door of a room up the hall. Jim said, "This is Captain Purvis of Homicide. Open this door. I want to talk to you."

Routine procedure, but my neck this time. I turned the key in the lock. There was no bolt. I was still thinking and moving in slow motion. I found my cigarettes and lighted one. I walked back into the bathroom, still undecided. The girl had come to. She glowered at me over the gag and thumped at the tub with her bare heels.

I closed the bathroom door and walked to the open window. It was a long way down to the cement courtyard. The darkness made the distance seem even greater. I looked at the rusted iron ladder. In places, it had even rusted away from the brackets holding it to the bricks

that formed the rear wall of the ancient brownstone front.

I sat on the window sill sucking my cigarette into a torch. The voices in the hall were coming closer. Jim was working one side of the hall while Cork worked the other. I couldn't hear Monte's voice. He was probably questioning the desk clerk. Still more feet pounded up the stairs. Lab men, technicians, camera men come to make smart scientific deductions. No guess work with them. They'd have hat and gun I'd left in Joey Simpson's room.

I fought a wave of nausea. I knew how a killer felt now. I knew how Joey had felt. For the first time in my life I was on the wrong side of the law. I reached out with one hand and tried to shake the ladder. It seemed to be reasonably solid. I put as much weight on it as I could, sitting on the sill. Could be it would hold me.

I sat facing out, then transferred my weight to the ladder. One of the rusted rungs snapped under my foot, the ladder swayed out from the wall but the curved hook over the roof held it. It was like descending a cargo net with every other web missing. When I put my full weight on a rung it bent or broke. I had to support my weight with my hands on the rusted sides of the ladder. Pain knifed through my bitten palm. When I reached the second floor, I hung a moment, spent. There were as many cops there as on the third floor. All one of them had to do was look out the hall window and see me.

I lowered myself to the courtyard, hand under hand. It was a small square of cement filled with garbage and ash cans, more of an air well than a court. Blank walls rose sheer on three sides. The only way out was through The Reef. The back door of the night club stood open to add to the ventilation induced by a roaring exhaust fan.

I licked the rust from the tooth marks in my palm, as I stood looking into the kitchen. My hand had begun to throb in rhythm with my head. Two cooks in white pants and skivies with tall crushed white caps on their heads

were working over the range and broiler. There was also a salad and a sandwich man. A Filipino vegetable boy and a dish-washer completed the kitchen crew. None of them were concerned with what was happening up the stairs. So some icky had gotten himself killed by a cop. So?

I put my bleeding hand in my pocket and walked through the kitchen. The vegetable boy's eyes slitted. With some idea of being a hero he reached for a knife. Then he looked at the hand in my pocket and went back to what he had been doing. The cooks didn't even look up. The sandwich man was transferring a club sandwich from his work board to a plate. He paused in mid-air to look at me, incredulous.

"Holy smoke. What happened to you, fellow?"

I pushed through the swinging doors without answering him, brushing a waiter aside, and crossed a short hall to the club proper. The Reef was getting a good play. The decor was pseudo Hawaiian. With live palm trees here and there and the murals on the wall purporting to be Waikiki Beach, complete with big-busted gals in skimpy bathing suits. The tables were filled with visiting firemen, squares from Weehawken and Bangor, from Goshen and Kankakee, from Des Moines and Omaha, due to be disappointed. Despite the smutty lyrics the hip-swaying girl in the spot light was mouthing she wasn't going to take off her grass skirt or the substantial panties under it. There is no stripping in New York. The late Little Flower took care of that. The law doesn't care too much what happens after a girl gets her clothes off. But you can't watch her undress, at least in public.

I wove through the narrow aisle between the tables toward the front of the club, glad it was semi-dark. When I reached it, the headwaiter saw and knew me. He looked from me to the police car and back at me. "For God's sake, Stone," he said.

I motioned him back with the hand in my pocket. "Get out of my way," I told him.

He swallowed the bite of the apple that has stuck in all men's craws since Adam and found something that needed his attention at a safe distance from the plate glass.

I'd stopped at The Reef in my earlier hunt for Joey. The hat chick also recognized me. Her eyes went round. "The walk's filled with cops, copper," she said, smugly.

I stood, trying to breathe normally, trying to nerve myself to walk out when every nerve was screaming at me to run. "Yeah," I panted. "I know."

The little bitch was having a good time. "Maybe you shouldn't have hit him so hard."

I didn't say anything.

She continued to needle me. "They'll smear you all over the sidewalk." Her lips parted at the thought. The tempo of her breathing increased. An odd look came into her eyes. "They'll shoot you full of holes."

I looked at her. "A shame your boy friend isn't here. You could have a good time while it's happening."

She ran her hands over her breasts as if they hurt her.

I picked a hat that looked like it might fit me from the rack, tucked a twenty into the bodice of her dress to square the beef and walked out onto the sidewalk. Again it was blue with uniforms.

A cluster of reporters were arguing hotly with the uniformed man guarding the door of the Vendig. The usual crowd of morbidly curious had gathered. I said, "Excuse me," to a roundsman.

He lost his chance to wear plainclothes every day by stepping aside without even looking at me. I walked toward the watching crowd, my back muscles joining my head and hand in aching, expecting to be recognized any minute.

Inspector Grady's arrival helped. His chauffeur triple-parked, practically sealing off 52nd Street and the old man and Second Deputy commissioner Reichert pushed through the ranks of respectful cops to the door of the

Vendig, where they were immediately surrounded by angry reporters.

"No," Grady said. "If Captain Purvis said you stay out, you stay out."

I gave the old man credit. At least, he backed up the hired help. I walked a few feet closer to the watching curious. Just as I reached the edge of the crowd a little man pushing his way through it ran into me so hard I had to grip his arm and steady him to keep him from falling.

"I beg your pardon," Abe said. He started on, did a double take and his mouth dropped open. For the first time since I'd known him the dapper little columnist was fresh out of words.

I gripped his arm harder. "Did I ever lie to you, Abe?"

Fietzel's shrewd eyes searched mine. "No."

"Every tip I ever gave you was solid?"

He hesitated briefly, "Yes. So?"

My neck ached from wanting to look back over my shoulder to see if any of the boys were watching me. I didn't dare. I wiped sweat from my face with my free hand, expecting momentarily to hear someone call, "*Hey, there. You. The big guy talking to Fietzel.*"

Abe repeated, "So?"

"So I didn't kill Simpson, Abe."

It was a beat for him if I wasn't lying. "You swear that, Herman?"

"I swear it."

"Who did kill him?"

"I don't know. There was someone waiting in the room."

"In other words, you were framed?"

"Yeah. Just like Connie was framed."

"By whom?"

"I think Rags Hanlon."

Abe's shrewd eyes bored into my face. "Why should Rags Hanlon frame you or Connie?"

"I don't know."

"It doesn't make sense."

I wiped the sweat from my face again. "So it doesn't make sense. Rags is in this up to his ass." The pain in my neck and back reached a point where it was almost unbearable. Every breath I took hurt me. I talked fast. "They're going to find my gun up there. It was used to beat Simpson to death. While he was in a drugged stupor. But I didn't use it. It was taken from me by Tony Bonelli, along with my buzzer and wallet, in a mugging at the Grove Street address."

"You wouldn't consider surrendering to the *Mirror*?"

"No."

Abe was a good newspaper man. He was also my friend. My back was to the door of the hotel. Abe was facing it. He clipped his words. "You came down the back way through that gyp joint on the first floor?"

"Yeah."

"You were seen and recognized?"

"Yeah."

He brushed by and stood so he partially covered me. "Then get going, fast. The hat chick just boiled out on the walk and she's all set to blow the whistle."

I pushed on into the crowd. A hundred feet behind me the hat chick screamed, "Stop him. He's out on the sidewalk somewhere. He has to be. He just walked through the club."

There was a sound of concentrated movement on the walk. One of the boys tapped the siren of the nearest car. A radio car man yelled at Inspector Grady's chauffeur to get his goddamn hearse out of the way.

From over my head and behind me, probably in the open window of Room 301, Jim Purvis wanted to know what gave.

The uniformed man guarding the door of the Vendig told him. "The hat check girl and the headwaiter of the club on the first floor say that Stone just walked through it, sir."

"Well, in the name of God, get him," Jim swore. "Stop

milling about, telling each other what swell cops you are and put the arm on him."

I knew how he felt. The blame would fall on him. Grady would give him hell. He might even try to bust him. But the way it had happened for me is the way it happens every time. When you read an account of some crook walking through a cordon of cops, it isn't because he's smart. It's because he's lousy with luck and the cops supposed to be corking the exit are too busy telling each other what they are going to do to spot him.

