

ACE
DOUBLE NOVEL
BOOKS

TWO COMPLETE NOVELS 35c

D-135

Maid for Murder

SHE LEFT HIM COLD

MILTON K. OZAKI

Complete and Unabridged

A vintage pulp magazine cover illustration. A woman with dark, wavy hair and red lipstick is lying down, looking upwards with a contemplative or perhaps sinister expression. She is wearing a light-colored, possibly white, dress. To her right, a hand with red-painted fingernails holds a lit cigarette, with a wisp of smoke rising from it. The background is dark and moody, with some red tones visible on the left side, possibly a pillow or part of the setting. The overall style is characteristic of mid-20th-century pulp magazine art.

DEATH'S SWEET KISS-OFF!

Carl Guard woke up with his face smeared with lipstick. But the lips that belonged to that crimson cosmetic were now sealed tightly in death.

Carl was a private investigator on what had seemed a run-of-the-mill skip-trace assignment. But it stopped being routine when the trail suddenly took an odd twist leading first to a very juicy bit of scandal, then to a very peculiar record shop, and at last to that very amorous corpse!

The solution lay somewhere between the darkened rooms of a Bohemian hangout and the plush suite of the glamorous actress. It was an answer Carl Guard had to find . . . or pay for that lipstick spree behind the bars of the death house!

Turn this book over for
second complete novel

CAST OF CHARACTERS

CARL GUARD

Someone painted Murder on his lips.

LISA LINCOLN

She was leading lady in an unrehearsed mystery.

BEN AJAX

His client was Sex personified.

CLARENCE COOK

He had queer tastes in records and romance.

CAMILLE CHAD

Her voice played tricks on her unseen audience.

GLORIA STEEN

She was looking for an "in" to Hollywood, not to Hell.

ELBERTA RYERSON

She failed to keep up the payments on her hearse.

***MAID
FOR
MURDER***

MILTON K. OZAKI

ACE BOOKS, INC.

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MAID FOR MURDER

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DEAD RINGER

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ONE

THE JOB was a standard skip-trace deal, the kind that's the bread-and-butter of every small agency. The Old Reliable Finance Corporation had sent it to me for action, and, according to the data supplied me, one Elberta Ryerson, 31, white, unmarried, purportedly of 502 Surf Street and said to be a registered nurse employed at Columbus Hospital, had visited the Victory Auto Dealers on March 26th and had made a \$600 down-payment on a Chrysler station wagon. The Victory Auto Dealers, apparently anxious to conclude the sale, had supplied her with the car, a Chicago vehicle sticker, a set of Illinois plates, and the usual financing agreements, mortgages, assignments and judgment notes. She had signed the papers and had been permitted to drive away in the car. On April 26th, the date on which the first installment payment came due, Old Reliable had received a postal money order for \$69.72. On May 26th, Old Reliable received nothing from Elberta Ryerson. A routine notice had been mailed to the Surf Street address, calling attention to the financing agreement and requesting compliance. This notice was returned by the postoffice, marked: *Unknown At This Address*. An unnamed lackey at Old Reliable had gotten on the phone and had tried to contact Elberta Ryerson at Columbus Hospital. The hospital's personnel department had been quite definite: No one named Elberta Ryerson had ever been employed there. At this point Old Reliable's collection division began to think that perhaps they had been had—and they'd dumped the problem in my lap.

Normally, running down a skip is pretty routine. To begin with, I called the credit agencies, the gas company, the Edison company and the telephone company, asking for data on Elberta Ryerson. They had none. I called the Chicago office of the state Department of Registration and Education, then all the various medical registries through which nurses ordinarily work. Elberta Ryerson was not on any of their lists. Obviously, Elberta was not a nurse, had never had an apartment of her own, had not been in Chicago long enough to establish credit. But she had had to work someplace. So I began calling the employment agencies.

A sore ear and an hour later, a thought struck me: Elberta Ryerson had bought a station wagon. Why not a sedan, or a coupe—or a convertible? Because she wanted a station wagon. Why does anyone buy a station wagon? Usually because they intend to haul around something bulky like groceries or kids or photographic equipment or cardboard cartons or something like that. But Elberta wasn't married, according to the data I had. Maybe Elberta had been planning to travel. The thought chilled me a moment, but I managed to rationalize it away. Only a stupe would lay down \$600 in cash for an easily-spotted station wagon and risk a Federal rap by driving it across state lines just to save a couple hundred bucks in freight charges. Elberta had probably wanted the car for hauling purposes—and she had intended to use it in Chicago. She had mailed in one payment of \$69.72. That argued that she had been around at least a month, using the station wagon for her purposes, and had been in no hurry to leave the city.

On a hunch, I locked my office and headed for the Loop office of the Old Reliable Finance Corporation. The manager of the collection division, with whom I had had dealings in the past, was most cooperative. He had no objection to my borrowing the originals of the financing agreement; he even slipped them into a stiff manila envelope for me. I drove down to central police headquarters, commanded the interest of a cop in the Identification Section by folding a

ten-spot into his palm, and, within the hour, had a photo-static copy of Elberta Ryerson's left-hand prints. Being right-handed, she had laid her left hand flat on the papers to steady them while penning her signature—and a clear set of prints had adhered to the contract. Feeling somewhat shrewd and worldly-wise, I trotted up to the licensing department.

Now here's a fact which most people don't know: in a big city like Chicago, the principal problem of the local machine politicians is figuring out new ways of raking in revenue, with the result that it's nearly impossible to engage in any kind of a business without applying for one or two licenses of some sort. In addition to paying a fee, the applicant has to place his fingerprints on file with the police. The record is made by a police officer, but the prints are kept in a separate file so they won't be confused with those of persons with criminal records. But they're available for study by anyone interested—and I was interested. It cost me another ten-spot, but the hunch paid off. The left-hand prints of Elberta Ryerson matched those of a Berta Shaw, who had been issued a Second-Hand Dealer's license in February. According to the application, she was doing business on East Oak Street under the name "Berta's Music Shoppe".

It took me ten minutes to get to East Oak Street, which is a short, busy, glittery lane in the heart of the Gold Coast district. Judging by its exterior, Berta's Music Shoppe was a chrome-plated, snobbish, expensive temple of high fidelity and strictly long-haired dissonances. The interior was a long fluorescent-lighted aisle walled with albumed symphonies and edged with bleached mahogany consoles and plateglass showcases. It looked as untrammelled as Eden on the sixth day. Behind one of the showcases, a thin-faced, sleek-haired, supposedly-male clerk with delicate fingers was arranging a clever display of plastic-sealed sapphire needles. He smiled brightly at me from beneath his small mustache and touched his fingertips to the top of the glass case as though they were small dancing feet waiting for a cue.

"Berta around?" I asked.

His smile dimmed a little. "No, she isn't."

"When do you expect her?"

His fingertips collapsed and sought each other. "I really don't know." He moistened his pale lips. "Are you a friend of hers?"

I gave him a grin which could have meant anything. "She still owns the place, doesn't she?" I asked.

"Well . . . no." His mustache jiggled a little, probably denoting a mixture of nervousness and pride. "As a matter of fact, I do."

"Hell!" I sounded disappointed—and I was. I had a quick glimpse of twenty bucks and a nice fee fluttering away. "When did she sell out? Recently?"

"Last month." His smile brightened again. "It's a lovely little store and I consider myself really fortunate. I'm giving special attention to Berta's regular customers, of course, so if there's anything in particular. . . ."

"Guess not," I interrupted, silently cussing my bad luck. Apparently Elberta had folded her tent in the middle of May and had taken off in the Chrysler station wagon. And a dame smart enough to plan that kind of a build-up would be smart enough not to leave much of a trail. It looked like I'd bought myself twenty bucks worth of round-trip tickets for a ride down a one-way street.

Misinterpreting my frown and brooding silence, he lowered his voice a little and confided: "I have the same contacts which Berta did."

I stared at him. "Yeah?"

He winked slyly. "I've got a new tape that's simply a collector's item." His voice sank to a warm, furry whisper. "Lisa Lincoln and Dixie Pelligori!"

He was giving me a hustler's smile—wide and fleshy and knowing—and I sensed that I was supposed to be hep to his pitch, but it rang no bells with me. Lisa Lincoln, of course, was the red-headed bombshell of sex who had climbed to sudden stardom in Metro-Urban Films, and Dixie Pelligori was the Blackhawk's goal king who had recently earned the envy of every red-blooded man in the

world by pucking out to Dan Cupid and eloping with Lisa Lincoln. The newspapers and movie magazines had had a picnic—and so had Dixie, everyone suspected—but the affair hadn't gotten much of a rise out of me. At the time of the sudden marriage, I'd been involved in running down an erring husband, and, aside from wondering what would happen to Dixie's performance in the next hockey season, I hadn't allowed my red corpuscles to get upset. A private dick learns to put business before pleasure; besides, it was Dixie's pleasure, not mine. But now this pretty boy was smiling lewdly at me and whispering the names.

"No kidding," I managed to say.

"Want to hear it?" he asked softly.

"Sure."

He glanced warily toward the entrance, then unlocked a drawer and took out a five-inch spool of what appeared to be standard Scotch-brand recording tape. Smiling secretly, as though listening to the inaudible cadences of a favorite melody, he threaded the tape into a play-back machine and made several careful adjustments. With a sly, intimate wink, he snapped the machine on.

A series of static-like scratches came from the loud-speaker and gradually blended into a background of what sounded like a radio or television announcer's excited account of a sporting event. A husky, petulant voice, instantly identifiable as Lisa Lincoln's, broke in suddenly, saying: "Dixie, darling, come to bed. . . ."

Pelligori's rough, equally familiar tones replied: "I'm watching the game, baby. It's only the middle of the first quarter and the Canadiens have Detroit tied in knots. Boy, what a game!"

Lisa: "But you've been watching that thing every night for the past two weeks! I want you to come to bed, Dixie."

Dixie: "Quiet, willyal. . . . Damn it, I missed what he said. . . . Hey, did you see that? The guy playing right wing is only a rookie, too!"

Lisa: "Dixie, for my sake. . . . I'm begging you. . . . Come to bed."

Dixie: "I don't want to miss this next play, baby. Wait until I see whether—"

Lisa: "Please, darling. You shouldn't have married me if you didn't intend to love me."

Dixie: "Aw, nuts! He missed!"

Lisa: "I'm sick and tired of you and that damned television set!" There was a sudden squeaking, as of metal springs moving, followed by a patter of rapid footsteps. "You're going to have to decide between me and. . . ."

Dixie: "Wait, don't turn it off! Hey, for chrissake, baby, wait at least until the half. . . ."

Lisa: "I'm not waiting any longer! What do you think I married you for? So I could sit and watch you looking at hockey games on television?"

Dixie: "Well . . . all right."

There was a sound of deep breathing, then a kiss.

Lisa: "Darling!"

Dixie: "How do you get this thing off?" There was a tearing sound, as though a fragile fabric had been ripped away.

Lisa: "Ouch. Let me help you, darling. . . ."

Dixie: "You're beautiful, baby. You're. . . you're. . ."

The loudspeaker emitted a long series of gasps, sounds of movement, groans, ending with a feminine squeal and a deep sigh. There was a long static-like scratching, giving the listener time to complete his mental picture, then:

Lisa: "Where you going, darling?"

Dixie: "They probably completed the half by now. Go to sleep, baby. I just want to see what that Detroit center did in the. . . ."

The tape came to an abrupt end. He snapped off the machine.

"I'll be damned," I said.

"Terrific, isn't it?" He blinked slowly, the way a frog blinks.

"Where'd you get it?"

"A friend of mine talked the hotel manager into letting him hide a mike in their room. The recording's excellent, isn't it? Did you listen closely? Every sound, every word, every gasp, every sigh is right there on the tape! It proves why they *really* didn't get along, doesn't it?" He winked lewdly.

"Imagine, preferring television to Lisa!"

"They've split up?"

"Why, she's divorcing him. Didn't you know?" The way he jerked his eyebrows, you'd think I'd accidentally revealed that I was illiterate. "It was in Louella's column last week."

I was doing some fast thinking. I'd seen Lisa Lincoln in a couple movies and I'd heard her on radio and TV. I'd been a Blackhawk fan for years and had heard Dixie Pelligori talk over a mike during game broadcasts. The voices sure as hell sounded authentic. Anybody who had ever heard Lisa Lincoln's sexy drawl in a movie—would figure her as the dame. And anybody who had ever heard Pelligori massacre American pronunciation—would figure him as the guy. But the excellence of the sound reproduction bothered me. I'd fooled around with tape recorders, and once I'd tried to put pressure on a straying husband by stashing a mike in a motel which he and a girl friend were in the habit of visiting. I got a recording of indoor action, all right, but it was mostly scratchy mumblings and indistinct conversation and movements which couldn't positively be tagged as belonging to any particular person.

Hell, to get all those intimate sounds, all those faint sighs and squeaks and whispers, three or four mikes would have to be spotted around a hotel suite—or there'd have to be a large mike riding on a movable overhead boom. In the case of mike-wise celebrities like Lisa Lincoln and Dixie Pelligori, such a set-up would be impossible. Furthermore, no hotel manager would hold still for it. He'd wreck the hotel and his own career if anything leaked—as it damned well would. So the recording was a fake. The sales pitch was

crap. The whole set-up was phony, based on a cute gimmick cooked up by someone trying to peddle a new kind of sex thrill.

I felt like pushing a fist into the pale mouth which was smirking at me from beneath the small mustache. But I asked: "How much?"

"Well, like I said, it's really a collector's item—" he began.

"How much?" I repeated.

"Fifty dollars."

It was a hell of a price for a roll of tape, even if it did contain entertaining sounds. But an idea was buzzing around in my head. I got out my wallet and checked my resources. Fifty bucks would make a big dent—but it might get me a big rich client. I laid five engraved portraits of Alexander Hamilton on the showcase. The proprietor of Berta's Music Shoppe pushed the bills together delicately, as though they might be infectious, and dropped them into a drawer. Then he removed the tape from the machine and folded it into a square of plain wrapping paper.

I thanked him and strolled out. While closing the door, I studied the plateglass window. A new blue-and-orange decal, indicating that the business was registered with the state Department of Finance as a resale enterprise, was stuck to a lower corner of the glass. I bent and read the typed-in lines. The sticker had been issued on June 1st to Clarence Cook, doing business as Berta's Music Shoppe.

I headed for my office at Chicago and Clark streets and got my portable recorder out of the closet. I put the tape on it and played it through slowly, listening to the sound critically. Then I got busy on the telephone. A call to a newspaper pal got me the information that Lisa Lincoln was agented by the Ability Agency and that a divorce was definitely in the making. The poop in supposedly informed circles was that Dixie, after enjoying the voluptuous red-head's charms for a scant two months, had begun objecting to some of her exhibitionistic tendencies—and Lisa had told him to shut up or get out. Dixie had gotten out. This made little sense to me, considering that Lisa had gotten her start

as a *cafe society* stripper and practically everybody in the world, which included Dixie, knew about it; but my pal assured me that the story was straight from the horse's mouth.

I checked with another newspaper pal and got virtually the same story, plus a tip that Lisa Lincoln was holed up in a suite at the Ambassador East and that Dixie was believed to be visiting his mother in Monmouth, Illinois. At the moment, I wasn't interested in Dixie's whereabouts. I called the Ambassador East and talked to a bellhop who had once sold me a valuable tip on a less glamorous tenant. I learned that Lisa Lincoln was indeed holed up there. She had a female secretary in a room adjoining hers, she was seeing no one—and Dixie definitely had not put in an appearance.

So far, so good. My fifty bucks was still riding. I looked up the Ability Agency's number in the phonebook and dialed it. I talked to a switchboard operator, then to a secretary, then to another flunkey of some sort, and finally to a Mr. Harold Greene, who sounded as though he might be in the throes of a very fine hangover.

"My name is Carl Guard," I informed him. "I'm a private investigator. I understand your agency represents Lisa Lincoln."

"So what?" he growled, rather nastily.

"I have in my possession a tape recording which I think will interest you—" I began.

"Sorry," he interrupted. "We aren't interested in recordings. I suggest—"

"How are your ears, Mr. Greene?" I asked, somewhat irritably.

"What?" he rasped. "What's that?"

"I'm a private investigator, not a wax peddler," I said crisply. "I have a tape recording which ought to interest you and your agency. You don't have to listen to it—but somebody else will if you won't."

I turned up the volume on the play-back speaker and held the telephone mike against it. The receiver squawked angrily a couple times, then the familiar husky tones of Lisa

Lincoln began to come off the tape. The squawking ceased. I played the tape straight through to the end, then picked up the telephone receiver and dropped it onto its cradle.

It took him two minutes to look up my number and get it through the agency's switchboard. My phone rang fifteen times, stopped, began to ring again. I grinned at it and lit a cigarette. On the thirteenth ring of the second series, I scooped up the receiver and said: "Yeah?"

"Mr. Guard? Is this Mr. Guard?" It was Mr. Harry Greene's voice, all right, and he sounded anguished and excited.

"Right," I said. "How were the sound effects?"

"I'm shocked, completely shocked!" he gasped. "Where did you get it?"

"They're being sold around town for fifty bucks a copy."

"Good God!" He groaned as though I'd punched him in a vital organ. "Can you come to my office immediately, Mr. Guard?"

"Well, I'm pretty busy right now, Mr. Greene—"

"We'll make it worth your while, of course."

Those were the words I'd been waiting to hear. I blew a puff of smoke at the ceiling. "I'll be there in about fifteen minutes, Mr. Greene," I said carefully.

TWO

THE ABILITY AGENCY is big—not as big as William Morris or Music Corporation of America, of course—but big enough to do things in the large, flamboyant, Hollywood manner.

As soon as I alighted from the maroon-and-gold express elevator which had whisked me twenty floors skyward, a cute girl in a maroon-and-gold page's uniform glided toward me with a smile and a silver tray. I murmured Mr. Greene's name and laid my card on the tray. She glided away swiftly and silently, her two-way stretch going in four directions. I sank into a deep chair, helped myself to a cigarette from a conveniently placed ceramic tray, and stared around at the sparkling life-sized portraits of several dozen high-bracket movie stars which circled the golden walls of the reception room.

A door whispered open, and, turning my head a half-inch, I saw a slim, pretty, dark-haired girl in a tight-fitting Hollywood version of a secretary's uniform hurrying toward me across the expanse of carpeting. She smiled and beckoned, then pivoted and headed back toward the door. I got up and followed her. She led me past a crystal-enclosed blonde who was officiating at a switchboard, down a wide apple-green corridor of small, silent secretarial dens, and into a gold-and-maroon bower where three very sharp-suited men were gathered about a huge slab of polished bleached mahogany. The man on the far side of the slab rose as I entered and came toward me with a pinkish hand extended. He was a small man, very thin, with a narrow face, red-veined eyes and very little hair.

"Mr. Guard?" He murmured my name as though it were a brittle, fragile thing which a harsh vibration might destroy, and permitted me to hold his hand a moment. "I'm Harold Greene."

"Glad to meet you, sir," I said.

The other two men had turned and were eyeing me the way one might watch a domesticated leopard. "This is Saul Tenner, the manager of our Chicago office"—Greene tugged my arm, turning me toward a heavy-set, hard-eyed man who wore a light blue suit and a dark blue mood—"and Ben Ajax, our public relations adviser." He tugged my arm again and I turned obediently to nod at the lanky, curly-haired man whose lips were twisted in a polite though somewhat

foreboding smile. "Mr. Guard is the private investigator I just told you about."

"Well, so there's another goddam recording," Saul Tenner growled. "Let's hear it."

"Did you bring it with you?" Greene asked anxiously.

"Yes." I took the spool of tape out of my jacket pocket and laid it on the slab of mahogany. All three of them stared at it, and, for a moment, it was so quiet I could almost hear the temperature drop.

Ben Ajax said abruptly: "What the hell, I may as well put it on the machine." He bent and tugged at a section of the desk, revealing a built-in Webster-Chicago recording unit. While he adjusted the tape, Greene gnawed at his lip and Tenner stared gloomily at a framed painting of a racing yacht which ornamented one wall. I leaned a hip against the arm of a boxy chair and lit another cigarette. Ajax got the tape set, glanced up at Saul Tenner, then shrugged and snapped on the machine. Green stopped gnawing his lip and began to stare at his manicured fingernails. I decided Tenner was the boss-man, so I concentrated on watching him. He listened dolefully to the preliminary noises on the tape as though he were resigned to hearing the gurgle of much money going down the drain.

Lisa Lincoln's husky voice began to pour into the room. Tenner tightened his jaw and muttered hoarsely: "The lousy stinking sex pot!"

Greene shuddered and turned to stare malevolently at the machine, as though fascinated by the slowly turning spools. Ben Ajax listened gravely, his lips pursed, his face as long and bleak as death. Tenner's face reddened with anger as the tape unwound and the bedroom skit unfolded. By the time it had scratched to a stop, he looked like a man in imminent danger of collapse from high blood pressure.

"It was her!" Tenner said hoarsely. "Jesus, to think the dumb bitch didn't even have sense enough to have somebody check the room! Which hotel was she at? I'll black-list the goddam joint and make a morgue out of it!"

"Wait a minute, Saul," Ben Ajax said quietly. "I'm not so

damned sure it was her. It sounds like her—and it sure as hell sounds like Dixie, too—but did you ever hear her talk like that when she wasn't in front of a mike?"

Tenner dropped his jaw and stared at Ajax.

"By God, that's right, Saul!" Greene said, slapping his desk as though urging it into a trot. "That's her *movie* voice, the voice everybody knows her by! She doesn't talk like that naturally. And if she were alone with Dixie, she'd talk just like she does to you and me!"

"Yeah," Tenner said slowly. "That's right. She talks like an Indiana clerk usually. But everybody'll *think* it's her, for chrissake!"

"If it isn't one goddam thing, it's another," Greene grumbled. He glanced around like a man badly in need of a drink.

"Where did you get this?" Ajax asked, looking at me.

"In a northside record shop," I said. "The sales spiel is that a hotel manager let one of his pals stash a mike in their hotel room. It's being peddled as a hot item, strictly under-the-counter, probably all over the city. At first, I thought it was an authentic recording. Then I changed my mind."

"Why?" Tenner snapped.

"The sound reproduction is too good," I told him. "I doubt if it could have come off a single hidden mike."

"You're right." Tenner scowled. He eyed me coldly. "You're a private detective?"

"That's right."

"Who are you working for?"

I gave him a very small smile. "The Old Reliable Finance Corporation."

Tenner looked blank. "You mean she owes them dough?"

"No." I explained, briefly, that I'd been working on another case and had stumbled onto the recording.

"They're selling them for fifty bucks a copy!" Greene proclaimed in a voice like a mortician announcing the next day's schedule. "What're we going to do?"

Tenner ignored Greene, and, looking puzzled, asked: "You mean you aren't trying to dig up some dirt on Lisa

Lincoln? Then why the hell bother to call Greene and tell him about this?"

"Look, Saul," Ajax interrupted. "Let me handle this. The guy has given us a tip to some dirt that's being thrown at one of our clients, and it's to our advantage to know about it. You know what that Frankie Pearl smear cost us."

"I'm just trying to find out what the hell his angle is," Tenner said darkly. "When a private dick goes out of his way to—"

"Maybe he hasn't got an angle," Ajax put in hastily. "Why don't you go on to the club with Harold? I'll talk things over with him and give you a report later. It's in my department, anyway."

Tenner seemed reluctant to leave the matter in Ajax's hands, but Greene was obviously relieved at seeing the problem shifted to someone else. He sided with Ajax, and Tenner, finally, grumbled something about being damned if he knew what was going on—and walked out with Greene on his heels. Ben Ajax sighed and mopped his forehead with a wilted handkerchief.

"These big executives," he said apologetically, giving me a wry grin, "they're always looking for someone to stick a knife in their backs. Not that they don't deserve it. I wanted to get rid of Tenner because I think maybe we can accomplish more without him." He adjusted his lanky frame to a chair and poked a cigarette into his mouth.

"Probably," I agreed.

Ajax exhaled a plume of smoke and gave me an appraising glance. "I remember reading about a private dick named Guard who was mixed up in that Silver Door mess a couple months ago. You any relation?"

"I'm the guy."

"According to the papers, you did a good job."

"Luck." I shrugged. "I had a couple good breaks."

Ajax grunted as though satisfied, then said abruptly: "Ability is a big agency. We handle a lot of valuable talent, which means that we do a hell of a lot more than keep them signed to a contract. We shepherd a whole crazy flock of

temperamental actresses, neurotic singers, big-shot musicians and screwball comedians around. We advise them, protect them, get them publicity, take care of their mail, worry about their taxes, arrange their divorces, do everything except change their pants for them. Lisa Lincoln is one of them. She's a relatively new account of ours, and she's a sort of a pain in the neck, especially to me, but we've been building her up in the public mind as a sort of glamorous sex tornado and her next contract with Metro-Urban will see her up in the five-grand-per-week bracket. That's dough, real dough—to her, to Ability, to Metro-Urban. But she's vulnerable. In fact, she's damned vulnerable, because all her build-up has been predicated on sex. When she was trying to get started and was hungry for a buck, she did a strip act in a 52nd Street joint. I've had a tough time building her up as a clean, wholesome American girl. All we need is a lot of smutty tape recordings about her and Dixie making the rounds, and we'll be hearing from school boards, women's clubs and God knows who, saying she ought to be run out of the country. Then Metro-Urban will start wailing, our New York office will begin screaming at me, and—hell, you get the idea."

"How about Dixie's fans?" I asked.

"The hell with them. All sports fans do is sit on their cans and look at television. This agency's interested in box office sales. If there's no box office, there's no contracts. And if our clients haven't got contracts, where can we collect a cut? You can forget about Dixie. We're interested in Lisa Lincoln and the star-studded names on our client roster. Dixie's got a manager, and, if he hears about this and if he's worried—that's his business, not mine. Lisa's a good kid. She's been a big success—and maybe some of it's gone to her head—but, what the hell, we'd get kind of dizzy, too, if we were raking in the kind of dough she is. Actually, she's not a sex machine. She's a clean, healthy, good-looking girl who got married because she wanted a man and kids. It didn't jell, for reasons which are none of our business, but not because she didn't try. She tried damned hard."

I quoted dryly: "Please come to bed, darling."

"That's crap, Guard, strictly pure and unadulterated crap. For nearly sixty days they were happy, completely happy, but then Dixie acted the heavy and tried to force her to a showdown between him and her career. She's big box office and she worked like hell to get there. A couple more years and she'll be tops. She'd be crazy to give it up. Dixie got sore and walked out. His ego was hurt more than anything. Once he cools off, they'll be back together again. Hell, you'd make some concessions if you were married to a dish like her, wouldn't you?"

"It wouldn't be hard to give up television," I said.

Ajax grinned. "Okay, so much for the build-up. I realize you're out to make a buck. I figure you heard that recording and bought it with an eye to making a strong contact with Ability. That's okay with me. It's no dough out of my pocket—and it won't hurt the agency to spend a few bucks protecting its accounts. Saul Tenner will scream a little, but I know the big boys in New York will back me up when they hear this recording. There's been several of them, but this is the worst. And whoever is behind the racket is getting smart fast. The first one was peddled for \$300 a copy and it sounded lousy. If they're selling them for \$50 now, they've got their production pretty well organized and are cutting prices in an attempt to get mass distribution. In short, we need help—and we can pay for it. Whether you're the man to help us or not is another question. Personally, I'm inclined to give you a chance. Do you think you can put a stop to these phony recordings?"

"It depends," I said.

