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Murder Was Her Business!

THE DAY HE DIED



Lewis
Padgett

A BANTAM BOOK
Complete and Unabridged

About THE DAY HE DIED

Caroline bolted the windows and double-locked the door. She searched every inch of the apartment for hidden entrances and secret hiding-places.

She doped herself with sleeping pills, stretched strings across doorways, and sprinkled powder to catch footsteps on the floor, to catch herself if she walked in her sleep.

Nobody could get in; nobody was caught by her traps and snares. But still she found traces of the midnight visitor who had come to haunt her house. The typewriter was used at night; a chair was turned about; food appeared in the icebox.

And when she went out, anywhere, to escape the terrors of her own house, she knew that strange footsteps were following her along city streets.

A leaden weight of fear settled in her mind; the solution to the nightmare puzzle was always just out of reach. And as she struggled to free herself from the whirlpool of suspicion and hatred, violence and death, she knew each day more surely that before the end came she would find herself face to face with murder.

About THE COVER

The handle moved. The heavy door began to swing . . . and she saw the thing that huddled there before her. The thing that began to push against the door from within as the latch let go, dreadfully as if it were helping her to open the door . . .

Illustration by Gilbert Fullington.

*Challant
N.Y.*

The
DAY HE DIED

by
LEWIS PADGETT



BANTAM BOOKS

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THE DAY HE DIED

CAST OF CHARACTERS

CAROLINE HALE wasn't afraid of ghosts. She knew how to take care of herself—but someone, or something, had set out to terrify her.

RAY KERRY had been married to Caroline. Now he wanted to come back.

BOB O'BRIEN hadn't been married to Caroline . . . yet. He just planned to be.

JONAS BRUNO was Caroline's uncle, a rip-roaring, swashbuckling, globe-trotting soldier of fortune.

VIC CURZON was a redheaded madman, the perfect ghost writer for a man like Uncle Jonas.

PAUL ROYCE was a literary agent for both Caroline and Jonas. A dependable guy.

MOLLIE HATHAWAY was a spiritualist, medium, hypnotist—and a *very* close friend of Ray Kerry's.

PETE WYNEKOOP was a broken-down newspaperman, competing with Kerry for Mollie's affections.

THE REMINGTONS, Julia and Elwood, were a nice midwestern couple, out of place in Mollie Hathaway's crowd.

1...

THE CLATTER of her own heels was the loudest sound in the street and in the world. She was trying not to run. She was trying to fight back the panic that had been altogether too close to her for—how long now? Less than an hour since she had seen Ray Kerry in the bar, but the beginnings of the terror had stirred into slow, germinating life many weeks ago.

Ray would not be running. He would be following her quite leisurely. He would be anticipating a scene. That was all it would mean to him; another scene. Her raw nerves shivered; a crisis was bad enough, but far worse were the endless, nagging, whip-flicks of questions and arguments and useless decisions. And with Ray—there was always fear, too.

She confessed it. It was physical fear. She had learned fear of pain, and fear of Ray Kerry, during the abortive eight months of their marriage that ended two years ago. Ended. That was the word Ray could not understand.

Now he was trying to make her come back.

The telephone call from him this morning had been the beginning. She was emphatic, and, she thought, final. But then, returning to her apartment at noon, she found the envelope stuffed in her letter-box. A note from Ray—"I'll phone you later. Here's the money I owe you"—and eight fifty-dollar bills. The surprising thing was that he had remembered that two-year-old debt. She herself had almost forgotten it.

The money would be very useful just now. She hadn't made much lately. Nervous hysteria, becoming cumulative, Bob O'Brien had diagnosed it, and recommended marriage as a cure. "Marriage to me, of course," he said, watching

her gravely across the rim of his glass. "With anyone else it wouldn't count."

That half-hour with Bob O'Brien had been a blessed relief, somehow. The bar was softly lighted and quiet. Her raw nerves had begun to relax. And then Ray Kerry came in. . . .

Oh, he knew her habits. For eight months they had learned one another's habits, in the apartment and out of it. The Chinese restaurant on 72nd, the taxi-stand conveniently around the corner on the Drive, the drugstore on the corner, the little, quiet bar where the daiquiris were so good. . . .

It had been foolish of her to leave. Ray couldn't have done anything, with Bob O'Brien there. He could have made a scene, though, and one glance at his flushed face had told her that Ray was very, very drunk. He enjoyed scenes, too, perhaps partly because he knew how much she shrank from any kind of emotional display.

She glanced back.

There was a familiar shadow at the corner where someone strolled slowly after her. She heard the soft footfalls, measured and deliberate, and it seemed, suddenly and irrationally, that they could follow her at the same unhurried pace to the end of the world.

She began to run.

That was fatal. The moment she surrendered to that impulse, the panic increased a hundredfold and leaped on her shoulders like a nightmare, swallowing up reason.

There was one giddy moment when the solid granite foundation of Manhattan sloped away underfoot, so that it seemed momentum must carry her on down the street and across the parkway and into the darkness of the Hudson. Then she was at the iron grille of the gateway before her own door, and Caroline caught at it and swung herself around it and up the low steps of the apartment house. She caught her lip between her teeth and bit down firmly, forcing the panic back.

The key was in her purse. She fumbled it out, listening

in the silence. But the blood was pounding in her ears. And Ray always walked so quietly.

The lock would stick. She knew that. For Caroline, locks always stuck, and typewriters jammed and motors stalled. She knew her own ineptitude. Inanimate things had always been in conspiracy against her. But until lately she had been able to trust herself. She had not always run from the things that frightened her. Lately it had been different, and she was not sure of anything any more.

She wrenched at the lock, and this time it relented. The door swung open ponderously and Caroline stumbled into the foyer. It smelled of thick carpeting and old, well-polished wood, the pleasant odors of a house that had been luxurious and cared for over fifty years of quiet living. A publishing nabob at the turn of the century had built it, and these stairs curving upward under stained glass windows must have known post-Victorian elegance in their day.

They were empty now, but there were shadows above and below. Caroline's feet thudded softly on the carpet as she ran upstairs. On the landing she paused for a moment, glancing at the little alcove where the elevator doors opened, and listening.

Was that another key in the lock? *Did* Ray still have his key? Suppose he had. Was it safer to run on up the two remaining flights or gamble on the tiny elevator? Indecisively she took two quick steps toward the elevator and then two back. But suppose the cage wasn't at this floor? She couldn't waste those slow, creaking minutes while it descended. No, then the stairs. But suppose while she hurried up Ray Kerry had found the elevator waiting, and stepped out of it to meet her above, at her very door?

It *was* a key in the lock down there, across the foyer.

Instinct settled the question for her. She found herself panting up the stairs two at a time without knowing she had started. Above her own quick breathing she heard the elevator moving in its shaft. Up or down? If it were on its way down to answer Ray's pressure on the button, then she

was safe; she would reach her door before him. But if he were already rising in the shaft while she stumbled up the curving flights . . .

Outside her door the little landing was empty.

Memory betrayed her then. She fought with the lock for moments before she remembered; she had had the lock changed, for the second time in a month, a week ago. The other key was in her purse. It evaded her. Lipstick, mirror, emery board, sun-glasses, comb . . . Her fingers felt stiffly numb. The deep whine of the elevator began to die. It was too late.

She remembered. She snapped open the little coin-purse and snatched out the key. With both hands she fitted it into the lock. Then, as the elevator wheezed and stopped behind her, she had the door open and was across the threshold and—and—

It was over. The door was closed again. The lock had snapped shut to guard her. She drew a long breath, reached for the safety-latch and put the chain in its socket, wishing for bolts and bars as well.

She stood listening.

Out there in the little hall was a metallic click—the elevator door sliding shut. But after that nothing but silence. Ray had always walked so quietly. Was he standing there just beyond the door, looking at her through the panels as if there were no solid wood between them? It would be like him not to ring, just to stand there waiting with that mild, terrifying patience, for ten minutes, for fifteen. For half an hour. Letting her nerves calm so that when he did knock she would have had time to feel foolish about running away. So that shame and bravado would make her unlock the door and let him in.

For Ray Kerry knew her too well. She thought he knew just what she was doing now as she reached to try the locks soundlessly. With the malice of inanimate things toward her, they might have come undone as she stood here. He would realize that. Presently, after she had left the door, he

would try it, very quietly. She wouldn't hear him at all, but she would know. *How much too well we know each other*, she thought despairingly.

But he couldn't get in. Not even if he had duplicates of the old keys. This was a new lock—burglar-proof, according to the beery-breathed locksmith who had come from his little shop around the corner to install it. "You don't need to worry, lady," he had said impatiently to her insistent questions. "There ain't any master keys for a lock like this. You got the keys I gave you, you can get in. Nobody else can."

But were there other ways of entering than through this door?

On tiptoe Caroline turned and went down the long hallway toward the living room. All the cumulative reactions of the past half-hour were overtaking her at once, so that her lungs burned from that headlong flight and the drinks she had had with Bob O'Brien made a soundless buzzing in her ears, sustained, just below the threshold of hearing. Her own body felt very small and fragile, ready to collapse inward upon itself in a huddle of delicate bones and thin flesh.

She crossed the big living room and sank down exhausted on the sofa beside the empty fireplace. Down cushions bilowed up around her with a cold illusion of comfort as she leaned forward to reach for a cigarette from the bronze box on the coffee table. Almost unconsciously she had learned lately a trick of bracing her unsteady fingers to light cigarettes. She did that now, and inhaled without pleasure.

I should make sure the windows are locked, she thought. *I should make certain . . .*

What was the use? She had made certain before. There was no way to get into this apartment without leaving traces. There were no secret panels, unless you counted the oaken cupboard door by the window that camouflaged an antique, four-foot safe that the redecorators had decided not to remove when they rebuilt the mansion into apartments. Not

that Caroline had any use for a safe; she kept it unlocked and sometimes thought of employing it as a liquor cabinet, but her supply wasn't that large.

A radio blared from somewhere, and Caroline moved nervously. She crushed out her cigarette and instantly lit another. She leaned back, trying to slow her spinning thoughts.

This is silly. Suppose Ray does make a scene? He's made them before.

He's made them too often. I couldn't stand it now. These last weeks—

Months, really. Months since she had begun to mistrust herself. She had always been proud of her almost photographic memory. But too often memory failed her these days.

Bob O'Brien was right. Nerves. The harder she worked, the more the tension mounted. But she couldn't quit. Her new independence meant too much to her. If only Jonas would come back . . .

Listening to the silence, she opened her eyes and looked around the room watchfully, seeking a false note somewhere. Her personality, and that of Jonas, had left traces, but there was nothing to remind her of Ray Kerry. Yet his presence made itself felt.

She listened.

This large square living room that had once been the mansion's library was now part museum of Uncle Jonas's erratic collections and part work-room for Caroline herself. Her typewriter stood on a leather-topped desk beneath one of the tall windows, and a shelf beside it held a rather startlingly virile little god chipped out of black African wood. About the heavy, carved shoulders wreathed a garland of exquisitely delicate roses and orange blossoms made of feathers, memento of some experience of Jonas's in Rio.

The god was friendly. Caroline was mildly superstitious. She wrote stories for the pulp-paper magazines, and it seemed to her that she wrote them better when the robust little godling stood above her on his shelf. It was Jonas who had draped him in feather flowers. Jonas sometimes lived

here, in a small bedroom off the living room, when he had time to waste in Manhattan. As far as he felt any responsibility toward anyone, Jonas felt it for his niece, and during his year-long absences she collected and spent the income for his Westchester house by way of avuncular support.

There was no income from that source now. There hadn't been for six months, since a storm had weakened some of the foundations and wrecked the drains and electric wiring. Caroline's bank account had been negligible then, so when Vic Curzon offered to move into the house rent free and make the repairs himself, she had rather unwillingly agreed. She should have known better. Vic was Jonas's ghost-writer, an ebullient, undependable man with a tremendous amount of energy he preferred to spend non-productively. Once installed in the Westchester house, he had simply used oil lamps, and, Caroline suspected, had dug a sanitary trench in the back yard.

It would be difficult to evict him. . . .

Paul Royce, Jonas's agent, could help her on that score. Royce was one man Vic couldn't out-bellow. Not that Paul ever—

He was a very quiet, competent man, and she wished he were here now. O'Brien would be helpful but explosive, whereas she thought she knew how Royce would handle Ray Kerry—with gentle, efficient authority. It was odd how revealing love-making could be, in so many ways. Paul Royce had kissed her only once or twice, but she could guess from that alone how he might react to Ray's insistence. There would be the same sense of deep, impregnable strength, the low-keyed intensity that could so easily alter to implacable pressure—and Ray would be out of the house and on his way home without quite knowing how it had happened.

But she couldn't call on Paul Royce for such a personal favor; she didn't want to. A few dinner engagements, a few plays seen together—and a few kisses, no more than that. She had no right to ask Royce to settle her private problems. Business problems were another matter; no emotions were

involved in those. But Ray Kerry was a challenge she must settle by herself, no matter how much she wished Royce were here with his unobtrusive, solid dependability.

No, she could not ask him, even though, with sure intuition, she sensed that those casual kisses had meant somewhat more to Paul Royce than either of them had been willing to admit. . . .

Had the doorknob rattled?

Caroline sat up abruptly on the sofa. Ray Kerry, trying the door softly? For a hollow moment she was sure the lock and the chain would mysteriously have gone limp before him, and she listened for his soft tread down the hall toward her.

That, of course, was insane. She looked away deliberately, and her glance fell on the typewriter, a finished manuscript neatly stacked beside it waiting for the envelope and tomorrow's mail. But she looked away from that too, quickly, and it seemed to her for a moment that the room shook a little.

For this was not sanity either. Desk, typewriter, script—how prosaic they looked, and how terrifying they had become to her now. It had been—how long?—months and months since she learned that she could no longer trust either herself or her professional training.

That profession meant much to Caroline, the knowledge that she could make an independent living by writing stories. It made a wall at her back, so that she could face even Ray Kerry, when she must, secure in the knowledge of her own self-sufficiency in this one thing at least.

And then, frighteningly, it was not there. Solidity that had seemed as real as the metal of her typewriter dissolved, and instead of the wall there was a pit that opened beneath its foundations. The one impersonal thing of which she had felt surest. . . .

It began months ago. The editor of an adventure magazine had telephoned to congratulate her, in passing, on the smooth dialogue in a story he had just bought from her.

Caroline, racking her brain for the dialogue he meant, accepted the praise happily enough without remembering any particularly bright phrases in the story. But she knew that editors were often unpredictable in their reactions. There was the time when she had forgotten to enclose the last page of a manuscript, and an editor had been delighted with the subtlety of her ending.

But this time . . .

Soon after the story was published indignant letters began to come in. A sequence of the dialogue had been lifted almost intact from Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance*. The editor checked. It had been. He telephoned Caroline angrily.

"I didn't!" she denied. "I'll prove it! I'll bring my carbons right down and show you!"

Her stomach tightened emptily even now as she remembered the first incredulous shock when she scanned the carbon copy and found that the page of stolen dialogue was actually there, typed on her machine which had certainly not left her desk in the interim.

That was the first time the earth had tilted underfoot.

It had never happened again, but only because Caroline took desperate precautions. She read and reread every script before sealing and mailing it, and five times she had found sequences that she knew she had not written. Some she recognized—a scene from *The War of the Worlds*, a description from a Father Brown story, a Jack London fight—all easily recognizable semi-classics. She caught those in time, and cut out the plagiarisms. But she knew that if she slipped up again, there was danger of being blacklisted among the editors—for who would believe her protestations of innocence?

Madison hadn't—the editor who inadvertently printed the Wilde plagiarism. But she had known Madison for a long time, and he was inclined to make allowances for her. "Every dog's entitled to one bite," he told her sourly. "But

don't do it again, that's all. Don't do it again." And he was as friendly as ever, though Caroline knew he had not forgotten.

She had no recollection of inserting those stolen pages into her manuscripts. She was perfectly certain she had not done it. But there were other things that shook her faith in herself. An extra bottle of milk in the refrigerator when she could not remember putting it there, or a bunch of grapes on the kitchen table, when she hated grapes and was sure she had not bought them . . . Trivial, inexplicable things that shook Caroline's faith in herself because she was afraid she did know the explanation.

It could not have been anyone else slipping into the apartment to play tricks on her in secret. Not even Ray Kerry could have done it—certainly not since she had the lock changed. And she had set little traps across the entrance hall—things like black thread stretched between thumbtacks, and even flour sprinkled where an unwary foot must mark it. There were never any tracks but her own. And some of the plagiarisms had appeared between night and morning, between finishing a manuscript on one evening and mailing it early the next day. No one could have done that but herself. She shut herself in too securely, with lock and chain, to cherish the hope that an intruder was trying fantastically to ruin her in her profession.

It was hard to think clearly about these things, or about anything. Caroline's mind did not focus very well any more; there had been too much continual strain and anxiety. She had run tonight from Ray Kerry as she would not have run a few months ago, because her whole life seemed to be flight now. She was on a treadmill. It had taken her a long time to achieve independence, and she could not give it up, though the strain of focusing her mind upon the mechanics of story-writing grew worse weekly. Vicious circle. She needed a vacation badly. But she couldn't afford one. If she could concentrate on a few more stories . . .

Her memory was failing; she knew that. While writing she

took copious notes to remind her of the characters and situations; that had never been necessary before. And in her daily life, too, her memory kept slipping. *Had* she bought those grapes, after all? Had she left the tap running in the sink all last night? It was impossible to concentrate, to think clearly. . . . Already she needed help. Help in a cardboard box with pink capsules in it. The seconal let her sleep—it was the only way she could sleep, in fact—but one capsule a night was her rigidly enforced limit, and the sedative in that amount was comparatively harmless. Nevertheless, with a flash of unreasoning suspicion, when she got her last supply she compared the new capsules with the older ones. Each contained the same amount of white powder. And the white powder was seconal in each case; she had tasted to make sure. So that was all right.

A knock at the door rattled briskly through the quiet apartment. Caroline looked up in alarm. Was it time so soon? Did Ray Kerry think the moment had come to summon her? Because if he did think so, he was probably right. Ray was never mistaken about things like that. Odd that he could be so sensitive in matters that affected his getting what he wanted, and so appallingly insensitive about everything else.

She kicked off her shoes and went on tiptoe down the hall. Just before she reached the door she paused, eyes straining through the wood and seeing him exactly as she knew he would be standing. There would be cigarettes stamped out around him on the floor, a char or two black on the beautiful pale parquet. It was not deliberate vandalism on Ray's part when he did things like that—it was just that he didn't notice or care. The eight months of their marriage had taught her that over and over, in many forms.

Now, perhaps, he was finishing a last cigarette, grinding its coal underfoot into the patterned floor; now he lifted his head and looked at her through the door. It might as well have been glass, that door. Now he moved forward on his soundless feet, lifting his hand again—

The knock echoed sharply past her. She stood without motion, hugging herself, hands gripping painfully into her upper arms. There was intense silence on both sides of the door.

Then from the kitchen the buzzer vibrated so loudly that Caroline gasped. For a whirling moment it seemed to her that he had moved past her into the kitchen and was demanding her presence there with the imperious buzzer. She pressed back against the wall, shaken with her own heart-beats, trying to hold her breath so that he could not hear its loud, uneven course.

They waited on the two sides of the door, motionless, for a long moment. Then from the living room the telephone rang startlingly. Hysteria rose in Caroline's throat at the sound. He was everywhere, surrounding her, blocking all escape.

Again the telephone rang, and simultaneously the reverberant knocking rattled against the door. And a sudden, desperate cunning brought Caroline back to her senses. How could Ray be sure she was really here? He had not actually seen her come into this apartment—had he? She was not even certain he had been close enough behind her to see her enter the building. If she didn't answer door or telephone, might he not think the apartment was empty?

She flattened herself to the wall, trying to efface herself so thoroughly that not even in spirit could he sense her presence.

The telephone rang on, an arrogant, senseless noise. The buzzer sounded again from the kitchen; knuckles pounded at the door. Her skin itself seemed hypersensitive to the sounds. She was hemmed in by demanding noises. But she was much too cunning to answer, or even to move. She thought that Ray, straining his ears just beyond the door, could feel the displacement of air if she so much as unfolded her crossed arms.

The telephone was the first to give up. It ended angrily in the middle of a ring and the silence vibrated after it. Then the buzzer sounded a long, long, nerve-fraying buzz as Ray

kept his thumb on the button for an interminable minute. The knob rattled. She thought there was an edge of anger in the noise it made, and the thought of Ray angry was an unpleasant one. He was drunk, too, she remembered, and that was unusual for him.

The door shook. There was one hard thud as he slammed his shoulder against it. But after that he didn't give way to his anger. For a man of so many uncontrollable impulses, Ray was curiously able to keep himself in hand when there was no audience and no likelihood of gaining his point. And she thought that she had made hers, that he was convinced the apartment was empty. For after that furious thud came silence. She stood taut, listening.

The elevator door souged again and she heard the safety gate rattle. Incredulous relief weakened her. Had he given up? Or was it only a trick? Did he still stand there motionless, his gaze fixed on the door, piercing it? There would be no sleep for her until she knew.

She listened to the diminishing clank of the elevator, and while her bravado lasted she touched the lock and swung the door open on its chain. The landing was empty, its parquet scarred with cigarette burns as she had expected.

Holding her breath, she slipped the chain free noiselessly and tiptoed in her stocking feet to the stairs, her heart thudding, almost expecting to see the familiar blond head tilted up at her from below—

The telephone's sudden, electrifying shriek from behind her was almost too startling to bear. It was as if Ray Kerry himself had leaped at her. She had whirled back into the sanctuary of the apartment, slamming the door and bracing herself against it, before her mind rationalized the sound.

Then she laughed weakly and hurried down the hall, forgetting, till she lifted the receiver, that it might be Ray. She could not speak then.

From a thin, buzzing distance someone said in a quiet voice, "Everything under control?"

It was Bob O'Brien.

"Oh. Hello, Bob. Yes—I'm fine."

"Sure?" He sounded skeptical.

"Sure. Where are you?"

"Same place—the bar. Thought I'd let you know your ex-husband just came in. I was wondering—"

"Bob, did you phone me a few minutes ago?"

"That's right," he said. "Did you talk to Ray?"

"No. I—"

"Want me to come up?"

"I don't want to see anybody," she said. O'Brien's voice was sympathetic.

"Okay. Take a drink and go to bed. By the way—"

"Yes?"

"We're having a date with Ray Kerry tomorrow."

She was silent for a long time. Presently O'Brien spoke again.

"I don't like the guy. I don't like to think about his being married to you once. I never liked him, and I like him even less at the moment. He's draped over the bar making faces at himself in the mirror. Did he follow you home just now?"

Her silence was assent. O'Brien said, "How long can this go on, anyway? Meet the guy and tell him to go to hell."

"I have," Caroline said. "He won't believe I mean it."

"Let's convince him. Marry me."

She ignored that. "Bob, I don't want to see Ray. He hasn't got any control at all when he's angry. I just can't stand another scene—"

"I come from a long line of scene-throwers myself," O'Brien said, with a certain harshness in his casual voice. "Five-thirty tomorrow, at the Quill. It's a date. Or else I'll break a bottle over Ray's head right now. What'll you have?"

Caroline hesitated. She knew O'Brien too well to doubt that he meant it. If she refused, the next sounds over the wire would most likely be the crash of glassware and brawling voices. Bob hadn't always been like that. The war had changed him, as it had changed so much. He seemed to see

things in a different light now—in black-and-white, without gradations.

How little she knew about him, really. He was art editor in a magazine publishing house; he had an apartment on Waverly Place, near Washington Square—she had never been there, and it was significant that she could form no image of what it might be like. At best she could summon up only the picture of O'Brien superimposed on shifting, shadowy walls and furniture. . . .

"Five-thirty tomorrow," she said.

"I love you madly," he declared. "Now go to bed. Good night."

"Good night, Bob," she said, and put down the telephone.

As it clicked into its cradle the dimly lit bar she had visualized so clearly, and the pleasant, grinning face with the yellow hair furiously ruffled, ebbed together out of her awareness. The big, quiet room came back around her. She let her gaze move slowly about the walls, paneled, carved, lined with shelves and books. Devil-masks smirked down upon her; she saw the machetes and a kris, and the African spears, the framed prints, the mirrors. It should have been a familiar and sheltering room, but for Caroline it had no walls at all.

"All right," she thought. "I'm a coward. That's lucky. I've got a coward's refuge—sleep." And she saw vividly in her mind the cardboard box in the bathroom cabinet.

Decisions, responsibilities! There were so many! Tomorrow there would be a scene with Ray. . . .

Suppose she *did* tell him she intended to marry Bob O'Brien?

Abruptly she saw the answer. Shift the responsibility. Let Bob handle it. Simply tell Ray Kerry that, and let him fight it out with Bob. She could feel the blessed relief of being a bystander. . . .

Perhaps, some day, she would marry Bob, but certainly not yet. She was afraid of risking a second marriage till she

was quite sure. There had been one blind bargain already, and a bad one. But if she told Ray that she had decided to remarry—it would be up to Bob O'Brien.

That was it. Shift the responsibility.

It was like a new, clear light shining into her mind. By its illumination she saw the answer to another problem—how to get Vic Curzon out of her uncle's Westchester house. Let someone else handle that, too! Let Paul handle it!

She dialed a number.

A deep voice spoke to her after a period of distant buzzing. Paul Royce, who was her uncle's literary agent and her own in the few small sales she had so far made in the smooth-paper magazine field, had a face as unlike his voice as a face could be. His voice was a velvety liqueur; his face was the weatherbeaten, craggy face of Piers Plowman.

"This is Caroline, Paul," she said crisply.

"Hello, Carrie," he said. "Whatever it is, I didn't do it."

"Do I sound like that? I'm sorry." But her voice was still sharp. "Paul, I want Vic Curzon got out of Uncle Jonas's house. You're the only person I know who can out-bluff Vic. Will you do it for me, Paul?"

"Is he still up there?" Royce asked.

"It's free, isn't it? Of course he's still there. I didn't care as long as I couldn't rent the place, but I've had a break. Somebody just paid an old debt. So I can afford to have the house repaired now, and then I can rent it and make a few extra dollars."

"Any hurry about it?" Royce asked. "Vic hasn't a phone up there, you know. I suppose I could drive up—"

Caroline said, "I wired him today to telephone me. He did. I told him he'd have to leave. He said he'd become a nudist and would be glad to show any prospective tenants through the house. You see?"

"I see," Royce said, chuckling. "Well, I'll try to put some pressure on him. Don't forget, though, Jonas is fond of Vic. Good ghost-writers aren't easy to find."

Caroline said flatly, "I've had about all I can stand of Vic

Curzon. Tomorrow I'm telephoning the contractor to start work, and I don't want Vic turning the hose on the workmen. Vic belongs in jail or in an asylum anyway."

"Not a bad idea," Royce said, rather dryly. "He might get a book out of it. Well, if Jonas's movie sale goes through, Vic will get his cut, and then he'll probably stop sponging for a while."

"I hope it goes through. How does it look now?"

"Pretty good. Not sold yet, but almost. If the studio can borrow the star they want for it, they'll buy. I'd say it's a sale. In fact, I'm so sure I'll buy you a drink out of my ten percent. Half an hour?"

"Not tonight, Paul," she said. "I'm worn out."

"It's probably boredom," he diagnosed. "You don't know what you need. I feel like a drink and a ride. How about it?"

She was briefly tempted. "Well, it sounds—oh, no. I'm too tired."

"I'll bet you'll stay up for hours working, just the same," he said. "I'll drive by. If the lights aren't on, I'll go on past. I want some fresh air anyway."

But when she had hung up, the thought of bed became overwhelmingly attractive. Well, if the lights were out, Royce wouldn't stop. And now it was up to him to cope with Vic Curzon.

She went rapidly down the hall in her stocking feet, and into the bedroom and through it to the bath. Tired as she was, there was no use courting sleep without one of the pink capsules. She opened the door of the medicine cabinet without looking at her face in the mirror as it swung aside. This was the last responsibility she could shift; the responsibility of wakefulness.

2...

SOMEONE WAS typing somewhere close by—was it herself?—the sound coming now loud and now distantly through clouds of sleep. She could see the lettered keys under her hands. The noise they made was like hail on a roof. Hail—hail—Caroline Hale, typing a story she was stealing from other people's books.

They were heaped ceiling-high around her, old books, new books, paper-back novels, leather-bound classics. One by one they sailed past her face, pages fluttering open as they went by, and she was typing frantically, trying to copy passages from every flying page. But they went too fast. The sentences blurred together and she could not read what she had written, and the books flew faster and faster.

"Caroline, Caroline! Open up!" Voices were shouting to her from behind the barricades of books. Fists pounded on the stacks. The books were swaying perilously above her. She cowered in terror as the vast heaps leaned out and began to fall.

"Carrie! Open up! Let us in!" The voices were louder and the fists beat harder upon reverberating surfaces. She and the books were falling together down bottomless depths of darkness, and the voices went with them inexorably. "Let us in!"

She sat up in shock and stared around a room that for a moment or two was utterly alien. She was alien to herself in that startled moment—not sure what day it was or what her name might be. Which way was the door? What was that glow of colored light falling across the floor? Where had all the books vanished to?

The voices at the door clamored louder than ever, the knocking redoubled its echoing rattle.

Foggily she began to grasp at realities again. This was her own bedroom, of course, the street lights filtering through drawn blinds to illuminate the white plaster walls with their elaborate borders of molding. Across the room her own dim face swam like a drowned woman's in the dressing-table mirror, wan, with the small pale mouth and the enormous eyes gray as the dusk in the room, and the heavy hair pushed back in ringlets that looked Medusa-like in the mirror just now.

That colored light fell from the bathroom through the door of improbable stained glass which our forefathers thought suitable for bathrooms fifty years ago. Caroline had learned to be glad of it, for a light left burning behind the glass at night cast comforting blurred colors into a bedroom otherwise frighteningly dim.

She put out an unsteady hand and switched on the light, wondering why the clamor of voices had not vanished with the rest of the dream. The clock said 11:30. She could not have been asleep more than a couple of hours. She could have told that by the feel of her own head. Everything swam when she moved suddenly, and when she sat still the floor tended to sink steadily, almost imperceptibly, under her. It would take hours more of sleep to wear off the effects of the sedative.

The knocking suddenly redoubled. "Let us in! Carrie!" She looked dizzily toward the sound. One of the voices she thought she knew, the harsh, deep voice of Peter Wynekoop. Ray's friend. Ray's rival, according to recent gossip she had half-tried not to hear. That very unpleasant cultist woman with the incongruous name of Mollie Hathaway had been a provocative bone of contention between the two men. But she did not want to think of Mollie Hathaway, Ray's mistress—or of Ray Kerry either.

She did not want to think. . . .

The voices clamored louder at the door. Ray's friends, all of them, she suspected. Perhaps that was his way of getting her to open the door. Perhaps he was with them out there,

silent, smiling as he watched the commotion, knowing she would have to let them in to quiet them. She dragged herself wearily out of bed, groping for slippers and robe, the room wheeling around her. They would hammer there until the neighbors called the police if she didn't let them in and pacify them with a drink or two. Luckily she hadn't much liquor in the house. When they had drunk the place dry they'd probably be willing to go. Ray's friends!

"Just a minute!" she called, and the uproar changed to vociferous welcome.

At the last moment her hand faltered on the knob. But her head was aching, her nerves cringing at the tumult, and she felt too confused to understand clearly what she was doing. The noise swelled out louder, and she swung the door open and blinked at the little crowd outside.

"All right!" she said. "*All right!*"

Ray Kerry was not there.

It was Pete Wynekoop who shouldered into the hall first. Caroline moved aside, glancing up at him with mingled dislike and faint pity. He was a thick, swarthy man with a permanent, nervous sneer under his thin mustache. His lips were as violently red as his hair and eyes were black, and beneath thick, clayey lids he had a busy glance that took in much too much. Pete Wynekoop was, among other disagreeable things, a confirmed busybody.

He was also rather pathetic. A once-popular newspaperman who has begun to slip and is not ready yet to admit it to himself walks on precarious ground, and Caroline was all too ready of late to feel sympathy for anyone who felt the earth shake underfoot.

Wynekoop, with any luck, might have been another Jonas Bruno. But he lacked something—perhaps the wholehearted, sincere belief in flamboyance that Caroline's uncle possessed—and so he had drifted, never quite achieving anything permanent in the way of a job or security. Now he wrote exposés and sensational pseudo-fact articles for the Sunday

supplements, and he brought out an occasional book with third-rate publishing houses. He had collaborated a few years ago with Mollie Hathaway on an autobiography exploiting her sensational life, her knowledge of voodoo rites, her Black Mass cults, her skirtings around the edges of actual crime in half a dozen countries and capitals. It had not sold well.

Mollie—she had an apartment in the Village and sponsored a local cult, and up to a few days ago she had also had Ray Kerry. It was not precisely fair to say that the Hathaway woman had come between Caroline and Ray, because the marriage had ended, in reality, long before. Mollie was the occasion, not the cause of the final rift. But Ray had been living with Mollie in her apartment for nearly two years now.

"I wonder if he's tired of being exotic," Caroline thought. "There must be some reason why he's haunting me lately. He's tried, off and on, ever since we split up, but he's never been so persistent before. It can't be love. He never did love me. But I never knew he was really cruel and vicious until—"

Her eyes searched the group as it melted past her. Ray wasn't there. She felt certain of that, but everything seemed to blur before her, and she put her hand out to the wall, less to support herself than to stop the hallway from its solemn dipping and swaying.

"I've enough whisky for a drink apiece," she said. "That's all. Then you'll have to go. Is Ray here?"

"That's what we came for," Wynekoop's heavy voice told her. "He said he'd meet us here. Come on, people." He started down the hall.

"Straight ahead," Caroline said vaguely. "Not in there; that's the coat closet—I think." She closed her eyes while the hall executed what felt like a neat complete revolution. "I'm dizzy. I took a sleep cap. Don't mind me." Useless to tell them to go home; they wouldn't. Part of their determined Bohemianism was their refusal to take a hint.

They didn't mind her. There were seven or eight of them, besides Wynekoop, and they all tried to push down the hall

together, half laughing, half quarrelsome, toward the living room. Caroline narrowed her eyes in an attempt to focus on them. Two or three women, one in slacks, a fat man, a slim man, Wynekoop. And a neatly dressed young couple, both in spectacles, looking embarrassed and very much out of place.

Wynekoop was the only one Caroline had met before. No, the fat man must be Thomas Hal—Hallam? Hylan?—an artist who did illustrations for the pulp magazines, careless ink and grease-pencil drawings of girls with their dresses torn half off and grim-jawed young men brandishing revolvers. But the others were strangers. One of the women gave Caroline a curious stare as she passed, from eyes that seemed abnormally large, oval, heavily ringed in black, like the eyes of a Byzantine portrait done in mosaics.