I walked as fast and as close to the building as I could without attracting attention. Sweat squished between my toes. It ran down my sides and tickled me. I brushed people aside, split couples, grateful that the walk was crowded. I felt like I was walking through a nightmare. Behind me the hat check girl was still screaming. Men on foot were fanning out. Squad car chauffeurs were burping their sirens, like small cats just learning to snarl, trying to clear the traffic jam that had formed in front of the Vendig.

I crossed Sixth Avenue with the light. It changed as I reached the far corner. A cruising cab started on with the green. I opened the door and got in.

"Where to, chum?" the driver asked me.

I named the first place that came to my mind. "Penn Station."

He tipped his flag just as the first radio car got under way and purred east on 52nd, the wail of its siren following it like a waving tail. The cab driver glanced up the street as we crossed it.

"Gee-sus. Look at all the police cars. Must be a stick-up or something."

I was still having trouble with my breathing. "Yeah. Must be," I panted.

His eyes met mine in the rear-vision mirror. He couldn't help but see the deep scratches on my face, the hat that didn't fit, the blood on my coat. He swallowed hard and reached for the handle of the door beside the wheel.

I slid the glass partition aside and pressed the muzzle of my spare gun to the back of his neck.

"Uh, uh," I warned him. "Uh uh."

Chapter Thirteen

From where I sat in one of the swings in the dark playground, I couldn't see if there was a stake-out in front of my apartment or not. There undoubtedly was. I sat a long time looking up at the windows of the building. Most of them, including those of my apartment, were unlighted. It was closer to one o'clock than midnight.

I sucked at the palm of my hand. It still hurt. The German girl's teeth had met through flesh. I decided I wouldn't want to be her boy friend. If she really got amorous she'd be apt to leave a man minus.

I was stalling. I was afraid. Not for myself. For Connie. Once the boys picked me up, no one of eight million people would believe her story, try to help her. With the possible exception of Abe Fietzel. I hoped the boys were having a good time combing lower Manhattan for

me. One advantage of being a Homicide man on the dodge was knowing how Homicide worked. Every clue, however minute, had to be investigated. The driver of every cab I'd ridden in had to be questioned. And I'd ridden in a lot of cabs before I switched to the subway, lost in the home-bound, after-the-theater crowd.

The swing swayed in the night wind and the chain creaked. It sounded unnaturally loud. I got up and walked to the high board fence that separated it from the apartment building. Stalling wasn't going to get me anywhere but caught, and I had to talk to Myra. The fence was high as the wall in the obstacle course at Benning. I didn't dare make any noise. I took off my shoes, tied the laces together and hung them around my neck. Then I backed off fifteen feet and made the wall my first try.

I sat a moment, breathing hard, silhouetted against the night, looking into the lighted office. The gray-haired night operator was sitting back of the switchboard, reading a book. Gilly and Mack, in plainclothes, were sprawled in two of the big lounge chairs in the lobby. From time to time, they glanced hopefully at the front door. I was spreading the boys out thin, damn thin. Gilly and Mack had been pulled out of uniform and used as a plainclothes stake-out because they knew me by sight. Both men looked like they were enjoying their roles of detective.

I lowered myself to the courtyard and put on my shoes. My socks were still wet with sweat. My feet felt clammy. I walked to the rear of the building. A short flight of steps led down to the boiler and package room. The boiler room door was unlocked. I opened it and stood listening. The only sound was the occasional pop-off of the safety valve on the hot water plant. From time to time it went psst!

I walked through the boiler room to the steel fire door and opened it as quietly as I could. There was a service elevator but I didn't dare to use it. The bedroom

of the super's basement apartment abutted the elevator shaft.

I climbed the steel and concrete stairs slowly, holding onto the rail, using the rail to help pull me along, one flight after another. I'd torn my injured palm on the fence. I was dripping a trail of blood. My arm ached up to my shoulder. I'd never been so tired. So Myra Wells had a single hotel room on the top floor. I didn't know the number of it. I wasn't even certain what I wanted to talk to her about. What I really wanted was to sit down on the stairs and bawl. I wanted to bang on the wall until Gilly and Mack heard me and cinched their promotion to third-grade detectives by 'detecting' me in the fire well. I kept on climbing.

The only light in the top floor came from the bulb over the elevator and the oblong red fire escape EXIT light. But Myra should be awake. She had just come off duty. If she was in her room. I leaned against the closed steel door and looked along the hall runner. Light showed under three of the doors. I listened at the first one. It wasn't Myra's room. Two men were talking about the Cards' prospects with Stankey at the helm. I moved on to the next room, trying to remember Myra's perfume. I couldn't. All I could smell was flesh. A man was talking over the radio, the radio tuned so low I couldn't distinguish the words but from the crackle it sounded like a short-wave set tuned to the police band.

I walked on to the third lighted room. A woman was patting her face—*pat, pat, pat*, the small intimate sounds a woman makes when she is putting on cold cream. I doubted it was Myra. As I recalled, the only cosmetic she used was lipstick. I walked back to the room in which the radio was playing and rapped lightly on the door. There was no answer. I turned the knob. The door was unlocked. I opened it and looked in. Myra was lying on the bed wearing the same baby blue housecoat she'd been wearing when I had first met her.

"Well," she said when she saw me. "Well!"

I closed the door and sat on the bed beside her.

"Well," she repeated. "I didn't expect to see you again."

"Why not?" I asked her.

She told me. "Because there are two detectives waiting down in the lobby for you." She indicated the small radio. "Because every policeman in town is looking for you. Why did you do it, Herman?"

It hurt for me to talk. "Why did I do what?"

"Kill that Simpson fellow?"

"I didn't kill him."

Her eyes studied my face. "That's not what I've been hearing over the police band."

I said, "Oh, that."

I stood up and opened the small medicine cabinet over the exposed basin. What I was looking for wasn't in it. I looked on top of the dresser and in the top two dresser drawers.

Myra said, "If you're looking for a drink, you won't find one in there." There was a small combination phone table and night stand beside the bed. She opened the door and brought out a bottle of whiskey. "Here."

I uncapped the bottle and took a drink. It was good rye whiskey. I poured a little of it into the puffed tooth marks in my palm, my mind traveling back down the nightmare. I'd asked Guinness, "*How many drinks did you say Connie had when she was in here Tuesday night?*"

"*Eight or nine,*" Guinness had told me. "*Maybe even more.*"

"*What was she drinking?*" I'd asked him.

And Guinness had told me. "*Straight rye.*"

I handed the bottle to Myra. She drank from the neck. Like a man. Without any chaser.

"You like rye?" I asked her.

Myra said, "If I didn't I wouldn't buy it." She unzipped her housecoat until the deep hollow between her breasts showed. "But why are you looking at me like that?"

"Where do you keep it, Myra?" I asked her.

She returned the whiskey to the night stand. "Where do I keep what?"

I said, "The Rit. The rust color Rit. Or whatever dye you used."

Myra leaned back against her pillow. "What would I want rust dye for? Any color dye, for that matter."

I sat studying her face. I knew now why she'd looked so familiar. It wasn't from seeing her at the hotel switchboard in the lobby. The longer I looked at her, the more sure I was of my ground. She was a big girl, a pretty girl of approximately the same weight and height as Connie. With her hair the same shade of red as Connie's, with a good pan-cake make-up foundation covering her freckles, made up as Connie made up, dressed as Connie dressed, it would be difficult for anyone who didn't know both women to tell them apart. Especially seeing them at a distance or in the dim light of a bar.

Myra continued to play with the zipper of her housecoat. She zipped it up. She zipped it down until I could see the firm white flesh of her stomach. "Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked.

"You wouldn't know?"

"No."

I put my hand over hers. "Stop playing with that god-damn zipper and tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"How you got Connie's clothes. Why you've been posing as Connie for the past six months. Why you had Joey Simpson drug her. How you got her up to Cary's apartment. Why you framed her for murder."

Myra's eyes filled with tears. She looked even more like Connie. When Connie got so mad she cried. "You're crazy. You're out of your mind, Mr. Stone."

"Now it's Mr. Stone."

"That's the way you seem to want it." Tears rolled down her cheeks. "I tried to be nice to you. I tried to help you. I held out the phone calls your wife made to

Lyle Cary. I gave myself to you." Her big breasts rose and fell with her emotion. "I tried to comfort you. I even made you coffee. I told you I'd come back as soon as I got off duty. And what did you do?"

I said, "You tell me."

She sat straight on the bed, sliding my hand and the zipper down into her lap. I took my hand away. "I'll tell you," Myra said hotly. "You made a fool of yourself. Because you're insanely determined to prove your wife isn't what she is, a dirty cheat, you got yourself suspended from the force. You beat Joey Simpson to death because he wouldn't tell the lie you wanted him to tell. What's more, you've been with another woman. Some cat who scratched you instead of trying to help you."

It was a good act. She was a clever actress. I asked, "How do you know all this?"

Myra sobbed, "I heard it on the radio. I've been listening ever since I came off duty. It's on the short-wave band. It's on every newscast."