"On what?"

"On where the production point is."

"The chances are that it's here in Chicago. Production costs are comparatively cheap in the midwest. Chicago is centrally located, which makes for easier, faster and cheaper distribution. Furthermore, the other two popped up here first, then a month or two later they made an appearance in

New York. I doubt if you can handle this alone, though. Think you can?"

"I can hire help."

"If you need a couple extra legs, that's okay. We'll hold still for any legitimate expenses, providing we get definite results." Ajax lifted an eyebrow. "What's your usual daily fee?"

"It averages around two-bits plus expenses."

"Suppose I double that." Ajax opened a drawer and took out a checkbook. "I'll give you \$500 now with the understanding that you'll get to work immediately. I'll expect you to make your reports to me, of course."

"Fair enough," I agreed. "How about the fifty bucks I paid for the tape?"

"Add it to your expenses and I'll see that you're paid. Incidentally, I don't want any of this leaked to the papers."

"It won't be."

"Fine." He filled in a check rapidly, scrawled his signature, slid the slip of paper across the polished desk. "Anything else?"

"I'd like a list of your clients."

He nodded and touched a button. The door behind me opened and a slim girl with hair like boiling gold entered, walking primly with very little hip movement. She had a nice shape—and wore a tight, black dress which molded every curve of it. When she was about six feet from me, she halted, moistened her red lips, and waited expectantly.

"Get me a client list, Miss Shaw," Ajax said briskly. "One of the folders we had printed last month will do."

"Yes, Mr. Ajax." She had a pleasant, throaty voice. Smiling quickly, she about-faced gracefully and left, leaving a faint wisteria-like scent behind.

I waited until the door closed, then I asked: "What did you call her?"

Ajax blinked. "Miss Shaw. Why?"

"What's her first name?"

"Ella, I think. Quite a dish, isn't she?" Ajax grinned. "Want me to fix you up?"

Before I could reply, the door reopened and the girl returned with a printed folder. She handed it to Ben Ajax, smiled, and turned to leave. I thought: *Elberta. . . . Berta. Elberta. . . . Ella. Could be.* As she passed me, I stood up and said: "Hello, Berta. Remember me?"

She stiffened like a WAC corporal standing at the head of a platoon and turned to face me. She had a pretty face, a pert chip of a nose, deep blue eyes. The eyes moved casually over me, then through me. "My name is Ella, not Berta, sir," she said softly.

"Didn't you used to operate a music shop on Oak Street?"

She shook the yellow-gold hair. "The only thing I've ever operated is a typewriter." She laughed lightly. "People are always thinking I look like someone else. I'm a common type, I guess." She moved smoothly away, leaving me staring after her.

Ajax said mockingly: "Nice try, Guard."

I shrugged. "It would have been a hell of a coincidence," I admitted, "but I thought I might be getting a series of lucky breaks for a change. Some days things go click-click-click, you know."

"She really looks like some one you know?"

"I don't know about the looks. It's the name which snagged me." I told him about Elberta Ryerson, alias Berta Shaw, who had disappeared, leaving unpaid notes and a music shop behind her.

Ajax laughed. "That's what I'd call a wild leap in the dark! This girl's been with us nearly a year—and she's a damned good secretary. I had to do plenty politicking to get her assigned to me."

"Is she married?"

"Used to be, I think. I'm not sure. I can't afford to mess around with the hired help. If you're interested, though, why not ask her? You'll pass her desk on the way out."

"Maybe I will." I pocketed the folder and the check. "Thanks, Ajax."

"Keep me informed, Guard."

"You bet."

I left Ajax's office at 4:55 and glanced into each of the secretarial dens as I went down the wide corridor. Miss Ella Shaw was not in sight. Neither, as a matter of fact, were any of the other secretaries. I noticed, passing the crystal cubicle, that the switchboard blonde was busily unplugging lines and tidying things up preparatory to calling it a day. The lights of the reception room had been dimmed. I swiped another cigarette from the ceramic tray and lit it while waiting for the elevator.

I had reached the lobby floor and was heading for the street when high heels clicked rapidly on the marble floor behind me and a girl's voice called: "Wait for me, darling!" Since I'm pushing forty and definitely not the type which sends women into a wild canter, I paid no heed. I didn't even look around. A moment later an arm was clinging to mine—and then something hard and blunt was digging into my side.

I jerked my head around and looked into the cool blue depths of Ella Shaw's bottomless eyes. She had on a wide-sleeved white jacket which concealed her arms and hands, a perky white tam, and a very white, determined face.

"Hey, what's the idea?" I growled.

Her red lips twisted into a bright, mirthless smile and the hard, blunt object dug deeper into my side. "This is a gun," she said in a quiet, tense voice. "Don't try any tricks."

"A gun?" I stared at her. "Are you crazy?"

"Maybe." Her nostrils dilated a little, as though enjoying the scent of danger. "Smile and act natural, as though I were a friend, then walk slowly to where that taxi is waiting," she directed. "I'll shoot if you try anything—and I won't miss."

I looked at the cars and trucks in the street, at the hurrying throng of homeward-bound clerks and stenographers on the wide sidewalk, and at the taxi which was waiting impatiently at the curb. It was a Vet Cab with a grizzled, sour-faced driver whose eyes were swinging between us and the traffic cop on the corner. I debated making a feign, shoving her off-balance, trying to grab the gun. I decided it wouldn't

be worth the risk. The gun felt like a .22 or .25 caliber automatic. It would make very little noise and would throw very little lead, but even a small amount of lead in the thoracic cavity can be deadly. Besides, I was getting curious.

"You're the boss," I said.

I walked slowly toward the taxi.

She kept her hip against mine every inch of the way, releasing my arm only so I could bend down and slide onto the seat. She sat close beside me, the muzzle of the gun against my ribs and her wisteria-scented hair brushing my shoulder. Without asking for instructions, the taxi started with a lurch and headed north.

"Mind telling me what's going on?" I asked.

"You'll find out."

"You're Elberta Ryerson, huh?"

"Shut up."

"Then you were Berta Shaw—and now you're Ella Shaw."

"Wise guy."

"What happened to the Chrysler station wagon, Ella?"

The gun bruised my side. "You're talking too much."

I watched the taxi merge into a stream of traffic behind an Addison bus. Then I said: "Kidnapping's a tough rap. Ella."

"So it's a tough rap! Shut up, for God's sake!"

A worried frown had creased her forehead, and she was biting her lower lip. She avoided my eyes and kept staring straight ahead. I sighed and thought about Elberta Ryerson, Berta's Music Shoppe, and the Ability Agency. It didn't make much sense. But if Ella Shaw was Elberta Ryerson, my trace job was complete. Old Reliable didn't give a damn about the station wagon. It wanted the balance due, which could be chiseled from Ella Shaw's salary at Ability.

She reminded me of the gun's presence suddenly by jabbing it into my side. The taxi had taken the Inner Drive through Lincoln Park to Diversey Parkway. It had turned west on Diversey and was heading for the corner of Pinegrove. It took the corner at reckless speed and ground to a sudden stop in front of a brownstone apartment building.

"Pay the driver, will you, darling?" she said in a honeyed tone. "I haven't any change."

"I haven't either," I said loudly. "Suppose we go to my office and see if—"

"Oh, I'm sure you have some," she interrupted. Continuing to smile, she gave me a sharp jab with the muzzle of the gun. "Look, will you, darling?"

Cursing inwardly, I shifted on the seat, got two bills out of my trouser pocket, and handed them to the sour-faced driver. He stalled with the change, hoping I'd tell him to keep it, but I was stubborn. It was a small matter, but I'd started building up some inner resentment. Hell, I'd been shanghaied on a cab ride and mauuevered into paying for it—but I wasn't holding still for the tip, too! He finally produced three dimes and a nickel, and, with a scowl, dropped them into my hand. I accepted them with a feeling of inner satisfaction and climbed out.

She fastened herself to my arm immediately and guided me into the lobby of the building. There was a chrome name panel and a row of small black bell-buttons. I craned my neck, trying to get a quick peek at some of the names, but she herded me toward the inner door, which was locked, and thrust a ring of keys into my hand.

"It's the Sager key," she said. "Open the door."

I stabbed the key into the lock. When I opened the door, she stepped behind me, keeping the muzzle of the gun against my back. I spotted a small self-service elevator and turned toward it.

"Not the elevator," she murmured. "The stairs—and go up slowly."

"Stairs are bad for the heart."

"So are bullets."

The stairs were wide and rubber treaded. I walked toward them and started up. I took them slowly because several things were beginning to bother me. I wasn't worried about handling Ella Shaw. I wasn't worried much about the gun, either. But what if she had a couple rough friends waiting in her apartment? Things could get complicated. I

could, if I acted immediately, put a period to her game by falling to my hands and kicking her down the stairs. It was a simple, relatively safe trick—and would definitely be effective because, like most amateur gunmen, she was making the mistake of keeping too close to me. But I might win the inning—and lose the series. She might tip me to the set-up in the recording racket. She might even mention the whereabouts of the Chrysler station-wagon. I decided to play along a little longer and give her a bit more rope.

At the third floor landing, she said tersely: "Turn left."

I turned obediently and preceded her down a narrow corridor lighted by a single bare, yellowish bulb. There was only one door, a narrow varnished panel which bore the numerals 308. I stopped in front of it.

"Use the same key," she directed.

I unlocked the door and turned the knob.

The door swung back silently, revealing the shadowy shapes of furniture and a heavily draped window. She pressed against me, urging me into the apartment. I stepped in cautiously—and stood still. The gun jabbed my back. I took another step forward, expecting to hear the click of the light switch—and then a strange, heady fragrance swirled into my nostrils and, at the back of my mind, an alarm began jangling.

Behind me, the door slammed shut and I heard a sharp, surprised gasp, the beginning of a scream—and then a piano landed on my head, striking a dissonant chord which sent consciousness trembling away into a deep, soft blackness. . . .

THREE

I GROANED and rolled over. My shoulder struck something, and, groping cautiously in the darkness, my hand located

the curved softness of another body. I sucked in my breath and became motionless, waiting for the person to move, to stir, to resent my touch. When nothing happened, I turned my head and stared into the darkness toward it. I could make out nothing. Suppressing a groan, I moved my hand again and sensed the coolness of bare skin, the roundness of a hip. Again I paused, as though awakened in the midst of a dream, and I was suddenly aware of the fact that I was sprawled on a floor, that I had been struck on the head, and that I was surrounded by darkness and silence. With mounting apprehension, I forced my hand into motion again.

It found the deep curve of a waist, then a gently rising swell, then the palm-filling weight of a breast. A *girl*. I jerked my hand back, remembering Ella Shaw, and lay still again, blinking painfully into the darkness. Somewhere a telephone was ringing. The ringing ceased—and then there was nothing but silence. I moved my hand toward the body again, gently seeking the hollow between her breasts. I held my hand there for what seemed a long time, listening to the silence, waiting for a rise of soft breathing, the pulse of a faintly beating heart. There was none.

I got to my feet eventually and stumbled awkwardly around in search of the light switch. I found it and an overhead fixture came on with blinding brightness, revealing a macabre scene which sent a chilling flood through my veins. It had been a small, modernistic apartment—now it was a shambles. Ella Shaw lay in an ungainly sprawl on the floor, the yellow-gold hair tossed about her face. Except for one high-heeled shoe and her sheer nylons, she was naked. Her clothes had been flung about the room as though torn from her body by a whirlwind of violence. There was no blood, however. She had been strangled.

I stared at a cheap enameled alarm-clock which sat on a chest of drawers. It indicated 6:41. I had been out for over an hour. I cursed softly and studied the room, trying to visualize what had happened. It wasn't hard. Someone had been searching for something. They had had difficulty find-

ing it. It had been a man—or a very strong, very angry woman—judging by the crudeness and violence of the search. The search hadn't been successful. They had waited for her, had clobbered me, grabbed her. She had struggled, started to scream—and had gotten throttled. That meant that whatever they had been searching for was important. Important enough to risk Murder One.

I stepped around an overturned drawer and walked slowly toward the phone, considering the pros and cons of notifying the police. Either way, I was in a mess. That much was obvious. But it might be smart to level with them. My foot struck something and I glanced down. I had kicked a brownish paperbook. Without picking it up, I could see that it was one of the French Company's printings of *Lady In The Dark*. The cover was worn and creased as though someone had studied the lines of the play long and earnestly, had carried it about in a pocket or a purse. At the bottom of the cover was the rubber-stamped legend: *Property of Northwestern University Players*. I kicked the book aside and continued on my way to the phone. I had made up my mind to play it straight and let the cops earn their salaries. I had the receiver in my hand and was beginning to twist the dial when I heard the screech of crudely applied brakes and a hoarse excited shout.

Still holding the phone, I pushed the drapes aside and peered down at the street. A squad car was in front of the building, discharging four uniformed cops. They conferred a moment on the sidewalk, then two headed for the front entrance and others trotted toward the rear. It sounds silly now, seeing it in black-and-white like this, but I knew I had to do something quickly, someone else had tipped the cops, spoiling the effect of a call from me, for which there was no time now, anyway—and running was out of the question. So I laid the receiver on its cradle, ran to the light switch, snapped off the lights, then stepped toward the center of the room, closed my eyes, and slid limply to the floor, feigning unconsciousness.

A hand rattled the knob violently, then pounded on the door. "Police!" a voice proclaimed. "Open up!"

I adjusted my legs comfortably and burrowed my nose into the carpet.

"You're sure we got the right place?" a gruff voice asked.

"Yeah. This is it."

"Let's bust the damned thing in, then."

The door shuddered, then crashed open with a shriek of splintering wood. Feet thudded into the apartment and the light switch clicked. A harsh voice said: "Jesus, look at the damel!"

Another voice, sounding more pleased than shocked, said: "Wow! Wait'll I tell the old lady about this! She dead?"

"Must be. Look at her neck."

"Yeah. Too damned bad. A nice looker—and young, too."

"Hey—I"

Footsteps crossed the room and a heavy shoe prodded me in the guts. I heard a grunt, then a big hand grabbed my shoulder and rolled me onto my back.

"Don't touch nothing, Jack," a voice warned. "You know what it says in the handbook."

"I got to see if the bastard's dead, don't I?"

"He oughta be if he ain't."

Fingers plucked at my eyelids and a hand pawed my chest. "Hell, he ain't dead."

"You sure?"

"Damned sure."

"Christ, look at his face!"

"Some party, huh? Think he's drunk?"

A garlicy breath brushed my face. "Don't smell like it."

"Better keep your gun on the bastard."

A new voice, brisker and more officious, said: "Looks like we got a straight tip for a change. They both dead?"

"The dame is, sergeant. Looks like the guy strangled her. He's out cold."

"The hell you say." Feet approached me. "Looks familiar." The feet moved around me. "For chrissake, I think it's

that smart-alecky shamus, the guy who put the skids to Captain Stone!"

"Yeah?"

"A goddam shamus, huh? How do you like that?"

"Jack, go down and call headquarters. Tell them to send the works. Frank, you'd better—"

It seemed like a good time to join the party. I moaned faintly and straightened a leg. The cops became silent. I sensed that all three of them were standing there, watching me intently. I moaned again, blew moistly through my lips. flopped an arm weakly across my eyes. I laid that way awhile, then rolled slowly over onto my belly. I'd seen men on battlefields, mortally wounded, crawl to their knees and stagger onto their feet, and, knowing that I was playing to a critical audience, I became a badly beaten man, racked by great pain, fighting determinedly to rise. As a final touch, I groaned, clasped the back of my head, and staggered toward what I hoped was the bathroom. It was a tiny kitchen. I aimed myself at the sink, leaned over it, tried to retch.

Behind me, one of the cops laughed.

"She poisoned him, maybe, huh?"

"Show's over, Jack. Go call Homicide."

I turned slowly and faced them. One of the cops was on his way out. The others were in the center of the room, watching me narrowly. Both had drawn guns in their hands. The one who wore a gilt sergeant's shield on his blue shirt said: "Frisk him, Frank."

The younger cop nodded and strode toward me. He spun me around roughly, slapped my pockets, relieved me of my wallet. Pulling me into the livingroom, he shoved me into a chair and tossed my wallet to the sergeant.

"It's the shamus, all right," the sergeant announced. There was a gloating note in his voice. "Carl Guard is his name. Boy, will Captain Hara get a charge out of this!"

With pathos and a judicious amount of tremolo, I moaned: "Christ!"

"Why'd you kill her, shamus?" the sergeant demanded.

I stared at him uncomprehendingly—then shifted my eyes

to the slim, naked body on the floor. I registered shock. With complete sincerity, I muttered: "Good God—!"

"What an act," the young cop commented cynically. "In a couple minutes he's gonna say he went nuts. He blanked out, don't remember nothing—"

"Shut up, Frank," the sergeant ordered. "Why'd you kill her, shamus? Maybe I can get you a break."

I blinked my eyes, swallowed, moistened my lips. I had to say something, so I asked hoarsely: "Did you get him?"

"Get who?" The sergeant's eyebrows jerked upward.

"He was here waiting for her," I rapped. "I walked in and got sapped. She . . . she was right behind me. The bastard must have—"

"You trying to say you didn't kill her?"

"Hell, no, I didn't kill her! I spotted her in an office downtown, and when I came out of the building she was waiting for me. She had a gun and she made me get into a cab. She brought me here, gave me her keys, made me unlock the door. Then she pushed me into the room—and somebody sapped me. They were hidden here, waiting for her to come home. I heard her start to scream—and that's all."

"Wait a minute. You spotted her in an office. Whose office?"

"The Ability Agency. I was talking to Ben Ajax there."

"How come you spotted her?"

"I was tracing a skip named Elberta Ryerson who re-neged on a contract with Old Reliable Finance. She'd had a music shop on Oak Street under the name of Berta Shaw—but the trail ran out on me there. I heard Ajax call his secretary 'Miss Shaw', so, naturally, I tossed a couple questions at her. She said she was Ella Shaw, not Berta Shaw—but when I came downstairs, she was waiting for me with a gun."

"How do you like that?" The sergeant grinned. "Went on the make for you with a gun, huh?"

"A small automatic, probably a .25," I told him. "I didn't get a good look at it. She wore a wide-sleeved white jacket and she kept the gun hidden in the cuffs of the sleeve. But

she kept jabbing the damned thing into my side. I had to play along with her. I had no choice."

"It certainly looks like you did some neat playing, all right, shamus. She went for you, huh? Forced you to come up and see her?"

"With a gun," I emphasized.

"Made you get into a cab, too."

"That's right. It was a Vet Cab, one of those red-and-white jobs, and she had it waiting in front of the building. I could have tried to grab the gun, I suppose, but I didn't like the odds."

"I'll bet." The sergeant chewed a lip speculatively and looked unconvinced. "I suppose she snuggled right up to you in the cab."

"She kept the gun in my side."

"Then what?"

"I told you. When we got here, she gave me her keys and ordered me to unlock the doors. I came up the stairs ahead of her, unlocked the apartment, and opened the door. She was right behind me with the gun. I heard her gasp and start to scream, then someone sapped me. Period."

"Get a look at them?"

"Hardly. The lights were off and the drapes were drawn, the way they are now. I couldn't see anything—and I don't think she could, either."

"In other words, your story is that the girl kidnapped you off a downtown street, hustled you here in a cab, and forced you to enter her apartment. You walked in, got knocked cold, and don't know nothing."

"It sounds screwy, but that's the way it was, sergeant."

"You didn't talk her into bringing you up here, didn't try to promote a little sex, didn't try to make her talk things over on her back—"

"I sure as Christ didn't!"

"—or rip off her clothes and strangle her when she tried to scream for help!"

"Don't be a goddam fool, sergeant!" I snapped. "I never saw the girl before. I'm not a sex crazy moron who'd—"

"Who isn't a moron?" a heavy voice demanded from the doorway. Captain Michael Hara, the acting chief of Homicide, strode into the room, followed by a tired-looking man carrying a black bag and two bright-eyed boys with camera equipment. Hara was a bald, short, heavy-set man in his middle fifties, who had the reputation of making captain the hard way, of being a tough cop, a smart homicide dick. Ignoring me, he glanced at the girl's body, then rested his eyes on the sergeant.

"What's the story, Farrell?" Hara demanded.

"Somebody phoned a tip to the district that a guy was beating up on a dame in this apartment," the sergeant reported, shuffling his feet. "Me and the boys got here and found the door locked. When we busted in, she was lying there dead, like she is now, and he was over there"—he pointed—"pretending like he was unconscious."

"Pretending, hell—!" I began.

"Shut up," Hara snapped. "You guys touch anything?"

"No, sir, captain!" The sergeant looked as shocked as though he'd been accused of peeping into the windows of a sorority. "I know better than that!"

"Okay." Hara gestured to the man with the black bag. "Get the formalities over with, Doc, so I can get to work. Al, set your camera high in that corner and take a shot of the whole layout, including the smashed door. I'll want a complete record." Hara swung his pink-granite face toward me. "What's your name?"

"Carl Guard," I told him. "I'm a private investigator."

"So you're Carl Guard." Hara didn't stress the comment, but his nostrils dilated a little. "What have you got to say for yourself?"

I gave him the whole story in detail, omitting nothing except the fact that a phony tape recording purporting to be an episode from the love-life of Lisa Lincoln and Dixie Pelligori had triggered my visit to the Ability Agency. Ajax, I knew, didn't want the existence of the recording publicized in the newspapers—and it had nothing to do with what had happened, anyway.

Hara listened without expression until I finished, then he said mildly: "That's your story, is it?"

"It's not a story, captain; it's the truth."

Hara grunted and a ghost of a smile hovered over his lips for a moment. Then he snapped: "Sergeant!"

The sergeant straightened alertly. "Yes, captain?"

"Take the shamus down to headquarters. He's to be printed and mugged immediately. Understand? *Immediately*. Then see that he's locked in an interrogation cell until I get there."

"Hey, what the hell—" I began.

"That's all," Hara snapped. "Make damned sure that he's printed and mugged immediately. I'll see about his formal statement later."

"For chrissake, captain," I said angrily. "You can't believe that—"

"I can believe facts, shamus!" Mara glared at me.

"Then I've got a right to call a lawyer—"

"Call six of them." Hara grinned. "You're going to need them!"

FOUR

THE POLICE DEPARTMENT of a big city is like a vast, sprawling machine of many intricate cogs and gears, each related in all ill-defined way, each grinding monotonously along in pursuit of a dull duty which is supposedly related to the whole. But the machine is cumbersome—and once it begins grinding, the action is relentless. I knew the dangers of getting caught up in the machine, but I'd been forced into its

clutches by circumstances, and I'd tried to temper those circumstances by telling Captain Hara, who was in charge of part of the machine, a straight story. But as soon as we reached headquarters, a multitude of regrets began to gnaw at me.

For one thing, I was a private dick, which is worse than being a private citizen. To any cop, a private dick is a weak sister, a conniving sharper, a guy trying to make them look like dopes. For another thing, I'd had occasion to tangle with the police on several cases. And cops have long memories. Hara was reputed to be a smart cop and an honest cop—but he was still a cop. He'd chop me down and get a whale of a kick doing it. I'd given him a straight story, a story in which most of the details could be checked, but I couldn't help thinking that something was very wrong.

Both of the district cops had grinned while I was telling them what had happened, and Captain Hara had betrayed an inner amusement. I'd been fingerprinted—and the cop had smiled the whole time he was inking my fingers. I'd been photographed like a common sneak-thief—and the photographer had acted as happy as if he were making glamour shots of a lovely bride. In fact, the whole damned Homicide detail seemed to be getting an unholy kick out of my predicament. They sure as hell weren't acting like cops. They were winking and smiling and hovering around my cell as though I were a country cousin with a big cigar in my mouth—the kind which goes off with a loud bang.

I tried to think calmly, rationally, and objectively. I went over the details at least a hundred times, but I couldn't spot any holes. Old Reliable Finance would vouch to the existence of Elberta Ryerson. There was a photostatic copy of Elberta Ryerson's and Berta Shaw's prints in my office. They were easily substantiated, if necessary. Ben Ajax had witnessed my initial meeting with Ella Shaw. He'd heard her deny knowing me. The taxi driver could be traced. He'd have to admit that she had hired him, not me—and that I'd been reluctant to get out of the cab. He may even have noticed the gun. And one glance at my head would reveal

that I'd been sapped. My head and neck still ached. There might be traces of concussion. An X-ray would show that I'd been hit from behind—and hard. If Hara was any kind of cop at all, he'd realize that I'd been an unwilling, innocent bystander at Ella Shaw's killing.

Christ, maybe Morrie could figure it out. I frowned darkly at the barred door of the tiny cell to which I'd been led. That was another thing. Morrie Harris was a sharp, shrewd, corner-cutting criminal lawyer. The cops knew that Morrie and I were pals. But they'd practically insisted that I call him immediately. They'd acted, almost, as if they *wanted* to see Morrie Harris come down and try to get me off the hook! That didn't add. You'd think they were playing with a marked deck and had dealt me a hand with kings full—and were waiting for me to reach for the pot, so they could laugh, throw four aces in my face, and rake in all the chips!

I was brooding over the details when a guard came whistling down the corridor and unlocked my cell. "Upstairs, shamus," he growled, giving me a broad grin. "Captain's throwing a party for you."

"Very funny," I told him. "Is my lawyer here?"

"Little guy with thick glasses and not much hair?"

"That's him."

"He came in five-six minutes ago. I hear he's a hot-shot mouthpiece. Looks like you're going to be a celebrity. The newspapers have got photographers three-deep outside Hara's office."

"For chrissake, take me up the back way, then!"

"Can't."

"Why not?"

"Captain's orders. He says he wants everything clean, square and above-board. No secrecy. The people got a right to know what's going on."

"Since when?"

"I dunno, but that's what he said."

I cursed silently and marched ahead of him to the big elevator. On the way up, I thought: *Hara's got an angle, and he's playing it to the hilt.* The guard hadn't been kid-

ding. As soon as the elevator door opened, at least 30 flashbulbs exploded in a blinding blaze of light. Instinctively, I flung an arm across my face and tried to turn away. The flashbulbs blazed again. The guard grabbed my arm and pulled me toward Hara's office. More flashbulbs exploded. Someone shouted: "Hey, what a kisser! Lemme get a close-up for—" A camera leered into my face. I struck at it, heard an indignant curse; and then I was being shoved into Captain Hara's office.

Hara was behind his desk, a panatella clamped in the corner of his mouth. Morrie Harris was standing near a window, talking to Paul Dockeray, an assistant in the state's attorney's office. Morrie glanced up as I entered, touched Dockeray's arm, and came toward me. The guard had propelled me to a chair in front of Hara's desk. Morrie sat down beside me. I saw that a police stenographer was in one corner, arranging a stenotype machine on a stand beside his chair.

"Dockeray says Hara's getting you set for Murder Two," Morrie said quietly.

"He's crazy," I said. "Didn't he read my statement?"

"He read it."

"There's no motive. None at all—"

Morrie was peering perplexedly at my face through his thick glasses. "What happened, Carl?"

"It's all in the statement, Morrie," I said impatiently, "I gave them the exact truth. I walked into a trap and woke up with the kid on the floor dead. Hara must be nuts. If there were an election coming up, I'd think he and Dockeray were—"

"You can refuse to be questioned now, Carl," Morrie interrupted, frowning a little. "I'll see Judge Swihard tonight and ask for a preliminary hearing the first thing in the morning—"

"For chrissake, Morrie," I protested, "I don't want to spend the night in the can! I've got nothing to conceal. Everything happened exactly as I said in the statement I signed. Someone sapped me and killed the girl. They were

searching for something. Christ, it's obvious, isn't it, that I'm completely without motive? I never saw her before. I stood to make a few bucks by turning her over to Old Reliable Finance."