Wynekoop herded them down the hall, his busy glance missing nothing of the bedroom as he passed its half-open door. The hall seemed full of people for a moment; then they had drained out into the living room, all but one man, who stood in the doorway looking at Caroline with wry amusement. It was Paul Royce.

"What is this, a party?" he asked. "I saw your light was on, but I didn't expect to run into a mob scene." He nodded toward the living room. "Who are they?"

She reached for the hat he was holding in heavy, blunt-fingered hands. "Oh, Paul. I'm glad you came. I'd gone to bed, but they woke me up—" She shook her head a little. "I'm full of seconal. Help me get rid of them. They're Ray's friends."

Royce took his hat back and laid it down. "I see. Gate-crashers. Go on back to bed, Carrie. I'll throw them out for you."

"No. They'd only come back later. If they have a drink, they'll probably go quietly. But would you mix drinks? I'm too jittery." She pushed open the door at her elbow. "Here's the kitchen."

Wynekoop came down the hall, his heavy-lipped smile

very nearly a sneer. Caroline had to remind herself that the man couldn't help having that kind of a mouth.

"I'll help," he said. "Hello, Royce." His bright black eyes under their thick lids searched the tiny kitchen. Caroline realized suddenly that he thought Ray had been here with her. He would undoubtedly make an excuse to search the apartment presently. Well, let him. She went along the hall and into the noisy living room, wondering how soon her guests would go. But the next moment she saw something so appallingly wrong that everything else was jolted out of her thoughts.

Royce had mentioned that her lights were on. And he must have arrived only a moment after she admitted the crowd, so there should have been no lights visible from her apartment then. But she saw that there was a light—at her desk. Wynekoop or one of his friends could have switched it on, as they were turning on the other lamps now; but they could not have left her desk in such a litter. The neatly stacked manuscript she remembered noticing just before she went to bed was spread out, an open book lay upon it, and there were two pages in the typewriter with a carbon sheet between.

Memory of her dream came back with a dizzy swoop. The walls dipped, and for an instant she almost saw the toppling stacks of books, open pages fluttering by while she typed with despairing speed. But—had it been altogether a dream? Could she possibly have come in here in her sleep, and—no! She was no somnambulist; the flour-traps she had occasionally set in the hall had proved that to her own satisfaction. But memory was another matter. And memory had played her false so often lately. . . .

Yet no one could be *that* lost in abstraction. She couldn't have got out of bed, typed a page or two, and then forgotten all about it. Not unless her memory was wholly out of control.

No time to wonder about it now. She crossed the floor on quick, uncertain feet—she still felt half-drugged—and

switched off the desk lamp. Then she pulled around the high-backed upholstered chair where she always sat to type. Its fan-shaped back hid the desk.

Her uninvited guests had taken possession of the room. She was ignored. She sank into the chair and tried to relax. . . .

Then Paul Royce was bending over her, handing her a glass.

"I made it light," he said quietly. "Just as well, if you took a sedative, to go easy on the liquor."

"Bolt and a jolt," Caroline said vaguely. "Thanks, Paul. Oh, *damn* these people!"

His big hand closed over hers briefly, reassuringly, and then he had gone on to distribute the rest of the drinks. Her gaze followed him. It was, she thought, utterly incongruous how Paul Royce's sophistication sat easily on that loutish body.

For he was a big, raw-boned, ruddy-faced man with hands sprung a little at the joints like the hands of a laborer, and a neck checked at the back with the red, roughened furrows a farmer gets from walking behind a plow in hot sunshine. Paul had probably got his from walking behind a golf ball but the result was exactly the same. He would have looked far more natural in dusty overalls than in his beautifully tailored clothes tonight.

Sophistication was the wrong word for him, though. He had an uncommon dignity too deep-rooted to call by such an artificial term. Caroline was grateful for his presence now.

As for the others—

The women by the fireplace were accepting their drinks. Caroline watched them with dislike. The one in slacks was heavily made up, with some skill, as far as the chin, but her neck was unpowdered and yellowish. She wore a great many rings. The other woman had gray hair and should know better than to be here at all. The third, with the Byzantine eyes, had her back to Caroline and was smoking in deep drags, so that the smoke made a cloudy nimbus about her.

The neat young couple sat apart from the rest, side by side on a loveseat beneath the far windows, watching everything through their spectacles with a sort of embarrassed eagerness. They had pleasant faces. Probably an out-of-town pair who had struck up chance acquaintance with the group and did not quite know how to escape politely. Caroline could have told them that politeness would be wasted. Wynekoop and the rest had long ago given up the amenities as a handicap and substituted blunt persistence.

A thin young man in harlequin horn-rims was exhibiting a photograph to the group by the fireplace. The plump artist, Hylan, met Caroline's slightly unfocused stare and brought the picture over to her for approval. It was a skilfully composed and lighted photograph of a hand lying on some dark surface, fingers drawn up spider-like, while over and among them furry caterpillars crawled. The sharp focus showed every detail of their delicate haze of down and their innumerable legs.

"Good God," Caroline said faintly, and let the room swim out of focus. Hylan said something about a photographer of the grotesque, but she ignored him. A long time ago she had learned the trick of reacting automatically, letting her mind drift while her voice made the necessary noises. It was easier tonight, with that foggy, floating sensation cushioning her. She was introduced to the group—their names slipped out of her head again instantly—and someone asked her about Ray Kerry.

Well, he would come. She felt sure of that. He wouldn't have sent his friends to hammer at her door for nothing. But Paul Royce was here now. It wouldn't be so bad with at least one ally—just so long as she wasn't left alone with Ray.

Silent in her chair, she watched and wished they wouldn't fiddle with Jonas's things. Some of them were fragile. Others—there was that ugly little shrunken head with the sewed-up mouth. The woman with the yellow neck had picked it up and was studying it.

"What's this?"

Caroline said automatically, "A witch-doctor. His head, I mean. It's my uncle's. Jonas said they had to sew his mouth up to keep him quiet. He had a very bad temper."

"The witch-doctor or Jonas?" someone asked, and there was a flurry of knowing laughter in which all but the neat young couple joined. They sat quietly together, rather like two embarrassed avian spectators from a Disney cartoon. Hylan said, "What's this thing, Miss Hale?" and thrust something at her.

Caroline drew back so quickly that her glass splashed cold liquid on her knee through robe and pajamas. "It's a cannibal fork," she said, looking down with revulsion at the six-inch wooden object with its crude handle and its four wooden prongs, sharp-tipped, set in a square base.

"African?" asked a cool, flat voice from the fireplace. The woman with the Byzantine eyes was watching her.

"I don't know. My uncle brought it back from some trip—"

"On the Amazon they use a different shape," the woman said with authority.

Someone laughed and asked, "Ever eat with one, Mollie? They say it tastes like pork—"

The woman's laughter was flat as her voice. If she answered the question Caroline did not hear it. The sound of that name had been like a slap in the face. Mollie—Mollie Hathaway. She turned her head involuntarily, trying to see the face that Ray Kerry had found so much more interesting than her own. But it was shadowy over there, and Caroline's eyes would not focus.

Between her and the group by the fireplace a large figure loomed. She looked up with gratitude as Paul Royce pulled up a chair and sat down beside her. He was smiling, but he looked angry. Deliberately he turned his broad back to the staring guests and said, "When are you going to do another story for me, Caroline?"

Caroline had no idea what she said in answer. It didn't

matter. The important thing was to ignore the people at the other end of the room until she could pull herself together. They were listening as she talked on almost at random to Royce. Now and then a murmur of conversation sounded among them, and that unpleasantly knowing laughter. Caroline thought, "In a minute I'll get angry enough to throw them out. . . ."

Her mind was blank. But suddenly she became aware of the curious hush in the room. All the faces were turned to her watchfully, waiting. What had she said?

Royce prompted her as she hesitated. "Go on, Carrie. What about Ray?" And then she remembered. It was the Westchester house she'd been babbling about, Vic Curzon, the unexpected repayment of money from Ray. . . .

From the other end of the room, as she hesitated, Hylan called, "What's happened to Ray, anyhow?" and for no reason everyone in the room seemed to turn with one accord to the door, as if their concerted glance could bring him into the room.

But it was Pete Wynekoop who came in from the hall, carrying his glass.

"Nice place you've got here, Caroline," he said casually. "Is this all there is? What's that door over there?"

She understood instantly what he had been doing. "Jonas uses that room when he's in town," she said. "It's unlocked, if you want to finish the search."

"It's the cat in me," Wynekoop said, grinning. "I'm just curious." He crossed deliberately and pushed the door open, jingling the ice in his glass as he stared around the room inside.

Caroline said maliciously, "There's a secret panel by the window. No, the next one—that cupboard door." She waited until Wynekoop had swung it open expectantly, then gave him a small, triumphant smile. There was nothing inside, of course, except the blank green door of the old safe. Wynekoop turned to her in sudden anger, his clayey face flushing.

"Where's Ray?" he demanded. Everyone looked at her expectantly.

"I don't know," Caroline said, sounding more defensive than she had meant to. "*You* said you were meeting him here."

Wynekoop said in a bullying voice, "Now look here—" and there was a sudden, confusing flurry of motion. Paul Royce stood up quickly, interposing his bulk between Caroline and the rest. But Caroline was already halfway to her feet, the room dipping before her at the rapidness of her motion. She stumbled a little, knocking her chair backward. It jolted against the wall.

Wood thudded on wood. Startled, Caroline jumped aside, looking down at the little mahogany godling who occupied the shelf above her typewriter. She had never realized how heavy he must be, judging by the resounding thump. He lay there face up, grimacing at the ceiling, his garland of feather flowers settling after him in a snow of drifting color. The fall had snapped a thread somewhere and Caroline, watching the orange blossoms dissolve into colored fronds, was aware of abrupt, unreasoning anger that made her temples thud. She put both hands to her head to keep it from cracking in two with that sudden violent ache.

"Get out!" she heard herself saying in a thick voice. "Go on—get out of here!"

Her time-sense failed her then. She knew there was a rather startled silence and afterward motion and a babble of somewhat indignant talk, but how long it lasted she didn't know. She was amazed and rather pleased at her own anger. The headache it had brought on was blinding, but at least she had coped at last with these intolerable people. . . .

The thing that brought her out of it was the soft, distinct sound of a ticking somewhere in the old panels. The group which had assembled itself to leave paused, and Mollie Hathaway's dark-ringed eyes were the only thing in the room Caroline could see distinctly in that moment.

"That," Mollie declared in her flat, soft voice, "is the

death-watch. I've been hearing it ever since we came. We'll go, Caroline, but you won't be alone when we've gone. You know that, don't you?"

Time had paused again, and the room seemed to re-focus itself so that Mollie Hathaway and her oval-eyed stare occupied the center of an otherwise empty stage. Caroline made a tremendous effort and said, "I—I don't know what you mean and I don't care. I—"

"You won't be alone," Mollie went on softly. "Do you know what an incubus is? I think you have one. This is a good room for an incubus—full of old things, evil things. . . ." She let her voice die, and in the silence the death-watch knocking sounded again.

Paul Royce broke the tableau. His voice was aggressively matter-of-fact as he said briskly, "We'll all go. Caroline, you're tired. You need sleep. I'll give you a ring in the morning."

Pete Wynekoop's harsh voice broke into the automatic exodus that followed. "Just a minute. We're going. But before we do—Caroline, what about Ray?"

"Oh, damn Ray," she said, suddenly too exhausted to argue. "I saw him by accident today. He was drunk. We didn't even talk. Goodbye, Pete—please go."

"I'm going. You did talk to him, though. You made a date for later?"

His insistence was puzzling. But the easiest way was to answer. She said, "Five-thirty tomorrow. At the Quill. Good-bye."

Wynekoop nodded, satisfied. "Come on, everybody," he said. "Out!"

They went. Caroline followed them down the hall, only dimly aware that Paul Royce was turning out the living-room lights behind her. He was the last to go. On the threshold he hesitated, looking down.

"Okay?" he asked.

"Just dizzy. Sleep's all I need. Thanks for coming, Paul."

He patted her shoulder and smiled. "Good night."

She put the latch on with fumbling fingers, conscious of a faint, senseless triumph. Ray Kerry hadn't had his way after all. She was shutting him out with the rest. She had won. . . .

Somehow she must have made the bedroom before sleep overtook her, but she had no recollection of it.

3 . . .

THERE WAS no interval at all between sleeping and waking. When Caroline opened her eyes she could not for an instant believe the light slanting through her windows was not the electricity she had forgotten to switch off. But it was hot yellow sunshine.

She felt nervously alert and irritable, but she did not wake to her usual semi-forgetfulness. She did not have to clutch at random wisps of yesterday's remembrances for orientation. It was as if she had not slept at all. Physically she was still tired, and mentally the same urgent thoughts raced around in their well-worn track as if the night had given them no respite.

She sat up and looked at the clock. It was fuzzy with unfocus until she shook her head and blinked; then it showed an uncompromising twelve. So much sleep, she thought, and so little rest.

There was something she had to do. . . . She lay back, closed her eyes, and thought. For a long time it did not come. Then she had it. Jonas's house in Westchester. The repairs. The sooner she ordered that work begun, the sooner she might have paying tenants again, instead of the egregious Vic Curzon. She hung doggedly to that thought while she made a sketchy toilet and began heating water for coffee.

But she had forgotten again by the time she reached the living room. She stood there vaguely, looking around and trying to remember. There was a smell of stale smoke, a

spilled ashtray, and a flurry of colored feathers where the godling had fallen. The desk was as Caroline had left it last night. There was the manuscript spread out, the open book, and the pages inserted in the typewriter, half a page already finished.

Caroline blinked at the book. *A Warning to the Curious*, by M. R. James. Yes, that fitted. Almost any one of Dr. James's dark, shadowy tales could be dovetailed into this particular manuscript without much trouble, since it was an atmospheric detective story depending more on mood than on plot. She looked at the page in the typewriter. The first few sentences were familiar, but only those. They ran on smoothly into paragraphs which had been lifted verbatim from the printed pages of the book. A whole incident that did not belong in her story was in the process here of being inserted.

It broke off halfway down the page. There had been an interruption. Caroline sat down in the high-backed chair and let her fingers fall in place on the familiar keys.

"My memory can't be that bad," she thought. "I couldn't have typed this and then forgotten about it. Or—even if I could have—I wouldn't."

For it was senseless. She had no need to plagiarize. It would have been far easier to write such a scene extemporaneously than to fit it into the text from another source.

She drew her shoulders together and glanced behind her around the silent apartment. It was listening to her breathe. She could feel it like a tangible presence, sentient and watchful. It was Ray. Suddenly she knew that unmistakably. Ray Kerry. Odd that this room which he had not managed to enter last night, though he tried so hard, should be so pervaded with his presence. Coming events, she thought, and then said half-aloud, "He'll never get in here again. Not unless he beats the door down."

That reminded her of the lock. But, even if Ray had a key to the downstairs door, he couldn't have one to her apartment. He had denied it, naturally, when more than a

month ago she had accused him of entering in her absence, but she knew better than to take his word on such a matter. "All right, forget about it," she had said into the telephone. "But I'm getting the lock changed anyway." Then she hung up quickly before he could renew his demands to see her.

Why did Ray want to come back to her? She suspected that she knew. It was her reserve that had first attracted him, the mental independence she had fought so hard to achieve. And that reserve Ray had never broken down, though he had tried. Caroline shook her head slightly; she did not want to remember those eight months.

The telephone rang. A stray memory flashed into Caroline's head and out again; she picked up the receiver. "Caroline?" a harsh voice said too loudly. Her prompt imagination conjured up Pete Wynekoop's face to the last detail. The swarthinness, the bright, prying eyes, the perpetually sneering red-lipped mouth.

"Hello," she said. "Don't talk so loudly."

"This better? Well, then. What's become of Ray?"

"I don't know. I told you that last night."

"I don't believe you," Wynekoop said. "Break down and give."

"Goodbye," she said.

His voice sharpened with sudden anger.

"Hold on! I've got something to say to you."

"I don't think I want to hear it," she said carefully.

"Probably you don't. But you will. I noticed a few things up at your place last night. One thing especially." He stopped.

Caroline said, "After the way you went through the apartment, I'm surprised you didn't notice everything."

"I noticed enough. Even if you've got your final decree, I've got a hunch Ray might cause trouble if he knew. Suppose you—"

She hung up. Instantly the telephone rang again. Caroline snatched up the receiver, words spilling from her throat,

but it wasn't Wynekoop's harsh voice. A woman spoke pleasantly in her ear.

"I'm Julia Remington, Miss Hale."

"Oh?" Caroline said blankly.

"I'm not sure whether you'll remember me. My husband and I were at your party last night."

Caroline said, "Oh, of course," and saw again the modest, bespectacled couple sitting uncomfortably on the loveseat. The woman smallish and conservatively dressed, the husband large, mild-eyed.

At the other end of the wire embarrassed laughter sounded.

"I called partly to apologize for being there at all. We'd just met those people and we had no idea what they were dragging us into when we came. I mean, obviously you weren't expecting us—I felt terribly rude."

Caroline said absently, "Not at all." She was not listening with more than half her mind, for Wynekoop's phrases still echoed in her ears. What had he meant—or implied?

"—did want to talk to you—"

Caroline dragged herself back.

"Of course, Mrs. Remington. I'm glad you called." Amenities of civilization. Damn them. She wasn't glad. All she wanted was to be let alone, to think, and straighten things out. But the soft little voice chattered on relentlessly.

"—love to meet you—really meet you, I mean. I've read some of your stories. . . ." It tailed off hopefully.

Caroline said what was appropriate.

"Yes, well—you see, I'm down at the corner of your street now. In the drugstore. My husband had a business engagement up this way, and I came along hoping you'd forgive me for last night and let me stop in for a minute. I promise I won't stay. But there really is something I think you ought to know."

Caroline sighed. "I do have to go out very soon, but if you'd care to come up and have coffee with me . . ."

It was agreed. Caroline put down the telephone and listened to the silence flow back around her. She stared at

the desk, trying to recall that mysterious urgent necessity that had slipped so completely out of her mind. Finally she gave it up and went into the kitchen to make coffee. She was buttoning herself into a housecoat when the telephone rang once more.

This time it was Paul Royce.

"How are you, Carrie? I meant to call before, but I thought you needed your sleep—after last night. Did Ray ever show up?"

"No," she said. "And I hope he never does. I feel fine now, though."

"Well, that's good," he said doubtfully. "Something's come up. You know Tim Madison?"

"Oh, Lord," Caroline breathed. Madison was the editor of a string of pulp magazines, and the one who had caught her plagiarized story.

It had happened again.

Royce said, "I don't handle your pulp stuff, but Madison was asking me all about you. Whether I'd ever had any complaints about your work. Whether you're a plagiarist. What's up, anyhow?"

"The house," Caroline said madly. A chain of thoughts had instantaneously built themselves up in her mind, so that now she suddenly remembered what it was she had intended to do when she had got out of bed half an hour ago. Jonas's house—the telephone call to the contractor—

"What? Carrie, are you there—Caroline?"

"It's all right," she said. "I'd better call Madison. I'll tell you all about it when I see you. No time now. Later, Paul, later. Please."

He hesitated. Then—"Just as you say, Carrie," he told her, and rang off. She closed her eyes and waited, her hand on the telephone. *The Westchester house. Then Madison.* Mistrusting her own memory, she scribbled the words on a notepad on the desk, feeling a gust of annoyance at this concession to her weakness. She hoped she could make the calls before Mrs. Remington arrived.

One thing at a time. She deliberately tried not to think about Madison while she put in a long-distance call to the village in Westchester and talked briefly with the contractor. She had discussed the job with him already. Yes, he could begin work immediately. New pipes would have to be laid, and perhaps a retaining wall put in. *Yes, Miss Hale. We'll take care of it, Miss Hale.*

That was done, at least. It was a relief.

Now for Madison. She shrank a little at the prospect. But she dialed his office with steady fingers.

His smooth, pink, oval face was vivid in her mind. She thought it would color a little, with Madison's easy flush, when he heard her name. She could see the kind, light-lashed eyes and the brow wrinkling beneath the receding hair.

"I was going to call you, Miss Hale. I suppose Mr. Royce—"

"Is it another plagiarism?" she asked.

"Don't you know?"

She had not expected to tell him. But now, unexpectedly, she found herself talking freely of the things she had feared and suspected and wondered. It was a relief to hear them put into words. And, somehow, she had to justify herself to him.

When she had finished, there was a long silence. A cold pit opened in Caroline's stomach:

She said, "Well? You don't believe me, I suppose?"

Madison said, "I'll be damned if I know. It's happened before—"

"I told you about that! And I didn't put those pages in. I wouldn't."

"That's the queer part of it," Madison told her. "You're no amateur. And only an amateur would stick in a single plagiarized page or two. There's no sense to it. It's like putting one paste diamond in a string of real ones. If you can afford the diamonds you don't need to use any paste stones. But—I'll tell you what. I've got an idea. I'll have to

check on it, but it may be just possible to find out whether or not you typed those plagiarized sequences."

"It was all done on my machine, wasn't it?"

"Uh-huh. Just the same—you come in tomorrow. I've picked up a few tricks from our whodunit writers, and maybe I can get a line on this business. Meanwhile, I'll take your word for it that you didn't lift the stuff purposely. Or at all."

"I—I'm glad you—"

"It's just an idea," he said. "I've got your script in front of me now. There's something—well, come in tomorrow, will you?"

"Of course. I—"

"Wait a minute," Madison said suddenly. "Remember what I said a minute ago about one paste diamond in a string of real ones? There's a story in that somewhere. Kick it around. Maybe you can work up a yarn."

And that was all. The door buzzer was ringing as she hung up.

4 . . .

JULIA REMINGTON looked today even more than last night the neat young matron from out of town, wearing her vacation clothes. Seen in the daylight and unshadowed by Mollie Hathaway's presence, she was a young person of more vitality than Caroline had guessed. Her face was round and gay, her eyes brightly round behind round glasses.

"I do hope you'll forgive me," she began almost before she had cleared the stairs and seen Caroline in the open doorway. "Our coming last night without an invitation was bad enough, but doing it again today—"

"But I invited you," Caroline said. "For coffee, remember? Come in and have some." She shepherded her guest toward the living room, but Mrs. Remington paused at the tiny kitchen.

"Let me help. I'll carry the tray. Don't bother with sugar and cream on my account. Oh, I do like those yellow cups. . . ."

She chattered cheerfully until they were settled over their coffee. Caroline was surprised to find that she was enjoying herself. Julia Remington's presence seemed to aerate the apartment; that inexplicable, pressing weight had drawn back when she entered.

And so they talked, about trivialities. Caroline's stories—Mrs. Remington was an inveterate reader of magazines. The new shows. The stores. . . .

Caroline took a cigarette and pushed the box across the low table toward her guest.

"Well—one perhaps. I don't usually. Elwood never says so, but he doesn't really approve. He thinks I'm a baby—which is nice, because he indulges me."

Caroline thought of Ray Kerry. "It's nice," she said, "if it works out that way."

Tactfully, Julia Remington changed the subject. "What I really came for was to tell you something. Those people—last night. I don't know how we ever got in with them. Elwood and I were having dinner in the Village, a wonderful little Italian place, and afterward we thought we'd go to a night-club." She paused, studying the smoke from her cigarette, and shook her head wonderingly. "I still don't know how it happened. One minute the two of us were alone together at a table, and the next Elwood was buying drinks for all of them. Of course they're interesting people. But—I'd hate to have to see them every day!"

"They're wearing," Caroline agreed.

"Yes. I—I don't know whether it's any of my business . . ." She drank coffee, thought for a second, and then went on. "Just the same, I'll make it my business. I like you, Miss Hale. And I *didn't* like them. I'm sure you know more about them than I do, but they made me a little uneasy. Especially that woman—Hathaway?"

Caroline put down her cup, conscious of the beginnings

of nausea. She decided to put out her cigarette. Her stomach was tightening again.

Mrs. Remington said hesitantly, "After we left here last night, I heard her talking to Mr. Wynekoop. Only a few words. But it was about you; I caught your name. She was telling Wynekoop to be sure of—something—and—oh, I'm sure it's ridiculous. But it did startle me for just a second."

"Why? What was it she said?"

"I really don't know. We were all going down the stairs, and I overheard just a few words. Something about you and Mr.—Kerry? But it wasn't the words so much as the way Miss Hathaway looked. I'm sure she must be a drug addict or—or worse." Julia Remington leaned forward and put her hand tentatively on Caroline's. "I don't know anything about her, but if I were you, I'd look out for that woman. I think she must hate you very much."

Caroline sighed. "I can't help that. I'd be quite satisfied if she stayed away from me from now on. I've never met her before last night, you know."

The round little face assumed a look of incongruous shrewdness. "She didn't want to see *you*," Julia Remington said. "It was Mr. Kerry she wanted. She made no secret of that." There was a pause, and then Mrs. Remington patted Caroline's hand gently and withdrew her own. "It's not my affair at all," she said, in a lighter voice. "You probably know what it's all about, and you're probably laughing at my imagination. But I did want to tell you. I wouldn't have felt right if I hadn't. Now I won't say anything more about it."

Caroline said, "It was kind of you. I wish—" She stopped. What she wished was impossible. She had met Julia Remington only twice, and, friendly as the woman seemed, she was still merely an acquaintance. Caroline had an inbred aversion to using even her close friends as confessionals. She had known too many people who used her merely as an audience, and she was so tired of hearing self-pitying

monologues that she shrank from putting herself in the same position. No, if she asked anyone for help, it would be Bob O'Brien. But she liked Julia Remington.

The buzzer rang. Mrs. Remington said, "Oh, that must be Elwood. He promised to ring when he was ready to pick me up. I'll go down and—" She fluttered. "It was so kind of you, Miss Hale—"

"Wouldn't your husband like some coffee too?" Caroline asked, partly out of courtesy and partly because she wasn't anxious to be left alone.

It seemed that he would. The owlish young man appeared, with a briefcase dangling at the end of one long arm. "What nuisances we are," he said deprecatingly, going over to kiss his wife. "But the coffee does smell good. One cup, and then we'll have to go. Thanks, Miss Hale. Darling, I hope you apologized for our bad manners last night."

"I tried."

Caroline laughed. The atmosphere of suburbia was refreshing. She said, "You know, it's been years since I've known anybody who ever saw the need for apologizing for anything. Cream?"

"No, thanks. They're all phonies," Remington said thoughtfully. "Plain phonies. Once you build up a certain character, you can't apologize if that would be out of character. There's a man back home who's like that. A sort of a cheerful steam-roller. I know the type."

"People live too fast in New York," Mrs. Remington said. "They have to. There isn't time for manners."

Caroline said, "My uncle told me once that the most Chesterfieldian person he ever met was a Jivaro head-hunter in the Amazon country. He was the chief of his tribe. Jonas was his guest for four months, and he was treated like a prince. He had all the best beetles to eat, I suppose. Finally he found out the chief simply wanted his head for a trophy, but felt it wouldn't be polite to chop it off without giving Jonas the key to the village first."

Remington chuckled. "I've read your uncle's books," he said. "He's really been around. What was his latest? *The White Trail*?"

"Yes. The one about the Andes."

"Isn't another one about due?"

"Just about," Caroline said. "He went off to Indo-China a year ago, and dropped out of sight as usual. That's his way. When he turns up, he'll have a hatful of notes and more trophies—" She waved toward the cluttered walls.

"What's he like?" Mrs. Remington asked.

"Nice," Caroline said. "Like that little pig in Beatrix Potter's book, though—hopelessly volatile. But very nice."

The door-buzzer rang again. The sound seemed to lance through the relaxing euphoria that had begun to surround Caroline. The faint nausea came back.

"Excuse me," she said, and hurried into the hall.

She pressed the door-release and went out to lean over the railing. The street door was flung open violently. Someone began to run upstairs, feet thudding.

It wasn't Ray. Those footsteps weren't his. They were familiar, though.

Suddenly she knew. It was her uncle. Jonas never walked when he could run; he had always bounded up these stairs like a jack-rabbit. Even when he sprained his ankle doing that, a few years ago, he had not given up the habit. There was too much energy in that tough, strong body of his, and it had to emerge through acrobatics if no other way offered.

Then Caroline saw the bleached mop of reddish hair and the lined, grinning face looking up at her, and knew that it wasn't energy after all. It was imitativeness, exhibitionism. Vic Curzon had finally emerged from the Westchester house.

"Oh, damn!" Caroline said, and fled back to her door. Curzon chortled and cleared the last steps in a bound. They reached the door together, and he got his hand on the knob before she did. Caroline struggled for a moment, then let go and walked down the hall with dignity.

"Why bother?" Curzon asked, following her and swinging

a suitcase. "Anybody'd think you didn't want me to come in. It's no use struggling against destiny. I come like water, and like wind I go."

In the living room, Caroline made a hopeless attempt at introductions. "Mr. and Mrs. Remington, this is Victor Curzon."

Curzon favored everyone with a leer. Then he dropped his suitcase and swung to face Caroline.

"The hell with them," he said. "What's the idea putting Paul Royce on my tail?"

"We've really got to go," Remington said, rising. Curzon loosened his belt.

"Don't go on my account," he said politely. "Just talk quietly, that's all. I'm going to bed." He let his trousers drop around his ankles.

Caroline drew a long breath and moved toward the desk. "Excuse me," she said to the Remingtons. "I can usually get rid of Mr. Curzon by threatening to call the police. So far I haven't had to do it, but—"

Curzon stepped out of his trousers, kicked them up and caught them, and went into Jonas Bruno's room, laughing. The Remingtons were drifting toward the hall.

"We do have to go," Remington said. "Unless—"

His wife said suddenly, "Miss Hale, can we help? Would you like Elwood to—"

"Julia!" Remington said.

Caroline made a hopeless gesture. "I'm sorry. It's all right. He's just a nuisance, that's all. Thanks for coming to see me. I hope we'll get together again before you leave." She was only anxious now to face the immediate crisis and get it over. Once Vic became firmly entrenched it would be more difficult to evict him.

At the door Julia Remington squeezed Caroline's hand. "I'll call you," she said encouragingly. "I meant that, about helping, you know. Goodbye."

"Julia. Goodbye, Miss Hale. . . ."

They were gone. Caroline stood in the hall, thinking. Vic

Curzon wouldn't be too difficult to handle, but he would be wearing. She could remember the time, years ago, when she had thought him glamorous. Not any more. She knew now that the right word was immature.

She crossed the living room and pushed open the door to Jonas's room. Curzon had opened a window and pulled the dust-sheet from the bed. He lay there comfortably, his shirt and trousers slung over a chair, his shoes kicked into a corner. He opened one eye.

"Call me Wednesday," he said.

"I'm going to call the police. Or Paul Royce. Any preference?"

"Look. Royce talked me into moving out of Jonas's house, but he didn't invite me up to his place. That's why I came here. I've got to sleep somewhere, don't I?"

"Are you broke?"

"No. I'm just highly democratic. People should support me. It's a public duty to patronize the arts. Besides," he said lazily, "how will Jonas feel when he gets back and finds you've thrown me out of his house?"

Caroline said, "There's a limit even to Jonas's soft-heartedness. How do you think I could have rented the place with you living there? Anyway, I'm having those repairs done, and I knew you wouldn't let the workmen in."

"Quite right," Curzon said. "Hand me that aboriginal zither over there, will you?"

"Are you going to get out of here?"

Curzon extended a long arm and captured the crude, three-stringed instrument himself. He settled himself more comfortably and began to tune it.

"I'm waiting for Jonas to come back so I can write his new book for him," he remarked. "If I stay here, he'll know where to find me. Jonas won't mind."

"But I do!"

"Jonas is the boy who pays me, though," Curzon said cheerfully. "Lucky for me he's such an easy mark. I'd just as soon be in town right now, anyway. I want to do some

more research on Elizabethan erotic poetry, and Westchester isn't the best place in the world for that."

"Vic—"

"My book on the subject will appear any day now. Or perhaps it won't. I'd have to write it first. Listen." He plucked humming chords from the strings and sang in a smooth tenor:

*"There were three birds that built very low,
The first and the second cried, have at her toe. . . ."*

"Spring seven three one hundred, isn't it?" Caroline asked loudly as she went out.

"O never went Wimble in timber more nimble. . . ."

Curzon stopped singing. There was a creak of springs and a thump. He caught her at the telephone, a thin, muscular figure in striped shorts.

"Damned if I don't think you would call the cops," he said, almost admiringly. "Okay, I'll get out. You've talked me into it."

She waited at the desk, watching him. He grinned.

"I didn't really expect to get away with it, anyhow," he said. "But I figured it was worth trying. Give me time to pull my pants on. Somebody might see me in the hall and get the wrong idea about you."

Still Caroline didn't speak. Curzon laughed and went back to Jonas's room, hurdling a couch that lay in his path. He sang cheerfully:

"There were three birds that built on a pin. . . ."

After he left, Caroline found that he had drawn a caricature of her in red pencil on the white panel of the door. It had enormous eyes and corkscrew curls sticking out in all directions.

5...

SHE CAME out of the theatre into the gathering dusk, her mind half on the old film she had just seen—a Clark Gable revival, showing the familiar face incredibly young and naive and dashing—and half focused on her own multiple troubles. This was the first time she had been actually unable to stay alone in the apartment, even for a few hours. After Curzon had left, the watching emptiness closed in instantly, with all its illogical panic.

And she had the impression that someone had followed her from her door. It was nothing explicable. She had—felt—eyes upon her, that was all. *Next you'll be hearing voices*, Caroline told herself angrily.

She caught a double-decker bus and watched the shop windows as they slipped past in the twilight. Probably, consciously or unconsciously, all day she had been dreading the coming interview with Ray Kerry. She would feel better after it was over. And this time she would have Bob O'Brien beside her, his deceptively casual eyes alert for trouble. Suddenly she knew what had changed in Bob since the war. He wasn't afraid of consequences any more.

Ray never had been, in those blind furies of his. But now she thought Ray would meet more than his match. Yes, she would tell him that she intended to marry Bob O'Brien, and then—let Bob handle it.

The bus went past Rockefeller Center and the figure of Atlas upholding a hollow world, and Caroline climbed down the swaying stairs again and stepped into the evening crowd. She wondered if the sculptor had intended irony when he gave his giant an empty world to shoulder, great metal bands interlocking and enclosing nothing at all. Probably not. Probably only a mind as unsure as her own would read any significance there.

Someone, she thought, was still following her.

Someone invisible in the crowds. She felt a tug of relief when she reached the Quill and found an empty booth half-way down the long room. She ordered a Dubonnet and soda and looked around, hoping to see O'Brien, afraid that she would see Ray Kerry.