I turned up the radio. That much of her story was true. The air was filled with me. I was driving the boys crazy.

Myra caught one of my hands and pressed it to her breasts. "For God's sake, Herman. Please."

"Please what?"

"Come to your senses. Connie isn't worth it. She's a tramp."

"How do you know?"

"I've heard her talking on the phone to Cary."

I took my hand away. "I thought you never listened in. I thought it would mean instant dismissal."

Myra wiped her eyes with the back of one hand. "I just said that because Mr. Halper was listening. She called Cary at least twice a day. And I'd be ashamed to tell you some of the things they said over the phone." She picked the bottle of rye from the night stand, took a drink, then offered the bottle to me.

"No, thank you," I refused it.

She corked the bottled and put it back. Her eyes were

bright, too bright. "Okay. So I've made a fool of myself over you. I still feel that way. Don't go out again. The police will get you if you do. Stay here with me tonight, Herman."

I played along. "You're willing to spend the night with a killer?"

She said, too quickly, "You're no killer. I—" she bit her lower lip. "That is," she added, lamely, "you—"

I stopped her there. "How do you know I didn't kill Joey Simpson? Rags call you up and tell you?"

There was a rustle of silk as Myra kicked at me with her bare feet. "Get out. Get out of my room. I won't be insulted by you. I don't even know anyone by the name of Hanlon."

I caught one of her threshing bare ankles and straightened her out on the bed. "Then how do you know the name Hanlon? It hasn't been on the radio, and the only name I mentioned was Rags."

Myra lay still a moment, panting. The zipper had unzipped all the way, exposing her perfect white body. I might have been looking at Connie, except that Myra was a natural platinum blonde. I raised my eyes to her face. Even with the difference in their hair there was a strong family resemblance.

I lost my head and slapped her. In the small room the blow sounded like the report of a pistol. I was breathing as hard as she was. "Talk, goddamn it, talk. Who are you? What are you to Connie? What's all this about? What has Connie got that you want?"

Fear foam flecked Myra's lips. She wasn't acting now. She was afraid I was going to kill her. "Don't you touch me," she panted. "Don't you hit me again. Get out of here."

She kicked at with her free foot and rolled at the same time. I caught at the blue housecoat. It came free in my hand. Myra stood with her back to the wall, her palms flat against the plaster, scream after scream tearing at the lining of her throat.

It was like reliving a nightmare. I'd been through this before. I threw myself across the bed at her. "Shut up."

She evaded my clutching hands, yanked the room door open and raced out into the hall, naked. Other doors were opening now. I ran down the hall after Myra. She opened a door at the far end of the hall and slammed and locked it in my face. I beat on the bathroom door.

"Let me in. Open this door, you bitch."

All I could think of was, *Myra knows. She has to tell me.*

A man's voice said, "Someone phone the police. The man is either drunk or insane."

I stopped pounding on the door and stood with my back against it. Every door in the hallway was open. There was someone in every door.

I looked from the man who had spoken to the locked bathroom door. Myra was in the wrong room. The sign over the door read—Ladies.

A new sound was added to the babble in the hall,—the whine of the service elevator. It would reach the floor long before I could break down the bathroom door and slap what I wanted to know out of Myra. Either Gilly or Mack would be in it, eager to nail down the job to which he had been temporarily assigned.

I realized I was still holding the housecoat. I dropped it on the floor and walked stiff-legged down the hall to the front elevator. No one tried to stop me. After midnight the elevator is self-operated. The cage was at the floor, which was probably the reason the stake-out in the lobby was using the service elevator. I got in and closed the door. I pushed the lobby button. Then I slipped my gun from its holster and began to sweat again.

The cage descended with maddening slowness. Long before I reached the lobby, Gilly or Mack, whichever one had stayed behind to plug the door, would be forewarned and waiting. But I couldn't be stopped now. I didn't mean to be.

All I'd had to go on before was faith. Now I knew.

Connie was still the same big beautiful doll I'd married out of a dime-a-dance palace when she'd been seventeen and I'd been the cop on the beat.

When the cage reached the lobby, the steel door opened by itself. Gilly had stayed behind to plug the front door. He looked at the gun in my hand.

"Don't try it, Stone," he warned me. "You haven't got a chance. I'll shoot."

"I'm going out, Gilly," I told him. "Don't try to stop me."

"I'll shoot," he repeated.

I took two slow steps toward him. "That's up to you. You have a gun. You're a cop. You're under orders to bring me in. But get me with your first shot, Gilly."

Gilly gave a few steps, uncertainly. "Now—look, Stone."

I shook my head at him. "Uh, uh. No talk. I'm going out."

Sweat beaded on his cheeks and forehead. I knew what he was thinking. He was a married man. He probably had kids. If he got me he was a first-grade detective—overnight. He liked to wear plain clothes. He could see ways of using the increase in pay. But if I got him he was dead. And, at the distance it wasn't likely that either of us would miss.

I backed him slowly toward the lobby door, at an angle. A drop of sweat ran down his face and dripped from the tip of his nose. He said, "For God's sake," hoarsely.

Then he backed into and fell over the arm of the chair into which I had steered him. His gun hand shot up, the bullet smacking harmlessly into the ceiling. Before he could recover his balance I saved his job for him by stepping in fast and bringing up a hard left to his jaw.

He grunted and folded into the chair. The blow had started my left hand to bleeding again. I stood a moment, panting, licking the blood from my palm. I looked over my shoulder. Her eyes round with fear, the PBX operator on duty was busy plugging cords into the holes in her

board. Calling the precinct station. Calling Centre Street.
"Help! Policel Herman Stone is in the lobby."

I looked back at Gilly. So I had out-gutted him. So? He wasn't wanted for murder. All he had to consider was his job. I had Connie to think of. And all of New York to run in, a steel and concrete jungle filled with deadly cats looking for me.

I yanked open the door and ran.

Chapter Fourteen

Hymie's Five Point Bath House smelled like all Turkish bath houses, of sour flesh and massage oil and steam, of drunks sobering up so they could go to work, go on another drunk or go home and beat up their wives.

Drunks staggered in and walked out. Behind the green baize door, in two of the cubicles across the narrow aisle, a pair of almost sober rounders boasted what swell wrens they were married to. How they didn't have to ask. How their wives were always willing. They cut up all the anatomical details. This at four-thirty in the morning, after

they'd been tomcatting around all night. I wished they'd go climb the tree reputed to grow in Brooklyn.

Lying in the dark, I wished I was smart. I wished I knew what the hell the whole thing was about. The frame had been staged with the perfection of a Broadway hit. Hate wasn't enough to explain it. No one hated me that much. No one had any reason to hate Connie. It had cost money to frame us, big money. The ground work had been laid for months. There *had* to be a profit motive somewhere. As I saw it, Cary had been a sacrificial goat. He'd thought he'd been in on the frame but he hadn't. Rags Hanlon and Myra had used him.

Hymie, a big Jewish boy with two hundred and sixty odd pounds well distributed over his six foot three, padded down the aisle and lifted the green curtain aside. "How you feeling, Hoimon?" he asked me.

I said I felt a lot better. I did. A half hour in the steam room, a short swim in the pool, another half hour on the slab under Hymie's capable hands, had steamed and kneaded the soreness out of my body.

Hymie turned on the dim light in the cubicle and laid a handful of morning papers on the table beside the bed, then set a greasy brown paper sack on top of them. "Better get some food in your guts," he told me. "Nothing looks quite so bad when your belly is full."

Hymie knew. I'd once done him a favor, a hell of a big favor. When I'd been walking a beat in Five Points, I'd slapped him out of a juvenile water-front gang. I'd kept him from doing time. I'd gotten him a regular job. I'd made Rabbi Feldman promise to tell me every time he missed synagogue. Now he had a prosperous bath house of his own. He'd married a neighborhood girl. He was putting money in the bank every week. He hadn't been a delinquent. All the poor guy had been was hungry.

I cracked the sack. There were four big Western sandwiches in it and a pint of Sunnybrook. I was glad it wasn't rye. I didn't think I could ever drink rye again.

I bit into one of the sandwiches. It tasted good. I said

through the ham and egg, "You're taking a big chance letting me hole up here, Hymie. With nineteen thousand cops looking for me."

Hymie squeegeed sweat from his massive chest, then adjusted the bath towel around his waist. "Water on the cops. The kind that tinkles. Present company excepted. You can stay here for fifty years if you wanna, Hoimon. But, boy, I hope I should never be so hot. In the newspapers. On the radio. All over the police band. The way they got you named, you're a free-wheeling *schlemiel*."

I laughed. "What do you think?"

"You know what I think," Hymie said. He padded back down the aisle.