Before Morrie could reply, Captain Hara said: "I think we're ready now." He glanced inquiringly at the stenographer, then continued: "This is an informal questioning of Carl Guard, in the presence of his counsel, Mr. Morrie Harris, about events relative to the murder of Ella Shaw. Mr. Paul Dockeray of the state's attorney's office is also present." Hara cleared his throat and pawed at a pile of papers on his desk. "Mr. Guard, I have here a copy of a statement which you dictated and signed earlier this evening." He shoved a stapled sheaf of typescript toward me. "Will you glance at it, please, and tell me whether or not it represents a statement of events as they actually happened?"

I flipped through the pages, checking my initials at the bottom of each sheet. "This is my statement—and it's true," I said.

"Thank you." Hara accepted the papers from me. "You are willing, then, for this statement to stand?"

"Why not?" I asked. "Everything in it is true."

"Of course." Hara smiled happily and pressed a buzzer on his desk. The door opened and a uniformed cop escorted Ben Ajax to a chair. "Do you know this man, Mr. Guard?" Hara asked pleasantly.

I stared at Ajax and wondered what the hell Hara was up to. "Yes," I said. "He's Ben Ajax, one of the men I talked to this afternoon at the Ability Agency."

Hara turned to Ajax. "Is that true, sir?"

"Yes, captain." Ajax eyed me uneasily, then nodded to Hara. "Mr. Guard was in my office this afternoon."

"What was the purpose of his visit?"

Ajax pursed his lips. "As I rememebr it, he was looking for a girl named Elberta Ryerson."

I grimaced. Ajax, of course, was trying to keep Lisa Lincoln's name out of things. But the bastard could have given me a break by saying I'd been there to discuss a business

matter. It wouldn't make any difference to Ajax—and it could mean a hell of a lot of difference to me.

Hara asked: "Did Ella Shaw enter your office while he was there?"

"Yes, she did. I rang for her and asked her to get me some papers."

"Tell us what happened, Mr. Ajax."

"Well, Mr. Guard asked me what her name was. When I told him, he smiled and seemed rather astonished. I think I said, jokingly, of course: 'She's a good-looking girl. Want me to introduce you?' He said no, it wasn't necessary, and when she came in with the papers he got up and spoke to her."

"What did he say?"

"He said: 'Hello, Berta. Remember me?'"

"What was her reaction?"

Ajax scowled at his fingertips. "Well, I can't really say, captain. She could have been startled—or she could have been frightened. But she made it pretty plain that she didn't want to have anything to do with him. After she left, he wanted to know if she was married, how long she'd worked for us, and so on. I told him she'd been with us over a year, that she was a good secretary, and that I thought she'd been married at one time. He seemed so interested in her that I suggested that he stop at her desk and talk to her on his way out."

"Did he stop at her desk?"

"I don't know. I had some business to attend to, and, when I finally left my office, there was no one at her desk."

"But he could have stopped?"

Ajax shrugged. "I suppose so."

Hara looked mockingly at me. "Any questions or comments, Mr. Guard?"

I thought about the \$500 check I had as an advance on services yet to be rendered—and I thought about the far-flung business interests of the Ability Agency. It would be a big account—and could make me financially healthy. Actually, Ajax's slight distortion of the facts made no difference to

me one way or another. Hara hadn't proved a damned thing.

"No comment," I said.

The grizzled driver of the Vet Cab was next on the agenda. Hara jiggled an eyebrow at me and asked: "Do you recognize this man, Mr. Guard?"

"Yes. He drove us from the Loop to the apartment on Pinegrove Avenue."

"What is your name, sir?" Hara asked with excessive solicitude.

"Vito Pacetti," the cab driver growled. "He's the guy I take in my cab, all right."

"Who was with him?"

"A young girl. A regular doll. She's got blonde hair and a white jacket and a pair of legs like—"

"Where did you pick them up?"

"Wabash and Lake, they come outa a building together, she on his arm, and they get in my cab and sit in the corner like a couple who's on the way to—"

"Did Mr. Guard seem reluctant to be with her?"

"Reluctant?" The driver glared. "What you mean by that?"

"Did she force him into the cab?" Hara explained.

"You kidding? You shoulda seen the way they were squeezing together. She was a doll. He didn't say more than two-three words all the way north, so I kept my eyes on the road, figuring they were loving things up while I went through the park. Most these guys, when they get a girl in a cab, right away they—"

"Did you see a gun in her hand?"

"Gun?" The cabbie's chin dropped an inch. "You kidding? Maybe she shoulda had one, I dunno, but the way this guy was squeezing up to her—"

I snorted disgustedly. "He needs his eyes examined," I told Hara. "It was in the sleeve of her jacket, which concealed—"

"Shut up, Guard," Hara snapped. "I'll listen to your cracks later." He smiled at the cabbie. "When they left your taxi, Mr. Pacetti, did Mr. Guard seem reluct—I mean, did

Mr. Guard try to avoid going into the building with her?"

"The only thing he tried to avoid was paying me." The cabbie glared darkly at me. "He stiff-armed me for the tip, too."

"Did you hear him arguing with her, pleading with her?"

"Naw, they just got out and went right in."

"Okay, Guard," Hara purred. "Any comments?"

"Tell them who hired you!" I said angrily. "Who told you where to take us? *She* did, didn't she?"

"The girl flagged me down," the driver admitted sullenly. He shrugged. "She said she hadda boy friend coming out in a coupla minutes—and she give me the address."

"You heard me suggest that we go to my office, didn't you?" I demanded.

"Naw, I didn't hear nothing like that."

"When she asked me to pay you. I suggested going to my office so—"

"Oh, then—" Vito Pacetti jerked his shoulders. "Hell, I figured that right away! You were trying to save a couple bucks by pretending you didn't have any change. How a young looker like that could go for an old cheapskate like—"

"Oh, for chrissake," I snorted disgustedly. "Because I refused to hold still for a tip, he's trying to make out that—"

"A tip? Who needs a tip?" the cabbie shouted. "For thirty-five cents I gotta take lip offa—"

"Okay, okay!" Hara snapped, pounding his desk. "Break if off, both of you! I'm giving you a break, Guard. If you don't appreciate it, I'll hand you over to Dockeray right now. Understand?"

"But the dumb bastard has everything screwed up—" I protested.

"Essentially, it's true, though, isn't it?" Hara demanded.

"Essentially, hell," I retorted. "*He* wasn't in the back seat. *I* was."

"Okay, Pacetti," Hara said. "Thanks for coming in." He jabbed the buzzer. The district sergeant came in and took the cabbie's place. "Sergeant Farrell, you arrived on the

scene while Mr. Guard laid unconscious on the floor of Ella Shaw's apartment?" Hara asked.

"Yessir, captain."

"Did you search the premises?"

"Yessir. We searched the place real good."

"Tell me what weapons you found."

"We found a couple kitchen knives, sir."

"No guns?" Hara looked astonished.

"No, sir, captain."

"That's strange. Mr. Guard says Miss Shaw had a small automatic in her hand at the time of the attack."

"There wasn't any gun there, captain."

"Well, how did Mr. Guard look when you first saw him, sergeant?"

The sergeant grinned. "If you mean his face, and I guess you do, sir, it looked just like it does now."

Captain Hara glanced at me and chuckled. Dockeray was smiling. So was the police stenographer. Even Morrie was peering at me through the thick lenses of his horn-rimmed glasses as though too aghast to believe what he saw. *What the hell was the matter with my face?* Involuntarily, I raised a hand and touched my cheeks and chin.

"That's all sergeant," Hara said. "Tell Dr. Worth to come in."

I was staring at my hand. Two of my fingers were smeared with an oily, reddish substance. Incredulously, I felt my face again.

"Dr. Worth," Hara was saying briskly, "I know you haven't had an opportunity to examine Mr. Guard, and I realize that the circumstances now aren't exactly ideal, but will you have a look at the right posterior of his head?"

Dr. Worth was an experienced police physician whom I'd known for years. He bent over me and probed the back of my head with gentle fingers. "There may be a slight concussion," he announced.

"Caused by an external blow of some sort?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Could it have been self-inflicted?"

"Hardly."

"Could it have been incurred while falling?"

"Well. . . . it's possible, but hardly likely."

"Could it have been inflicted, say, by the heel of a woman's high-heeled shoe, wielded in self-defense by a—"

"I object, captain!" Morrie cried. "My client isn't being prosecuted here. As I understand it, he's here to help clarify—"

"Okay, okay, skip it," Hara said hurriedly. "It isn't important, anyway. Just one more question, doctor. You'll notice a series of reddish marks around Mr. Guard's mouth. Will you examine them and give us your opinion as to what could have caused them?" Hara grinned as he asked the question.

The physician peered at my face, looked puzzled, then dabbed at my chin with a piece of facial tissue. He studied the tissue a moment, then said gravely: "I'd say they were caused by a rather strong sexual urge—and cheap lipstick, captain."

My guts quivered sickeningly.

Lipstick!

No wonder the bastards had been smirking!

FIVE

IT WAS a long night.

I tossed restlessly on the lumpy cot and listened to the desultory snores which sawed through the silence of the cell block. And I kept remembering Morrie's horrified gasp of astonishment and Captain Hara's gust of raucous, contempt-

uous laughter. Everyone—even Dr. Worth—had gotten a laugh at my expense, making me feel like a prim old maid whose lace pants had deserted her in the midst of a high tea. Talk about all-time lows, that was it. If there had been a piece of toilet tissue on the floor, I'd have tried to crawl under it.

There wasn't a hell of a lot Morrie could do. And there wasn't anything for me to do except wish to Christ I hadn't been born with a block of wood for a brain. I had never thought the closing of a cell door could sound like music, but I heaved a deep sigh of relief when Assistant State's Attorney Dockeray formally ordered me removed and I had nothing except three steel walls and a slab of cotton batting to face.

I must have dozed eventually, for the creak of the cell door startled me, and, by the pale grey light seeping through the barred window, I saw the bulky figure of a guard move into the cell with a tin tray. He glanced at me, grinned, set the tray on the floor, grinned again, then went out, banging the door with a note of finality. A folded newspaper was on the tray. I sat up, groaning, and reached for the paper. It was a late *Tribune* with a page one headline which made me wince:

"KISSING KILLER" NABBED BY POLICE!

The story which followed, though toned down by the *Trib's* editors in an habitual attempt at dignified journalism, detailed the manner in which Carl Guard, a private investigator, was believed to have followed Ella Shaw, beautiful young secretary, to her room in a northside apartment building, and, having tricked her into admitting him, had tried to take liberties with her which she had decided were worse than Death. The story ran for a whole column, broke to page two, and ran another column and a half, every line studded with innuendo which made Guard out as a complete nitwit and a desperate sex fiend who got a charge out of forcing kisses upon hapless victims.

The final paragraph packed quite a bang. Captain Michael Hara, in charge of the police detail which had cornered Guard, had stated to reporters that "Guard's arrest will undoubtedly end the long series of rapes, assaults on elderly women, and Peeping Tom incidents which have been causing disquiet to northside residents during recent months." I read that paragraph twice. And I cursed Hara in a way which should have shriveled his guts. For his intentions were obvious: He was planning on nailing me with every unsolved sex crime he had on the books!

The preliminary hearing, held at ten o'clock in Criminal Court, was as dignified and as cut-and-dried as a lynching bee. I'd counted on Morrie's getting me before Judge Swihard, but Dockeray must have been up before dawn, pulling strings. As soon as I spotted Judge Ronald Stewart on the bench, my hopes went spinning down the drain like a dose of salts. Stewart, a former alderman and a good Democrat, had a reputation for thinking like the county machine—and he made short shift of the hearing. For all the good he did, Morrie could have been talking to himself. And all I was asked were my name and occupation. Stewart rushed through the formalities like an Evanston express and, in less than ten minutes, ordered me into the custody of the county sheriff and held for trial on a charge of Murder Two. Morrie requested a change of venue. Stewart brusquely refused. Morrie, shaking his head as though a swarm of flies were pestering him, demanded that I be admitted to bail. Stewart, like a second-rate jurist in a third-rate courtroom drama, delivered an unctuous lecture on the obligation of the courts to protect helpless citizens by preventing dangerous criminals from circulating in their midst. What he meant, in plain language, was: Hell, no. Two deputy sheriffs grabbed my arms and began pushing me back to my cell. I didn't resist. I felt as hopeless and as small as an ant trudging across Soldier Field.

Morrie brought me some smokes and the afternoon papers. The *American* and *Sun-Times* had had a field day. In addition to blaring headlines and a series of photo-

diagrams, they'd dug up police photos of several convicted sex-deviates and spread them across a page, with a picture of my lipsticked face in the center, so their readers could see how innocuous really dangerous fiends looked.

"The lousy, rotten, dirty bastards!" I muttered helplessly.

Morrie shrugged. "It's their job. They're trying to sell papers."

"There's not a grain of truth in it!" I cried. "Not one goddam grain!"

"Of course not." He tried to sound soothing, and failed.

"Can't you stop them?" I demanded.

He shook his head. "You've been indicted—and it's news."

"But it may be weeks before we get to trial!"

"We'll work something out."

"Like what?" I snapped.

"I haven't decided yet." Morrie hesitated. "You shouldn't have volunteered that statement, Carl."

"I shouldn't have been born, you mean."

"It's not that bad, Carl. I have connections—and I'm doing everything that can be done. You'll have to trust me for a day or two."

"At least get me admitted to bail, Morrie. I'm going nuts in this cracker box."

"It has to go through channels. Judge Stewart refused bail. I'm trying to find a line to Dockeray, or to the State's Attorney. If they'll agree, Stewart will have to relent, but the papers have him on the spot, of course."

"Where the hell have they got me?" I retorted.

"I know, I know," Morrie consoled. "Need anything besides the smokes?"

"You might send in a couple fat old ladies," I told him bitterly. "As long as I'm supposed to be a fiend, I may as well enjoy myself."

"Don't talk like that Carl."

So he didn't send in the fat old ladies and I didn't enjoy myself. Instead, I laid on the lumpy cot, and looked at the pictures of Ella Shaw and Lisa Lincoln which kept running through my mind, on and on, like the corset and underwear

ads in a Sear's catalogue, and the more I looked at them and thought about Ella Shaw's dead body, the more convinced I became that it was strictly No Sale. Only a screwball would buy a deal like that. If I'd throttled Ella Shaw, she couldn't have beaten me unconscious—and *vice versa*. If I weren't unconscious, I'd have shag-tailed out of there fast. If I'd licked all the lipstick off the girl's face, I'd have known it and I'd have gotten rid of it. If. If. A thought crouched in my mind like Davy Crockett stalking an Indian, then sprang erect. I hadn't smooched with Ella Shaw. So where had the lipstick come from *unless the killer were a woman and had put it there?* For a moment, my lips felt drier than a B-girl's throat. The lipstick was part of a frame, a woman's frame. That meant a smart dame, a foresighted dame, the kind that'd buy a washable wedding gown. I tried to think about dames who might fit and came up with zero.

The afternoon stretched forward into a colorless void, and my mind kept registering blanks like a slot machine coming up with lemons. It must have been around four o'clock before the guard came around again and unlocked the barred door.

"You're wanted," he announced, giving me a toothy expression which was not a smile.

"Big deal," I commented. "Who wants me?"

"Captain Hara. Get your shoes and shirt on."

I told him what Hara could do.

"You're doing it the hard way," he advised, giving me the teeth again. "It's either get dressed or get dragged downstairs the way you are, and it's nothing to me if you want to look like a jerk. Don't you want the dames to go for you?"

That did it. He was a big guy and nearly as wide as the Edens Speedway—but he wasn't nearly as fast. I catapulted off the cot and pounded a fist into his gut and another smack into his grinning teeth before he got his arm up. He let out a bellow like an elephant in heat and flung a beefy arm around my neck. I got him in the gut again before he

dragged me to the floor. Two other guards came running and tore us apart.

"Another crack like that," I panted, "and you won't have anything to brush in the morning!"

"He got me when I wasn't looking!" the guard gasped, clutching his mid-section. "The bastard must be crazy. All I did was tell him to get his shoes on and—"

"Can it, Pete," one of the other guards growled. He glared at me, measuring me for size, then unholstered his pistol. "We'll take care of him later." He pointed the gun at me. "Get your shoes and shirt on, Buster."

I stared at them. One was opening and closing his hands, practicing what he'd like to do to my throat. I might have taken them, but what the hell was the use? I'd let off a little pent-up steam—and bucking a gun could only get me bad trouble. I shrugged, pushed my feet into my shoes and reached for my shirt. With the guards in formation about me, I marched downstairs.

They unlocked a door, pushed me into a bare room, slammed the door shut behind me. Captain Hara was sitting beside an interview desk, his big face as dark as six days of stormy weather. He looked up but didn't speak. The way I felt, I didn't care much whether he said anything or not. I walked to the chair on the other side of the desk and sat down.

Hara cleared his throat. I stared at the wall over his head and waited. "I suppose you've seen the papers," Hara said finally. He sounded as though he'd had three drinks and needed a fourth.

"Sure," I said evenly. "Want a kiss?"

"The papers have to have a gimmick." He reached for each word reluctantly like a merchant using red ink. "That 'Kissing Killer' stuff wasn't my idea."

"Ha-ha," I commented.

"You're in a bad jam, Guard."

"Glad you told me. I thought you might be sending me on a tour of Europe."

"We'll get farther if you'll take the chip off your shoulder."

"You've already knocked it off, captain."

Hara grunted and lapsed into a brooding silence. "Okay," he said heavily. "I can't blame you for being sore. But take a look at it, an objective look, Guard, and you'll have to admit that you looked like a kid caught with jam on his face. You've got a reputation as a fast guy with dames. This Ella Shaw was a young girl—and a looker. You could have picked her up, given her a quick spiel about having to check her credit references, and wormed your way into her room. You wouldn't be the first guy to make that kind of a pass, nor the first private dick to try to promote something for himself for nothing."

"Nor the first cop, either," I put in.

"Nor the first cop, either," Hara agreed, nodding. "But this girl got killed. Sex I can swallow. I made plenty of passes of that kind myself once." Hara scowled at his clenched hand and his voice tightened a little. "But I can't swallow murder, Guard. First of all, I'm a cop—and second, well, strangling is a tough way to die. A bullet, poison, a knife—they're not so bad. Usually they're fast and clean and the victim hardly knows what's happening. But strangling—" Hara shook his head. "Think how it happened, Guard. The killer grabbed her by the neck, jabbed his thumbs into her throat, and held her like that while she stared frantically into his face and flapped her arms and felt Hell beginning to burst within her. Christ!" Hara pulled a handkerchief from a pocket and mopped his forehead.

"If you expect me to break down and weep, you're crazy, captain," I said. "Besides, I thought I'd strangled her with kisses. I'll bet there are dames who'd love to die that way."

"Yeah," Hara said gruffly. He clenched and unclenched his hand. "Here's what I wanted to see you about: I got a call about an hour ago from Paddy O'Connor. I figure Morrie Harris just got through talking to him, because he gave me a song-and-dance about how you were a personal

friend of his and what a tough time the mayor will have running the city with you in jail."

I grinned faintly. O'Connor was a power in the 41st ward, and the 41st ward was the police department's private bonanza for graft and pay-offs. If Morrie had gotten to O'Connor—and O'Connor had socked into Hara—a motion to fix might be in the offing. I said nothing.

"I told O'Connor to go to hell," Hara said bluntly. "I run a clean department and no damned politician is going to tell me what's what, not when murder's concerned. I told him that."

"It's been nice knowing you, *Lieutenant Hara*," I said pointedly.

Hara colored like a sweet young thing who'd just been caught peeking at a deck of French postcards. "I don't give a good goddam if O'Connor does jerk the rug," Hara rasped. "I've got enough grief without listening to politicians. Especially crummy saloon-keepers like O'Connor."

"Why cry to me?"

"I'm not crying; I'm explaining," Hara snapped. "I'm a cop, and I aim to be an honest cop. If I weren't I wouldn't be here. I'd let you rot in your cell until somebody remembered to send you to trial, and I'd suppress every bit of evidence which might be in your favor. Don't think I couldn't do it, either. There are guys rotting in Statesville right now because they spit at a cop and the cop got even by looking the other way when a piece of new evidence popped up—"

"Look, Hara," I interrupted, "if you're just looking for somebody to sound off to, let's skip me. I need a cop pep talk like I need a pimple on my—"

"This isn't a pep talk," Hara retorted. "I'm explaining the situation, so you and that shyster Morrie Harris won't think O'Connor pressured me into anything. I'm recommending that you be admitted to bail—and O'Connor didn't have a damned thing to do with it!"

"You are?" I perked up like a person awakening from a bad dream. Then, somewhat incredulously: "You're recommending me for bail?"

"Yes, me." Hara scowled darkly. "It's a mess—and I admit it. I should have thought of it sooner, I suppose, but it didn't hit me until I was going over the statements this afternoon. Fortunately, those tissues Doc Worth used on your face were still in my wastebasket. I sent them to the lab and asked for a comparison with the lipstick Ella Shaw had on. I got the report a half-hour ago."

"And?" I held my breath.

Hara stared at his blunt fingers. "There was a slight difference in shade."

"Then for chrissake get me out of here! That proves that I was framed!"

"Not so fast, Guard." Hara looked as dour as if he'd just heard that his daughter had been rendered pregnant by party or parties unknown. "There are a few other factors."

"For instance?" I demanded. "You can't hold me when—"

"The hell I can't. You were found on the premises. You told a cock-eyed story so flimsy that no jury would believe it. Furthermore," Hara smiled slightly. "—the only samples of the lipstick which was on your face were on pieces of tissue which I found in my wastebasket. I think they were the ones Doc Worth used on you last night. But someone could have substituted others. They're not acceptable evidence. What it boils down to is my word, my personal convictions, against the testimony of everyobdy who was in my office last night and saw you when—"

"Hara, if you're—!" I rose angrily to my feet.

"Sit down. You need something explained to you—and I'm explaining it." Hara chewed at his lip a moment. "I said it was a mess. If the girl hadn't been such a looker, the papers might not have given it the play they did. But the pictures hit front pages all over the country today, putting Dockeray and the police department on the spot. That's obvious. You can understand that."

"I understand you've cooked up some cute scheme to conceal the facts!" I began, still seeing red.

"Not the facts, Guard. Nobody knows the facts, not even you. I'm trying to be an honest cop, fair to everyone con-

cerned. Maybe you killed her. Maybe you didn't. I don't know. All I know is, that the lipsticks were different, so maybe you got a raw deal this morning. I'm giving you a break, and if you'd shut up and think a minute, you'd realize it."

I sat down. "Okay, Hara. I'll listen."

"Like I said, I'm convinced there's a doubt. But I can't back down now. Dockeray can't back down, either. We'd both look like fools. Frankly, Guard, I was tempted to throw that tissue down a toilet and forget about it. I can still do it. The lab made a routine test and nobody except me knows where the tissue came from. But I'm an honest cop and I believe in giving everybody a fair shake. In this case, it's hard because things are largely out of my control. Understand?"

"The wheels are turning and it's a big machine," I commented. "Go on."

"That's about it." Hara nodded. "Here's the deal I'll make with you, Guard: I'll go to Dockeray and level with him. As long as I promise to keep him off the hook, he'll listen. We'll recommend that you be admitted to bail. It'll have to be high, though, otherwise the papers will suspect something. Think you can raise fifty grand?"

"Maybe," I said grimly. "Go on, give me the rest of it."

"We'll say fifty grand, then. That'll look good in the papers, in case anybody asks questions—and you'll be back in circulation again. But—" Hara hesitated and shot a heavy-lidded glance at me.

"But what?"

"You're going to be minus your gun permit and your P.I. card."

"For chrissake, Hara," I exploded, "what the hell good am I without them? I can't earn a dime, I can't protect myself, I can't—"

"Sorry, but that's the way it is." The words clicked like balls bouncing out of a side pocket. "You can take it or leave it."

I did some fast thinking. Like he said, he and Dockeray

were in a spot. The fact that they'd pulled a boo-boo would have the papers laughing like loons in the mating season. Also like he said, he had all the winning cards. He had the lipsticked tissue—and I didn't. He could forget them—and I couldn't do a damned thing about it. And fifty grand bail wasn't bad. O'Connor was good for it and Morrie could undoubtedly persuade him to sign a bond. Losing my gun permit and P.I. card hurt, though. I'd be out of business, forced to borrow dough for living expenses, a sitting duck for anybody who wanted to take a swat at me. But it was better than sitting in the can. . . .

"Okay, Hara," I said. "It's a deal. Get me out of here."

SIX

IT TOOK nearly five hours, exactly two hundred and forty-seven minutes, each of which crawled like a soggy fly across a vast expanse of nothing, before I was free again—free on a string.

"I suppose you realize," Morrie said when we were in his car and headed toward the Loop, "that you're still in a bad spot. O'Connor signed your bond as a favor to me, but fifty grand is a lot of dough and he's nervous about it." He gave me a worried glance through his thick-lensed glasses. "You can't leave the county. You can't operate as an investigator. You can't do much of anything."

"I can try to find the killer," I said grimly.

"Well. . . . yes." Morrie nodded. "You can do that, as long as no fee is involved. But it's important that you keep out of trouble. Judge Stewart can order you recommitted at

any time, and O'Connor can withdraw his bond. It's a ticklish situation."

"So's stewing in the can," I told him. "Suppose you try to get a water-tight statement from Hara on the lipstick angle. Remind him that he might drop dead, in which case I'd be in jeopardy. It's an argument he might fall for. In the meantime, I'm going to get a line on Ella Shaw. I've a hunch she was in on the racket and was killed on purpose."

"Remember, Carl, no guns," Morrie warned. "If you're picked up with—"

"Don't worry," I said. "Shooting's too good for the bastard. I intend to wring his neck with my bare hands." We had hit Wacker Drive and were nearing the Wells Street bridge. The neon sign in front of the *Sun-Times* building caught my eye. "Drop me here, Morrie. I want to see Fanny Murdock."

Morrie swung the car toward the curb and stopped. "Need money?" he asked.

"I have a 5C check of Ability's which I haven't had a chance to cash yet. But a few bucks in cash would help. Can you spare a tenner?"

He peered into his wallet and brought out a pair of double sawbucks. "Take this, Carl." He smiled. "I'll add it to your bill."

"Thanks, Morrie."

Gratitude welled in me as I watched his car worm its way back into the stream of late evening traffic, then I turned and strode into the *Sun-Times* building. Locating Fanny's desk was like spotting a picnic lunch in Lincoln Park. After peeking in doors and wandering around among chattering teletypes for ten minutes, I glimpsed a frowsy head of hennaed hair surmounting a bright green blouse. It was Fanny. I walked over and leaned a hip on the edge of her desk. She finished pecking out a sentence on her typewriter, glanced sharply at me, then looked pointedly at that portion of me which was resting on the scarred oak.

"Well!" she said in a surprised tone. "I thought they had that in a sling."

"They have," I said, grinning. "How are things, Fan?"

"I'll tell you someday when we're on a closed circuit." She reached for a pencil. "When did you break out, Carl, honey?"

"You don't have to put *everything* in that damned column of yours, do you?" I asked. "Anyway, the *Trib's* probably on the street with it by now. I'm on bail. Fifty grand worth. The less printed about it the better."