She saw neither of them, though there were a few familiar faces. The Quill was an unpretentious bar-restaurant serving good food and liquor to the artists, writers and editors who made it their gathering place. Signed portraits and a frieze of book-jackets autographed by their authors were the only indications of the profession the bar catered to. It had a pleasant atmosphere, though, an oasis in the center of a neurosis-ridden city. Perhaps that was because here neuroses were frankly recognized, often cherished and bragged over.

A fat man came through the door and stood looking around. It was Tom Hylan, the artist. He caught Caroline's eye and came forward, grinning apologetically, a heavy, awkward man who knew he was awkward and spent a lifetime of automatic apology for it.

"Hello," he said. "Hope we didn't keep you up too late last night. How are you?"

"Just fair," Caroline said, wondering if Hylan was the one who had been following her. She felt dubious about that. Hylan was distinctly not the type. He would make a thoroughly incompetent shadow, she thought, as he turned and managed to blunder into the waiter bringing her drink.

"Dubonnet and soda, miss?"

Caroline nodded. Hylan said, "Mind if I join you, Carrie? There's no room anywhere else. Uh—rum and coke."

"I'm expecting someone—"

"I'll clear out when he comes," Hylan said, sitting down. "My feet hurt. I've got a hangover. And I've been running around seeing art editors all day." He lifted a huge portfolio to the seat beside him.

Caroline studied the heavy, sweating face across the table. Hylan simply looked like the tired fat man he was. He

rubbed a palm across his plump cheeks and sighed.

She said, "Tom, did you know I was coming here to-night?"

He seemed surprised. "Me? No. Why?"

"Oh—no reason. I was . . . Bob!"

He had come up unobtrusively, a slim, blond, lazy-looking man in a dark blue suit that fitted him very well. His hand touched her shoulder gently.

"Bob. Do you know Mr. Hylan—"

"Sure. How are you, Hylan?" O'Brien slid into the seat beside Caroline and reached for her drink. He took an experimental sip.

"Hello, O'Brien," the fat man said, suddenly alert. "Sure, we know each other, Carrie. He even buys my pictures sometimes." Hylan paused, smiled tentatively, and asked, "Got anything open now?"

O'Brien turned to the waiter who brought Hylan's drink.

"Scotch and soda," he said. "It's preventive medicine for me. I figure some day I may have to have a leg amputated when there's no anaesthetic handy, so I'm drinking against the day. Ounce of prevention."

"I can't drink when I'm working," Hylan said. "Right now I'm between assignments. Did they tell you I was up at the office today, O'Brien?"

"Sorry I missed you. I had to go down to the printers. Want to come in tomorrow? About four suit you?"

"Four will be fine. I'd like to do a cover, if you've got something."

O'Brien said, "We're bought way ahead on covers, but I'll check up. I think there's a couple of double-spreads you could take on. Maybe you could bring in some roughs with you tomorrow." He pulled out a pencil and began to sketch rapidly. Hylan bunched his fat shoulders over the table and craned his neck to watch.

"This might do it," O'Brien said. "There's no girl interest in the story, so you might spot in a cheesecake portrait in the background. Scene's an art gallery, so it'll fit. But try

to get a cleaner line. Don't use drybrush again."

"Double spread on this?"

"Yeah. Now the other one—look here—"

Caroline sipped her drink and stopped listening. Part of her mind was tensely waiting and watching, ready for the inevitable conflict that followed all her meetings with Ray Kerry. And part of it moved thoughtfully and silently around and around a curious idea. . . . Incubus, Mollie Hathaway had said. It was ridiculous, of course. The Hathaway woman was simply drawing on her voodoo background to frighten Caroline with the first thing that had come into her head. But somehow, the apartment had been dreadfully oppressive ever since last night. . . .

"Hey."

She looked up, startled. Hylan had gone. O'Brien was watching her, his blue eyes amused.

"It must have been a fascinating thought," he said. "I called you once, I called you twice . . ."

"I would not listen to advice," Caroline finished. "But I did, Bob. I'm here."

He nodded. "But Ray isn't, I gather. He's late. I hope to God he remembered this appointment. When I made it, he was in quite a state."

"Drunk?"

"And dithering," O'Brien said. "He jumped six feet in the air and came down screaming when I tapped his shoulder. Guilty conscience, no doubt. How do you feel?" He turned to face her, and his gaze was very steady and slightly curious.

Caroline said, "Oh, don't ask me. I'm mixed up. After last night—"

"What happened?"

She told him, and a little more as well. O'Brien listened quietly, his lids lowered, his face expressionless.

"Well?" he said when she had finished.

"That's what I was going to ask you. What do you think?"

"Somebody must be getting into your apartment and

typing those plagiarized pages. And leaving grapes and things around to worry you."

"I had the lock changed. And I always put on the chain, too. Nobody could get in—"

He laughed softly. "Every locked room's a public thoroughfare. You've written enough whodunits to know that. What about the windows?"

"I lock them. And there are screens. Don't you imagine I've thought about that possibility? I've gone over the apartment with a magnifying glass. Nobody's tampered with the windows. I'm sure of that."

"Sure you've told me everything? All the details?"

"Everything I could think of."

"Well, it isn't likely you did those things yourself—leaving the water running and so forth—more than a few times. And if you'd typed those plagiarisms, you'd have remembered *that*."

Caroline said nervously, "But I'm not sure! My memory's got so bad lately, Bob. I have forgotten a lot of things and remembered them later—"

O'Brien revolved his glass slowly. He didn't look at Caroline.

"I've a solution," he said. "Marry me. Tomorrow, in Greenwich. We'll go down to Cuba or somewhere and spend our honeymoon building sand castles."

Caroline didn't answer.

O'Brien sighed.

"She would not listen to advice. . . . All right. I'll take care of Ray Kerry when he shows up." Suddenly his face looked bleak. "That should help a bit, eh?"

Caroline said, "Yes, Bob. It'll help a lot. But I don't want to use you as a crutch."

"It will be a pleasure," he remarked, and his casual tone couldn't disguise the anger underneath. "I don't like your ex-husband very much, Carrie."

"Who does?" Pete Wynekoop's harsh voice asked. "Who could?"

He sat down across from Caroline and O'Brien, his clayey lids drooping, tiny beads of perspiration above the hair-line mustache. He was carrying a glass, and he lifted it, drank, and grimaced before he spoke again.

"Excuse me for butting in," he said, with enough of a curve to his mouth so it didn't sound like an apology at all. "I got tired sitting back there and watching you. I thought you said you were meeting Ray here tonight."

"I thought so too," Caroline said. She introduced the two men. Wynekoop put his chin in one hand and his elbow on the table and surveyed O'Brien with dislike.

"You wouldn't know me," he said. "You wouldn't remember my by-lines." It was a question stated flatly, but the hope in it sounded faintly through the words. O'Brien shook his head.

Wynekoop said, "Well, you wouldn't have known Chicago in my day. I almost landed the Pulitzer award in Thirty-one." He glanced toward the bar where Caroline recognized a well-known gossip columnist holding forth. Wynekoop's sneer deepened.

"Back in those days—" he said. "You don't get news like that any more. Good, bloody murders, with red ink splashed all over the place and a babe in a love nest with her head smashed in—that's headline stuff. I was one of the first guys in O'Banion's flower shop after they got him."

Caroline watched him, wondering a little. He wasn't as brash as usual. Perhaps his surroundings depressed him; the Quill was patronized by successful professionals like the columnist at the bar. And Pete Wynekoop wasn't successful these days. His gory Chicago fame had passed with Capone and Diamond and O'Banion. Red ink fades fast. Wars come and go. New styles come; new writers win the Pulitzer prizes. The old ones disappear; they drift to other cities and end up as hangers-on to third-rate cultists like Mollie Hathaway. . . .

"Ray isn't coming," Caroline said with sudden certainty.

Wynekoop looked at her sidewise. O'Brien murmured something unintelligible.

"It's no use," she said. "He's over an hour late now. He wouldn't have missed this chance to make a scene with me. He won't come now; there's no use waiting any longer."

Wynekoop struck the table a soft blow with his fist. "Where is he? I've got to see him!"

"I don't know, Pete. Honestly I don't."

Wynekoop glowered; O'Brien took out his wallet and laid a few bills on the table. Caroline became busy with lipstick and mirror.

"Caroline, I want to talk to you," Wynekoop said.

She paused, watching her mouth in the mirror. "All right."

"Privately."

"Mr. O'Brien can hear anything you've got to tell me."

"No," Wynekoop said doggedly, and finished his drink. He wiped his red lips and scowled. "I'll tell you alone or not at all."

"Then it'll be not at all. I don't want to hear anything Mr. O'Brien can't hear."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," Wynekoop said, with unpleasant emphasis. "Listen. I want to lay some cards on the table. I want to let you in on some angles about Ray and Mollie and a few other people. Maybe you'd just as soon Mr. O'Brien didn't hear — everything — I've got to say." He nodded slowly, half-smiling. Then he winked at Caroline.

He had managed with a few words, a gesture, to create an air of tight embarrassment around the table. Caroline could feel O'Brien's withdrawal beside her. She turned toward him, furious with Wynekoop, seeking something—she wasn't sure what—in his face, but Wynekoop's heavy, suggestive voice went on ruthlessly.

"Maybe Mr. O'Brien doesn't know all about Ray Kerry. I'd just as soon make it a private talk, for your sake as well as mine, Caroline."

Caroline said angrily, "It won't be—"

But O'Brien was standing up. "I've got to go," he said. "I

guess you're right, Carrie. Ray won't show up now. Better luck next time."

"Bob," she said, and stopped.

His hand touched her shoulder. Was there some hidden significance in that slight pressure? Was he advising her, warning her? Did he want her to find out what Wynekoop had to tell?

She relaxed. O'Brien said, "I'm going home. Got some work to plan out. Call me when you're free, will you? Glad to have meet you, Mr. Wynekoop."

"See you," Wynekoop said, shaking hands ungraciously. Then O'Brien's lean back and yellow head was moving away toward the door.

Caroline looked after him till he had vanished. She sighed.

"All right, Pete," she said. "You couldn't have embarrassed me more if you'd tried, and I'm sure you were trying. Hard. Now what is it?"

Wynekoop met her eyes, hesitated, and began studying his black-rimmed nails. "Long story. I'll tell you a few things. Then you'll tell me a few things. Or just one thing; that's enough. Where's Ray?"

"In hell, for all I care!" Caroline flared. "If that's all—" She started to rise. Wynekoop gripped her wrist.

"No, wait. It's important. I mean that. You don't know the set-up, do you?"

"What set-up? I don't even know what you're talking about."

"I wonder," Wynekoop said slowly. "I wonder just how dumb you are, Caroline. . . . Well, never mind. After you've heard what I've got to say, you may want to change your plans. Especially if they're mixed up with Ray's. You know he's in trouble, don't you?"

She stared at him. "No. No, I didn't know. But it doesn't surprise me. What is it?"

"A long story," Wynekoop told her. He stood up. "Let's get out of here. Hungry?"

"No."

"Well, I am. I need to get some food in me. You see—" Incongruously he snorted with laughter. "I'm a little drunk. Not much, though. But enough so I know it. I want to be sober when I lay things on the line. Come on, let's find a restaurant, and then we'll settle this."

Caroline let him guide her out to the street and into a cab in the taxi-rank at the curb. Wynekoop's proximity wasn't pleasant, but that didn't matter. Apparently he knew something important, and he was willing to talk. Besides, Bob had urged her to follow this up—or had he, after all?

But if Wynekoop could give her a few answers, it would help. Perhaps he might even be able to give her some weapon against Ray Kerry. What trouble had Ray got into now?

"Washington Square," Wynekoop told the driver. He leaned back and shut his eyes. Lights from a cross-street flashed briefly into the cab; his face, relaxed now, was tired and strained. His armor was down. The red, sneering lips weren't sneering; they sagged. He looked tired, tired, body and mind and soul. She could read the weariness of years of gradual failure stamped rather terribly on those unguarded features.

She looked away quickly.

They were crossing Washington Square when Wynekoop woke up. Caroline became conscious of his dull, questioning regard.

"Where's Ray?" he asked thickly.

"Pete, for heaven's sake—"

"I could tell him a few things about you, you know," he went on, only his mouth and his eyes alive in the gloom of the cab. "He's still jealous."

"Let him be."

"It's nothing to me who's sleeping with you," Wynekoop began, but paused at Caroline's sudden, angry movement. "Okay," he said, shrugging. He leaned forward. "Turn left at the next corner. That's it. Now stop."

Caroline waited on the sidewalk while Wynekoop paid

the driver. She realized she was in for an unpleasant interview. But it was helpful to know that Bob O'Brien's apartment was only six blocks or so from here, on the other side of the Square. He was probably there by now. If Wynekoop became too annoying—

"Chinese dinner, eh?" Wynekoop said, coming back and taking her arm. Above them a tall brownstone had a neon sign splashed across its façade, announcing Chinese-American dinners, one flight up. "That ought to sober me up fast. Then we can get down to business."

Caroline said thinly, "All right," and followed him through the open doorway. His big hand tightened on her arm as they mounted the stairs. Directly before them lay a long hallway, with another flight at its end, seen dimly in the light of a flyspecked bulb. The air smelled of cooking.

Wynekoop headed for the stairs. She tried to pull free.

"You're going the wrong way, Pete."

"Second floor," he said. "Come on."

"But—"

"Next floor," he said dully, without pausing. "Tell you about Ray."

They were halfway up the flight already. It had not occurred to her yet to be frightened; the fright was there, but buried beneath anger and a feeling of self-ridicule. What was she worried about? Wynekoop was drunker than he had seemed, that was all. . . .

"Let go of me," she said sharply, pulling back.

Another hallway stretched before them, the third flight of stairs at its end. The smell of cabbage and dust was stronger here, the light dimmer. Wynekoop abruptly lunged forward, so that Caroline had to run or be dragged. As she caught her breath for a scream, he paused, swung her around, and stood motionless, blocking her retreat.

As in the taxi, only his eyes and mouth seemed alive. There was something strangely avid about his poised immobility.

She drew back one involuntary step, and regretted that

immediately, for at her retreat Wynekoop's dark bulk stirred and moved. He took a step toward her.

Her stomach knotted; her nerves betrayed her. Sheer panic dried her throat. It was useless to be logical, to say that nothing could happen to her here. The dun-papered walls had become the walls of a cave, closing in slowly; and the closed doors along the hall were suddenly hideously menacing in their blank suggestion.

Then the door at her shoulder clicked and swung wide.

Relief blew over her like a warm wind. Wynekoop was, after all, nothing but an annoying drunk, to be handled easily with firm tact. She was no longer so frighteningly alone with him in this dim, odorous passage. Her taut nerves relaxed as she glanced toward the open door.

Mollie Hathaway stood on the threshold.

6...

LAST NIGHT, somehow, hadn't counted. Caroline had been too confused and drowsy then to get more than superficial impressions of her guests. The face she saw now was familiar, but it was the face of a complete stranger too.

It was Byzantine. The black-ringed eyes had a thin rim of white showing all around the irises. There was that look so common among Spanish women of lips drawn tight over forward-thrusting teeth, a quality too delicate to call prognathic. It gave Mollie a look of paradoxically fastidious coarseness, as if she had come up from the Neanderthaler a little faster than the rest of humanity, so that some of the subhuman qualities clung on in spite of the overbred fineness of her features.

She had a thin nose with a very delicate arch to it, and a skin like satin, drawn tight over a face that looked boneless

except for the arch of the nose and the submerged thrust of the teeth beneath the thin, pale lips. And she was looking at Caroline with a rather terrifying lack of expression.

"You're early," she said.

Caroline stepped back, sensed Wynekoop's nearness, and felt a long shudder tremble through her body. She took a deep breath and tried to keep her voice steady.

"I don't understand this," she said. "I don't know what you're trying to do. But I'm leaving. Now." She stopped, because the words had begun to choke her. The slim, silent figure in the doorway, the bulky form of Wynekoop, both of them seemed to be approaching her imperceptibly, not walking forward, but gliding as though the floor underfoot had begun to slide. A sense of complete unreality made it difficult even to think. She had the fantastic impression that she was a spectator at a play—no, more than a spectator, for as long as she made no move, this tableau would hold, perhaps forever. . . .

She forced herself to walk toward Wynekoop, tension mounting within her as she came closer and he didn't move. This was nightmare. Perhaps, before she touched him, he would slide backward on that shifting floor, or perhaps she would walk right through him. . . . Was his dark outline actually becoming less tangible, or was it merely imagination?

Imagination. One more step, and she would be close enough to touch him. The cords in her throat had grown taut for a scream, she realized. In another moment . . .

"Never mind," Mollie said behind her. "It doesn't matter. Get out of the way, Pete. Let her go if she wants to."

Wynekoop looked at Mollie over Caroline's head. They exchanged a silent question and answer. Then the man stepped aside, his lip flattening in a sneer under the thin mustache.

"You've probably frightened her," Mollie said, with such casual contempt in her tone that anger began to replace Caroline's fear. She paused. Her retreat to the stairs lay open, and she could walk down them and out of this build-

ing, with the derisive stares of Mollie and Wynekoop leveled at her back.

She might have run away from Wynekoop, but she knew that, for the sake of her own self-respect, she couldn't let herself run away from Mollie Hathaway.

She got her face and voice under control before she turned. She even managed a smile. It wasn't too convincing, but the hall was dim. She let her stare move from Wynekoop to the woman, and then she said, "Of course he frightened me. He practically dragged me upstairs and nearly pulled my arm off. I was wondering if he'd started on a career of homicide." She rubbed her shoulder gently and waited. The next move was up to them.

Mollie made it. Her narrow shoulders lifted and fell slightly. She said, "Pete's ingenuity must have failed him at the last moment. I asked him to bring you here. I wanted to talk to you. But I didn't tell him to drag you by the hair. I'm sorry he frightened you."

Caroline said, "I have a telephone. If you wanted to see me—"

Mollie made a soft, impatient sound. She took a step back.

"Do you want to come in? You don't have to. Stay or go, I don't care. I haven't much time now anyway; we're going to have a . . . séance. But there's time enough for me to say what I want to about Ray Kerry."

Caroline looked at Wynekoop. "I thought you were the one who wanted to tell me something."

"It's up to Mollie," he said. "It's not my affair."

Caroline said, "Miss Hathaway, I don't really want to talk about Ray. I know I don't want to see him again. We were divorced two years ago. What he's done since then is his affair, not mine."

Mollie said, "Come in or go." She stood back from the door, and Caroline lifted her chin very slightly and crossed the threshold.

She half expected something exotic—divans and pierced-

iron lamps and deep-piled Eastern rugs. But if this was Mollie's home, the exoticism dwelt solely in Mollie herself. It was a dreary place, a duplicate of many thousand others as dreary, and with a patina of deeply incised grime that seems peculiar to the furniture of furnished apartments. And in Mollie's living room there was no evidence of human living. The room must have looked like this the hour she moved in; she had added nothing to prove her tenancy. The place had the same flatness as her flat, indifferent voice.

But that voice did have an undercurrent of power in check, as if there ran beneath its surface a tremendous latent resonance which she did not choose to release ordinarily. The very sound of her voice was faintly insulting with that reservation. Caroline was reminded of some parallel from childhood, and groped for it as she followed Mollie across the room.

"Well, sit down."

Caroline sat down gingerly on the dun-colored sofa. "I don't want to delay your séance," she said, and Mollie nodded, regarding her guest speculatively from eyes like two flat mirrors which, like mirrors, reflected only spurious depths. It was that which lay before them, Caroline realized, that gave the bright surfaces life, not anything behind. They had no more depth than the thickness of glass.

"You won't," Mollie said. "Pete, go take care of things." She waited till Wynekoop went out of the room, and then sat down in a sagging, grayish chair opposite Caroline.

And this was Ray Kerry's mistress. She looked remarkably untidy. That delicate face had a fineness of line that made Mollie Hathaway's straggling hair and loose robe seem all the more incongruous and disheveled. She looked as if she had just arisen from a nap. Her black hair was rumpled and swept back with lazy indifference from the narrow brow. She wore a faded terrycloth robe cut like a man's, the belt wound twice around her thin waist. The sleeves were pushed up on long, thin arms, bonelessly round

in spite of their thinness, and her bare feet were thrust into cheap straw huaraches.

"All right," Mollie said. "Where do we start?"

Caroline said coolly, "Isn't that up to you?" On a sudden impulse she added, "Why don't you start by telling me where Ray is?"

Mollie's eyes widened a little. Her colorless mouth twitched, and when she spoke there was just a hint of resonance in her voice that gave Caroline a feeling of absurd satisfaction. It implied that she had startled Mollie into using a little of her latent personality.

"You're reading from the wrong script," Mollie said. "That's my line." And if her depthless eyes had seemed intent before, they were unwavering now as they watched Caroline's face for the answer.

Caroline sat straighter on the dusty sofa.

"I don't know."

"You saw him yesterday."

"For about a minute, in a bar. I didn't even speak to him."

"Not even about money?" Mollie asked, and gave a small, satisfied nod as Caroline drew in her breath. "I thought so. Where is it?"

There was a long pause. Then, unexpectedly, Caroline heard herself laughing. The relief was tremendous. She had been expecting—almost anything; now the answer was almost ridiculous.

"Did he steal it from you?" she asked. "That would be like Ray. Well, you'll get it back. If you've a blank check around, I'll write it out now."

Mollie sat staring, frowning. She didn't answer.

"If I'd known it was your money, I wouldn't have taken it," Caroline said. "I'm sure you know that. If you've a checkbook—"

"Wait a minute," Mollie said. "I don't think . . . How much did Ray give you?"

"He didn't give it to me," Caroline said. "I loaned him

four hundred dollars over two years ago. I'd written it off as a bad debt. I wish it had stayed that way. If you'd told me last night what had happened, there'd have been no need for all this mystification."

"Wait!" Mollie snapped her fingers with a startlingly loud crack. "Look at me."

Caroline met the insistent stare steadily, and with rising irritation. She was near enough to see the intricate pattern of the irises and her own tiny image motionless in Mollie's pupils. Mollie said, "You put it over very well, you know. But I don't believe a word you say."

"All right," Caroline said flatly. "I'll mail you a check tomorrow, then."

Mollie said, "You can keep the four hundred if you'll tell me where Ray is. But you can't keep the rest. If you want Ray back, you can have him. But damn it, he can't finance the affair on my money!"

Caroline felt the blood sinking from her cheeks. She bent her head, opened her purse, and found her bankbook. She opened it and held it out for Mollie to see.

"I deposited four hundred dollars today," she said, clipping the words. "Here's the proof, since I'm sure you won't believe me without it. I don't know how much Ray stole from you, but I got only four hundred dollars, and Ray owed me that. You'll get it back; I don't want it. I don't want Ray either. Thanks for offering him to me, but I don't want him back. You've had him for two years. Keep him."

"I'm not that forgiving," Mollie said. "All I want is the money. Ray's been useful to me in my work, but he's not indispensable. And Pete Wynekoop will be glad to step into his shoes."

Her work? Caroline remembered what she had heard about Mollie Hathaway's cultist activities. So Ray had become a stooge for a fake-religion outfit!

"How much was it, exactly?" she asked.

"Don't you know?"

There was no use protesting. "No," Caroline said patiently.

"Well—a large sum. I had it in a safe in my bedroom. Ray very cleverly learned the combination. I don't know when he found it out, but he may have waited to rob me until I had enough in the safe to make it worth the risk. It is a risk, you know," she said, her voice changing timbre. "I have a few resources."

"I'm sure you have. I hope you'll have Ray beaten up thoroughly. He usually picks his victims carefully—women. I found out what Ray was like within eight months. It's taken you two years."

"I knew what he was like when I first met him," Mollie said. "We lived together before he married you. Didn't you know that?"

"Yes, I knew it," Caroline lied.

"Of course." Mollie smiled. "Well, I want the money, that's all. Will you help me to get it back?"

Caroline said, "It's something between you and Ray. Some women can divorce their husbands and then go on being friendly with them. I can't do that. I divorced Ray because I disliked him, and there's no reason I should go on seeing people I dislike."

Mollie said, "That wasn't the real reason you divorced him. If it were, I'd be more convinced by your attitude now. You were afraid of him, weren't you?"

"Perhaps you know him better than I do. I hope so."

"You were afraid of him," Mollie repeated. "That's why you might go back to him."

Caroline shook her head and smiled. "You're wrong. I'm not masochist enough to admire a Heathcliff. Marriage means something more to me."

"I didn't mention admiration. There isn't any word for what I mean. Love might do, if it hadn't become identified with romantic sentiment. But when someone mentions love now, the automatic reaction is to think of candied violets and *Blossom Time*. Love!" Her lips curved scornfully. "You

don't know what you're talking about. You've probably never let yourself think about your own feelings."

"You're wrong," Caroline said. "I often think about them. But I hardly ever discuss them."

Mollie leaned back, her manner almost casual. "Why?" Good taste? If people had less good taste and more honesty, there'd be fewer divorces. You can't build on a foundation of moonlight and kisses. Not when the emotion goes back to prehistoric times, to the rites of the Magna Mater and the Corn Kings and Pan. But probably you're right. If you want to be quite safe, stick to conventional romance. Ray isn't safe, you know—for you."

"I don't want Ray back," Caroline repeated.

"No? You may be more masochistic than you realize. The blood's older than the brain, and those old rites and religions weren't based on the brain. That's not superstition, either. Biologists talk about hormones now, but it's the same thing. There used to be more honesty, and wider horizons. Now the horizons are still there, but they've been walled out. You're not supposed to look at them. And people like you, Caroline, are safer if you stay inside the walls."

There was a long silence. Mollie let her hands drop, relax, in her lap.

"But outside the walls—" she said. "There's terror. For you. Not for everyone, of course. Some are strong enough to endure the old, deep passions of the blood. Passions civilization's afraid of today. And I'm not talking Krafft-Ebing or Gestalt psychology. A few thousand years ago people could reach the peaks of emotion. Centaurs and satyrs, Jupiter in his shower of gold, Hecate, legends of demons—it's all symbolism. Do you know what an incubus is?"

"The modern definition?" Caroline said. "Indigestion."

"That's convenient, isn't it? But I didn't mean the modern definition. I mean the original one. The invisible night-demon that comes to women in the dark and has intercourse with them."

Caroline said, "I can see we're not going to get anywhere. I'll send you a check tomorrow. Now we're simply wasting time."

"No—wait," Mollie said. "I'll be finished in a minute. Listen to me. I mentioned those peaks of emotion. What I meant was the—the complete marriage, the absolute intimacy between two people. Perhaps one couple in a thousand or ten thousand ever achieve it. But everyone's aiming at it unconsciously. It can be dangerous, when there's someone like Ray Kerry involved. You see—it isn't a normal emotion at all. It's like overloading a wire with electric current. Not many wires can stand that. Ray would be very bad for you."

Caroline said impatiently, "I've already told you—"

"I know what you told me. And I know what you think about me, too. You believe I'm running a fake metaphysical-cult racket. In one way, you're right. My séances are never on the level if I can help it." Mollie paused. Her opaque eyes darkened. "Sometimes I can't help it," she said.

"You don't need to justify your—business ethics. I don't care how you make your money. I don't personally believe in spiritualism, but it's your affair." Caroline stopped, because she saw Mollie had not finished.

She said, "I don't like to talk about it at all, because it never sounds convincing, and discussing it rather—spoils things, somehow. I'm not pretending to be a medium or a sensitive or any of those catchwords. But psychology has a word for it: hyperacuity. I happened to be born with a certain sense abnormally developed. Some people can see in the dark. Others can hear for long distances. In some kinds of insanity, you get this hyperacuity. Well, that's what I have, but it's not tied up with any physical sense. Except the sense of touch, but it's more than that. Something happened to me a good many years ago, a rather violent emotional experience, and ever since then—I've been drunk."

Caroline stared. Mollie nodded.

"Yes, I'm drunk now. I don't show it any more. But I'm always drunk. I couldn't stand it otherwise. Imagine the

slightest breeze feeling like a mild electric current. Imagine a cold spell scraping saw-blades over my skin. I'm—flayed alive. Alcohol helps. It's the only thing that does help. Without it, I couldn't even walk. Walking would be like the bastinado. I don't want sympathy; I get along very well. I simply wanted to explain that I am hypersensitive."

"I'm sorry," Caroline said.

The woman ignored that. "I mentioned an incubus. I felt something last night, when I saw you. It wasn't temperature or wind or anything like that; nobody with a normal skin would have felt anything. I did, though. Something—oppressive. I don't know what it was. It might have been Ray Kerry, but I don't know. I've felt that kind of thing only once before. . . ."

Incubus? Caroline felt her throat tighten. She, too, had felt that subtle difference in the air of the apartment; it had driven her out of it today.

"I taught Ray a good deal," Mollie said. "He never was safe for you, but now he's less safe than ever."

"So that's it," Caroline said abruptly. "We keep coming back to the same point. Obviously I'll never be able to convince you that I don't intend to take Ray back."

Mollie studied her thoughtfully. "Ray was drunk yesterday," she said. "He was worried, too, because he knew I'd find out what he'd done. He's been talking about you a good deal lately. He hinted there was a reconciliation in the wind."

"He was lying—naturally."

"Yesterday he was doing some more talking. That happened to come to my ears; I told you I've good connections, didn't I? He was drunk. He said you were going to elope with him."

"He was still lying. It's the first I've heard about it."

Mollie said, "I had some people looking for Ray yesterday. They didn't have any luck. That's why I came up to your apartment last night—to see if Ray was there, or if you knew where I could find him."

"Then he didn't invite you and the rest to come?"

Mollie shook her head. "No, it was my idea. It didn't work out. But . . . I think Ray may come here tonight."

Caroline blinked. "Here? To you?"

"Not to me. Ray's drawn to you, Caroline, very strongly. I'm not sure whether he loves or hates you; perhaps there's no great difference. But he wants you. Ever since you came in here, I've felt the same . . . oppression I felt in your apartment last night. I know it doesn't come from you. You're too . . . normal. I think it may come from Ray. Don't you feel it?"

"No." Caroline reached for her purse. "If Ray does come here, I want to be somewhere else."

"You might be safer here," Mollie said.

"I—"

"You're afraid of Ray, but Ray's very much afraid of me, Caroline. If you go now, he may follow you. He probably will. If you're telling the truth about how you feel toward Ray Kerry, you've a good chance now to get rid of your incubus. Let him come here, looking for you. Let me handle him. I can promise you that he won't bother you any more."

Caroline said quietly, "Do you mean what I think you do?"

"No. I wouldn't need to kill him. I wouldn't do any more than talk to him." She paused and turned her head toward the closed door. Then strangely, in quite a horrible way, she slid her long eyes sidewise beneath the heavy lashes and looked at Caroline over her shoulder, through the tangle of unkempt hair.

"Are you afraid of me, Caroline?" she asked in a very soft voice.

Caroline felt the gooseflesh rise along her arms.

"Should I be?" she asked, her voice coming small and choked.

Mollie turned back and gave her a full, deep stare from the great eyes ringed with black and white. Then she smiled, and suddenly the eyes were not cold any more, not flat mirrors. They were deep, soft, shining. The smile was won-

derful, the whole face was wonderful. Caroline realized only in this moment that it had been a mask until now. It was a mask no longer, but a shining thing, full of light and warmth and gentleness. Lines of curving softness came into Mollie's body as she bent forward, radiant with that lovely smile.

"No, of course you shouldn't be afraid," she said, and the voice was as lovely and as warm as her face. Caroline had caught hidden echoes of this richness in the monotones; now she heard the full power and sweetness released as if flood-gates were opening.

She met the wonderful smile, the wonderful eyes shining with light and warmth and felt something turn over inside her in response. It was a purely involuntary reaction; answer moved in her quite apart from reason. The woman opposite her had a personal power so irresistible that any one upon whom she turned its full volume must be helpless for a moment if caught unawares.

"Stay for the séance," Mollie said. "I can't keep them waiting much longer, but I'll make it a short session. And you'll be safe. When Ray comes, I'll settle this business once and for all. Demons never were supernatural, you know—but they were very dangerous. So—won't you stay? Please?"

Caroline found herself nodding dumbly.

7...

MOLLIE SMILED. Then she leaned back in her chair and called, "Pete! Is everybody ready?"

There was a muffled "Wait a minute" from beyond the closed inner door. Mollie turned back to Caroline and the smile faded. Caroline watched the wonderful glow receding visibly, sinking back inside and vanishing. Mollie was as she had been before, calmly, insolently indifferent, cold as ashes. No one who had not seen her a moment ago would

have guessed what fires the ashes banked. Neither of them spoke. They sat there looking at one another, Mollie's eyes flat mirrors again, watching Caroline with the old speculative stare that only half saw her.

She reached out a lazy hand and turned the switch of the lamp beside her. The light sprang on full strength from the dimness which had half-hidden the apartment until now. The room came into depressing vividness around them.

Caroline saw the worn places in the upholstery, the dust, the veneer of grease. She saw that Molly's terrycloth robe was not very clean. She saw that it was not only a dim light that made Mollie's skin like satin.

"Ready?"

Caroline rose too, clutching her handbag in gloved hands and frowning a little. Mollie crossed to the door behind which Wynekoop had vanished. She opened it slightly, her long, boneless fingers caressing the knob.

"Wait," she said. "I won't be a second."

She vanished behind the door-frame, and the door closed behind her. Caroline could hear the woman's voice; then the door opened again and a switch clicked. Darkness lay beyond. Within the next room, nothing was visible but a strip of dun-colored carpeting at the threshold. Caroline could hear the shuffling of feet. Someone said something in a whisper, and someone else was breathing in a heavy wheeze. She wondered if she knew any of these people, and was curiously glad of the darkness.

Mollie spoke to her softly as the door half-closed between them.

"It'll be a short séance," she said. "Before you come in—listen. It's dark in here. It has to be. You'll understand why later. I'll take you to a seat, and you must sit quietly, not talking to anyone. Remember, don't speak, not even if anyone speaks to you. Especially if anyone speaks to you! Have you got that? It's important."

Caroline nodded.

"All right," Mollie said. "It'll be a while before things

start to happen. Don't be surprised, no matter what you see. And don't leave your chair unless you're told to. Understand?"

Again Caroline nodded; the door opened for her, and she stepped forward into intense darkness. She blinked vainly as Mollie guided her toward a seat. How could Mollie find her way so easily through the black? Was it merely habit, or was it—perhaps—that abnormally developed sense of touch she said she possessed?

"Here," Mollie whispered, and Caroline's foot struck a chair that scraped slightly across the floor. She put out a groping hand and found it. "Sit down," Mollie's whisper went on. "Wait. Don't move."

The door behind Caroline closed. The rhomboid of light narrowed and vanished from the floor. Caroline shut her eyes uselessly and tried an old childhood game of counting the noises she could hear. It was very nearly silent, but she identified the sounds of breathing—one slightly rasping sound, with a wheeze on the inhale—and a rhythmic creaking of someone's chair, as if the occupant were heavy. Man or woman, Caroline wondered. And anyone she had met before? It might be Tom Hylan. He was fat enough to make a chair creak under him.