I cracked the seal on the bourbon with my thumb nail and washed the mouthful of sandwich down with whiskey. My throat felt sore. It was difficult to swallow. By now, the shoot to kill was out. My clipping Gilly the way I had would be the last straw. By now the newspapers would be biting big chunks out of Inspector Grady's tail. He was the big shot of Manhattan Homicide West. As such, he and Jim Purvis would have to take the rap.

I unfolded one of the newspapers. I'd crowded Connie off the front page. There was a big picture of me getting a citation for something or other. I read on down the story. It was by-lined by Sally Gibbs, one of Manhattan's top-flight sob-sisters. One paragraph stood out—

. . . . out of his mind with grief at his own personal tragedy, Herman The Great, and mark you, he was a great detective, went too far this time in an attempt to beat the lie that could not be spoken out of Joey Simpson's lips. Crazed with grief, determined to prove his unfaithful wife guiltless of a charge of which, by every right of evidence, she stands convicted

The rest of the story was more of the same. I dropped the paper on the floor and picked up another one. The

boys were all sharpening their axes on me. With one exception, Abe Fietzel. In the few words I'd had with him I'd evidently convinced him there was some doubt as to my guilt. Abe pointed out several things. It wasn't in keeping with my known character to beat an unconscious man to death. The P. M. finding wasn't in as yet but Simpson had obviously been unconscious, drunk or drugged, or the couple across the hall would have heard some outcry. Then Abe went way out on a limb. He was personally acquainted with Mrs. Stone. He had eaten at her table. He and his wife had been guests of Mrs. Stone on numerous occasions. And the more he thought about it the more difficult it was for him to believe her guilty as charged, especially of the infidelity. I could have kissed the guy.

I read through Abe's story again. He had been fighting a deadline. He didn't have much to go on. It was all surmise and "I think." I crossed my fingers. But at least Abe was on our side. I'd told him about Rags Hanlon. Feeling as Abe did, he'd ask questions. He was asking questions now. And the guy had more news pigeons and underworld contacts than any fifty cops on the Force.

Still, Abe was one loud voice yelling in Manhattan. Right across from his by-lined story some punk on the same paper had a torrid interview with the fraulein through whose room I had escaped. It was small wonder she'd given me a tussle. It would seem she was a lady wrestler. She'd been waiting for her husband, it said in the paper, when I'd burst into her room. The reporter quoted her verbatim:

"This man, he burst into my room. I am asleep. At first I am thinking he is Hans. Then I see he is not and I am afraid when I hear much noise in the hall. I hear someone say a man is dead. I look at the man leaning against my door, on the inside. I point my finger at him and say, 'Those are police in the hall. You are a killer. You have killed a man.' And then he point a big gun at me and say, 'Yah, sure. That is right'."

Then, thinking of the gate at her next match, she went on to say how I had attempted to attack her but due to her superior wrestling skill, she had succeeded in fighting me off until, frightened, I had fled through the window. Neither she nor the reporter bothered to explain that the police had found her gagged and tied. There was even a picture of her in the "she'll love you for it" nightgown.

I hoped Connie didn't see it. Then I thought of Myra and almost lost the egg sandwich I'd eaten. My only consolation was I hadn't taken her. Myra had taken me. And she had been good at her business. She had a certain professional touch. I took another drink of bourbon, wondering what her business was when she wasn't a switchboard operator.

Outside of Abe switching sides, the only bright spot in the papers was an item concerning the old couple who lived in the apartment under Lyle Cary. I read through it three times. It read:

.... Charles A. Swanson, retired Title Policy Company employee, and Mrs. Swanson, the elderly couple who live in the apartment under that in which the murdered man had lived, made a partial retraction late last evening of their former positive identification of Mrs. Stone as the red-haired girl whom they had seen visit the murdered man on numerous occasions. On talking it over, Mr. Swanson said, "Mrs. Swanson and I have decided that possibly it was some other girl we saw, a girl similar in size and coloring to Mrs. Stone"

An idea the size of a very small fruit fly began to buzz through my brain. The Swansons were too good to be true. The crap in the Charles Street Station about Swanson being reluctant to point the finger at Connie had been just that. The old buck had risen to the occasion like a high school punk seeing a naked woman for the first time. Mrs. Swanson had been just as bad.

"I'm sorry. But this is the girl," she had sworn. "I remember that beauty mark distinctly."

The business of bringing coffee and sweet rolls to the uniformed man guarding Cary's apartment had been more of the same. The Swansons had been feverishly eager to be on the inside. Why?

The fruit fly grew to blue-bottle size, then into a B 36. When I had asked Connie what had happened to her pastel green housecoat she'd told me—

"I gave it away. Yes. I remember now. Someone came to the apartment and said they were collecting bundles for Britain. And I gave them the housecoat and some dresses I hardly ever wore."

I'd asked if it was Miss Wells.

"No," Connie had told me. "I'm certain it wasn't her. It was a nice old lady with white hair."

Mrs. Swanson's hair was white. She was a nice old lady.

There was a public phone at the end of the dark aisle. I found a dime in my change, wrapped a towel around me, padded down the aisle and dialed Abe Fietzel's number.

Shirley answered it first ring. "Mrs. Fietzel," she said.

"This is Herman, Shirley," I said.

"Good," she said. "I'm glad you called. And I'm glad you're standing up for Connie, Herman. That little pimp deserved to get his head beat in. He must have drugged her coke. Connie couldn't do such a thing to you."

I asked her how she knew.

Shirley told me. "Because you're her God, Herman. Because she was perfectly satisfied and happy in her marriage. Believe me. I know. I'm her friend. And women tell each other such things, when they are as close as Connie and I have been. There's never been any other man in her life but you."

A lump formed in my throat, a lump too big to swallow.

"I love you, too, Shirley," I told her. "And if I ever get out of this mess, your boy friend isn't the only one

who can give orchids. But speaking of boy friends, is Abe there?"

"No," Shirley said. "He isn't. He's checking that tip you gave him on Rags Hanlon."

I felt better than I had in hours. "Fine. But if Abe should phone home, Shirley—"

"Yes—?"

"Tell him to check on Swanson, too. That's the old guy in the apartment under Cary's." I played a hunch. "Tell Abe to check with the vice squad and see if they've pinched him for any reason whatsoever."

"As soon as Abe calls," Shirley promised.

I padded back to the sleeping cubicle and forced myself to review what I knew of Connie's background. It wasn't much. Her great grandfather, Daniel Eagan had settled in Brooklyn shortly after the civil war. He had farmed a large section of land in the vicinity of where the Gowanus Bay Barge Canal terminal now stood. Her grandfather had been a well-known man about town at the turn of the century. A man with a thirst, who drank up the family land, sub-divided by that time, and nine-tenths of the family money.

Connie had often told me, "If the old gent had only been able to pick as many fast horses as he did women, the Eagans would still be in the money."

But he hadn't. Little had been left for Connie's father. Her mother, a registered nurse, had come to Brooklyn from Denver during the First World War. On that side, the only one left was her mother's sister's daughter, a cousin named Iris whom Connie had never met but with whom she exchanged an occasional letter and a Christmas card.

I realized I was sweating again. I used my shorts to wipe my face. I knew more about Connie's background than I'd thought. Connie said she favored her mother, except that she had inherited her father's red hair. Her mother had been a blonde. Iris was about Connie's age.

And Golden, Colorado, if I remembered my geography, was only a few miles from Denver.

I tapped the whiskey again.

The depression of '29 had bankrupted Connie's father. She was four years old at that time. Two years later, her father and mother had been killed in an auto accident. Well-meaning friends had had her committed to a semi-private orphanage where what little insurance her father had left her was supposed to pay her way.

It hadn't. The institution, managed by a sanctimonious old goat, whom she called Baldy Parks, had worked her like a slave. At sixteen, tired of fending him off, she had run away. Another girl who had been in the home had become a taxi-dancer. She had gotten Connie a job. And that was where I had come in.

I put on my shorts and socks and pants and shoes. I couldn't stay where I was forever. Outside in the red of the morning, the mills of the law were grinding. Uniformed and plainclothes men were pounding on doors and ringing bells and asking questions of everyone who had ever known me. It was only a matter of time till they got to Hymie's.

I put on my shirt and coat and tied my tie. Before the boys caught up with me, I wanted to talk to Baldy Parks and look over any papers about Connie that might still exist.

I slipped my gun into its holster and pulled the green curtain aside just as Hymie padded swiftly down the aisle. I knew before he spoke. The brass really wanted me, bad. Grady had turned on the heat. And I hadn't been kidding Hymie about there being nineteen thousand cops in New York.

Hymie talked from the corner of his mouth. "Out the back way, Hoimon. Fast. Two station bulls just walk in the front door. An' they don't want no bath."

Chapter Fifteen

The orphanage was in the west central part of the borough, not far from Prospect Park. It was a large square red brick building, set well back from the street. Connie had pointed it out several times as we had driven by.

"Even the sight of it still makes my flesh crawl," she'd told me. "And as for old Baldy—well, let's not go into that. But it's a good thing I ran away when I did."