She puckered her lips with disappointment and tilted her nose as though listening for the scent of whiskey. "Well, you didn't come here to look into my beautiful green eyes, did you? I need another inch or two to fill my column. Give." She narrowed her eyes a little. Fanny Murdock wasn't pretty, not unless you like thin faces with snub noses, and she didn't have much of a figure, not even with the rather elaborate falsies which she sometimes remembered to bobble when she was interviewing a male. But she was smart—and she exuded a lot of vitamins. "Come on, Carl, don't break my heart by telling me you're simply looking for free information, as usual."

"It's a trade this time, Fan. Try this on your machine: What beautiful titian-haired screen star, recently separated from her husband, is a fifty-buck item in a fake recording racket? The latest release is a bedroom scene which has the star boiling."

Fan lifted an eyebrow. "Initials L.L., maybe?"

"Right."

"Cute. Who dreamed it up?"

"This is the McCoy, Fan. Better not mention her by name, though."

"Well, it's an item, all right." She typed busily a moment, then tore the sheet out and tossed it into a wire basket. "Okay, that's that. I'm grateful. What's my bill?"

"I'd like a line on the Northwestern Players."

"That's easy. They're a little theatre group, active on Northwestern University's campus, dedicated to the production of sparkling dramatic art, not for profit."

"Evanston or Chicago?"

"Well, principally in Evanston, but there's a smaller group on the Chicago campus, too. The ones in Chicago are mostly grads who are hoping somebody in television will notice them. I've been to a couple of their productions. Some stink, some don't. What's your interest?"

"Which one put on *Lady In The Dark*?"

"The Chicago group," Fan said promptly. "It was last November, I think. A dark-haired girl named Camille Chad had the lead, and, while she was no Ginger Rogers or Gertrude Lawrence, she did a bang-up job. She sleeping with anybody interesting?"

"Forget the column for a minute," I said. "I think Ella Shaw, the girl who got killed, had a part in the play. Where can I get a list of the cast?"

"Professor Offenback would have one." Fan had a speculative note in her voice. "The other papers haven't mentioned this, have they?"

"No—and you aren't going to, either," I told her. "This may mean my neck. You can break it later, after I've nosed around. Where do I find Offenback?"

"Ever hear of the telephone directory?" Fan jerked a drawer open, lugged out a Chicago directory, and leafed through it rapidly. "Here he is. John Clark Offenback. East Superior Street, practically within spitting distance of the theatre. I wrote him up for the Altrusan magazine once, so tell him you know me and he'll let his hair down, what little he has, that is."

"That's a help. Thanks, Fan."

"When can I use the Ella Shaw stuff?"

"Not for a day or two. I'll call. Okay?"

"I'll have your gizzard if you forget!"

I gave her the Boy Scout sign and crossed my heart. When I left, she had a fresh sheet of paper in her machine and was stabbing violently at the keys with her red-tipped fingers.

I taxied north to where my Buick was parked and then headed for East Superior. It turned out to be an ivy-covered red-brick mansion which featured a fig-leafed statue of a

Greek god on the front lawn. There was no resemblance between the Greek and John Clark Offenback. Offenback was a tall, stooped man in a single-breasted blue serge suit, the pants of which were nearly as shiny as his hairless head. I mentioned my name, then Fanny Murdock's, and gained entry to a large, book-littered room which smelled faintly of pipe tobacco and sour wine. The wine smell came from Offenback's thin lips, and, if the empty bottle on the floor was any evidence, the professor had recently treated his bloodstream to a quart.

I sank into an ancient leather chair and waited for him to locate his glasses. He found them eventually and peered at me brightly through the old-fashioned gold-rimmed lenses like a friendly owl about to strike up relations with a two-headed woodpecker. To get the ball rolling, I said: "Miss Murdock tells me you did a wonderful job on *Lady In The Dark*, professor."

"Ah, yes. Last year." He nodded with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm.

"Do you have a list of the cast handy? I'm trying to locate one of the players."

His eyes slid half-shut. "Miss Chad?"

"No, one of the others. I'm not sure of her name."

"You're connected with television?"

"No, professor."

He snorted and cast me a sly look like that of a seal who had just stolen a prize trout. "You're a television scout," he pronounced carefully. "Or you're with some advertising agency. You want to take one of the girls I've trained and you'll make her mumble commercials or point with a stick at a weather map and exhibit her teeth and her breasts so some pill manufacturer will sell more—"

"No, professor," I said earnestly, "you've got me wrong. I'm an investigator for an insurance company. I have nothing to do with television."

"Hmmp!"

"The girl I'm interested in was named Berta Ryerson. Do you recall the name?"

"Ryerson. Ryerson." Offenback directed an academic scowl at a leather-bound edition of Gibbon's *Rise and Fall*. "She wasn't in *Lady*."

I tried a different approach and questioned him about a blonde, aged 22, with a slim figure and a sexy walk—and got a blank stare for my trouble. Apparently he noticed their diction and the way they handled stage mechanics—and nothing else. In desperation, I asked if he had Camille Chad's address. He had, but either my personality or the wine was putting him to sleep. It took a couple minutes to remind him what we'd been talking about, and several more minutes to get him to scrawl the address on a slip of paper with one of those ball pens which ought to be put under water and left there. I took the slip of paper and my departure.

Locating Camille Chad was like running down a firecracker on July 5th. She lived with her parents in an apartment on Belmont Avenue, but, like a lot of educated modern girls, she had her own friends, planned her own evenings, and wasn't required to file an itinerary when she left the family domain. Her father, a nice grey-haired old geezer, suggested that she might be out with a kid named Larry Haverman. I wasted a half-hour tracing the Haverman boy to a building on West Addison, only to learn that he knew from nothing. Camille, I gathered, had scratched him early in the season. But he remembered that she sometimes palled with a gang which frequented a joint called The Ripple. I was beginning to feel like the pink horse on a merry-go-round, but I stubbornly headed for Diversey Parkway and The Ripple, which was a poor excuse for a drinkery if there ever was one. The bartender, of course, gave me the glass eye when I asked for news of Camille Chad. I flashed a fiver, but he was strictly from the Baptist circuit, an original see no evil, hear no evil, talk no evil guy. I was about to give up when I spotted a girl at a table who was waving her ears in our direction and giving me the eye. A private dick gets sensitive to things like that. I bought a drink, carried it over, and sat down.

"Hello, beautiful," I said. It was a lie, but a sort of pale white one. She had short hair, as black as a preacher's hat, a round, plain face, and breasts like saucers, but obviously not as hard. She wore a red suit, rather gaudy, and very dangly earrings. A typical Tri Delt if I ever saw one.

"Hello, yourself." She said it coolly but with a slight martini accent.

"I'm not taking anyone's seat, am I?"

"It makes a difference?"

I grinned and treated my tongue to a taste of scotch. "It might. I'm looking for Camille Chad. Any idea where I might make contact?"

"You must be new." By the way her eyes plucked at me, I gathered that this made a difference. "Did you try Cooksie's apartment?"

"Who's Cooksie?"

"Gawd, don't you even know about *him*?" Her eyes widened with mock horror. "You must be *brand* new!"

"Hardly housebroken yet. How about smartening me up?"

"Cooksie runs the music den on Oak. Didn't she even tell you how—"

"Oh, you mean Clarence's place," I interrupted, taking a shot in the dark. "He lives upstairs, doesn't he?"

"Gosh, no, he's got a real jivey apartment over on Delaware, where Camille and her crazy crowd practically live. I go there once in awhile but, honestly, some of the things they do! I'm afraid my parents might hear about it and—"

"What kind of things?" I asked.

"Gosh, I'd be embarrassed to tell you!" She gave me a slanted look. "Why, I don't even know your name."

"Call me Carl."

"Mine's Terry. Want to buy me a drink?"

"Sure." I invested in a couple more drinks at the bar and carried them to the table. "Tell me about these parties," I coaxed. "Camille's been holding out on me, I guess."

"I'll say. You haven't known her long, huh?"

"A week or so. Offenback introduced me."

"Oh, *him*." She made a gesture which would have sobered

the professor in a hurry. "Don't tell me you're interested in dramal!"

"Sort of. I saw Camille in *Lady*. I thought she did a good job."

"Sure, but Cooksie's the one who put her over! Remember the songs she sang? And that dance she did? You don't think Offenback taught her *that*, do you?"

"They did seem a little extra-curricular."

"You're darn tooting! I was at Cooksie's when he was showing her how to swing her hips and give that punchy little twist to the words and—"

"Look, Terry," I slid a hand under the table and patted her knee gently. "do you think she's at Cooksie's right now?"

"Sure." Her plump knee froze under my hand but a lazy, throaty note entered her voice and she fluttered her lashes expectantly. "You don't want to bust in there this late, do you?"

"Why not?"

"Gosh, they'll all be floating! And Camille might—"

"We can float right in and out, can't we?" I asked, closing one eye slightly.

"Well . . . you're sure you want to?"

"Positive." I patted her knee again.

"All right. Wait'll I fix my face."

She arose with alcoholic dignity, steadied herself by grasping the edge of the table for a moment, then set sail for a door marked Jane. It took her a good ten minutes to do whatever it is girls do in such sanctums. And by then an idea was buzzing around in my head like a bee in a big new hive.

SEVEN

I PARKED BESIDE the Maryland and nudged the girl beside me. She was feeling no pain and her chin seemed to be try-

ing to peek down between the deep cleft which the fold of her suit jacket made. "Come on, baby," I urged. "Let's make hey-hey."

She reacted by lifting her head and giving me a look as empty as a bottle on Sunday morning. "Who're you, big boy?" she murmured.

"Marlon Brando. Can't you smell my sweat? Come on, let's have a little action. You were going to take me slumming, remember?"

"Huh?" She smiled a real loose smile and flopped a hand toward me.

"Cooksie," I said, trying to prod her mental processes. For good measure I put a hand on her knee and massaged it suggestively. The hand did the trick. She struggled up and gave me a look of liquored affection.

"You're cute," she muttered.

"Sure," I agreed. "So are you. Which one of these dumps is Cooksie's?"

Never underestimate the power of a woman. I'd decided she was too far gone to go anywhere under her own power, and I was trying to decide what to do with her, when she lurched out of the seat, got her legs planted firmly on the sidewalk, gave her girdle a tug on each side, and swiveled her head around like a dog getting ready to point. Then she headed for a squat two-flat from which the muted booming of a symphonic music was coming. I locked the Buick and followed.

Except for the sonorous booming, there was no sign of life in the building. No lights, no voices, nothing. But Terry headed straight for a sidedoor, opened it, and plunged into the darkness. Considerably less precipitately, I fumbled around, located a flight of stairs, and went up after her. A door opened and the booms became BOOMS. A hand caught my arm, guiding me forward, and I entered a large room, illuminated murkily by the feeble rays of a small red pilot light which, I deduced, was attached to the music machine. There were people in the room, I sensed, and my nerves tightened apprehensively. The hand on my arm

urged me onward. I tripped over a foot. I murmured an apology, heard a soft laugh, a murmured, "Sorry." Then hands urged me toward the floor. I sank down, Nippon fashion, and immediately became conscious of a faint gardenia-like scent. I was peering around, trying to locate the source, when someone whispered "Drink?" and the cool dampness of a glass touched my arm. I grasped the glass, whispering thanks, and lifted it automatically to my lips. It contained wine, strong and sour, which, I suspected, was both cheap and spiked. I swallowed bravely, then eased the glass to the floor beside me.

I listened to the music and decided it was Beethoven, probably his Fifth. A hand fingered its way playfully up my spine. Turning, I made out the sprawled figure of a girl behind me, knees drawn up in an attitude of relaxation, her dark-haired head half-buried in a pillow. She was shoeless, wore a skirt which could have been red, a thin blouse through which the cups of a bra were visible even in the pseudo-darkness. My eyes were rapidly making out other shapes in the reddish haze, most of them coupled in lazy intimacy, and I assumed that the girl beside me was Terry, jacketless and on her way to a dreamy oblivion. But the fingers kept teasing. I reached back and captured them. The fingers squirmed a little, then tugged gently. Beethoven was crescendoing in a blast of percussions and the wine was reacting with the scotch in my stomach. She urged me closer, the invitation plainer than if engraved on vellum. I grinned, released her hand, and leaned toward her. Her arms circled my neck and drew me down. A moment later hot, wine-tinged lips were giving me the kind of kiss which makes hair sprout on bald-headed men. I leaned into it, enjoying the surge of unexpected wattage, just as Beethoven blew himself out. The sudden silence was loud, loud enough so every body in the room could hear the moist *smack* her lips made leaving mine and her moaning: "Jack, darling—"

Someone laughed and a male voice inquired: "Hey, someone paging me?"

The girl stiffened in my arms, then laughed easily. "Guess I'm kind of drunkie—aren't you Jack?"

"I'm Carl." I tried to straighten, but she continued to hold me tightly.

"I don't care . . . kiss me again, Carl. . . ."

While I was obliging, the changer clicked and a polka came banging out of the music machine. The change from long hair to short roused drunken laughter and several figures leaped up and began dancing in the center of the room. Two of the dancers were girls, the other a male, slender and extraordinarily graceful. Another girl, short and chunky, joined in, jiggling more like the beer barrel than the polka. The heat of the room, the bite of the wine, the beat of the music, the throb of the girl's kisses—everything blurred together for a moment. The next time I looked one of the dancers was kicking exaggeratedly, can-can fashion, and blithely disrobing. No one paid her much attention. When she was as bare as September Morn bending over the water, she did an awkward bump-and-grind, stopped dancing, and began retrieving her clothes, precisely as the polka record ended.

A girl's voice crooned: "Camille! Your turn, Camille!"

Several other voices took up the chant.

The girl in my arms twisted away and sat up. "Let Cooksie do something!" she wailed.

"Duet! Duet!" someone cried.

"Camille and Cooksie!"

"Come on, come on, give us an act!"

"Hey, where'd Cooksie go?"

A deep voice, definitely not Cooksie's, said, "Aw, come on, Camille, let's give 'em Beauty and the Beast."

The girl, pretending reluctance, threw an arm about my neck and planted a farewell kiss on my lips. "Be right back. Gotta take care of my public," she whispered. Then she rose lithely, her hand busy tucking her blouse back into her skirt. "Where's the Beast?" she asked loudly.

"Right here," the deep voice proclaimed. A bulky figure rose from a shadowy corner and blotted out the red light.

"Ladies and so-called gentlemen, we bring you a secret episode from beyond the footlights, starring Miss Dawn O'Dare, beautiful call girl, and Mike Muggins, nose U. S. senator. The scene is the hushed chamber of a senate sub-committee."

A girl giggled. I sat erect, trying to identify the man. His big body obliterated the light, making his bulk and Camille Chad's curves stand out as hazily contrasting silhouettes. I sighed inwardly and mentally echoed someone else's question: *Where'd Cooksie go?*

Suddenly the deep voice, altered to resemble the voice of a famous southern senator who had been active in a recent crime inquiry, asked: "Miss O'Dare, where did you usually entertain your . . . ah . . . customers?"

A voice startlingly like that of a famous radio actress replied: "Well, sir, there was no definite place I entertained them. Sometimes they would spend the night at my room and sometimes I would go to their apartments after a round of night-clubbing. Other times I would go to their hotel rooms for an hour or two."

I blinked incredulously and inched closer.

The senator's voice asked: "Did these men pay you directly or was the money given to someone else?"

"Oh, I was very seldom paid. Sometimes they offered me a gift, though."

Someone laughed—then lapsed abruptly into silence.

Senator: "What kind of gifts?"

"One of them, I think, gave me a fur coat."

"What kind of a fur coat?"

"It was a mink, I think."

"You think! How many fur coats did you receive as gifts?"

"Well . . . several."

"In other words, you were quite promiscuous with your favors."

"I wouldn't say I was promiscuous, senator. It's just that I've always been a friendly person."

The room echoed with laughter and I took advantage of the break by moving more to the side. Here, the man's face

was in semi-profile and I could make out a pudgy nose and dark, wavy hair. When the laughter subsided, the senatorial voice demanded: "You deny, then, that you received any money, Miss O'Dare?"

"They may have paid it to someone else, I suppose."

Deep voice: "I object, senator. That's a speculation on the part of the witness."

Same voice, changed slightly: "Sustained. Please restrict yourself to items on which you have actual knowledge, Miss O'Dare."

Small voice: "Yes, sir."

Senator: "Tell the committee the names of the men you entertained for profit."

"I don't think I can remember all of them."

Senator: "Well, name as many as possible."

"But I don't remember them all. Honestly, I don't. I remember a couple senators and a judge, but—"

Deep voice: "Senator, this is outrageous. Men are being crucified in this committee chamber. If this procedure is followed I shall insist on putting in the record the names of some of this country's outstanding officials, all of whom are respected throughout the nation. If even one name is mentioned, then *all* must be mentioned. We'll let the chips fall where—"

A loud crash at the rear of the apartment put an abrupt period to the skit. There was silence for a moment, then someone asked: "What's that?" As though in reply, there was another crash, followed by a splintering of wood and a muffled cursing. A voice near me stage-whispered: "Maybe it's cops!" The comment triggered general movement, most of it in a direction away from the crashing. I got to my feet slowly, listening to the racket, and began to move toward it. I had reached a hallway when a light came on behind me. I caught a glimpse of naked legs and red-tipped toes darting into a room. As I reached it, the door slammed and a bolt rammed into its socket. I hesitated—and another crash came from farther down the hall. The cursing, more distinct now, was in an angry, effeminate treble. I ran to-

ward it and located a splintered door which was trembling from the force of furious blows administered to the accompaniment of gutter language. A wooden chair was jammed under the knob, holding the door securely shut. As I released the chair, the door slammed open violently, unleashing a flood of yellow light, a view of a steamy bathroom, and a scrawny figure in a girl's pink nightgown. He was pretty mad, and, as frequently happens with girls, anger had made him pretty, so much so that I almost didn't recognize him. But it was Cooksie, the owner of Berta's Music Shoppe, literally in the pink. . . and I must say it became him.

He passed me with an animal-like scurry and fled down the hall toward the closed door, screaming threats and phrases of unmoral origin. The door was still locked. He clawed and kicked at it, then it opened to admit him. A cat-like shriek came from within—then silence.

"Well, I guess that tears it," a voice commented.

Startled, I turned and found a slim, pretty girl in a white blouse and scarlet skirt watching me. She had a lighted cigarette in one hand and was smoothing her short, curly black hair with the other one. She sounded calm and a little amused.

"What the devil was that?" I ejaculated.

"Cooksie with one of his boy friends, probably," she explained, taking a theatrical drag on the cigarette. "Billy must have locked him in the john." Her eyes measured me curiously. "Say, I don't know you, do I?"

I grinned. "You've a short memory, Camille."

She lifted an eyebrow. "I have?"

Something about her calm, sin-plated air of sophistication irritated me. I caught her with one arm and pulled her against me. Her dark eyes went wide with alarm and she strained away, trying to stab me with the cigarette, but I caught her arm, held her tightly, and forced my mouth over hers. For a long moment, it was like kissing a board. Then she relaxed suddenly and pressed against me and her lips

burned into mine. When I released her, she was breathing fast and her dark eyes had a heavy-lidded look.

"So you're the one," she murmured, straightening her blouse.

"Carl," I reminded her, "—not Jack."

"Of course."

"Think Cooksie's all right?" I asked, looking at the closed door.

"Oh, sure. But it put a period to the party, all right."

"Everybody else scattered?"

"I guess so. Let's go see."

She preceded me back down the hallway to the big room. It was still dark and uncomfortably quiet. I fumbled around on a wall and found a switch. It clicked but no light.

"Wait a sec," she murmured. "There's a lamp over here." She moved across the room, the tip of her cigarette zig-zagging a red trail beside her. I heard her trip over something, exclaim "Darn!" in a tone of mild irritation and then the lamp came on, flooding the room with filtered yellow. I was looking toward her and saw her head turn, her eyes fix on something—and snap wide. Then I heard the beginning of a scream tear deep in her throat as horror leaped onto her face. I bounded across the room and got a hand over her mouth. The scream gurgled in her throat and ended as a whimper as she struggled to free herself. I held her tightly and looked where she had looked.

A girl wearing a yellow blouse and a black skirt was sprawled on the floor, one long slim leg hooked toward a blue satin-pillow like a runner sliding toward third base. The blouse was partially unbuttoned and torn down over her left shoulder, revealing the cup of a white bra, some pale white skin, and a reddish, angry-looking bruise. A tumbled mass of light brown hair obscured a portion of her face, but another bruise was visible alongside her jaw. Her head lay in an uncomfortable, unnatural position on the floor.

"Don't scream," I said harshly. "Understand? Don't scream."

Her blouse was jiggling as though a pair of frightened birds were imprisoned there, and she rolled her eyes imploringly toward me. I released my hand cautiously. She choked, turned, and pressed her face against my chest. "Oh, no, no, *no!*" she whimpered.

"Sit here. Don't move." I helped her to a chair.

I approached the sprawled body carefully and knelt beside it. Her flesh was still warm, but there was no pulse, no trace of respiration. The girl was dead. I brushed some of the tumbled hair away from her face. Her features were too sharp for beauty—but she'd been attractive, probably in her mid-twenties. I turned on another lamp for a moment, long enough to examine the marks on her jaw and neck. At the base of the neck, a double bruise was visible, telling where a pair of murderous thumbs had pressed the life from her body.

"Who was she, Camille?" I asked.

She stared at me, swallowed painfully. "Is she . . . d-dead?"

"Yes. Did you know her?"

She nodded. "G-gloria S-steen."

The name meant nothing to me, but the fact that another girl had been murdered—and I was on the premises—did. Gloria Steen's troubles were ended—but Carl Guard's were sizzling around in the frying pan and threatening to jump into the fire. I had a sudden urge to be somewhere else when Homicide walked in.

"We can't help her, Camille," I said. "Let's get out of here."

"Y-you're s-sure?"

"She's dead. What can we do now?"

Camille nodded blankly and got up. She stood there beside the chair a moment, looking around the room, then she crossed slowly to where a pair of red high-heeled pumps lay. She put them on, gathered up a red purse, then looked questioningly at me. I nodded. As she moved toward the door, I remembered something. I wandered about the room, like a suburbanite looking for dandelions, until I found a

half-filled glass near a squarish pillow. I stood beside it and looked toward the glowing red eye of the pilot light. It was hard to be certain, but it was probably the glass I had used. I emptied the wine onto the carpet and rubbed the surfaces of the glass carefully against the pillow.

When I reached the door, Camille was looking uncertainly down the hallway. "Shouldn't we t-tell them?" she asked nervously.

That reminded me of something else. "Wait here a minute," I told her.

I went down the hall and examined my face in the bathroom mirror. Lipstick. Plenty of lipstick. I washed it off, rubbed my face and hands on a purple guest towel, and re-joined her.

Then we got out of there.

EIGHT

IT WAS NEARLY midnight, so I drove to the Booze Arts Club on North Wells. Arturo, the aria-throated waiter, had few customers and was in no singing mood. Which was just as well. I was getting a headache like the throb of a solid brass dinner gong. And Camille was beginning to look like she needed a drink or a poke in the jaw—I wasn't sure which.

As soon as we were seated, she hissed: "We should have called the police!"

"Sure," I agreed. "Go ahead, call them. There's a phone back there next to the jane."

She made as if to rise, then sank back. She bit her lip. "What about Cooksie and . . . and Billy?" Her red lips

were tight with emotional strain, but she had pretty teeth and heightened color; I couldn't help thinking that she was a damned attractive girl, especially when flustered. For a moment I felt a sharp pang of regret, like a hobo on the high road of love.

"What about them?" I asked callously. "I don't know Billy, but Cooksie is a crumby little nance who happens to own a record store and likes to throw gay little parties. It's his apartment—and his headache."

"But . . . but to just *leave* her there like that!"

"Hell, Camille, use your head. What could we do? Wrap her up and take her home with us? The girl's dead. She'll stay right there until somebody else—Cooksie, probably—finds her. Let him call the cops. As it is, you're probably scheduled for a million bucks worth of publicity, most of it bad."

That hit her. "Publicity? *Me?*"

"You were one of the belles of the ball, weren't you, baby?"

"Oh . . . nol"

"Oh, yes," I mocked. "How's this for a headline? *GIRL SLAIN IN GOLD COAST ORGY!* Can't you just see it? How long do you think it'll take the cops to figure out what was going on? They'll take one look at Cooksie and start grilling some of the juice out of him. He'll mention names, and then somebody'll blab about the drinking and the smooching without lights and a girl dancing without clothes and all the rest of it. You'll be mentioned because you were one of the regulars."

"But—but—"

"*Weren't you?*" I demanded.

Her eyes were murky with fright, as though I'd lifted the lid of a crate and given her a glimpse of a couple family skeletons. "I suppose I was," she admitted in a husky whisper. "But . . . it was just fun, something to do. You know."

"Sure, I know. A choice group of pseudo-intellectuals. Lovers of the arts. Everything on a high plane. Nobody could get hurt because everybody was too clever. Hell, I

went to college once myself." I reached across the table and laid a hand over hers. It was like fondling a bunch of refrigerated carrots. "Look, Camille. You're a big girl. Gloria Steen was murdered. Someone at that party strangled her. Get that through your head."

She gulped at her drink, shuddering as the liquor burned down her throat. But it seemed to help. "I realize that," she said huskily. "It just seems so . . . so *impossible*. I didn't even know Gloria was there!"

"Anybody could have been there," I pointed out. "Who had the bright idea of turning out the lights?"

"I don't know. We usually did. It . . . it was supposed to make it easier to concentrate on the music."

"And on other things, too," I said grimly. "How many were there? Any idea?"

"Ten or twelve, I guess."

"Name as many as you can."

"Why?" Suspicion flared in her eyes. "Why do you want to know?"

"I'm trying to help you, Camille. Whether you realize it or not, you're sitting on a can of garbage that's going to blow up and stink to high heaven. The sooner the killer is caught, the sooner the papers will lose interest." I patted her hand. "There was Gloria and you and Terry and Jack and Cooksie and Billy. Who else?"

It took two drinks and a lot of psychological skirmishing to batter down her defenses, but I finally got a list of names.

Terry Dunn
Billy Graham
Clarence Cook
Flo Reilly

Jack Lowell
Mary Zeihen
Jeanne Caplan
Sammy Brevis

And her, Gloria Steen, and me, of course. Eleven. Terry had palled with Sammy Brevis at one time, Billy Graham was Cooksie's current inamorata, Mary Zeihen, Flo Reilly and Jeanne Caplan had come stag, and Jack Lowell, I gathered, had been playing the field. All were music and

drama lovers, nearly all had been in little theatre productions around town, and—with the exception of Camille—lived within an area of a few blocks of Cooksie's music nook.

"You didn't know Terry and I were there, did you?" I asked.

"No, but I knew somebody had come in and . . ." She colored slightly.

"So there could have been others, too, couldn't there?" I insisted.

"I suppose so."

"In fact, some of these"—I jabbed a finger at the list—"could have left without your knowing it?"

"I wasn't trying to keep track of them!" she flared.

"I realize that. Who was Gloria with?"

"Nobody, I guess. I told you I didn't even know she was there."

"That's right. She came often, though, did she?"

"Not since she started working for Lisa Lincoln."

"What?"

"She used to come often, but then Lisa Lincoln gave her a job and—"

"Camille—" My voice sounded as though it were being squeezed through a keyhole. "—you mean Lisa Lincoln, *the* movie star?"

"Of course. I'd heard a rumor that Lisa was in town, but it never occurred to me that Gloria might—"

"This Gloria worked for her?"