Someone whispered, —"says she hates him—" the sibilants hissing in the quiet. It was a curious fragment. Caroline wondered who was violating the tabu against talking, wondered who was so hateful to whom.

Someone coughed. There was a little flurry of coughs that made Caroline fight down a tickle in her own throat from sheer suggestion. She couldn't count the sounds after all. How many were there here? How large a room was it? Fairly large, she thought. The sounds had a certain echoing quality, as if they sat together in a good-sized hall. It wasn't impossible. These old Village houses harbored the most astounding variety of halls and galleries and chambers behind their grimy brownstone fronts.

What were they all waiting for? What did they expect?

What sort of pitiable misfits would Mollie have drawn together here into her cult? One or two might be here out of curiosity. The others were probably the usual frustrate and defeated, groping through abnormality for the answers they had never been able to find in a normal world. Fanatics, the lunatic fringe.

She began to itch with nervous impatience. The dark did not grow less as her eyes became accustomed to it, but her ears began to sort out the noises, and some of them were inexplicable. A curious sort of whisper ran beneath all these other sounds which she could not quite place, and something clicked now and then like false teeth, or a chair being rocked to and fro by some other equally impatient guest. She wondered where Mollie was.

Across the room light began to glow.

It was red and very dim, and it shone up from floor level, illuminating nothing except a dark drapery hanging in heavy folds. No light was diffused among the audience. Caroline decided that it must come from a shaded darkroom bulb.

The curtains parted soundlessly and a man stepped through. He wore a dark robe that swallowed up all of him but his face, and in the red light from below the face was a fantastic Mephisto mask. It took Caroline a perceptible moment to recognize the features as Wynekoop's. He had, she realized with surprise, a conventional devil's face. She had never noticed that before. The right lighting, a touch or two of grease-paint, were all that were necessary to transform him into a stage Lucifer. The black brows, the hooded black eyes, the thick-lipped sneer were so perfectly in character that he did not look in the least ludicrous as he peered at them now, shadows from below etching his features into deep planes and furrows.

With his appearance, sudden silence fell through the room. The creaking, the wheezing stopped, as if the whole room had dropped away inexplicably and left Caroline alone in the dark watching the demon face.

Wynekoop stood quiet for a moment. Then his deep,

coarse voice began to speak, intoning words that had no meaning, and yet, as he spoke them, seemed heavy with meaning.

"*Karrellyos—Lamac lamec Bachalyas,*" he chanted, his voice rising and falling rhythmically. "*Cabahagy sabalyos, Baryolas, Lagoz atha Cabyolas. . . .*"

His voice had a practised sound, as if he had gone through this mummerly many times before. Its modulations as he chanted seemed to mold out of the solid darkness great swooping curves of sound; he made the words themselves seem dimensional things, soft and heavy to the very touch.

"*Samahac et famyolas—*" he intoned, his voice sinking to a syrupy murmur. Then it rose suddenly to a mighty bay. "*Karreylos Bachalyas!*" His heavy lips grimaced downward in an inverted grin like a tragedy mask.

Caroline jumped in convulsive surprise and glanced around involuntarily through the darkness, but the rest of the audience must have expected that deep shout, for no one else moved. She snatched for her slipping handbag, and then looked up again and blinked in bewilderment.

For the red-shadowed face was gone. The light was gone. Except for the dazzle it had left, a swimming of remembered light in the darkness before her blinded eyes, there was no illumination in the room at all. And no sound. She watched the light-stain slip to and fro as she turned her eyes about in the dark. She saw the dazzle change to blue-green and fade through a whole chromatic scale to black again. Still nothing.

After a long silence someone coughed loudly and the murmurs and motions began around her. Somewhere, distantly, a bell rang beyond muffling walls. Feet moved across a carpet, making the floor shake slightly.

She twisted in her chair and peered futilely toward the place where the door should be. She half rose and then sat down again irresolutely, her heart, which had quieted during this long wait, beginning to pound again. A sense of wrongness began to grow. There should not be this delay—

now. The timing was off. Mollie was too good a mistress of dramatics to permit this lull after the crescendo of Wynekoop's—invocation.

And that noise from beyond the wall—a ringing bell, footsteps, vaguer, inexplicable sounds now—all that was wrong too. Something unexpected was happening. There was a definite feeling of wrongness in the air. A feeling of—danger?

Was this what Mollie had felt? What she had called an incubus?

Was Ray Kerry standing on the threshold?

With a shock of realization Caroline knew that she was not, after all, expecting Ray to come. There was no reason why he should. Ray would scarcely return to Mollie after he had robbed her; it was illogical to expect that. Mollie had said—

Mollie had said! It was the old, effective trick of false emphasis. Caroline knew that she had been tricked into believing what Mollie wanted her to believe. The only evidence Mollie had offered to prove that Ray was coming was her own statement that she felt—oppressed.

If Mollie had really expected Ray, would she have gone on with the mummery of her séance? Would she have wanted possible witnesses to her interview with Kerry? The stolen money must be a large sum, large enough so that recovering it without a hitch would be more important to Mollie than holding a séance on schedule. Besides, all along Mollie had been playing for time.

That seemed blatantly obvious now. Her monologue lifted from Jung and *The Golden Bough*, her deft methods of stopping Caroline whenever she had tried to leave, finally the trick of inducing her to attend the séance—Mollie had been trying to keep her here, of course. But why? Caroline tried to remember if Mollie had seemed surprised when she had first opened her door to see her guest and Wynekoop in the hall. She had said something. . . .

"You're early."

Too early? Too early for what?

Something was happening.

Something was happening, not very far away from her. There was a sound from beyond the wall, quite indescribable, but unmistakable. Caroline had never heard a sound like that before—but she recognized it for what it was. There are primitive memories in the mind that recognize what the ears have never heard.

The oblivious audience around her breathed on, creaked on, whispered on. And there was something wrong about that, too. Something indefinable, too far below the threshold of perception for anything but instinct to sense it—yet.

Caroline was on the edge of her chair, her stomach tight and cold, her eyes aching as she strained to see. This might be the moment—now!—to get up fast and find the door, quickly, before they could stop her, before whatever it was beyond the wall came nearer, into the very room. Her conscious mind did not yet know what it was she had heard, but the primal memory warned her. Get out—get out—go! Run! Never mind reason—this is dangerous!

Then something tangible happened, something that made her congeal because of its impossible familiarity. It was a very simple thing. She had heard it before. It was a voice, sibilant and hissing, that whispered, “—says she hates him—”

Caroline sat rigid, staring incredulously toward the sound. It was the same, precisely the same in intonation and inflection, so far as any whisper can have either. And it was wrong, wrong—so wrong that she felt the side of her face toward the whisperer freeze lightly over all its surface with a little crawl of tingling nerves, and the scalp above her ears moved a little with that stir that only the wrong sounds in darkness quite evoke.

She had had nightmares like this. She heard without surprise a cough and a flurry of coughs, and her subsurface mind tried again to count the number of coughers as it had done before. It was happening all over again. In a few min-

utes red light would begin to glow and Wynekoop's face would appear with its red-lipped, inverted grimace.

The crowd breathed on. But the floor-boards, old and creaky as they must be, were soundless, though they had shaken under Wynekoop's tread. Caroline stood up without knowing she had risen. There was no crowd. She recognized the whisper running persistently below all other sounds, and the rhythmic mechanical hum. It was not a real crowd at all. It was only the noises of a crowd repeated over and over on a phonograph.

She was quite alone in the dark.

It was an extraordinary moment. She felt in the first instant absurdly naked, all the warmth and assurance of human company stripped away in one flash. Her own treacherous mind, quick to build up images from the flimsiest foundation, had peopled the dark so solidly with a crowd that their disappearance left an almost physical vacuum. For an instant the world's foundations reeled underfoot.

Reason vanished without an echo in terror. Caroline spun around senselessly, still gripping her handbag in hands that were wet with moisture inside the gloves, her throat too dry for swallowing. The chair crashed down. She did not know where the door was. That primal memory warned her only to run, to keep silent and run. The noise of the falling chair died. . . .

The phonograph labored on, whispering, clicking to itself beneath the spurious sounds of human breathing. The echoes from distant walls were echoes in the machine; this was not a large hall, she knew now. Her groping hand found a wall angle and she stumbled forward soundlessly toward the door that was not where it should be.

It was not a large room. It was small, terribly small. She was quite certain of that. It was a tiny room, tiny as a coffin. She gasped for air against those closing walls that seemed to swoop down toward her in an embrace as fettering as the grave's. If she put out her hands she would feel boards hemming her in on all sides—

She closed her eyes and forced the panic back. It receded, not much, but enough to let her remember the cigarette-lighter in her handbag.

Miraculously she found it immediately. Miraculously it lit at the first trial. Miraculously the door was only a few feet away from her. She dropped the lighter back in her purse and put her hand on the knob and turned it. But she did not open the door until the suffocating blackness began to choke her.

She stared into a dim room. The door to the hall was open, but the faint light from its oblong did not help much. There was nothing to be seen except a vague, pale, formless shape where Caroline remembered a sofa had been. Something moved there, a faint stirring and a very soft exhalation of breath.

She took a noiseless step. There was the outline of a floor lamp near by. She reached toward it.

From the shadows Mollie Hathaway's voice spoke, incredibly flat, a voice so wholly without inflection or emotion that it might have been the furniture speaking, inhumanly, caring for nothing.

"Don't turn it on," she said.

Caroline heard herself whispering. "What . . . what's happened?"

"Don't turn it on," Mollie said again. It was a deaf voice. She had not heard the question. She spoke from some empty place inside her own mind, untouched by outside things. "I like it in the dark." There was a soft, smooth sound Caroline could not identify.

She glanced toward the open door longingly. Mollie moved again, and Caroline said in a shaking voice, "What are you doing?"

This time she heard and understood. "Sitting here," she said. "Just sitting here. Go away. You'd better go away."

Caroline strained her eyes into that gloom. She could see the sofa, and Mollie seated upon it in vague outline, and

there was something wrong with the outline. It was too large. And there was a strange, half-familiar odor that made her skin prickle atavistically. The odors of cabbage and dust, the hint of incense—but there was another fresher, strangling odor.

Caroline caught her lower lip between her teeth and reached for the lamp-switch.

The color was what struck her first as the room leaped into brilliance. The bright, wet, shining color streaking Mollie's bare shoulder, dabbling her robe. . . .

She sat on the sofa, leaning back, the terrycloth robe slipping loose where she had ceased to hold it around her. Cradled in her arm, his head flung back upon her shoulder, was Pete Wynekoop.

Mollie's eyes were glazed, blind, incredibly enormous, and they did not see Caroline. She was sightless with a self-induced, determined blindness. She had cut herself off from reality; she did not seem to realize where she was or feel what lay against her shoulder.

Caroline looked down at the worn carpet and the old-fashioned straight razor lying open and bloodstained there. The thick smell was in her nostrils, the red memory of Wynekoop's throat in her mind, and they would be there for the rest of her life.

She felt the switch click again under her hand. The room was dark.

Almost automatically, she began to walk toward the open door.

8 . . .

THINKING ABOUT the little things kept her safe. Perhaps it was always like that during emotional stresses. The unimportant details assumed sharp surrealistic clarity, each

one a rung on the long ladder; but you didn't let yourself think about the ladder itself. Instead, you thought about the smell of cooking cabbage.

And the interminable stairs, and the square fluted moldings of the ceiling. Fresh cold air blowing along the street. At that point, indecision and danger. The drugstore at the corner would have a telephone, but there was a taxi cruising slowly past; which would be better?

With relief she let those problems slide away and concentrated on the thought of Bob O'Brien. After that, she was able to react automatically. She did what was necessary without thinking about it. She must have signaled the cab and given O'Brien's address, for she found herself, quite unexpectedly, in an elevator, and then walking along a hall and pressing a bell. . . .

"Hello, Carrie . . . hey! What's the matter?"

She started to tell him. But her voice blended into his, and she stopped, satisfied to let the warm, comforting sound flow over and around her. It was heavenly to relax. She let herself drift into a warm, dreamlike state, dimly conscious that Bob was doing a great many things deftly. His blue eyes were troubled. . . .

"Drink this."

She was on a sofa, covered with a blanket. Her feet felt warm; a hot-water bottle wallowed gently as she wriggled her toes. O'Brien had drawn up a chair beside her. He held a glass of something that smelled like brandy. The apartment—she took it in piecemeal, the bookcases, the gray-green walls, the piano. The little Victorian fireplace, iron-lined, with a tiny fleur-de-lis pattern embossed upon it, Rousseau's *Sleeping Gypsy* facing her from the wall, and beneath it, propped up on books, a magazine-cover painting of two men locked in a death-struggle while a disheveled girl screamed in the background. She laughed weakly.

"Funny as hell," O'Brien agreed. "Whatever it is. Drink up."

She obeyed. The brandy helped. She lay back, closing

her eyes, and let the warmth drive out the long, racking shudders.

"Tell me about it."

"No," she said drowsily. "Let me go to sleep, Bob."

"You said someone had been killed. Who?"

"Not now. Not now."

He stood up. Presently he returned with more brandy. His hand slipped under her back, lifting her.

"Here . . . All of it. That's right. Now tell me."

She sighed.

"It—it was Pete. Pete Wynekoop—"

O'Brien was at the window, staring out at the darkness. She watched him and waited. He turned and came back, pushing the blanket aside and sitting on the sofa where she lay. That odd look of bleakness had come back into his face, so that the bone structure seemed more prominent.

He lit cigarettes for them both and found an ashtray.

"How did you get here, Carrie?" he asked.

"I took a taxi. Yes, that was it."

"Did the driver see you come out of that building?"

Caroline shook her head. "I don't know. I don't think so."

O'Brien glanced toward the coffee table. Caroline's purse and gloves and hat were there.

"You were wearing your gloves? Did you take them off at all in that apartment?"

"No. I'm sure of that."

"Did you do any smoking?"

Caroline tried to remember. "I didn't do anything I didn't have to do. It wasn't a social visit. No, I didn't smoke."

"I suppose you didn't leave anything there?"

"Get me another drink, Bob, please. Thanks."

"Feeling better?"

She nodded.

"Good. The best time to talk about trouble is just after it's happened. You get it out of your system."

Caroline said, "I didn't leave anything up there, I'm pretty

sure. But—Bob, I'll have to tell the police about it, won't I?"

O'Brien didn't answer until he had deliberately crushed out his cigarette. "I'm wondering," he said.

"I don't want to. But I'm a witness—"

He said slowly, "It occurs to me that Mollie Hathaway could accuse you of killing that fellow Wynekoop."

She looked at him blankly. "But why?"

"To cover herself."

"But—I don't think Mollie killed him!" Her own words brought back a sudden, terrifying picture of that nightmare room, and she shut her eyes and gulped brandy quickly.

O'Brien didn't answer directly. He said, "I've cleaned your shoes. You'd got blood on them. Where did that come from? You said you didn't go near Wynekoop's body."

"I don't want to think about it."

His hand closed over hers. "It won't hurt you. Don't run away from it. You've been running away too long, Carrie."

After a while she said, "There was blood by the door."

"And the door was open. You'd already heard the bell ringing." O'Brien got up, poured a small drink of brandy for himself, replenished Caroline's glass, and sat down again. "Let's say this is what happened. While that séance was going on, somebody rang the bell. Wynekoop answered it. The moment he opened the door, somebody used the razor. Wynekoop turned around and got as far as the sofa before he collapsed. He'd have left a trail."

"You mean—"

"Blood, yes. Did you notice?"

Caroline shook her head violently. O'Brien said, "Well, where was the razor lying? Near the door?"

She forced her mind to recreate a picture. "No. I think—in the middle of the room."

"It could have been thrown there from the doorway."

Caroline said, "Bob, the police will accuse Mollie of killing him. I'll have to tell them I was there."

"Can you prove she didn't kill him?" O'Brien asked. "You weren't a witness."

That was casuistry, she knew. "I heard the doorbell—"

"If Mollie didn't murder Wynekoop, her fingerprints won't be on the razor. I think you'd better wait a little. The door—you left it open, didn't you? Well, probably the police have been notified already. Somebody must have walked by and looked in. Wait and see. After all, if Mollie says you were there, you'll have the police coming around soon enough."

"I can't, Bob," Caroline said. "I've got to go to the police."

He watched her. "You may be right. I'm not sure that you are. Those people—Mollie Hathaway and her friends—are pretty unscrupulous. Mollie wouldn't hesitate to frame you and produce fake witnesses to prove her story if she figured that would help. She may not think so. She may not want you to talk—especially about that money Ray Kerry stole from her. As long as you keep quiet, she may be willing to play it her own way."

"But she might be accused of murder."

"And she might not. From what you tell me, I've considerable faith in that woman's ability to wiggle out of a jam. The less you get involved with a gang like that, the better. Then there's another point. Who did kill Pete Wynekoop?"

Caroline's lips framed a name.

O'Brien said, "Ray? It's likely. But it could have been somebody else. These phony spiritualist rackets often end up in knifings. It could have been anybody. Whoever it was is free and homicidal. My idea is that it might not be so smart to stick your neck out. If the killer knew there was a witness—even one who didn't actually see the murder—you might not be too safe."

Caroline said, "That isn't right. The—the murderer might have known I was there. And anyway there was a witness. Mollie."

O'Brien scowled. "What did you see, though? The room was dark when you came into it—the living room, I mean. There was a dim light outside in the hall. Mollie might not

even have come into the room when Wynekoop answered the bell. But let's play it the hard way. The light *was* on; Mollie *was* in the room. Wynekoop opened the door. Somebody was outside. But Wynekoop's body may have screened that somebody from Mollie, or our killer may have used common sense and tied a handkerchief over his face. He'd scarcely have come calling with a razor if he didn't know who'd answer the door."

"He could have looked through the key-hole, I suppose," Caroline said wanly, and O'Brien nodded.

"Is there one?"

"I don't know. It's an old building. The doors probably have the old-fashioned key-hole locks in them."

O'Brien's hand tightened into a fist. He looked at it unseeingly.

"Stay here tonight," he said.

"But—"

"The morning papers will tell us something. Then we can figure out the smartest way to play this game. As for the police—well, you came here tonight in a state of shock and passed out. I put you to bed. You didn't wake up till tomorrow morning, and then—" He shrugged. "Then you can telephone Headquarters, if you want. If they ask you why the delay, you can say you reported the murder as soon as you knew what was happening. I'll back you up. Post-traumatic amnesia or something," he added, smiling slightly.

She finished the brandy. O'Brien leaned over her.

"Sometimes it's smart to wait," he said. "Make the enemy show his hand. You're safe here. Nobody knows where you are. If Ray Kerry killed Wynekoop, I don't think you should go back to your own apartment tonight. I don't think you should in any case. Wait and see what happens."

"All right, Bob," she said. "I can't believe it was really Ray, though."

"We'll see."

"Mollie said she thought Ray would come, but—she had no real reason for thinking so. She certainly was playing

for time, trying to keep me there—waiting for something or somebody.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.” Suddenly she was exhausted. Feeling drained out of her body like water vanishing in sand.

“Better get to bed,” O’Brien said. He picked her up, blanket and all, and carried her into the next room. He switched on a light.

“You rate the bedroom,” he said. “Get undressed. Quick. I slipped some nembital into your drink.”

Dimly she fought against encroaching sleep. “H-how much?”

“Not much. It’s the brandy and the nervous reaction hitting you mostly. But I wanted to make sure you wouldn’t have a fit. All right?”

He went out, closing the door gently. Caroline managed to extricate herself from her dress. She pulled off her stockings, but it was too much trouble to remove her slip. It was lucky O’Brien had turned the covers back, or she could never have fumbled her way into the bed.

She heard him knock and enter. He moved about softly. The light went out.

She thought he kissed her gently. Then the door closed. . . .

Her mind began to turn smoothly without engaging her body at all. It spun on a humming axis of sleep and her ego went with it into deep oblivion.

Ray Kerry was standing beneath her window, a dark shape in the shadows, tilting a pale oval of face to look at her through the walls. He had stood there all night long, patient, staring upward. Caroline turned over in bed, and her outflung hand struck a wall that should not be there. She opened her eyes.

The night vanished; Ray Kerry vanished. Even her own bedroom had vanished, and she stared in bewilderment around a strange room. Then memory came back and her stomach tightened in the old knot of nervous dread as she remembered last night.

The clock said 10:20. She sat up. She said, "Bob?" in a tentative voice, but no one answered. She got into her shoes and made a brief exploratory trip. Her dress was neatly adjusted on a hanger in the closet, amid suits and a topcoat. But the apartment was empty. The kitchen had a glass coffee-maker half full of coffee on the stove, and two morning papers lay folded on the table.

She lighted the gas and took the paper up with suddenly unsteady hands. The story was on page three. It told little. Mollie's cultist activities were stressed, for their sensational angles. She had been found in what the *News* called a coma and the *Times* described as a semi-conscious state. She had been hospitalized for treatment. The "murder weapon" had shown no fingerprints. There was no suggestion that Mollie was the murderess; from what Caroline could deduce, the police had followed the same line of reasoning that Bob O'Brien had last night. *A blood trail led from the door to the sofa where the victim's body was found.* Caroline hastily turned to pour herself strong, bitter coffee.

When she went back to the bedroom to dress, she found a note pinned to one sleeve. It said, "Call me at the office when you wake up. Bob."

She did. His voice sounded surprisingly cheerful.

"Hello, Carrie," he said. "Sleep well?"

"Wonderfully. Bob. I saw—"

"We're talking through the office switchboard," he said, "so I won't tell you I love you. But I will when I see you. When will that be?"

She understood. "I don't know. When?"

"Got any plans?"

"I'd like to talk to you first."

"Want to come up to the office? Now?"

"Y-yes. I guess so. All right, Bob."

"Don't do anything till you see me," he said briefly.

"I won't. Goodbye."

She hung up and looked at the silent telephone for a while. It didn't tell her anything she didn't know already.

O'Brien looked as placid as a cat behind his littered desk. He rose as Caroline came in and, picking his way past stacks of magazines and drawings, he took her competently into his arms and kissed her before she had any idea of his intention. She was a little startled, too, by the strength in his arms and the hardness of the chest pressed against her.

"Hello," he said, releasing her. "Sit down. I'll close the door. Now. Cigarette?"

"Thanks."

"How do you feel?"

"I don't know. I was all right for a while. Now I'm beginning to be nervous again."

"That agent of yours phoned," O'Brien said. "Paul Royce? He asked me if I knew where you were. He says he's been phoning everywhere to try and locate you."

Caroline said tightly, "Is it—?"

"About last night? I don't know. Did Royce know Wynekoop?"

She nodded. O'Brien said, "Let it wait for a bit, anyway. He wouldn't tell me what he wanted. Seen the papers?"

"The ones you left—yes."

"I got a later one half an hour ago. Mollie's still unconscious. But apparently the police don't think she killed Wynekoop. What have you decided?"

"I haven't," Caroline said.

"Well, Mollie hasn't talked about you so far. I wonder if anyone noticed you leaving the Quill with Wynekoop last night? Your taxi-driver may go to the police, too. And Royce—" O'Brien stopped. "Call Royce," he said, pushing the telephone toward her. "Play dumb. Find out what he wants. If necessary, hang up."

"Go on," he urged, as she hesitated. "Remember what I said about running away."

She picked up the telephone.

"Is Mr. Royce—"

"Caroline! I've been trying everywhere to find you!"

She said quickly, "You saw the papers this morning?"

"What? It wasn't—oh. Wynekoop? Yes, it's a horrible affair, of course. But—Caroline, I've something to tell you. Bad news."

"I don't understand."

"I'll feel sorry about Wynekoop later," Royce said grimly. "This is about your uncle. Caroline—Jonas is dead."

She found herself staring at the round black mouth of the telephone in profound silence. There were no words left in her. This sudden switch of focus—

She met O'Brien's blue, enquiring stare.

"Jonas is dead," she said, picturing him, somehow, flamboyant even in death, in some exotic oriental capital or Indo-Chinese jungle. Last night's blood, the color and smell of it, rose to her nostrils, and she thought of Jonas Bruno lying as Wynekoop had lain, awkwardly relaxed, with bright wet color gushing everywhere under some hot foreign sun.

Royce said, "They found him in the cellar of the Westchester house. Those workmen you got—they were digging, and . . . He's been dead for a long time. Months. Maybe a year. Maybe since we saw him last."

She wrestled with her own imagination, curbing it again, forcing her mind around to this new concept. Jonas long dead, all the blood dried; the hot oriental sunlight faded to the gloom and dampness of a familiar cellar. The whole world for an instant swung around her and transposed Jonas in space and in time, out of a bright hot picture into a dark, chill, musty one, an old grave. . . .

"He was—murdered?" she asked in a small voice.

"I suppose so. He—he couldn't very well bury himself," Royce told her with a ghastly attempt at lightness. "The police have been trying to locate you. You'd better call—wait a minute—Lieutenant Merrill. I'll give you the number. We've both got to go up to Westchester this afternoon. The identification isn't formal yet, but there's no real doubt about whose body it is."

"How was he killed?" O'Brien was watching her, listen-

ing, his cigarette smoking unheeded on the edge of the desk. Caroline pointed at it, and O'Brien started slightly, nodded, and picked it up.

"I don't know. I've told you all they told me. Here's Merrill's number—"

"No," Caroline said abruptly. "I can't. I can't do it. I won't."

"Caroline, you've got to. This is serious. Your uncle's dead."

"I can't!"

"Where are you—at your apartment? I'll pick you up there. I'll call Merrill for you—"

Blindness and desperation closed over her head. She slammed down the receiver and drew back in her chair.

"Easy," O'Brien said. "Easy! What is it?"

She told him, not very coherently.

"That settles it," O'Brien said. "You can't tell the police about the Wynekoop affair now. Two murders in a row sound fishy, especially if you're the only connection between them."

"I can't go up there," Caroline said dully.

"Yes, you can. You've got to. Two reasons. You've got to react naturally. And you've got to find out all you can about your uncle's murder."

"Why?"

"So we can plan our campaign," he said. "Get all the dope first. Then act. Never run away from an enemy. Bad tactics." He moved the telephone toward her again. "Call Royce back. Get that police lieutenant's number, too."

She hesitated.

O'Brien lifted the receiver from its cradle and held it out toward her.

PAUL ROYCE's hand was under her arm as they went together up the steps of a white-pillared building on a hill above the Hudson. It was very quiet here, half an hour from the city. Caroline's thoughts, which had been circling frantically around and around a well-worn groove, slowed a little in the sunny quiet.

Too much had happened. The catalyst of murder wasn't a settling influence; perhaps there was a basic pattern somewhere, but she couldn't find it in the unintegrated confusion within her mind. Since she had met Royce at his office, and during the long drive up the Hudson, she had been trying to arrange her thoughts in neat little separate packages, but without success. Still, she could think more clearly now. She was able to act normally, she decided—Paul had not seemed suspicious. Though why should he be? Naturally the death of her uncle might be expected to distress her.

For the first time she distrusted Royce's sensitivity. She didn't want him to read her mind now. Perhaps he was reading it, for he had been very quiet all during the drive, scarcely looking at her except to offer her cigarettes or a drink from the flask in the glove compartment. She had accepted the cigarettes but not the whisky.

Now she was glad of that. She wanted to be able to watch her own reactions when she met Lieutenant Merrill. . . .

He was a thin, tired-looking man with a mole on one cheek and a habit of blinking painfully, as though even the dim light in the office was too strong for him.

"Been trying to locate you, Miss Hale," he said, getting up from behind his desk. "Glad you phoned. Want to get this over with now?"

Royce said, "We don't know exactly what's happened, Lieutenant. Can you tell us any more about it?"

"Do my best." He peered at Caroline. "You won't have to see the body, Miss Hale—that is, unless Mr. Royce can't identify it. If you'll just look over this stuff, we'll be back in a minute."

She felt the tension go out of her as Merrill switched on a green-shaded overhead light above a long table and then went out of the room with Royce. It wouldn't be as bad as she had expected. A group of small objects was spread under the light on a towel, all of them dusty, moldy, water-soaked. A gold fountain pen that had turned green, a verdigrised pencil, keys, a monogrammed belt buckle, a rusted watch—the face had been cleaned and showed the hands standing at 2:06. That meant nothing, though. It could have ticked on a long while, senselessly measuring time for a man who had nothing more to do with time.

The door-latch clicked sooner than she expected. Paul Royce came to her side, and she turned to him, noticing the faint pallor underneath his ruddy skin.

After a moment of strained, questioning silence he nodded stiffly.

"Thanks, Mr. Royce," Merrill said at Caroline's left. "Too bad these things have to be done, but the rest is pretty much routine." He indicated the table. "There were some papers, too. Illegible. Does any of this stuff look familiar to either of you?"

Caroline said, "That belt buckle—it's silver. It came from Tiffany's, I remember."

"Right, Miss Hale. It did. There were some keys, too. A couple of 'em fitted the locks in your uncle's house, front and back."

"That looks like Jonas's watch," Royce said slowly.

Merrill nodded. "Not much doubt about it. We're checking with his dental chart. And we're trying to locate his physician, too. There's an old fracture of the left humerus."

Caroline said, "He broke his arm years ago. It used to bother him sometimes."

Merrill clicked off the light. Royce said, "How long has Jonas been dead?"

"Pretty hard to say, Mr. Royce. Depends a lot on the type of soil and so forth. It's been a fairly long time, though. When did you last see him alive?"

Royce frowned. "About a year ago, I think. In April—yes, that's when he left for Indo-China—yes, a year ago."

"Easter," Caroline said suddenly. "I remember that. He had his plane reservation for the day after Easter."

Merrill waved them to chairs and went back behind his desk. He blinked at Caroline.

"You haven't heard from him for a year?"

"That's right."

"Didn't you think that was funny?"

Royce said, "Jonas never wrote to anyone, as a rule. Often he was in places that had no mail service. He told me last year he was heading for the Indo-Chinese interior—jungle, lost cities, the sort of thing that would make good copy."

"Never wrote letters, uh? And you figured he was in Indo-China all last year."

"When he went down to the Amazon, we didn't hear a word from him for nearly two years," Royce said. "Remember, Caroline?" She nodded. "He'd simply disappear. Then he'd come back to New York with a lot of notes and photographs and—there'd be his new book."

"He didn't write them himself, though, did he?" Merrill asked. "That fellow Curzon did that?"

Royce hesitated. "It's not for publication. But outside of that it's an open secret that Curzon was Jonas's ghost-writer."

"I see. How long has Curzon been living in Bruno's house?"

"Nearly six months," Caroline said. "When Jonas was away, he let me have the rents from the house—usually. But it hasn't been fit to live in since that storm last August. Nobody'd rent it. Vic asked me if he could stay there a while, and I said all right."

"You waited seven months to get the repairs done?"

"I didn't have four hundred dollars to spare," Caroline said. "Besides, Vic—Mr. Curzon—kept saying he'd do the repairs himself."

Royce said suddenly, "Exactly how was Jonas killed?"

Merrill blinked. "How?" he repeated, and fumbled among the papers on his desk. "Well . . . here. Fracture of the odontoid process of the second cervical vertebra. Meant to ask you about that. Was Bruno a pretty strong man?"

Caroline said, "Well, he was very active. And tough. He had to be, in his business."

"His neck was broken," Merrill told her. "I was wondering what sort of defence he might have been able to put up."

"He'd have defended himself," Caroline said. "He'd have put up a fight, I know. Jonas wasn't weak. Unless—" She thought. "Unless that arm of his was bothering him. It did sometimes. And I've got an idea—I think I remember his mentioning it the last time I saw him."

"When was that?"

"A few days before Easter. I don't know exactly."

Royce said, "You don't have to be strong to break a man's neck, do you? There've been cases of muggings—"

Merrill rubbed his cheek. "That's right, Mr. Royce," he agreed. "A mugging, a rope, a blow—or Bruno could have been knocked out first. We don't know yet. It'll be hard to tell, I suppose, after so long. But now we've got a line on when Bruno was killed."

There was a silence. Caroline saw that Merrill was watching her. Almost at random, she said, "I suppose the autopsy—I suppose there'd be nothing but b-bones after . . ." She stopped.

The lieutenant said, "No, Miss Hale. Conversion into adipocere was beginning. That can happen in wet ground. The body's chemically changed into a sort of waxy substance."

Royce coughed. "If you've any more questions—" he suggested.

"Uh—well, nothing much. Did Bruno have any enemies? I'm supposed to ask that, you know."

"He must have had some," Royce said. "Not many, though. He was too good-natured."

"He had a temper," Caroline added. "He'd blow up like a— a typhoon, but he'd calm down just as fast. When I married, I remember, Jonas came down and roared like a tiger. Half an hour later he'd gone out to buy me a new car for a wedding present." Caroline didn't mention that Ray Kerry had wrecked the car a few weeks later.

"Oh. I see. How was Bruno fixed for money?"

"Up and down," Royce said. "Sometimes a lot, sometimes a little."

"Who'd inherit?"

Royce exchanged a glance with Caroline. "I don't know," he said flatly.

Caroline said, "I'm next of kin, if that's what you mean. But I don't even know if Jonas left a will."

Merrill blinked at her. "Well, I guess we'll find that out soon enough," he said. "There'll be plenty of routine work for us, but we won't need to bother you with all of it. You'll hear from me pretty soon. Thanks for coming up." He rose.

Caroline said, "The—the funeral—"

"I'll take care of that, Caroline," Royce said quickly. "You'll let me know, Lieutenant, when I can make the arrangements?"

"Sure," Merrill said, rather uncomfortably. "I'll phone you." He moved with them toward the door. "I can reach you both at the numbers you gave me, I suppose. Fine. You won't be going out of the city for awhile, either of you?"

Caroline said, "No," and Royce shook his russet head.

"Well, goodbye, then."

He stood blinking in the sun, watching them down the steps.

They found Vic Curzon in the back of the car, ostenta-

tiously snoring, a note pinned to his lapel. It said, "Fragile. Please deliver to the Winchester Hotel."

"Now how did that happen?" Caroline asked in a cross voice. Royce shrugged and held the door for her.

"Up for an interview too, I suppose. Is he really asleep?"

"You never know, with Vic."

Royce went around the car and got in. His big freckled hands lay lightly on the wheel. "It's just as well he didn't know there was a flask in the glove compartment," he said, watching intently the reflection in the mirror above him. Curzon's snores rumbled on undisturbed. "Maybe he's asleep at that," Royce said, and switched on the motor.

They turned south on the Saw Mill River Parkway and slid into the stream of city-bound traffic.

"There'll be an inquest," Royce said, his eyes on the road.

"I suppose so." Caroline was silent for a while. Then she said abruptly, "Paul, somehow, with Jonas—can *you* remember what he looked like?"

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe that's why I can't feel as shocked yet as I should. It isn't like a real person dying. It's like a character in a book."