In the first red flush of dawn, it didn't look too bad. All it was was a building. As I looked at it, a bell rang and the lights on the second floor came on. I left the tree under which I was standing and walked across the scrubby lawn to the rear of the building.

The boiler room was locked but the basement window next to it was open. I slipped through it and lowered myself to the cement floor. The joint smelled like an institution, of stale grease and boiled oatmeal, of spinach and beef hearts and pork liver. What the hell. They're only kids. Give 'em whatever is cheapest. But don't forget to warn them that any kid who makes a complaint when the inspector comes around will get the hell beat out of him. Or her.

Connie had told me that, too. How old Baldy had rel-

ished spanking the older girls, bare palm to bare flesh.

I found a flight of stairs and climbed it. I could hear the children now, not whooping and hollering like most kids do when they get up, but subdued and quiet. Doing what they were told to do. Kids raised in a Home, without love. The long hall was antiseptically clean, dimly lighted and cheerless. As I closed the door to the basement, a girl about fourteen came down the stairs from the second floor, braiding her pig tails as she came. A second Connie, maybe, on her way to do KP.

I asked her if she knew where I could find Mr. Parks.

She looked down the hall toward the front of the building. There was about as much life in her voice as there was in Joey Simpson. "There you have me, mister," she said. "The old goat should be in chapel. But it could be he's still in the sack."

She walked on down the hall and pushed open twin swinging doors.

I watched her out of sight. While I was watching her, a second bell rang and the faint babble of voices on the next floor stopped. I saw what Connie meant. I could feel my own flesh crawl. Living in the Ellington Home for Homeless Girls was the same as doing time. You got up when one bell rang. You shut up when another bell rang. You prayed when a third bell rang. And so on through the day. Meanwhile, if you were mature and pretty, you fended off old Baldy.

I walked down the hall until I came to a door with a brass name plate—

Mr. Ivar Parks
Superintendent

I opened the door and walked in. There was a big glass-topped desk and a half dozen comfortable arm chairs in the office. At the moment it was unoccupied but from what Connie had told me, I knew Parks' living quarters were connected with it.

There was a door in each of two walls. I opened the

one on the north side. It led into a board room of some kind, complete with a big directors' table. I closed the door and looked at a bank of steel filing cabinets that took up almost all of one wall. The pull-out drawers were listed alphabetically. Whatever data the Home still had on Connie Eagan would be in the drawer marked E. I tried it. It was locked.

I crossed the floor and listened at the door on the far side. I could hear the faint scrape of a razor on whiskers. I opened the door and walked in. It led me into a bedroom. In the bathroom, on the far side, a bald man in his middle fifties was shaving with a straight-edged razor. It was the first time I'd ever seen Parks. I didn't like him on sight. The feeling was mutual. I'd startled him so he nicked his chin.

Parks lowered his razor. "Whoever you are, get out of here."

I closed the door behind me. "You're Mr. Ivar Parks?"

He dabbed at the cut on his chin with a wash rag. "I am. Who are you?"

I said, "I'm Herman Stone. Connie Eagan's husband."

The name didn't seem to register. "Who?"

"Connie Eagan's husband."

Parks resumed shaving. "Oh, yes, Connie Eagan." He was so smug it was all I could do to keep from taking the razor away from him and use it to better advantage than he was. "The girl who didn't appreciate a good home. The girl who ran away in '40 or '41. The one who's in all the papers. The girl who shot her lover." He looked over his razor at me. "And what did you say your name is?"

"Stone. Herman Stone."

Park got it then. He closed his razor and laid it on top of the flush tank. "My God. Then you're the suspended detective who beat that man to death last night. A fit husband for Connie." He wet the wash rag with hot water and wiped the lather from his face. "So? What do you want from me?"

Under his bald dome his cheeks were pink and plump. His face looked like a spanked baby's rear. I slid my gun from its holster. "A little information."

"About whom?"

I said, "Let's start with Rags Hanlon. The way I see it, he's bankrolling the frame. He'd have to come to you for information about Connie. Being the smart louse you are, you undoubtedly insisted on a piece of whatever it is."

"You're out of your mind."

I crossed the room and slapped him hard. "No, I'm not out of my mind. Talk, damn you. What did Hanlon want to know about Connie? What's this all about?"

Parks' face looked even more like a fat baby's heinie, with twin brown moles for eyes. "I don't know what you are talking about," he lied.

I transferred my gun from my right hand to my left and made a fist of my right. "Perhaps I can refresh your memory."

He cowered back against the tile. I started to swing and spun on my heel instead, as the door of the bedroom opened. Myra, looking very blonde and very lovely stood framed in the doorway with Rags Hanlon a few inches behind her.

"Well," Myra said. "Well. You finally got here. We've been expecting you all night, Mr. Stone. Ever since you walked out on me. Know something?"

I asked her, "What?"

The big blonde said, "For a man who's supposed to be smart, you're awfully dumb."

I shook my head at her. "I'm not smart, honey. I never claimed to be. I solve all my cases by attrition."

Myra looked puzzled. "What does attrition mean?"

Hanlon displayed his college education. "It means to wear down."

Myra was amused. "I took a pounding all right. But for my cut of this deal, it was worth it."

She walked on into the bedroom and sat on the edge

of the bed with one leg crossed over the other, showing plenty of white space and not giving a damn. "Now you look natural," I told her. "I figured out just this morning what your regular profession is. The only thing missing, baby, is the blue housecoat with the trick zipper."

Myra lighted a cigarette. "I don't recall your complaining. That wire recording Captain Purvis got must have been a honey."

Hanlon closed the bedroom door and leaned against it. "Maybe we played it wrong in a couple of spots," he admitted. "If so, it was because you forced us to extemporize. You're a dope, Herman. Women are a dime a dozen. You should have let Connie take what was coming to her. Then you wouldn't be in this mess."

He had his right hand in his coat pocket. The muzzle of his gun made a small round bulge. So? I had a gun in my hand. "What's it all about, Rags?" I asked him.

He told me. "Money."

Myra puffed at her cigarette as if she was enjoying it. "So now we have him," she said, "What do we do with Stone?"

Hanlon had it all planned. "I think we'll put him on ice," he told her. He looked at Parks. "Do you have a good strong closet downstairs?"

From behind me, Parks said, "We have several. But why not keep him right here? That way, none of the employees need see him."

"That's an idea," Myra agreed.

Hanlon continued as if I wasn't in the room. "His own squad thinks he killed Joey. His wife is facing a first degree murder charge. At the moment, and until he is found, Stone is the object of the most intensive man-hunt New York had known since the boys combed the town for the lad who rubbed out the pants salesman who fingered Willie Sutton. What can the poor devil do? What would you do if you were in his place?"

"I see what you mean," Myra said.

Hanlon was very well pleased with Rags Hanlon. "To-

night or early tomorrow morning, when the heat has died down a little, I'll come back with Ben or one of the other boys. And will Inspector Grady be happy, when some dumb cop on the sea gull patrol out at Coney happens to look in a parked car and there is Herman The Great. With a thirty-eight slug in his head and the gun it came from in his hand."

"Not bad," Myra smiled.

I said, "There's only one hitch to that, Rags."

"Name it," Hanlon said.

I pointed the gun in my hand at the bottom left hand button of his double-breasted coat. "Like when you make rabbit pie. First catch your rabbit."

I didn't like the silence that followed. The ache returned to my spine. I couldn't see Parks but neither Hanlon nor Myra was frightened. They were amused. I stood it as long as I could.

"All right. What's so goddamn funny?"

Hanlon asked, "Were you wearing that gun when you killed Joey, Herman?"

I shook my head. "I didn't kill Joey."

"No," Hanlon admitted. "That's right. I did. Poor Joey. He probably would have talked if you had gotten to him first. Having to kill Nick Casaras scared the hell out of the little pimp. But is that the same gun you had in your holster?"

My mouth was suddenly dry. I'd been too keyed up to notice it before, but the gun in my hand was lighter than it should be. After belting me unconscious, after beating Joey Simpson to death, Hanlon had stopped to empty the clip and pump the shell out of the chamber of my gun. All I had in my hand was so much blue steel.

"No," I lied. "I switched guns."

Myra's eyes searched my face. "He's lying. He hasn't had time to pick up another gun. He's been on the run ever since." She smoothed the cloth over her breasts with the palms of her hands. "Now, don't you wish you'd stayed with me last night, Herman?" She laughed. "Instead of

chasing me down the hall. You should have seen me, Rags. There I was in my birthday suit hot-footing it down the hall with Herman breathing on my neck. I'd never been so glad to see a bathroom in my life."

I stalled for time. "What did you tell the squad when they got there?"