"She was a sort of personal secretary. Answering the phone, typing letters, arranging reservations, things like that. Gloria thought she'd learn something about acting, being around a movie star and living in Hollywood most of the time, but I guess—"

"Camille—!"

"Yes?" She caught the expression on my face. "What's the matter? Did I say something I—"

"Listen, Camille." I squeezed her hand hard. "Who got Gloria the job with Lisa Lincoln?"

"Gosh, I don't know. I think somebody at one of the agencies recommended her, but I'm not sure. Why?"

"Do you know a girl named Berta Ryerson?"

"I know a Berta. She used to own the store where Cooksie—"

"That's the one. Did Gloria know her?"

"I suppose so. She came to a couple of Cooksie's parties before she sold the store, and Gloria was still living in Chicago then, so—"

"What happened to Berta?" I interrupted. My mind was whirling like a drunken dervish.

"Nobody knows. She sold out to Cooksie and that's the last we saw of her. Why are you so—"

"Try to think, Camille: Could Berta have gotten Gloria the job with Lisa Lincoln?"

"I don't see how. If you'd tell me what you're—"

"A wild idea. Forget it." I took a large gulp of scotch. "Was Gloria ever involved with any of the boys there tonight?"

"Jack may have dated her a couple times. It wasn't anything serious, though, or I'd have heard."

"How about the girls? Any of them ever express a hatred for her?"

"No. We didn't even know her very well. We all envied her, of course, and we talked about her often enough, but that's all."

"Jack Lowell—is he the big guy you did the skit with?"

"Yes." She twisted her lips wryly. "He's always making up things like that. The first one we did was just a gag, but it got such a laugh that we worked up a couple more. The one tonight wasn't very good. We didn't have time to figure out any sound effects or—"

"Jack writes the script?"

"There isn't any script, not really. He comes up with an idea, a take-off, sort of, and we talk it over and put in bits of business for laughs, and then we ad lib it. Sometimes it comes out pretty corny, of course."

I lit a cigarette, hoping to conceal the excitement which

was pounding through me. Then I asked: "Ever record any of them?"

Her nostrils dilated as though I'd whispered an obscene suggestion. "Gosh, no! Some of them were kind of raw. We wouldn't want just anybody to hear them."

"Ever do one about Lisa Lincoln and Dixie Pelligori?"

Her eyes widened with surprise and her hand trembled a little beneath mine. "What if we did?"

"I'm just asking. Did you?"

"Well . . . yes. But that was several months ago. How did you—"

"Did Gloria know about it?"

"I don't remember. Honestly. It was right after Lisa got married—and there were a lot of corny jokes floating around—and Jack thought it'd get a laugh if we did one about—" Camille colored and avoided my eyes—"well, about a sort of bedroom scene, making fun of Dixie. Cooksie thought it was terrific, but I—I sort of hated to do it."

"You're sure you didn't record it?"

"Of course I'm sure!"

I grunted skeptically, but her answers had been candid enough and she gave the impresson of talking straight. But the skit and Gloria Steen's relationship to Lisa Lincoln was too coinky-dink to suit me. And Cooksie, Berta Ryerson, Ella Shaw and the Ability agency added up to more than a bag of jelly beans. Drilling was indicated. Lots of drilling. . . .

"Okay, Camille," I said. "I'll take your word for it. Want another drink?"

She shook her head. "Not unless you want to pour me home. Gosh, it's after one. Do you think they've . . . found her yet?"

"Probably." I stubbed out my cigarette. "Look, baby, don't think this isn't serious. The cops will be buzzing around tomorrow. They'll ask a lot of questions. You'll have to supply answers—or else. If they get too tough, here's the name of a good lawyer." I got out one of my business cards and wrote Morrie Harris' phone number on the back of it. I tucked the card into her purse. "My name and phone

number is on the card, in case you want to reach me. I'll tip Morrie off that you may call." I grinned. "Incidentally, it'd be nice if you didn't mention me to the police."

"Why?"

"For several reasons. They'll want to know why I didn't holler cop. They'll also want to know what I was doing there."

"You can say I invited you to the party."

"That would be a real laugh. I used to be a private dick."

"Oh." She was silent a moment. "I thought private eyes always worked hand in hand with the police and—"

"Only on television, baby," I said drily, "only on television. Ready to push off?"

She huddled in a corner of the seat and maintained an aloof silence during the ride north to Belmont Avenue. I located the building I had been to earlier in the evening and parked. She sighed softly and turned on the seat to face me.

"I've been thinking," she began quietly. "You know more about what happened than I do. It's something to do with Lisa Lincoln and Berta and some recordings, isn't it?"

"The less you know about it, Camille, the better," I told her.

"Why can't you tell me?"

"You're going to be questioned by the police," I reminded her. "And you can't tell them anything you don't know. Sometimes it's possible to avoid a lot of trouble by knowing very little."

"You weren't there . . . just by accident, Carl."

"Yes, I was."

"Liar! You said you were with Terry but you didn't even know her name."

"I met her earlier in The Ripple on Diversey."

"I'll bet." She brooded darkly a moment, then moved closer to me. "Carl, maybe I shouldn't suggest this, but how's this for an idea? You don't want the police to know you were there—and I'm not crazy about having the papers printing vile stories about me, either. It was dark in the

apartment, so . . . so we could have gone out together, couldn't we?"

I stared at the pale blob her face made in the car. "We could—except for the good senator."

"What do you mean?"

"That skit. Everybody there saw you and recognized you, and it was at the tail end of things. Gloria Steen was dead by then. She was probably killed during the Beethoven finale. The music was loud enough to cover a pig-sticking."

"Then . . . then there isn't anything we can do."

"No."

"I feel so . . . so *wrong*, Carl!"

I put an arm around her and held her for a moment. She was trembling. "Go in and hit the sack," I told her. "Things may look different tomorrow."

"Not to her!"

"No, not to her," I agreed soberly. "Goodnight, kid."

It was nearly two in the a.m. when I crawled into my own rumpled sheets, but I didn't sleep much. I kept seeing the scrawny figure of Cooksie dancing around a big-pillow-strewn room in a pink nightgown, pursued by the glowing evil eye of the music machine. . . .

NINE

I AWAKENED Wednesday morning feeling like I'd spent the night on the spiked cot of an Indian dervish. The sun was blazing through the venetian blinds, the air felt muggy; the day looked like a scorcher. I showered, dressed, and walked

over to the Commonwealth drugstore for breakfast and the papers. The late Trib had a page two story headed: KISS KILLER OUT ON BAIL. It consisted of a mere statement of the facts, that Carl Guard, accused killer of Ella Shaw, had been released on \$50,000 bail. Reading between the lines, I could see the fine political hand of Hara and Dockeray, for neither the police nor the state's attorney's office was mentioned. I half-expected to find an editorial condemning the state for allowing an indicted sex-killer his liberty pending trial, but the editorial columns were full of The Soot Menace and The Guaranteed Annual Wage. For once, I felt grateful to the UAW and CIO. There was nothing about Gloria Steen.

I drove down to my office, glanced through the mail, and made a few phone calls, one to Morrie telling him he might be getting a new client named Camille Chad. I didn't give him any details because he was in a rush to prepare for a court appearance. Ideas were gnawing at me, but Hara's stripping me of my P.I. card made me as vulnerable as a fish on dry land. No matter which way I flopped, I was bound to get jumped, and the record looked bad enough without adding deliberate non-compliance to the list. Finally, to keep from going nuts, I made out a deposit slip for Ability's check for \$500, dropped it off at the Cosmopolitan bank, and smoked cigarettes on the corner of Chicago and Clark until a *Sun-Times* truck came along and dropped a load of papers at the newsstand.

The banner head on the tabloid's front page was:

MOVIE QUEEN ROBBED OF
\$100,000 IN JEWELS
HERE; SECRETARY SLAIN!

Below the black, blaring headline was a large cut of Lisa Lincoln, showing the curvacious redhead in a skin-tight bathing suit and a nighty-night version of her famous open-mouth smile, and a smaller cut of a plain-faced girl with sad eyes and a page-boy bob. The caption beneath the

large cut read: *Lisa Lincoln, star of Strike-Out, whose suite at the Ambassador Hotel here was ransacked early this morning by daring thieves who escaped with \$100,000 in jewels.* The other cut bore a shorter caption: *Gloria Steen, 23, secretary of Metro-Urban star, who met death in attempt to prevent robbery.* (Story on Page 3.)

Incredulously, I turned to page three.

The story ran for two columns and boiled down to this: Lisa Lincoln had retired early with a headache. She had awakened at three in the a.m., when the effects of a sleeping potion she had taken wore off. Intending to find a book and read awhile, she had turned on the lamp beside her bed, thrown on a robe, and gone into the adjoining room, which served as a combination parlor and study. Beside the desk used by her secretary, she had found the body of Gloria Steen. Screams of the hysterical star had brought a bellhop and the night manager running. A police squad summoned by the night manager had ascertained that the secretary's desk had been ransacked, that a leather case containing \$100,000 in jewels was missing, and that assorted blows had been administered to the jaw, neck and body of the valiant girl during what appeared to have been a brave but foolhardy struggle. The star had sobbed, over and over: "The poor, foolish child! The jewels meant nothing, nothing at all to me!" Suffering from shock, the glamorous redhead had been taken to another suite and the hotel's resident physician had recommended rest and seclusion.

It took a couple minutes for it all to sink into my stunned mind. When it did, I could think of only one comment: "I'll be completely goddamned. . . !"

It wasn't hard to figure what had happened. Cooksie, of course, had gone gallivanting into the big room shortly after Camille and I had left, probably to clean up the mess which the party had left in its wake, and had found Gloria Steen's body. It must have scared him gritless. He had called Lisa Lincoln, told her what had happened, and, between the two, the transfer of the dead body had been arranged. To hold still for such a maneuver, Lisa Lincoln was either

nuts . . . or Cooksie had ways and means of persuasion heretofore unsuspected . . . or she didn't want it known that her secretary had been frequenting Cooksie's hangout. Since beauty and brains aren't supposed to be compatible, maybe she was just nuts. It'd simplify things considerably.

But what if the doll-faced beauty *had* had a headache and *had* taken a sedative and *had* awakened to discover the body? Then it followed that Cooksie had contacted an unknown third party with access to the star's suite, that that person had stage-managed the phony robbery, and, incidentally, made himself an accessory after the fact to the killing. It sounded to me like a lot of ado about nothing, a hell of a dangerous play with little to be gained by anyone except Cooksie, who'd be spared some questioning—maybe.

But what was all this about \$100,000 in jewels being missing? Were they nuts—or was I? That kind of stuff is always covered by insurance, and, when it disappears, insurance dicks come flocking like hungry sparrows around a pile of fresh manure. A murder was bad enough. But adding robbery to it was sheer over-playing. Unless the stupes wanted a big investigation. . . .

Foregetting for a minute that, professionally speaking, I was up a creek without a legitimate paddle, I hot-footed it back to my office and called the Ability agency. Ben Ajax was in, and unthrilled to hear from me.

"Forget it," I said, cutting his lame apologies short. "That's all down the drain now. I need some information. Who had the cute idea of brightening up the Steen killing by throwing in a missing jewels angle?"

"Angle?" He sounded surprised. "Hell, that was no angle; that was the truth. They cleaned her out."

"How do you know?" I demanded.

"For chrissake, haven't you read the papers? They broke in, killed the secretary and ripped everything apart until they found the case in which—"

"Yeah, yeah," I interrupted. "I read the guff in the papers—and it stinks. If she was lugging a hundred grand in jewels

around, they should have been in the hotel's safe—not in her secretary's desk, for chrissake!”

“Dames are that way, Guard, especially movie stars. She probably liked to keep them handy.”

“They were too damned handy. Look, Ajax, I want to talk to Lisa Lincoln.”

“So do a lot of guys. No dice.”

“Strictly business, Ajax. That jewel angle interests me. I want to try to square it with the killing and that tape business.”

“Impossible. She isn't available to anyone. She's suffering from shock.”

“Like the farmer's daughter,” I cracked. “Fix it up for me, Ajax. It could be damned important.”

The line hummed emptily for a moment, then Ajax said: “How come you're making like a private dick, Guard? I thought the cops put you out of business.”

It was like getting a whip across the face. I licked my lips and managed to say: “Strictly speaking, they did. But even a private citizen can ask questions, can't he?”

“Not of Lisa Lincoln.”

“Ajax, for chrissake, it's as much for her sake as for mine—”

“I doubt it,” he interrupted. “Sorry, Guard. Let me know when you're squared away. Right now I'm so damned busy that I hardly know where I'm—”

I hung up without waiting for him to finish. He had a point, of course. Lisa Lincoln was box-office; Carl Guard was barely post-office. And Ajax's job was publicity, good publicity, which included screening out threats of bad publicity, which a session with the indicted “Kissing Killer” certainly might entail. But this was the second time Ajax had had a chance to make a small, costless gesture and give me a break, and again he'd refused. I began to wonder if Ajax had a cute little angle all his own. . . .

I sat there and thought about it a long time, at least sixty seconds, before I got out the classified phone directory and started going down the list of surety companies. On my

sixth call, I struck oil. Jerry Florsheim, an adjuster with Great Northern Surety, had been yakking the news over with a couple other adjusters in the Insurance Exchange building's coffee shoppe and had heard that Omaha Fidelity had a \$100,000 headache as a result of the Lincoln robbery. Ben Busch represented the company locally, was new in the racket, but was a nice guy. I thanked Jerry and looked up Omaha Fidelity's number.

"Mr. Busch, my name is Carl Guard," I said cautiously. "Jerry Florsheim of Great Northern Surety referred me to you. I understand your company wrote the policy on Lisa Lincoln's jewelry."

"That's true," Busch admitted in a tired tone. "We haven't been officially notified yet, however. Omaha Fidelity will make good whatever loss Miss Lincoln has suffered as soon as a proof of loss has been approved. Which paper do you represent, Mr. Guard?"

"No paper," I said. "Maybe you missed the name. Carl Guard. I've been operating as a private dick."

A moment of silence flowed between us. "Yeah, I remember now," Busch said. His voice quickened a little with interest. "Weren't you mixed up in a killing the other night—?"

"The Shaw case," I told him. "I'm out on bail and temporarily stripped of a work permit. But it occurs to me that we may be able to do each other some good. Understand?"

"Of course. Want me to meet you someplace?"

"Let's see—" I checked the address in the phone book. "—you're on LaSalle and Washington. There's a drugstore on the corner. I'll wander in in about twenty minutes for some java. Look for a guy with no hat and a racing form."

"Right." The phone clicked.

I locked up the office, picked up a Daily Form on the corner, and taxied down to LaSalle and Washington. The drugstore was thronged with java-sipping, donut-dipping stenogs and clerks from city hall. I watched my chance and slipped into a small booth being vacated at the rear. I spread the racing form in front of me and bent over it. A few minutes later a brown suit paused beside my table. Without

moving my head, I spotted a hand holding a large manila envelope on which was printed: OMAHA FIDELITY & SURETY COMPANY.

"Busch?" I murmured.

The brown suit moved into the seat opposite me. I looked up casually. He was a stocky, tanned man, about forty, with greying hair, pale blue eyes, and a ready smile. He gave the smile a couple more watts of brilliance as he asked, nodding toward the form on the table: "Got anything good for today?"

"A couple in the third look okay." I gave the adjoining booths a quick once-over, then said: "I suppose you checked with Jerry Florsheim."

"A normal business precaution." Busch's smile turned into a grin. "He said you'd bear watching."

I lifted an eyebrow. "That's all?"

"He said you were sure to have an angle, which I expected, of course, but that your word was good and that I needn't worry about your talking too much in the wrong places. He admitted he'd done business with you on more than one occasion and had no regrets. That's good enough for me."

"Fine." I waited until a perspiring waitress mopped ineffectually at our table and took our java order. Then I said: "How much do you know about the robbery and killing?"

"Not a hell of a lot," Busch admitted. "I read the newspaper account, of course. And I checked with our home office regarding the policy. She's been carrying a comprehensive loss policy of \$150,000, covering personal property. It was written last year by our Los Angeles office."

"There's no question of your liability? You're stuck for \$100,000—if, as, and when?"

"If that's the value of the jewelry lost, *as* soon as proof of loss is supplied, and *when* our claim department gets dry-eyed enough to write the check."

I thought a moment. "What proof of loss are you going to demand?"

Busch hesitated. "An inventory of the missing jewelry, a

sworn statement of loss from Miss Lincoln, and possibly a transcription of the on-the-spot police notes. With the amount of publicity this is getting, the company won't hem and haw about payment. Poor advertising, you know."

"But, if the loss is phony, the company would prefer to hang on to the hundred grand, right?"

"Absolutely." Busch gave me a narrow look. "In fact, just between you and me, Omaha Fidelity would feel very grateful to anyone who brought such a situation to its attention."

"Ten percent grateful?" I asked.

Busch looked pained, but he said: "Could be. What's the pitch, Guard?"

"It's more a gimmick than a pitch, Busch. What I'm going to tell you is absolutely confidential. If you spill it and I'm questioned I'll deny everything. Is that clear?"

"Of course."

"Okay, here's the situation: I'm under indictment for a killing which someone wished onto me. It's a sweet frame and I got my neck into it while working on a case which doesn't involve you. I managed to get out of the can last night on bail—fifty grand worth—but I'm handicapped. All I have to do is start making like a private dick and I'm liable to get my bail rescinded. On the other hand, there are certain questions which I'd like to ask Lisa Lincoln. I already approached her agency, the Ability outfit, and got turned down."

Busch frowned. "What's this got to do with Omaha Fidelity's policy?"

"Suppose I told you that Miss Lincoln's secretary, Gloria Steen, was not the victim of a ruthless robber; in fact, wasn't even in the hotel when she met her death!"

Busch's eyes jerked wide. "Hell, according to the newspaper accounts—"

"—and suppose I told you that Lisa Lincoln collaborated with someone in an attempt to conceal the true facts surrounding the murder and that the robbery is part of an attempt to—"

"You mean it's faked?" Busch ejaculated.

I shrugged. "I think it was. I *know* that Gloria Steen wasn't involved in a robbery, and, just by the general smell of things, I'd guess that the robbery set-up was staged. She may be short a hundred grand in jewels, but I'll bet they weren't stolen last night."

Busch drummed his knuckles on the table. "Interesting. Real interesting," he murmured. "Let's hear the rest of it."

"That's about all. But suppose my theory is true. Your company has an out if it can disprove the circumstances of loss, hasn't it?"

"Maybe. I'm not a lawyer. But I'm certain our claim department would insist on having a true statement of loss. If you can prove—"

"I can't prove a damn thing yet. But I think I can find out what did happen if I can get to Lisa Lincoln and pressure her a little."

"So that's your angle." Busch smiled faintly. "You want me to arrange an interview."

"Think of it like this," I told him. "You represent Omaha Fidelity locally. You read about the robbery. Naturally, you're interested in her loss and want to ascertain the facts, both for her benefit and for Omaha Fidelity's. You want to explain the claim procedure, supply her with the necessary forms, make an adjuster's report, do whatever it is you guys do when somebody loses a mint. You wouldn't be doing anything irregular; in fact, it's standard operating procedure, isn't it?"

Busch nodded. "It is. But I haven't been notified of the loss yet. Not officially, that is."

"For chrissake, use your imagination! She's distraught. She's a young girl with beauty and no brains. Maybe she's forgotten about the policy. Maybe she doesn't know she's supposed to file proof of loss. But you read about it in the papers, and, being on the ball, you want to show her some typical Omaha Fidelity service. Sounds reasonable, doesn't it?"

"It sounds like you've been reading one of our training

manuals. Suppose I go along with that. Where do you come in?"

"That's the problem," I admitted. "I can't go along as an investigator. That'd be sticking my neck out. But you could hire me as a trainee, or as an assistant adjuster, or something, couldn't you? Get me past the door, and I'll be happy."

Busch thought a moment. "What if the robbery stands up?"

"We'll have had a pleasant half-hour talking to a sexy babe—and you, as an alert insuranceman, will rate some nice publicity. No matter what happens, you're the winner." I smiled tightly. "But if I'm right, you'll have saved your company a pot of dough and done your bit to discourage other chisellers."

"I'll also owe you ten percent."

"Ten percent of nothing is how much?" I asked pointedly.

The shot went home. "All right," he agreed. "It's a deal. Omaha Fidelity can't get hurt, and I'm going to make damned sure that I don't. First, I suppose, I'd better call Lisa Lincoln and make an appointment with her."

"First," I corrected, "you give me some status by putting me on the payroll. Then we'll barge right in on her."

The waitress brought our coffee. We left it sitting there.

T E N

THE WORLD LOST a good potential thespian when Ben Busch decided to get into the insurance business. Once he grasped what we were shooting for, he tackled the problem with

energy and imagination. He took me back to his office, instructed a secretary to prepare an employment application for me, and had my name inscribed on the books as an adjuster trainee at a *per diem* salary of five dollars. While that was being accomplished, he loaded two briefcases with old letters and forms. We left the office, he weighted down with one of the briefcases, I with the other.

Getting to Lisa Lincoln's suite was simpler than I had expected. Ben Busch strode across the hotel's lobby, flagged a bellhop, and growled: "Insurance adjuster. Take me up to the Lincoln suite." The hop clicked heels, grabbed for our briefcases, and trotted toward the elevators, without even bothering to clear us with the desk. I deduced that the procession of police technicians which had preceded us had upset the hotel's normal routine. The hop escorted us upstairs with slightly less swagger than he'd have given visiting royalty and turned us over to a burly uniformed cop who was boredly maintaining a vigil over the scene of violence. The cop, hearing the words "insurance adjuster", immediately got dollar signs in his eyes and unlocked the door. I took the briefcases from the hop, tossed him an eagle, and asked if Petey was on duty. Petey was. I asked him to send Petey up. Then I traipsed into the suite after Busch and the cop.

Busch played it straight. He unpacked a briefcase, scanned forms, adjusted carbon paper. Then he strode about, examining windows and doors, studying the assaulted desk, noting the position of the body chalked on the floor, and asking questions. While the cop was busy explaining the obvious, I strolled about the suite and quietly snooped into things. I didn't glean much. But Lisa Lincoln's stuff was still in her bedroom and a checkbook on a Los Angeles bank was in a drawer of the dresser and the last stub showed a balance of \$237.24 . . . hardly enough to pay her monthly social security. I wandered into Gloria Steen's room. It didn't smell quite as nice as Lisa Lincoln's, but it was a lot neater. This struck me as peculiar, because women, as a breed, are generally messy creatures. Rich or poor, society

or back-of-the-yards, they all scatter things on their dressers, hang stockings on doorknobs, flop things carelessly onto hangers. But Gloria Steen's room was as neat as a church on Saturday night.

I was still wandering around in the Steen girl's room when Petey, the hop with whom I had a buck-passing acquaintance, came in. He did an involuntary double-take when he saw me.

"I'm working with the insurance adjuster," I warned quietly. "Understand?"

He flashed me a wink. "Looking for all them jewels?"

"Smart boy. Any idea what happened to them?"

He shook his head. "All I've heard is some scuttlebutt from the maids."

"Such as?"

Petey glanced worriedly toward the parlor, where Busch and the cop were debating the probable means of entry. "One of them's saying that there wasn't anything like a hundred grand worth of stuff here for anybody to steal. She says all she ever saw was a couple rings and some pins, and even they looked phony."

"She'd know the difference?"

"The maids may not know everything, but there isn't much they don't see," Petey said wisely.

"True" I agreed. I thought it over. It could mean a lot—or nothing. "How about the secretary?" I asked. "Anybody spot her coming in last night?"

"Well . . . no." He glanced worriedly toward the parlor again.

"Come on, Petey, give."

"I don't want to get my tail in a sling—" he began, giving me a sly look.

"Okay, you're on the payroll," I promised.

"Well, I didn't see her coming in last night, and neither did anybody else, near as I can find out." He lowered his voice. "But I sure saw her going out around seven o'clock, and she was mad enough to spit. I carried her suitcase down to a cab."

I whistled softly. "She moved out?"

"Looked like it to me." He jerked a thumb at the closet. "The maid says most of that stuff in there didn't belong to her. It's stuff Lisa Lincoln used to have in her own bedroom."

"Wow," I said softly. I performed the rite of transferring funds from my hand to his. "Thanks, Petey. Better beat it before the cop tags you."

He got out just in time. I was making a hasty check of the closet to confirm the maid's judgment that the clothes therein were more suited to Lisa Lincoln than to her secretary, when I heard a door bang open and a male voice demand: "What's this man doing in here, officer?"

As I reached the door leading to the parlor, Ben Busch was saying: "—I'm the adjuster from the Omaha Fidelity & Surety Company."

"Adjuster my foot!" the male voice retored angrily. "Throw him out!"

I recognized the voice as Saul Tenner's even before I saw his big body and his light blue suit. A girl was standing beside him, a slim girl in a green quilted-satin robe whose long reddish hair boiled about her shoulders like liquid copper. She didn't look much like her pictures, but, even from ten feet away, I could sense the vitamins which the robe concealed.

"Hello, Tenner," I said casually. Their heads swung around as though jerked on the same string, so I grinned and added: "I'm Carl Guard, Miss Lincoln."

Tenner's face reddened like that of a man with sky-rocketing blood-pressure, and, for a moment, his lips moved soundlessly. Then he screamed: "Jesus Christ, a goddam private dick prowling around like he owns the place! What the hell kind of police have we got? Get these bastards out of here before—"

"Shut up, Tenner!" I snapped. "Who the hell do you think you are? This isn't *your* apartment, is it?" His eyes popped and his jaws moved soundlessly again. I turned to the pale glamour puss. "Mr. Busch and I are with the com-

pany which insured your jewelry, Miss Lincoln. It *was* stolen last night, wasn't it?"

"Yes." She smiled nervously and moved toward me, giving me a close-up view of the eyes which were supposed to make strong men wilt in their seats. They didn't make me want to grab her and carry her into the hills, principally because I realized that she was merely near-sighted and trying to get a look at me, but I sensed that she could be *une belle dame sans merci* and I decided that Dixie Pelligori must be nuts or very badly in need of celery indeed.

"How much did they take?" I asked.

"All of it!" She said it in a sort of husky gasp, as though confessing to a small grey incident in a very black past, and then she remembered to clutch the front of the satin robe with a small beautifully manicured hand and add in a dramatic moan: "The devils killed her! The poor darling was here alone, fighting for something which didn't even belong to her, while I lay in there"—she extended a white, hairless arm in a graceful Daniel-come-forth! gesture—"drugged and powerless to help her!"

"Lisa, for God's sake, let me handle this!" Tenner interrupted. He took an angry step toward me, glaring and raising a hand threateningly, like a street-walker who has just discovered she's been handed a counterfeit bill. "Can't you bastards realize that Miss Lincoln has had a severe emotional shock?"

"Waita minute, waita minute," the cop blustered, "these gentlemen told me—"

"Oh, shut up!" Tenner snapped, gesturing angrily. "Leave it to a stupid goddam cop to let these crumb-bums in herel First thing you know, we'll have—"

"Saul!" She said it quietly, but there was a new chrome-plated tone in her voice. The change was a surprise to me—and to Tenner, too, apparently, for he gaped at her and closed his mouth in mid-syllable. "If these men are here to talk to me about the loss of my jewels, it's to my advantage to cooperate with them."

"This one," Tenner pointed a blunt finger at me "is a private snoop who's under indictment as a—"

"That was yesterday," I interrupted quickly. "I'm working for Omaha Fidelity now, and not as a snoop. Show him your credentials, Ben."