Royce gave a sharp, dry chuckle. "I see what you mean. Jonas wasn't real. He *was* a character in a book—his books. Vic wrote them, but he created Jonas, in a way. The books showed Jonas as a type, and he had to be that kind of person. Nature imitating art. In everything else I think Vic's always been destructive and Jonas constructive, but not right there."

Caroline said, "It was different when I was a kid. Jonas was another man entirely. That was before his books got started. I—let's not talk about Jonas. I'm sorry, Paul. I've got a lot on my mind."

The road swung them up on a broad mounting curve and far ahead they saw the hazy geometrical skyline of the city. Royce said, "You've got a lot to straighten out. I know that."

Writing isn't an easy way to make a living. Advertising and competition have ruined the field. Made it profitable en masse, but look at all the writers who turn alcoholic, or go crazy or blow their brains out. Look at me. I'm an artificial product. The business has got too complicated when an agent's necessary. At the start a writer was a priest, and much better adjusted than now."

Caroline gave him a grateful side-glance. You could depend on Paul, she thought, to know what you really wanted before you knew it yourself. This business about Jonas coming on top of everything else might well turn out to be the last overbalancing straw on her burdened mind. It was pleasant to sit here and turn the mind free for awhile.

"Go on, Paul," she said. "Priests? I'd rather like that."

"The first writers drew pictures on cave walls—religious pictures of animals to insure good hunting. The first sociologists. They got paid for their magic. They got their percentage of the kill. That was a simple, sensible arrangement. But today things are far too complicated. Artists, writers, musicians—all the creative arts are in a strait-jacket. Creative people simply shouldn't live together. They're vampires. They have to be. Did you ever hear of a happy family of vampires on a desert island? The right balance is one artist or writer in a community of more normal people. In a set-up like that, the writer can stay normal too. But in New York . . . Look at Wynekoop."

Caroline stared straight ahead at the road. "Yes?"

Royce shrugged. "That's what I mean. He was dead long before last night. Living doesn't mean merely breathing and walking around. The last time Pete Wynekoop was alive was in Chicago fifteen years ago."

She didn't answer. Royce said, "At least Jonas wasn't like that. He didn't die of dry rot. There's no need to feel sorry for him. He'd have preferred a more glamorous death, but—he died when he was at the top."

From the back seat a voice sang mournfully:

"He bought her a pair of shears
To hang by her side:
And she bought him a winding-sheet
Against the day he died."

"Oh, go back to sleep," Royce growled.

"I won't," Curzon said. "That damn fool detective thinks I killed Jonas. Paul, I need some money."

"Who doesn't? Go to sleep."

Curzon's faded red head thrust between Caroline and Royce. "Hello, Carrie," he said briefly. "What about that movie deal? I get a cut on that, don't I?"

"You do," Royce told him. "If and when it sells."

"You said it was practically a sale."

"The studio's got an option. I can't make them pick it up. But I'm almost certain they will."

Curzon said, "I suppose you know I'm out of a job? Unless Jonas left me something, I'm without expectations. Listen, Paul. This business ought to make headlines. That'll be good publicity, won't it?"

"Will it?" Royce said curtly.

"Oh, hell. Why don't you make the most of your opportunities? A big splash campaign now—"

"It's quite possible Hollywood won't like this kind of publicity. They may let the option lapse."

Curzon groaned. After a time he said hollowly, "Get me a job, Paul. You must have somebody on the string who needs a ghost. Anybody from the President down. Let's stop for a drink."

"No. Unless—Caroline?"

She shook her head. Curzon said, "I could use one. Every time I think about me living for six months in that house I get the shivers. Jesus!"

"Forget it," Royce said. "How about you, Vic? Suppose I drop you somewhere and take Caroline home?"

"I'm not going home yet," Caroline said, visualizing the empty apartment that did not seem empty any more.

"Want to take me to dinner?" Curzon asked.

"It's too early."

"You can buy me a drink first."

Royce snorted and got his flask out of the dashboard compartment. He handed it back over his shoulder to Curzon, who seized it in a death-grip and spoke no more.

Royce said, "Jonas didn't have any enemies, I suppose. Did he, Caroline?"

"I don't know. Could it have been a—a burglar?"

"A burglar would scarcely have buried Jonas in the cellar. It's a queer set-up. I rather think that if the body had been found last year, it would have pointed directly to the murderer."

"Did Jonas say anything to you last Easter?"

"Anything that might be important now, you mean? No. Not that I recall."

"Well . . ." There was a toll-gate ahead; she watched the cars ahead creep slowly forward. When they were on the Henry Hudson Parkway, Royce said, "What are you going to do now?"

"Right now, you mean? Or—"

He didn't answer.

She said, "If I figured that out, I'd probably forget it in an hour. It's odd. I can remember so clearly about last year—what happened then—but things that happened a week ago keep slipping my mind."

"Take a vacation after the inquest, Caroline. You should." He thought. "Did you remember to call that editor—Madison?"

Madison. Of course. He had asked her to come in about the plagiarisms. She had totally forgotten about that. Well, it was understandable; too many things had been happening since Madison telephoned her yesterday. Nevertheless she should have remembered. It might be very important indeed. Madison might, just conceivably, be able to give her a clue to the mysteries that had been darkening around her for so long. . . .

"Can you drop me at Madison's office?" she asked abruptly. "It's on Eighth—"

"I know where it is. Sure. But do you have to see him now? What about your going home for an hour or two and resting?"

There would be little rest for her in the apartment, she knew. "No. Not just yet. I've got to see Madison."

Royce looked at her sidewise. "Nothing wrong, is there? Can I help?"

"No, Paul. But thanks."

"Well—"

Curzon sang sadly,

"He bought her a gown, a gown
Embroidered all with red:
And she gave him a pair of horns
To wear upon his head."

But she did not see Madison immediately. When Royce had let her out on Eighth Avenue, she found a telephone in the building's lobby and called O'Brien. At his insistence, she walked three short blocks and took the elevator up to his office.

"You'll have time to see Madison later," he said, when he had settled her with a cigarette and ashtray. "Now let's have it. Everything."

She told him.

"I'll have to tell the police about last night," she said at last. "I haven't been thinking at all clearly up to now. But there's a murderer loose—"

"One at least," O'Brien agreed.

"It might be Ray or it might not. Mollie—"

"She's still in a coma, according to the latest editions. Nothing new. They're trying to trace the razor, but you can buy 'em in any pawnshop on Sixth. I mean Avenue of the Americas." He leaned back against his desk and watched her. There was something in his complete immobility that

was at once restful and slightly alarming, a sphinx-like quality. Few men have the muscular or nervous control to remain so motionless.

"Suppose somebody else gets killed?" Caroline asked.

"Well—the police might not like your story. Two murders in a row is a damned peculiar coincidence."

"There isn't any connection between them—"

"There's one," he said. "You."

She looked up in such sudden dismay that he laughed. "Relax, Carrie," he said. "I'm just figuring all the angles I can think of. Maybe I was wrong last night. Maybe we should have gone straight to Headquarters. But now—who does inherit your uncle's money?"

"I don't even know if he had any," Caroline said. "The only coincidence is that Jonas's body was found just now."

"Was that a coincidence?"

"But I ordered the work started myself! Nobody could have—"

O'Brien said, "You told me Ray had given you some dough, and that you were having the work started immediately. Did Ray know what you'd do with the money he repaid?"

"I don't remember telling you—"

"Night before last, at that bar before Ray walked in. You mentioned it then. Did Ray know?"

"I don't see how. He might have guessed I'd use the money for that, but he couldn't be even halfway sure of it."

"So. Well, your uncle was killed last Easter. Four months after that Vic Curzon moved in. Was he anxious to get in the house?"

"Well—here's what happened. I never leased the house, for Jonas never knew when he might be coming back to New York. I'd rent it on a month-to-month basis. There was a bad storm around the end of August, and the tenants moved out—they'd been trying to get me to let them have a lease, and I suppose they got disgusted."

"When had they moved in?"

"A couple of weeks after Easter, I think. They were California people. After the storm, I told them I couldn't have all the repairs done right away—and they'd found another place, so I just let them move out. I didn't have any money anyway. And when Vic said he'd do the repairs himself if I let him move in for a while, I said all right." Caroline hesitated. What had happened a year ago was surprisingly vivid, in view of her recent forgetful spells.

She said, "Bob, I've just remembered something. A couple of days after Easter I went up to the house to see if it was all right—if Jonas had left anything."

"Had he?"

"There was a table set up in one of the bedrooms. . . . Bob, you know those doctor's tables—the adjustable, padded things? Jonas had one of those. He used to keep it shoved up against the wall, with books stacked on it, but when I went up to Westchester I found it out in the middle of the room."

"Well?"

"The chiropractor," Caroline said slowly. "He'd been going to a chiropractor for years. He used to tell me the man was the only one who could help his arm when it started hurting. He had an old fracture. . . . And when I saw him last I'm sure he mentioned that his arm was painful. Bob—"

"You're guessing," O'Brien said. "Just the same, Jonas Bruno died of a broken neck, didn't he? What's the chiropractor's name?"

"Ullman—Ellman? Something like that." She reached for the telephone directory, and pored over it while O'Brien waited.

"It sounds too easy," he said after a while. "Chiropractors don't really go around snapping their patients' necks. It just feels like it sometimes, is all. A chiropractor has to know how much pressure to apply—and you say your uncle kept going back to this guy—"

"Talbot? No."

"—so he must be pretty good—"

"Tallman!" Caroline said triumphantly, her finger stopping at a name, "Morton Tallman. That's it. Should I call Lieutenant Merrill?"

O'Brien shrugged. Caroline said, "I'm almost sure it was Tallman. But it might be Talbot or—or—"

"Why not call the guy and ask him?"

"Me?"

"He can't break your neck over the phone," O'Brien told her.

A receiver clicked at the other end of the line, in an office she had never seen, and a man whose face she did not know—she felt oddly at sea because of the abstractions—spoke thinly.

"Dr. Tallman speaking."

"This is Caroline Hale," she said, a little at a loss for words.

"Yes, Miss Hale?" Obviously he did not know her name. "You'd like an appointment?"

O'Brien, bending forward to listen, caught the words and shook his head. He reached for pad and pencil and scribbled something. Caroline craned to see the message.

"No," she said. "I'm Jonas Bruno's niece. I just wanted to talk to you for a moment."

O'Brien had written, *Meet him in some public place. Safer.* The voice had paused, and sounded more guarded now.

"Oh yes, Miss Hale. Of course."

"I wonder if you've heard about my uncle's death."

This time the pause was longer. "It was on the radio," Tallman said. "It's shocking. I'm so sorry, Miss Hale."

Caroline hesitated. Somehow, it seemed scarcely fair to ring off now without telling him why she had called. But if he were Jonas Bruno's murderer—

He doesn't sound like a murderer, she thought madly.

On impulse she said, "When did you see my uncle last, Dr. Tallman?"

"When did I see him last?" He was hedging. "Quite a

long time. I don't remember exactly, I'm afraid. Why?"

"Wouldn't your appointment book show?"

"Oh—oh, yes. I . . . the truth is, I've a patient waiting at the moment, Miss Hale—"

"Dr. Tallman," she said, O'Brien's steady blue gaze encouraging her, "Dr. Tallman, I'm sure you realize the police will have to be told about that—that treatment you gave my uncle."

"The *police*!" He caught himself. "They . . . don't know?"

"Not yet."

Tallman said rapidly, "Miss Hale, I've got to talk to you. I've been worrying about it ever since I heard the news-flash. Surely you must see—if this should get out, I'll be ruined. I had nothing to do with Mr. Bruno's death. I'd be willing to swear that. But if my name comes out in the papers—under the circumstances—surely you can realize what people would think! My patients—"

His confusion was remarkably convincing. Caroline looked blankly at O'Brien. Tallman went on.

"Won't you meet me somewhere to talk it over? I'm sure I can convince you of the truth. If you'll give me ten minutes or so before you do anything—Miss Hale?"

"Yes. I'm here."

"Won't you let me talk to you? Come up to my office, or—or—"

"No," she said on impulse, "I'll meet you—at the Grand Central Oyster Bar." It was as public a place as she could think of offhand. O'Brien nodded approvingly.

She heard Tallman gasp softly. "Thank you," he said, with a queer, weak dignity. "I appreciate it. What time?"

She remembered Madison and the plagiarisms. "Six-thirty?"

"Yes. You . . . won't do anything till you've talked to me?"

She promised and hung up on his repeated thanks. O'Brien leaned back.

"I heard," he said dubiously. "Well, I guess he can't break your neck in the Oyster Bar. Shall I come along?"

"Tallman probably wouldn't talk if you were there, Bob. I'd better go alone."

He looked toward a big oil painting on stretched canvas propped against a chair. "I've got to get this to the printer first thing tomorrow," he said. "Deadline. It needs work, the artist's off drunk somewhere, and I hate working in oils. Tell you what. I'll do it here, at the office." He scribbled something. "This is the night number. It's an open line after five-thirty. When you've seen Tallman, call me and I'll meet you or you can come up here. Does that sound sensible?"

She said, "All right. I want to see Madison—" She glanced at her watch. "I've lots of time."

"What about going to the police?"

"I think—I'll talk to Madison and Tallman first."

"All right," he said. "I suppose—"

"What?"

"Nothing." He picked up a brush. "Nothing at all, Carrie. Only be careful."

In the anteroom a fat man with a grubby collar was sitting, a worn portfolio between his knees. He jumped up at sight of Caroline, spilling a cascade of drawings from the folder. Involuntarily she glanced down, seeing uppermost in the sheaf a crayon sketch of a girl in tights, struggling in the grip of a many-armed monster. She knew that style, as she could almost have recognized Tom Hylan by his inevitable clumsiness.

She talked to him automatically while her mind checked back. He had an appointment with Bob O'Brien. He had made it last night—yes, at the Quill. But he had left before Wynekoop's arrival, hadn't he?

Hylan was talking about Wynekoop now. "Terrible thing. Poor old Pete! And Mollie . . . I hope this won't interfere with you and Ray."

"Why should it?" Suddenly she understood what he was saying. "Ray? Ray Kerry? What do you mean?"

"Well, of course—Mollie—" To Caroline's surprise he flushed and stumbled. She said impatiently,

"I know Ray's been living with Mollie Hathaway. But what's that got to do with me? We've been divorced for two years."

Hylan pulled at his lower lip and stared at her. "He said you'd patched things up."

"What?"

The artist looked distressed. "I'm sorry, Caroline. Am I talking out of turn?"

"No, I'm interested. Very much interested." Mollie had spoken of something like this. Caroline helped him gather up his scattered drawings and led him to a couch distant from the receptionist's window. "Now tell me, Tom. What's this all about?"

"I guess Ray was drunk," Hylan said. "It was the day before yesterday. I ran into him on Broadway, and he told me he was going up to see you. I'd asked him to have a drink with me. . . . He said I needn't look so surprised, that there'd been a reconciliation."

"Oh, he did?"

Hylan nodded. "He said you were—uh—finding out you couldn't get along very well without him."

Caroline said, "Tom, are you trying to make mischief?"

Surprisingly he met her gaze and smiled awkwardly. "Ray was lying, then?" he asked.

"He certainly was."

"I'm glad to hear that," Hylan said. "He's gone from bad to worse the last two years, you know. I—I like you, Carrie. And I've got an idea Ray's in some jam right now."

"What? Do you know?"

He shook his head. "But Mollie Hathaway was damned anxious to locate him night before last, when she dragged us all up to your place. She and Pete Wynekoop and Ray—there was something between them. I'd stay away from Ray, if I were you. Not that I suppose . . . The police are looking for him, you know," he added abruptly.

"I hadn't known."

"They were questioning me today. . . . They haven't got to you yet? That's funny."

The receptionist leaned out of her window and said, "Mr. O'Brien will see you now, Mr. Hylan."

Caroline went out thoughtfully.

Madison jumped up from behind his desk, a smooth, pink man with downy hair receding from the rosy dome of his forehead.

"Glad you came, Miss Hale. Say, I heard about your uncle. I'm sorry."

"Thanks," Caroline said, accepting the chair he indicated. "I never was very close to Jonas, but it was—a shock."

"I can imagine. They don't know who killed him yet, do they?"

She didn't want to talk about Jonas Bruno. "No. I—I've got this plagiarism business on my mind. Can't we get it over with? I want to know the worst."

"It isn't the worst," Madison said, tactfully allowing the subject to change. There were several huge cardboards on his desk. "Come over here. Look at these. Photostats of some pages from your script. I had the art department blow 'em up." He spread a page flat on the desk, knocking over a paperweight and a small china pig. "Never mind. Look."

Caroline watched the pink finger dabbing here and there at the typewritten lines. "Look at what?"

"It's from your manuscript," Madison said. "The last four pages. This one here you typed yourself—right? The next two are partly copied from your script and partly from another source."

"That's the way my carbon copy looks. It checks. But I didn't write this part. I'm sure of it."

"So am I," Madison said dryly. "Mark Twain wrote it. I mean the physical appearance of the typescript."

"It was done on my typewriter," Caroline said. "I know I can't prove anything, but—"

"Typists are as individual as typewriters," the editor told her. "When I get a yarn from a regular, half the time I can tell the author's name just by the look of the pages. I generally try to see if I can guess right. One way to brighten the day. You know Wilson—he's doing that F.B.I. series now? I can always spot his scripts. He puts a period after his page numbers and two asterisks at the end of his script."

"I put three dashes," Caroline said.

"I know you do. Some people put *thirty*, some of 'em write *the end*—another thing Wilson does is to break all the words he can to get an even right-hand margin." He ran his finger down the margin of the photostated page. "This was typed on your machine, all right, but not the way you'd type it at all."

Caroline said, "But don't people type differently at different times? How could you tell if—oh, if I'd deliberately been trying to disguise my own typing?"

"You've got automatic typing habits," Madison explained.

"I'll bet you couldn't tell me what they are. It's not difficult to tell one pianist's technique from another's, and typewriters have keyboards too. Look at this. You usually jam your *s* and your *e* together—as in *use* here. But on this next page, the two letters—in *see*—are separate and distinct. And again in *persevere*. And there. The letters aren't run together once on any of the plagiarized pages, while in the rest of the script they are. That's one point. Here's another: the top line on both pages." He swung around to his own typewriter, slipped in a white sheet, and typed a few words. "There's a sort of shadowy imprint above this line, see? I didn't pull down the bar gadget that keeps the paper pressed against the platen. You always do, but whoever typed this plagiarized insert didn't. Only two pages of your script—the Mark Twain bit—have this ghost imprint above the top lines."

Caroline said, "But it's not really proof—"

"It is," Madison said, "to me. When I get a theory, I'll stick to it till hell freezes. See this. Whoever pulled this trick

on you studied your typescript, you know. He noticed you never x out a mistake; you use *wm*. But how would you break *overlook*?"

"O,v,e,r, hyphen, l—"

"Right. So would I. But here it's o, hyphen, v, e, r—catch? I've seen thousands of scripts, maybe millions, Miss Hale. I know typography and I know writers. I feel perfectly sure you didn't type these last three pages. And I've got another reason for believing that, too."

"What?"

"You wouldn't plagiarize Mark Twain," Madison said, grinning. "And if you did, you'd take something from *The Mysterious Stranger*, not *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. And you wouldn't have chosen a descriptive scene like this, that throws the story out of balance. You're too good a technician for that." He gave her a large envelope. "Here's your story back. Cut out the plagiarism and I'll buy it."

Caroline said, "You don't know what a relief it is to get this straightened out."

Madison gave her a quick, probing glance. "You know who pulled this trick?"

"I—well, I'm not quite certain."

"Then it isn't straightened out by a long shot," the editor told her. "I won't dare buy your stuff till I'm sure it's safe. We can't take the risk—you know that."

"I know," Caroline said. "The trouble is, I think I know who's been doing this, but I haven't any proof." She tucked the envelope under her arm and rose. "I'll straighten it out, though."

"You'd better," Madison said firmly. "I want to keep on buying your stories. But you see what the position is."

He was right, of course. No publishing firm could afford to run such unnecessary risks. She left Madison scowling at the photostats, apparently trying to identify the unknown plagiarist. He wouldn't succeed. But there was little doubt in Caroline's mind. There never had been, really.

She doubled the script and thrust it into her handbag as

she went out. It wasn't five o'clock yet. A mirror in the elevator made her realize that a return to the apartment was almost necessary.

She needn't stay there long. She knew how unpleasant it would be. That silent, watchful oppression. . . .

It was almost a relief to find a plain-clothes detective waiting for her on a bench in the foyer.

10 . . .

IT WAS EASY, after all. He was interested only in locating Ray Kerry. There were a few routine questions—she took him upstairs and gave him a drink—and then he asked about Ray. Caroline told him all she could safely tell him. She hadn't seen her ex-husband for two days. No, she didn't know where he could be found. Did Ray dislike Pete Wynekoop? She didn't know that either. Routine question, routine answer. The detective didn't seem suspicious. He made notes, finished his drink, and finally asked Caroline to get in touch with him if Ray appeared. After he had gone, the heavy silence closed in slowly, and Caroline showered quickly and changed her clothes in a steadily rising tension. But nothing happened until she was closing the door behind her, and then she heard the telephone begin to ring.

She pretended she hadn't heard. *I don't want to be late*, she told herself, hurrying down the curving, carpeted staircase. *It probably isn't important. I can't miss Dr. Tallman now.*

Grand Central's ramp was seething with commuters. She went down the broad slope into the arched and echoing spaces of the underground and turned into the Oyster Bar under its lighted arch. The horseshoe counters were nearly filled but at the other end of the room, beyond the partition, there were a few tables still empty. She sat down at one and waited, her eyes on the clock.

She was early, but she had scarcely settled herself when someone cleared his throat loudly, and Caroline looked up across the table. A man was standing there, looking at her uncertainly.

"Miss Hale?"

The apprehension on his face somehow stiffened her own resolve. For he had no reason to be afraid of anything physical; he was built like a barrel, his head set necklessly between enormous bowed shoulders. A pince-nez sat incongruously on the thick nose. Coarse black hair was combed neatly above his low forehead, and hairy-backed hands moved nervously.

"Dr. Tallman? Please sit down."

The chair groaned as he lowered himself. "I wasn't sure. You were the only woman sitting alone at a table, so I took a chance. . . ." He met her eyes, frowned a little, and let out his breath in a deep sigh. "You haven't told anybody?"

She shook her head.

He seemed relieved. "It's so easy to smear a doctor's reputation, Miss Hale. I know how bad all this must look. But—" A waiter had come up quietly. "Oh. Ah—have you had dinner?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Well—shall we have a drink?" They ordered, and when the waiter had gone, the chiropractor settled back in his chair and looked despondent.

"I've been worried," he said in a low voice. "Ever since I heard that news-flash about Mr. Bruno. You see, I did give him a treatment on Easter. That's the trouble."

Caroline waited. The silence drew on and on. Suddenly Tallman's heavy face changed expression as he looked at something beyond Caroline's shoulder. She turned—it was nerve-racking to see his eyes go into refocus just beyond her—and saw a tall, thin woman standing behind her chair. She was perhaps forty, blonde, with a calm, efficient face.

"I'm Mrs. Tallman," she said. "May I join you?"

"Please," Caroline said blankly.

The waiter returned with the drinks. Mrs. Tallman ordered a highball and sat down, putting her handbag on the table. She said, "Now, I didn't think Morton could go through with it. Just as well I decided to come along." The thin mouth hardened. "Are you trying to blackmail Dr. Tallman?"

Indignation gave way to surprise. "Certainly not!"

"That's good," Mrs. Tallman said placidly. "Drink up, Morton. You probably need it. Probably the police will have to be told about this."

"I didn't touch his neck," Tallman said in an urgent whisper.

Caroline said, "Wait. Let's get this straight. You're sure it was Easter Day you saw Jonas?"

"I looked it up in my old appointment book," Tallman said. "It was for three o'clock. I'd have remembered anyway, because I don't give appointments on holidays. But Mr. Bruno phoned and said he was leaving town the next day, and his arm was bothering him. So I told him I'd come up—"

"Morton," Mrs. Tallman said. "Start at the beginning."

Tallman closed and opened his eyes. "I took a taxi from the station to his house. I'd been there before. The front door was open, I think. It isn't easy to remember the details, but . . . yes, the screen door was latched and the front door was open. I rang the bell. I could see inside. You know that stairway that goes up and turns. Mr. Bruno ran downstairs and let me in. He was feeling spry, and I told him he didn't look much in need of a treatment. Then we went upstairs. The table was already set out in the middle of the room. I worked on his arm."

Caroline thought. "Did he say anything—unusual?"

"No. He was telling me about Indo-China, I remember. But I didn't touch his neck!"

Caroline said, "I don't know much about all this, but I'm wondering if even a competent doctor couldn't make a mistake."

Tallman's face twitched. He started to speak, but paused as the waiter came with Mrs. Tallman's highball.

Afterward, Mrs. Tallman said, "I see what you mean, Miss Hale. But it isn't at all likely. Besides, Mr. Bruno was buried in his own cellar, wasn't he? I can assure you that the doctor didn't do that."

"Of course not!" Tallman said, with nervous emphasis.

"You couldn't have kept it from me if you had," Mrs. Tallman pointed out. "I can read you like a book."

"What happened after that, Dr. Tallman?" Caroline asked.

"Nothing much. We talked a while and had a drink. Mr. Bruno was feeling fine. The taxi came back and picked me up. Your uncle was alive when I saw him last. He was latching the screen door when I went down to the taxi."

"Was he expecting anybody else, did he mention?"

"I don't know. I don't remember. You see, dragging me into this wouldn't help at all."

"That's for Miss Hale to decide," Mrs. Tallman said. "We're both extremely sorry about Mr. Bruno. I know it must have been a dreadful shock to you. But if no useful purpose can be served by throwing mud at the doctor—and that's what it'll amount to, after all . . ." She let the sentence die.

Looking at the chiropractor, Caroline felt convinced that he was telling the truth. She did not believe that he had killed Jonas. This was another dead-end. Abruptly she felt tears of nervous exhaustion hot in her eyes.

"Miss Hale!" Tallman said quickly. "Are you—"

Caroline reached for her glass and gulped it. "It's nothing," she said. "I'm j-just . . . I'll be fine in a minute."

There was an embarrassed pause while Caroline, determined not to cry, forced herself under control. She managed a smile.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Tallman said, "Miss Hale, please don't be offended. I've been wondering ever since I sat down here . . . You're not in a very healthy state, really."

"It's nothing but nerves."

"Well . . . Do you mind if I ask you something?"

"What?"

"Have you been taking barbiturates? In large quantities?"

"Morton," Mrs. Tallman said warningly.

He looked at her and then back to Caroline. "Sometimes the layman doesn't quite realize the danger," he said. "I'm sure Miss Hale knows I'm not prying."

Caroline said, "I generally take a capsule of seconal at night. But I get them on prescription, half-strength."

"How many grains?"

She didn't know. Tallman said, "You do show certain symptoms. Your eyes . . ."

"What are the symptoms?" Caroline asked.

He explained. Nervousness. Loss of appetite. Lapses of memory. Melancholia. Gastric disturbances. Skin eruptions.

Caroline said, "I'd like to ask you something, Dr. Tallman. Would it be possible to pack a seconal capsule with a stronger dose?"

"Oh, a pharmacist—"

"I don't mean a pharmacist."

He paused, studying her, frowning. He said, "The capsule is filled with a percentage of the drug and mixed with an inert powder—what do you want to know for?"

Caroline said carefully, "I've just realized that—someone I know—might have a good reason for giving me heavy doses of seconal."

"Are you serious, Miss Hale?"

"My uncle was murdered," she said. "We know that, don't we? I'm quite serious."

"We can't keep your name out of this, Morton," Mrs. Tallman said decisively. "It's a police matter. I told you so. If this girl—"

Tallman said, "You might be imagining things, Miss Hale. Are you sure you never take more than one seconal capsule at a time?"

"Perfectly sure. I've been worried about that myself. So

when I take one, I check it off on the calendar in the bathroom." She leaned forward. "Could a capsule be repacked with a heavier dose?"

"Yes, it could. You'd get the seconal in tablet form, which has much less of the inert filler in it. If you crushed the tablet and packed the capsule with that, you could get a very strong dose. I think you should see your physician as soon as possible. And—and—"

"The police," Mrs. Tallman said.

The chiropractor let out his breath.

"Yes," he agreed. "The police, too."

He got up heavily, signaling the waiter. Caroline scarcely knew it when the Tallmans said goodbye and left. They, too, were abstracted and worried.

After a time the waiter began hovering. Caroline pushed back her chair and rose. She wanted to talk to Bob O'Brien. He would know what to do.

Someone was following her.

Caroline's gaze swept the crowded station, knowing that any one of these strange faces might be the one she sought, or that any outspread newspaper or turned back might hide familiar features.

Ray Kerry?

She must telephone Bob O'Brien. She must find a telephone—an empty booth. At this hour it might not be too easy. But she remembered that in the women's lounge was an additional row of telephones. She turned right and tried to hurry through the crowd.

Someone was behind her.

She could almost hear the rhythm of feet matching hers, slowing when she slowed. She made an unnecessary detour around a newsstand and imagined that the feet detoured too. No point in looking back, of course—but she tried it nevertheless, and saw only what she had expected to see. No familiar face.

She turned into the corridor toward the lounge, went up

a half-flight of stairs and saw the long smoking-room before her. There were several empty telephone booths. She paused at the door of the nearest, fumbling for a coin. She never knew what forced her to look up at just that moment, but she lifted her head and saw a tall woman standing at the head of the stairs she had just ascended.

The woman wore a striped dress belted with cord around her lean waist. She carried a green arm-bag; her long, thin feet, like a skeleton's feet, every tendon showing, were thrust into rawhide sandals. A big rakish hat with a broad brim dipped low over her forehead. Beneath the brim she stared at Caroline out of enormous dark-ringed eyes and smiled a tight smile, lips drawn smooth over prognathous teeth.

It was certainly Mollie Hathaway.

Caroline's reaction was instantaneous and unthinking. She dropped the coin back in her handbag, turned smoothly and walked away down the room. It was the old urge to flight taking control of her brain when shock for a moment put a stop to conscious thought. To get away was her only desire now.

Mollie had come out of her coma, then. The police had questioned and released her. And Mollie could not have implicated Caroline, or that detective who had come asking questions about Ray Kerry would have asked other questions as well. So—

She was at the other end of the room and mounting the steps toward the upper level and the street before she quite realized she was moving. She heard herself whispering something.

"I've got to call Bob. I've got to call him." But the thought of shutting herself in a telephone booth while Mollie stood outside and smiled at her with that grim, delicate, pale-lipped smile was intolerable. She would not even think of Mollie now without smelling blood and seeing the bright wet rivulets moving down Mollie's shoulder. She must get clear away from that stare, that smile, before she could bear

to enter a booth she could not escape from if Mollie caught her in it.

She stepped blindly into the first taxi in rank at the curb, sinking back without any feeling of relief as the door slammed behind her. She gave the address of Bob's office.

Was that another cab behind her? Of course it was. It would be a remarkable thing if a constant stream of cabs did not pour off the Forty-second Street curb of Grand Central.

It was not far. There was a bar across the street from the office building, and Caroline went toward it. An office building at night is a lonely place at best. No—better to wait in this lighted bar till Bob could come down to meet her. . . .

It was dim and quiet inside. A juke-box thumped and rattled in a subdued rumba at the back of the room, and a morose sailor looked up from the bar as she came in. The bartender, rubbing glasses and watching himself in the mirror, glanced at her reflection and went on with his work. It was too early for the after-dinner patrons; except for these two and herself, the bar was empty. She saw a telephone booth beside the door and stepped into it, dialing the number O'Brien had given her.

In the empty office she heard the telephone ring and ring. She could see clearly O'Brien's littered desk, the oil painting stretched across the frame, leaning against a chair, the stacks of magazines. She could all but smell the paint he had been using. She tried in vain to visualize O'Brien himself sitting there with his cool blue stare upon the telephone, letting it ring.

But he did not answer. Slowly the vision of Bob faded, as if she watched his actual figure growing translucent and vanishing. He was not there. No one was there. She hung up at last and stared at the telephone in forlorn surprise.

"But he knew I'd call," she told herself. "He wouldn't go out—"

She decided to wait for five minutes and then call again. She stepped out of the booth, glancing around the room with preoccupied caution. No one had entered since her own arrival. She crossed to the bar and slid onto a stool, laying her handbag on the moist hardwood surface. Her own face looked back at her out of the long mirror on the wall, peering through a thicket of bottles.

Something bulked between her and her reflection. It was the bartender, buffing a glass, regarding her with bored inquiry.

"Brandy and soda," she said at random. He went away and her mind spun on. *I know I'm a fool. I've been a fool straight through this whole thing. But it started a long time ago. Ray got me into it. I know that now—and I can guess how and why. . . .*

The glass of soda thumped softly on the bar. Caroline nodded to the bartender and watched him pour the bright brown liquid into her glass. It smelled heartening. She took the glass up in both hands and found that it tasted heartening, too.

"It'll clear my head," she promised herself hopefully. "My mind will wake up and maybe I'll think what to do. I can't go on sitting here. I've got to talk to Bob. I can't go home. Mollie could find me there—"

A prompt vision of the apartment rose before her, three-dimensional, like a stage-set, blotting out the mirror and the bottles, and that feeling of watchfulness and menace reached out from the vision to touch her. She knew that she could not go back now. The walls would be listening to her, the devil-masks would roll their eyes whenever she was not quite looking. And something, something—she did not know what—might lie in Uncle Jonas's room that had not been there before.

"No," she said to herself. "Not the apartment."

A breath, a motion of displaced air moved past her through the room. Caroline froze. She could not look around. Her eyes remained fixed in a rigid sort of self-hypnosis upon her

own reflected eyes in the mirror, among the tall bottles. She thought, "As long as I don't look around, nothing can happen. It doesn't exist. Nothing exists that I can't see."

The bottles reeled solemnly in a tilting row, their reflections reeling with them. Bottles, looking-glass—Alice at the dinner party. She could all but see that table where the candles shot up like rockets and the decanters took wings and flew. She remembered the White Queen's scream, "*Take care of yourself! Something's going to happen!*"

Someone beside her laughed, a soft, hoarse sound. Caroline thought numbly, "I won't look. The White Queen laughed, and when Alice turned to see why—"

"Hello, Caroline," Mollie said.

Her eyes were large and lusterless under the dipping brim. She was beautiful in her own strange Byzantine way, smiling that delicate, feline smile. Caroline could see vividly for an instant the bright wet shine of blood. There was none upon her, of course. But she did not look quite—quite right.

She said, "Where's Ray, Caroline? Where's Ray?" And she spoke without inflection, as if the words were sounding from a phonograph record and would drone on and on in exact, endless repetition until she got an answer. She scarcely seemed to hear her own question. Her eyes were fixed and not upon anything in this room.