Myra said, "That you'd confessed to me that you had killed Joey because he wouldn't admit he'd doped Connie's coke. I told them you wanted to hide in my room and when I wouldn't let you, you blew your top and started to beat on me." She laughed again. "And just in case you might have told anyone your fantastic story about me dyeing my hair and posing as Connie, I told *my* story *au naturel*. Just to make sure that Captain Purvis and the other members of the squad really knew I was a blonde. You should have seen the trouble I had, getting the zipper of my housecoat to zip."

Hanlon laughed with her.

Parks wasn't amused. "Well, do something about him," he said. There was a brief pause as if he were looking at his watch. "I'm supposed to be in chapel right now, leading the devotions."

Hanlon took his gun from his pocket. Holding it by the barrel, like a club, he took two short steps toward me.

I squeezed the trigger of my gun. Metal clicked on metal. The big blonde was right. I hadn't been smart. I'd been dumb. Also very lucky. I'd cheated Gilly out of his promotion with an unloaded gun. For all the good the automatic in my hand was going to do me, it might as well be a water pistol.

Hanlon poised to strike. "So now you know."

I backed a step from him. Then sensing motion behind me, I turned to face Ivar Parks. His fat face glistening with excitement, the bald man swung the chair he'd snatched up. I caught the blow on my forearms but it enabled Hanlon to step in and beat at my head with his gun. The blow knocked me to my knees. A second chop of

the gun opened a gash on my forehead. Blood covered my face like a veil.

Beating at air with an empty gun, I tried to fight back to my feet and pain followed the silk-sheathed leg that flashed in front of my eyes.

"Lie down," Myra said, without heat. "You're through. Washed up. As of now. Lie down, you tough copper. You're dead."

So saying, she kicked me again.

Chapter Sixteen

I lay with my mouth pressed to the dirty carpet, sucking dust into my lungs, blood forming a pool on the broadloom. I had never hurt so much. I'd never been so tired. It would be so easy to quit. On the other hand, I'd told Connie:

"While you're going through what you're going to have to go through, I'll be working to bring you home. And you're not to worry, see?"

"*I see,*" Connie had breathed. "*And I won't worry, now.*"

Funny. How a man's mind works. I was looking at bloody carpet but all I could see was Connie's eyes, glowing like stars, wet sea blue in the white of her face.

I was her husband. Connie was depending on me. I'd promised.

I got to my hands and knees.

"Watch him," Myra said, sharply. "The big bastard's getting up."

The pimp in Hanlon came out. He was afraid. "Maybe I'd better shoot him."

"No. Not in here," Parks bleated.

I wiped the blood from my eyes and looked at Hanlon. The one thing he couldn't afford was noise. He stepped in fast and chopped with his gun. I ducked the blow and swung with a blind punch that connected with his groin. The pain caused him to suck in his breath. It also made him cautious.

"A tough guy, eh?" he winced.

I got to my feet, my legs wide, my body weaving. I wasn't trying to be a hero. All of the heroes are dead. All I was doing was stating a fact. "You don't know how tough, fellow. You've made a chump out of me. You've made a chump out of the Department."

Hanlon's yellow belly showed through his two hundred dollar double-breasted coat. Beating a drugged punk to death and killing a two-hundred-pound cop who didn't want to die were two entirely different things.

Myra read my mind. "You're going to have to kill him, Rags."

Hanlon reversed his revolver.

"No. Not in here," Parks pleaded. "You promised there wouldn't be any killing. Now three men are dead."

I wished my damn blood would stop running down into my eyes. I wiped it away with the back of one hand and looked at Parks. The bald orphanage superintendent didn't like the way things were going. A corpse here. A

corpse there added up. And he was more lecher than crook. Until he'd gotten mixed up in this thing, the chances were, his only contribution to crime had taken place in the dark on the immature bodies of God knew how many minor girls.

I braced my back against the wall. "If you don't know the law, I'll tell you. It so happens in New York State that the statutes read that anyone guilty of plotting or abetting a murder is just as guilty as the trigger man."

Parks panted. "Get him out of here. You said you were going to fix it so it would look like he committed suicide. You said you were going to leave him in a parked car out at Coney."

I repeated, "First catch your rabbit."

Hanlon looked from me to the phone on the bed table. I needled him. "Go ahead, Rags. Call the Brain. Maybe he can think of something. Tell him you have a bull by the tail. A former harness bull by the name of Herman Stone."

The beating had almost knocked me out and had sent my gun spinning across the floor. Hanlon picked it up and tossed it on the bed. He tossed a full clip after it. "You know how to load a gun?" he asked Myra.

Myra said, "I do."

"Then load it," Hanlon told her.

She slipped the clip in place and pumped a shell into the firing chamber. "Now what?"

Hanlon wet his lips with his tongue. "You asked for it, Stone. You're going to get it. Like I said before, we weren't after you. All we wanted was Connie. We got her. But you had to poke your big nose in. You *had* to believe her story."

He brought up his arm. I pushed myself away from the wall and rushed him. I felt a streak of pain burn across my ribs. Then I was on top of him, beating at his face, his body. His nose smashed flat with his face. He sobbed, "Oh, God," and dropped the gun.

"Shoot him," he sobbed. "Shoot him."

Behind me, Myra cursed. "I'm trying to."

I swung Hanlon around as a shield. Myra was fumbling with the safety on my pistol. Parks had enough of where he was. He started for the door, to lead devotions, maybe. I stopped beating on Hanlon long enough to stick out a leg and trip him just as Myra figured out the safety and sprayed the bedroom with lead, emptying the gun in one burst.

The burst showered me with plaster. Parks put a finger to his chest, touching a small red spot. A small red spot that continued to grow. The bald man's knees gave way and he sat down on the floor.

I continued to pound on Hanlon. He alternately sobbed and screamed for help. Someone was pounding on the office door. Children were screaming in the hall. Some dame yelled:

"Mr. Parks? Are you all right?"

I tossed a quick look at Parks. He was sitting with his back to the wall. The dime-sized spot had grown to cover his chest. Myra flung herself on me and raked her nails down my face in an effort to get Hanlon free. I straight-armed her away. "You're next, baby," I told her. "And this time you're going to talk."

The pounding on the door came closer. The dame doing the pounding and the calling was at the bedroom door, now. I punched Hanlon into the door. He caught the knob on the rebound, opened the door and slipped through. And that was all right with me. He wouldn't get very far. Not in the shape he was.

The kid I'd seen in the hall looked at me with round eyes. "I'm going to call the police," she said.

"You do that, honey," I said and closed and locked the door.

Myra fought me for the knob. "Uh, uh, blondie," I said. I slapped her against the wall. "You should have done your running long ago. Back to Golden, Colorado. All right. Start talking, Iris."

The kids in the hall, all girls, were screaming so loudly

now it was difficult to hear what was said in the room. It was like trying to talk in an aviary during feeding time. The big blonde put the back of her hand to her mouth. "What did you call me?"

I said, "I called you Iris. You're Connie's only living relative. You're her cousin from Golden. So what has Connie got that you want?" I slapped her again. First with my palm, then with the back of my hand. "What's so important and so valuable that you and Rags and the Brain were willing to kill three men for it?"

She said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You didn't dye your hair red and pose as Connie?"

"No."

"You didn't carry on a five-month affair with Cary?"

"No."

"You didn't plant Connie's clothes in Cary's apartment? You didn't plant her purse in Eddie Guinness' Bar?"

"No."

"You didn't fake the record of those phone calls so I'd be grateful to you? You didn't use that pretty body of yours as a torch? You didn't practically rape me, hoping the heat smoke would get in my eyes and I'd forget my promise to Connie?"

The big blonde I'd known as Myra was panting now. "No. No, it was just that I was attracted to you."

I caught her by the front of her dress and shook her. The thin goods tore as she twisted free. She wasn't wearing a bra. She backed across the room, away from me, cupping her breasts in her hands.

I stalked her. "Talk, damn you."

She spit in my face. "Why should I? The hell with you. In spades. You can't prove a thing if I don't talk. And I don't intend to."

I tried to slap her again. She tried to kick me where it would hurt the most. Both of us missed. She resumed her backing. I continued to stalk her.

I warned her, "Remember, this isn't official. We're not down at the Bureau. I'm not a cop. I've been sus-

pended. I'm just a man wanted for murder. A man whose wife is facing a first degree murder charge. *What does Connie have that you want?*"

Iris kept on backing, being modest, cupping her breasts in her hands. She wasn't tough now. She was crying. She thought I meant to kill her if she didn't talk. I did.

"Believe me, Herman," she said. "It wasn't my idea. He came to me. He looked me up in Golden. It was his proposition."

I'd taken a hell of a beating. Blood was blinding me. I was tired of chasing her. I stood with my back to the door and wiped my eyes with my sleeve. The blonde continued to back until she was only a few feet from where Ivar Parks was sitting with his back against the wall, his life leaking out of the hole in his chest.