Busch, getting the hint, flipped open his wallet and extended it to Tenner. Lisa Lincoln moved forward determinedly and snatched it out of Tenner's hand. Holding it about six inches from the tip of her nose, she studied the windowed I.D. card carefully and, for good measure, she compared Busch's face with the picture. Completely deadpan, she handed the wallet back to Busch.

"Tell me what you need in the way of information, Mr. Busch," she said crisply. "I'll try to provide it."

"Thank you, Miss Lincoln." Busch sounded relieved. "I have several forms here with me which will have to be filled out."

"Of course." She nodded. "You'll want an inventory, too. I'm in another suite down the hall. Do you mind coming there with me?" The way she said it made Tenner as superfluous as a bishop at an orgy, which he must have realized, for he turned to the cop and began talking in a low, angry monotone. Ignoring him, she turned and swept from the room. Busch glanced at me. I drooped an eyelid and grabbed one of the briefcases. We both followed.

The star's auxiliary suite was smaller but just as plushy. She busied herself for a moment with some papers which she took from an expansion envelope, then she arrayed herself on a brocade love-seat, fluttered her eyelashes, and gave Busch the kind of look Delilah may have used before the big haircut. The role she decided upon was sweet, trusting, childishly helpless.

"All right, Mr. Busch," she said, fluttering a hand helplessly. "I don't know anything about all this, but you'll help me, won't you? I feel so . . . so out of my depth."

Busch smiled gravely like a salesman about to unveil the latest gadget for her vacuum cleaner and assured her that he'd make things as easy as possible for her. He asked first

for a statement of facts. She repeated, almost word for word, the story which the *Sun-Times* had carried. Busch wrote it down on a printed form. He asked if the policy had been paid to date. It had. In proof, she produced a properly stamped receipt from the envelope. Busch studied it, wrote busily on another form, then asked if she had available an inventory of her jewels. She had. She dipped into the envelope again and brought forth a typed list. All were gone, she stated in a hopeless voice, except one small three-carat marquise diamond ring which had been on her finger when she went to bed. Did she have bills of sale to support the evaluation she placed on the missing gems? Yes, indeed. They were all in the envelope. In fact, dear Miss Steen had done a wonderful job of keeping track of things. She didn't know how she was going to get along without her. By watching Busch's face, I could tell that all the data being supplied was as up-to-date as a one o'clock scratch sheet and that he was beginning to visualize a lot of Omaha Fidelity money going down the drain.

I waited until she had signed the various forms, then I said casually: "I suppose you know, Miss Lincoln, that you've just committed a felony."

"What?" Her lips opened, giving me a glimpse of a kitten-pink tongue and a row of pearly porcelain-capped teeth. Her eyes stared at me like a middle-aged virgin seeing a color slide of what goes on between married couples on chilly nights.

"You have just signed a statement which is fraudulent in intent," I explained. "In plain words, you're trying to gyp the Omaha Fidelity insurance company out of a hundred thousand bucks. In this state, that's a felony. Felonies are punishable by at least one year in the state penitent—"

"Why . . . why you must be out of your mind!" she gasped, paling a little. "Do you realize who you're talking—"

"Sure, sure," I broke in. "You're Lisa Lincoln, the heart-throb of the American male, the glamour-girl of Metro-Urban pictures. But you're still trying to rob Omaha Fidel-

ity of a hundred thousand bucks with a loss statement that's got more holes in it than a screendoor."

"What do you mean?" She executed an appealing little gesture which involved puffing up the front of her robe and then slapping at it with one hand.

"In the first place," I said, "Gloria Steen wasn't your dear, sweet, wonderful little secretary. Oh, I'm not saying she didn't do some secretarial chores for you. She probably did. But you didn't like her and she didn't like you, and last night she blew up and quit her job."

"How ridiculous!" She held an imploring hand toward Busch. "Do you know what he's talking about?"

Busch, not knowing what to say, said nothing.

"Furthermore," I went on, "Gloria Steen threw her stuff into a suitcase and beat it out of here about seven o'clock yesterday evening. She didn't come back. She didn't even—"

"She did!" The redheaded star gave me the flushed, hot-eyed look which had made millions cling damply to their seats. "You've got to believe me. We had differences, of course. After all, we were both women—and perhaps I'm temperamental at times. But it had happened before and she always came back and asked me to forgive her. We were almost like sisters. I know it's hard for a man to understand, but in spite of our little spats we were very close, very fond of each other. I depended on her. I knew she would come back, that's why I wrote her a little note of apology and left it on her dresser. She saw it when she came in and—"

"This is the first time anyone has mentioned such a note," I commented.

She bit her lip. "I tore it up before the police came," she explained hurriedly. "It was laying on the floor beside the desk, where she must have dropped it when sight of the robbers startled her and—"

"I get it," I interrupted drily. "She found the note, an overwhelming emotion surged through her, and she felt she had to see you, had to talk to you, had to tell you how sorry she was—and she was on her way to your bedroom."

"Yes! You do understand, don't you! When I think about it, I want to cry and cry."

"Why did you destroy the note?"

The green robe trembled slightly, denoting a small shrug. "The newspapers are unkind sometimes," she murmured. "And I wasn't sure the police would understand. I've had so much bad publicity lately, you know."

Tenner's non-appearance was worrying me and I realized that time was running out. I decided to stop kidding around. "What do you think the police and the newspapers are going to say, Miss Lincoln, when they discover that Gloria Steen was in an apartment on Delaware Place—nearly a mile from here—when she met her death yesterday evening?" I asked bluntly.

The question hit her hard, but there was tough, resilient stuff beneath the flawless skin of her pale face. "Really, Mr. Guard I'm beginning to think perhaps Mr. Tenner was right! I should have had you thrown out. And if you make that fantastic statement to anyone else, I'll certainly have you sued for slander!"

"Go ahead," I said. "Call them."

She eyed me coldly. "Call whom?"

"Your lawyers."

She sat there, staring at me, her inner tension betrayed only by the spasmodic quiver of her throat as she swallowed nervously. "You wouldn't dare!" she whispered.

"Listen, Miss Lincoln." I leaned forward so she wouldn't have to strain her eyes. "Maybe you've been reading too much of your own publicity. You're a beautiful girl. You make big dough. But strip away the dough and the make-up and the clothes and all the front Metro-Urban has wangled for you—and you're still just a young kid, subject to sickness and death and taxes like anyone else. Some jerks may swoon when you give them that near-sighted gaze of yours, but to me you're a dame who hasn't learned which end she has up yet. Take my word for it, you've got the *wrong* end up, and it's going to get swatted hard when the papers find out what really happened."

Her throat quivered again. "You can't . . . You wouldn't

"Shut up and listen. Gloria Steen was killed in Clarence Cook's apartment. I was there. So were eight or ten other people. Not all of them saw the body, of course, but at least three of us did—and the killer knows it was there, too. She was killed between ten-thirty and eleven. When Cook called you, she had been long dead. I don't know what kind of a hammer he used to pressure you into letting him bring the body here, but you made the worst possible mistake when you agreed. It made you what the lawyers call an accessory after the fact and that's bad. It makes you as guilty as the murderer and carries the same penalty. In Illinois, it means the chair."

She shuddered involuntarily and her hand tightened on the arm of the love-seat, making her knuckles stand out like hard, white buttons.

"But on top of that," I went on remorselessly, "you had to fake a robbery set-up. You had to hand out a corny story to the newspapers. You pulled the wool over the eyes of the dumb cops who made the preliminary investigation. And you just got through signing a statement asking \$100,000 in indemnity from an insurance company. How dumb are you, anyway? Don't you realize you've put yourself right in the middle of the big squeeze? The killer knows you lied. I know you lied. Cook knows you lied, and so do a couple others. You've made yourself a Grade A target for blackmail, and that's just the beginning!"

She closed her eyes and swayed a little, as though getting ready to pull a faint. Busch was sitting on the edge of his chair and his face wore a blend of surprise and embarrassment.

But I kept pounding it into her. "You probably figured the cops were dumb, or that you could dazzle them or pay them off if they asked too many questions. That's the way things are in B-pictures, but they don't always work out that way in life. Sometime today the crime lab is going to get Gloria Steen's stomach contents. They'll make a routine examina-

tion which will go into the records in black-and-white, and it'll show that she couldn't possibly have been killed in the early hours of the morning. They'll find wine in there—cheap, sour wine—and some smart cop is going to tumble to the fact that she didn't drink it here. Once they start scratching their heads, all sorts of questions are going to have to be answered—and you won't be able to answer them. The newspapers are going to start wondering, too, and you ought to know what a picnic they'll have stripping the glamour off of you. You'll be on every front-page from coast-to-coast, just like you are today, but the headlines won't be anything you'll want in your memory book because every muck-raking columnist in the country will be calling you a dope addict, a liar, a thief, a bitchy boss who drove her poor underpaid secretary out into the night, a money-hungry murderess—”

With a faint sigh, she went limp suddenly and began to slide slowly off the love-seat. Busch made a gulping sound and leaped off his chair. All I had to do to catch her was stick out my arms—and I did, automatically, without thinking. She was a light, warm, delicately-scented burden in my hands, and I swung her up and against me, holding her there in an intimate embrace for a moment, intending to shift my grip and ease her lengthwise onto the love-seat.

So there I was, holding her against my chest and looking as flustered as a kid caught pawing around in his big sister's dresser, when the door burst open and Saul Tenner shouted: “There he is, captain—by God, you got here just in time!”

Captain Hara and two plainclothes cops charged into the room.

ELEVEN

“STAND BACK!” Hara barked. “You're under arrest, Guard!”
I got a hand under her legs, leveled her off, and laid her

gently on the love-seat. I straightened and faced him. One of the cops, a smug look on his face, had headed for Busch. Tenner, seeing the closed eyes and limp body of his glamorous revenue-producing client, emitted a wail and began waving his arms. Hara, red-faced and angry, had an arm extended in a Get-him! gesture. The other cop was striding toward me, his gun out, his face set determinedly.

"For chrissake," I said more calmly than I felt, "leave it to a bunch of dumb cops!"

"He's killed her!" Tenner screamed. "Oh, my God! Somebody get a doctor!"

Hara caught the look of disgust on my face and swung toward Tenner. "Shut up!" he barked. Of me, he demanded: "What did you do to her?"

"Not a damned thing!" I snapped. "She fainted. If you dumb jerks will only—"

At that moment Lisa Lincoln opened her eyes and sat up. In a tone as chilly as a Maine breeze, she asked: "What are these people doing in here?"

For a moment, it was so quiet you could almost hear the temperature drop. The two cops froze—and Hara opened and closed his mouth silently. Tenner, sounding somewhat strangled, managed to blurt: "Lisa, you're all right? You're sure you're all right?"

"Of course." I could tell she was fighting to get a grip on herself by the way her fingers were balled into tight, hard fists and by the strained notes in her voice. "Who are these men, Saul?" Some feminine instinct made her inflate the front of her robe slightly, giving her an indignant, outraged—and very sexy—stance.

"They're policemen," Tenner mumbled. "I thought—"

"Get them out of here!" Her voice cracked a little.

"Look, Miss Lincoln," Hara began hoarsely. "I'm Captain Hara of the homicide detail. Mr. Tenner though you were in some danger, but I was coming to see you anyway, so—"

Her eyes widened and began to brim with tears. She clawed a hand toward her lips. "Get out! Get out! I couldn't help what happened! I swear I couldn't! You're trying to

ruin me You're all trying to—" The words choked in her throat and tears ate paths in her make-up. Suddenly she covered her face with her hands and great, shuddering sobs shook her.

I sat down beside her and put an arm around her. She huddled against me, sobbing uncontrollably, and her tears dripped down and splashed against my hand. I met Hara's perplexed frown and pointed at Tenner and the two cops. His frown deepened, but he gruffly told them to beat it. Tenner's face clouded darkly and he looked like he was going to give Hara an argument, then he shrugged and followed the cops out.

I said to Busch: "Make sure they're gone, Ben."

Busch nodded, went to the door, opened it and glanced down the corridor. Closing the door, he said: "They're at the other end."

"What the hell is this all about?" Hara demanded. "Dammit, I thought I made it clear that you weren't to do any private dicking!"

I shook my head urgently and pointed at a chair. Hara glared at me, then at the chair, and sat down. The sobbing redhead had adjusted her curves to my chest and was rubbing her make-up off onto my shirt. I squeezed her in what I hoped was a fatherly manner and said: "Don't be a damned cry-baby, Miss Lincoln. All you'll get is red eyes and a runny nose."

"I'm n-not a c-cry b-baby!"

"Then stop blowing your nose against my shirt. It's getting wet."

She jerked away as though I'd surreptitiously pinched one of her bulges. Fumbling in the pocket of her robe, she found a wisp of tissue and dabbed at her nose and eyes. Her eyes, I noted, were a shimmering green now—and very pretty. "S-sorry!" she whispered, averting her face.

I saw Hara's mouth tighten and I gave him a warning glance. I said carefully. "I didn't plan on calling in the cops. That was Tenner's bright idea. But now that Captain Hara's here, you might as well level with him. He's not a bad guy,

even if he is a cop, and he's in a position to do you a lot of good. I have a hunch he saw the lab report, anyway, so more lies will only make the jam you're in worse. I advise you to make a clean breast of everything—and let the slips show where they may."

She stiffened and her lips trembled and she looked beseechingly at me. "I c-can't!"

"Sure you can," I told her. "There's good stuff in you or you wouldn't be head and shoulders above the crowd. And you're a fighter—or you wouldn't be a star. This is a dirty fight—and it'll take courage—but you can fight dirty too, can't you? Hell, any woman can. They think you're afraid to talk, but, don't forget, I'm on your side. I *know* you didn't kill her. All you have to do is tell the truth and you'll have them on the run." When she didn't answer, I asked: "Want me to tell Hara what really happened?"

She lifted her chin and blinked her damp lashes and nodded.

"Okay, here goes," I said. I turned to Hara. "Who handled the Steen killing last night?"

"Lieutenant Doubleday," Hara said gruffly. "I was taking care of a knifing case out west."

I thought a moment. Doubleday was okay, but somebody had to get it in the neck and my neck was getting tender. Also, Tenner had done his damndest to heave a wrench into things, which made me feel unkindly toward the Ability Agency. They could take their five hundred bucks and stick it. I wanted o-u-t of the whole lousy mess and my best chance was by convincing Hara that I was a bright, cooperative boy who had been done wrong. Keeping that objective in mind, I started in at the beginning and gave Hara all of it. The phony tape recording. The party at Cooksie's. Even the bathroom episode.

I concluded: "And that's the truth and all of the truth, Hara. You can believe it or forget it. But don't expect me to give you a signed affidavit because I just forgot how to write. You'll have to play this by ear."

Hara stared at me so long that I thought maybe he had

had a stroke. Then he transferred his gaze to Lisa Lincoln. As though seared by it, she sucked in her breath and huddled against me. Hara cleared his throat abruptly. "Is that true, Miss Lincoln?" he asked gruffly.

I took her hand and pressed it encouragingly.

"Yes," she whispered. She hesitated, swallowed painfully, then added: "But he didn't tell you . . . all of it."

"Suppose you tell me the rest, then."

She glanced at me. I smiled and held her hand tightly. Her fingers relaxed suddenly—and so did her voice. "It started a couple years ago," she said in the low husky tone which the silver screen had made famous. "You've probably read where I'm a big star and make \$3,500 a week and have all the companies fighting for a chance to make a picture starring me. Well . . . some of it's true, of course, but some of it isn't. When I made my first picture, I had to take whatever contract Metro-Urban offered me. It wasn't a good contract, but I didn't know it then. It was a three year contract, with a sliding scale. The first year, I got \$500 a week; the second year, I got \$750; right now I'm getting \$1,200. That's the truth, and, if you don't believe me, I can show you the contract. It may sound like a lot of money, but it isn't. The agency takes ten percent. I have to pay for voice and dancing lessons, buy publicity pictures, contribute to charity, maintain an apartment and a car, pay doctor and dental bills, and a dozen other things. And if anything is left after all that, the government takes it for taxes. When I think about it, it seems incredible. Back in the days when I made \$60 a week, I actually had more real money in my purse. Now, just because I'm a star, everything costs twenty times as much. Like this suite, for example. Thirty-five dollars a day! I can't afford it, but what would people, what would the papers say if I went to some crummy little hotel?"

"Didn't your last picture gross two million dollars?" Hara asked.

"Sure." Her lips twisted wryly. "Metro-Urban got it; I didn't. If I'd been smart, if I'd had someone to advise me,

I'd have asked for a percentage of my pictures, but, like I said, all I could see was that big \$500 a week and the fact that I'd actually be starring in a picture. But once I signed, I was caught . . . and I've been caught ever since. I've had to sponge off my friends for meals, borrow money from loan sharks—and lately I've even had to rent the clothes I wear. But next year I'll be in line for a new contract, and the Ability agency is going to handle the deal, and Lisa Lincoln is going to collect big dough, if nothing happens." Her jaw tightened as she repeated: "*If nothing happens*. That's my big worry. A star can shoot into the public's fancy, and she can drop dead at the box office overnight, too. It has happened time and time again. Right now, when I'm collecting peanuts, I'm worth millions to Metro-Urban; next year, when I'll be free to stick them for six or seven grand a week, some other girl may have them swallowing their gum—and I'll be on the way out like Davy Crockett."

"Where'd you get a hundred grand worth of jewelry?" Hara demanded.

"Gifts. I couldn't save enough to buy a Mickey Mouse watch on my salary," she said candidly. "Some of the stuff I got from men, but most of it I earned doing small roles at other studios. I couldn't accept a salary from them because of my Metro-Urban contract, but nobody could stop them from giving me nice presents." She smiled briefly. "I made them send me a letter with them, saying they were gifts, otherwise I'd have gone broke trying to pay the income tax."

Hara grunted. "So you're broke. What's that got to do with the killing?"

"I'm getting to that." She stared at her hands a moment. "It's hard to explain. You see, all I am, really, is something which people imagine. Being a star is like being . . . well, like being a dream. Today I'm big box-office. I'm worth money to the studios. But what if something happened which ruined my reputation? I'm supposed to exude sex, but it's nice, clean, parlor-type sex. But what if the papers started calling me a slut, a bedroom pig, an immoral hussy?"

The churches would blackball my pictures. Mothers would start making their kids look at TV instead of Lisa Lincoln. And I wouldn't have a job, either, unless I went back to the nightclub circuit or burlesque. So I'm forced to be careful. Right now it only means bread and butter, but next year it'll mean nuts and cake."

"I still don't—" Hara began impatiently.

"I said it started two years ago," she interrupted. "My first picture was getting good notices and I was working on the second. I got a phonecall one evening. It was a man, a man who said he had some pictures I'd be interested in. I thought he was a crank and I hung up before he finished. The next day I got a picture in the mail. It was a foul, shocking picture, you know the kind, and the girl in it looked like me. He called me again the next day and said he had an assortment of poses. He wanted a hundred dollars a picture—and if I didn't pay, he said he was going to put my name on them and sell them all over the country through saloons and nightclubs and cigar-stores. I told him I didn't have any money, I pleaded with him. Finally, he said he'd sell me all his negatives for a flat \$1,000. Well, I borrowed the money and bought the negatives, and I thought that was that."

"Should have reported it," Hara grumbled.

"This was in Los Angeles," she pointed out. "And what was a thousand dollars when just one of those pictures could have wrecked me forever? I paid, captain—as other stars have. Maybe I shouldn't have, but I was scared, as you would be if you knew your whole future could blow apart at somebody's whim. Anyway, I got the negatives and destroyed them. But that was just the beginning."

"Naturally," Hara said unsympathetically.

"Then about ten months ago, I got another phone call. This time he had some letters. They appeared to be in my handwriting. They were written on the kind of stationery I use. And they were supposed to be to a man, another movie star, and . . . and what they said was . . . horrible! I had met Dixie a few weeks before, and my second picture

showed signs of being a hit—and, well, he wanted \$25,000. I simply couldn't take any chances. I borrowed from the studio, from the agency, from everybody I could—and I got the letters."

"The rotten bastard!" I muttered.

"Yes." She nodded. "But I didn't care, not really. It was tough paying the money back, but it was only money, and the picture was a big smash and Dixie asked me to marry him and—well, I kept thinking about the future and telling myself that he'd leave me alone from then on."

"But he didn't," Hara commented.

"No. He called me in New York two weeks ago and told me that I'd hear from him in Chicago. He knew about my plane, my hotel reservations, everything. And he told me this was the last time I'd ever hear from him and to start scraping together a lot of money. I was frantic. He wouldn't tell me what he had, how much he wanted, or anything, but I knew it would be something terrible. Then"—she shook her head slowly and stared at a wall as though seeing a weird vision there—"then he called me here. And he let me hear a recording he had." She faltered and her voice thinned a little. "It was about Dixie and me. I don't know how he could have made it, but it sounded like Dixie and me talking. Only we never said anything as crude and vile as that. It . . . ridiculed Dixie more than it did me—and that's why I knew I had to buy it, no matter how much he wanted. You see, I love Dixie. I wouldn't have him hurt for anything. Not even for the \$50,000 this . . . this voice said I'd have to pay."

I whistled softly. "Fifty grand?"

"Yes." I felt her shoulders move in a weary little shrug. "I've been trying all week to raise the money. But I wasn't able to. That's what Gloria and I fought about yesterday. I was nervous and on edge, and she kept saying she was going to write a letter to the police, and—and I told her to pack her things and get out. I didn't mean it. She was a real friend, and I knew she was right and meant well, but worrying about the money was driving me crazy."

"She knew all about the racket, then?" I asked.

"Of course. She answered the phone when he called, and she knew I was upset about something, so I had to tell her. Do you think . . . do you think that's why they killed her?"

Hara shrugged and asked: "What time did he call last night?"

"It was a few minutes after one. I was in bed, regretting my fight with Gloria, thinking about Dixie, worrying about the money, wishing Gloria were with me. Then the phone rang. He sounded excited. And he said he had a new proposition. I was to put all my jewelry on the desk in the parlor, leave the corridor door unlocked, and stay in my bedroom until he phoned me. He promised to leave the recording there. Frankly, it looked like a Heaven-sent out for me, so . . . so I did what he told me. I could hear someone moving around in the parlor—it sounded like two people—and for a moment I thought of opening the door and facing him . . . but I was afraid, not for me, for Dixie. He phoned again at 2:45. I can still hear what he said. First he chuckled, then he said: 'Okay, sucker, I left you a present. But keep your mouth shut—or else.' Then he hung up and"—she shuddered—"I opened the door . . . and found her."

"You never actually saw him, of course," Hara said in a disgusted tone.

"No."

"Did he tell you to play it as a robbery?"

"No. One of the policemen suggested it, I think. I was too shocked, too stunned to fully realize what had happened."

"Did he leave the tape?" I put in.

"Yes. It's . . . it's in that desk over there." She pointed a trembling finger. "I haven't played it. I intended to walk down to the lake and throw it in tomorrow."

"You're an actress, Miss Lincoln," Hara said heavily. "You've studied voice and diction and things like that. So you ought to be able to describe this man's voice."

"It was a deep voice, full of evil, very resonant and firm. I always had a mental picture of a large, strong man when

I talked to him." She moved her hands helplessly. "But that's foolish, I know, purely imagination."

Hara said nothing in reply. I looked at Ben Busch. He was slumped in his chair and there was a confused, worried look on his face. I said: "This ought to release Omaha Fidelity from liability, Ben. Suppose you tear up Miss Lincoln's statement and the application for indemnity."

Busch pursed his lips and scowled. "Hell, I'm not sure but what—"

"Under the circumstances, you don't want to file a claim, do you, Miss Lincoln?" I asked.

"I don't know—" She looked at me uncertainly. "They weren't really stolen, were they?"

"No."

"Then . . . then I wouldn't . . . I couldn't file a claim."

Busch, clearly relieved, bent and began looking for the papers in his briefcase. Hara glowered at me and drummed his knuckles on the arm of his chair.

"What a hell of a mess this is!" Hara growled finally.

For once I was in complete agreement with him.

T W E L V E

CAPTAIN HARA, with the deadly deliberateness of a falling barometer, sat brooding for a few minutes and then he laid down the law: Lisa Lincoln was to remain incommunicado in her suite. Ben Busch was to pretend that a formal statement of loss had been filed with Omaha Fidelity. I, being an allergy which he couldn't quite reach to scratch, was to keep my mouth shut and to stay the hell away from police

business—or else. He didn't amplify the "or else". He didn't need to. So saying, he got to his feet and stalked out, taking the roll of tape with him.

Lisa Lincoln, obviously acutely conscious of the fact that her entire future was in the hands of an unsympathetic cop, looked as worn and haggard as a Sunday school picture of the wages of sin. Busch, of course, was dubious about the whole set-up and wore the expression of a man who isn't quite sure whether it's safe to get off the pot or not. As for me, I had an uncomfortable feeling of wasted effort, sort of like a fan dancer who knocks herself out doing a hot strip only to discover that the customers are reacting like wooden Indians. Hara could have given me a pat on the back; instead, he had acted as though I were the biggest pain since Nero gave the hotfoot to Rome.

I adjourned the gathering by saying: "Let's go, Ben."

Busch got up with alacrity, glanced at Lisa Lincoln, lifted an eyebrow at me. I pointed at the door. He grabbed his briefcase and started out. I picked up the other briefcase and said: "Sorry, Miss Lincoln. It had to come out. It looks bad now, but I don't think you'll get hurt much. I'll do what I can, of course."

She looked at me with eyes which were as communicative as a pair of bottle caps. She didn't say anything. I figured that, behind the blankness, emotion was surging, emotion as painful as beng born, and that there wasn't anything I could do or say to help. I got out of there.

Busch wanted reassurance. I gave him very little. Hell, I needed reassurance myself. But I convinced him that he had lost nothing and that, if necessary, he could square himself with the high moguls of Omaha Fidelity by saying that he had been forced to cooperate with the police in an attempt to protect the financial interests of Omaha Fidelity. The words were hot air, but they had a nice rah-rah sound which I thought ought to appeal to any dollar-conscious insurance company. Busch said he was going to go to his office and dictate a complete report for his home office. I assured him that that's exactly what I'd do if I were in his shoes and the

sooner he took care of it the better. I hoped he wouldn't forget to mention that one Carl Guard might be entitled to a few bucks for services rendered.

When I reached my office, the phone was ringing. I picked it up and growled hello. A voice I didn't recognize at first said: "Carl? This is Hank."

"Hank?"

"Yeah, you know, the barber downstairs."

"Oh, sure. Couldn't place your voice, Hank. What's on your mind?"

"Thought you might like to know that a couple big guys were hanging around, asking about you. One of them had a trim and tried to pump me."

"Coppers?" I asked.

"Naw, not cops." He sounded scornful. "Just a couple big guys. Didn't sound like they could be customers, so I figured maybe one of them was somebody's husband." He laughed the way barber's always laugh. "They were in the coffee joint across the street a few minutes ago. Thought you'd want to know."

"Thanks much, Hank. I'll keep an eye out for them."

I hung up and went to the window. The coffee joint needed its windows washed, but I could see a big guy in a sloppy grey suit lounging against the pin-ball machine and watching the street. Another guy was holding down a stool at the counter. While I was staring at them, the one at the window moved his lips and the one at the counter swung around. I got a glimpse of a green necktie and a whitish face. I decided Hank was right. They didn't look like cops. They didn't look like customers. They hardly looked like people. The hell with them.