"She's remembering," Caroline thought. "Remembering—"

Last night?

Mollie said again, "Where's Ray? Where's Ray? Are you waiting for Ray?"

Some irrefutable instinct had warned her of danger the moment she had seen Mollie in Grand Central. There was something quite horrible about the woman now. Caroline's lips felt stiff. She tried twice before the words came out.

"I don't know where he is. I—I'm not—" A desperate cunning touched her and she thought she would try to

pacify the staring creature at her elbow "If you wait here, he might show up. I've got to go, but if you wait—"

Mollie put out a long, narrow hand and laid it upon Caroline's arm. At the touch Caroline's whole arm cringed. It was the reaction she felt when she had to kill a spider—a shrinking in the arm that crushed it, as if the very marrow inside the bone had congealed, and the congealing ran coldly upward until the roof of her mouth shrank and her palate drew up tightly.

That feeling moved swiftly up the arm Mollie touched.

"No," Mollie said. "Sit still. It's all right. No one's going to hurt you." The monotone was a drone, not the flat, contemptuous monotone she had used before, but an unutterable weariness and dreariness. She drew her lips back in a cold smile. "Don't worry. There's nothing wrong. Don't look at me like that. I'm just—sober. That's all."

Caroline stared, realizing now that it was quite true. This was not the Mollie she had met twice before; Mollie sober was a new person. No, an old person, very old, very weary. Like an immortal who had been tortured for so long that nothing but weariness was left. No wonder the woman lived in habitual drunkenness, if sobriety was—this.

Caroline remembered Mollie Hathaway's abnormal hyperacusis. She wondered, for an unpleasant moment, how Mollie must be feeling now, in a world where the slightest feather-touch could rasp her nerves unendurably. Perhaps this terrifying mood of dreariness was her only defence against that torture.

"Keep your mouth shut," Mollie said. "You won't get hurt if you don't make any noise." She slipped her free hand in her arm-bag; now the circle of a gun-muzzle nosed just over the opening of the clasp. "You see," Mollie said.

The bartender lumbered up and stood before Mollie. Caroline caught her breath in an involuntary appeal, and Mollie's thin fingers sank into her knee below the bar. It was a hard and painful grip, as if the fingers were bare bone.

"Bring her another," Mollie said, nodding toward Caro-

line. The hat-brim rippled like something under water. Her face was only half visible beneath it. "I'll take ice and soda."

"What with?"

"Nothing. Plain soda." Mollie laid a dollar bill on the bar and turned her shoulder to him. He moved away. Mollie's fingers relaxed on Caroline's knee.

Caroline cupped her glass in both hands, braced her elbows, and managed to gulp down the last of her drink. She waited while it hit her stomach with a cold, stimulating burning. She felt slightly better.

"Ray isn't coming here," she told Mollie. "I don't know where he is. I thought I'd convinced you of that."

"I've got to find him," Mollie said in her dreadful monotone. "No one can help me but you. I've got to find him. Where is he?"

"But I . . . Oh, listen to me! Ray was lying when he said he'd been seeing me. I only found out today what he was trying to do."

Mollie did not answer for a moment. Then she turned her head slowly, the long eyes sliding round to Caroline with an opaque stare. The dipping hat-brim was almost ghastly in its coquettishness above that dreadful dreariness.

"What?"

"He's been drugging me. You didn't know that, did you? He's been putting something in the seconal capsules I take at night—they're supposed to be a minimum dose, I don't know how much—"

"A grain and a half," Mollie said unexpectedly.

Caroline stumbled and stared. "You did know, then," she said.

"No. No, I didn't. But I'm not surprised. It's like Ray. Only—why?"

"It must have been Ray. You know the effects of barbiturates, don't you? I haven't been able to work much. I've been worrying about everything. Forgetting things. Just when I'd begun to be independent and make a fair living—then I started to go to pieces. Don't you see why Ray did it?"

The more independent I got, the less chance he had of ever getting me back."

Mollie watched silently. Caroline went on.

"That money of yours he stole—he must have planned that for a long time. I know Ray. He was trying to break me down, stop me from making a living—" Ray Kerry had been the secret plagiarist, too. "Trying to wreck my nerves so I couldn't trust my own judgment any more. And then, when I was hanging on the ropes he meant to come around with a lot of money and—and I was supposed to fall gratefully into his arms. Only I didn't." She was surprised to hear herself laugh unevenly. "He didn't think I hated him that much. He never believed I'd rather kill myself than go back to him—if I were starving!"

But how had Ray got into the locked apartment?

"I'm surprised he didn't use morphine on you," Mollie said. "Yes, Ray must have planned this for a long time. He was just waiting till I had enough money in my safe. . . . I've got to get it back. If I don't, I'll lose my job. I've got to make enough money to buy whisky. I haven't been sober in years. Not like this." She bent her head and the hat-brim hid her face, but Caroline saw a little shiver run over the thin body beside her. From beneath the green shadow of the hat, she said in her deadly monotone, "I was sober when I woke up in that hospital. I had to get out. I had to get a drink."

"The police let you go?" Automatically Caroline glanced up, but the bartender was at the other end of the bar, and there was no one within earshot.

"No," Mollie said. "They're looking for me now. They thought I was in trauma. I pretended to be unconscious after I'd seen where I was. I listened for a while. They didn't watch me very closely. I waited for a chance to slip out. My clothes—I took a nurse's uniform I found in a laundry bag. Then I . . . went somewhere and got this." She looked down at her dress, and the blue glint of metal showed briefly from the half-open handbag.

The bartender came back with three glasses. Mollie watched avidly while he mixed the brandy and soda. Her long hand twitched toward it as he shoved the glass toward Caroline; then she got herself under control and took up the plain soda stoically.

The bartender moved away. On impulse Caroline pushed her glass toward Mollie.

"You'd better take this."

"Don't," Mollie said. "Don't! I can't drink yet. Not till I get my money back. It's different when I'm drinking steadily; it's under control then. But I haven't had a drink for twenty hours. If I start now, I'll keep going. I won't stop. I'll drink till I pass out. I know. There isn't any time to waste now. Oh, God, when I find Ray—!"

Caroline said, "The police are trying to find him too."

"Are they? Yes, I suppose they are."

"Did—did Ray kill Wynekoop?"

Mollie was silent for a moment. Then she said in a thin whisper, "He opened the door . . ."

Caroline felt a chill go over her, a chill that started up under the curls at her nape and flickered downward until she felt the gooseflesh start out along her legs. She knew as well as if she could see into Mollie's thoughts what door she meant. The twisted, tortured mind had swung around to last night, and the Byzantine eyes were fixed as if they saw it now, in retrospect, and more clearly than they had seen the reality.

"He opened it," Mollie repeated, in the tones of one who hears nothing but her own voice. Or perhaps not even that. Perhaps only the creak of a door and the sound of heavy breathing (was it the murderer who breathed so loudly? Does killing make the breath race?) and from somewhere, muffled, the whisper of a phonograph record playing in a darkened room.

"What happened?" Caroline said, almost inaudibly.

"You know. You were there. You saw—I think you saw."

I remember—looking up after awhile and you were there. *He* opened the door, and then—” Mollie did not seem capable of pronouncing Wynekoop’s name. She stumbled over the very pronoun by which she referred to him. “He was heavy,” she said thinly. “I couldn’t hold him up. He—he just folded over. . . .” She looked blindly into Caroline’s eyes. “He walked back toward me in the dark, and I didn’t know what had happened to him till . . . till . . .”

“Was it Ray who killed him? Or—or did *you*—”

“No,” Mollie said. “Oh no, I didn’t do it.”

“Then who?”

“Someone at the door. You know. It might have been you. Was it?”

“No,” Caroline parroted. “I didn’t do it. Don’t you remember how it happened?”

Mollie nodded. “The doorbell rang. Pete went to answer it. I thought it might be Ray.”

“Was the light on?”

“No. We could see a little. There’s a transom over the door, frosted glass. There was some light from the hall. I saw Pete open the door, and something moved. I heard a noise on the floor—that must have been the razor. Pete turned around and came back toward me. Then—I don’t know. He started to fall, I think, and I tried to catch him, and we both went down on the sofa. I . . . felt the blood. I knew he was dead. I don’t remember what happened after that. Except that I saw you.” She struck the bar a light, fretful blow. “It might have been Ray. But I don’t know. I didn’t see who it was.”

Caroline picked up her glass quickly. She thought of Wynekoop. She thought of anyone, opening the door to a caller, and seeing only a face with a look upon it that no man has ever told of. A look that passes only once between the killer and the slain.

Wynekoop would have seen only that look in someone’s eyes, and the flash of a quick stroke toward his face and vanishing beyond vision-range beneath his own chin. He

would have felt the force of the blow, and then surely, surely little else. He had turned and walked a few steps. . . .

How long would it take a man to die after his throat was cut? Surely a matter of seconds, and in them he would stand there in bewilderment and confused choking for breath, too concerned perhaps with the fact that he could not breathe to know clearly what had happened to him. Perhaps he never knew, standing there on the threshold in those few moments of awareness which were all that remained to him. Then a few stumbling steps, and blackout, and the crossing of another sort of threshold.

Mollie's tale rang true. The shock to Mollie as Wynekoop's head fell upon her shoulder and his whole throat opened and the blood spurted over her would be enough to explain much of her attitude now. It was not an experience one would recover from in twenty hours. Not even Mollie. And sobriety, with her pathological hyperacuity, would not help either.

Caroline said carefully, "You were trying to keep me there last night. Why? Were you really expecting Ray?"

But Mollie didn't answer. It was the wrong question, somehow, Caroline sensed. She tried again.

"Was there anyone who'd have wanted to kill Wynekoop?"

Mollie said, "I've been wondering. Wondering if Pete hadn't tried to get hold of my money for himself. If he'd been able to fix up something with Ray . . . I don't know. That night we came up to your apartment—afterward, Pete told me there was someone there with you. I thought he was just guessing. But was Ray there before we came, Caroline?"

"No. At least . . . I was asleep. You woke me up when you rang the bell. If Ray had changed my seconal capsules, that would explain why I've been sleeping so heavily." And why Ray had been able to get into the apartment—somehow—and type plagiarized passages into her scripts, and perform his other pleasant little tricks without arousing her.

Mollie said, "I don't believe you. I can't believe you. Tell me where Ray is, or I'll let the police know you killed Pete."

"W-what?"

Mollie waited patiently.

11...

THE ROOF crashed around Caroline's head. She caught her own stunned gaze in the mirror again, and her mind grasped futilely at fantasy to save her from the impossible problem. For Mollie believed—what did she believe? Conviction was in her voice and her waiting stare. Somehow she had managed to assure herself that she had at least found a lever by which to force information out of a stubborn opponent. She looked complacent as she sat watching Caroline with unswerving, dark-ringed eyes.

The woman was psychotic. This wasn't happening. Caroline saw herself in the looking-glass, very pinched and pale between the bottles. Bottles and looking-glass—Alice again, but now it was another scene that rose up before her with dreadful appropriateness. She saw the bright, well-remembered garden with flamingoes wandering through it, heard a hoarse voice shouting "Off with his head!" and saw the white roses dripping red. . . . But for Pete Wynekoop there had been no low voice in the background to murmur, "You are all pardoned."

Even in the fantasy the roses dripped red. She could not escape it. The fantasy contracted sharply and thrust her forth into a reality from which there was no retreat.

So she attacked, instead.

"You said the police are looking for you. I should think you'd be more worried about your own skin than trying to get me in trouble."

Mollie shrugged indifferently. "I've been in scrapes before. I know how to get out of them. But you don't."

Caroline said, "You can't prove I was at your apartment last night." But perhaps the police could! There was th

taxi-driver—and someone must have seen her leaving the Quill with Wynekoop. She said sharply, "If it's just a question of your word against mine, I think I've got a little better reputation in New York."

"I've got to get my money back."

"Ray's probably holed up somewhere drunk. You know him. And the police are looking for him too. When they find him, you can get your money."

Mollie said angrily, "The police mustn't know about the money!" She caught herself. "I didn't steal it. That's not what I mean. But I've got to find Ray first." Caroline could sense a fresh vagary turning the strange, illogical mind of the woman. "There's one way. It might work."

"What is it?"

"I told you about it last night. I said my séances were never on the level if I could help it. Sometimes I can't help it, though. I'm abnormally sensitive—" She moved impatiently. "Why should I try to explain it to you? I can't even explain it to myself. I know it works sometimes, that's all."

"You mean a séance? But surely—"

"I'm not asking you to believe anything. I'm not doing this for fun. There's just a chance it might work this time. Have you got a pencil?"

Caroline searched through her handbag and produced a battered stub. Mollie took it, folded it between her palms, rolled it in long fingers. She nodded.

"Paper? We may need quite a lot."

Search produced nothing. Then Caroline remembered the telephone booth and slid off her stool. She came back with a dozen small sheets of scratch-paper from the pad in its holder against the booth's wall. Desperately as she wanted to call Bob O'Brien's office again, she knew that this was not the time. She was too conscious of the gun in Mollie's handbag to run such an obvious risk.

"All right," Mollie said, getting up. She nodded toward the row of booths at the back of the room. "Bring your drink."

Mollie sat facing the rear, so that she was little more than a silhouette against the lights around the bar. Caroline could see the large ovals of her eyes, in the oval face, making two flat shapes of light. The rest of her face was featureless in the twilight.

She gathered up the sheets of paper with her thin fingers, making a neat stack on the table. She took up the pencil, turning it around and around in fingers that seemed no thicker than the pencil itself.

"I'm going to try something I haven't done for a long time," she said. "I haven't needed to. It's hard work, very hard. And it may be simply a game I play with my own subconscious. That's possible. Just the same, if it works, I won't be faking."

"But what are you going to do?" Caroline asked, clasping her hands under the table to quiet their involuntary trembling.

"Automatic writing. You'll have to help. You ask the questions. I'm going to—there isn't any real word for it—focus inward. It isn't easy. The questions—" She bent to the paper and scribbled rapidly, one sentence to a page, passing them over to Caroline.

"Ask me these, one at a time, slowly. Keep them in order. I'll answer—try to answer—on separate pages. Then we'll see." She flashed Caroline a warning glance, and Caroline saw suddenly that Mollie was not trusting her too far. She intended for no eyes but hers to see these answers, until she was sure they were harmless.

"I won't be unconscious," Mollie warned. "I'll know everything that happens. Wait a minute."

She twisted to scan the room cautiously. A few people had begun to drift in and out by now, but apparently no one to arouse suspicion.

"All right," she said. "Wait till I'm ready. You'll know."

She folded her arms upon the table and sank her head between her shoulders like a thin and elegant bird of prey. She had pushed the big hat back on her head and its brim

made a dark halo now to shut off what light might filter past her from the area around the bar. Her face was a dim oval, but the great eyes swam in light. They seemed to gather all the light in the booth and focus it in two flat mirrors that stared fixedly.

Caroline fidgeted. Silence quivered around her. She heard her own heart thumping and her breath seemed to sough when she drew it. Mollie was quite silent, and after a moment Caroline realized that she was not actually staring at anything at all. The luminous eyes were off focus, seeing nothing, or seeing inwardly, perhaps.

Play along, Caroline told herself. What intentions moved Mollie now were problematical. Perhaps the woman was in earnest. *And—Caroline thought—if she does go into some sort of trance, I may be able to slip away without her noticing.*

It was a curious, endless moment. Music thumped softly through the dim air, people laughed above the gentle hum of talk, glasses clinked. There was a tinkling of shaken ice, the gurgle of liquid from a bottle, all the tiny sounds coming with great clarity through a ground-swell of merging noises that filled the bar as the air and the dimness filled it.

Then Mollie drew a long, long breath. It was quite soft, but the sound of it drowned all the other sounds for Caroline. Hurriedly she groped for the written questions. Mollie's gaze seemed disconcertingly direct now.

"Ask. . . ." It was no more than a sigh.

Caroline fumbled for the first page. She could scarcely read it in the gloom.

"*Where is Ray Kerry?*" she read slowly and softly.

Mollie hesitated, a little frown flickering across her face. Then the pencil, lying loosely in her fingers, moved with an uncertain gait across the paper. Caroline craned involuntarily to see what was being written. Mollie's hand shielded the message with a sort of unconscious expertness. She wrote smoothly what could not have been more than a single word, but she hid what she had written. Her eyes did not

follow the pencil. She still stared into distant nothingness. But when the pencil had finished its movement she turned the sheet over, face down, and sat without motion, waiting.

Caroline looked sideways toward the distant door. She heard Mollie stir. She turned back to the next page.

"Who can take me to Ray Kerry?"

This time the frown deepened between Mollie's staring eyes. The pencil moved more rapidly. It scribbled another word and then rose from the paper like something with volition of its own. Mollie pushed that sheet aside and again waited.

Incredulous excitement began to well up in Caroline. An overwhelming curiosity flooded her to see if the truth could possibly be emerging in this fantastic fashion. Logic told her that it was impossible. But . . . with an effort she turned to the next question.

"Where is the money?"

Without warning, Mollie's face crumpled into a twisted grimace. The pencil dashed suddenly at the paper like something bent on destruction. Caroline heard it fairly hiss across the sheet, digging deep in its violence. She thought it underscored. It wrote a moment longer than it had done before. Then it rose again to wait, and the poised motion was like a snake's head rising, with a snake's balance and deadly patience.

Caroline held up the last question to the light. Her hand was shaking.

"How can I find Ray Kerry and the money?"

Almost a rephrasing of the earlier query, as if Mollie were deliberately trying to trap something elusive and reluctant.

"How can I find Ray Kerry and the money?"

A breath of violent impatience fairly snorted from Mollie's delicate nostrils. Again her face convulsed with angry emphasis, almost an anguished emphasis. The pencil rose and stabbed at the paper from a small height, like a striking snake. It made hollow, whispering noises on the table as it rushed across the page. It struck periods like small, resound-

ing hammer blows. It underscored again with vicious strokes that dug into the paper. It wrote even longer this time, a message of four or five words.

Then it fell from Mollie's hand with a curious effect of exhaustion, and rolled across the table. Caroline caught it, her fingers shrinking involuntarily, as from something abnormally alive. She was conscious of faint surprise that it did not stir in her hand as the small, angry, synthetic life died out of it.

Mollie turned her head slowly from side to side. She blinked several times. That was all. Focus had returned to her eyes when she looked at Caroline again.

"All right," she said in her normal voice. "Now we'll see."

The pages had been pushed aside helter-skelter as the pencil finished the last. Mollie drew them all into a neatly squared pack and read the first. Her expression did not change. She read the second. She read the third. She only glanced at the fourth and longest answer; then she put them down on the table and stared at Caroline.

"What is it?" Caroline demanded.

Mollie drew her shoulders together and shook her head slightly. She pushed the pages across the table.

Caroline took up the four sheets.

She had to hold them to the light to see what was written upon the pages. The first bore a single word written in light, sketchy strokes. The word was *Incubus*.

She looked up in bewilderment.

"Go on," Mollie said. "Look at the others."

The writing on the second page was firmer. The word, however, was the same. *Incubus* sprawled across the sheet in larger letters, blacker, steadier. On the third page the rising violence began to show itself. In heavy black letters, tall and leaning, the word repeated itself furiously.

Incubus—Incubus.

And the fourth page had all the qualities of a shout in print. The letters were emphatic capitals, irregular with haste and fury.

INCUBUS—INCUBUS—INCUBUS.

Mollie was watching her as she put the pages down. Their eyes met and they sat in silence, sharing the same uncomprehending look.

"It didn't answer," Mollie said slowly. "Or it did, in a way. But it doesn't make sense. I don't understand this. It's like something blind and furious screaming at me. One word over and over, trying to make me understand—trying with only the one word. Why? Something all but mindless, desperate to speak but having only one word to answer all our questions."

Caroline said, "Last night you mentioned an incubus. A—a feeling—"

Mollie grimaced and nodded. But she did not speak.

Caroline looked at the cryptic notes again. "You said you'd had that feeling only once before. When was that? Perhaps—"

"That man's dead," Mollie said flatly. "Dead twelve years. It was in Trinidad. There was a—a sort of séance. And I got the feeling then. It was centered about one man . . . he was caught and hanged a few months later. He'd been mixed up in several very brutal murders, but I hadn't known it at the séance. Nobody had known that then."

It was at that moment that the door of the bar closed with a thud and two familiar faces caught the light briefly. Julia and Elwood Remington, bespectacled and looking more than ever like rather dazed Disney birds, hesitated between the bar and the row of booths.

Caroline's mind flung out a frantic command. *Look this way! This way!* She was too conscious of the gun in Mollie's handbag to rise, but she could turn her head so that it emerged from the concealing shadows.

This way!

Remington touched his wife's arm and took a step toward the bar. Mrs. Remington turned with him.

But as she moved, she glanced around the dim room, and

her gaze crossed Caroline's and lighted with instant recognition.

Caroline said softly, "It's those people—the Remingtons. Remember? If they come over here, they'll see you. You don't want to be seen, do you? If the police are looking for you—no, of course you don't. Stay where you are. I'll head them off."

She had only a few seconds to make her point. Already the Remingtons were swinging in her direction. If Mollie's shifting mind could understand, if she could convince her—

"I'll stop them," she said. "Wait here."

Still Mollie did not move. Perhaps the hat-brim dipped just a little, but Caroline could not be sure. She slid out of the booth and went toward the Remingtons. She didn't really expect to feel the shock of a bullet in her back, but Mollie was thoroughly unpredictable. With half her mind Caroline went through the routine of greetings.

Julia Remington was saying something about "your friend" and nodding toward the back of the bar. With relief Caroline saw that Mollie had not turned; there was nothing to see but the rim of that swooping hat. Hastily Caroline said that she was just leaving.

"You'll have a drink with us?" Remington suggested. Caroline nodded. She did not want to go out into the street alone, where Mollie could follow her. Nor did she quite dare to go to the telephone booth—*that* might provoke Mollie into dangerous action. She moved to the bar with the Remingtons.

Once there, she found horn-rimmed spectacles regarding her in a friendly fashion from each side. "Like being studied by bugs," she thought madly. "But what are they doing here?"

She asked them.

"Having a drink," Remington said, signaling the bartender. He ordered, with brief consultations. "After the poisonous dinner we had tonight, we needed a drink. The

next time we choose a restaurant out of the phone book—!"

Julia Remington said, "Oh, we know this little bar. That artist, Mr. Hylan, isn't it?—he took us in here yesterday. We met him on the street with his portfolio under his arm, almost as big as he was. I like him. Miss Hale, I've almost decided to live in New York."

"But we won't," Remington said.

"All the restaurants aren't like that one. We had a wonderful day. We were at the Museum all morning, and we saw a play this afternoon—"

"And then we had dinner. A bitter blow that was."

"Oh, well. What have you been doing, Miss Hale? Something interesting?"

Caroline gasped with laughter; she couldn't help that. "More or less," she said, as the bartender arrived with the drinks. Remington laid a bill on the bar.

The brandy was helpful, but her hands were shaking badly. She was too conscious of Mollie motionless and watchful in her booth. The Remingtons looked at her rather questioningly.

Mrs. Remington said suddenly, "Is anything wrong, Miss Hale?"

"No. Not really. It's just—" She had a sudden idea. "You haven't seen the papers today?"

"I glanced at them," Remington said. "Why?"

"You probably missed it. My uncle's dead. Jonas Bruno—you know?"

"I'm so sorry," Julia Remington said with quick sympathy. "No, we hadn't known."

"It was a shock. I still don't feel quite . . . steady about it."

There was a pause. Caroline said, "So I wonder if I could ask you to do me a favor."

"We'd love to," Mrs. Remington said. Her husband nodded.

"I want to make a telephone call. No, not here. Would you come with me while I'm doing it? I—I know it's silly, but I don't want to be alone."

"Finish your drink, Elwood," Julia Remington ordered. "Now. Let's go."

Walking between them, Caroline began to feel safer. She did not look back. Her skin seemed to come alive, abnormally sensitive, as though it could hear any stir of movement from Mollie in her booth. But the endless journey to the sidewalk was made safely.

"I'll find a taxi," Remington said. Caroline put out her hand.

"Please. Don't go. There'll be one along in a minute."

It was nearly curtain time in the theatres; presently a cab, with its flag up, came cruising toward them. Remington signaled.

In the cab, he looked at her inquiringly. But Julia Remington leaned forward and gave an address in the East Fifties. "Miss Hale's coming home with us," she said. "Till she feels a little better, anyway."

"No, really," Caroline protested. She stole a glance out of the rear-view window. "I've got to find a drugstore. Then I'll be all right. As soon as I telephone . . ." Was that another cab following? No, it had turned off.

Remington said to the driver, "Stop at a drugstore, will you?" Almost immediately the taxi pulled in to the curb. Julia Remington said, "I need some cigarettes. You can wait here, Elwood." The two women entered the brightly lit store together. Caroline saw a booth at the back. She hurried toward it as Mrs. Remington stepped to the cigar counter.

She deposited her nickel and dialed, but she had forgotten to listen to the dial tone. Nothing happened. She had no more change. As she stepped out of the booth, Julia Remington came toward her.

"All right?"

"No more nickels."

But Mrs. Remington had one. She gave it to Caroline and hovered rather anxiously outside the folding doors. Caroline

thought, "I must look ready to faint." This time she remembered to wait for the dial tone.

The bell rang on and on in O'Brien's empty office. She listened, half hypnotized by the monotonous buzz—pause—buzz—pause. Where was he? Where *could* he be?

At last she gave up. She came out of the booth, biting her lower lip and frowning. Mrs. Remington said, "No answer?"

"No. I . . . I'm not sure what to do. I've *got* to make that call. It's important."

"Do it from our place. You can lie down on the couch with a blanket and a hot-water bottle. It won't be any trouble, if that's why you're hesitating. Really, Miss Hale."

Caroline hesitated. Perhaps that would be best, after all. If she waited here, Mollie might come through the swinging doors. . . . She couldn't go to O'Brien's office; he wasn't there. She could go back to her own apartment . . . *no!*

"Come on," Mrs. Remington urged, her round little face anxious. "I'm beginning to be worried about you."

Caroline said, "Let me make one more try."

The woman supplied a coin instantly; Caroline went back into the booth and tried Bob O'Brien's apartment. But she had no better luck there. O'Brien had apparently vanished.

She gave up. She let Mrs. Remington steer her to the cab and give the East Fifties address again. She remembered to look out of the back window, but there was no sign of Mollie.

She found herself, presently, entering an apartment building, one of those sleekly restrained lobbies that exhale sedate respectability. The elevator took them aloft.

"This *is* good of you," Caroline said.

"A return visit," Remington said pleasantly. "Only this time it's by invitation. Come on in." He unlocked a door. Caroline had only a glimpse of a dim, quiet living room before she was taken protesting down an inner hall and into a bedroom. Mrs. Remington shooed her husband out, with instructions to fill a hot-water bottle.

"Off with your shoes. I'll put this blanket over you."

"Oh, no. I'm not—"

"Elwood! Heat some milk! Don't let it boil. Miss Hale, did I tell you I used to be a nurse? That was before I married Elwood. If you'll lie down for just half an hour, I'll discharge you as cured."

"I've got to try that number again—"

"I promise to call you in exactly half an hour. Then you can phone."

It was impossible to resist Mrs. Remington's gentle solicitude. Caroline relaxed on the bed, pillows behind her, the light shaded, the room still. The milk and the hot-water bottle arrived. The cup was steaming. A lump of butter floated in luscious melting rings on the milk; pepper speckled it.

Afterward, she must have slept.

He stood under the window, waiting. He stood in shadow. But when he moved suddenly so that the light fell across his face, she saw that it held an expression that terrified her.

She woke to the memory of Ray Kerry's face and with Remington's voice in her ears.

It was not quite waking, somehow.

"Miss Hale? Are you all right?"

Her tongue felt stiff. She said thickly, "I'm . . . not really awake. Is it . . . half an hour?"

"Yes. I'm sorry to wake you up, but I had to talk to you. It's important."

She looked past him. He was seated on a chair by the bed. Beyond him, Julia Remington was taking something out of a briefcase. Light glittered on steel and glass.

"I've got to ask you something," Remington said. His deep voice was soothing. "First, though—please understand me. We're not going to harm you."

She felt sick panic. This must be part of the dream. . . . Involuntarily she found herself sitting up.

Remington pushed her gently back on the pillows. "Please," he said. "Lie there and listen."

But her eyes were on Julia Remington and the familiar instruments being taken out of the briefcase and arranged

on a towel laid on a small table. A hypodermic syringe is easily recognizable, even in a dream.

The low hypnotic voice went on.

"I'm in business. It's a rather peculiar sort of business. It isn't a legal one. Still, we like to keep things running smoothly. So I've got to find out something. Do you understand me?"

She couldn't speak. But she could move her head in a stiff nod.

"A large sum of money has been stolen."

Caroline whispered, "I thought—Mollie said it was hers—"

"Mollie Hathaway is—well, a sort of agent of mine. A collector. When enough money accumulates, she turns it over to me. Usually it's monthly, but I've been unavailable for some time—the money's piled up until it's become quite a large sum. More than we can afford to lose."

"How much is it?"

"You don't know?"

Caroline moved her head again.

"More than forty thousand dollars."

Forty thousand dollars. But what sort of illegal—business—could show such remarkable profits? She tried to think. There was something Mollie had said tonight . . . what?

"I'm surprised he didn't use morphine on you."

How had Ray Kerry supplied himself with the barbiturates he had used to pack the seconal capsules? Oh, there were places in New York where sedatives could be bought without a prescription, but Mollie's words seemed to imply that Ray might not have much difficulty in securing even morphine. And Mollie's séances, her cultist activities—they would be a fine cover-up for—

She didn't know her lips had formed a word.

"That's right," Remington said. "Narcotics. Did Kerry tell you?"

"No. I—I—"

"That's the main part of my business. I've got other

angles, of course, but there was a chance to make a killing in the narcotic business. Probably you don't know it, but after every war there are a lot more addicts. And no supplies. It takes a while for supply to catch up with demand, but the stuff's coming in now and we've been cleaning up."

He smiled at her gravely and Caroline blinked back, clutching at the slipping tatters of her dream. She had to be dreaming. This couldn't be happening to her. But the dream was fading and Remington still sat here, balancing the hypodermic in his large hand.

"This is lucky for us all," he said, gesturing with the hypodermic. "We've had a lot of trouble with you, Miss Hale. For someone who doesn't guess what's going on, you've been a mighty slippery girl."

She stared up at him, not yet quite able to speak, but beginning to realize his meaning. In the apartment yesterday, then—

"My wife and I were all ready to go to work on you right then," Remington said with a nod, seeing in her stricken surprise that her thought followed his. "I had the stuff in my briefcase. But your noisy friend came in at just the wrong time. Then we meant to catch you last night, at Mollie's place—"

So that was why Mollie had tried so hard to detain her! That explained the séance and the mystifying hints.

"We had bad luck again there," Remington told her, holding up the hypodermic and squinting through it at the light. "Wynekoop got you up too early, and by the time we came, the police had arrived before us. So it was quite a relief when Mollie escaped from the hospital today and phoned us that she was following you."

So it hadn't been coincidence when the two of them came into the bar. Remembering her relief at the sight of those two earnest, spectacled faces, Caroline choked a little on an unexpected bark of laughter. Remington chose to misinterpret it.

"Good," he said, smiling down at her. "Feeling better?"

Her throat was dry, but she got out the few words she knew she had to say, for her own peace of mind. "Then—do you know who killed Wynekoop?"

"No. It may have been Ray Kerry. I'm inclined to think it was, maybe out of sheer panic. He knows how big our organization is. He knows he can't get away with that money."

Caroline shut her eyes tightly and tried to think. Wynekoop—Jonas—the two dead men between whom she was the only link. Did Remington know? She said unsteadily, "My uncle—was murdered too."

Remington was silent. "I didn't know that," he said finally. "Who killed him?"

"They—don't know. It happened—a year ago."

"We had nothing to do with it," Remington said. "I'm very sorry it had to happen. And I'm sorry we've caused you so much trouble this time. No, I mean it. The difficulty is that you're our only link with Ray Kerry. So we haven't any choice."

There was a rustle and the tap of brisk footsteps behind him.

Caroline had not noticed Mrs. Remington leave. She came in now, carrying a steaming saucepan. Caroline swallowed dryly.

Hastily Remington said, "Please, Miss Hale! We're sterilizing a needle. Didn't my wife tell you she used to be a nurse? We're not going to hurt you; you must believe that. Why should we?"

Caroline tried to marshal her thoughts. "Mr. O'Brien—a friend of mine—he's expecting me to phone him. He'll go to the police if I don't."

Remington said, "I can't believe that."

"It's the truth. He knows—about some of this. He's worried about me. I was supposed to call his office tonight—"

Remington rose, went out, and came back with a telephone on a long extension cord. "Mr. O'Brien wasn't in his office when you tried before. But try again, if you want.

Don't try to dial the police, though. Julia, do you remember Mr. O'Brien's number?"

"Of course," Mrs. Remington said, and gave it.

Caroline stared until she remembered that Julia Remington had hovered outside the telephone booth while she had tried to reach Bob. She reached an unsteady finger toward the dial.

Remington drew the instrument away.

"Do you know what you're going to say?"

"I . . . you've got to let me go." Was he merely tantalizing her, holding the telephone almost within reach?

Remington said, "We can't do that. Listen to me. We're going to give you a shot that will put you to sleep. It won't hurt you. But you'll tell us the truth while you're asleep."

"I told you I don't know where Ray is!"

"You've told us that. But you can understand why we can't take your word. Too much is at stake. We've had men trailing you since the night Kerry disappeared. They lost you last night, when you left Mollie's place after Wynekoop was killed, but they picked you up again today when you went back to your apartment. We thought Kerry might get in touch with you. It's quite possible that you may be telling the truth, but we can't risk the fact that you may be a clever liar, and that you're planning to jump the country with Kerry at the first opportunity."

"If I can't convince you—"

"You can," he said, with a glance toward the instruments on the table. "Easily, and without running any risk. We're rather skilled at this. A few injections, and we'll know whether you're lying to us or not. If you're not, you've nothing to fear."

Scopolamine? Sodium pentothal? Some kind of truth-drug, some hypnotic—Remington would have easy access to such things, in his business.

"You'll kill me," Caroline said dully. "You'll be afraid to let me live now that I know—"

"We're not murderers," Remington told her. "We're very,

very careful about that. There's always the possibility that some day we'll face a jury, and we want to get off as lightly as possible. It's a sort of insurance. Besides, you're no danger to us. This isn't our apartment. We borrowed it for the occasion. My name isn't Remington. There isn't much you could tell the police that would worry us."

"About Mollie?"