I remembered Hanlon's dropped gun, too late. She stooped and tried to snatch it from the floor where it had fallen beside Parks. Parks picked it up before she could and pointed it at her.

"No," he said, weakly.

Iris straightened slowly. As if her breath hurt her. She spoke as if she were speaking to a child, each word separate from the other. "Give me that gun, Ivar."

Parks shook his head. "No."

I took a step away from the door. "Then give it to me, fellow."

"I don't like you either," he told me. He looked back at Iris. "But you got me into this. You shot me."

"But I didn't mean to, darling," Iris said. "It was an accident. Please give me the gun."

She held out her hand. Parks slapped it away with the gun. "No." The motion caused the blood on his chest to spread. "You and Hanlon told me I'd be rich. You lied to me."

The big blonde wet her lips with the tip of a pink tongue. She had only one thing to offer. Herself. Her dress was hanging in shreds. She ripped it the rest of the way. All she had on was a pair of sheer panties. She

walked across the room and back, using her sex to hold the dying man's eyes. "We can still be rich, darling," she whispered. "You and I. All that stands in our way is Stone. Now, *please* give me that gun."

She was standing over Parks now. Her big breasts swung out and down as she tried to take the gun from his hand.

"You bitch. You blonde bitch," Parks named her.

The gun in his hand jumped three times.

There was the familiar smack of lead into flesh. The blonde girl staggered back under the impact until she bumped into the rumpled bed and sat down abruptly.

"Oh, no," she said, softly. "Oh, no."

Her voice was small, like that of an unjustly punished child. She pressed both palms to her stomach as if she was trying to hide the ugly blemishes that marred her soft white flesh. For a moment she succeeded. Then blood leaked through her laced fingers.

"Oh, no," she repeated. "Oh, no."

I looked at Parks. Pulling the trigger had been it. He'd lost his appetite for young girls for all time. For any kind of girls. His body had jack-knifed in the middle. From where I stood, his bald head looked like an Easter egg trying to hide between a pair of blue serge legs. I picked the gun from his fingers, slipped the clip and walked over to the bed.

Iris was breathing heavily. In and out. Hoarsely. The harsh expulsion of her breath was the only sound in the building. The screaming of the children and the pounding on the door had stopped. Faintly, in the distance, I could hear or thought I could hear the wail of a police car siren.

"It's bad, eh, kid?" I asked the blonde.

She looked up without moving her head. "Yes," she said, simply.

I laid the gun on the pillow. "Want me to see if I can stop the bleeding?"

"It's on the inside," she told me. "The minute I take my hands away, I'm through."

I squatted down in front of her. "Then how's for giving Connie a break? What's this all about, Iris?"

Her blue eyes were curiously flat. Her pink tongue ran the curve of her lips. Like the head of a trapped coral snake looking for something or someone on which to expend the last of its venom. "Why not?" she said, finally. "Chains fifteen. East one half block forty, tract sixty-three, Gowanus Bay addition."

I said, "That's over east of the Erie Basin, isn't it? Where most of the canal traffic ties up?"

She nodded.

I parroted the words. "Chains fifteen. East one half block forty, tract sixty-three, Gowanus Bay addition." All it was to me was words. I lighted a cigarette and held it to Iris' lips.

She sucked smoke into her lungs. Cautiously. As if not quite certain they would hold it.

"So?" I asked her. "I still don't know."

It was an effort for her to talk. "You'll find out."

I put my hands on her waist to steady her.

"Tighter," she whimpered. "I'm frightened."

So what could I tell her? We all have to go sometime? All she was interested in was herself.

Her eyes searched mine. "You hate me, don't you?"

I gave her a break. "No. I wouldn't say that."

Her voice was barely audible now. "Prove it," she whispered. "I'm frightened. Kiss me goodbye, Herman."

So she'd been in my bed. I'd known her. I kissed her goodbye. Her lips clung to mine, greedily. Her hands left her stomach. The fingers of one hand tangled in my hair. Her other hand reached out and picked the gun off the pillow.

"Just so I won't be lonely," she whispered.

She thrust the barrel into my guts and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

I took the gun out of her hand and tossed it back on

the pillow. "I thought you might try that, honey," I told her. "That's why I slipped the clip. That type automatic won't fire without it. Killing is a business. You have to know your trade."

The pink snake head explored her lips again. "You bastard. You big smart Dutch bastard," she breathed. "If it hadn't been for you—"

A shudder ran the length of her body.

She tried again. "If it hadn't been for you—"

I took my hands away and stood up. "Goodbye, baby," I told her. Cold. Without emotion. A cop. Thinking of what she had done to Connie. Thinking of what she had done to me.

The big blonde fell forward, slowly, twisting in air as she fell. I stepped aside and let her fall. She fell on her back, tried to spit up at me, gagged on her spittle, and died.

The wail of the siren grew louder. A second, then a third siren added their voices to the undulating wail. The big black cats had found their fish. Running wouldn't help me now. I'd run as far as I could. All I could do was wait for the scratch on the door.

I looked down at the blonde girl I had known as Myra. I was embarrassed—for her. A pair of blood red panties was a hell of a costume in which to face the Big Judge. All she could do was cop a plea.

I ripped a sheet from the bed and laid it over her.

"Good luck, baby," I whispered.

So who was I to throw stones?

Chapter Seventeen

Charles Street hadn't changed. It still smelled like a Manhattan precinct station. I looked out the barred window of the washroom. It was night again. Young couples were strolling the street or sitting on the worn stone stoops with their arms around each other. Like Connie and I had sat on a stone stoop in Brooklyn. Here and there a window was still lighted. Men were winding alarm clocks, making love to their wives, getting their kids a drink of water.

The little people. The hard-working little people who lived with one wife or one husband all their lives. Who never got their names in the newspaper. Who wouldn't recognize a police blotter if they saw one.

So it happened every night, three hundred and sixty-five nights a year. In the good hotels and cheap ones. In the back seats of cars. In bushes. In offices. In hallways. In cold-water walk-ups. On Central Park South. There were eight million people in Greater New York. That figured down to one eightieth of one percent who couldn't control their libido. Whoever heard of putting a dame's picture in the *Daily News* or *Times* or *Mirror* because she'd never cheated on her husband?

Jim Purvis came into the washroom as I was putting on my coat. "How you feel, fellow?" he asked me.

I told him. "Lousy."

I looked at my reflection in the mirror over the basin. Monte had gone out to the apartment and gotten me a clean shirt and a freshly pressed suit of clothes. One of the police surgeons had done what he could with my scratches and cuts and contusions. I was all right in the clothes department but my head and face still looked like I'd been run through a sausage grinder.

Abe came in to wash his hands. The little guy was bubbling, talking even more staccato than ever, out of the corner of his mouth. He slapped my rump as he passed me. "So the big Dutchman did it again, eh, Jim?"

Jim still wasn't entirely convinced. He didn't say anything. I asked Abe if he'd brought the man from the Title Policy Company.

Abe dried his hands on a paper towel. "I brought the president. And he brought two clerks carrying enough old plat books to re-subdivide all of Brooklyn."

Jim asked if I was ready. I said I was and followed him down the hall to Captain Carver's office, still technically under arrest. With Monte on one side of me and Cork on the other.

The office was filled with the same people who had crowded it the night Connie had been arrested. I stopped beside Connie's chair and squeezed her shoulder. "Hang on just a little while longer, kid," I told her. "Then you and I are going home."

Her eyes filled with tears and ran over. "You mean that, Herman?"

I stooped and kissed her wet eyes. "I never meant anything more."

Assistant District Attorney Havers' pink cheeks turned even pinker. "That's very touching," he said. "But suppose you give us some proof of the allegations and contentions you have been making all day."

I lighted a cigarette, looking at him through the flame.

"All that's the matter with you, fellow," I told him, "is that you're stuck with a true bill you don't know what to do with. But you keep on cracking like that and I'll tell you."

Havers swallowed his bile and shut up.

I walked over to the long wicker basket resting on two sawhorses and lifted the lid. The lab boys had done a good job on Iris. With her freckles covered with makeup and her hair dyed red she looked like Connie's reflection in a mirror.

Grady was in the same class with Jim. He still wasn't entirely convinced. The old man rested one lean haunch on the edge of Captain Carver's desk. "Well, let's get on with it."

I asked Jim if Hanlon had been picked up.

Jim said, "Three hours ago."

"He had my shield on him?"

"He did." Jim flipped my shield on his palm. "We found it in his pants pocket with his change."

I nailed Hanlon in the chair. With a little white lie. It could have happened as I told it. "Good. To show what a big shot he was, Rags took it off me in Joey Simpson's room at the Vendig Hotel. After he slugged me unconscious. After he beat in Joey Simpson's brains."

"Why did Hanlon kill Simpson?" Grady asked.