I went back to my desk and got busy. First, I called the manager of the Blackhawks and asked about Dixie Pelligori's whereabouts. I got the expected runaround, but, by sounding very sincere, I teased out the information that he was still in Monmouth, Illinois, visiting mama. Getting Dixie's mama's address was a cinch. I simply called a pal on the *Trib's* sports desk and promised him a thick slice of

my spleen. He looked it up for me. I called Western Union next and sent a deliberately titillating wire to Dixie, telling him that dire circumstances had banked Lisa Lincoln's fires and that she was badly in need of some attention. I signed my name to it, just in case he wanted to be grateful. Then I phoned Morrie.

"Did Camille Chad call?" I asked.

"Just a minute." I heard a murmur of voices and deduced that he was querying his secretary. "No," he told me. "I just got back from court, but Sarah says there were no calls. I have a client waiting, Carl. I'll call you back in a—"

"Skip it," I told hm. "It's nothing that can't wait. I'll drop in later."

I located the Chad residence in the phone book and dialed the number. A woman's voice, bland as cream, answered. I asked for Camille. The voice informed me that Camille was not at home. I hesitated, then asked if there was any place I could reach her. No, Camille hadn't said where she was going, but, the voice surmised, she was probably working at one of the studios.

"Is this Mrs. Chad?" I asked.

"Why, yes. Who is this?"

"My name is Carl Guard. It's rather important that I talk to Camille as soon as possible. Have you any idea where she may be working?"

"No, I haven't. She had a call early this morning and I believe—"

"A phone call?" I interrupted.

"Yes. She hurried out without even eating breakfast and—"

"Didn't she say where she was going?"

"Let me think . . ." The voice faded and I thought the line had gone dead. Then the voice said: "Oh, I remember. She said something about getting a terrific break—I think that's the word she used—and having to meet a new friend of hers, a man named . . . what did you say your name was?"

"Carl Guard."

"Carl. Yes, that's the name she mentioned. I gathered, from the way she was hurrying, that a wonderful opportunity had presented itself and that she had to meet you somewhere near here and—"

"Mrs. Chad—I"

"Yes?"

"I didn't call your daughter. Are you sure she mentioned the name *Carl*?"

"Why, yes. Of course, it may have been another Carl, but—"

"Thank you, Mrs. Chad."

I hung up, spun the dial viciously, and called the answering service, which I should have done sooner. A Llewellyn George had called twice, leaving his name but no number. Had there been any other calls? There had not. With a mild epithet, I banged the receiver down and pushed the instrument away.

Carl wasn't an uncommon name. But I had taken Camille home at around three in the a.m. and she had been worried and upset. I'd warned her that the police might be around to question her. I'd instructed her to get in touch with Morrie. But she hadn't called Morrie; she'd received a phone call and gone gallivanting off to meet some character who had a job for her. Just like a woman, sinking one moment and sailing the next. A phrase leaped into my mind: *A new friend of hers, a man named . . . Carl*. For a moment, my mind spun dizzily. I *was* a new friend—and my name *was* Carl. Suppose someone had faked a call to her in my name, someone good at imitating voices. It was possible. But why? An answer screamed into my thoughts: *Because she knew the killer*. But she didn't. *Because the killer thought she could finger him*. Possible, I admitted reluctantly, damned possible. But it was all conjecture, all worried-dream stuff. Maybe she *had* gone to see about a job. . .

I stewed for an hour, then called Camille's number again. Her mother's voice was tinged with faint irritation, as though I'd interrupted her at a crucial point in the pruning of some petunias. She hadn't heard from Camille and she didn't ex-

pect to hear from her prior to dinner-time. What the hell, I thought, her mother isn't worried, so why should you be? Mothers are supposed to be able to sense danger. The kid's stage-struck. She's probably sitting in some stinking studio and waiting for a chance to strut her stuff. . . .

I locked the office and went downstairs. When I reached the street, I paused to light a cigarette. A guy in a grey suit was standing in front of the drugstore across the street and picking his nose thoughtfully while staring innocently toward me. As I flicked away the match, I spotted Green Tie. He was loitering in front of the P & E cafeteria and staring intently at the sky as though seeking the coordinates of heaven. Deliberately, I walked to the corner, crossed the street, and passed in front of the drugstore. In the middle of the next block I paused to study the heterogeneous exhibits in a pawnshop window. Grey Suit was behind me, deeply absorbed in the fly-specked pages of an open Bible in the Mission two doors down. I turned, sauntered to the curb, spat into the street. The manoeuvre gave me a quick peek at the other side of Clark. Green Tie was there—and strolling casually along in the same direction I was.

I continued to the corner, then crossed directly toward Green Tie. He blinked and missed a step but kept going southward. I grinned inwardly and headed back the way I had come. When I reached Chicago Avenue again I stepped into the corner eatery and ordered a corned beef on rye. I ate slowly, casually turning on the stool to look out the window. Green Tie wasn't visible, but Grey Suit was in front of the drugstore again. They were on my tail, no doubt about it.

I finished the sandwich and contributed a dime to the pay phone on the rear wall. Captain Hara sounded brusque and impatient. "This is Guard," I said shortly. "Have you got a tail on me?"

"Don't be a damned fool," he snapped. "I've got better use for my men than to—" He stopped abruptly. "You're sure somebody's on you?"

"Yeah, I'm going to shake them. Thought I'd let you know."

He started firing questions, but I hung up. When I reached the street, Green Tie was back on the job. I lit a cigarette, then walked briskly east to Michigan Avenue, turned north, continued to Walton Street, then went west. Walton Street is a long unbroken block and it suited my purposes perfectly. I stopped in front of Mollie Lewis' corset shop long enough for them to close in, then I went west a couple more doors and entered the House of Eng. A couple Chinese waiters in droopy mandarin jackets eyed me suspiciously, but I strode the length of the diningroom and pushed through the door which led to the kitchen. A sleepy-eyed cook was boning chicken with a cleaver and a stupid-looking helper was unpacking live lobsters from a barrel. I breezed past them, treating the lobster with respect, and headed for the alley entrance. As soon as I reached the alley, I trotted westward, looking for an unlocked gate. I found one, went through it, and reached Oak Street without incident. Grey Suit, I figured, would wait outside the chop suey joint for a couple minutes, then start to wonder if he'd been had and go in to check. That's when he'd begin to wish he'd learned Chinese. Green Tie, on the other hand, would have a cute dilemma to occupy his braincells. If he was on the ball, he'd realize that I might be onto them and that I could try to duck out the rear. But the alley ran east and west and its nearest entrance was back on Michigan Avenue. He could take a chance on losing me, or he could hotfoot it back to Michigan Avenue, which was quite a trek, where he'd be out of sight and contact with his partner. I figured he'd suspect the worst and head for the alley.

I walked rapidly east on Oak to Michigan, rounded the corner, and took a quick peek south. I'd figured right. Green Tie was standing at the mouth of the alley and frowning into it like a cat which suspects vaguely that the mouse has scampered elsewhere. I could have ducked back out of sight and given them both a cold trail, but I was curious—and Green Tie looked more brawny than brainy. So I stood in

plain view and eyed approvingly a very low-cut beaded gown in the window of Weathered's dress shop. When I peeked at Green Tie again, he had his hands on his hips like a woman building up to an explosion of rage and was still staring pessimistically into the alley. Grey Suit, I realized, might be asking questions by now, might reach the alley at any moment and reestablish contact. So, pretending interest in the shop windows, I started toward Green Tie. I reached Anna's flower shop before I felt him jerk to attention. I studied a clever arrangement of pink roses for a moment, then gave him my back and headed toward Oak Street again.

A platinum blonde in a snug red blouse and a tight yellow skirt came out of Oak and turned north on Michigan. I fell into step behind her, my eyes making a pleasurable and incredulous excursion of her rhythmic charms, and I followed her curves as far as Division street. At Division I regretfully abandoned the synthetic blonde and turned west. Green Tie was right behind me, his eyes trying to ogle the departing blonde and still keep track of me. Grey Suit was nowhere in sight. I quickened my pace a little until I reached Slim Jim's beer parlor. When I entered, a couple kids were perched on stools near the front, and Jimmy Cass, the owner, was behind the bar opening a bottle of Schlitz. I pointed at the far end of the bar and headed for it. Cass lifted an eyebrow and moved toward the rear, bringing the uncapped bottle with him.

"Anybody in back?" I asked hurriedly.

"No." He grinned. "Why?"

"A guy's coming in after me," I told him. "Big guy. Green tie. Better put a couple nickels in the juke."

"Right." Cass wiped the grin off his face and nodded. "Need any help?"

"Just see that we aren't disturbed." I reached over the bar and relieved his hand of the bottle of beer. Then I strode toward the door at the rear. Green Tie, I knew, would be worrying about a possible trick and would try to keep me in sight. To do that he had to follow me in. He did. I was a

step short of the rear room when I heard the muted hiss of the front door opening. I held the bottle in front of me, pushed through the door and flattened myself against the wall. I'd done Jimmy Cass a favor once by getting an over-greedy dame off his neck and I knew he'd cooperate. He did. The jukebox burst into raucous sound a second or two before the door began to open.

I clamped a thumb over the neck of the bottle and shook it violently while I waited. He opened the door, stuck his head in, and got a gusher of beer right between the eyes. I grabbed the green tie, pulled him into the room, and kicked the door shut. Then I clouted him across the ear with the bottle. He screamed like a soprano landing in cold water, but the jukebox blared merrily on, drowning out his cry of pain with an equally painful love call. Blinded, he began punching wildly. I clouted him again, then dropped the bottle and sank a fist into his gut. It was like punching a brick wall. He shook his head like a lion at bay, unleashed a curse, and jabbed wildly with his right. I ducked, came up under his arm, caught his elbow with both hands, and levered him over my shoulder. He crashed into a wall, then fell to the floor like a bag of sand. I watched him narrowly. Something about the way he laid seemed phony. I picked up the bottle, stepped close, and prodded his chest with my left hand. He jerked his eyes open and reached for me. I brought the bottle down on his head—hard. He sighed like a spent woman and collapsed.

I went through his pockets methodically. Besides the inevitable pack of cigarettes, keys and small change, there were a few crumpled bits of paper in a side pocket and a worn wallet. He carried no weapon. Evidently he hadn't planned on running into any rough stuff. I checked the wallet first. In money there was a crisp double-sawbuck and three ones. A driver's license identified him as Willard Motts, 6911 Davis Street, Skokie. Besides the license there was a snapshot in a kodapak flap. The edges of the print were white and crisp, as though it had been acquired recently. The girl in the snapshot had on a peasant-type skirt

and a gaudy blouse. There was a ribbon in her hair and a yes in her eyes. She looked vaguely familiar. The bare-chested guy, of course, was Willard Motts, complete with grin, fishing rod, and what looked like a string of fair-sized bass. But what interested me particularly was the car in the background. The picture had been taken with a cheap camera and poor depth of field had rendered things slightly out of focus, but it was a station wagon, a big one, and it looked suspiciously like a Chrysler. I studied the hub caps and radiator. It sure as hell looked like a Chrysler.

I tucked the snapshot into my shirt pocket and tossed the wallet onto the floor. I began smoothing out the bits of paper. Each bore a scrawled notation. The first I recognized immediately; it was the address of my office. The second was a telephone number. I stared at it stupidly for a moment. It was Camille's number. I had called it twice. . . .

The jukebox was blaring loudly—but not as loudly as the warning which began to scream across the vast, vacant reaches of my brain. I glared at Motts. He was crumpled up like an old napkin and wouldn't be talking for quite awhile.

I ran for the door.

THIRTEEN

I HEADED FOR Michigan Avenue and hastened back to Oak. Grey Suit, easily visible from a block away, was standing on the corner of Michigan and Walton, looking as harried as a female rabbit. I ducked across the street when the lights changed and went through the Drake Hotel to Walton

Street. Grey Suit, after a final frustrated look up and down the busy boulevard, dragged his feet toward Mrs. Snyder's candy shop. He went in and proceeded toward the public phone at the rear. He made two calls, neither of which seemed to improve his humor. When he came out, he strode south on Michigan. I swung along behind him.

At Chicago Avenue, he hesitated, then turned west. I crossed to the other side of the street. He quickened his pace a little. Thinking he was headed for Clark Street and intended to cool his heels outside my office until he either spotted me or heard from his pal, I gave him a long lead and paused to light a cigarette. As a result, I nearly lost him. He suddenly ducked into the subway entrance at State Street and disappeared from sight. Cursing, I ran for the the other entrance and flung myself down the stairs. Northbound or southbound? I gambled on north and took the remaining stairs three at a time. The train platform was thronged and people were jostling their way into the open doors of an Evanston Express. I stood on tiptoe and looked frantically over the milling heads. Grey Suit was not in sight. I flipped a mental coin and boarded the nearest coach. The train started with a lurch which threw me against the fleshy arms of a turtle-faced matron in a pink halter dress. I apologized brusquely, squeezed past two shopping bags and a skinny child, and peered through the window at the southbound platform. Grey Suit wasn't on it. I located him, finally, two coaches ahead, hanging onto a strap in front of a girl in a red-feathered hat. I found a discreet nook behind a buxom brunette with hairy arms and glued my eyes to the shoulders of the grey suit.

The crowd thinned out at Howard Street and Grey Suit moved to a seat at the center of the car. I maneuvered cautiously until I was near an exit but partially concealed by a rider's newspaper. Apparently Grey Suit was headed for Evanston. Motts lived in Skokie. Skokie was near Evanston. Two plus two should equal four, but I kept getting zero. At the Church Street stop, Grey Suit got to his feet and headed for the door. So did I. Like a man with weighty things on his

mind, he strode into the station and dropped two nickels into a pay phone. The conversation was brief. He pronged the receiver with a show of irritation and moved purposefully toward the street. A lone cab was parked near the corner. Grey Suit climbed into it. The cab ground its gears tauntingly and pulled away from the curb, leaving me cursing impotently.

The cab might or might not return to the corner. In any event, I was in no mood to stand around and see. I went into the station and glared at the phone. There was no way of tracing the call. His fingerprints were on the receiver, of course, but a lot of damned good they were to me. I snapped my fingers. He'd deposited two nickels. A dime bought local service only, so he hadn't checked with anyone in Chicago. I picked up the suburban directory and stared at it helplessly. Who lived in Evanston? Thousands of people . . . and Grey Suit, maybe. I thought about Grey Suit. A goon type. Definitely a goon type. Who in Evanston would have use for a goon type? A boss goon, natch. So who was a boss goon? This stopped me. I thought about Willard Motts. Another goon type. Motts lived in Skokie. I thumbed through the directory and located his name. The address checked. I bet fifteen cents by dropping three nickels into the slot and dialing his number.

A nervous female voice answered: "Hello, hello?"

Making my voice deliberately brusque, I asked: "Where the hell is Willie?"

A startled, half-laughing, half-choking sound came over the wire. "Ain't he with you?"

"You think I'm calling because I haven't got anything better to do?" I demanded, edging the question with sarcasm. "The jerk hasn't showed."

"He said he was going straight to the studio."

"Here or in Chi?"

The voice trembled. "Isn't this Georgie?"

"Of course it's Georgie," I said. "Snap out of it, honey, this is important. The boss wants him right away. Where the devil is he?"

There was a silence for a moment, then a high, nerve-wracking laugh rasped my ear. The receiver clicked. The line was dead.

I said something one-syllabled and pronged the receiver. Obviously, I'd bollixed the pitch someplace, but at least I'd learned that Willie was connected with some kind of a studio. Mentioning Chi had been a mistake, so it was probably an independent studio. And Georgie must be the boss. I'd tripped myself up good. But I had a lead. I went through the classified section of the directory carefully, looking for likely-sounding studio organizations. Omitting photographers, there weren't many. I boiled the possibilities down to five and began calling them, asking if Willie Motts was around. My third call was to the Avalon Independent Productions Studios on Dempster Street—and it hit the bell. When I asked for Willie Motts, a hoarse voice said: "Nah, he ain't here. Who wants him?"

"When'll he be in?"

"Tomorrow, maybe. Gimme your name and I'll—"

"Tell him Sullivan called."

"Sullivan?"

"Yeah, Jake Sullivan." I hung up.

A cab came angling toward the curb in front of the station. I eyed it incredulously, then ran out, waved to the driver, and hopped in. The hackie slapped the flag down.

"Where to, mister?"

"Same place you took the other guy," I told him.

"Huh?" He turned a scarred chin toward me. "What other guy?"

"The one in the grey suit. You picked him up here a few minutes ago. I've got a fin which says you can't remember where you took him."

"You a cop?"

"Would a cop throw you a fin?" I countered.

"I ain't seen it yet."

"I could tell you to take me out to the Avalon studios on Dempster and give you a big six bits for the ride."

"Sure." He shrugged and got the cab rolling. "But you wouldn't catch up with him if you did, mister."

"Isn't that where you took him?"

He grinned at me in the rear view mirror. "We made a stop there."

"Where'd you take him?"

"Suppose you let me see that fin, mister."

I floated the bill over the back of his seat. He caught it, gave it a glance, and tucked it into his shirt pocket.

"Well, it's like this," the hackie began in a pleased tone. "He tells me to take him out to Avalon, like you guessed, but when I pull up in front of the building a guy comes running out. I already had the meter off and he had his dough out, but this other guy wants him to go out to Davis Street and see a dame named Marie. This Marie was in trouble or something, I gathered, because the guy got back in and told me to drive like hell to Davis."

"Davis Street, Skokie?" I asked.

"Yeah." The hackie lifted an eyebrow. "You know this Marie?"

"A doll," I told him. "Puts up a wonderful front."

He snorted. "You got the wrong number, mister. This Marie comes running out when we stop, and you could spread her under a carpet without hardly making no bulge at all. Skinny little thing, you know, all legs and arms. Laughing like crazy, too. I figured she'd been hitting a bottle kinda hard."

"Is that where you dropped him?"

"Yeah. He grabbed her and went into the house with her. I hope you realize I'm entitled to a fare besides this fin."

"Sure," I agreed. "Roll past the house sort of easy, will you?"

It was a small red-brick cigar-box with a blue roof and a tiny green lawn bisected by a narrow concrete walk. The hackie rolled the cab past it slowly and came to a halt at the next corner. I tossed him two bucks to cover the meter and got out. I strolled back toward 6911. I was half-way there when an engine roared and a station-wagon began to

back out of the driveway. Instinctively, I swung up the next sidewalk, mounted the porch, and rang the doorbell. Fortunately, no one was home. By turning cautiously, I wangled a glimpse of the station-wagon. It was a big Chrysler, the same model Berta Ryerson had renegged on, and it carried large-size cream-and-green Wisconsin plates. Grey Suit was behind the wheel. He appeared to be alone. I waited until it was pointed down the street, then I feigned disappointment by shaking my head and descended to the sidewalk. The rear plates of the Chrysler were muddied. Maybe it was a coinky-dink; maybe they were that way on purpose. I'd have laid eight-to-five on the latter. I strolled slowly toward the red-brick cigar-box.

A large picture window exposed a portion of the living-room. No lights were visible. I walked past the house and glanced toward the rear. There was a small garage, a breezeway, and, beyond that, a wedge of backyard which featured a white clothesline to which was pinned an assortment of pastel-shaded feminine garments. The doors of a one-car garage stood open, revealing a clutter of gardening equipment.

I continued to the corner, turned, came back. A vague uneasiness was flooding through me. It wasn't anything I could put a finger on, except the hackie's story of a drunken woman didn't jibe with the unlighted house, the silent house, the house from which Grey Suit had exited so hurriedly. According to the hackie, she had been laughing like crazy. A woman who has a laughing jag on usually wants bright lights, music, company. Unless she has passed out, of course.

I went up the narrow sidewalk and pressed my thumb against the ivory button of the doorbell. Somewhere inside the house a chime sounded a double note. I waited, then pressed the bell again. The chime played its simple melody again, sounding rather tired and hopeless. I tried the door. It was unlocked. I stepped in and closed the door quietly behind me.

A glass ashtray lay on the floor in front of an upholstered

chair, its former cargo of dead butts strewn across the dark green carpet. An open pack of Marlboro cigarettes was on a coffee-table, with part of its contents poking out, looking as though the pack had been flung there in either haste or carelessness. A cushion of the davenport had a fresh, sunken look, as though someone had sat there recently. I sniffed the air delicately. A tomatoey scent hung in the still air. I could hear nothing except the heavy beating of my own heart.

I crossed the livingroom and entered a large kitchen. The sink was piled high with soiled dishes. Several pots and frying pans littered the stove, all badly in need of polishing. A plate strewn with remnants of spaghetti sat on a chrome-trimmed table. Beside the plate, there was a soiled fork, a butt-piled ashtray, and a cup of brackish brew. I dipped a finger into the cup. Its contents were still warm. I moved to the stove and touched the pots and pans gingerly. One of them was quite warm. I lifted its lid. Spaghetti. Frowning, I turned back to the table and studied the ashtray. Most of the butts were Marlboros, each with a red lipstick stain on its tip. One was a Camel. It had been punched down into the center of the mess, as though strong fingers had ground it out deliberately and with decision. There was no lipstick on it. I noticed that the back door was open. No one was in the yard.

I retraced my steps back to the livingroom and turned toward what obviously was a bedroom. It was a man's room, decorated with hunting prints, true crime magazines and old neckties. The narrow bed was unmade, its sheets twisted and soiled. The room stank faintly of stale sweat and half-consumed cigars. A bathroom came next, tenanted with the standard equipment, two toothbrushes in a plastic rack, a pink plastic cup, and the inevitable mark of a woman's presence: an assortment of recently rinsed hosiery dangling from a towel bar. A faucet of the washbasin was dripping. I tightened it gently. The drip ceased.

I found her in the second bedroom. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, eyes staring from a thin white face like two

brown buttons floating on a puff of whipped cream. She wore nothing except a pale, frilly, pink pantie, hardly substantial enough to stifle a good sneeze. The hackie, I saw, had been wrong. Her curves were small, almost virginal, but she was definitely a girl; put them all together, sprinkle them with a good cologne, and bake them in a sizzling sun until brown—and she'd be a cookie tasty enough to tempt any man's appetite.

My voice jarred the silence: "Marie?" I asked.

She trembled slightly but went on staring at the wall beyond my head. There was a faint smile on her lips, as though a pleasant memory was flickering through her thoughts.

I asked, a little louder: "Marie?"

She trembled again and her tongue slowly moistened her lips. Then I saw the needle. It lay on a nightstand beside the bed, a thin shiny nickel instrument with a short, gleaming tip. A square of creased paper was on the floor. I picked up the paper, moistened a finger, and touched it to the few crumbs of fine whitish power which still clung to the creases. I tasted my fingertip. Heroin, I decided. A mainliner, and doped to the gills.

I was standing there, eyeing her dubiously and still holding the paper, when she laughed throatily, stood up, and came across the room like a sleepwalker, eyes half-closed and slim arms tentatively stretched toward me. I froze. She touched my face with her fingers, then slid them behind my neck and pressed her body against me.

"Georgie," she whispered. "Oh, Georgie!"

I remained rigid, but she stood on her toes and pushed her face into mine. It was like kissing a volcano, and, for a moment, I felt the lava of desire rising within me. I grabbed her shoulders and thrust her away, thinking, "What a good boy am I."

"Love me, Georgie!" she moaned. "Hurry, darling, while I'm sailing!"

"Marie!" I shook her. "Listen, Marie!"

A faint light went on behind her eyes as though a switch

had been flicked. "What's the matter?" she whimpered. "Where's Georgie?"

"He told me to find out where the girl is. Where is she, Marie? Where did they take her?"

"Girl? Girl" Her eyes blinked. "I'm a girl."

There was no doubt about that. The way she was twitching her lips and her hips, she'd absorb sex like a Kansas farm soaking up rain. Ever notice how breaks always occur at the wrong time? Giving temptation a strong push to the rear, I said: "Sure, Marie, you're a wonderful girl. But it's too hot for that stuff now. Anyway, Georgie has to have the girl. He needs her at the studio. Where did they take her, Marie?"

A giggle began deep in her throat and bubbled toward her lips, as, with a lithe wriggle, she escaped my hands and flung her arms about my neck again. I tried to push her away, tried to avoid the warm curves which were molding themselves against me. It was like trying to avoid the heat of a humid summer night. With a sigh, she found my lips.

The kiss seemed to last forever.

Behind me, a harsh voice said: "Well, for crissake—I"

I sensed quick movement, tried to whirl—and couldn't. Clutching her naked body and intensely conscious of the arms which locked my head and the mouth which burned against mine, I fell slowly forward into a deep black box....

FOURTEEN

SOMEONE was sobbing.

The sound pierced the thick murkiness of my mind like lazy fingers thrusting their way through layers of mud. I

lay still, feeling the pain throb dully in my head and neck and wondering vaguely where I was, whether I was alive, and, if so, why. The sobbing stopped suddenly and a hand touched my face. It startled me, so that, involuntarily, I cringed away and sucked in my breath sharply.

"Carl—oh, Carl!"

Though whispered, it sounded like a frantic cry in the darkness. My first thought was *Marie*—and, somewhat guiltily, I turned my face away. The hand sought my face again and fondled my cheek. I thought groggily: *No, not Marie. She wouldn't know my name.* The hand was cool, gentle, understanding. Memory flooded me suddenly and I tried to sit up. Instantly, something tightened cruelly on my arm and jerked me back. I cursed softly, and, with considerably more caution, tried to move my legs. My ankles were tied tightly together.

"Can you hear me, Carl?"

I licked my lips. "Yeah." It sounded like a harsh croak.

"Are you all right?"

I stared in the direction of the whisper. "Yeah."

"Thank God!"

Realization hit me. I groaned. "Camille—is it you, Camille?"

"Yes."

I took a deep, painful breath. "Where are we?"

"Upstairs. They brought you here a couple hours ago." A note of hysteria tinged her voice. "I thought . . . I thought you were dead!"

I tried to keep my voice calm. "Upstairs where?"

"The studio. The Avalon Productions, it's called. They . . . I've been here all day. Didn't you—"

"It's dark in here, isn't it?" I interrupted.

"Yes. It's late, I guess. Why?"

"I thought I might be blind," I admitted. "My ankles and arms are tied. Can you reach my arms?"

"No. I've been trying, but I'm on a cot and my legs and one wrist are handcuffed to the frame. What . . . what do you think is going to happen?"

I shrugged—and immediately wished I hadn't. A sharp pain jolted into my neck. I cursed silently and tried to relieve some of the strain on my arms. Aloud I said: "I don't know. What am I anchored to? Any idea?"

"The leg of the cot, I think. Carl, I'm scared!"

"That makes two of us." By straining my arms backward and rolling on my right side, I could touch the edge of the cot with my shoulder. While I was trying to visualize the situation, her fingers trailed across my cheek and touched my lips. Impulsively, I kissed them. "Listen, Camille," I said softly. "What's on the other side of the cot?"

"A wall."

"Where's the door?"

"Five or six feet toward the right. There's a chair at the other end of the cot." The hysterical note was in her voice again. "And there's a picture on the wall. It's a horrible bright blue, with a skinny Indian sitting on a tired horse. I think its called *The End of the Trail*—"

"Don't Camille. Get a grip on yourself. If they planned to kill us, we'd be dead by now." I kissed her fingertips again.

"Sorry." She sounded contrite. "I'm . . . just scared."

"I know. Roll as close to the wall as you can, then lie still for awhile. I want to try something."

The cot squeaked and bumped as she worked her way across it, and I heard the faint clink of a metal chain touching concrete. I wedged my shoulder against the cot, strained with my back and hips, succeeded in lifting it a few inches. Pain flamed through me and sweat poured down my face. I felt the wire which bound my arms gradually slide down the metal leg of the cot. Exhaustion and pain defeated me. I collapsed—and the cot clumped back on to the floor. I bit my lips to stifle the sob which rattled in my throat.