"That's washed up. We've other connections. Mollie's done her job; she's worked with us tonight. But she's no good to us any more in New York. Perhaps in some other country—we'll see. However, we won't kill you. The less investigation we stir up, the better for us. If I knew who'd killed Wynekoop, I'd arrange to have him turned over to the police."

"If it were Ray?"

"That's a bit different," Remington said. "Kerry knows too much about us. The main thing, though, is the money. I want it back."

Julia Remington said, "This hypnotic's harmless. It's used in childbirth cases sometimes, you know. If we wanted to kill you, we could that easily."

"I don't have any choice, do I?"

"No," Remington said. "Do you want to call Mr. O'Brien?"

"I—"

"You could tell him to come here, you know. You could tell him to bring the police. But he wouldn't find us here, any of us. And if he came alone, we'd be able to handle him. I have some men outside in the street." He frowned. "Here's what I advise. Call him; tell him you're all right, but that you haven't time to explain anything now. Reassure him. Say you'll call him tomorrow afternoon. Then you'll wake up in this bed tomorrow, feeling quite normal, and—you'll be free to do whatever you want. We won't bother you again. All we want is the truth, and unless you're afraid of that—"

Caroline reached for the telephone.

O'Brien answered immediately.

"Carrie! I've been worried as hell. Where are you?"

Remington's ear was close to the receiver. Caroline said carefully, "Everything's fine. I tried to call you before—"

O'Brien said, "My fault. Carrie, did you know Mollie Hathaway's trailing you?"

Caroline hesitated till she saw Remington's nod. "Yes. I've seen her. I talked to her. How did you know?"

"I played detective," O'Brien said morosely. "After you left the office I began to wonder about that chiropractor. Finally I went down to Grand Central and waited in the Oyster Bar."

"I didn't see you."

"That was my idea. But I'm a lousy detective. I followed you out and saw Mollie Hathaway coming after you, but before I could reach you—there was a hell of a crowd—I saw you both go in the woman's john. I waited for half an hour for you to come out. Then I gave some dame a buck to investigate. How do you do it?"

"There's another way out," Caroline said.

"Damn," O'Brien said. "Naturally I never thought of that. I looked all over Grand Central. I called your apartment. I went back to the office and got there just as the phone stopped ringing. I've been here ever since. Where are you now?"

Remington met her eyes. She said slowly, "I'm . . . uptown."

"But where? I'll pick you up—"

"No, Bob," she said. "I'm too tired. I'm staying with a friend. If I don't get a good night's sleep tonight I'll die. Everything's really all right. I'll phone you tomorrow."

"Are you with Ray Kerry?"

"With . . . no. Of course not. Please, Bob. Don't ask any more questions now. Wait till I call you."

"Early?"

"As late as I can sleep. Afternoon, maybe."

"Carrie," he said, "this isn't like you. What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Is it something about Mollie?"

She said, "Bob, I want you to do something for me. Don't ask any more questions. Say good night and hang up and wait for me to call you tomorrow. Will you do that, please?"

After a while he said, "Yes, Carrie. Good night."

"Good night."

Remington gently took the receiver from her hand. There was a soft clicking of glass as Mrs. Remington came toward the bed.

12...

A BELL was ringing. Caroline stirred sleepily, and turned her head on the pillow to shut out the sound. It stopped presently, but she could not push back the rising tide of wakefulness. There had been strange dreams, too, nightmares, and—and talking. Much talking. Cheerfulness of a sort, and a delightful spate of conversation, with herself doing most of it.

She sat up abruptly. Dusk quivered grayly through the room. Her dress, neatly folded, lay across a chair, her shoes near them. Amazingly enough, her stockings had been washed and hung on the chair-back, dry now. The door to the living room was open, but there was no sound.

Caroline looked at her bare arm. There were three dots of red, scarcely noticeable. They were the only trace of last night's fantastic happenings.

Her handbag lay on the dressing table. A clock beside it said 6:12. No one moved anywhere within hearing; the voices of her nightmare were still.

Caroline swung her feet to the floor warily, expecting to feel weakness. She didn't; she felt refreshed as though by a long sleep. Moving quietly, she padded barefoot in her slip and glanced into the living room. Empty. The kitchen was

empty too, but a coffee-pot stood on the stove, a kettle on the burner beside it. Caroline laughed shakily. Her wakenings were falling into a pattern these days—strange apartment, solitude, coffee on the stove. . . .

She put the latch on the hall door. Then she went back quickly to the bedroom and dressed as fast as she could. She was pulling on her hat when the telephone rang again.

Tentatively she lifted the receiver. But she did not speak. Remington's voice said, "Miss Hale?"

Caroline waited, her mouth suddenly dry.

"It's all right," Remington said. "Just let me know if it's you. Otherwise I can't talk very freely."

"Yes," she said. "It's—what do you want?"

"I want to make sure you're all right. How do you feel?"

"I don't know. How should I feel? Did you—"

"We did," Remington's voice said. "And you can forget it. I owe you an apology. So far as we were able to find out last night, you really don't have the information we want. Of course the stuff isn't infallible, but, everything considered, we're inclined to believe you."

"I'm glad to hear it," Caroline said, with a faint spark of irony. She glanced at the dusk outside the window and spoiled her effect by asking, "Is it morning or evening? I just woke up."

"It's evening," Remington told her. "You've had a long sleep. Now listen. There's a pencil and paper by the phone. Please write this down." He gave her a midtown number. "If Kerry should get in touch with you, I want you to call that number. If you will. Remember, you probably have more reason to be afraid of Ray Kerry than to be afraid of us. As for the number, don't bother to have it traced. We're well organized—I get my information at third or fourth hand. Do you have any intention of going to the police, by the way?"

Caroline hesitated. She heard Remington laugh softly.

"It doesn't much matter. You'd have a wild story to tell. And you haven't been harmed. Better forget the whole thing, Miss Hale. The only annoyance you might have to expect

now is from Kerry. I'm sure you won't be tempted by any suggestions he may make, now that you know the circumstances. Besides, you'll be watched—closely. And—oh, don't forget to telephone your friend Mr. O'Brien. Or have you?"

"Not yet," Caroline said.

"Anything else?" He waited. "No? Goodbye, then. And good luck."

Caroline laid back the receiver, her lips forming soundless words. She found it difficult to imagine the Remingtons as heads of an illicit dope gang. She thought: A man can smile and smile and be a villain. And a man can be a villain and still be perfectly ordinary and normal in his spare time. When the felon's not engaged in his profession—

She called O'Brien's office.

"Carrie!" he said half-angrily when she had spoken. "Why haven't you phoned? I've been eating my nails down to the elbows. What the devil's going on?"

She didn't want to stay here while she told him. "Where can we meet, Bob? I've a lot to tell you."

"Where are you?"

"Over in the East Fifties."

"What's the address? I'll pick you up and we can go to your apartment. Something I want to show you there."

"No, wait," Caroline said. "I . . . I don't want to stay in this neighborhood. Do you know that drugstore around the corner from my place? The Liggett's? Meet me there, will you?"

"You'd better have a good story ready. Sure you're—you didn't run into any trouble, did you?"

"I feel fine. I don't know why. I'll meet you, Bob—hurry."

"Okay."

She was ravenously hungry. From the Liggett's they went to a restaurant on 69th Street and Caroline greedily worked her way through onion soup and veal scallopini, while she told O'Brien everything that had happened.

"I wonder if I feel better now because of that truth

serum?" she hazarded. "Isn't it a treatment they use for psychotic cases?"

"You're thinking of narcosynthesis," O'Brien said, crumbling a roll. "God knows what you told that bastard Remington. I wish I had gone to the police. I was about ready to when you phoned."

"I know a few more things, though—and that helps."

"You don't know who killed Wynekoop or your uncle."

"Oh. I wonder if Lieutenant Merrill tried to reach me? Well—I feel certain Dr. Tallman didn't murder Jonas."

"The chiropractor, you mean. Who did, then? Ray?"

"Perhaps. It was Ray who was doping me, I'm perfectly sure of that, though I can't see how yet. Trying to throw me so much off beam I'd fall into his arms when he appeared, with that forty thousand dollars."

"Which is a good deal of money," O'Brien said. "Through?"

They walked back to the apartment house. Caroline's key hesitated as usual in the lock. Then the door swung open and the familiar carpeted entry lay silent and dignified before them, light reflecting dully from the stained-glass windows of the landing. There was a smell of furniture polish and old, well-cared-for wood, and the opulent past.

And the dark apartment upstairs, still, listening, waiting, breathed out its sentience as that door swung open. Caroline found herself holding her breath for the motion of soundless feet. The walls watched, but no flicker from within betrayed Incubus in waiting for her.

She switched on the light. O'Brien had paused and was playing intently with the door-chain. Suddenly he laughed.

"Look at this, Caroline," he said. "No, wait. I'm going outside. Put the chain on and latch it. Don't lock the door. Just the night-chain. And watch."

She obeyed. The doorknob turned. The door swung open the length of the chain. Then it swung back again so that the chain hung loosely. O'Brien's square-fingered hands came through the gap, one above the other. They took the chain at

a place close to the wall and fumbled briefly. The chain fell neatly in two.

He shoved the door open and came in.

"I've been seeing people and asking questions today," he said. "One of our regular writers used to be a stage magician. I talked to him and found out some ways this little trick might be worked. It's a gadget. You can buy 'em in any novelty shops. It's just one of those puzzles where you work two metal loops apart. A chain with two links that will come free if you hold them exactly right."

Caroline reached for the chain. O'Brien guided her fingers. The links snapped together and then apart as the cleverly camouflaged breaks slipped through each other.

"But—I'm a fool! If I'd examined that chain closely, I couldn't have missed this, Bob!"

"Misdirection is a useful trick," O'Brien told her. People don't somehow. You were probably thinking more about the lock on the door. Or else searching the place for a secret panel."

"The lock," Caroline said, reminded. "I had that changed, you know. There were only two keys, and I have both of them."

"You didn't have it changed till fairly lately," O'Brien said. "That's what you told me. And you had it changed because you suspected Ray had a key to the original lock—the one that was in the door when he was living here. Well, he did. He let himself in one day when you were out—or one night when you hadn't put on the chain—and substituted this trick chain. I suppose he had it made to duplicate yours. A magic supply shop could handle an order like that. He fixed those seconal capsules of yours at the same time."

"I did have the lock changed, though."

"Tell me again just how you went about that, will you? Let's go in the living room. No, wait. I brought along a good, strong chain, without any trick links, in case I'd guessed right. *And* a screwdriver." He went to work intently.

Caroline watched him.

"I began to wonder if Ray had a key," she said. "So—oh, I went over to the nearest locksmith and asked him to put in a new lock for me. He came up an hour or so later and did."

"But hadn't you phoned Ray before you did that?" O'Brien asked over his shoulder.

"That's right. I did. I wanted to know if he did have a key—but of course he said no, and that didn't prove anything."

"And you told him you were going to have the lock changed the same day?"

"Yes. But what could Ray have—"

"Ask a magician some time," O'Brien said. "You'll find the most mystifying tricks are generally the simplest. I was trying to figure out something—a bean, or dehydrated stuff—that you could poke in the hole where the bolt fits. I had it all worked out. You put this bean in, and when you wanted to unlock the door, you squirted water on it through the crack. Then it expanded and pushed the bolt back. The only difficulty was that it probably wouldn't work," he finished, rather morosely.

Caroline suppressed an impulse to laugh. "But you do know how Ray did it?"

"Sure," O'Brien said. "At least, the magician told me a couple of ways. Ray knew you were going to have the lock changed. Perhaps he guessed you'd go to the nearest locksmith, or perhaps he came out here and trailed you. Then he bribed the locksmith to make him an extra key."

"Oh, no!"

"Why not?"

"I don't know. It's too—too easy—"

"It's so obvious you wouldn't be likely to guess it. You'd find it easier to believe Ray had discovered a secret panel, wouldn't you? Like Chesterton's Invisible Man—nobody notices a postman. Well, nobody suspects a locksmith of accepting dough to make an extra key for—for Ray Kerry."

"Are you just guessing, Bob?"

"I saw the locksmith. You told me he was around the corner from here, so it was easy to find."

"Did he admit doing it?"

"Not right away. I had to threaten him with the police. I said Ray had confessed to bribing him, anyway, so—well, I finally got him to admit that that was what happened, on one condition."

"What?"

"That we keep it a secret. Now wait," he said, finishing the last turn of the screwdriver and straightening. "The story we cooked up is just as plausible, and the locksmith will swear to it in court if necessary, where I'm certain he won't admit taking a bribe. Here's what happened—it says here. Ray called the locksmith one day when you weren't home and said he'd been locked out. He identified himself easily enough as Ray Kerry. The locksmith noticed the nameplate on the downstairs letter-box was Kerry."

"But it isn't. It hasn't been for two years."

"It could be Santa Claus, if I wrote Santa Claus on a bit of paper and stuck it in that little slot. Ray could have done that easily. Why should the locksmith have suspected anything? Presumably Ray Kerry lived here, and it was Ray Kerry who was paying him to unlock the door and make a new key in place of the one he said he'd lost."

"But that wasn't what happened."

"No," O'Brien said, testing the new chain. "There, that's better. You'll sleep safer tonight. Have the lock changed again tomorrow, but don't tell anybody in advance. And go to another man! I wish I'd brought a sliding bolt too. Well, I'll do it next time." He led the way toward the living room.

"Help me look around," Caroline said. She had no intention of mentioning it, but Incubus was with her still, as it had been ever since that first evening. Heavy, oppressive, a presence she found herself naming Ray Kerry without any good reason. Only—they were not alone here.

But they were. Carefully the two of them went through the apartment. There was no one behind the curtains or under

the bed or in the closets. The living room was empty. They sat down finally, under the grimacing masks, and O'Brien lit cigarettes.

He watched her over the flare of the match. "Ray's been trying to break you down. He won't get away with it. I won't let him." He laughed. "If Mollie Hathaway and your friend Remington catch up with him, I won't need to bother."

Caroline jumped up. "The plagiarisms," she said. "Madison showed me how the typing was different on some of the pages—wait, I'll show you—I hope!" She was fumbling in a drawer. "I've got some old letters from Ray here, and I think . . ."

She brought them back to the sofa and leafed rapidly through the sheets, explaining Madison's theory as she went. O'Brien bent over the pages, checking the points as she found them.

Presently he nodded. "Okay, that's it. Not that we needed proof. It was Ray, all right."

"But—wait a minute. What about those traps I set? I've tied thread across the hall at night and scattered flour around."

"How well does Ray know your habits?" O'Brien asked. "You lived together for eight months, remember."

She nodded helplessly. Ray knew her with an almost terrifying perceptiveness. When he waited at this door three nights ago he had waited with confidence, sure she would come back and let him in when doubt had had time to seep through her mind. He knew her smallest habits of mind and body. If he had been a stupid husband she could never have come to hate him as she knew now that she did. No insensitive man could be so cruel.

"I should have thought of that," she said. "I tried stretching thread across the hall first. He might have been watching for something like that. He could have felt it break and reset the trap. It's like him. After that he'd be watching. If he walked through the flour—well, he could have left his shoes there and gone on in his sock-feet. When he came back

I suppose he'd back out, wipe off his shoes, and spread the flour around again. Yes, he'd watch for traps. He'd love it. Like a game. And he knew I wouldn't wake up and hear him." She tipped ash from her cigarette into a tray. "Why didn't he come in that night?"

O'Brien knew her meaning. Perhaps he, too, was visualizing the silent, confident figure standing just outside the door, waiting and waiting. . . .

"If he'd used his key and unsnapped the chain, he'd have given himself away. Perhaps he never intended you to find out—of course he didn't! You'd have guessed Ray was behind all your troubles, the moment you saw him walk in here. You wouldn't be likely to fall in his arms after that."

"He wanted to make me open the door for him," Caroline said slowly. "He wanted to . . . win. But he didn't win. I heard him go away again."

"I know," O'Brien said. "He came back to the bar. Very drunk, and trying to get drunker. I expect he was worrying about Mollie and Remington by then."

Caroline took up the half-guessed tale. "Then he came back here. By then I was asleep. He let himself in—"

"Drunk. Wait, though. Why did he start typing another plagiarism that night? He knew he couldn't play a waiting game with you any longer. He had forty thousand dollars burning a hole in his pocket, and he was scared to death of Mollie and Remington."

"He was drunk, you said. No, I know. My story was all laid out on the desk, ready for submission. When Ray saw that, he thought one more plagiarism might be the straw that would break my back. He hoped I'd notice it the next day, and be so worried about my own bad memory—the half-chance that *I* might have typed that insert and forgotten it—that I'd be ready to collapse in his arms. He didn't finish that typing job, though. He was interrupted halfway through."

"Mollie and her gang?"

"How could he get out?" Caroline asked. "There's no back door. And no secret panels."

O'Brien said, "What about that closet by the hall door? Could he have ducked into that, and slipped out after everybody'd moved on into this room?"

"I think Wynekoop would have noticed. He was watching everything."

The telephone rang shrilly. O'Brien said, "Let me take it, Carrie," and got up. He lifted the receiver, scowling slightly, his gaze abstracted.

"Hello?"

There was a pause. O'Brien grimaced.

"Wrong number," he said, and hung up. He came back to the couch.

Caroline said, "Bob. That could have been Ray!"

But O'Brien shook his head. "I know Ray's dulcet tones. This sounded like pure Brooklynese. Just a wrong number. I thought it might be the cops finally catching up with us." He crushed out his cigarette and slipped one arm about Caroline's shoulders. She relaxed gratefully against him.

"There's too much to remember at once," she said. "I'll have to tell the police now—about Wynekoop and everything."

"I suppose so. It's too much to hope that you could stay out of the affair completely. Although so far you haven't been suspected of—oh, call it complicity, in either murder. Wynekoop's or your uncle's."

She looked across to the closed door of Jonas's room, and, curiously, for the first time was aware of an actual sensation of loss, a feeling of almost physical pain in the region below her breastbone. This is what the ancients meant, she realized, when they put the seat of the soul not in the heart or head, but in the stomach. Here is where emotion really strikes you.

She had not thought she felt emotion about Jonas. He had been dead for a year; she had known the fact of his death

for many hours. And she had never seen him frequently when he was alive. But, strangely, she knew fully, quite unexpectedly, that he had been of her own flesh and blood, and that she would not see him again. He would never come bounding up the staircase again, laughing, full of an overwhelming vitality, his arms laden with gifts, shouting until the stained-glass windows rattled and the other tenants put out their heads to welcome him too.

The brain accepts many truths far too facily and less thoughtfully, in a way, than the body does. Her mind had known, and had not very much cared that Jonas was dead. This was the first time she had stumbled, so to speak, over his absence, and now suddenly her body knew, the same body that had shared certain qualities of the blood. Now the synapse closed between brain and body and there was a deep, intangible ache just under her breastbone.

She turned and burrowed her nose into O'Brien's shoulder. His arm tightened around her. He said nothing at all.

Her thoughts spun. Jonas—she did not want to think of Jonas. Vic Curzon, with his faded red hair and his avid grin, his extroversion that was merely a bad imitation of what Jonas could do naturally, gracefully—What was that old song Vic had sung in the car, coming back from Westchester with Paul Royce yesterday?

He bought her a pair of shears

To hang by her side:

And she bought him a winding-sheet

Against the day he died. . . .

The day he died. When had that been? Last Easter?

Mollie Hathaway . . . when was the day she had died? It must have been a long time ago. For certainly Mollie wasn't alive any more. And Pete Wynekoop. He had died fifteen years ago, in Chicago, when the days of his red fame as a gangdom reporter had waned.

She, herself . . . she was no longer as alive as she had

been nearly three years ago, when she had first met Ray Kerry. Oh, death meant nothing—the tearing of a bullet, the sharp cold thrust of a knife. That was another kind of death.

Ray—he must have died, the real Ray, long before she knew him. It had taken her a while to find that out. She had not guessed before their marriage. Afterward, of course—

. . . she bought him a winding-sheet
Against the day he died. . . .

She pressed her forehead harder against the rough cloth of O'Brien's coat. She did not want to look at him. A deep tide of emotion was rising in her, something unexpected and unwelcome and wholly impossible to resist. She knew what it was—the old weakness and emptiness of desire which she had felt three years ago for Ray Kerry and thought never to feel again, a hollow longing for some strength she had sensed in him and looked for later in vain. It might have been there once, before he died, before she knew him. It was not there when she needed it.

O'Brien said softly, "Will you marry me, Carrie?"

It was a long time before she answered. O'Brien pushed her away, staring in disbelief. His comment was scarcely romantic.

"Well, I'll be God-damned," he said in a stunned voice. "Do you mean it?"

Incubus stood behind them after that. Perhaps they should not have given this hostage to fortune. The secret, crouching thing Caroline had already sensed began to grow slowly, invisible and intangible, but deadly and furious. It was an insane, undirected fury—a bodiless emotion, Caroline thought, trying to imagine such a thing—and it flowed up noiselessly until the whole room was brimming with it.

It was not malevolent. It was too inhuman for that. It could have been simply a matter of mood, but both of them felt it. Darkness is never as dark until a lamp is lit. Per-

haps it had been a mistake to light this lamp, for they realized now far too keenly the dangers that lay ahead.

One slight movement could put out the lamp, Caroline knew. One slight movement had sent Pete Wynekoop plunging across a dark threshold. The swift, purposeful flexion of an arm . . .

O'Brien's arm tightened around her.

They sat in silence for a long time. For this was a time that would not come again. This moment only was safe. It was theirs, together, in spite of the Incubus that stood furiously at their backs—blind, deaf, dumb, with its mindless, bodiless violence.

They did not mention the police again. They did not talk much. There was too much to say.

Only when he left did O'Brien say, "Put the chain on tonight, Carrie. And call me as soon as you wake up tomorrow. We'll have to get busy."

She knew what he meant. That was stolen time. Tomorrow morning was the deadline. The police, and—and—

So many chances for that single, slight movement that could put out the lamp.

13 . . .

AFTER O'BRIEN was gone, she found that she wasn't sleepy. She found a dust-cloth and visited the window-sills. She investigated the icebox and poured into the sink a quart of soured milk. There was mold on the bread; that went into the garbage can. She scrubbed the bathtub, in an effort to tire herself physically so that she could sleep without the aid of any more sedatives.

The telephone rang as she shook scouring powder into the wash-basin. She answered the shrill summons with a faint shrinking, a feeling that the expected, inevitable move-

ment had finally come. But there was nothing ominous about Paul Royce's voice.

"Hello, Caroline," he said. "Hope I didn't wake you up."

"No, I'm still awake. What—" She paused; Royce was saying something in a low aside. She strained to hear.

"—says she's up, Lieutenant. Want to talk to her?"

"Paul?" Caroline said. "What's happening?"

His voice came louder. "Lieutenant Merrill wants to see you. He came up to my place half an hour ago—it's about Jonas. I—" He hesitated. "I can't tell you what it is; he probably wants to get your reaction firsthand. May we come up?"

Before Caroline could answer, Royce said resignedly, "I withdraw that. I can't come. The lieutenant wants to see you alone. Don't worry, Caroline. I'll see you tomorrow. Meanwhile—Lieutenant Merrill in half an hour. All right?"

"Well . . . yes, I suppose so."

"Fine," Royce said. "Goodbye, Caroline."

"Goodbye."

She sat on the sofa before the fireplace and lit a cigarette. Presently she remembered the wash-basin and went back to the bathroom to finish cleaning it. After that, the sofa again. She kept glancing at the telephone, half expecting it to ring.

She could call Bob, tell him what had happened. She wanted him here now. But there hadn't been time for him to get home yet. She waited impatiently.

She was not alone.

Someone was watching her. Abruptly she was perfectly sure of it. She twisted on the sofa, glancing at the curtained windows, at the masks on the walls, the closed cupboard doors. Nothing. No one. She glanced only briefly and then looked away, fearful of finding what she looked for, of having her quick glance meet an answering stare from somewhere in the room. Low down, perhaps, through a half-opened cupboard door close to the floor.

"Oh, stop it," she told herself with unsteady irritation. "Think of something else. Two times two is four."

Incubus was here.

The blind, secret rage beat out at her.

Ray Kerry?

There was a chain on the door now. He couldn't get in. And she had searched the apartment with Bob; he wasn't here—period. Exclamation mark. He had never entered through the walls or by a secret panel; there had been, after all, a perfectly logical explanation for the way Ray had gained access to this apartment.

Three nights ago he had waited till she was asleep and then used his duplicate key, unlinked the trick chain, and entered. And had been interrupted at his work when Mollie and her party came ringing at the door. How had he escaped then? By hiding in the hall closet? But the closet door was hinged toward the hall door, so it would not have shielded him from the living room while he slipped out and got away.

She tried to remember all that had happened that night. She had been drugged; it was very vague. That photograph of the hand with caterpillars crawling on it—why should she remember that? The cannibal fork. Mollie's oval, watchful eyes. The wooden godling falling from its shelf, and after that what Mollie had called the death-watch—a faint tapping from somewhere. And—

A tapping from somewhere?

There was a secret panel in the room! Not really secret, except that the paneled doors were identical with all the other paneled doors to cupboards and bookshelves. But behind those oaken doors near the window was the empty, unlocked safe.

The safe. . . . She wished she had not thought of that. For now, until she looked into it, she knew there would be no peace of mind for her.

She knew she would have to get up from the sofa, and

cross the room, like this, and open the paneled doors and put out her hand to the safe—

It was locked. But it could not be locked. She never locked it.

The cold, serrated knob of the dial spun easily beneath her fingers. She hated the feel of that spinning. She did not want to open the heavy door.

The dial pointer touched the last number and she drew a deep breath and tugged at the handle. It did not move. She was aware of inglorious relief that the ordeal had passed her by in spite of herself, but she knew she could not let it go so easily. Machinery never functioned for her on the first try; she had simply mistaken the combination. She must try again.

She did. Painstakingly she controlled her unsteady fingers and touched each number of the ritual in turn. And now—

The handle moved. The heavy door began its ponderous swing. In her mind's eye she had so vivid a picture of how the safe would look inside, dim steel walls hollow and mirrory, her own face moving in distorted reflections in that emptiness when the door swung fully open . . .

For an instant, so vivid was that mental picture, she actually saw it as she had imagined. She saw it bewilderingly, superimposed for just one flash, upon the thing that really huddled there before her. The thing that began to push against the door from within as the latch let go, dreadfully as if it were helping her to open the safe. . . .

It moved ponderously and all in one mass, not like anything alive. It moved toward her, swinging the door outward with its weight. She did not see the face. She saw blond hair, disordered, and dark shoulders hunched forward, lunging toward her in slow motion. He moved even in death as he would have moved in life, not bothering to lift his face to her, pushing outward with blind, unreasoning stubbornness, head sunk between his shoulders, thrusting himself terribly upon her through the opening door.

She caught it on her braced hip and shoulder, and for a moment they struggled together, the living and the dead, with the door poised between them and hovering both ways. She thought at first that his weight was too much. She thought he would have his way even now, forcing himself upon her with that insensate determination she knew so well in him. He had battered at the outward door while he was last alive; now he battered at this inward door with sheer falling weight that threatened to smash his way into her room in spite of all she could do to keep him out.

If it had been any other thing on the wrong side of that door, she thought she could not have held him back. Sheer hatred came to her help now. This was Ray Kerry with whom she had fought and won too often to fight now and lose. The same blind weight thrusting a way for him into the room was the thing that gave her the strength she needed. With all her might she braced her feet against the slipping carpet and pushed, hatred and revulsion like tangible allies pushing with her against the door.

And slowly the balance shifted. The door swung noiselessly on its hinges and began to close. He who had lain three nights inside the safe went back slowly once more, with the heavy and sullen reluctance she knew, ready to lunge forward again at the slightest sign of weakness on her part.

She did not weaken. She did not relax a muscle until she heard the latch click into place and she could push the long bar of the handle downward.

She was in the kitchen, holding a match very carefully to the end of a cigarette, noticing the small blue rim of the flame and the upward tongue of yellow, and the way the paper crackled with a tiny sound as the fire took hold. She was inhaling a deep cloud and holding it, her eyes closed. Slowly she let the smoke trickle from her nostrils.

While she did these things there was an instant of oblivion for her. It was the same oblivion that clouds one's mind on

first awakening from sleep or unconsciousness. She remembered nothing. Her mind was as smooth and untroubled as a child's. She had no recollection of walking along the hall and turning into the kitchen or anything that had gone before.

Again, as she had noticed before this evening, it was the body that remembered before the mind. She found suddenly that she was shuddering. Not only her hands or her knees, but her whole body, shaking in deep waves that were almost convulsive spasms.

The cigarette dropped from her fingers and rolled in a circle on the linoleum. She could do nothing about it. She was too utterly absorbed in this phenomenon which had invaded her body and driven out her will so that she no longer had any control over her muscles. After what seemed a great while, she found she could kneel and touch the cigarette. She picked it up. And finally she managed to rise and drop it into the sink.

Aloud, she heard herself saying, "Caroline, you need a drink," and was surprised to realize how right the voice was.

It was difficult. The bright black-and-red kitchen seemed to swell out and then shrink again, distorted in shape. Someone was blowing it out like a balloon, with uneven puffs.

"I like this," she told herself. "I like it very much." And she did. As long as it went on she was so obviously unfit to cope with anything that might happen. She could lay responsibility down, let someone else worry. Lovely feeling, lovely, unreal room. . . .

She spilled a good deal of brandy before she filled a jigger glass and got it to her lips. When the burning had stopped in her throat she poured another shot and drank that too. It was warmer in the kitchen then, and the walls steadied.

"If I feel better I'll have to cope again," she warned herself in a half-whisper. "And if I can, I must." That was a quotation from something. "Bear it you can, and if you can you must. Shoulder the sky, my lad, and drink your ale." Housman. Good advice. She poured another shot of brandy,

not spilling more than a few drops this time.

It was while the third drink still burned in her throat that she realized who had killed Ray. The closet in the hall told her the answer. Someone had hidden there three nights ago, but it had not been Ray Kerry. It was the same one who had murdered Pete Wynekoop—and she could guess the reason for that too.

The telephone. She had to phone Bob. He would be home by now. But she found that she could not go down the hall into the living room where the safe was. Her fingers unclosed in midair from the glass. It thumped solidly on the linoleum and rolled. She turned blindly toward the door. The superintendent—one of the other tenants—there would be sanctuary. For she still had a little time. He would not have had time to get here yet.

The chain on the door resisted her, and the knob did not want to turn, but it seemed to her that this time they must be powerless if she chose. She could rip them apart like paper if there were no other way to get out.

The door swung open. A man standing there stepped back a little and looked down at her.

He said, "Oh, hello, Caroline," in a very tired voice.

She echoed, "Hello, Paul," and then sagged in the doorway, looking at him. His hat was on the back of his head and his coat hung open. There was cigarette ash on it, and she saw the stubs of other cigarettes trodden out around him on the floor. Ray Kerry had stood here three nights ago, smoking in silence and treading out the stubs, waiting for her to open the door. Tonight, Paul Royce—

There was something a little unfamiliar about the set of his shoulders and the way his head was dropped between them as he looked at her. Normally Paul did not stand this way. But she had seen him doing it once before. Monday night. In the same doorway, in this same slightly hunched position, a little like the man-bull she had seen once on a Minoan vase, the hall light behind him outlining his heavy shoulders. She ought to be frightened. . . .

Too much had been happening in the past days. Too much had happened tonight, shock upon shock, suspense and terror—and the brandy. The hall hummed with the ringing in her ears. She knew she had gone too far on the way to complete collapse to pull herself back over the edge for anything at all.

She did not exactly lose consciousness, but her knees doubled beneath her and she saw Royce shoot up unexpectedly to tremendous height as she went down softly at his feet.

He bent to pick her up. She felt his arms gathering her and it seemed to her that her flesh was so insubstantial that she would run through his arms like water.

She heard the door click shut. He was carrying her down the hall toward the living room. Her head fell upon his shoulder. It smelled pleasantly of tobacco.

She lay on the sofa.

Paul stood above her, looking down and striking one fist lightly into the other palm with quick, unconscious nervousness. She had never seen him nervous before, but tonight he seemed all but gauche. It was the first time she had ever seen his manner almost match his appearance. And she noticed wearily the bigness of his hands, slightly sprung at the joints as if he had spent all his life holding a bucking plow in the furrow.

"Feeling any better?" he asked quietly.

"A little."

He glanced at her and then looked away, not meeting her eyes.

"Caroline," he said, "I've got to do two things tonight that I hate like hell to do. I wish I could put them off. I was standing out there in the hall just now wondering if I couldn't, when you opened the door."

"You didn't have time to get here," she said. "You couldn't have had time."

"I phoned earlier tonight," he said abstractedly. "I've been calling for days, trying to see you alone up here. But

you were never home. And the one time I almost managed it, Vic Curzon insisted on sticking with me."

"Bob said it was a wrong number."

"That's right. I'd found out you were probably home."

"But you didn't have time to get here," she repeated.

"I called from a drugstore on Seventy-second the second time. I'd been waiting for your visitor to leave. When I saw O'Brien come out—I've met him a few times, you know—then I phoned you again and said Lieutenant Merrill wanted to see you."

Her too-vivid imagination had betrayed her. She had heard Royce's voice speaking presumably to Merrill. But Merrill himself had not spoken; he wasn't there. . . .

She said, "I called Bob O'Brien. After you phoned. He's coming up here, Paul."

Royce shook his head. "No time. He couldn't have got home before I phoned you, Caroline. And I came over here right after that. You haven't used the telephone since I got here. I've been listening. There isn't any out, Caroline. I almost wish there were— Do you feel well enough to get up now?"

"I don't know. Must I?"

"Yes, Caroline."

She knew that tone.

"I'll try." She sat up dizzily and swung her feet to the floor. It wasn't so bad. She was unspeakably weary, and there were little pinwheels of giddiness spinning above her ears, inside the skull, so that her brain seemed to float free of the rest of her. But that was probably the brandy.

One of Royce's big hands closed on her arm.

"All right?"

"I think so."

"Come over here, then. I want you to do something for me."

He was not really thinking about her now, she saw. His solicitude was simply the kindness he had always shown

toward her, that innate and almost feminine delicacy of perception which sprang from the depths of his character. But tonight it was on the surface only. He was too immersed in his own problem to have room for any other.

"What is it, Paul?" she asked.

"The safe," he said. "I want you to open it for me."

"The—safe?" she echoed, playing for time with no thought of what use she could put the time to. "The safe? Why?"

"Never mind, Caroline. It's got to be done. Here you are—now open it. I'm sorry. If I'd known the combination it would have spared us both a bad time. But it's too late now. Open it."

He read her thought. "You mustn't make any noise, Caroline. You know that, don't you?" She nodded, not moving her eyes from his. "Now—open the safe."

Looking into the red-brown eyes, she said, "It's open, Paul. I opened it just before you came."