I told him. "For two reasons. One to pin it on me. But mainly because Joey panicked and killed Nick Casaras when Nick tried to put the arm on him. And Rags was afraid Joey would talk. He was afraid Joey would admit he had spiked Connie's coke."

"With what?"

I said, "That's up to the lab men. Whatever he used it was some volatile substance that didn't show up in Connie's regurgitation when she was sick in Lyle Cary's apartment."

Jim looked at the shield in his palm. "So what do I do with this?"

Grady held out a gnarled hand. "I'll keep it for now."

He looked up at me from under his jutting white eyebrows. "Go on, Herman."

At least I was Herman again, instead of "Officer Stone." I looked around the office. "Is Mr. Meyers here?"

The druggist stood up. "I am."

I indicated the wicker basket with my thumb. "Take a look at this girl, will you, Mr. Meyers? See if you can identify her."

The druggist looked in the basket, then across the room at Connie. He said, "I would swear it is Mrs. Stone. But it can't be."

"No," I agreed. "It can't." I located Eddie Guinness. "You're next, Eddie."

Guinness looked at the girl and did the same double take that Meyers had. "I'll be damned. No wonder I thought she was Mrs. Stone. Sure, I can identify her. That's the dame who was in my place with Lyle Cary. Who is she?"

I named her for him. "Her name is Iris James. She's Connie's cousin. Her mother's sister's daughter. A natural blonde, from Golden Colorado."

Connie got to her feet. "My cousin Iris?"

"That's right. When did you see her last, Connie?"

"I never saw her. We corresponded but we never met."

I corrected Connie. "You met and talked to her a lot of times. Only you didn't recognize her. Because she's a natural blonde, with freckles. Because she used the name of Myra Wells."

Connie gasped. "One of the switchboard girls at the hotel."

"That's right. In a perfect position to keep track of your movements and mine. That's why neither of us ever bumped into her while she was posing as you. She knew right where we were at all times." I looked at Inspector Grady. "How about you, sir?" I asked. Purposely tardy with the sir, rubbing it in a little. "You told me you'd seen Connie with Lyle Cary on numerous occasions."

Grady didn't need to look at the girl in the basket.

He'd seen her before and after the lab men had worked on her. The old man spread his hands. "So I was wrong. So she made a chump of me."

I eased the knife a little. "You, and me, and a lot of other men. But the biggest sucker was Cary. She really sold him a bill of goods. He thought he was a gay caballero playing around with the wife of a tough homicide cop. And all the time he was playing patty-cake with a homicidal baby. To make the thing good, to rap Connie with first degree murder, Cary *had* to die. And Iris knew it from the start."

I lighted a fresh cigarette from the butt of the one I was smoking. "Like nine out of every ten crooks, they outsmarted themselves. Because Connie was married to me, they were afraid to kill her outright. So they were clever about it, they thought. They made it look like Connie had been having an affair with Cary and when he tried to shake her, she killed him. I was supposed to be so burned I didn't care what happened to her. They figured the blood in my eyes would put out the smoke. And it damn near did."

I sucked at my cigarette, still looking at Inspector Grady. "All day you've been yelling for a motive. Okay. Now I know. I'll tell you. This all started some time ago when one of the men in this office dug into a pile of old records and came up with a gold mine. The only trouble was the gold mine didn't belong to him."

"Who did it belong to?" Grady asked.

"Connie. At least she had the best claim on it. So this man of whom I am speaking went out and talked to Ivar Parks the superintendent of the orphanage in which Connie had been raised. Together they checked through her papers and learned she had a cousin, her only living relative. So far, so good. But the deal would take time and money. So they cut Rags Hanlon in. Rags was the money man. He flew out to Denver and talked to Iris. As it turned out, Iris wasn't difficult to talk to.

"She flew back here with Rags. And using a temporary

dye she could wash out at will, she spent the five months just past alternating as the PBX operator at our hotel and posing as Connie. Building up to what happened three nights ago. When they were ready, they had Joey Simpson dope Connie and a nice old lady who just *happened* to be sitting at the fountain helped Connie outside where she passed out in her own car and was driven down to Cary's apartment."

Connie's breasts rose and fell with her breathing. "Of course. I remember now. I felt dizzy. And a nice old lady—"

I finished the sentence for her. "Took you for a ride. You see her here in the office, baby?"

Connie searched the faces in the office one by one. "Why, yes. I do. It was that white-haired old lady over there." Connie gasped. "Why she's the same old lady I gave the clothing to."

Mrs. Swanson stood up, insulted. "I'm afraid you're mistaken, my dear. I merely came here with my husband."

"Yeah. Sure," I cut her down. "At Captain Purvis' request. And, as it so happens, we want your husband, too."

"For what?" Swanson asked.

I told him. "Murder. You're the man who dug into the gold mine. You're the man who climbed the fire escape and shot Cary before you blew the whistle." I walked over to where Swanson was sitting and yanked him to his feet. "All right, stand up and admit it, you bastard. The rest of it I can take. But I ought to kill you for what you did to Connie. Connie rigged for the frame, passed out nude on Cary's bed, was more than you could resist. So you helped yourself." I slapped his head against the wall. "You took her while she was unconscious."

Connie buried her face in her hands.

I shook Swanson like the weasel he was. "What's more, it was you who tipped Rags that the frame hadn't gone completely as planned, that instead of blowing my top, I was standing by Connie. And for that reason I was tailed

from the time I left Charles Street the other night until I stopped in Times Square and asked Nick Casaras to put the arm on Joey."

Swanson blustered, "This is absurd."

"No. Not so absurd," Abe Feitzel corrected him. "It so happens I've checked on you. And you've been booked by the morals squad five times. That's probably how you got to know Rags Hanlon. By patronizing his expensive call girls."

Mrs. Swanson began to cry. I asked if the man from the Title Policy Company would identify himself. A lean-faced, middle-aged, man stepped away from the wall.

Abe introduced us. "Mr. Morris, Officer Stone."

Morris shook hands. "I'm pleased to meet you."

I said I was pleased to meet him. Then I asked him if he knew Swanson and Mr. Morris said, "Not under that name. He called himself Sterling when he worked for us. We fired him two years ago."

"Why?"

"Because our auditors found a serious shortage in his accounts."

I snuffed my cigarette. "Now tell me this, Mr. Morris."

"Yes—?"

"Have you checked on that legal description that Abe gave you?"

"Yes," Mr. Morris said. "I have. I've had four clerks working on it all day."

"And just what is Chains fifteen, east one half block forty, tract sixty-three, Gowanus Bat addition?"

"It is a plot of ground, approximately an acre in size, part of the old Eagan farm. Where the farm house originally stood."

"Is there anything odd about it?"

Mr. Morris' smile turned wry. "Well, I'm glad we didn't guarantee the title."

"Why? Tell me. Tell Deputy Chief Inspector Grady."

Mr. Morris told us. "Because it's worthless. I mean the present title. I've checked the records myself. And as

nearly as I can ascertain through a clerical error in 1879 the plot of which we are speaking was attached to a bill of sale for the adjoining acreage, and has been so recorded ever since."

"But this particular acre has never been sold?"

"It is not so recorded."

"In other words, legally, it still belongs to the Eagan heirs?"

"Yes. I would say it does."

"And how much would you say this acre of ground is worth?"

Mr. Morris laughed. "That's hard to say, Officer Stone. But if I were the Erie Barge Company I would be glad to pay the Eagan heirs almost anything they asked for a clear title."

"Why?"

"Because it so happens the Erie Barge Company had built two five million dollar grain elevators on property it doesn't own."

I looked at Inspector Grady. "Does that do it, sir?"

"It would seem to," the old man admitted. "With Connie out of the way, the claim would revert to her cousin." He fingered my shield a moment then flipped it through the air at me.

I put it in my pocket. "Thank you, sir." Then I gripped Connie's elbow. "Okay, baby. Let's go."

Jim protested, "But, Herman. There are still a lot of loose ends."

I tied a few of them for him. "Okay. It was Joey who killed Nick Casaras. It was Hanlon who killed Joey. It was Iris who killed Parks, accidentally, in a try for me. It was Parks who killed Iris, on purpose. It was Swanson who climbed the fire escape and killed Lyle Cary in such a way the blame would fall on Connie. So what do you want me to do? Wrap him in cellophane?"

Jim grinned, "Okay, Herman. Take off. I guess we can take it from here."

I walked Connie out of the station into the spring-

filled night. At the foot of the steps she cried a little.

"Forget it, baby," I told her. "It's just as if none of it ever happened."

I walked a few feet away. Then I walked back and took off my hat. Like we were meeting for the first time.

"Hi, beautiful," I named her.

Connie's eyes glistened like stars in a night sky after a rain.

"Well, the Law," Connie said. "The cop on the beat in plain clothes."

She lifted her lips to be kissed. We kissed for a long time. Without passion. Just sweet. Knowing how it was with us. How it would always be.

Then we got in the car and drove home.