"Wait, Carl." The cot moved away from the wall and bumped me. I inched away from it. It bumped me again. "Now try, Carl."

I got my shoulder under the edge of the cot again. As I strained upward, she rolled far to the other edge, adding

leverage with her weight. The leg of the cot rose off the floor and I felt the wire slip down in an eternity of agony—then come free. As I rolled away, the cot banged the floor violently. I laid still, gasping for breath, praying no one except us had heard.

“Carl?”

Her whisper was a frightened whimper. I got to my feet, hopped to the cot, flopped heavily down beside her. “That’s round one,” I told her. “Now see if you can break this wire. Keep twisting it, it ought to break.”

“What . . . if it does break? We’ll still never get out!”

“Just twist it!” I said impatiently. “We’re not quitters, are we?”

“No, but—”

“Then twist, damn it!”

Her hand found the wire and I felt her fingers search for a grip. The wire tightened suddenly, cutting into my flesh, and pain stabbed the length of my arms. “Like that?”

“Yeah.” I bit the greasy fabric of the thin mattress for a moment, trying to smother the sharp pains. “Tell me what happened this morning,” I gritted. “Who called you? Who brought you here?”

She was silent a moment, then, in a small voice, she said: “A man phoned me this morning. He . . . he sounded like you. He said he’d talked to one of the agencies and located a job at one of the studios for me. I was half-asleep, and he sounded like you, and—well, I guess I didn’t think. He said the studio was in the middle of a commercial film and the girl with the leading role had a bad cold and they had to have someone right away. It sounded like a real break. So—”

“Keep twisting.”

“Sorry.” Her fingers worked at the wire. “I promised to meet him in front of the North Park Hotel. When I got there, two men were standing on the corner and one of them said you’d been delayed but that he was from the agency and would take me to the studio. I was nervous and excited, I guess, and he had a card with the Ability agency’s name on it, so I got into his car with him. He kept talking

about the big part he had for me and the wonderful opportunity it was, and things like that, and I didn't even begin to get suspicious . . . until later."

"Did he give you a name?"

"He said his name was Ajax. Ben Ajax. The card had his name—"

"I'll be damned. Lanky, curly-haired guy with a sad smile?" I asked.

"Yes. He said he was an executive at Ability and—"

"He is. Keep twisting that wire, kiddo. He handles publicity. He brought you straight here?"

"Yes. He introduced me to a grey-haired man whom he called Georgie, then he left. That's when I began to get suspicious."

"Why?"

"Well, maybe I haven't had much experience as an actress, but I've read for a few parts and I know a little bit about how commercial and TV films are shot. There was just George and I there. No cameramen, no electricians, nobody. And he didn't seem to care what I was wearing or how my makeup looked or anything like that. Gosh, even I knew that that was screwy! Then he started telling me about how important the sound track was and that he wanted me to read some lines from a script he had. It was just typewritten on regular letter paper, not like a real script at all. He told me to pretend I was a famous star, someone like Lana Turner or Bette Davis, and to try to get some real emotion into the lines—"

A wire snapped. My wrists jerked apart several inches, but I couldn't free them. "Good, good," I murmured. "There's another wire, Camille. See if you can locate it. And keep talking."

"Well, I read through them, like he told me to, with him supplying the connecting dialogue, but it didn't make much sense. It was all about how desperately I needed money. I told him it sounded dopey, but he said it was an emotional scene from a thriller they were making and that the whole

climax hinged on it. So I read it again, trying to make it sound like Bette Davis. It still didn't jell."

She was silent a moment.

"Go on, Camille," I urged. "Keep talking. Don't skip anything."

"It's kind of mixed up. I was nervous and after a while he told me to forget the script and just think about the dark room at Cooksie's apartment and how Gloria Steen had been killed, and then to close my eyes and pretend that I was Lisa Lincoln being questioned by a police officer. He made his voice gruff and I closed my eyes and—" Her voice trembled and stopped.

"Easy, Camille, easy. What happened?"

"He started firing questions at me. It wasn't hard for me to mimic Lisa Lincoln, but . . . some of the questions started me wondering. It was almost as if he had been there, had seen Gloria murdered! And . . . and then I peeked."

"You what?" I ejaculated.

"Peeked. Opened my eyes a little. There was a horrible, intent look on his face, and I noticed, sort of half-consciously, that something was different. It took a while for me to figure out what it was. Then I saw the tiny red light. It hadn't been on at first. I realized that he'd been recording everything—I"

The second wire snapped. My hands were free. I tore the loops of wire from my wrists, then turned and felt in the darkness for her. She sighed as my hands found her and her body strained toward me. I bent, holding her tightly for a moment, and kissed her lips. Then I said: "I've got to get my legs loose. You peeked, you realized he was making a recording—and then what?"

"I blundered, I guess. I'd been trying hard to emote like Lisa Lincoln, and I'd been answering his questions like a moll in a second-rate thriller—and suddenly it dawned on me that . . . that I was talking about a *real* murder, that he was trying to make it sound as though Lisa Lincoln had

really been there . . . you know, when Gloria was killed. And I refused to continue."

"That was dumb," I commented. I had found the ends of the wire which bound my ankles. My fingers, stiff and painful, were working at them.

"Sure, but . . . well, I was getting panicky. He seemed to know all about what had happened, almost as if he had been there, and I suddenly realized that some of his questions had really been aimed at me, as though he were trying to find out how much I knew."

"He was," I told her. "He thought you had seen something."

"But I didn't! You know I didn't, Carl."

"You may have, without realizing it. Who was he trying to tie in, Ajax or Lisa Lincoln?"

"Both of them, I think."

"What did he say when you refused?"

"He became very angry. He . . . he hit me. I screamed and tried to get away from him, and he grabbed my throat . . . and I thought he was going to strangle me. Like . . . like Gloria. I guess I fainted, because the next thing I knew I was in here."

My legs struggled free from the loops of wire. With a sigh, I flung the wire into the darkness and laid back on the cot for a moment. Her hand found mine and squeezed it tightly. Once again I felt tempted, but there wasn't time. Remember what I said about the breaks? I sat up reluctantly and smoothed my hand along her arm. Her wrist was clamped tightly by a steel handcuff, the short chain of which led to another cuff fastened to a rounded iron bar. The bar was a solid part of the cot. I grunted, moved to the foot of the cot, and slid a hand along the slim curves of her legs. Her ankles were crossed and wired tightly together, the wire anchored to another iron bar with a second handcuff. I could free her legs by working at the wire, but it would take time—and she'd still be fastened to the cot by the handcuff. And time was of the essence.

I got up and moved cautiously in the direction of the

door. It was a solid panel and locked. I leaned an ear against it and heard nothing. I said: "Is there a window, Camille?"

"Yes. . . ."

"Where?"

"To your right, along the wall."

I groped around until I found the wall. My hands tangled with a heavy drape. I parted it, studied the window with my hands, and unlatched it. It rose grudgingly, but it rose. I leaned out.

"Don't leave me, Carl!" she cried plaintively. "Don't leave me here alone!"

I didn't answer. There was a sheer drop of at least thirty feet to a concrete loading platform. No ledges, no fire escape, no nearby trees. Beyond the platform, a single yellowish bulb glowed dimly, throwing into stark relief the bulk of another squat building. I stared at it hopelessly. Its windows were all dark and at least fifty feet away. Given a cable tied to the moon, I might be able to make it. I leaned farther out and studied the building I was in. It was a long structure, and, at one end, several thin slivers of light were visible. They were downstairs, probably deciding what to do with us. Again, I was acutely conscious of the flight of time . . . I had to do something. And I had to do it fast.

Something fluttered in the darkness. As I stared in the direction of the sound, a thin dark line gradually became visible. There was another flutter, then a dark shape sped up into the night. I followed the dark line with my eyes, hardly daring to believe that it existed, until I located the greyish bulge of an insulator protruding from the side of the building. There were three of them. Power lines, probably. I traced them in the other direction until my eyes lost them in the shadows of the other building. Could I reach them? And if I did, would they support me?

I moved cautiously back to the cot.

"You aren't going to leave me, are you, Carl?" she whispered.

"Listen, Camille." I bent and cradled her face with my hands. "They're downstairs. They may come up here to

check on us at any minute. There's a power line outside the window. I think I can reach it. If I can, I'm going to try to get to the next building. But I'll come back for you. No matter what happens, I'll come back."

Her arm encircled my neck and pulled my head down. Her kiss was vibrant with fear and need and promise. I put my arms around her and held her tightly. She was trembling. Her lips released mine suddenly and she whispered against my cheek: "All right, darling. Be careful."

"Of course." I kissed her forehead lightly and rumbled her hair. "I'll need your help, Camille. It's about fifty feet to the next building, I think. I don't know how long it'll take me. I'll whistle softly when I get there. If they come before I whistle, let out a few loud yips. I don't want to get plugged like a clay pigeon."

"I'll scream. I'll stop them some way."

"Good. Stiff upper lip, honey. I'll be back."

I climbed onto the sill and leaned out as far as possible, groping with one hand. The darkness was deceptive. My fingers clawed thin air and I nearly lost my balance. I thought of the concrete below, and my stomach moved sickeningly. I steadied myself, clinging to the window frame with my fingernails, and extended my arm again. The power line was inches away. I was going to have to lunge for it. The suddenness of my weight upon it might rip the insulator free, and I'd be plunging through space with a deadly live wire between my fingers. I tried not to think of the possible consequences. I fastened my eyes on the black line, aimed inches above it, then kicked away from the window sill.

For an agonizing instant, I seemed to float in a voidless space—and then one hand was clutching the line. I swung, grabbed it with my other hand, and heard the straining groan of the insulator. For a long moment, I dangled helplessly, hardly daring to breathe. The line steadied. My arms were beginning to ache. I reminded myself that I was getting too old for fancy acrobatics, and, as gently as possible, I shifted a hand along the line. The insulator groaned a mild

complaint. Grimly, I shifted my other hand. The wire seemed to be stretching. With painful urgency, I hauled myself ahead five or six feet.

I was midway between the buildings when, with a sudden screech, the insulator pulled loose. For an instant I hung motionless in space, then I felt my body arc downward. Remember the old wheeze about seeing your past flash before your eyes? It's crap. All that flashed through my mind was a line I'd gleaned from a wise-cracking columnist a long time ago: *Girls who are good for nothing are seldom bad for nothing.* And, as the wire snapped free at the other end and I swung down, down, clutching the taut, deadly wire, I suddenly knew who was the root of all the evil. . . .

FIFTEEN

THE WIRE swung me pendulum-wise smack into the center of a huge multi-paned window. I landed violently inside the other building amid a rattle of falling glass and the protest of splintering wood. Pain stabbed the length of my leg and I tasted blood on my lips. Instinctively, I shielded my head and rolled. The free end of the power line whipped about me like an angered snake, sending showers of spitting sparks between hooded shapes around me. As it writhed away, I clutched the leg of a workbench and dragged myself toward safety. A stench of molten metal and smoldering wood was cloying the air. I got to my knees, scrambled away from the deadly voltage.

A scream rose in the night—then silence.

I found a door and plunged through it. I tripped, nearly fell, and ran recklessly toward the front of the building. The square shapes of desks loomed in front of me. I staggered toward them, clutched a phone, spun its dial frantically.

A lazy female voice droned: "Op-er-a-tor. . . ."

"Chicago police headquarters," I gasped. "Hurry!"

"Your number, please. . . .?"

"I don't know what the hell my number is," I snapped. "This is an emergency. For chrissake, hurry!"

The urgency in my voice must have gotten through to her. The line clicked rapidly, then a crisp male voice said: "Central police headquarters. Sergeant Rafferty."

"Listen carefully," I said. "My name is Carl Guard. Get Captain Hara and tell him I'm at the Avalon Production studios on Dempster Street in Evanston. The killer he wants is holding Camille Chad prisoner. I'm going in, but I need help. Understand? *I need help.* I don't know the Evanston chief. Maybe Hara does. But tell him to get somebody here *fast*. Got it?"

For once, I didn't get an argument. "Avalon studios, Dempster Street, Evanston—right?"

"Right." I dropped the receiver.

I ran back to the rear of the building. Flames were licking at the floor of the big workroom and the wire had come to rest near a large drill-press. It was sputtering sparks like a tired pin-wheel. I gave it a wide berth as I headed for the smashed window. The whole studio building was dark. I peered upward at the window of the room where Camille was. A murmur of excited voices floated down to me. I hesitated, then climbed through the window, ran a few steps, and flung myself onto the concrete. Just in time. A flashlight beam cut through the darkness, aimed from above, and zig-zagged across the loading area. It touched me, moved on, came back and steadied.

"There he is!" a voice growled. "The dumb bastard musta jumped!"

"Christ, there's a fire next door!" another voice exclaimed.

"Go down and get him. Quick!"

"Hell, he's dead. What's the hurry?"

"Somebody'll spot him. Get him in here while I take care of the girl!"

The flashlight went away. I took a deep breath and waited.

Heavy feet slapped the concrete and came toward me. A hand turned me over. I groaned realistically and flopped an arm. I heard a surprised mutter, then arms lifted me and carried me toward the loading platform. A flashlight beam met us and someone asked: "Dead?"

"Nah, just out," the guy carrying me reported. "Looks like he landed on his tail and skidded some. Give me a hand, the jerk's heavy."

"What's the matter, you getting weak or something? Dump him in the studio someplace. I gotta help Georgie run an extension up from the basement."

"Damn him to hell, anyway," the man beneath me grumbled. "Things are blowing up and all he's doing is nothing."

"Keep talking and you'll get yourself some loose teeth."

"That's better'n a loose neck."

My carrier stumbled, cursed fluently, and dropped me onto a couch. I groaned and kicked my legs. A flashlight came on and played over me briefly. At the other end of the studio, a metallic clank sounded, followed by a heavy dragging. I opened my eyes cautiously. Two men were approaching with a small reflector lamp. I recognized Grey Suit, then Ben Ajax. Ajax set the lamp beside a cleared area, brushed his hands together as though dusting them, and strolled toward me. I slid my eyes shut.

"You should have knocked this guy off, Georgie," Ajax commented sharply. "Now we've got both him and the girl on our hands. Wait'll Lisa sees the mess you've got us in."

"The hell with her," Georgie growled. "She may not even show. Listen."

The shrill wail of a siren rose and fell, rushing closer,

and the warning clang of fire engines' bells began to assault the night's stillness.

"She'll show," Ajax said coldly. "She wants an explanation."

"Maybe she'll get one and maybe she won't."

"Don't get tough, Georgie. We're in this together, you know."

"Why don't you tell her that?"

"Yeah," the guy who had carried me agreed. He stepped into the circle of light. I recognized Motts. "Why don't you tell her what's what, Ajax?"

"Tell her yourself," Ajax snapped. He got out a cigarette, lit it, tossed the match carelessly aside. "What are you complaining about? We've got our stake. A couple more months and distribution will be set. Then we can establish ourselves in St. Louis and take our time raking in the dough."

"I could use some right now," Motts growled.

"So could I," Ajax retorted. "But we agreed to play it smart. That dame of yours is what bitched things up. She's pressuring you for dough so she can buy herself dope."

"Lay off, for chrissake—" Motts began.

"Lay off, hell!" Ajax snapped. "She was supposed to mail in payments on the wagon. I gave you the dough. What happened to it?"

"She says she forgot."

"Sure, she forgot," Ajax said sarcastically. "So what happens? Right away we've got a shamus on our tail, and that damned fool Cooksie makes matters worse by peddling a tape to him! Christ, we'd have done better if we'd hired a couple idiots."

"I suppose you think it was smart to kill the kid?" Georgie challenged. "You and Lisa done that, Ajax. We could have given them both the runaround, but you hadda try something fancy. I'm not holding still for a murder rap."

"Why not?" a new voice asked softly.

All eyes peered into the darkness. Like a wraith, a blob of whiteness appeared, came closer, and then Lisa Lincoln, wearing a long dark cloak, flung back to reveal a white

sweater and skirt, stepped into the light. She carried a small purse.

"Why not, Georgie?" she repeated huskily. She smiled at him like a cat playing carelessly with a mouse after a heavy feed.

Georgie's eyes bulged like those of a frightened horse. "Dough is one thing," he said hoarsely, "but murder's another. I promised to make the tapes and I made them. I didn't agree to set in with a lot of killings."

"That goes double for me," Motts agreed.

"Well, so I've got a couple yellow panty-waists to deal with!" She took a step toward me, as though noticing me for the first time. "Who's that?"

"Guard," Ajax said shortly. "He jumped out of the window."

"How nice," the red-haired actress said frostily. "I hope you've managed to take better care of the girl."

"I gagged her a few minutes ago," Ajax volunteered.

"Why?"

"She started screaming after Guard took off."

"Didn't you have him tied?"

"Of course. We wired his wrists and ankles. He got loose somehow."

Her comment was drowned out by the roar of a nearby fire engine. A siren shrieked, then gradually sank to a purr as it halted outside the building. Lisa Lincoln's green eyes glowed in the faint light of the reflectored lamp.

"Where's the girl now?" she demanded, raising her voice slightly.

"In back," Georgie volunteered. "She's okay."

"Get her."

"She's okay," Georgie repeated. A stubborn note had entered his voice. "She's just a kid and doesn't know from nothing."

"I want to talk to her."

"For chrissake, get her!" Ajax snapped. "Can't anybody do anything without making a production out of it?"

Georgie, with obvious reluctance, moved into the dark-

ness. He reappeared in a few minutes with Camille in his arms. A dirty rag obscured her face and her blouse hung in tatters about her writhing body. He kicked a chair into the circle of light and sat her down on it. I stared at her and felt the first hot rivulets of anger seep through me.

Without thinking, I rasped: "You rotten, lousy bastards!"

The words had an electric effect. Georgie pivoted his head toward me and glared malevolently. Ajax swung around and lifted an eyebrow curiously. Motts, raising a fist, took a step toward me. Lisa Lincoln, after a moment of startlement, laughed. It was a tinkly, nervous laugh, like thin chinaware rattling in a sink.

"Look who has joined the party," Ajax commented.

Hara, where the hell are you?

"Sure," I said bitterly. "The gang's all here. Let's spin the bottle and see who gets killed next."

"One guess," Georgie growled.

"Okay." I forced a grin. "You."

"Why, you—!" Georgie started toward me.

"Stop him, Ben," Lisa Lincoln directed. Ajax caught Georgie's arm. "Why should Georgie be killed, shamus?" she asked softly.

"Ask her." I pointed at Camille.

Georgie jerked his arm from Ajax's grasp. "What the hell is this?" he demanded angrily. "You all gone nuts or something? Anything that dick says is something he cooked up with—"

"Shut up, Georgie," Ajax said quietly. He walked to Camille and unknotted the gag. As it came away, she licked painfully at her bruised lips.

Hara, for chrissake, get a move on!

Camille raised an arm and pointed at Ajax. "Carl! I remember his voice. He was at Cooksie's!"

"Sure he was," I said. "He followed Gloria there. She tumbled to the filthy racket her boss was mixed up in, and Lisa told Ajax to hop after her."

Camille shuddered and paled. I knew what she was thinking. I'd been thinking the same myself for several minutes:

They were killers—and they wouldn't burn any faster if they cleaned up their trail by getting rid of us. They practically had to. We knew too much.

Lisa Lincoln's eyes were drilling into me.

I added: "Don't be scared, honey. They're starting to scamper like rats on a sinking ship. Give them that act Georgie had you record this morning."

Above us there was a crash of breaking glass and the sound of running feet. Another siren began a squealing diminuendo. Lisa Lincoln started. Ajax, straightening, looked toward the high studio ceiling and ejaculated: "What the hell was that?"

"Firemen," Georgie growled. "Sounds like they're on the roof. I'd better check." He started to move away.

"Never mind," Lisa Lincoln directed sharply. "This is more important."

Georgie halted indecisively. "Well, Willie had better have a look, then."

"Willie stays here too," Ajax said, "Lisa's right. These things have to be settled right now."

"That's right," I taunted. "Georgie and Willie could pick you off from the dark, couldn't they?"

Ajax's jaw tightened, but he didn't bother to reply. Lisa Lincoln, looking somewhat like the last girl to leave the party, was staring at Camille. "You were going to give us an act," she said crisply. "All right, give it."

Camille looked at me beseechingly. I nodded reassuringly. She glanced at her hands, then squared her shoulders a little and looked at Lisa Lincoln. Then, in the sulky tone of voice the red-haired actress had made famous, she said: ". . . I didn't want to kill her—but I had to. Ajax warned me that a private dick was onto her. I figured she'd go straight to her apartment, so I took a cab to Diversey and Pinegrove, and I was waiting for her. The dick was with her. I could have killed him too, but I thought I'd play it smart and—"

I'd been watching Georgie. He dropped a hand toward his jacket pocket as Camille started talking. I tensed grad-

ually, thinking: *That bastard Hara . . . he's had time to get here twenty times!*

"It's a lie," Georgie rasped. His pocket bulged as though he'd clenched his hand around something. "It's something she and—"

"Shut up," Lisa Lincoln warned. She had opened her purse and her fingers seemed to be searching within it. "Maybe it's a fake act—but it's a good one. Go on," she directed.

Camille swallowed and closed her eyes. ". . . It was all Ben's idea. I needed dough, and he knew it. And he had found out some way about the dirty pictures and the black-mail racket. He suggested cutting a few tapes, pressuring a few biggies for a payoff, and—"

"You lousy rat—" Ajax began.

Georgie's hand jerked from his pocket. I glimpsed the gun as I catapulted toward him. There was a flash of white off to the left, then a series of small, cracking explosions. The gun in Georgie's hand exploded as my shoulder struck him. He landed hard, cursing, and rolled away from me. Some one was screaming. I clawed at his leg, trying to drag him toward me. He face glared at me whitely and his shoe seemed to float toward my chin.

Pain jolted me into a technicolored siesta.

SIXTEEN

HARA STARTED the squad car.

"You and your goddamn end plays," I said bitterly. "What'd you do, come by way of Denver?"

"Hell, Carl, we got there right on Lisa Lincoln's tail," Hara growled. "I figured, what with all the fire equipment and everything, it'd be smart to break in upstairs, work our way down, and take our time closing in. That way—"

"You took your time, all right!"

"We had you covered. None of them got away, did they?"

"Georgie did."

"Well . . . how was I to know Lisa Lincoln had a gun? Flynn was watching her and he says he didn't even see her shoot. I was ready to pick off Georgie, then you hadda bust into him, and first thing I know they're both shooting. She got him twice, right in the guts."

"How about Ajax?"

"Ajax is a sick boy. When he tried to duck, Flynn let him have it. Got him in the shoulder. One of the boys in front spotted him trying to sneak out and gave him another slug. If the docs can patch him up—which I doubt—he'll burn sure for the Steen killing. You figure him for it, don't you?"

"Yeah," I nodded somberly. "He and Lisa Lincoln made a good pair. She was the lure, of course, but he mapped the play."

Hara eyed me curiously. "How'd you happen to tumble to the set-up, Carl?"

"A girl who's good for nothing is seldom bad for nothing," I quoted. "She stripped for dough. She posed for dirty pictures—for dough. So why wouldn't she cut a few tapes? The rest was easy. What she told us at the hotel was true enough. She was earning big dough for Metro-Urban and pennies for herself. That made her vulnerable to Ajax's ideas. It looked like they could both clean up a wad without much trouble until Ajax got nervous when I spotted Ella Shaw. After that, they started getting into each other's way."

"Shaw." Hara frowned. "You figure she was in the racket?"

"Of course. She was probably the link between Ajax and Georgie. She sold out her store when the racket looked set up and took a job with Ability so she could keep an eye

on Ajax and a few of the agency's clients. Ajax had an in with a lot of big name celebrities, and, with Ella Shaw steering Georgie, they had a chance to plan a lot of red hot recordings."

"They didn't have to kill her."

"Of course not. That was Lisa Lincoln's mistake. After prancing around in a couple movies, she figured life was lived like it's shown on the silver screen. She had to play it big, give it an angle, like that lipstick she pasted on me."

"Imagine getting kissed by a hormone heater like that—and not even knowing it!"

"Thinking about it makes me want to puke."

"Sure, but still—" Hara glanced at me obliquely.

"Can it, Hara, for chrissake."

"Okay, okay," Hara grinned. "You think that really was her voice on the tape, then?"

"I'd bet on it. Dixie must have heard a copy of it—or smelled the rottenness in her. That's why he walked out. I'll bet getting into bed with her was like cuddling up to a lamp post."

"Well, maybe." Hara shrugged. "She won't be in any more movies, anyway."

"That suits me."

Hara brought the squad car to a stop in front of St. Francis Hospital. We were both silent a moment. Hara finally said: "Sam Ratten, the Evanston chief, is in there with her. You won't need me. I want to get after Cooksie and the missing jewelry."

"Yeah." I climbed out. "Thanks, Hara."

"I'll fix things with Dockeray."

"Sure."

I started up the long sidewalk. A nun smiled at me and opened a wide glass door. A short, fat man, who looked as though he was pushing 60—and as though that were his only exercise—murmured my name. I nodded and followed him down a long, silent corridor. Another nun was waiting in front of a closed door.

"He wants to see Miss Chad," the man whispered.

The nun touched her crucifix and shook her head slowly. She laid a hand on the knob of the door. "I'm sorry," she began.

"I *have* to see her," I said harshly. "I have to talk to her alone. For just a minute or two."

She must have read the tortured expression on my face, sensed the bitter agony which was coursing through me, for she moved aside and whispered: "Only for a minute, then. Her parents are on their way here."

"Yes," I said quickly. "A minute. I promise."

My tongue felt dry and thick as I tip-toed in and stood beside her. Her eyes were closed and her short, curly, dark hair looked tossed and gaminish against the white pillow.

"Camille," I said softly. "It's Carl. Remember me?"

She didn't move. She didn't answer.

"I knew it was Lisa Lincoln," I said slowly, watching her lips. "I felt sure it was her. But I wasn't positive. She was a star—and stars are hard to reach, aren't they? Anyway, that's all finished now. What I'm trying to say it this: I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let Ajax get to you. I shouldn't have let you step into a role you hadn't practiced, hadn't wanted. I thought it would start an explosion—and it did—but I'd forgotten that you were a real actress. I thought you'd give them a few lines, just enough to trigger some suspicion between them. But you did a real bang-up job. I should have known. I should have understood."

I took her hand and pressed it gently.

"You saved my life, Camille. When I leaped for Georgie, you flung yourself against Lisa Lincoln. She got Georgie—but she didn't have time to get me. The cops nabbed her red-handed—and they got Ajax and Willie, too."

Her eyes didn't open, her lips didn't move.

I sighed.

"So the case is finished, Camille, except for one thing. I took care of that a few minutes ago. I called Fanny Murdock at the *Sun-Times* and gave her your story. They're going to feature it today on page one, with lots of pix—

and you're going to be star of the show. So you're a real star now, Camille, in one of the biggest dramas of our time. People won't forget you for a long time—and I'll never forget you. I hope it's what you wanted."

I released her hand and turned reluctantly away. At the door, I looked back. She was still sleeping, but there seemed to be a glow on her face, a smile on her red lips.

"They must have theatres up there," I whispered. "Save me a couple ducats, will you, honey? I want to see the big gold star on your dressing-room door."

I stumbled past the nun on the way out. She touched my arm compassionately, but I brushed her hand away. Hell, even a tough private dick can cry once in a while, can't he?

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