Opaque, expressionless, his gaze regarded her. It seemed a long time before he let his hand slip down her arm and close about the wrist. Then he drew her after him, his eyes still on hers, and with the other hand groped for the safe handle. It turned in his grasp.

She saw the fleeting spasm of shock that crossed his face as he felt that pressure from inside which she had fought before him. His eyes left hers at last and he turned and braced the door with one knee, let go the handle, bent to look inside. His hand on her wrist tightened. Now he was groping inside the safe, his face averted.

She did not watch. She did not breathe or think.

In a moment he straightened. The safe door whispered on its hinges and thudded softly shut.

Royce's weathered face was gray when she saw it again. With his free hand he was gripping two very bulky packets banded with stamped pink paper. She heard him sigh, a long, deep sound that seemed to empty his lungs of air and

his body of its tension. This, in a way, was the climax of his ordeal; she guessed it from the softening of his face and the way strain seemed to vanish from him. And there was a sort of passion in the way he touched the thick packets of money. The half-incredulous passion with which one might receive a grail after long and dangerous striving.

One could guess from the almost luminous look upon his face now what stresses and agonies he had endured leading up to this moment. It was all over now—except for one thing. One final detail, so that he could be safe forever.

The opaque, red-brown eyes came thoughtfully around and looked at her.

This was the face she had guessed at so vainly; this was the look Wynekoop had seen last of all, the look that passes but once between two humans, the look that is never told of afterward.

She knew she was afraid, and yet there was a lassitude in her body and mind that blunted even the fear. It seemed to her that so long as the two of them stood motionless this instant could never end. The night could not move on to the next moment, and the next, toward that final thing she knew was coming inexorably nearer.

She could not match his immobility. Her knees were giving way again. She caught at the arm of the sofa with her free hand and sank down upon it, and he released her wrist without moving his eyes from hers. He seemed to pivot upon the axis of their locked gaze as he moved slowly around her and stood looking down.

Frantically her mind began to search for safety.

"Paul," she said. "Paul. Get me a drink. Please."

His gaze shifted. She had thought he might be persuaded to leave her alone while he went to the kitchen. But he did not. He laid the two packets of currency on the coffee table and stepped toward an open shelf where a row of thick, green Mexican glasses stood. With one of them in his hand, he came back and stood looking at her.

Then from his coat pocket he took a flask, gold-plated,

beautifully engraved. There was a pleased look on his face, as if he had remembered something in time.

"Here," he said. It looked like whisky, dark amber, as he poured it. She took the proffered glass numbly, sipped the smallest possible taste, watching him over the brim. He said in a slightly thickened voice, "I'd forgotten that. I brought it for you."

There was probably significance in that. She could not think of it just now, for she was watching something very curious dawn in Royce's face. He looked down at his hands and put them behind him abruptly. He glanced away from her. Now that he had opened the safe and taken the money, he did not seem exactly sure what came next. The gaucherie inherent in his appearance was emerging now. He looked embarrassed.

He did not quite know how to go about it. . . .

As a last resort, Caroline thought, she could scream. But these walls were so thick. A single scream, even if it penetrated to outside ears, would probably be ignored or attributed to a radio. And she knew she would be able to scream once only.

No, that might be the final stimulus, the thing he was waiting for as her opening of the door had been the initial stimulus. He waited now, wondering what the next step would be. She must not force action upon him.

She said, "Paul, if you need the money so very badly—"

His head turned quickly, a smooth, ophidian quickness, his whole body swaying a little with it, and his eyes as he met hers were terrifying in a way she could not name. She had always thought she knew the man behind this russet gaze; this was a stranger who looked at her. More than a stranger—a creature whose like she had never seen before.

She had to go on. "Couldn't you have got it before? The money? You knew it was—in the safe—"

The look of luminous opacity faded. It was Royce again behind the russet eyes.

"I didn't know," he said. "I didn't know till Wynekoop told me the next day."

"Wynekoop . . . he knew you were here—that night? He saw you—"

Royce nodded. Then he frowned a little and came toward the sofa, sat down carefully a little distance from her. The springs gave deeply beneath his weight, tilting Caroline toward him. He said thoughtfully, "It's been a—a fascinating thing, Caroline. There are so many angles—intellectual patterns I've thought out and couldn't discuss with anyone. In a way I'm glad . . . it's . . . you. . . ." He glanced down at her and for an instant that shining look began to glow in his eyes. But he was not ready yet. And she thought he was not yet quite sure how to begin. To talk was to postpone this act for which there was no legitimate precedent. He could not know that by the look in his eyes she read the glittering thought whenever it rose to the surface of his mind.

"Tell me," she said. "Paul—tell me."

Amazingly, he responded. In a way she understood his need for an intelligent listener. He must have been accumulating much of this forbidden knowledge that cried for expression and could not be spoken of to a living soul. But now he could speak of it to her.

"I've thought a lot about it," he said, settling himself on the sofa so that the springs creaked again. "There's a great difference between the . . . murderer and the killer." He hesitated before that word, but it was out now. Murderer. An ugly word, muddy and mouth-filling, with dull, heavy consonants. "There's a difference. Not everyone who kills is a murderer. Soldiers aren't. Killing's quick and spontaneous. It's a matter of muscular reflex. Murder is a—a matter of the intellect. You watch it coming. Both of you watch." His voice faded. His eyes narrowed slightly and brilliance began to swim up in them. He reached out gently and touched her shoulder, his big hand curving to enclose it. From the corners of her eyes she could see the hand with abnormal clarity, the red-gold hairs shining and separate, the weathered

grain of the skin, the way the muscles interlaced into the strong flatness of the wrist disappearing into his cuff.

"Did you ever think," he said in a very gentle voice, "what an intimate thing murder is? The most intimate act that can happen between two people. It's the ultimate violation. And it can only happen once. That makes it more intimate than love." He looked at her with swimming radiance. Incredibly, he said in a shaken whisper, "I'll try not to hurt you, Caroline."

He sounded ludicrously, horribly like a bridegroom when he said it. Through her numbness she realized what was coming, what he had at last succeeded in working himself toward. He had waited until this twist of macabre rationalization came round to give his intent a basis in convention.

Now, in his distressed and fatally sensitive mind, the parallel between love and murder had entered, and this was the moment, the impossible point of infinity where parallels meet. The bridal night and the instant of murder were the same to him, one no more guilty than the other.

For he came of a generation, she realized, to which love is a matter of masculine aggression, singly imposed, singly enjoyed, the woman as passive a factor as the victim of murder. This parallel was normal to him, and he had found what he had been groping for—the means to shift their relation from friendliness to violence.

There had been no meeting ground before. Paul was a civilized and sensitive man. And a very conventional man. You do not reach out and take by the throat and strangle a woman you have liked.

But he could do it now. He had found the meeting ground. He knew the way. Convention sanctified it. He could take her struggling in his arms and impose the ultimate violation of death upon her body, and he need bridge no impossible social gap to do it. The most civilized people make love.

Now she had to take up the burden of her responsibility or lay it down forever. She must destroy this moment before he knew fully that he had reached it. For an instant utter

incredulity almost silenced her—it was so impossible that this could be happening here, in the familiar room—but she spoke in time.

“Paul,” she said, and gulped a little because her throat was dry. “Paul—tell me. When did it start? She stumbled over the question. “Was Jonas . . . Did you murder Jonas?”

Subtly the look in his eyes changed. Blood had begun to flush beneath his ruddy skin and she saw a pulse beating in the vein at his temple, and knew that if she had stopped him now, she was stopping him just in time.

Insanely, perversely, she was aware of a dim quiver of regret, far back, deep buried. Was this what she had desired, after all? The ultimate end of that negation which had ruled her so long? She had looked to Ray Kerry, she had hoped to find in Bob O'Brien a strength beyond her own, a strength so firmly proved that no question could shake it. Perhaps she had found it here. Not only the strength to kill, but the strength to kill deliberately, in full knowledge of the risk, deliberately to face the worst punishment mankind can inflict for the worst crime. To solve one's problems by murder—is that the proof of a man's resolution? If it were, then she had found the man she had been seeking.

But this was not a strength that would protect her.

He had not touched her yet except to close his palm upon her shoulder. She felt the grip slacken, though he still held her, and the flush of his purpose began to recede from his ruddy face. Another look came into it, almost without changing the expression. He had been about to force physical violence upon her; now that sense of intoxicating domination shifted and became the murderer's other domination—pride.

And why should he not be proud? He had met men on the common ground of survival and forced upon them the final humility, proved his power by wresting from them the thing the body and mind defend to the last breath. No wonder pride was in his face when he thought of it.

He said thickly, “Jonas? No. Not Jonas. But I buried

him." And pride sounded even in that. He had put the flamboyant Jonas underground, shoveled the dirt in his face, and walked away alive and strong. Yes, he could feel superior even to Jonas, though he had not killed him.

"But what—happened?" she asked.

"I killed Ray Kerry," he said, unhearing. "We fought, here in this room, and I killed him." He drew a deep breath, his chest swelling and his shoulders going taut and square beneath the coat, his whole body inflating with the knowledge of past power. This was the murderer's triumph, a victory of body over body and will over will, the final test from which only one man walks away. He savored the memory.

"I killed Wynekoop," he said, and looked at her with half-shut eyes, smiling to himself. His right arm moved slightly, with a quick, unfinished sickle-swing, fist closed. She understood. The razor was in his grip again, and the throat bare before him.

He smiled at her, his eyes nearly closed. She understood what was moving in his mind. She could feel his thought touching her all over. Those had been men. He had fought and overcome them. But she was a woman. There is another sort of struggle and victory over women. Few men know what it may be like. Royce would know, soon. It must be very different, killing a woman. For a man strong enough to murder, and sensitive enough to feel fully the moment of that ultimate consummation.

With a flash of perception, she knew what she must do when she could put him off no longer. Love and murder were the same in his mind just now, intertwined in impossible union. If she wanted to live, she must shift his focus from one to the other. She thought she could do it. She must do it. And afterward— Wait and see.

"Do you want to tell me, Paul?" she asked him softly. She was not tired at all now. The lassitude was gone. She was quivering all over with a responsiveness of the mind that met his thoughts and reactions as if they were the caresses

of a lover, anticipating them, urging them on. She was not even aware of terror now. The urgency of the moment left no room for anything but the moment's needs.

He did not know it, but this was as much of a duel between them as any struggle he had ever fought. He had killed two victims; he was fighting now with a third, but her weapons were not his. He did not know them for weapons. He had put this murder upon the grounds of love, and on those grounds she could meet him. She said, "Paul, tell me. You can't ever tell anyone else, you know. But you can talk to me."

He smiled at her, a warm, blurry smile. "Yes," he said. "I can talk to you, Caroline." There was an impossible caress in the words, and in the thought behind the words. A terrible caress. He said, "I do want to talk. I need to talk. Do you understand that, Caroline?"

She nodded, not speaking. Yes, he needed to talk. The necessity for keeping silent must have been a burden heavier to carry than the knowledge of what he had done. Consciously, she was sure he felt no guilt—the knowledge was not a burden on his moral sense—but a man cannot so easily override the mores by which he was reared. A confessional was what Royce needed now. To talk freely, completely, to tell the story of his achievement to an understanding listener, and in the telling to achieve catharsis that would release his mind for further killing. . . .

He could talk to Caroline as freely as to a stranger. More freely than that, for accident may bring the stranger back into one's path, but Caroline, he knew, he would not meet again.

"There's no hurry," he said, still in that blurred voice, and slid a palm down her arm to pull her closer on the sofa. "I don't need to hurry. I can tell you—"

She could understand even that. The sybarite prolongs all his pleasures; delights postponed are doubly delightful for the waiting.

"I didn't kill Jonas," Royce said, his arm tightening about

her. She let herself relax against him, breathing as quietly as she could, not to make him aware of her in any way that could be avoided. For that very breathing was a sound he meant to stop, when the time came.

"I didn't kill Jonas. No one did. Except maybe himself. I saw it happen. It was an accident."

She could feel his attention shifting as he spoke. A re-focusing and expansion. He was not thinking solely of herself and him, and the thing that must happen between them. His voice grew clearer, and, she thought, his mind, as he told the story he must have wanted so often to tell, and never before dared.

"I saw it happen," he said again. "The whole thing—through the screen. It was Easter Day. He was leaving on Monday, you know, for Indo-China. There was something I had to see him about. I drove up the Hudson that afternoon." His voice was clear and rapid now; he was seeing the Westchester house and the things that had happened there more vividly than the room before him. He did not hesitate over words. He must have told this story over and over to himself until the phrases took firm shape in his own mind for lack of any other mind to hear them.

"The screen door was latched," he said, "and I rang the bell. Jonas called to me from upstairs as he started down. He was running—you remember how he always ran. It was those damned acrobatics of his that did it, Jonas's acrobatics that Vic Curzon's always imitating. He put his hand on the newel post at the bend of the landing and jumped. He meant to land on the lower flight, and he would have except for his arm. That old fracture of his—it had been bothering him anyway. His arm folded up when he put his weight on it, and he fell. . . .

"There wasn't a sound after he fell. He never moved. I called to him. He didn't answer.

"I couldn't get in by the front door; I could have made a hole in the screen easily, but I thought the back door might be open. I went around the house. It wasn't, but the

cellar window was. I crawled in that way. There was a shovel leaning against the wall. I fell over it, and I think that was how I first got the idea.

"Jonas was dead when I got to him. I could see that. I buried him in the cellar. I had to," he finished abruptly.

Caroline said, "But you could have told the police what happened. No one would have thought you killed Jonas."

Royce stared at nothing. "Jonas had been away for nearly two years," he said. "I'd made some big sales for him in that time. The way I usually worked it—I held out my ten percent and deposited the rest to Jonas's account in his bank. But . . . I'd had expenses. I—I don't know how it happened. Some debts came due unexpectedly, and I couldn't pay them. I used some of Jonas's money instead of depositing it."

His shoulders slumped. "Then I had the devil's own luck. I'd known Jonas for a long time. I knew he'd have lent me the money if I could have reached him. I was right, too. The minute he got back. I told him what I'd had to do. I was honest about it. Jonas knew I hadn't tried to rob him. He agreed to let the debt ride till I could pay him back. But I hadn't any proof—and who would have believed it, afterward?

"On Easter I drove up to see him. There were some details on a new book contract, some last-minute stuff. I told you what happened. I must have stood there by his body for half an hour, thinking. I knew I wouldn't be accused of murder. But there'd be lawyers, audits—all the business of winding up a dead man's estate. I knew somebody would discover that Jonas's account was short eight thousand dollars. It would be easy to check up on that—his sales were a matter of record. But, I thought, what if nobody knew Jonas was dead? Then there'd be no need for his executors to audit the accounts and records and compare them. Well—now you know." He shrugged. "You know the truth about something no one else will ever understand." He smiled at her as if this knowledge were a favor he conferred. Then

he saw the forgotten glass she still held. "Drink your drink, Caroline," he said.

She thought, "Is that what he's waiting for? Has he set himself a time limit by the finishing of this whiskey?" But she could do nothing except obey. Only the liquor must be made to last. Surely, if she could postpone the end long enough, she would think of something—

"Ray Kerry?" she asked.

He leaned back.

"That was because of Jonas. It was an accident, in one way. I wasn't ready to have Jonas's body discovered yet. I hadn't made up that eight-thousand-dollar deficit in his account. In fact . . . it's nearly fifteen thousand now. And when you told me you'd got hold of some money and wanted to have the repairs done on Jonas's house—digging up the cellar drains—I knew I had to stop you."

Caroline said, "But you phoned Vic! You told him to get out so I could bring the workmen in!"

"Yes. I knew you'd bring them in anyway. I didn't dare try to stop you overtly; that would have looked too suspicious later. I wasn't very firm when I spoke to Vic—but you'd already thrown a scare into him. He'd already decided that you meant it. I came up here three nights ago to . . ."

"What?"

"To stop you," he said flatly. "I thought perhaps I could get the money you'd said Kerry had given you. Steal it, after you were asleep. Or—"

She did not want to look at him, but in spite of herself she found her head turning. He was smiling down at her, with a warm, intimate look that a watcher might have thought an exchange between lovers.

"Or kill me?" she said.

"I didn't want to. I'd never—killed anyone before. But I needed a few weeks' grace. A few days'. There was that movie sale. It's going through, I'm certain of that, but those Hollywood delays—! It's big money, Caroline. My cut on it won't be quite enough to make up the deficit in Jonas's

account, but I could have managed the rest all right. All I needed was time enough to push that sale through, before they found Jonas's body.

"So I came up here Monday night." He paused, looking back through time. "I saw your lights were on. I meant to ring, but the street door was unlatched, and when I came upstairs, I saw a line of light around your door. I hadn't expected such luck."

"My door was open?"

"Unlocked. It hadn't quite caught the latch, and it had swung a bit. I came in and closed it behind me. I made sure it was shut."

Ray. Ray Kerry. He had been very drunk, Bob had said—so drunk that he made this last, fatal error. He had failed to close the door behind him.

The duplicate key—he wouldn't have neglected that. It was probably in his pocket now, in the safe. . . .

Royce was speaking.

"There was a light in the living room and the typewriter was going. I could see from the hall that someone was sitting in that high-backed chair at the desk, but the chair-back hid him and I had no idea of its being anyone but you."

His voice softened; the words came more slowly, and he lingered on the words and the memory. "I went into the living room," he said. "The typewriter was making enough noise to cover any sound I may have made. I was—an amateur, then. Excited. It's strange—I don't remember exactly . . . whether or not I saw it was Kerry before I—"

His hand twitched. He had forgotten his pretense of intending to rob her. She knew that murder had been in his mind even then, that he had decided to take the surest way of stopping the work on the Westchester house. He had come here on Monday night with a weapon in his hand. . . .

"Anyhow, it was too late to stop then," he said. "We fought—a little. I had to hit him a second time with—a second time. There wasn't much blood. I didn't hear the doorbell ringing at first, or I thought it was in my ears—

you know? When I did hear it, I didn't know who it was. I thought it might be you. You'd have a key. You might not be alone. Or—

"Then I heard you moving in the bedroom.

"There wasn't any place to put Kerry except the safe. You'd shown it to me—or Jonas had. I don't remember. There was no time to think; there was only time to act. I didn't dare hope the safe would be unlocked. But it was. I got him into it and twisted the dial. All the while Mollie and the others were ringing the bell and shouting outside the door."

"You hid in the closet," Caroline said. "That was it, wasn't it?"

"Yes, that was it. I saw you come out of the bedroom as I closed the closet door. You didn't notice; you were looking the other way. I heard Mollie and the rest talking. I kept expecting somebody to look into the closet. . . .

"No one did. I heard all of you go down the hall toward this room. The front door was still open; I could see that. So I stepped out. I thought I could make it, but—Wynekoop turned around and saw me. I didn't think he'd seen me come out of the closet. And I was standing there in the hall with my hat and coat on. So—well, I had to pretend I'd just arrived.

"You know what happened after that. When that tapping sounded in the wall, I guessed what it was. I hadn't killed Kerry—quite. He was still alive.

"That was when I herded everybody out, as quickly as I dared."

He swallowed.

"I went home and went to bed and hoped I'd never wake up. I went through the next day in a daze. Nothing had worked out successfully. Then Wynekoop phoned me. He wanted me to make you tell where Kerry was. He thought you knew.

"I told him to go to the devil. He said he'd seen me come out of your closet the night before. He thought—he assumed

that I was your lover, Caroline. He threatened to spread the news around unless I did what he wanted. Well, I laughed at him. I told him it wasn't 1925 any more, when a Chicago love-nest was news. But he was trying to use any weapon he could find. He talked about damaging your reputation, and how jealous Ray Kerry was—and he said Kerry was in trouble. Then he switched to another angle. He told me that if I wanted to marry you, I'd be smart to help him. For that would get Kerry out of my way. He said Kerry had stolen forty thousand dollars.

"My God, if I'd known that! I had my hands on it and then locked it up out of reach. I'd actually felt those packets in Kerry's pockets and hadn't guessed what they were. If only I hadn't spun the dial on the safe! I could have got in here somehow. . . . But no, you had to open it for me. I've been trying so hard to get you alone up here. . . ."

He looked down at her again, and this time there was a long pause.

"It's strange," he said, "how you've come so close to both my—killings. Like a pattern that keeps drawing you back time after time until—I meant it to be you the first time. And the second time you were there in the apartment when I killed Wynekoop."

Caroline said, "You followed us? You knew all along I was there?"

"I waited a long time," he said. "Wynekoop had told me he was going to see you at the Quill that night. I waited outside, in my car. I followed your cab down to the Village. And I followed you up to Mollie Hathaway's apartment." His voice faded. For a moment there was only a remembering silence.

"When Kerry's body was found," Royce said, after a while, "I didn't want Wynekoop saying that I'd been hiding in your closet the night Kerry died. And now—" His eyes were half-closed and very luminous. His hand tightened on her arm, bringing her close against his side.

"It isn't true," he said thoughtfully, in a lingering voice.

"Did I say a while ago that I didn't want to kill you? Or anybody? I do want to." He watched her with a fixed, shining look under the lowered lids. "Caroline, finish your drink."

14...

IT WAS more than a concluding gesture. Something in his voice told her that. He would wait until she finished—but why? She lifted the glass and looked at it as if sight alone could tell her. It looked like any glass a quarter full of whisky, except for the translucent, thick green with little air-bubbles caught when the glass had been molten. And it tasted like any whisky—or did it? She had taken only two small sips, and the liquor's own taste was strong enough to disguise almost any other flavor. Had it been—bitter? She looked up to meet Royce's luminous stare.

"Drink it," he said gently. "It's all right, Caroline. You'll find it's much easier that way. For us both."

So she knew.

"What is it?" she asked in a whisper.

"Something I got hold of for myself quite a while ago, in case . . . it won't hurt you, Caroline. It's very quick."

And it would look, of course, like suicide. Or it would after Paul had finished. Later on they would find Ray's body, and they would think her suicide a confession for his death, perhaps. They might decide that she had murdered all three of them—Ray and Wynekoop and her uncle. Oh, no. He couldn't believe it would work out as neatly as all that!

She opened her fingers deliberately and let the glass drop upon the carpet.

Royce's half-closed eyes started to open wide, and then closed again to shining slits.

"I think I'm glad you did that," he said very softly, and she felt the muscles rising along the arm that encircled her as he tightened that close grip. And she saw in his face, below the sudden anger, a look of subtle satisfaction.

The other way would have been easier—but it would have been passive, too. He would have let the poison do his killing for him. Now he must kill her himself, in actual combat, a struggle of body against body and will against will. It would be infinitely more pleasurable that way to him.

She tried to envision that struggle to its ultimate finish, and found she could not. That embrace is the sort in which only lovers and deadly enemies meet, and she had never fought an enemy like this before. She could not picture to herself the end of this tightening embrace.

She was afraid again now. The terror sprang to life in the sudden hollow place beneath the breastbone where all her emotions were, and she was filled with nausea and coldness and a passionate desire not to die. She knew abruptly and not very clearly what it would be like, and knew she was not ready yet. Not now or ever.

Royce's face was close above hers, grimacing with the effort of holding her. She was surprised to discover that she was struggling violently, furiously, without making more than the smallest motions. He was too big and too strong. She lunged desperately against the arm that was wrapped around her and pinioning both her arms to her sides. She achieved nothing but a displacement of the cushions on which they sat.

Wildly she tried to kick, but he shifted a little to throw one heavy leg across her knees. She had never fully realized before how physically small she really was. He could hold her helpless like this and still have a free hand to lay gently across her throat.

She did not know she was screaming until she felt it, a shrill, full sound opening her throat up wide and round, welling out as involuntarily as blood would well if—if—

"No," Paul said in a thick, choked voice, and the hand

that had hovered at her neck swooped and closed across her opened mouth. She tried twice more to scream, and made only a muffled, animal noise against his palm. So she stopped and lay there in his arms, tense and motionless, not yet passive at all, staring up above the edge of his hand at the face bending over hers, very near.

The face changed. A strange softness came over it, almost a tenderness. This was the way he would look if he were about to kiss her. But if she had hoped to bring him to that, she had let it go too long. For it was not love he forced upon her now. The hand across her mouth tightened and flattened, and between thumb and forefinger he closed her nostrils up. She had breathed the last of the air of earth. She would get no more breath in this world.

For a brief instant it was not so bad. In that instant she saw at last, surely and without doubt, the face she had wondered about. This was Incubus. It was not only the strange, luminous shining of the eyes. It was a look that caught and transfigured the whole face—exultant, avid, and something more she had no name for. But now she knew.

His palm was warm and soft. It smelled of tobacco. She gasped, or tried to, as she realized the first constriction of the lungs and felt against her teeth the soft flesh of his palm sucked a little way in as she strove for breath. She tried with animal reflex to bite, but his palm hollowed above her mouth and she could not.

And now the need for air was an actual pain, a desperation. Hunger or thirst would be less of an indignity; everyone in some measure knows these. But no one knows twice this sudden, deathly need for the free air. Not if the need goes on as hers must go. . . . She was filled with unreasoning fury, animal fury, at this closing off of her birthright which had never been denied before. She arched convulsively in his arms, with a strength she had never known until now.

Her vision was streaked with darkness already, but she could see the look of pleasure and response on his face as

she fought. This was what he had wanted and never known before. To kill slowly and deliberately, and to kill a woman. . . . She would not be the last woman he killed, that look said. This struggle was ecstasy. . . .

The pain in her lungs was intolerable, not to be endured. She could not, she would not— She must. Spatters of light and darkness exploded before her eyes. Something must happen to end this—someone must hear, someone must come. But she knew that no one was watching and no one could hear. There was no one at all. She would never see any other face than the grim, flushed, ecstatic face she glimpsed now through the pinwheels of her blindness.

She had one timeless flash of nostalgia, bitter nostalgia for everything in this world, an exile's longing for all he does not know he loves until he leaves it forever. And then she would give up the struggle. . . .

She felt Royce move abruptly. Through swimming darkness the air came back. She was beyond wonder or reason; she simply lay where she was, gulping in the air and letting it run out again fast so she could take still more into her mouth and throat and lungs. She could not see what had happened and she did not try.

It was a little while before she became a rational being again. But presently it was no longer dark. She saw a man's feet and legs. With infinite effort she lifted her eyes and found a face looking down at her. Light glinted on round horn-rimmed glasses. The man seemed solicitous, but not surprised.

"All right now?" Elwood Remington asked.

She was beyond answering. In dumb amazement she looked about, and saw Royce sprawled face down on the carpet by the sofa. Remington swung a length of what seemed to be thick leather before her—a blackjack?

"Don't worry," he said. "You're safe now."

She tried to speak, but her throat was raw from the screams she had not been able to voice. Remington said,

"Wait a minute," and vanished. He was back immediately with a glass of water.

"I told you we'd keep an eye on you," he said. "It's lucky for you we did. Did you think we'd let you out of sight before we got this?" He picked up the packets from the coffee-table and counted the bills rapidly. "Not much short. Good." He slipped the money into his coat pockets, where it bulged noticeably.

Caroline waved a shaking hand toward Royce. Remington said, "He won't wake up for a while. But perhaps I'd better—" He went to the windows and stripped several curtain cords from their places. "These feel strong enough." For the first time she noticed that he was wearing yellowish rubber gloves. He knelt beside Royce and, with practiced efficiency, began to bind the unconscious man. He crossed the wrists and lashed them together, bound Royce's ankles, and then bent Royce's knees and tied wrists and ankles together tightly. Royce never moved.

Caroline said weakly, "The—the safe—"

"I know. I can't help you there. You see, we were hoping Kerry would come here. We—borrowed—an apartment next door today—which reminds me!" He crossed the room, pushed the screen away from the fireplace, and knelt to reach up the chimney. He pulled down a small microphone and began to wind up what seemed to be an enormous length of wire.

"It's that brownstone on the west," he said, intent on his task. "Apartment Four-C. We ran the wire across and established a listening post. We were hoping to hear Kerry's voice, but—"

Caroline realized she was still holding the glass of water. She gulped it. It was difficult to keep her eyes away from Royce.

She whispered, "How did you get in?"

"By the bathroom window. Yes, I know it's locked. We had to cut a hole in the glass. Sorry." He finished with the wire and thrust it into still another pocket. "This is really the

last you'll see of us, Miss Hale, I've got what I want now."

"No—don't go yet! Don't leave me alone with—with him!"

"I'm sorry. He can't hurt you now."

"But—the police—you were a witness. You heard Paul confess—"

"I'm not anxious to talk to the police, Miss Hale. I'm sure you can understand why. You'll have to find some other answer. There must be evidence—proof that your friend killed Kerry and the others. That business with your uncle's bank account—that might do it. But I'm afraid I can't testify in your favor."

She said blankly, "I can't understand why you don't kill *me*."

"We avoid capital crimes," he told her wryly. "That's our life insurance. Besides, what you can tell won't hurt us. We've made our plans. We'll be out of New York in an hour. The Narcotic Squad was beginning to breathe just a little too heavily on our necks, anyway. This city isn't safe for us any more."

Caroline shook her head. "You could have waited. You could have let Paul kill me—that wouldn't have implicated you. I don't understand."

From the doorway he looked at her owlshly through the horn-rimmed glasses. "My wife wouldn't have liked that," he said. "Your stories, you know—Julia's one of your fans. She admires you very much. So—well, good luck, Miss Hale. I'd advise you to call the police and tell the truth. It won't hurt us, and it will help you. Good night."

"Good night," she said dazedly, and sat there until the door at the end of the hall had thumped shut. She lifted a hand to her bruised mouth.

She got up very carefully, skirting Royce's motionless, doubled-back body. She sidled toward the desk, not turning her back on him at all. She felt the cool bakelite of the telephone. . . .

She dialed a number mechanically. Then she hesitated, staring at the receiver, wondering what number it had been.

"O'Brien speaking," a voice said.

She waited on the staircase, outside the apartment, until he came. Instantly the words began to pour out of her. He listened briefly, said, "Where is he? In there?" and moved swiftly toward the hall. She followed as far as the threshold.

O'Brien came back, his face grim and angry. "Still knocked out," he said. "I want the whole story, Carrie, but I don't want you to faint. Where's your liquor?"

"In the—the kitchen. I don't want any. I don't want to go in there—"

"Come in the bedroom," he said, and suddenly picked her up and carried her into the apartment. She was deposited gently on the bed. O'Brien went out and reappeared with the brandy bottle. "I forgot a glass," he said.

"There's one in the bathroom—"

"Don't try to sit up. Lie there. Try to relax. Everything's under control."

He gave her brandy and sat beside her on the bed. He put his hand over hers.

"Now tell me," he said.

It should have taken hours to tell. But it didn't seem very long, after all. When she had finished, O'Brien pinched his lower lip between finger and thumb and stared at her.

"There's no proof," he said.

"Oh, there must be. You can't kill three people and not leave any evidence."

"Royce did pretty well, though. Well—I suppose the police can dig up proof eventually. Now that they'll know what to look for. Your uncle's bank account and the record of his sales—still, it would help if—"

"If Remington could have given evidence! I know. But how could he?"

"He may give evidence yet," O'Brien said. "If the police manage to rope him in." He was silent. Caroline shivered and O'Brien's hand tightened over hers.

In the silence they heard a sound from the living room.

"Bob," Caroline said in a frightened whisper.

He stood up and turned toward the bedroom door. "I'll be right back, Carrie."

"He may have got loose!"

O'Brien hesitated, grinned crookedly, and picked up the brandy bottle. He went out swinging it ominously. The soft fading thuds of his footsteps sounded final in Caroline's ears. Abruptly she felt a terror of what Bob might do.

She got up shakily and ran along the hall after him.

Royce was lying on his side on the carpet, still bound and with his legs doubled up behind him. He was watching O'Brien, who stood a few feet away, the bottle hanging from his hand. Caroline walked straight to O'Brien's side and stopped.

She looked down at Paul Royce.

The bright, terrible shining had gone from his eyes. He looked puzzled and worried and very, very tired.

"My head . . ." he said slowly. His gaze moved to the brandy bottle O'Brien held.

"But the door was locked, wasn't it?" he asked. He blinked painfully against the light. "I thought it was locked."

O'Brien put his arm around Caroline's shoulders. She felt his hand tighten warningly.

"You made a mistake, Royce," he said.

"I saw you leave here. Caroline said you'd gone home."

O'Brien's eyes narrowed a little. They seemed slightly luminous.

"I came back, though," he said. "Caroline gave me an extra key. We thought something might happen tonight. I heard the whole thing. There are two witnesses to your confession, Royce."

"My money's gone," he said. "You took it."

There was silence for a moment or two. Caroline felt O'Brien's fingers twitch on her shoulder. He had not considered that factor.

He said, "What money?"

Royce's eyes opened wide. A faint hint of that perilous glow showed in them, but it died instantly. He looked utterly tired, that was all.

O'Brien said, "Those bruises on Caroline's throat are pretty good evidence. But if they aren't enough to convict you, my story ought to do the trick. I can tell the police enough to send you to the chair."

Royce didn't answer.

O'Brien released Caroline and went over to the desk. He lifted the receiver. He put the brandy bottle on the desk and touched the dial with one finger. He watched Royce steadily.

Caroline looked from one man to the other. One of them, she thought, was going out of her life forever, the other coming in more intimately than ever before. This was a crossroads—this night, this moment. And, curiously, she remembered something Mollie Hathaway had said to her.

Those peaks of emotion. The complete marriage, the absolute intimacy between two people. Perhaps one couple in a thousand or ten thousand ever achieve it.

She had achieved it tonight—with her Incubus.

It would never come again, that utter intimacy, that incredible peak of strange distorted passion. She would know it with no other man. Nor did she want to.

Oddly, it seemed to her that this was a time of choice. That she was choosing between Paul Royce and Bob O'Brien. Not a physical choice, for nothing could turn the inevitable now. But she had seen and felt a strength in Paul Royce that she had never felt in anyone else. In some strange manner, she had become betrothed to him—a betrothal without hope of consummation.

What she wanted was peace and security and normality. She did not want the peaks ever again. She did not want to believe that they existed, that Incubus could tower, shining

and undefeated as Lucifer, above men she could love and trust, like Bob O'Brien, and men she could not love or trust, men like Ray Kerry.

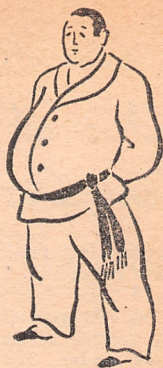
She wanted safety. And there was no safety anywhere in the world if Incubus existed. If Paul Royce could face what was coming undefeated, as strong as he had been when he murdered Ray Kerry and Pete Wynekoop.

There was an ecstasy she would never know again. She never wanted to know it again, and she would not regret its loss. But she would remember; her body and mind and perhaps her soul would remember. . . .

Paul Royce said, "Call the police. What are you waiting for? Get it over. There's only one thing I want now. I want to die."

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